Voices of Inclusion

Vianne Timmons and S. Anthony Thompson, March 2017
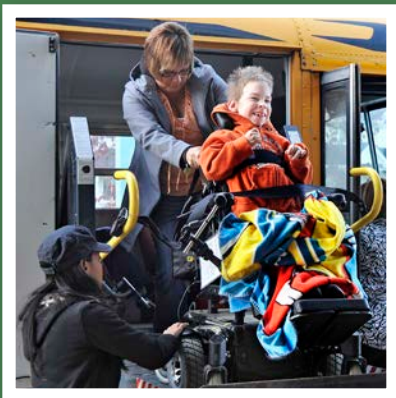
Acknowledgements and Notes

All photographs were taken by Don Hall Photography with the consent of parents, students, and staff.

Pseudonyms were used for all interviewees in order to protect their privacy.

Contents

Introduction

The inclusion of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in educational and employment settings is an important issue. Individuals with disabilities often are not meaningfully included in, or are even segregated from, typical classroom settings, and they also have difficulties securing employment once their formal education is complete (Levy & Hernandez, 2009). For the past number of decades, Canadian education systems have begun shifting away from placing children with differing abilities in segregated rooms/schools, to placing them into the classroom, or even better, including children of all abilities meaningfully as part of the school culture.

With that said, there is still a lot of work to be done. Educators and employers will sometimes state, "We tried inclusion," "We have inclusion rooms," or "We did inclusion," as though inclusion is something that exists only for certain people in some classrooms or work spaces (Causton & Theoharis, 2013). Authentic inclusion, however, can only come about when diversity is viewed as the norm (Ferguson, 1995).

Generally speaking, inclusive education and employment exist when all individuals, regardless of ability or disability, are educated or working together in the same space. Effective inclusion involves a certain degree of flexibility in teaching and learning that allows for improved educational and employment outcomes for all individuals. Moreover, in order to be authentic, inclusion must be more than just the sharing of a space; it must also be a collective agreement in the mindset, beliefs, values, and culture of the school or place of employment.

"We see it every day, you know, in how the children accept one another now, and just carry on and just, you know, they don't even see any kind of special needs of the kids. They just accept them the way they are."

- Mona, Staff at a Preschool

"I don't like when people treat me differently just because I have something different about me. ... Like, for next year, I don't want to do resource room, because I don't want to be the type of kid that needs the extra help. Makes me feel stupid. I want to be treated like everybody else."

- Kyle, Student at an Elementary School

Researchers have identified many perceived obstacles to authentic inclusion, including lack of understanding of disability and differentiation (Robinson, 2000), and a lack of time, resources, and preparation to accommodate a diverse array of needs (Ferguson, 2008). However, it is also important to look at factors which *enable* successful employment and education for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. That is what we sought to do with this project: we turned to Saskatchewan teachers, students, parents, assistants, employers, and employees to help identify the enabling practices which support authentic inclusion in the province.

In cases where people with disabilities have been authentically included in their schools, and where they have secured meaningful employment, researchers have found significant (and positive) economic, social, and psychological benefits. Interestingly, students both with disabilities and without do well or even better than their counterparts who are educated separately (Lyons, Thompson, & Timmons, 2016). Further, employment in particular may become instrumental in integrating people with disabilities into society (Schur, 2002), and has the potential to build self esteem and self worth for people with disabilities. The financial security associated with work is also critical for the quality of life of people with disabilities (Burge, Oulette-Kuntz, & Lysaght, 2007). Taken together, these factors demonstrate how important it is to strive for truly inclusive school and work settings.

Methodology

For this project, we sought settings that members of the Saskatchewan education community and advocacy organizations such as the Saskatchewan Association for Community Living identified as reflecting strong inclusive practices.

Our goal for this project was not only to gain a detailed understanding of participants' perspectives on inclusive education and employment, but also to focus on the successful practices and positive aspects that enabled authentic inclusion in Saskatchewan schools and workplaces.

