Re-Imagining Inclusive Education (Inclusion)

Imagination in education has often been defined as a synonym to creativity – as in “imaginative” teachers planning creative, often arts based lessons or students being engaged in “imaginative” / creative endeavors (Nielsen, 2006). However, Egan and Judson (2008) define a more cognitive perspective, describing imagination as “the ability to think of the possible” and thinking “not only constrained by the actual” (p.127). Of course, this can lead to creative thinking and planning, but it goes beyond the concrete of instructional practice to a visioning of the possible in education outside of the perceived actual.

Inclusion, or inclusive education, has been a global consideration for more than three decades now. Around the world, children of the same age enter today’s classrooms with differing learning strengths and challenges, background knowledge, cultures, languages, and experience (Karangwa, Miles, & Lewis, 2010; Mowat, 2010; Schirmer & Casbon, 1995). While most educators agree that ideally, all children would be included in our school systems and classrooms, many doubt that possibility, and feel constrained by the actuality of limited resources, increasing student diversity, and lack of training (Bennett, 2009). So how do we bring back imagination into the dialogue about, and implementation of, inclusive education? How do we show students, parents, teachers, and administrators that not only is inclusive education possible, it can be achieved in spite of the perceived “actualities” of budgets, systems, and student diversity?

Imagining begins with an ideal, with stretching beyond what we think are the limits of the possible. Imagine what the ideal inclusive classroom, school, and school system look like, sound like, and feel like. Imagine a place in which every student feels good about themselves, what they have to offer, a sense of belonging. Imagine a place in which every student is challenged to
learn, to grow…to reach their full potential. Imagine a place in which every adult, too, has the same opportunities, that is - feels valued, has a sense of belonging, and is challenged to learn and grow. Imagination, in this context, is more a synonym for vision than for creativity, although, of course, one can have a creative vision. What is our vision?

We cannot decide what is possible, until we decide first what it is we are striving for. Inclusive education means just that – providing an education in which ALL students are welcomed and included. As such, it is important that we all recognize that diversity, or diverse learners, does NOT refer only to children with exceptional needs! Nor does it refer solely to ethnic, racial, or linguistic diversity. All children are diverse – fat/thin, rich/poor, personalities, ethnicities, languages, family constructions, and learning styles all contribute to the makeup of a diverse classroom. An inclusive learning community, on any scale (ie classroom, school, division, etc.), by definition includes ALL of the students encompassed by that community. In this definition then, inclusive education is not just about including students with disabilities, or students from culturally or linguistically minority populations – it is about providing education to ALL students.

In actuality, our system is currently heavily verbal linguistic by nature. The vast majority of learning occurs either through text, or through lecture/discussion, excluding students who do not learn well in this way. Alternative modalities are often seen as secondary. Yet in the job/professional world, the vast majority of performance takes place through non-text based means. Architects, software programmers, chemists, carpenters, doctors…spend little time reading novels and writing essays! Their performance is not evaluated through writing either. Even for those learners who can learn in traditional ways – read the chapter, write a summary/read the textbook/take a test – there is little engagement, and less higher order thinking to this
type of learning. In science, diagrams, dissections and models are a significant element to quantum physics, biochemistry, biology, and other fields – yet in elementary school, it is not unusual to hear a teacher say “you can draw if you finish your writing.” It is much more difficult to symbolically or visually represent a concept, than it is to write about it. Take a character sketch from a novel. A student can write, “she is brave” with little thought. However, if asked to represent that character symbolically/visually – the need to identify or create a symbol of the concept of bravery involves much more abstract thought. What about music? What would the tone or tempo of a symphony titled “Ode to Bravery” be? Differentiating our instruction in a way that includes the learning profiles of a broader spectrum of students can also actually increase the learning of all the students, even those traditionally successful, and create a community in which all students can feel valued and accepted. As a result, behavioral challenges significantly decrease, and student self-concept and engagement significantly increases (Katz, in press).

In order to imagine what inclusive education can be, to define a vision for inclusive education, we have to first look at where we’ve come from, what it should not be, and what the issues are that we have confronted thus far in the journey. We have made progress! At one time, many youth who now attend schools either never attended at all (e.g. those with disabilities, some from remote areas, etc.), or left before entering high school. However, we still have room to grow. Two themes emerge in conversations and literature within modern educational and larger societal research that outline key elements underlying a vision for inclusive education.

Social Inclusion/Exclusion

Social inclusion/exclusion has become a rising concern around the world. Organizations like the Laidlaw Foundation conduct research and advocate for marginalized populations in Canada, in
particular for children and youth. This is based on serious data indicating rising numbers of Canadian children living in poverty, suffering from hunger, and being excluded from both public policy and the opportunity to fully realize their potential (Wotherspoon, 2002). Social inclusion recognizes the need for belonging, acceptance and recognition for all people, and requires the opportunity for full and equal participation (Koster, Nakken, Pijl, & van Houten, 2009). It is about recognizing and valuing diversity; it is about engendering feelings of belonging by increasing social equality and the participation of diverse and disadvantaged populations. For education, social inclusion means that all students have the opportunity to be part of school communities and learn and grow alongside their peers. In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms prohibits discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. Despite this, and in contradiction to inclusive education policy in every province, it is common practice in our schools to segregate based on language/origin, disability, and emotional or mental well-being (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). Classrooms exist for students with a range of disabilities, for students learning English as a second language, and for students with emotional or behavioral disorders. Even when placed in regular classrooms, students with disabilities often do not participate in the academic or social life of the classroom. Instead, they are frequently given a separate space, and a separate program, and work solely with an educational assistant (Giangreco, 2010). The neediest learners are therefore taught by the least qualified personnel, and lack models of age appropriate behavior, social skills, and language their peers could provide – and the opportunity to have friends. There are still far too many students in Canada, with and without disabilities, who do not feel a sense of belonging and success in our schools.
Academic Inclusion/Exclusion

