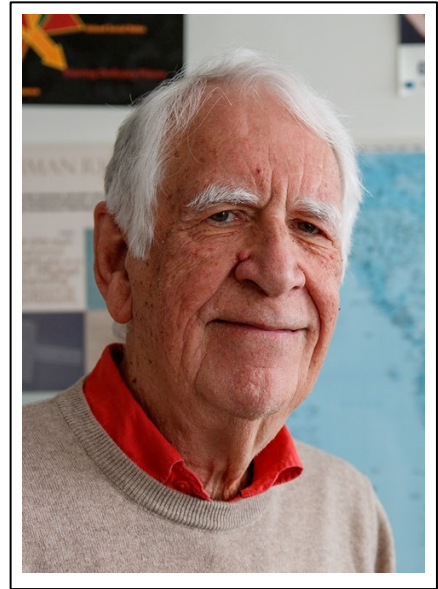# Achieving Inclusive Education
- Recent Lessons From Canada

by David Towell*

Introduction

A little over thirty years ago, I had the privilege of spending some months of a sabbatical year working for the Canadian Association for Community Living (now *Inclusion Canada*) - a nation-wide family association advocating for people with intellectual disabilities. As part of this work I visited the province of New Brunswick to see the progress there in establishing a comprehensive system of inclusive education. In this field New Brunswick was and remains a global pioneer. My host in this visit was Gordon Porter, a local teacher, school principal and, by then, adviser to government, who has been a key leader in this educational transformation. Much more recently, I joined Gordon in writing a [short pamphlet](#) - the first in a series drawing heavily on Canadian experience - that tells the New Brunswick story and suggests lessons for achieving system-wide change.

Gordon is now the Director of *Inclusive Education Canada* (IEC). During 2022, IEC hosted 30 broadcasts (*Let's Chat about Inclusive Education*) in which he and two other distinguished Canadian leaders (Diane Richler and Jacquie Specht) 'chatted' with people - family members, educators, policy makers and university researchers - about their perspectives on contemporary progress and challenges. All of these are available on IEC's website (www.inclusiveeducation.ca) together with a [study guide](#) for those seeking to explore these many contributions in more detail. The 30 broadcasts were presented in three sets of 10 and Gordon invited me to offer a trans-Atlantic perspective on each set**.

The primary 'audience' for all this work is doubtless Canadian but in this short article I draw on my three commentaries to suggest some *lessons for leaders everywhere* in the movement to advance quality and inclusive education.

Progress in Canada: a brief overview

These thirty broadcasts certainly demonstrate the strength-in-depth of informed leadership on inclusive education in Canada and the networks that link good people in different roles and places. Nevertheless, the cumulative story they tell paints a mixed picture of progress. On the positive side, there is increasing recognition that the experience of inclusive education is key to ensuring people are included throughout the life-span. One mother talks eloquently about seeking to ensure her disabled son was at the heart of community from his birth. Others reinforce this message in relation to the early years and pre-school education, where there is still much to be done. More generally these broadcasts make the point that the experience of inclusive schooling lays the foundations for successful inclusion in adult life, for example in employment and housing.

Also very positively, the 40 years of experience to date has clearly given great depth to our understanding of inclusive practice and enriched the variety of instructional strategies and

