Child-Centred

WORKIN IN EDUCATION IS A VALUED PROFESSION & HONOURED FOR IT'S IMPACT ON OUR ~~SOCIAL~~ SOCIETY

kids are people with human rights

HONOURS THE INPUT FROM TEACHERS & EA'S WHEN THERE ARE PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED

Prioritizing Relationships + Community

Have a shared knowledge base with educators, families, advocacy groups, and child

Belief that we all deserve to learn (AND re-learn)

"Everyone" (educators) can & should have access to new learning

Commit to funding the educational support for new + existing educators

Focusing on the whole child and what every child needs.

we value prof. collaboration We can't do this alone

Honouring Truth + Reconciliation Protecting Language Culture + Traditions

Human Dignity Self-Advocacy ↳ Transformation of the heart!

Growth + Learning Supporting gifts, passions + Abilities Learning Outside the Classroom

Self-Agency Equity Community + Family Safety

Belief in the inherent value of a human, not based on ability

Inclusive Education is a Human Right

Communities of belonging:
Conversations from the *Think Tank* on Meaningful Inclusion for Students with Disabilities and Diverse Needs

Every child has something to offer, & is a contributing member of the school community

Everyone in the school should FEEL a sense of belonging

Inclusion is the expectation - and all teachers need to know how to implement this.

mental health is foundational to learning for students and educators

schools should feel safe for everyone

2 or more educators in every classroom will allow for inclusion processes to be more attended to.

Belief system that values SEL ♡

Indigenous voices will move Education towards meaningful inclusion.

Parents Know what their children need.

Compassionate Systems Leadership

Safer spaces for indigenous leaders in schools are important

Valuing indigenous Knowledge is necessary to move forward

Disability in our schools is an inherent fact.

Training should be intersectional!

Educating our educators will move us toward meaniful inclusion

Acknowledgement of Traditional Territory

BC Teachers' Federation members and staff live, teach, and carry out union work on the traditional and unceded territories of the many First Nations peoples of British Columbia. We specifically acknowledge the unceded joint territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), səlilwətaɫ (Tsleil Waututh), and Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) Nations on whose land the BCTF building is located.

Communities of belonging:
Conversations from the *Think Tank on Meaningful Inclusion*
for Students with Disabilities and Diverse Needs

In June 2024, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) hosted a *Think Tank on Meaningful Inclusion for Students with Disabilities and Diverse Needs*. The motivation for the *Think Tank* [1] came from the experience that conversations about inclusive education too often happen in silos or behind closed doors. Many groups and organizations have documented gaps and failures in inclusive education and the devastating effects on children, their families and school staff. One effect of a fractured space for talking about inclusive education is that those who are fully committed to inclusive education can find themselves fighting for and triaging the limited supports that currently exist within BC's public schools. [2]

The *Think Tank* sought to shift the frame for the conversation, asking what might happen when there is time and space to think beyond binaries and divisive positions. This approach seeks to resist what Eve Tuck (2009) [3] calls a "damage-centered" framework for research, in which "pain and loss are documented in order to obtain particular political or material gains" (p. 413). Instead, Tuck invites a "desire-based framework" as "an antidote to damage-centered research" (p. 416). To centre desires for meaningful inclusion is not about ignoring critical issues that currently exist or adopting a naïvely optimistic vision about what inclusion could be. A desire-based framework "accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the *not yet* and, at times, the *not anymore*" (p. 417).

By foregrounding desire, the *Think Tank* invited conversations around the *not yet*, starting from several shared assumptions:

- **Not if...how** - Inclusion *should* and *can* be happening. The work is *how* to get there.

- **Complexity** - Inclusion *will not* and *cannot* look the same for every child. This understanding must be held alongside all children's right to full participation in meaningful education and learning.

