

Perspectives

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Professional Development

Inclusive Education in Canada: *Can We Talk?*

by Michael Bach

This article is adapted from the author's opening plenary remarks at the CTF "Building Inclusive Schools" conference held in Ottawa in November 2005.

I'd like to begin by thanking the Canadian Teachers' Federation, its Board and its members for taking the step to host this conference. It comes exactly one year after the Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL)¹ hosted a National Summit on Inclusive Education to consider the barriers that students with disabilities face to full inclusion and how we might forge strategies and mobilize with others to move an agenda forward.

CTF committed in November 2004 to hold a conference one year later to follow up our Summit, and to widen the dialogue to consider how to advance inclusion not only from the perspective of students with disabilities but from other perspectives as well – including anti-racist education, anti-homophobic education, feminist perspectives of gendered education, and the exclusion and cultural marginalization of First Nations and aboriginal students. This conference is meant to be a dialogue that takes place at those many intersections where certain differences have come to mean inequality and exclusion in our education systems and in our broader society. I think we owe CTF a huge debt for convening the space where we can have this dialogue nationally – with teachers from across the country, teacher unions, other movements for change, thinkers and academics, and governments.

As I go into this dialogue I have some questions in mind, some hopes and cautions about what is possible and desirable as we convene these spaces to broaden our conversations about quality inclusive public education. By way of beginning, and speaking very much from my perspective in a national advocacy movement to advance the full educational inclusion of children and youth with intellectual disabilities, I want to frame some of the questions, and some of my starting points.



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addressing conference participants



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Shared political vision for inclusive public education?

1. *Firstly, do we in this room share, or can we forge through the kinds of conversations we'll have over the next few days, a political vision and project for quality inclusive public education for all children and youth in Canada – for an education system that nurtures and helps secure full citizenship for all?*

By full citizenship I mean a citizenship status that brings with it valued recognition from others for differences, and for shared identities, and which secures membership and belonging in regular classrooms and in communities.

This conference is meant to be a dialogue that takes place at those many intersections where certain differences have come to mean inequality and exclusion in our education systems and in our broader society.

In our movement we don't take it for granted, given the scale of exclusion of children with intellectual disabilities from educational opportunity and belonging in our education systems. And given continued political pressure by elected leaders for what we see as systemic exclusionary education policies and practices – such as the Ontario MPP who, at special education hearings last week at Queen's Park, the provincial legislature in Ontario, spoke openly about how we should look for guidance in this province to some of the more effective segregated education systems in other countries.

We don't take for granted – even across different disability groups – a shared vision and project, though many are making efforts to build one. At our Summit last year we began to explore more common ground between those advocating for students with learning disabilities and those advocating for students with intellectual disabilities – many of the former advocating to get children out of regular classrooms so they can get the attention they feel students need; and many

in our movement advocating to get children into regular classrooms in ways that include, support and value them.

And in the broader picture, what does it mean for a quality public education system if faith-based and particular ethno-racial-cultural groups get separate publicly funded schools because of the failure of our current system to respond. We know an inclusive system has no place for the systemic separation of students with intellectual disabilities that we now see; does it have room for separation across other lines of difference, as long as such schools don't segregate on the basis of disability? My gut tells me no, though I am compelled by the stories and analysis of those who see such exclusion on the basis of race, of faith, and of other differences.

So I think we need to critically examine, in conversations across the many perspectives represented at this conference, what we mean by quality inclusive public education for all – in order to get perspectives and positions on the table and begin to look for common ground.

Hearing each other's stories

2. *A second question I have as we start this conversation is this: Are we hearing each other's stories of exclusion and of inclusion? And are we hearing the stories of those who are trying to create classrooms where all kids do belong, those teachers who are still struggling to make this happen, those who have given up, those young teachers who have burned out in the process? Are we prepared, even if we're willing, to have the kind of conversation across differences out of which a shared political project might grow?*

I often feel there are so many of us talking, so many of us trying to make our claims heard because we are so angered by the exclusion and denial we face that we aren't listening to others. And I speak here only for myself, and not for others in the movement I work in, or other movements we collaborate with and want to collaborate with. I feel we're up against so much in terms of trying to transform the education

system in this country. I feel challenged by leaders who remain or are recently becoming enamored of segregated education, and threatened by what appear to be dominant values in society that so easily justify exclusion and harm. I feel extraordinarily frustrated that our attempts to build public recognition of the desperate need for a disability agenda in this country so often go unheard. But I also wonder if we're listening well enough to the claims of others because if we don't, we're not having a conversation. I think we're often in a series of monologues, where positions become fixed, polarities widen, and political possibilities, it seems to me, diminish.

At the same time we can't underestimate the challenges we face in starting up a conversation – in listening across the differences that have come to divide us. Perhaps that is where we have to start – to share with each other our own understanding of some of the difficulties we face in even beginning to share our stories. Certainly for children and youth with intellectual disabilities and their families, we're cautious. Stories are often used against them, or let me put it this way – parents are often required to tell stories about their children in certain ways as a condition of getting the support they need.