tools available to teachers and others. Moreover the discussions with those who teach teachers mostly give a positive account of the willingness of those now entering the profession to think holistically and become - as one education professor puts this - detectives seeking to identify each child's unique gifts and possibilities. As a consequence we have many more examples of a diverse range of students belonging in regular schools and achieving success.
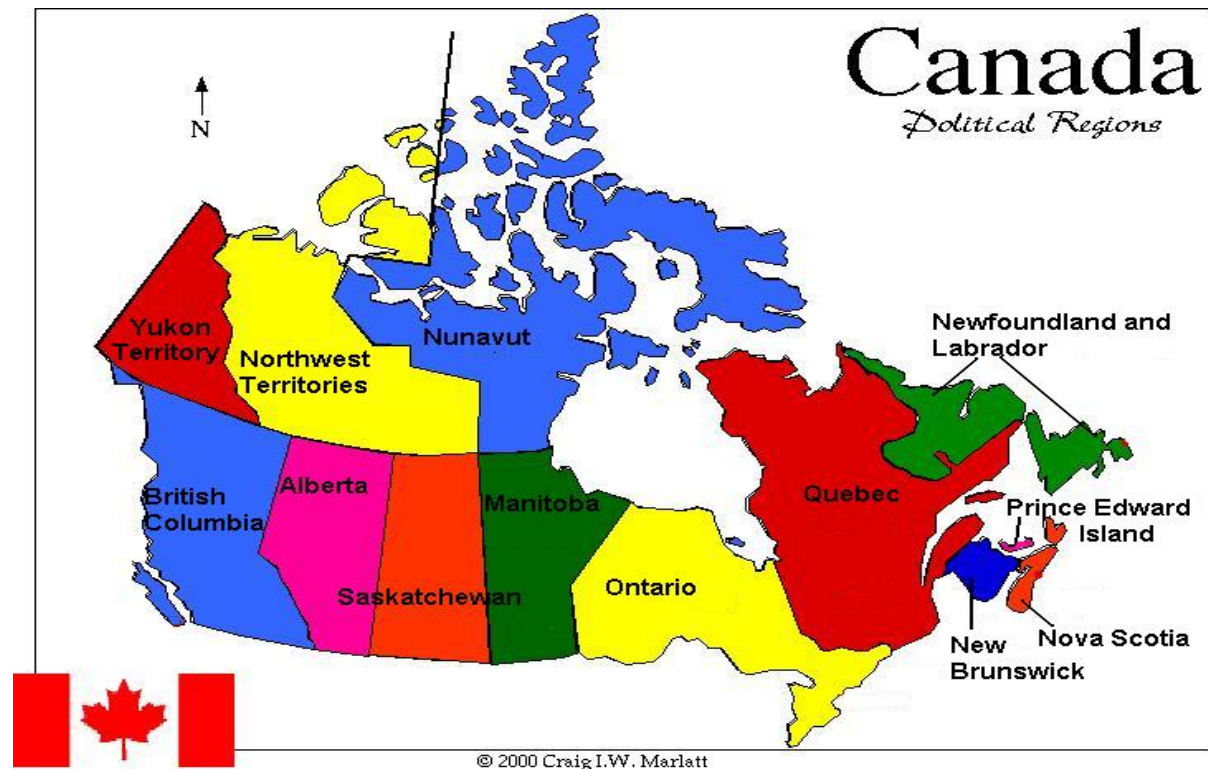
On the other hand, it sometimes seems that such individual success is not generalised to the school as a whole; parents still have to fight hard to gain and maintain school inclusion for their children especially in places where there is major investment in segregated 'special schools'; and some of the impetus to advance inclusion has been lost or at least become more diffuse as we have got further away from where this social movement started.

Legal issues provide one important example of these tensions. Many of these discussions focus on the experience of students and families and the local delivery of education. But of course it is the law and policies established provincially (education is a provincial responsibility in Canada) as well as nationally and the resources invested in their implementation that provide important conditions for local success. Canada has long had an impressive *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and government has been strong in ratifying global human rights conventions, including the *Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities*. However a law centre leader argues - and many families will agree - that these principled commitments are only given limited recognition in the archaic frameworks and procedures that characterise much legal practice.

All these discussions were conducted in the shadow of the pandemic. Students, families and teachers (and those who teach teachers) had to deal with the challenges of Covid 19 and learn how best to adapt to widespread school closure. On the one hand, home schooling certainly

strengthened attention to the importance of families as partners and there was rapid growth in both internet access and the availability of useful assistive and instructional technologies for all students. On the other, both the pandemic and school closure damaged physical and emotional health, disrupted learning and undermined efforts to advance inclusion. Judging from these discussions, the jury is still out on how far we will be able to *build back better.*

As Jacquie Specht wisely observes, there is substantial research showing that inclusive education works: the challenge remains to ensure system-wide implementation. Despite the forty of years of Canadian experience starting in New Brunswick, this message is yet to arrive everywhere.