- **Tensions and contradictions** - How inclusive education is defined, conceptualized, and practiced cannot be simplified or flattened to a single model or vision of what it looks like.
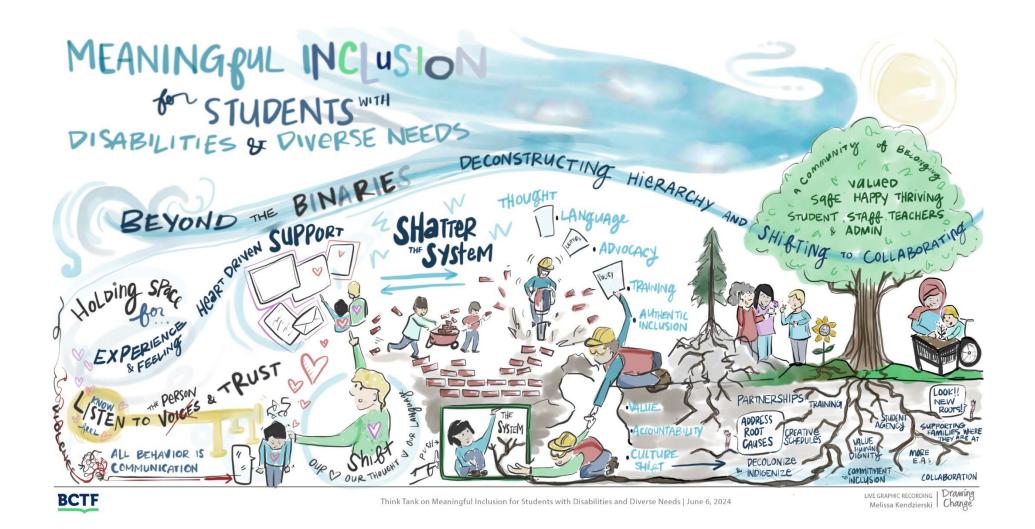
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[1] See Appendix A for a full description of the *Think Tank* methodology.
[2] This can be seen as part of what Sam E. Abrams calls the "commercial mindset" in education, whereby discourses of crises within the public contribute to privatization. See: Abrams, S. E. (2016). Education and the Commercial Mindset. Harvard Education Press.
[3] Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities. Harvard Educational Review, 79(3), pp. 409-427. For more information on Eve Tuck, see http://www.evetuck.com.

- **Curiosity** - Tensions and contradictions can be met with curiosity and an agreement to listen and learn, while not necessarily sharing the same conclusions.

Building on these assumptions, this report does not present a linear record of the conversation or fixed conclusions emerging from the *Think Tank*. Instead, by synthesizing themes - and recognizing tensions and contradictions within the two days of dialogue - it invites the reader to think alongside the diverse experiences and perspectives of what meaningful inclusion looks and feels like and how, together, we can create stronger and more diverse communities of belonging.

Think Tank on Meaningful Inclusion for Students with Disabilities and Diverse Needs | June 6, 2024

LIVE GRAPHIC RECORDING
Melissa Kendzierski
Drawing Change

Shared roots: Valuing inclusive education

Fundamentally, an education system reflects the values upon which it is built. This was a key theme throughout the *Think Tank*, and participants broadly expressed four key values, or orientations, that must underpin an inclusive education system.

- **Education is a human right.** All children have the right to learn and, as supported by law,[4] children have the right to the scaffolds and supports necessary to access education. When equity of access to education is understood as a human right, then inclusion has to be the expectation. This requires viewing all decisions related to education through a child-centered lens and starting from the assumption that all children can learn and have the right to be in school.

- **Every child should have a sense of belonging in school, supported through community and relationships.** Meeting the needs of the whole child cannot be siloed into hierarchical roles, provided in isolated supports or codified into paperwork. Belonging must be nurtured through purposeful relationship-building. Parents know the needs of their children and school staff, including teachers, education assistants and specialists, bring different knowledges and skills to supporting any particular child. There also needs to be recognition of the positive impact of both education and educators on society.

- **Disability is at the center.** Ableism runs through BC's education system,[5] reflected in the language used to talk about inclusive education in the province, outdated diagnostic criteria,[6] as well as approaches that focus on 'fixing' a child. Valuing disability can take the form of supporting disabled students to build self-agency and advocacy, as well as recognizing and addressing ableist assumptions and structures within school buildings and communities.

- **Inclusive education must be decolonized.** Inclusive education is layered onto an education system that still needs to do the work of addressing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.[7] White settler knowledge systems have defined what inclusive education can and should be. Indigenous knowledges, including languages, cultures and traditions, offer different possibilities for imagining and enacting inclusive education for all children.