Principles of *appreciative inquiry* were followed to collect data on current practices that were perceived to enhance the inclusive school and work settings. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) describe appreciative inquiry as:

...the cooperative, coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations and communities, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives a system "life" when it is most effective and capable in economic, ecological, and human terms (p. 74).

Furthermore, Villeneuve and Hutchinson (2012) note that appreciative inquiry uses "interviewing techniques that emphasize the sharing of stories to enable a participant's reflection on their experience of a program" (p. 9). Appreciative inquiry involves looking for what works and providing information on how to duplicate it. Within appreciative inquiry framework, researchers may ask participants for advice and direction for others interested in similar accomplishments.

"... it's the full meal deal. It's not just in the class. It's everywhere. ... It's in the extracurricular. It's in the rock band. It's not just in the classroom setting; it's throughout the whole school."

- Sarah, Consultant at a High School

"... part of being an engaged citizen to me, is acknowledging that there are people who are different from you and that you can learn from them as much as you can accept them. ... When students with special needs are put in a different classroom, I think it really puts up walls between them and other students, that they don't get that feeling of knowing them as people. ... Because they ARE people and they have the same interests as every other 13 and 14-year-old kid does. And they should be able to get to know one another on that kind of a level."

- Leslie, General Education Teacher at an Elementary School

Process

We contacted school divisions in the province of Saskatchewan as well as the province's primary advocacy agencies to solicit nominations of education and employment settings that incorporated strong inclusive practices. Nominations were received for early childhood programs, schools, and work places.

One-on-one and focus group interviews were conducted with participants from 3 preschools, 4 elementary schools, 1 secondary school, and 3 places of employment. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and then categorized into themes. Quotations that reflected those themes were collated. Analysis included triangulation within themes, some code-checking, and purposeful searching of disconfirming evidence.

Interviews were semi-structured in nature, and participants could choose to bring trusted confidants to the interview. In total, 72 individual and group interviews (110 participants) were completed with teachers, staff, students (with and without disabilities), parents, educational assistants, employers, employees (with and without disabilities), and supportive community members. The interview questions were open-ended and framed positively, in line with the principles of appreciative inquiry.

Results

There were many similarities across all four settings (pre-school, elementary school, secondary school, and employment), and these commonalities can be summarized as follows:

- Value of teaching and learning

- Importance of establishing relationships

- Visionary leadership

- Individual commitment and contributions to inclusion

- Team contributions to implementing the inclusive vision

- Supports, structures, and spaces

- Inclusion is true belonging

- Inclusion as a road to establishing individual identity apart from a disability

All of these categories can be tied together via the concept of agency, which may be defined as not just talking about what can or should be done, but actively implementing authentic inclusion. Each of these categories is discussed in more detail in the following pages.

"And for Peter, I think he enjoys his job. I really – I mean, you've seen the file bays, and how much we have here. We'll walk down there later. He keeps all that organized, and I know for a fact that I could not file the paper he files. … It would probably take three other people to do what he does sometimes."

- Jenn, Employer at an Insurance Company

"I mean goals for him were to communicate his needs, and he talks all the time now. And so when you think back to how he was in kindergarten and how much he's grown in two years, and I know that's not just me, but you do feel like you had a part in it. There are definitely tough days, but you do have to just think of those little things and I think how much has this impacted the family and, you know, his friendships that he's built here. … I can't wait until I see two years down the road how it's going to be if he's developed that much in that time. And I think just having the interactions, the kids benefit, he benefits, like we all do."

- Barry, General Education Teacher at an Elementary School

Value of teaching and learning

Throughout the interviews, it was apparent that teaching and learning is highly valued, both in an academic and a social context. Academically, children enjoy learning, parents value the education their children receive, teachers and staff love teaching and seeing their students grow and learn, and employees are proud of what they have learned at work. Socially, there is a lot of mutual benefit: individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities benefit from peer modelling and being included in the work/school environment, and other individuals learn acceptance, patience, and develop positive and meaningful relationships that they may never otherwise have sought or experienced.