Reflections on Canadian experience

What can we learn from this Canadian experience about what is involved in achieving transformative change in education? My analysis suggests that there are *four main pillars* in the strategies necessary for radical change: clarity of vision; system-wide leadership; partnership with students and families; and investment in developing the skills of teachers, including through an extended role for Universities.

1. Be clear about what inclusive education means

The two most important international commitments to advancing inclusive education are found in the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (notably Article 24) and the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (notably Goal 4). The former calls for an 'inclusive system of education at all levels' as a *human right* and is focused on disabled people; the latter goal seeks to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education …. for all'. The convergence on inclusive education is very helpful to our national efforts but the differences here are also instructive.

Addressing quality, equity and inclusion

First, SDG4 directs our attention to three axes defining progress: quality, equity *and* inclusion. Discussions of inclusive education sometime leave the other two axes implicit. 'Quality' directs our attention to what education is for and what it means in the life of all students. The late British educationalist, Ken Robinson, offers this useful definition: education aims 'to enable students to understand the world around them and the talents within them so that they can become fulfilled individuals and active, compassionate citizens'. This definition can help a lot in discussions of national curriculum, testing and other policies directed at standardisation.

Welcoming diversity

Second, SDG4 widens our focus from disability to ensuring access *for all* (and the targets specifically mention eliminating gender disparities and ensuring equal access e.g. for indigenous people and children in vulnerable situations). 'Intersectionality' is a clumsy word dreamed up by academics, but it does draw our attention to the ways in which different threads of disadvantage are intertwined in the lives of children, something that of course teachers both experience and need to engage with, in the school and classroom.

Learning together

Another parent who has been industriously working to help parents, students and schools for several decades makes the argument that, 'inclusion is a richly woven blanket and we must attend to all the threads'. Inclusive education is about welcoming all students with disabilities and other differences into local schools alongside their brothers, sisters and neighbours; it is about holding high expectations for their participation and contribution; it is about giving good support to both teachers and students so that everyone can learn; and it is about recognising that education with one's peers has important social as well as academic benefits.

Remembering our history

In all this, we need to stay in touch with the roots of the movement that drove educational reform. Of course, time moves on, new people enter the field. A discussion of the 1980s legal fight (based on the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*) by Luke Ellwood's family in Nova Scotia provides a powerful argument about the need to remember the realities of segregation and the huge efforts ordinary families made to change this. We stand on the shoulders of these pioneers.

2. Promote effective school and system leadership

Visionary leadership is key to creating and sustaining value-driven change. This is essential at all levels from the classroom to the education ministry.

At the level of the school

While schools (and other important structures like school boards) require good management, they also need *inspirational leadership*, capable of building widespread commitment to the belief that *every child belongs* in their local school and providing the support required by teachers and others to develop the attitudes and skills required for everyone to succeed in diverse classrooms.

School principals and their deputies are critical in defining the purpose and culture of schools: they make the difference in places where policy is ambiguous as to whether inclusive education advances or otherwise. Undoubtedly positive leadership at this level is influenced by personal biographies, especially previous successful experience of inclusive practice. Canadian research suggests that leadership in this sense is not something that can mostly be learnt on a course: rather leadership development requires that people like school principals have the opportunities and support in *learning communities* to reflect on their own experiences and learn from peers, some of whom will be more established champions for inclusion.

An illuminating discussion with a school principal who has had a long-term leadership role in New Brunswick emphasises that inclusion has to be a foundational aspect of educational improvement (not just another 'project') in which we continually invest in learning how to do better. At the school level, this principal's experience suggests that this means building strong

commitment to inclusive values, investing in skilled support to practitioners, working collaboratively so that everyone learns from each other and genuinely valuing parent engagement in problem-solving.

At the level of the system

The same is true at the level of whole systems i.e. the provinces in Canada's federal structure. One provincial policy-maker argues that this means embedding inclusion at the centre of law and policy-making so it is not vulnerable to changing political winds and priorities. It also means establishing processes that ensure policy-making is itself an inclusive process, for example by ensuring we hear the voices of the people most affected by our decisions and by disaggregating available data so as to tease out differential impacts on different sub-groups. Even in small provinces, there can be a long distance from the classroom to the minister's office: we have to ensure that the educational enterprise becomes a learning system, mobilising multiple feedback loops so that we 'see' the whole system at work.