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[4] See Moore v. British Columbia (Education): www.decisions.scc-csc.ca/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/12680/index.do

[5] Following the BC Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, ableism is "a practice of dominate attitudes that devalue the potential of disabled people. There are set rules and values that favor the able-bodied and non-disabled." See: www.bchumanrights.ca/rewrite-the-rules/#:~:text=Ableism%20is%20a%20practice%20of,%2Dbodied%20and%20non%2Ddisabled.

[6] The manual used to guide inclusive education in BC uses outdated language (e.g. "special education services") and relies on outdated diagnostic criteria (DSM-IV). See: www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/inclusive/special_ed_policy_manual.pdf

[7] See www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1524495412051/1557511602225

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None of these orientations are intended as prescriptions for what inclusion should look like. Indeed, multiple visions of what inclusion 'looks' like were engaged at the *Think Tank*. What wove across them, however, was what meaningful inclusion 'feels' like: valued, happy, safe and thriving.

One of the tensions currently felt in BC's public schools is that organizational routines and practices often fail to fully align with the values and promises of inclusive education. This can lead to fierce debate over the efficacy of a particular approach or a search for another 'fix' to make schools more inclusive. It can result in reliance on actions that 'look' inclusive, such as a child engaged in a particular learning activity with the support of an adult and/or technology, while simultaneously undermining how fully a disabled child is welcomed into a school community. As outlined in the next section, *Think Tank* participants shared ideas and stories about what inclusion looks like in today's BC classrooms, and about tangible shifts needed to better align actual lived experiences with what a meaningful inclusive education experience could be.

Building inclusive school communities

It can be overwhelming to think in the space between 'where we are' and 'where we want to be' on the pathway to meaningful inclusion. There are urgent needs that must be met on any given school day, many of which were discussed during the *Think Tank*. These include: ensuring that students with intellectual needs are engaged in meaningful learning activities; receiving adequate funding for all designated and not yet designated students; addressing waitlists for learning assessments; meeting the needs of children with complex medical and mental health needs; fostering language-rich environments for deaf and hard of hearing students; stopping the exclusion and restraint of disabled students; addressing disparities in support services across the Province; meeting staffing needs across schools; and altering unsuitable school spaces. Reactive discourses, such as the focus on 'violence' in schools, pathologize children's behavior rather than engaging what children are very clearly telling us: the current education system is *not* working for them and is failing to uphold their right to an education.

The *Think Tank* started from the position that BC's public education system must address these needs *and* put in place systems and structures that will shift the enactment of inclusive education from *reactive* to *proactive*. Key elements of this shift include:

- **Training for school staff that is responsive to student needs and the whole child.**
  Professional learning is not a one-off activity. Learning needs can vary widely, and every classroom and school community will have a unique composition of needs. Furthermore, while school staff have different roles in relation to inclusive education, all staff require training and support. Inclusive education training is crucial before working in a school and should be more comprehensively incorporated into   teacher education and school leadership programs. At the same time, ongoing training that is responsive to particular students' needs is essential. This training should be rooted in equity, with a recognition of

privilege and intersectionality. It could be offered through an annual dedicated Ministry in-service day on inclusive education, as well as time for collaborative learning opportunities at school and/or district levels. It should also invite multiple knowledges and experiences, including from disabled people, elders (who are paid for their labour), and community organisations.

- **Time and space for collaboration.** As building relationships is a fundamental orientation for inclusive education, collaboration must be enabled through systems and structures. This requires identifying and dismantling hierarchal structures that impede communication and collaboration within schools, both between school staff members as well as between school staff and the community, including parents. It also requires having staff in every school community to collaborate with (classroom teachers, education assistants, school counsellors, and specialists such as Speech Language Pathologists) as well as linkages to supports within the broader community.

- **Investment in systems and structures that value disability.** Schools can be very unwelcoming places for students with disabilities—from building design (such as a lack of ramps) to 'common sense' notions of what constitutes a school and classroom (e.g., fluorescent lights, large class sizes, and loud bells). While accessibility is a crucial lens, a deeper appreciation of not just universal but anti-ableist design principles should shape educational spaces and places. Furthermore, the structures of education must be guided by policies and procedures that value the success of *all* students.