It's a classic Catch-22 – to get educational supports and services one must construct need. The more 'severe' a child's need, the more likely he or she will get access to funded supports. But in doing so, a child has come to be seen as being so 'severe', so disabled, that there's no hope of including her in a regular classroom. That Catch-22 has been institutionalized by the Supreme Court of Canada in the Emily Eaton case – where the court articulated a norm of inclusion for education systems in Canada, but then determined disability-related thresholds that needed to be met for children to be able to benefit from that right.

We face other challenges in telling our stories. It's not that children with disabilities are not known – no, the knowledge about them fills files. There is often so much information about a child, so much

data crunched by the lenses available for viewing them, that they are objectified out of possibility. I remain convinced by the claim of the Jewish moral philosopher Emmanuel Levinas that the basis of an adequate and inclusive ethics for our relationship to others lies in coming face-to-face with others. The more we fill children's files with reports by psychometrists and other professionals, the more we close the space for other kinds of stories to be told, the more difficult we make it for others to come face-to-face with children with intellectual disabilities. And in so doing, we make it easier for an ethical justification to exclude.

It is, as environmental philosophers Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston suggest, that we need to start placing ethics before epistemology. We need an ethics of listening respectfully and openly to others, even when they speak in ways we don't understand, before we rush to know them, if we are to have a hope of fostering more valued recognition across the differences that have come to mean separation and exclusion. I'm not suggesting that assessments are not helpful information for assisting us pedagogically and in meeting a child's real needs. However outside of a context where we come face-to-face, outside of a context where we can hear first what comes from the other side, these ways of knowing won't serve inclusion well.

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Another challenge we in the disability equality rights movement face is that the exclusions facing children with disabilities, and children with intellectual disabilities in particular, are not seen as an essential standpoint for critical analysis of education. The issues children with disabilities face are often seen as primarily administrative in nature.

While there are wonderful thinkers and writers in this country putting together a critical analysis in education theory and practice on the basis of disability, I don't believe the standpoint and category of disability is yet as integrated as it needs to be in the basic categories of critical education analysis – of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and increasingly sexual orientation. I don't say that as a judgment of those whose work on critical education theory, pedagogy and practice I admire, but simply state it as an appeal.

The challenges facing children with intellectual and other disabilities in the education system are unique.

I share these as just a couple of the challenges our movement faces in being heard more clearly, simply to make the point that a conversation among us is critical – and that one of the places we might start is exploring, from our own perspectives and spaces, why it has been so difficult to have that conversation in the past.

Forging alliances

3. *A third question for me is the following: If we assume we could have a conversation where we heard one another, and learned from one another, and if out of that conversation we could forge a shared political project that accounted for our distinct and shared identities, does it make sense to forge political, strategic and tactical alliances to move this project forward?*

An immediate response might be “well of course”, and I believe we absolutely need to forge such alliances. But there are some well-founded cautions that suggest we need to build such alliances carefully – on the basis of real conversation, real listening, and a deep understanding of what a shared political project entails.

One of the cautions in assuming that an alliance is easily constructed and won, is that the issues regarding the inclusion of children who have been differently marginalized raise

unique challenges. Many have said we can't advance inclusive education for one group of children, without advancing it for all other children at the same time. Certainly from a broad perspective of fostering inclusive school cultures I believe this to be true. If we don't, we'll risk winning advances for one group at the expense of others.

At the same time we have to proceed down that path very carefully if at all. The challenges facing children with intellectual and other disabilities in the education system are unique. They require enormous structural change in basic pedagogical concepts and practices; in teacher education institutions; in funding regimes; in inter-departmental coordination – across education, health and social services; in global knowledge management and brokering on education – the list goes on.

Given the scale of challenges to be addressed, one strategic approach is that we need to remain focused on our issue, and appeal to the likes of those in this room to support us in this cause. A general call for inclusive education won't advance us far enough – either in terms of vision, tactics or outcomes. Given the limited resources we have to build alliances even within our own federation, and then across the disability movement, combined with the multiple claims for and understandings of inclusion, there is reasoned advice in this approach.

However while we need to remain focused, and have distinct strategies, I think they will ultimately fail us in our particular goals unless we have a broader alliance that emerges from a respectful conversation to forge a shared political vision and project for quality inclusive public education in Canada. Without the grounding of that vision, and a real dialogue where we hear one another, we won't be able to mobilize the resources or the public recognition for our strategies and tactics to make that much difference. This doesn't mean to me that we don't mount focused efforts to advance the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities, but rather that we need spaces to have a broader conversation and seed a political project that can bind us in common cause.

That's I hope why we're here today. I look forward to listening, to clarifying our claims, and to wondering with you how we might shape a common understanding to move us all forward, to create public schools where all children really do belong.

Endnotes

1 The Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL) is a national federation of 13 provincial/territorial and over 400 local Associations for Community Living, with 40,000 members nationally. CACL's mission is to advance the full citizenship, human rights, and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. CACL is an active member of Inclusion Interamericana, the regional federation of sister organizations in the Americas; and of Inclusion International, the international federation of over 200 national family-based associations with a mission to advance the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities globally.

References

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