

Inclusive Post-Secondary Education in Canada: Transition to Somewhere for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

Inclusive Education is not a new concept in Canada, however in contrast to the dominant approach to post-secondary disability access that narrowly focuses on the legal obligation to accommodate student learning, we consider Inclusive Post-secondary Education (IPSE) for students with intellectual disabilities within a broader framework of inclusive citizenry. IPSE programs in Canada originated in the province of Alberta and have enjoyed significant leadership from within the Canadian post-secondary and not-for-profit sectors. An overview of the principles and practices of IPSE programs is provided as well as details about the multiple program options available across Canada.

For the past 30 years in Canada, many educators, families and community members with and without disabilities have been working positively towards the development of inclusive educational policy and practice. Following the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982, it is understood by Canadians that education is a right not a privilege and that no child shall be discriminated against as a result of his or her mental or physical disability. Globally, in 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization organized the Salamanca Conference where 94 countries participated in the development of the Salamanca Declaration and Framework for Action. This declaration states that inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights. However, as Macartney (2012) recently reminded us “the existence and dissemination of laws, official documents, policies and pedagogies that support inclusive and human rights responses to disability and education do not guarantee the radical transformation of practices and settings that are called for and, in many cases, required.” (p. 180). Children and youth with disabilities remain among the most stigmatized and oppressed group in the world (UNICEF, 2005).

Inclusive education programs offer hope for equitable access and participation in education for all. As an academic discipline, Inclusive Education usually encompasses the foundations of all social difference; not only issues of disability but also race, ethnocultural identities, socio-economic class and gender diversity (Loreman, McGhie-Richmond, Barber, & Lupart, 2008; Mackay, 2006). Inclusive education can be described by its advances in public education but may also be traced through the academic work of scholars from sociology,

philosophy, disability studies, as well as the contributions of community activists. Most relevant to the consideration of Inclusive Post-secondary education programs is the conceptualization of inclusion as being in unity with societal diversity, benefitting all students, and fundamentally about equity, student rights and social justice (Slee, 2008). Inclusive post-secondary education programs take up social inclusion whereby all planning and action start from “the experiences of the individual and challenge society to provide a meaningful place for everyone.” (Hanvey, 2003, p. 3). Hanvey drawing on the literature of Indian economist Amartya Sen, reminds us that inclusion is an “active process – it goes beyond remediation of deficits and reduction of risk. It promotes human development and ensures that opportunities are not missed – not just for some, but for all” (p. 3).

In terms of human development, the need for increased opportunities for people with disabilities to acquire life and work skills that will facilitate full citizenship in society has been clearly documented in Canadian jurisdictions (Aylward, Farmer & MacDonald, 2007; Mosoff, Greenholtz, & Hurtado, 2009). For many youth with disabilities, the inclusive schooling experience of the primary and secondary public school system does not translate into a successful transition to continued post-secondary learning. Essentially, if transition planning is taking place in secondary schools without sufficient post-secondary and/or community involvement options to meet all student’s needs, then some schools, parents, and students are planning for a transition to nowhere.

The abrupt end to inclusion for some students with disabilities occurs at the age of eighteen with the graduation or completion of high school. As researchers

and parents have documented, some students with disabilities are therefore destined for a life of “clienthood” that necessitates a dependency on government and consumer-based services rather than moving more naturally through the various stages of adulthood (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2000). As Ferguson and Ferguson succinctly note, “a full understanding of the meaning of adulthood must look at the structure of symbols and imagery that surround this culturally defined role” (p.650) and they suggest that any efforts of establishing pathways towards the “promise of adulthood” take into account the dimensions of autonomy (self-sufficiency, self-determination, and completeness) and membership (citizenship and affiliation). Certainly one part of a pathway to adulthood that holds prominent status and high regard is enrolment in post-secondary educational study.

