



# **What Constitutes Support?**

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*"There is only one child in the world and that child's name is ALL children."*

*- Carl Sandburg*

This discussion paper is intended to stimulate thinking, conversation and the development of common understanding about support in inclusive educational settings. It is not a statement of official policy. However, it is hoped that through conversation, collaboration will be enhanced and more efficient as well as effective support systems can be designed to respond to the diverse needs of the learners in our school communities. The information was drawn from a number of sources already circulated in the district. Certain components of these sources were selected and compiled in this paper.

No response is requested but comments and questions would be more than welcome. They may be directed to the attention of Kathy Champion. It would be valuable for all members of staff to have access to this discussion paper.

### **What is inclusion?**

The Ministry definition of inclusion is as follows:

*Inclusion describes the principle 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 is not necessarily synonymous with integration and goes beyond placement to include meaningful participation and the promotion of interaction with others. (Ministry of Education, 2006)*

Thus, inclusion is an attitude - a value and belief system, not an action or set of action plans. The word "include" implies being a part of something, being embraced into the whole. The values underlying an inclusive system are acceptance, belonging and community. As such, students, staff and parents are members of a community of learners. An inclusive school focuses on how to support the special gifts and needs of each and every student in the school or community, to feel welcomed and secure, and to be successful. Inclusion does not mean that students must spend every minute of the school day in general education classes, that students never receive small-group or individualized instruction, or that students are in general education classes to learn the core curriculum only.

Unique learning needs are now the norm rather than the exception. Inclusive schools create learning environments where all students can succeed rather than excluding those who don't fit.

### **What are some of the educational initiatives that support inclusive education?**

- cooperative are more effective for learning

- cooperative learning and cooperative teaching
- individualized approaches to assessment and instruction (e.g. multiple intelligences, universal design for learning, differentiated instruction, etc.)
- collaboration among staff, students and community members in the design and delivery of effective learning experiences for all students
- the enhancement of critical thinking skills in the curriculum
- specific instruction in social skills

### **What is the relationship between labels/categories and the provision of services?**

Although labels may create problems, it is difficult to communicate without them. The problems associated with labels are not so much a function of the labels themselves, as what is communicated by them - the concepts - the connotations to which they refer. As professional educators, we should come to grips with the fact that labels are an inevitable part of discourse. However, it is important to avoid the careless use of categories and to remember always that no category or label comes close to telling us everything we need to know about a person if we are to interact caringly with him or with her. Most importantly, it should remind us to be curious and keep questions about students open rather than seeking closure through identification. Thus a label or category does not dictate the type or level of support a student may require.

### **What is an inclusive curriculum?**

Conceptualized broadly, curriculum can be thought of as "everything children learn in school". Every time an adult interacts with a child or group of children, those children learn about normed and valued ways of interacting in the school culture. Designing a curriculum for students with special needs, and indeed for all students, can be approached by thinking about learning outcomes in three non-mutually exclusive areas:

- learning to be a member of a community
- learning skills that are useful across contexts
- learning skills that are specific to the respective curricular areas that define the class period.

In the inclusive classroom, the teacher strives to make all students successful learners. This does not mean that all students will be equally successful but rather that all students can find meaningful personal success in school and can complete at least a public school education with the inclination and ability to continue to learn throughout their lives. This goal requires the school system to adapt to the

needs and abilities of individual students rather than requiring them to conform to a standardized way of thinking and learning.

The basic principles that underlie inclusive education have been articulated by the Ministry of Education as follows:

- Learning requires the active participation of the learner.
- People learn in different ways and at different rates.
- Learning is both a social and an individual activity.

These principles have not only prima facie validity but also unassailable empirical support. If we acknowledge them and if we believe that is our job to help all students to succeed, then our classroom practice should reflect them. Of course, there is no one right way to teach any more than there is any one right way to learn and professional autonomy in instructional methodology is to be valued, but some approaches are clearly better than others. It is the professional responsibility of all educators to seek out and refine those methods in the context of their particular classroom. Instruction that is founded on these principles will vary in its detail but will exhibit common characteristics.

Adapting to the needs and abilities of individual students is not so much a matter of "individualizing" instruction as "personalizing" instruction. Students do not need to be on individual programs - in fact, this is both an unrealistic and potentially unhealthy objective - but they do need the opportunity to construct individual understandings through personally meaningful engagement with information and ideas. This requires the use of open-ended instructional strategies that both invite and support such personal engagement and expression. It also suggests that student choice should be supported whenever possible.