3. Work with students and their families as partners

Of course, the definition of what is quality in education offered earlier requires that students are active leaders in managing their own learning. (As Plutarch expressed this 2000 years ago, 'Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel'.) Moreover the largest resource available to each student at school comes from their peers: teachers need to work with students as partners.

Equally, education is a partnership between schools, students, their families and the wider community. Building inclusive education and indeed social inclusion more generally can only be achieved when public agencies and civil society work together.

At the level of the school

In many parts of Canada school inclusion still depends heavily on the efforts of parents to make this the preferred option for their children. Moreover, partnership between families and teachers is very important in ensuring that each student enjoys a positive educational experience. Families need support to understand their children's rights and be able to engage positively with the struggles that seem to be an inevitable part of getting the best for children at risk of disadvantage.

The wider functions of family associations

In Canada, a lot of this support comes from family associations organised at the local, provincial and federal level. *Inclusion Canada* is one example. This association is organised in all Canada's provinces where the responsibility for education lies. At the provincial level these associations perform multiple functions - informing and supporting individual families, helping teachers and schools, advocating for systemic change at the policy level - all of

which are essential to making sustained progress. (Some of their stories provide the basis for another [pamphlet](#) in this series.) To varying degrees, other NGOs have emerged with similar functions in relation to other disadvantaged groups as well as joining alliances that seek to advance quality education for all.

4. Invest in teacher development with support from Universities

Teacher education, continuing professional development and support for classroom teachers is the *key investment* required to advance inclusive education. Universities have a central role in all these functions but also the potential capacity to do much more as independent resources to whole systems change.

Prioritising the development of teachers as reflective practitioners

Teachers need to be life-long learners, seeing each new student as unique and seeking to understand how they learn best, within a school culture that prioritises reflective practice. Two further pamphlets in the series that Gordon Porter and I have published provide detailed examples of what this means at the [level of the school](#) and [the classroom.](#)

Such capacity-building includes encouraging a detailed understanding of how *Universal Design for Learning* can be an effective orientation for teachers as well as a codified set of technical skills. It also means showing teachers how to encourage peer support in their classrooms and promote social capital formation for all their students. It requires that within each school there is ongoing support, space for reflection and opportunities for *teachers helping teachers*.

Universities as resources to educational transformation

Universities remain privileged institutions in our countries with the status, independence and expertise to be a *resource to their communities* through scholarly engagement with societal challenges (going well beyond traditional conceptions of teaching and research). They certainly have the potential to offer a trusted base for supporting and sharing learning about achieving visionary social change.

Even so there is often a significant gap between Universities and the field, between research and practice. One part of closing this gap is to ensure that Universities are themselves *model* inclusive institutions, not just in their welcome to student and staff diversity and promotion of inclusive pedagogy but also in establishing an organisational culture of mutual respect. Another is to offer the University as a base for knowledge exchange among leaders so as to help make the education system (embracing educational institutions and the communities they serve) a *learning system* - a place and a set of processes through which all participants can enhance their understanding of how their own activities contribute to positive change.

Looking forward

The 31st broadcast was a wrap-up session, click here

There has certainly been 'top down' change in Canada, driven by progressive law and policy; there has also been 'bottom up' change stimulated through the efforts of local innovators. But perhaps more important than either in achieving wide progress towards inclusive education has been what, following Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze, I call 'scaling across' -creating communities of practice within which people exercising leadership offer each other support and share their experiences 'laterally' as part of a social movement, aspiring to value-based transformation.

These lessons from Canadian experience, all illustrated with detailed examples in the *Let's Chat* broadcasts, offer a valuable agenda for renewing our efforts in 2023 and beyond.

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** My reflections on the three sets make explicit reference to the people and broadcasts from which the lessons in this article are drawn....and indeed include references to all 30 broadcasts. In this shorter article I have looked across these reflections to identify common lessons. The three original commentaries are available in the Study Guide.