It is clear from surveying the available options that there is an insufficient number of post-secondary opportunities for students graduating from Canadian high schools with diverse learning needs (Bruce, 2011). Within a North American post-secondary landscape that is increasingly conscious of the legal obligation to ensure access for students with disabilities, the number of students enrolling in post-secondary education has significantly increased (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006). However, students with intellectual disability labels remain systemically marginalized with respect to post-secondary opportunities (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza & Levine, 2005) and have not enjoyed the same increase in access as their peers without such labels (Stodden & Whelley, 2004). University and community college admission policies are heavily influenced by an explicit commitment to the protection of academic integrity (Aylward, 2006; Hibbs & Pothier, 2006). This concentration on the establishment and preservation of historical academic standards can perpetuate low expectations and poor adult outcomes overall while reinforcing institutional and systemic barriers that continue to exclude students with intellectual disabilities from many post-secondary environments (Grigal, Hart & Paiewonsky, 2010)

With admission and access policies and practices that are firmly founded in discourses of academic integrity, students with intellectual disability labels are firstly denied admission to university programs through the use of standardized entrance criteria focused on previous academic achievement. Then, because individualized learning supports are not usually available within post-secondary settings, another barrier is erected. Finally, there is an assumption among educators that universities and colleges are for educating the “best and the brightest” which constructs an intellectual divide that is difficult if not impossible to traverse (Hafner, 2008).

Consequently, secondary educators and related professionals do not generally present going to college or university as a viable option for continued learning beyond high school for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities (Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez, & Will, 2006; Hughson, Moodie, & Uditsky, 2006).

In reality, students with intellectual disabilities can benefit from post-secondary education and experiences as much as any other student (Casale-Giannola & Wilson Kamens, 2006; Hafner, 2008; Hart et al, 2006; Weinkauf, 2002). Benefits to students have consistently been observed in the areas of improved academic and personal skills, employment outcomes, self-confidence, self-advocacy, transition to community, and independence (Migliore, Butterworth, & Hart, 2009; Stodden & Whelley, 2004). In addition to these student benefits, studies have demonstrated that Inclusive Post-secondary Education (IPSE) programs within a Canadian university setting can have a positive influence on institutional structures and on faculty, staff, and students (Thompson, 2010).

Overview of Inclusive Post-Secondary Education Programs Principles and Practices

Inclusive post-secondary education has its origins in the province of Alberta, and programs in Canada (as well as in the U.S.A.) strive to serve students with intellectual and developmental disabilities who wish to pursue further education with their peers in typical college and university settings (Greenholtz et al, 2007; Mosoff et al, 2009; Thompson, 2010). Students who enter IPSE programs are those who would not usually gain admission to college and university courses because they do not meet the standardized entrance criteria of the institutions. Viewed as adult learners, students are not assessed for admission to IPSE programs based on previous academic performance, diagnostic criteria, or psychometric or medical documentation of an intellectual disability.

IPSE represents a progressive model of adult education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. While specific IPSE program models will vary, researchers and program staff generally define IPSE, as a set of practices that enables students with diverse learning needs to engage in general college and university experiences rather than specialized targeted programs (Hughson, Moodie, & Uditsky, 2006). Motivation to learn is the principal criterion for admission, and individualized supports are provided to students in ways that facilitate a post-secondary experience that is comparable to that of their peers. It is important to note that IPSE is not an end in itself. It is a pathway to adulthood that facilitates the

achievement of socially valued roles where adults with diverse learning needs are viewed as achieving full membership status in society (Bowman & Weinkauff, 2004; Greenholtz et al, 2007; Mosoff et al, 2009). Eventually, with the comprehensive implementation of IPSE programs across Canada, it is hoped that the presence of students with intellectual disabilities will be an unremarkable aspect of all diverse college or university communities (Mosoff et al, 2009).

Hart and colleagues (2006) and Kleinhart, Jones, Sheppard-Jones, Harp and Harrison (2012) have identified salient models of IPSE programs. In the *Substantially Separate or Stand Alone* model students participate only in classes with other students with disabilities. These are frequently referred to as life skills classes or transition programs. Students may or may not be offered the opportunity to participate in regular campus activities. Employment experience in this model tends to be provided in a way that rotates students through a set of predetermined jobs either on or off campus. In the *Mixed* or *Hybrid* model students participate in social activities or academic classes (for audit or credit) with their same-aged peers without disabilities. Additionally, they participate in classes with other students with disabilities – classes that provide life skills training and transition options. Within this model, students gain experience in either on or off campus employment. The *Integrated* or *Inclusive Individual Support Model* offers students individualized support to take college courses, certificate programs, or degree programs either as audit or credit students. Supports might include educational coaching, tutoring, assistive technology, or naturalized assistance. The individual supports are determined by the student's vision and career goals. There is no program base on campus because the attention is given to establishing student-driven goals that will direct the course of study and employment experience.