Inclusive instruction is often divergent and classrooms may appear to be unstructured because of the high degree of individual and group activity. In reality, open-ended approaches require both greater intellectual and procedural structure than more tightly scripted ones. This structure, however, has the intention of support rather than control and is to be found more in the careful planning of rich, meaningful activities than in the regimentation of student learning activities. Deep personal engagement requires emotional as well as intellectual involvement in the learning process. It is often strongly supported by social learning processes in which students teach and learn from each other and is liable to be accompanied by the active hum of industrious activity.

Instruction which values and supports diverse outcomes also promotes student responsibility and the rigorous pursuit of personal excellence but it does not use standards as an excuse for excluding or as a tool for censoring students. Standards based on broad norms provide important information to both students

and teachers and assist in making instructional decisions and judgments about student progress. Personal understanding and intellectual sophistication develop through a process of step-wise refinement and is supported by accurate feedback. Thus, errors are used as the springboard to further learning. At each point, the most important question to be asked is not "What is wrong here?" but "What comes next?" The former question is concerned with gatekeeping while the latter invites continuous improvement.

### **What are the sources of support?**

As stated by York, Giangreco, Vandercook and Macdonald in *Curriculum Considerations in Inclusive Classrooms*, support for inclusive classrooms can be classified into four types - **resource, moral, technical and evaluation.**

**Resource Support:** Resource support consists of providing tangible material (e.g. lab equipment, adapted computer keyboard), financial resources (e.g. funds for community experiences), informational resources (e.g. professional literature) or human resources (eg. instructional assistant, peer tutor). However, resources alone do not ensure quality of support. More money or people do not necessarily meet the support needs of an inclusive classroom. Likewise, a paucity of resources does not necessarily preclude the availability of needed support for a classroom. For example, in some resource-scarce schools, teams are forced to find creative and often more positive and interdependent ways to address challenges. Some of the best examples of inclusion-oriented classes are in economically disadvantaged, rural areas.

**Moral Support:** Moral support refers to person-to-person interactions that validate the worth of people as individuals and as knowledgeable colleagues. It includes active listening characterized by non-judgmental acceptance of ideas and feelings. The person providing moral support does not always agree with the speaker, but adequate trust exists so that perspectives can be shared without fear of put-downs, criticism, or breeches in confidentiality.

**Technical Support:** Technical support refers to offering concrete strategies, methods, approaches, or ideas. Providing a teacher with a journal article on instructional methods is a form of resource support (informational), not technical support. Technical support can be provided through inservice training, staff development activities, on-site collaborative consultation, peer coaching, or other methods. It provides the recipient with skills that can then be implemented, adjusted, and reimplemented in a cyclical fashion to meet student needs. Technical assistance is a dynamic process that is individualized and requires interpersonal interactions.

**Evaluation Support:** Evaluation support refers to assistance in collecting information that allows support to be monitored and adjusted. It also refers to assistance in determining the impact of support on students, families, and professionals. The scope of evaluation should extend beyond acquisition of specific targeted skills by students to

include outcomes of educational experiences on the lifestyle or quality of life of the students and their families (Horner, 1991; Meyer & Janney, 1989; Schalock, 1990).

### **Who decides the type of support to be provided?**

Collaboration is required to identify and agree on the type of support needed. The intended recipients of support know their situations best and therefore have a primary role in identifying supports. This means that support personnel are not "in charge" of making support decisions. Decisions about the type of support needed in any particular situation belong to everyone involved. Furthermore, all members of the school based team have the capacity to provide and receive support. This seemingly benign concept may be a challenge to actualize since many professionals are socialized and accustomed to retaining authority over decisions related to their discipline. At the same time, the knowledge and broad-based experience of many support personnel provide them with perspectives that may assist consumers in making decisions about support needs. Additionally, support personnel may be knowledgeable about whether they can provide the kind of support being requested or whether others could offer that support more effectively.

### **Who decides how much support is needed?**

Sometimes well-intentioned recommendations to provide support services on behalf of a student or teacher can backfire. More is not necessarily better. In fact, providing more services than necessary can have negative ramifications, such as: 1) decreasing the time available for the student's interaction and participation with peers in school activities, 2) causing disruption for students and teachers in carrying out their normal classroom activities, 3) causing inequities in the distribution of scarce resources when other students or educators in need of supports remain unserved or underserved, 4) overwhelming families with an unnecessarily high number of professionals, or 5) unnecessarily complicating communication and coordination among all involved persons. An alternative is to provide supports that are only as special as necessary.

