

Towards the National Summit on Inclusive Education

November 24-26, 2004

Ottawa

**Priorities and strategies for action on inclusive education:
A discussion paper... in search of input and suggestions**

by

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to consider a framework for action after the **National Summit on Inclusive Education** (November 24–26, 2004), and to invite feedback and input to this framework. This paper outlines a range of options and possibilities which we hope might be considered and discussed as the Summit takes place, thereby avoiding the perennial question of many such meetings: good discussion, but what do we do next?

As the conference host (Canadian Association for Community Living – CACL), and one participating organization (British Columbia Teachers’ Federation – BCTF), we offer this paper purely to stimulate thinking and discussion about potential actions. It does not represent our “policy” on the issue. We consider it a “work in progress” (likely at a very basic stage), and hope that you will offer your ideas and input so that our initial thinking can be expanded and improved prior to the conference. At the end of the paper we outline ways to provide feedback.

As participants in the planning of this conference, we are aware of the need for strategic thinking and planning prior to and during the conference, so that actions can build on the ideas generated at the Summit to support students, teachers, and families who participate in/support others in Canadian K–12 educational programs. This Summit is action-oriented and is based on a simple premise: that if we act together we can make greater headway toward inclusive education in Canada.

Each stakeholder group might consider whether its organization is willing to commit to future individual or collaborative actions identified at the Summit, or at subsequent planning stages, with commitments of staff time and funds. While such decisions will not be possible until some time after the Summit is concluded, it is anticipated that ideas generated through discussion at the Summit, or shortly after, might generate financial or in-kind commitments within 6 months of proposals for action being developed. For such commitments to be made, we are also aware that actions should meet the needs of the organizations represented at the Summit, so that the “buy-in” reflects an investment of utility for each organization or level of government.

We anticipate five kinds of organizations that might co-develop strategies and projects:

- governments (provincial and federal)
- universities
- school districts
- teacher unions/associations
- community organizations.

Not all proposals for projects would involve every organization, but we hope that all organizations are involved in some projects.

In considering the future, we think it may be helpful to operate within a framework for action that includes:

1. **Priority areas** we feel must be addressed to provide a solid foundation for inclusive education across Canada
2. **Strategies** for addressing these priorities for action.

Priorities for an Inclusive Education Agenda

Five priorities will be explored at the Summit. Others may emerge, or the current five may evolve into different areas of focus or different configurations. But at the time of writing, the five priorities identified through the Advisory and Program committees for the Summit are:

1. Leadership in education and society

What kinds of leadership are required? How should governments that set policy support the policies they have imposed? Might a particular organization such as a teacher union or a community organization take leadership over a specific issue? How does leadership occur in schools and communities? What role might universities play? What other sectors could provide leadership for and support inclusive education? How can leadership at all these levels be developed and sustained?

2. Effective instructional strategies

Are all teachers aware of and confident in using inclusive strategies? Is there a core of what is essentially good teaching which is the same as inclusive teaching? What are ways that teachers can “differentiate” the curriculum to respond to the diverse needs of students with disabilities, while still creating an inclusive classroom and school? What kinds of mentoring, knowledge-sharing, and mutual support make for effective teaching?

3. Supports for teachers, students, and parents

Teaching to growing diversity in the classroom is a major challenge for teachers. What do teachers need in order to provide students with disabilities an effective education in a regular classroom? What are ways that students can get the supports they need to participate effectively in their own education, but not at the cost of excluding them from the regular classrooms and school? How can parents best be supported to assist their children?

4. Pre-service/in-service and professional development

Many universities have a limited focus on inclusionary strategies, yet almost all of their graduates will teach in nominally inclusive schools. How might this be addressed? How can teachers access in-service “as needed”, and might innovative forms of professional development be created to meet such needs?

5. Fulfilling the social contract

The social contract for quality public education in Canada seems to be unraveling. Restricted funding, and growing demands and diversity, have stretched school boards/districts and teachers to the limit. Some students and parents seem dissatisfied with the education system. There are concerns in the community that students with disabilities are by-and-large not getting an effective education that provides a foundation for their inclusion, citizenship, and opportunity in Canadian society. Nor are they getting the supports and accommodations to make such an education possible. Demand is growing for access to private or “charter” schools where exclusion of certain children can be made a matter of policy. There is diversity in our communities and schools, but there are also pressures on governments to spend resources in other ways. What efforts are underway, or could be mounted, to re-write the public covenant for quality education for all children?