A crucial finding was that all teachers recognized the connection between innovative pedagogy (teaching "outside the box") and inclusive classrooms. They saw challenges as opportunities and recognized that they were learning themselves every day. This reciprocal relationship with the students led to a dynamic, open learning environment.

The teachers saw inclusive practices benefitting all children. They spoke of the importance of all children learning together. The teachers spoke about their learning from the children. They valued the differences the children brought to the classroom.

Importance of establishing relationships

The development of relationships is critical to fostering an inclusive workplace or educational setting. Relationships provide a sense of belonging and support, and ultimately a feeling of community. Throughout the interviews, we saw a complex web of relationships that spans between parents, educators, students, staff, employers, employees, and support groups. These relationships reach between those with and without disabilities.

For example, parents of children with disabilities not only ensure their child goes to school or work, but they also work with educators to keep a consistent learning environment across home and at school; they communicate with employers; they work with support staff to help their child place in school and at work; and they help encourage friendships between their child and other students. These groups are also integrated in other ways beyond parental involvement, ultimately producing a widespread and interconnected community of support.

It was notable that colleagues spoke about each other with respect, and that parents were identified as key resources for the school. Students with unique learning needs were always described as children first, and language used throughout the interviews was dignified and positive. This showed that relationships are important, but even more so, that respect is critical.

"I think that it's [being a paid employee] critical to Laura's self-esteem and the pride in her work because I know from speaking with her parents that this is something that she wants to work towards and being a normal person, a normal contributing person to society."

- Doreen, Mentor and Employee at a Government Organization

"I want to just comment that we need a strong leader, and I think Donna has done an amazing job of modeling her belief that this is the best for all students, and I think you really need that strong support system, someone who's a leader, to make it happen, because otherwise you're just fighting a battle maybe that you can't win on your own."

- Anna, Student Support Teacher at a High School

Visionary leadership

A crucial element of success for authentic inclusion is having a leader who supports and champions the vision for inclusion. Leaders in this study included principals and employers, all of whom expressed their support of inclusive principles, and discussed how inclusive practices fit into overall school and work improvement efforts. In addition, teachers pointed out that their vision for inclusion comes from the principal, and even the school division, and that these leaders motivated the whole school to take responsibility in implementing the vision.

There was a tone, an atmosphere when you entered the inclusive setting. Staff were proud of the classrooms and work settings. They felt a sense of accomplishment and support from the top. They felt valued and celebrated by the leadership.

In employment settings, leadership and support were also identified as critical, and employers were supported and given opportunities to learn themselves as they worked toward building an inclusive workplace. Thus, it is important to have champions who guide the overarching vision and encourage the entire organization to take part. Leadership at all levels is critical.

Individual commitment and contributions to inclusion

For inclusion to be successful, *everybody* needs to be on board. Nearly every individual who was interviewed discussed his or her individual role in and/or commitment to authentic inclusion. This included principals and teachers, along with staff, parents, children, employees, and employers. The need for dedication and patience was identified as important to make successful contributions. Interviewees also discussed the role of members of the school division, workers at disability resource centres, and the broader community.