### **What are some considerations for selecting support personnel?**

Support may be needed to overcome or circumvent difficulties experienced as a result of a student's ability or disability, environmental influences, or a combination of both. Characteristics of students that may influence support selection include skills acquired, experiences, and/or aspects of their intellectual, communication, social, physical, sensory, or health functioning. The knowledge, skills, and previous experiences of teachers as well as the class members can also have an impact on the type and degree of support needed. In addition, environmental influences including school, home, and community factors can have a dramatic effect on the success of students and teachers in inclusive classrooms and schools.

Too often, educational team members focus exclusively on challenges related to a child's disability (eg. physical difficulty, mental retardation) without sufficient knowledge of contributing external factors (eg. nutrition, expectations at home, peer pressure), or they attribute student challenges to presumed disabilities when, in fact, challenges may be the result of school, home, or community variables external to the child.

Support personnel need to focus more now than in the past on environmental adjustments and improvements (e.g. better cues and assistance in getting from place to place; more accommodating communication environments such as learning symbols on a communication board) rather than just focusing on what a particular student can do to better fit into the existing environment.

**How can a teacher be expected to meet the needs of all children in an inclusive classroom?**

Meeting the needs of all children in an inclusive classroom is impossible for a teacher working alone with traditional teaching methods. Inclusive education requires a redefinition of the role of classroom teacher from the "lone ranger" to a partner with supports---a teaching team. A teaching team is an organizational and instructional arrangement of two or more members of the school and greater community who share planning, instructional and evaluation responsibilities for the same students on a regular basis over an extended period of time. An often overlooked instructional and support resource in schools is the student body. In inclusive schools and classrooms, students are invited to be partners in various teaming arrangements.

It is impossible to expect teachers to meet all of the needs of all of the children to the same degree all of the time. Therefore, a useful framework for determining where best to invest time and energy is Covey's (1994) "Center of Focus". Covey says:

*"You can want to do the right thing, and you can even want to do it for the right reasons. But if you don't apply the right principles, you can still hit a wall."*

We each have what Covey describes as a Circle of Concern that encompasses everything we're concerned about. We also have another circle inside the Circle of Concern - our Circle of Influence. This circle defines the area of concern where we can actually make a difference. The most effective circle, however, is our Center of Focus. In this circle, the things about which we are concerned and are within our ability to influence are aligned with our personal mission and are timely. To spend time and effort in any other circle diminishes our effectiveness. When we operate within our Circle of Concern, we basically waste effort on things we have no ability to control or affect. When we operate within our Circle of Influence, we do some good, but what we do may be at the expense of something better. When we set and achieve goals that are in our Center of Focus, we maximize the use of our time and effort. As we do this over time, our circle of Influence automatically increases and we find positive ways to influence more people and circumstances.

### **What is co-teaching? How can it be used to support inclusion?**

Co-teaching refers to two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space.

The most salient elements of a rationale for co-teaching include:

- increased instructional options for all students
- improvement of program intensity and continuity
- reduced stigma for students with special needs
- increased support for teachers and related service providers.

Co-teaching may take a variety of forms which include:

- one teaching, one assisting
- station teaching
- parallel teaching
- alternative teaching
- team teaching.

### **What are the various ways in which the learning assistance and/or resource teacher provide support?**

The learning assistance and/or resource teacher may provide support in a variety of ways depending upon the needs of the students, the preferences of the teachers, the availability of time, space, etc. Some of these include:

- in-class support through co-teaching
- small group pull-out support
- collaborative planning and consultation
- designing cycles of support (workshops) to accommodate students with mild learning difficulties
- mini-workshops for the staff on specific curricula or instructional areas.

### **What is the role of the learning assistance/resource teacher in inclusive schools?**

In inclusive schools, the role of the learning assistance/resource teacher cannot be considered in isolation to that of the classroom teacher. In inclusive schools, the roles and responsibilities of classroom teachers and learning assistance/resource teachers are changing in fundamental ways. Collaboration is shifting from conferring only about an individual student's problems to making curriculum accessible to a diverse group of students. The task is becoming one of integrating knowledge about curriculum and new curriculum trends with expectations about how learners with diverse characteristics will interact with the content. Through such collaborative discussions -- and actions --

teachers can shape what goes on in classrooms to the advantage of all students before presenting content rather than after a student encounters difficulty.