Academic Inclusion in education is an approach to educating all students together. Under the inclusion model, all students are placed in their home schools, and services are delivered in the classroom/school – with the general education teacher taking primary responsibility for ALL students enrolled in the class. Academic exclusion, on the other hand, refers to the denial of the opportunity for an education, in the fullest sense of the word, to some individuals or groups of students. Academic exclusion includes the denial of enrollment in neighborhood schools, the lack of exposure to curriculum and instructional activities, the absence of interactions with qualified teaching personnel and services, and the segregation from peers during learning activities. As previously noted, in many school divisions across the country, students with disabilities continue to be bussed to schools outside of their community, attend classrooms segregated from their typical peers where curriculum is rarely a central focus, are taught by educational assistants, and have little or no interactions with typical classmates. In addition, it is important to note that many of our most capable students are also being excluded, as they too are not being exposed to appropriate curriculum and instructional activities, and often feel isolated socially (Jackson, 1998; Stoeger & Ziegler, 2010). Again, there are still far too many students, with and without disabilities, who are neither appropriately academically challenged, nor engaged.

Inclusive Education

What then, is our vision for the future? Is it possible to have a school system in which every child is a part of the social and academic life of their classroom, school, and community? When I say every child, I mean every – no exceptions! Is this possible, even given the actualities of current conditions in the system? The answer, is yes.
Even before we knew how to do it well, inclusive education had positive outcomes for all involved. Early stages of research explored the outcomes of including students with disabilities on their typical and gifted peers. The fear was that students with disabilities would negatively impact their peers, because they would require teacher time, and changes in the complexity and pace of the curriculum. Research has not borne this out, however. Comparisons of the literacy and numeracy skills, scores on standardized tests, college entrance, and other academic scores of typical and gifted students in classrooms with and without students with disabilities are identical, even those including students with significant behavioral challenges (Bru, 2009; Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Crisman, 2008; Kambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2007). This research has been replicated over decades and across countries (Curcic, 2009)! It is clear that the presence of students with disabilities, including challenging behavior, does not negatively impact the learning of other students.

The next set of research explored the outcomes of inclusive education for students with disabilities. Around the world, students with disabilities demonstrate improved academic outcomes, including literacy, numeracy, general knowledge, and higher order thinking when placed in inclusive settings as compared to peers matched for level of disability in segregated classrooms (Katz & Mirenda, 2002). Perhaps more surprisingly, students with disabilities also outperformed their peers in segregated classrooms in adaptive/life skills, vocational and academic competence (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010; Myklebust, 2006). In a national study of outcomes related to inclusive education in Canada, students in inclusive settings were reported to be in better general health, progressing more in school, interacting better with peers, and more frequently looked forward to going to school than those in less inclusive settings (Timmons & Wagner, 2008).
Despite the actualities of limited training, reductions in resources, and pressures to standardize achievement and “accountability”, we have made progress in implementing inclusive education, and children around the world are benefitting. Imagine the possibilities…

Perhaps as a result of these successes, current research has shifted its focus. We have gone from the “why,” and the “should we”, to the “how” of inclusive education. In the last two decades, a plethora of research has focused on strategies and resources for improving and implementing inclusion. Research has identified specific instructional practices, pedagogies, and service delivery models that support inclusive education (McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling, 2010). However, from a classroom teacher's standpoint, it is unclear how to apply ALL of these pieces in a holistic, practical manner that works in all grades (K-12), and a variety of settings (e.g. rural, urban, inner city, multigrade, etc.). This is the goal of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (King-Sears, 2009). UDL provides accessibility to the curriculum, learning activities, and social life of the classroom for all students, at all grade levels.

Research exploring the outcomes of a Universal Design for Learning pedagogy in classrooms from K-12 shows that a learning community can be created in which all children can learn and grow, in interaction with each other (Katz, in press). The Three Block Model of UDL incorporates evidence based strategies for building inclusive learning communities, inclusive instructional practices, and system and structure supports. Results investigating the outcomes of this model demonstrated improved student self-concept, autonomy, sense of belonging, and engagement – for all students (ie with and without mild disabilities, and severe cognitive and behavioral challenges) - including at the high school level!

Our history as educators has been much like the development of an infant. In the early stages, we were unaware of anyone who did not fit our needs and desires – we simply excluded
them (ie we placed them in institutions, special schools, etc.). As we began to mature, we learned how to parallel play – we placed special classes in regular schools, so they could live alongside us, but not with us. Sometimes, we placed children in a regular classroom, but their program was a parallel program. They did math when we did math – but a different math, and usually with an educational assistant, not in interaction with their peers. It is time, now, to grow into maturity. To develop a system in which we all grow and learn in interaction with each other, celebrating what our diversity brings, sharing our triumphs and challenges, and creating compassionate learning communities for all of our children/youth. It can be done.
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