



### Inclusion: Making education work for all students

This position paper was created by a subcommittee of members of the Special Education Association (SEA) executive. The paper represents the current views held by this group on the timely topic of inclusion and through this addresses class size and composition. The purpose of the paper is to provide information designed to promote thought and dialogue around these issues. The premise of the paper is the importance that must be given to meeting the needs of each individual student, the primacy of the role of the classroom teacher in making inclusion work, and the supports required for both.

*Inclusion is the value system which holds that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their education. The practice of inclusion transcends the idea of physical location and incorporates basic values that promote participation, friendship and interaction.*

**BC Ministry of Education. (1995). *Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines for Special Education Services.***

Inclusion is a philosophy that promotes the acceptance of all students as members of a learning community, regardless of their circumstances. It supports the rights of students to be educated with their peers in a meaningful way, to the extent that they can manage. It is the foundation for making the classroom or school a welcoming place, where appropriate learning experiences are available for everyone.

A successful inclusion experience must be tailored around the strengths and needs of individual students, not around a label or designation. It requires deliberate consideration of the systemic capacity to provide the services that will enable these students to be successful.

The Special Education Association (SEA) believes that there are certain, vital components required for successful inclusion. These components include, but are not limited to:

- An accurate understanding of inclusion
- An attitude of acceptance of the inclusion philosophy and the use of this philosophy to guide decision making and practice
- Teacher knowledge and skills that allow for inclusion to be successful
- Adequate student and teacher supports for program implementation

Along with these key components, system structures developed at the school, district and ministry levels are necessary to foster ongoing, long-term commitments to making inclusion work. We support and defend inclusion as a model for our schools and our society, with the knowledge that a concentrated, collaborative effort has to be maintained to ensure its feasibility.

It should be noted that there is an ever growing body of knowledge regarding the requirements for successful inclusion to occur. Promoting a broader understanding and acceptance of the philosophy of inclusion, along with using the existing research to guide supportive practices in schools, will allow the inclusion of students with special learning needs to work.

### Understanding Inclusion

Inclusion is often confused with integration however these terms are not synonymous. Inclusion is a philosophy of belonging that is supported by a number of educational practices. Integration is a practice, a strategy that can

be used as one means to facilitate inclusion. Integration is the process of having students participate in regular school programs and interact with same age and grade peers when possible and appropriate. Integration does not mean that a student with special needs will always be placed full time in a regular classroom. Nor does it preclude the use of alternate instructional settings when it is appropriate. It is the participation with peers in the school and classroom community in meaningful ways that is the intent of integration, and this practice fosters the ultimate goal of belonging, of being included.

### Attitudes

Attitudes on inclusion can serve to support or act as a barrier. For inclusion to work, classroom teachers must be willing to acknowledge their responsibility for the educational program and success of every student in their classroom, including those with special needs. This acceptance is demonstrated by teachers who structure positive and welcoming classroom settings, embrace the value of diversity, and view each student as a contributing member of the group. Inclusive teachers recognize that children have more commonalities than differences. They also have an attitude that fosters problem-solving in order to find ways to create opportunities for all students to participate successfully.

Attitudes are influenced by experience. Educational environments that allow for inclusion to be successfully practiced must be created. This goes beyond the classroom to the larger school setting. A positive school climate requires collaborative teamwork that includes a shared staff vision along with administrative support and leadership. Trust among partners is critical to the equation, and this is established when action plans to achieve the goals set for students are supported by adequate resources and consistent professional support. School, district and provincial organizations must be structured to

acknowledge challenges and allow for them to be addressed to the benefit of all.

It can be argued that the attitudes of some teachers who were once open to the concept of inclusive education have shifted negatively, due to experiences of constantly trying to make it work with less - fewer supports required to address the challenges of teaching to the range of diversity in the classroom. Nothing motivates like success, and successful experiences are imperative to developing and maintaining a positive attitude toward inclusion and internalizing the belief that inclusion should be the philosophy embraced by our public education system.

### Teacher Knowledge and Skills

Research demonstrates that it is the classroom teacher who plays a pivotal role in the success of student inclusion, so the knowledge and skills necessary to fulfill this role are crucial. Fortunately, there is a large and growing knowledge base about successful inclusive education practices. Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that this information is not being obtained by pre-service or in-service teachers. For example, 43% of a sample of B.C. teachers report feeling unprepared to teach to the diverse range of students in their classrooms (Naylor, 2002).

Pre-service teacher training programs should be guided by the philosophy of inclusion and must intensify their focus on strategies for teaching to the range of student abilities that are demonstrated in all classrooms. As well, in-service classroom and specialist teachers need on-going access to professional development that enhances their knowledge about diverse learners and their ability to develop educational programs in response to current research on effective practices.