All participants accepted inclusionary practices in the spirit of "this is just what we do"; there was no questioning whether it was the right way to educate. There was a palpable feeling of deep personal and professional commitment to inclusion throughout the interviews. These attitudes permeated school and work environments, and led us to label the sites as practicing "authentic inclusion". Thus, at all levels we could see a thriving commitment to inclusion.
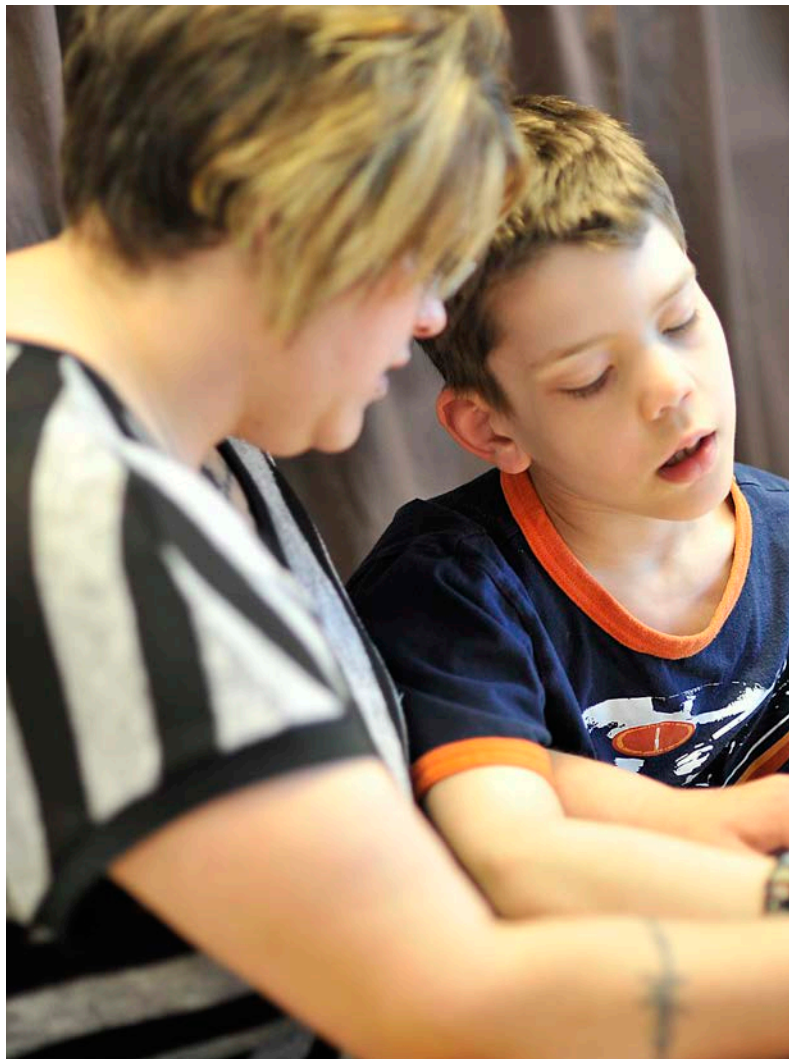
"The only thing I can add is, it takes a little bit more time [to teach Avery]. And we're all willing to give that extra time … We're very grateful for Avery. And this has been a great experience, just to – when you actually sit down and talk about it, you actually see the importance of what you're doing."

- Kara, Student Support Teacher at a High School

"I think to be good in this program, you have to be proactive. You've gotta be a good problem solver, a good team player, and open to new ideas and trying things."

- Donna, Teacher at a Preschool

Team contributions to implementing the inclusive vision

Individuals alone cannot make inclusion happen; they must band together and work as a cohesive team. Each person brings something unique to the table, and when taken as a whole, powerful changes can happen. Indeed, interviews revealed that effective interpersonal relationships allowed teamwork to function more smoothly. In school settings, the teams include parents, teachers, support staff, other professionals, the community, and the children. In employment settings, the teams include employers, employees, parents, and the community. This team approach allows for mutual support among personnel, meaningful parent involvement, and enables the teams to brainstorm together for solutions to the challenges that they may face when implementing the inclusive vision.

Through the interviews, it was established that all team members treated each other with great dignity, and that all contributions were respected. Parents were seen as valuable resources to the school team, and employers reached out to the community to ensure they were utilizing best practices. Agencies such as the Autism Resource Centre staff became part of the extended teams. Everyone respected the other team member's expertise. They often credited others with making inclusive practices work. Overall, it was clear that teamwork was critical in promoting and implementing inclusive practices.