More recently, the *Dual Enrolment* option has been extended to students with intellectual disabilities. This option is typically one in which high school students in their final two years are simultaneously enrolled in secondary and college/university programs. Through a collaborative agreement between public high schools and post-secondary institutions, students have the opportunity to earn college or university credit for some of their high school courses (Martinez & Queener, 2010).

Researchers have found that successful IPSE program initiatives tend to be small, individualized, and personalized with student numbers in natural proportions to the general population (Hafner, 2008; Hughson et al, 2006). Equally important is the necessity to protect IPSE students from being seen by faculty and students as

subjects of either research or practica (Hughson et al, 2006). While IPSE offers excellent reciprocal learning opportunities, in a North American society where post-secondary participation and indicators of achievement are predominantly linked to realizing status as a valued member of one's community, staying away from power structures such as researcher and researched or pre-service professional and practicum subject is favourable (Bowman & Weinkauff, 2004).

Bowman and Weinkauff (2004) have also emphasized the importance of examining the way in which IPSE programs are administered. IPSE programs, to the greatest extent possible, are best embedded within post-secondary institutions. While parent involvement and inter-agency cooperation are important elements, organizational alignment with post-secondary institutions allows IPSE students and services to be an integrated part of the campus community.

Weinkauff (2002), through involvement in IPSE in the province of Alberta has articulated several principles that have guided much of the IPSE program development in Canada. These principles help to ensure that IPSE programs are available to any adult with an intellectual disability and that no academic or physical criteria will prevent enrolment in programs. Some principles speak to providing individual student supports in a manner that will facilitate a learning experience that is coherent with that of other students as well as ensuring that there is adequate faculty and staff development. A vital principle of IPSE is the recognition of the students as adult learners who are involved in all program decisions in order to lead increasingly self-determined lives.

Inclusive Postsecondary Programs across Canada

Alberta. Inclusive Post-Secondary Education programs began in the province of Alberta twenty-seven years ago (Trish Bowman, Executive Director, Alberta Association of Community living, personal communication December 3, 2013). IPSE programs in Alberta are consistent with the inclusive individual support model identified by Hart et al (2006). Students in Alberta have a wide variety of post-secondary options in numerous college and university settings. While the governance structures vary across programs, adherence to full inclusion principles is guided and supported by an Alberta Association for Community Living provincial network (Hughson et al, 2006). Students have access to a coherent post-secondary experience through academic classes, recreational experiences, and campus activities. Inclusion facilitators provide support in course adaptation as well as to faculty and to peer mentors. A primary goal of the IPSE initiatives in Alberta is for

students to gain relevant employment experience and preparation.

British Columbia. In British Columbia the initiative on Inclusive Post-Secondary Education is led by a not-for-profit agency (i.e., Steps Forward) that supports students with intellectual disabilities on four Campuses in the province. The initiative began in 2001 by parents who wanted to create campuses where students with developmental disabilities would be ordinary members of a diverse campus community, regardless of the nature of the disability. The program is a process of participatory auditing in which students access course material adapted by Steps Forward staff to meet individual learning needs. While IPSE students do not receive traditional grades or degrees, they do receive a certificate of completion from the university or college.

Saskatchewan. Campus for All at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan is a partnership among The University of Regina, the Regina and District Association for Community Living, and People First of Regina. It provides a post-secondary option to adults with developmental disabilities aged twenty-two or older. Campus for All students can audit classes, improve literacy, and develop connections with other students. At the University of Regina, students have access to campus facilities and services, can participate in student campus activities, can design individualized literacy plans with Campus for All staff, and can receive literacy tutoring from non-disabled classmates. The Campus for All program is most closely aligned with the inclusive individual support model.

Manitoba. Since 2004, the University of Manitoba, Faculty of Education, has been offering an inclusive post-secondary program called "Campus Life". Faculty, staff, and student volunteers have been supporting students with intellectual disabilities to take regular courses, to engage in social activities, and to be a part of the life of the University of Manitoba campus. Students are supported to audit courses in multiple faculties and departments, and the typical student will take one to three courses per term over a four to five year period. Campus Life students have the opportunity to complete a 30 hour non-credit certificate; and in the spring 2011, the first Campus Life students graduated in convocation ceremonies with their peers.