Strategies – how we might address these priority areas

Drawing on consultations hosted by the Canadian Association for Community Living, and some of its provincial/territorial affiliates, Michael Bach, in his address to the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) Inclusive Education Conference of July 7–8, 2004, suggested four broad strategies to move an inclusive education agenda forward – beyond the individual, policy, and legal advocacy the community has engaged in for many years. We propose these as starting points for discussion on future directions. Existing initiatives by the B.C. Teachers' Federation (BCTF) which connect to each strategy are briefly described as examples of ways these strategies can be put into action. As you review/reflect on these broad strategies and examples, we invite you to add other examples, and/or you might want to suggest other strategies as well.

Strategy 1: Knowledge Networking: building on what we know

While much is known about effective inclusion, the sharing and dissemination of such knowledge is far from ideal. Very little is shared across districts and provinces, so that there is a constant “reinventing of the wheel”, when we might better share the existing knowledge and collaboratively build new knowledge and understanding.

One future direction, therefore, is to radically improve the dissemination of knowledge about effective inclusionary practices. Some examples of possible knowledge dissemination ideas may be found in the Social Science and Humanities Research Council's (SSHRC) document “From Granting Council to Knowledge Council: renewing the Social Sciences in Canada” (pages 14 and 15)¹.

Current examples of sharing knowledge:

a. BCTF web page on “Teaching to Diversity”²

This web site, currently being developed, aims to gather much information about inclusionary practices, and is targeted primarily at teachers in B.C. But the site could be expanded for use by teachers across Canada, and could also be accessed and improved by parents and community organizations. There are dual goals in building this web site: to facilitate access to information, and to pilot the use of the web site in pre-/in-service and professional development.

b. BCTF reports and publications

In 2002–03 the BCTF conducted research in two school districts to consider whether the concept of inclusive education was being challenged by changes forced upon districts by government funding, legislation, and contractual changes. 37 reports were published, including community profiles, parent perspectives, teacher survey data, and case studies of schools. These are all available on the BCTF web site³. Other BCTF reports include six case studies of good inclusionary practice from schools in urban and rural settings⁴, two studies on the issue of ESL

¹ http://www.sshrc.ca/web/whatsnew/initiatives/transformation/documents_e.asp

² <http://www.bctf.ca/TeachingToDiversity> (n.b., launch in November 2004)

³ <http://www.bctf.ca/education/InclusiveEd/ResearchProject/>

⁴ http://www.bctf.ca/cgi/LessonAidsDb.exe/get_entry?x=la.id=9909

students with special needs, the first focusing on the literature⁵ and the second⁶ exploring environments where teachers were developing practices to meet the needs of ESL students with needs other than English language acquisition.

Strategy 2: A Social Capital Strategy: building shared values, partnerships, and relationships

Social capital is the trust, values, and partnerships that make social innovation possible. Fully realizing the goal of inclusive education will require immense innovation at many levels – from how classrooms operate, to how relationships between schools and communities are managed, to how policy and financing for public education is designed and implemented, to what the terms should be for dialogues on education that take place provincially/territorially, nationally, and internationally. Building social capital is about building the relationships and partnerships that will enable value-driven change at these and other levels to take place and be sustained. Many recent studies (OECD, 2003) have stressed the need for such relationships to address complex issues requiring cross-departmental/-organizational/-sectoral participation.

There are many opportunities to build alliances for change in education systems that might include provincial governments, community organizations, school districts, and teacher unions, within and across provinces. In some jurisdictions there is a history of such relationships; for others the concept may be new. In some provinces and territories, the concept of collaboration between governments and teacher unions is common (Saskatchewan), while in others there seems a more fractious political climate where such collaboration is difficult, if not rare.

Current examples of building partnerships and relationships:

a. The B.C. “Special Education Partners’ Group”

This group consists of provincial community organizations with an interest in Special Education, and the two main unions whose members work in the K–12 education sector (BCTF and CUPE). In existence for four years, this group now offers union/community organization presentations at conferences, shares resources, and holds forums and seminars such as a May 2004 seminar on accountability and inclusion. Two of the main benefits from this partnership have been an increased understanding of issues, and engaging in dialogue to address them.

b. “Teaching to Diversity” supports in three school districts

This BCTF initiative offers teacher union support for teacher research, new-teacher orientation, and a number of other projects linked to inclusive education. Some funding is provided by the union, some by the school district, while management/organization of the project is shared between union (central and school-district local) and the school district. Initiatives will be piloted and information shared with other districts’ teacher associations and management in order to consider the utility and possible expansion of the initiatives. We hope that some projects will also include post-secondary institutions with teacher-training programs.