Supports, structures, and spaces

Although teams of people with a shared vision of authentic inclusion can make many contributions towards its implementation, they nonetheless still need resources and support conducive to inclusion. The interviews revealed a variety of supports, structures, and spaces needed to successfully implement an equitable, inclusive program. Such supports included: sufficient financial support; access to specialized spaces/equipment like sensory gyms for students with autism or iPads for individuals with communication difficulties; communication with speech therapists, psychologists, and disability resource centres; and ongoing internal support through regular meetings and check-ins. Some of these resources (e.g., finances) may be limited, which means that teams regularly needed to prioritize their approaches.

Equipment and adapted tools are essential to ensure the best education possible, and even a simple, easily accessible and relatively inexpensive tool such as an iPad can make a big difference. The staff in these settings felt supported by their leaders in acquiring necessary tools. When they needed resources such as specialized equipment or help from outside agencies they felt comfortable asking and were often successful in acquiring what they needed. This highlights the intersection between the themes. For example, leadership is critical in the acquisition of supports for the inclusive setting.

"... another big thing that I have really found successful in this program is the way they use the picture cards and visual schedules and visual timers for the whole class. So they're not singling out the kids that need it more. They're using it for everybody."

- Donna, Parent of a Child in Preschool

"With our program? I think just the interaction with the typical students, with our designated students. They both learn from each other, and I've seen it time and time again. It just seems to work. And they carry on like – they don't see any kind of difference or anything in each other, and they play together, work together, and you know."

- Mona, Staff at a Preschool

Authentic inclusion is true belonging

Regardless of the setting, be it preschool, elementary school, high school, or the workplace, people banded as a collective and became something greater, together. A large number of quotations demonstrated this sense of belonging that results from authentic inclusion. Students expressed their joy at developing friendships, while teachers discussed the pleasure they receive from seeing their students learning from each other. Parents described how individuals at the schools and work places began to feel like extended family. Employers even recounted the pride they felt when their employees found their niche and felt comfortable enough to begin stepping out of their comfort zones.

The sense of belonging for all was a critical concept that emerged and was evident in all settings. All participants were totally engaged and connected to each other. The positive energy and enthusiasm in the settings was notable, while an attitude of acceptance was prevalent.

Inclusion as a road to establishing individual identity apart from a disability

The immediate goal of inclusion according to the interviewees appears to be creating an environment where everyone belongs, and needs are met equitably. For the individuals with exceptionalities, however, inclusion extends far beyond that. By being a part of something greater than themselves, these individuals are free to explore who they are as people. Non-inclusive, segregated treatment of these individuals often results in their living as people with a disability—rather than people. In the interviews, we could see individuals' independence by building on strengths, pushing beyond boundaries, and celebrating successes. Ultimately, this led to increased self-esteem and confidence, which is important for general well-being and mental health.

Other students and staff also supported the individual to push his or her boundaries and learn new skills. There was recognition of the likes and dislikes of the person with a disability as well as the strengths and areas that had potential to grow. Everyone supported the person in his/her path to greater independence.

"Everybody builds on Jane's strength, you know what I mean? They educate her and they allow her to be successful by looking at what her interests are."

- Barb, Parent of Children in a Preschool

"I always participate in every activity there is. And I have gotten better because I found, and I said this to my mom, I said to her, I've come to a point where I found my confidence."

- Joseph, Student at a High School

Final Thoughts

There is no magic formula to set up an inclusive setting. But there is an attitude, an approach where every person is valued and supported. There is also an acknowledgement that this is hard work. Everyone was prepared to work hard and felt that they reaped the rewards.

Throughout this study there was a sense of pride and accomplishments by all involved. The respect people held for each other, and their recognition of the interdependence of all involved was notable.

There are fabulous inclusive settings in the province of Saskatchewan, where the staff, students and families see this as a journey. There are many challenges on the journey, but our participants expressed a openness to exploring solutions to these challenges together.

Looking at environments that work can give us insights into themes that support inclusive settings. What stuck with us as researchers were the similarities, not in the structures, but rather in the attitudes, leadership, teamwork and openness we observed. All participants were totally committed to the work they were doing, they believed that all children should be educated together and that men and women with disabilities can do meaningful work in an inclusive setting.

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