The current challenge for educators in inclusive settings, then, is to frame classroom dilemmas from a proactive planning perspective -- to design curriculum in response to the needs of the students.

In the past, most collaboration between classroom teachers and learning assistance/resource teachers has been defined by looking at students' deficits as the source of the problem. However, an inclusive approach to education requires a refocus into designing learning experiences which promote the strengths and affinities of all students.

**How should priorities for the assignment of EA time within the school be determined?**

While no formal list of priorities has been developed, there is a clear hierarchy of response. First priority should be given to issues of health and safety, both for self and others. Personal care needs and any adult assistance required to support a student's communication needs should also receive a high priority. Individual student circumstances also influence decisions about EA assignments. If a student is already receiving support from other individuals such as the resource teacher and/or the speech/language pathologist, a team might decide that EA time may not be necessary or desirable as the number of adults assigned to work with the child increases.

**How else might support be provided to students other than assigning a CA?**

The definition of the term "support" is an important task that should be undertaken periodically by each school community in order to ensure that there is common understanding amongst staff. Support may include a wide variety of individuals, strategies and circumstances.

The most fundamental form of support is, of course, learning experiences in the classroom and the instructional approach taken by the teacher. A curriculum that has been adapted/modified to the needs of the students and an instructional approach that acknowledges the diversity of their needs and is designed to enable them is the most important form of support. Frequently, when students are experiencing difficulty, the most effective support is not additional adult presence or peer support but careful adaptation or modification of the curriculum and instruction that is offered. EAs may, of course, be very helpful in developing materials, under the direction of a teacher and within the context of a program developed by the teacher, to assist with this.

Direct instruction from a Learning Assistance or Resource Teacher is an important form of support. Similar types of support may be provided by the various itinerant personnel within the Learning Services Department or by the occupational and physiotherapists who work within our schools. In some cases, support may be supplied for the student

and/or his/her family by other agencies such as Children's Hospital, the Ministry for Children and Family Development, or Mental Health. All sources and forms of support should be coordinated through the school-based team. This is one of the important purposes of an IEP, which focuses on the education program but may well acknowledge and accommodate other associated services.

In addition to the instructional and/or medical services that can be provided by adults, students can also be strongly supported by their peers. Peer support can take many forms. It may mean that the class as a whole receives some instruction about the disabilities or challenges which one of their classmates is experiencing so that they can understand and respond to it appropriately. This is known as "demystification". It may take the form of students providing specific assistance such as reminding a friend when s/he is off task or ensuring that s/he is not left alone on the playground. For some students, a "circle of friends" may be the most important support we can provide.

### **How can we ensure that support promotes increasing student independence?**

The understanding that EAs provide support so that students may develop independent competencies and that, consequently, they work within the student's proximal zone of development but should never do things for a student which that student could accomplish with assistance is an important and elusive one. Discussion of this objective at the school level is essential and it should be revisited regularly in order to ensure that understandings remain sharp and that EAs are not asked to do things "for" students rather than "with" students.

### **Should the schools strive for equal access to EAs by each teacher? Is it considered appropriate to provide different amounts of EA time for different students and different classes?**

Equity, not equality, is the objective in assigning EA resources. It should not be imagined that this would result in the provision of equal amounts of EA time to each teacher or classroom in a school. In fact, even though schools will attempt to create viable classes by assigning students in a relatively equitable way to all teachers, it would be a rather exceptional situation in which this resulted in a logical need to assign precisely equivalent EA time to each classroom given the many other forms of support which are important and which have been previously discussed.

### **How can we best organize to support students?**

The system of relationships within which a student grows and develops is complex and contains many elements that cannot all be discussed here. It is important, however, to note that the classroom is the most important basic sub-system within the domain of the school and, therefore, that the classroom is the basic support system which is to be strengthened if we wish to improve education. This involves changes to curriculum, methods of instruction, the role of the teacher and the role of the student.

In addition to effective classroom practice, however, there must be a supportive network of relationships throughout the school. The two central relationships of importance are those between student and teacher, and between the student and peers.