⁵ <http://www.bctf.ca/Education/esl/ESL-SpecialNeeds.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.bctf.ca/education/InclusiveEd/ESL-SpecialNeeds/>

c. Mentoring project

Based on BCTF research findings, there is evidence in B.C. of a considerable exodus of highly experienced specialist support teachers⁷ from roles that support students and classroom teachers in inclusive educational settings. As a result, many specialist support teachers have limited experience or training in the roles. The BCTF's mentoring project will offer BCTF facilitators who have received training in mentoring to join with experienced specialist support teachers to plan and operate group collegial conversations in which less-experienced specialist support teachers will meet with the more experienced. Participating school districts will pay for release time and teacher travel costs, while the union will pay for the facilitators to hold planning sessions and fund travel costs to the district to support the mentoring groups.

Strategy 3: Leadership – a leadership of ideas and action

Much has been written of leadership strategies, exemplified in the themes stated by education expert Michael Fullan in his book on how to foster leadership for educational change at the many levels that change is required. He points to five key areas where leadership is needed:

- bringing a moral purpose to a cause
- using people capable of managing change in complex times
- building relationships
- developing knowledge
- bringing coherence with vision of purpose

We suggest that leadership will be shared, and be explicitly a leadership of ideas, not status. By this we mean that one or more organizations/sectors might take the lead in a given area or initiative, so that each “leader” has a responsibility to move the actions forward while not dominating the directions decided.

Current example of leadership strategies:

The BCTF projects listed above are, we would argue, evidence of the “leadership of ideas” where a teacher union commits time, staff, and money to developing concepts which are communicated to potential partners, who decide whether or not they wish to participate, and how they should be shaped for use in different communities. Our purpose is clear and simple: to support as best we can our members who teach a diverse student population in B.C. schools by improving access to information and piloting collaborative approaches to supporting inclusive education. As relationships are built, our collective knowledge is increased through the development of the projects, and our progress is shared with our members and a wider audience, with access to all through the BCTF web site.

Strategy 4: Minority Rights Strategy: creating a valuing, disability-positive culture in the classroom

Much of the current debate on human rights tends to stress the rights of the individual. The “Minority Rights” strategy suggests that the disabled are also a community with a shared history and perspectives, a diverse and evolving set of cultures that have not been valued in society, a group whose forms of life are deserving of respect, value, and protection. “Disability culture” is

⁷ In B.C., such teachers include Special Education and Learning Assistance teachers.

an emerging arena for action with a focus on literature by people with disabilities, arts, and media. How does a minority-rights strategy connect to inclusive education and the priorities identified above? The curriculum and teaching challenge for inclusive education is not just about how to include and support students with disabilities in the regular classroom. It is also about how to create curriculum resources and a school culture where all students, including students with disabilities, can see themselves, and learn to value the identities and cultures of others.

Conclusion

The National Summit on Inclusive Education offers a unique opportunity to identify key areas of action required to build a more inclusive K–12 education system across Canada. It also provides an opportunity for organizations to take the first steps in developing or expanding collaborations and partnerships to achieve this goal.

We can do more together than we can do separately. If inclusive education is a common goal and a shared focus, then the conference must be the first step in concrete, strategic planning utilizing the strengths and interests of the participating organizations. But we must also be realistic, perhaps starting small within a bigger vision. We should also recognize our limited resources and serve the needs of each participant organization, so that initiatives are not “add-ons” to already-stretched workloads. We suggest pragmatism and manageability in projects, but also believe in the idealistic goals of improving education for all students while also supporting the work of teachers and the needs of families.

We ask you, as Summit participants, and those who might not be able to participate in the Summit but can participate in this ongoing dialogue, to consider these priorities and strategies as we move towards our meeting at the end of November.

If you wish to add your ideas to this document (perhaps by sharing examples of existing workable initiatives), please e-mail your response to both:

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Charlie Naylor, B.C. Teachers' Federation: cnaylor@bctf.ca

Please copy all your responses to Denise Silverstone, Conference Co-ordinator, at the Canadian Association for Community Living: dsilvers@cacl.ca

If we can find sufficient examples of working strategies, we will also organize a poster session at the November Summit where participants might view and consider the strategies. We will also prepare another draft of this paper including the ideas and input we receive.

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