- **Safe schools for students, families and staff.** Inclusive school spaces must be intentionally cultivated and incorporate physical, cultural and emotional safety. *Physical safety* can be created by having the right resources at the right time, fostering student autonomy to use school facilities and communicate, and recognizing that police presence in schools may undermine restorative and transformative approaches to conflict resolution and problem solving.[8] *Cultural safety* can be supported through mechanisms that address and repair the impacts of racism, focusing on restorative practices and committing to listening to and believing all children. *Emotional safety* starts from listening, explicitly valuing difference and diversity, learning from the lived experiences of people with disabilities, and fostering safe and trusting relationships. All of these aspects of safety require having access to social, emotional and physical supports within every school.

- **Accountable funding that demonstrates that society values inclusion.** In the capitalist system in which we operate, governments fund what is valued.[9] Simply put: if government agrees that inclusion matters, it must be fully funded. This is not to say increased funding alone will 'fix' inclusive education shortfalls. Rather, funding is a necessary condition for moving further down the path towards a more fully inclusive education system. It is a

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[8] The BCTF *Policing in Schools Project* highlights teacher perspectives on creating and sustaining the conditions for safe, healthy and equitable public schools. See: www.bctf.ca/docs/default-source/for-news-and-stories/policing-in-schools-final-report.pdf%3Fsfvrsn%3D2494acaf_2&ved=2ahUKEwiBrr77l9yGAxVrDzQIHeEzC18QFnoECB4QAQ&usg=AOvVaw2Jxzf L6hoauqotlcsYxl7a

[9] This builds on the view, argued by Martin Luther King Jr., that government budgets are moral documents, reflecting what a society values and is willing to invest in.

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mechanism to ensure every child has access to learning assessment and specialist support services. It can help create the time and space for collaboration and relationship building. It is a condition for generating more creative school design and structures. It pays for the work of reimagining inclusive policies, approaches and procedures that are grounded in a rights-based perspective. It allows students to thrive in well-resourced classrooms and schools, supporting their gifts, passions and abilities.

Building inclusive school communities is fundamentally about educational change, where education change is understood as a deeply contested process precisely because it is about "deeply held beliefs and commitments about how we want to live."[10] The basis for this change must be a fundamental shift that prioritizes meaningful engagement with all members of a school community, working within tensions and contradictions, providing the time and space to have difficult conversations, and taking bold actions.

Teachers on the pathway to meaningful Inclusion

A key aim of the first day of the *Think Tank* was to allow the 15 teacher participants the time and space to engage as colleagues working on inclusive education. Their voices have been woven throughout this report. Additionally, BCTF Research identified themes shared by the rest of the applicants to the *Think Tank* that offer a shifting and nuanced understanding of meaningful inclusion from the perspective of teachers across the province. Broadly, teachers shared varying definitions of what inclusion 'is,' that shared some key concepts, as illustrated In Figure 1.

Figure 1: Inclusion is...

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[10] Westheimer, J. (2017). What kind of citizens do we need? *Educational Leadership*. 75 (3): 12- 18. Available at https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/what-kind-of-citizens-do-we-need

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Furthermore, teachers' descriptions of meaningful inclusion, shared during the *Think Tank* as well as in the written applications, foregrounded multiple facets of the practice of inclusive education:

(1) **Conceptual** – teachers spoke about what ideas guide their thinking about inclusion, such as education that is accessible, education that meets the needs of all students, and education that is based on valuing all people.

(2) **Ethical** – teachers recognized the ethical positions that underpin inclusion, such as recognizing and valuing every student and the right of every student to a meaningful education.

(3) **Actionable** – teachers highlighted the need for certain conditions to be in place for inclusion, such as adequate funding and appropriate learning spaces.

(4) **Pedagogical** – teachers shared how they incorporate inclusion into how they teach, such as making adaptations and accommodations in learning objectives, recognizing individual student learning needs, and fostering an inclusive classroom community.

(5) **Affective** – teachers pointed to how inclusion is embodied in experiences and emotions, such as belonging, being valued and empowered, and feeling welcome, safe and secure.

