A brief introduction to inclusion, inclusive schools and barriers to inclusion.

Sabrina E. Redwing Saunders
and
Yvette DeBeer
OISE/UT

It is easier to say what inclusion is not than what it is. We know it when we see it, but often are not sure how to replicate it in our own settings. Inclusion is not a new response to diversity in our schools. Researchers (Ryan, 2006, 2002; Dei, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2002; Byrne, 1999) have acknowledged that those defined as “different” are often unable to gain access to the privileges available to the majority populous. Ryan (2006) states, “Inclusion’s alter ego is exclusion. They are intimately related. When people are not included, they are excluded” (p.19).

It is easy to agree that inclusion is a healthy state and that being excluded causes unhealthy and even violent reactions within the school, yet practitioners do not always see exclusion as the result of the absence of inclusion. Exclusion comes in many forms defined by a person’s race/ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, social class, sexual orientation and physical or developmental abilities. As a school is a microcosm of society, it is only natural that we would see these same exclusionary “isms”. Fortunately, our schools are governed by missions, mandates and curricula that aim to address these “isms” and broaden the learner’s mind to inclusive content.

The consequences of educational exclusion significantly influence life chances. Black/African Canadians, First Nations/Aboriginals and Portuguese Canadians have higher drop out rates than the general student population (Dei, 2003). A disproportionate number of students from these groups are enrolled in special education and non university streams programs (Dei, 2003). Over the years, attempts have been made in Ontario to address these issues. For example, in 1992, the Ontario government issued a policy directive, Policy/Program Memorandum, No. 119, “Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Anti-Racism and Ethnocultural Equity”. This memorandum required all boards to develop race relations policies. Interestingly, despite the strong neo liberal agenda of the Harris conservative government during the mid 1990’s, this memorandum was not repealed.

So what does inclusion look like? Inclusivity is at the heart of the vision, mission and collective commitments of many schools in Ontario today. Even so, commitment is not a road map to success; it is only the first step in the process. Staff and administrators must acknowledge exclusion, then take the time to address it in their school communities. According to Ryan (2003; 2000) administrators often feel that they do not know enough about the communities they serve. Lack of understanding and mis-information are significant barriers to inclusion.
Race Focused Schools
Schools such as the Black and First Nations focus schools have been often viewed as segregated institutions that limit the opportunity for growth in society. However, these schools have been successful in fostering ethnic pride and knowledge while opening those institutions of learning to all people regardless of race, religion and socio-economic standing. Dei (2005) states,

Some argue that black-focused schools represent a reversion to the days of segregation. But there is a meaningful difference between forced segregation and separation by choice. Segregationists in the first half of the 20th century sought to exclude blacks from meaningful participation in society. By contrast, black-focused schools aim to address an educational crisis and help minority youth succeed.

Although both the Aboriginal schools (on and off reserves) and the black focus schools are in place in major cities across Canada; other races, religions and ethnicities have not had similar opportunities. Given the demographic mix in Toronto, however, there are schools where the majority of students are students of colour. In such situations, practitioners are beginning to ask questions about ensuring the inclusion of white students. Although this is a reverse of what we often consider as a need of inclusion, it must be understood that inclusion has to occur on all fronts. As an inclusive school we are responsible to be inclusive to all cultures, races, religions and beliefs—regardless of enrollment in our schools.

Gender
Gender equity has been an issue in Canadian education for many years. Much of the time the focus has been on issues similar to inclusion issues for other groups, specifically, access to education opportunities for girls and women, addressing sex-stereotyping in curricula, teaching women’s studies, and examining achievement gaps especially in areas such as science, technology, and mathematics (Coulter, 1996). More recently, there has been focus on addressing the role of schooling in shaping notions of masculinity (e.g. Frank, 1999; Wang, 2000), and how schools continue to perpetuate gendered hierarchies (e.g. Chapman, 2003). While some have begun to believe that gender equity is no longer an issue in education, we believe that there is much work yet to be done on this front if we are working toward true inclusion.

Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Gender Identity
Many educators have had difficulty working at the same vigor on gay/lesbian, transgender or gender identity issues than that of other areas of inclusion (Goldstein, 2004; Solomon, 2004; Sykes, 2004). Teachers often actively avoid situations where they believe issues related to sexual identity will emerge. Some provinces and individual districts have created policies and manuals for working with “controversial issues” in order to both assist and protect the teacher. British Columbia has created a workshop on teaching controversial issues “without becoming part of the controversy” (Clarke, 2005) while the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) created a policy to address the teaching of such issues that could be considered controversial.

In November 2004, students in one Ontario school were participating in a class that, among other content, addressed homophobia. This raised a controversy where many Muslim parents felt that the teaching was amoral and a direct affront to their beliefs (The Record, 2004; Benzie,
Kalinowski & Scrivener, 2004). Further they believed that the queer students were being given more respect than the Muslim students whose beliefs were in conflict with the lessons (Kalinowski, 2004). While the school district eventually resolved the conflict by referring to its own policies and procedures addressing equity and human rights, this example demonstrates the difficulty in reconciling different aspects of inclusion.