Ontario. The Ontario college system has created a post-secondary option for students with developmental or intellectual disabilities. Community Integration through Co-Operative Education (CICE) is a two-year full-time program in which students take a combination of regular college courses and core life skills courses with other CICE students. Depending on the college campus, students complete the program and receive either an Ontario College diploma or certificate. Regular

college courses are adapted to meet individual learning styles, and academic support is provided in the classroom and through tutorials. Students in this program are required to have a certain level of independence, and supports are not provided outside the academic arena. Course work includes a variety of field placements to allow students to gain valuable work-related skills. These programs appear to be most consistent with the mixed or hybrid model of IPSE.

Quebec. In Quebec Inclusive post-secondary programs exist in four English CEGEP (general and vocational pre-university programs) in Montreal. One program, the Post-secondary Alternative Community-based Education (P.A.C.E.) is a partnership between Champlain College and the Riverside School Board in St. Lambert Quebec. Intended for students with intellectual disabilities and/or pervasive developmental disabilities, this program is an opportunity to gain post-secondary experience through multiple learning opportunities. Program components include community-based instruction, parent involvement, job training, regular college classes and activities, transition planning, and inter-agency collaboration. In order to be admitted, students must be between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one with a coded pervasive developmental disability and/or developmental disability. They must also be able to use public transit, be able to function with minimal supervision in college and work environments, and be willing to learn from a variety of experiences.

New Brunswick. Since 2001, the New Brunswick Association for Community Living and the New Brunswick Community College have worked in partnership to increase the participation of students with intellectual disabilities in post-secondary education. A four-year pilot project that ended in 2005 led to the development of a special admissions process for students with intellectual disabilities to access a limited number of seats in New Brunswick Community College programs across the province. Students work with college staff to develop an individualized learning plan that will include adaptation of the course work in the program. They are required to attend class on their own with the provision of appropriate accommodations. Instructors are trained in teaching alternative learning strategies, and tutorial services are also offered. Upon completion, students receive a certificate of participation along with a profile that outlines the skills they have acquired as a result of their participation in the program.

Prince Edward Island. In the province of Prince Edward Island the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) offers a program called Adult Connections in Education (ACE). In the ACE program, students with intellectual disabilities engage in university classes, extra-curricular activities, time with peers, and work

experience opportunities that are intended to provide academic enhancement and personal growth. Admission is based on compatibility between the goals of the student and the goals of the ACE program.

Nova Scotia. In 2012, after research and planning conducted by the authors, the first IPSE program in Nova Scotia was started on a university campus at Acadia University. Access Acadia is based on the University of Manitoba Campus Life model whereby the primary admission criterion to the program is students' motivation to continue learning. The Access Acadia program adheres to the inclusive individual support model with the goal of providing a post-secondary experience that is coherent with that of campus peers. Access Acadia students engage in a personalized student advising process that supports course selection, determination of required supports, and facilitation and implementation of those supports by interacting with faculty, staff, peer mentors, and student volunteers. It is also the goal of the program to assist students to find part-time and summer employment in order to explore possible work interests.

Conclusion

Many primary, secondary and post-secondary schools in Canada root their espoused policies and practices in the belief that all students are valued members of the educational community. One often encounters within inclusive education policy, statements that affirm how all students share the following desires: to be challenged, to participate, to contribute, and to be respected for who they are. In recent years, Canadian disability advocacy groups have worked diligently to move the discussion of disability issues into the realm of human rights and citizenship. In particular, advocates for persons with intellectual disabilities have emphasized the realization of full citizenship for this systemically marginalized group. Engagement in higher education and employment are two key components of achieving full participation as citizens (Greenholtz et al, 2007).

Inclusive citizenry requires the development and enrichment of post-secondary educational settings where a diversity of learners can belong, an environment where belonging is not only defined by prior academic achievement and the standardized assessment of learning potential. There must also be a commitment to post-secondary teaching that recognizes the value in teaching all who can learn, not just in teaching those who can reach pre-determined academic goals. Inclusive post-secondary education programs encourage us to re-imagine university and college campus communities where it is possible to generate equitable spaces of

belonging and a transition to somewhere where all students get to be somebody.

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