## Adequate Supports

The Special Education Association believes that successful inclusion requires multiple, interconnected supports. To this end, the five principles of support that have been approved by the BCTF Council of Professional Specialist Association presidents is a useful model. These principles outline a continuum of strategies (prevention and intervention) which include: 1) professional development to extend teacher knowledge of effective classroom practices, 2) manageable class sizes, 3) prompt assessment procedures to identify and respond to student difficulties early, 4) appropriate interventions and 5) access to services from qualified specialist teachers. (Sparks, Myrtle and Fewster: *Grey Area Students: What's missing in the discussion of class composition?*)

All students require a classroom placement that addresses their instructional needs. This means a classroom where the teacher maintains a current knowledge base about effective instructional strategies, offers activities or learning experiences that are individualized to the extent necessary, and is provided adequate resources to teach diverse learners. Professional development opportunities that not only introduce effective programs and strategies but also reinforce their implementation in ongoing feedback activities can help teachers with successful differentiated instruction.

Manageable class sizes are also preventative in nature, as they allow increased teacher attention for all students. An important concept in learning is the value of immediate and frequent feedback to gauge student understanding and catch developing problems early. This is not always possible with large classes, which can result in decreased time for individual teacher-student interactions and increased numbers of learning problems. Smaller class sizes also provide an opportunity for meaningful connections to be established between teachers and students as well as students and peers, both of which are crucial to an atmosphere of belonging. The determination of a manageable class size,

however, cannot be judged entirely on the number of students in the class. There must also be a consideration of the diversity and dynamics of the students in the classroom. This means that schools need to be able to exercise some flexibility for reducing class sizes in order to create optimum teaching situations, in response to the class composition.

A combination of prompt assessment and collaborative consultation is the vehicle to gather information from multiple sources and create a student profile that determines specific strengths and needs as early as possible. This profile can then be used to build a timely individualized educational program for the student. Assessment procedures, whether for the identification of a special learning need or for ongoing progress evaluation, need to be timely and linked to instructional decisions. Without this, we risk the loss of early intervention opportunities, which are proven to be more effective than late remediation. In general, as the severity of a problem increases, so does the amount of resources required to alleviate the problem.

When educational interventions are indicated, support must be structured and continuous. Not all students need qualitatively different instruction or modified programs, but they do need more intensive, explicit instruction. The type of support must be determined according to the individual student needs. For some students this will involve individualized learning activities within the classroom setting and for others it may mean intensive remedial instruction in an alternate setting. Adequate educational services must be provided to support interventions not only for students with identified special needs but also for any student experiencing learning difficulties.

Instructional interventions are dependent on the provision of resources. Specialized materials and equipment must be available when needed. Technology and environmental adaptations that support a student's success should be based on their need and available to all students. Restrictions that

prevent access to these resources may be detrimental to learners. For example, if a student has a written output disorder, he or she should have access to services like Specialized Education Technology BC (SET-BC). Although this represents a departure from the current model of service delivery, the services provided by provincial outreach programs may be able to help many students if the eligibility focus is student need.

It is a challenge for regular classroom teachers to have the knowledge to meet the needs of the diversity of learners in their classrooms from year to year. Classroom teachers need access to specialist teachers and support personnel who can work with them to develop and implement effective individualized programs that will help them address individual student needs. In turn, these specialists should have the appropriate skills, knowledge and training in order to provide this support. Students need access to learning opportunities that are appropriate to their strengths and different abilities, and teachers need the collaborative support of knowledgeable colleagues to deliver these opportunities.

### Discussion

There is and will continue to be considerable diversity in the classrooms of this province. One driving force for successful inclusion must be an initial examination of the individual strengths and need of the students. Another is the centrality of the classroom teacher in the day to day life of the student in particular and the success of inclusion in general. To honour this, classroom teachers must be given the opportunity to articulate what they need to be successful with students, based on their professional knowledge and on information provided about students. Classroom teachers must be allowed time to collaborate with specialist staff and to know they are supported by other stakeholders involved with the student.

While we agree that the classroom teacher plays a major role in inclusion, the organizational structures necessary to support successful inclusion must be in place. These structures include:

- A positive, accepting, collaborative school climate
- Manageable class sizes
- Consideration of the numbers and educational needs of students placed in the classroom
- Ongoing professional development for all teachers that is accessible, relevant and meaningful
- Adequate funding and resources
- Access to the services of specialist teachers and other specialist staff
- Instructional leadership at the provincial, district and school levels
- Time.... time to plan, time to consult, time to examine and revise practices, time to teach, time to connect with each student as an individual, and time to reflect on what is working and what needs to be changed.

The Special Education Association calls for constructive dialogue on how to implement the ideas presented in this paper in order to keep the focus on creating successful educational experiences for each individual student.

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