The classroom teacher is the first and most important source of assistance and support for all students within the school context. While other educational services will frequently be required to extend or enrich those which can be provided by the classroom teacher, they should never displace the classroom teacher as the person with fundamental responsibility for enabling all learners under her care. Just as an architect may call upon structural engineers or interior designers to apply their particular expertise in the construction of a building, so too a teacher may call upon various colleagues within or beyond the school setting. Like the architect, however, the classroom teacher must retain overall responsibility for requesting, coordinating and integrating those services in the interests of the student.

This architectural metaphor contrasts with a commonly used medical metaphor in which the classroom teacher is analogous to a general practitioner who deals with common situations but passes responsibility to a specialist when complications arise which require knowledge that lies beyond that individual's experience or training. This approach is not appropriate in an educational setting unless the child is actually being transferred to another program, and then only if the transfer is intended to be permanent. The point is not to deny the value of and the need for specialist knowledge, but to stress the primary responsibility of the classroom teacher and the importance for children and youth of maintaining stable relationships and having an adult mentor, particularly when the student is stressed due to learning, behaviour or emotional challenges.

The many specialist services upon which a classroom teacher may call are referred to collectively as "Learning Services". Some of the personnel providing these services are school-based and, where this is not possible, some are district-based.

All available resources should be considered in designing supports for students. This will include classroom teachers, school-based and district-based Learning Services teachers, classroom assistants, parents and community services. Just as student needs are viewed in a non-categorical manner, so too, should available resources be utilized in a flexible manner which is based on student need rather than any presumed zone of exclusively defined responsibility for particular individuals.

When planning for the use of learning services personnel, it is generally best to think in terms of creating effective classroom environments rather than attempting to meet the needs of each student by assigning resources to him or her individually. That is not to suggest that individual students do not have very specific needs which must be considered but rather that an environmental approach will result in the most integrated, effective and efficient use of available resources. Although some EAs work primarily with a particular student due to the nature of that student's needs, EAs should be encouraged to work with other students at the same time whenever possible to promote a feeling of belonging. Similarly, a school-based or district-based learning services teacher

who is working in a classroom setting will normally be most effective by fitting into the life of the classroom as seamlessly as possible and supporting the learning of all students, albeit with a particular focus on one or more students with specifically identified needs, rather than being attached to any one or two individuals exclusively.

All adults working in a school should remember that their role is to facilitate the participation of students in the social and intellectual life of the classroom to the fullest possible extent and not to protect or in any way isolate them from it. In *Support Networks for Inclusive Schooling*, which has been supplied to all school libraries, Vandercook and York offer the following comment in this regard.

*When an adult provides physical support to a student in a classroom, a great deal of caution must be exercised to prevent conveying the message that if the student needs help, the support person always will provide the assistance. This can prevent interactions with natural support personnel (such as the classroom teacher and other students), build dependence, and prevent skill acquisition by the classmates and classroom teacher. The support person should be viewed as an adaptation to the environment and like all adaptations, should be faded if and when it is appropriate. This is not to say that additional support is not needed but that natural supports exist and should be utilized to the greatest extent appropriate. If needed, the responsibility of the adult who provides additional support is to facilitate the membership, participation, and learning of all students in regular classes and other integrated school settings (p. 112).*

The manner in which learning services teachers work together, the way in which School-Based Teams respond to teacher requests and monitor individual students, the way in which classroom assistants' time is assigned, and general school procedures all affect the efficiency with which resources are used and the effectiveness of those resources in meeting student needs. Generally speaking, however, the more flexible, adaptive and collaborative the approach the better. Because the resources assigned to a school are not student-specific, they should be organized to meet the greatest possible number of needs and can be reorganized at any time in response to changing needs or circumstances using the Continuum of Learning Services as a framework.

### **How can roles be blended to support inclusion?**

The need for teamwork requires that personnel work very closely with each other around the central agenda of the classroom curriculum. It also requires that School Based Teams work towards sharing expertise and developing flexible modes of organization and work. Strict distinctions between Learning Assistance Teachers and Resource Teachers are inconsistent with such an approach. Therefore, some schools have dropped these separate titles in favour of the common team label, "Learning Resource Teacher". "Learning Services Teacher" might also be appropriate.

This is a positive direction but a challenging one. How can we build flexible interdependent teams of professionals without losing sight of the fact that the individuals involved have valuable specialist knowledge and remembering that it is foolish to imagine that everyone can be expert at everything? How and to what degree can ESL and gifted education be incorporated into the School Based Team? These are important questions that need to be considered by individual teams according to their composition and circumstances but the value of greater interdependence and teamwork is clear.

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