**People with Disabilities**

Inclusion of special education is a topic of great debate. The desirability for inclusion has resulted in the elimination of the parallel tracks of regular and special education systems. Debate is constant on whether regular class placement is equal to or superior to a special class placement, while others believe that inclusion is not feasible or valuable (Bunch & Valeo, 1997). Although there are those who argue that special education was created on the belief that students with disabilities needed a protective, special environment to learn, (Landrum, Tankersley & Kauffman, 2003; Hegarty, 2001), others argue for the amalgamation of the special education and regular education systems (Lupart, 1998). A “one size fits all” model for inclusion would not be supported by advocates supporting students with learning disabilities or giftedness who support a range of placements (Bunch & Valeo, 1997). Even those teachers who have stated being in support of inclusion have found themselves trapped by barriers such as class size, lack of personnel, lack of parental involvement, lack of preparation (Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher & Saumell, 1996).

Students with disabilities have the support of many social policies in Ontario including the Ontario Human Rights Commission’s (OHRC) which requires accommodations extended to the field of education. The OHRC identifies key barriers to full participation, including inadequate funding, physical inaccessibility, cumbersome and time-consuming accommodation processes, negative attitudes and stereotypes, and a lack of understanding of the rights and responsibilities of all parties under the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, the Ontarians with Disabilities Act (ODA) and Commission policy. Nevertheless, the requirement of educators to provide appropriate accommodations, even to the point of undue hardship, is now considered a human rights issue. In effect, school boards now have a duty to accommodate the learning needs of special education pupils or face the possibility of being involved in a Human Rights Tribunal case.

**Religion**

Having looked at gender, sexual orientation, culture/race, and disability, it is important to also address religion within our schools. First there is the need to have access to and respect for religious practices. Beyond the need to have a safe and racist free environment we must have space, policies and educational opportunities for our students in order that people might practice and learn about the variety of religions present in our country (Beaman, 2003; Cote, 1999, White, 2003; Zine, 2001). Among the issues that need to be addressed in the realm of religious inclusion/exclusion are:

- Which religious celebrations are observed throughout the school?
- How are minority religious observances acknowledged?
- How does the school calendar take into account diverse religious traditions?
- Are students learning about diverse religious traditions in the curriculum?
Exclusionary policies and practices

Standardized Testing

Inclusion is also linked to student success. In a recent discussion with members of the EQAO team at the Ministry of Education one of us voiced her concerns with the process of the EQAO standards. In this discussion she stated that she sees minority students, First Nations, low income, immigrant and students with disabilities accounting for disproportional amounts of the unsuccessful students. This observation is supported by literature that has shown that standardized testing is exclusionary (Portelli et al., 2005; Portelli and Vibert, 2001; McNeil, 2000; Gillborn & Youdel, 1998). Although the schools are rated by their successes, in general, the heterogeneous schools may “allow” this body of students to fail as long as the school continues to be seen as successful or they may push out students who may “bring down the scores”. Additionally, in Ontario, schools may allow members of the student body who they believe “would not be able to succeed” to simply not write the tests. Many of the students who are treated in this manner belong to the groups identified above. As such, provincial testing supports a system that neither values nor tests for inclusivity.

Consequences for Misconduct

Consequences for misconduct on school grounds are not equitable; those with disabilities, especially those resulting in outbursts, and people of colour are more likely to receive harsher punishment for the same violations as their able-bodied and white counterparts (Achenbaum, 2005; Jull, 2000). In Ontario, the Ministry of Education instructs principals to consider mitigating circumstances. For students with a disability, especially those with a propensity toward behaviours, educators are asked to consider to what degree characteristics of the exceptionality influence the propensity toward behaviours that may be interpreted as aggressive and/or violent. The effect is to give principals flexibility in administering the suspension and expulsion consequences of the Safe Schools Policy. Despite this, the Ontario Human Rights Commission recently found that students with disabilities and students of some racialized groups were still disproportionately negatively affected by safe schools policies (Bhattacharjee, 2003).

Many safe Schools policies have been conflated with zero tolerance policies, which ignore the individual social contexts of conflict, and the inherent imbalances in social power relations that occur within schools. The accompanying issues include a displacement of violence to the periphery of schools and communities and an over representation of marginalized students and students with disabilities receiving suspensions and expulsions (Jull, 2000).

Conclusion

Administrators hold very important leadership capacities to instill, foster and gently shove their school into an inclusive mind set (Ryan, 2003; Derkatz, 1996; Gillborn, 1995; Troyna & Hatcher, 1992). Whereas some believe that leadership is an individual function, still other feel that leadership is a cross school activity (Ryan, 2003). Regardless, few would argue that the principal is a neutral party in this important issue. Ryan and Joshee (2006) are currently working on a major research study entitled The Inclusive Schools Project. This research is intended to discover how principals across Canada approach inclusion. It is looking at how principals include students, teachers and parents in decision-making and policy-making. It also explores the strategies that principals employ to include marginalized, diverse and underprivileged students in curricula, teaching and other school activities. The Inclusive Schools Project is being
conducted in four distinct phases: policy analysis, interviews, case studies and online questionnaire collection. The information this study generates will help principals with their inclusive practices. The study is designed to document the obstacles principals face in practicing inclusion and report successful strategies from the field.

References