The failure to support and foster this multiplicity and complexity has devastating consequences. In the 2024 BCTF Membership Survey,[11] roughly half of teachers reported that students with disabilities and diverse needs are having their needs only slightly met (35.5%) or not met at all (10.7%). The 'answer' will not be found in a new program, consultant, or approach. We need a different starting point for "welcoming the child who arrives" (Kelley, 2023, p. 74)[12] into BC classrooms and schools.

Beyond the binaries: Deconstructing hierarchy and shifting to collaborating

As captured in the graphic recording (see page 3) of the *Think Tank*, by artist Melissa Kendzierski, a thread running across the *Think Tank* was the desire to think beyond binaries and hierarchies. *Think Tank* participants graciously shared aspects of their own identities and experiences. This complexity cannot be reduced to the 'boxes' of identity that public education systems often demand (teacher, parent, researcher, disabled person) or contained within the silos that seek to structure our work. It is the desire to continue having a different kind of conversation, one based in complexity and lived experiences: inclusive education as the shared work of building communities of belonging for all children.

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[11]. See: https://www.bctf.ca/docs/default-source/for-news-and-stories/bctf-membership-survey-summary-report-2023-2024.pdf?sfvrsn=3bdb986c_2

[12] Kelley, L.M. (2023). The person who arrives: Connecting disability studies and educational practice for teachers, parents, and others. Tellwell Talent.

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Appendix A: The *Think Tank* as a form of activist research

The *Think Tank* is a methodology that BCTF Research uses as a form of activist research, seeking to reclaim the 'Think Tank' approach from conservative framings. Following Jones (2018), activist research is a "framework for conducting collaborative research that makes explicit challenges to power through transformative action" (p. 27).[13] In a *Think Tank*, a group of teachers is selected from across the province to provide their perspectives, experiences, and recommendations on a particular issue. These conversations are complemented by academic and/or community-based partners. As part of the interactive research space, the conversations are interpreted in a visual mural, created by a trained graphic recorder who listens, synthesizes, and draws dialogue in real time, enabling participants to see patterns and collective wisdom emerging from group dialogue.[14]

Organized over two days, the *Think Tank on Meaningful Inclusion for Students with Disabilities and Diverse Needs* aimed to be a space for teachers, parents and other education partners to engage in collaborative conversations about the possibilities for and challenges to inclusive education in BC.

Recognizing the need for time and space for conversations with colleagues, the first day brought together 15 BCTF members from different classroom and specialist roles (10 participants), as well as representatives from BCTF Provincial Specialist Associations (PSAs)[15] and Provincial Advisory Committees[16] (5 participants). The day focused on sharing experiences from around the province and working within the tensions between the lived realities of teachers and students and the vision for an education system that supports the meaningful inclusion of all students. The day also incorporated the voices of teachers who were not selected to attend by presenting qualitative analysis of themes within applications that teachers submitted to the BCTF.[17]

This initial conversation was expanded into the second day of the *Think Tank* when the 15 BCTF members were joined by 15 guests representing community-based organisations, parent advocacy groups, and other educational partners. The day focused on holding a space for diverse perspectives and experiences alongside shared visions for inclusive education.

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[13] Jones, D. (2018). Research as resistance: Activist research as a framework and methodology for social change. In *Innovative techniques, trends, and analysis for optimized research methods*. IGI Global. 10.4018/978-1-5225-5164-5.ch002

[14] See Drawing Change - www.drawingchange.com

[15] The BCTF has over 30 Provincial Specialist Associations (PSAs). For this *Think Tank*, invitations were sent to the five PSAs who represent specialist teachers and/or focus on particular aspects of inclusive education in BC.

[16] Provincial Advisory Committees bring together a group of members, serving two to three year terms, who advise the BCTF Executive Committee on key issues. For this *Think Thank*, the Professional Issues Advisory Committee (PIAC) and the Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee (AbEd) were each invited to send one representative.

[17] The BCTF received over 150 applications for 10 spaces available for members. Final selection was made by the BCTF's Full-Time Table Officers (FTTOs).

Communities of belonging

Across both days, the *Think Tank* aimed to:

- explore what is needed to fully include all students in school
- identify issues, opportunities, and challenges shared by teachers and parents
- build connections and partnerships to strengthen collective advocacy for educational conditions that support the needs of all learners in BC.

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