

Inclusion and the Nature of the Human:
A Canadian Perspective

Prof. Dr. John Valk
University of New Brunswick
Fredericton
New Brunswick
Canada

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Abstract

The questions that lie behind all matters related to inclusion have essentially to do with the nature of the human, what it means to be community, and who do we include or exclude in the societies we create. This presentation seeks to address these questions from a Canadian perspective. Canada, the 5th most pleasant country in the world in which to live according to a recent UN study, is multicultural, has three founding nations (First Nations, French, British), exhibits unity within diversity, strives for consensus, and emphasizes belonging and individual and group contributions. By its nature it is an inclusive society, though far from perfect. How did Canada get there and what are the implications for Inclusive Education?

Introduction

Europe is experiencing a refuge crisis, or stated more positively, a refuge challenge. I say challenge intentionally because it has everything to do with inclusion and exclusion, the underlying theme of this conference and I think the underlying theme of all the things in which you are involved.

Admitting two million refugees into a country, as Turkey has done, or 850,000 as Germany is in the process of doing, can present a crisis. No doubt, to some extent it will. Some feel it will upset their comfortable and settled life, one which has given them advantages, privileges, and above all power. Indeed, that lifestyle may face a crisis, and great fear has already been expressed.

On the otherhand, admitting refugees into a country, region, or town, may open up new possibilities, new opportunities, and new enrichments. The road forward might not be entirely smooth, yet for many is the right thing to do, difficulties notwithstanding. “You are to treat well the foreigner in your land”, the Old Testament reminds us (Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19; Ex 22:21). To include, rather than exclude, can make a world of difference – for those included or excluded, and for those with the power to decide.

Inclusion and exclusion applies not only to refugees. It applies to all of us. In greater or lesser degrees, on numerous levels, and in a variety of situations or contexts, we all experience inclusion and exclusion. As such, inclusion and exclusion is part of life. We are either the perpetrators or the victims, and sometimes both. The extent to which we include or exclude others says something about us as

individuals and as a society. Most importantly, it says something about our understanding of what it means to be human. Here it is not difficult to make the link to education: how we educate, and most importantly who we educate. It is at this point that I want to speak from the perspective and context of my society – Canada.

Canada: Inclusion at its heart

According to a recent UN study, Canada is the 5th most pleasant country in the world in which to live. Why is this? What is it about Canada that makes it so attractive?

Those who conducted the UN study may not have visited Canada during the winter months. It can be quite cold and with lots of snow. The city of Calgary will always get some snow in the month of August, when most Europeans are experiencing the warmest month of the year. My son Michael teaches school in a town near the Artic Circle. He has winter boots for temperatures that reach to -50 degrees Celsius. But not all of Canada experiences such cold extremes. We do have many warm months of the year.

Canada is also a beautiful country, with many varied landscapes: oceans on three sides, the Great Lakes, mountains, prairies, farmlands, forests and more. But other countries also have their natural beauty, in fact perhaps even more so. Hence, there must be something more that makes Canada attractive.

Recently a Muslim woman sought to wear a niqab at a citizenship ceremony, asserting her religious freedom to do so. The previously governing Conservative

Party refused her request. When she challenged this, the courts affirmed her right, indicating that religious accommodation is an overriding principle in Canada.

Another Muslim woman recently recounted her story of immigration. As a young child she left Pakistan with her family, went to England for some time, and then eventually settled in Canada. Here, over the years, she experienced considerable success. She excelled professionally, to become director of the popular Canadian TV show “Little Mosque on the Prairie”. But it was on the personal level, she indicated, that she felt most included and most free. It was in Canada and not elsewhere, she said, that as a woman and a Muslim she was able to express her Islamic faith in a manner different from her parents and different even from her Muslim community. It was also here that she experienced openness to critical dialogue on some of Islam’s traditional cultural practices.

So what is it about Canada that gives space to people such as these to flourish? Perhaps not least because 95% of the Canadian population consists of immigrants; we or our ancestors all came to Canada, whether in the last the year, the last decade, the last century, or more. For each of the last 25 years Canada has admitted approximately 250,000 immigrants annually, the highest per capita in the world. Canada is full of immigrants. In larger and smaller cities across the country one can see and hear people of various colour, ethnicity, culture and language. Canada is inclusive by its very nature – it is in our national DNA. It was there from its very beginnings.

Canada consists of three founding peoples (First Nations, French, British). When Europeans first set foot in Canada, they encountered indigenous people who

welcomed them. After all, there was enough land for everyone. Treaties were made between the original inhabitants and the newcomers – treaties that negotiated how to include everyone and how to share in the abundance of land and resources.

Those treaties are still in effect today.

It is from the First Nations Peoples that European immigrants learned how to survive in the harsh climate. It was from the First Nations Peoples that Europeans learned to include everyone – to strive for consensus rather than perpetuate conflict. It was from First Nations Peoples that early settlers learned that the best way forward was not to use a gun but to strive for a common solution, to create a win-win situation for all, to negotiate into the late hours of the night if necessary, to create friendship treaties so all would be included, to accommodate rather than conquer.

Those early lessons were not lost. When the British became the dominant power by defeating the French in Canada, accommodation was found for French speakers, most specifically in the Province of Quebec. To accommodate French speakers as they later spread throughout the land, Canada became officially bilingual. To assist in preserving the French language and culture in the Province of Quebec the Canadian Government continually grants that province increased jurisdictions over its own affairs. Canadians believe Quebec belongs to Canada, and hence would prefer to accommodate their demands than see them separate.

Canada is built on inclusion and diversity. Canada has accommodated more and more diverse peoples, and most especially since the Second World War. Today there are large and numerous Italian, German, Irish, Chinese, and Vietnamese

communities spread throughout the land, and pockets of them are clearly visible in certain cities. Each has contributed to building a rich and prosperous country.

Canada exhibits a rare form of unity within diversity. It includes others and has benefitted immensely by doing so. By its nature it is an inclusive society – everyone belongs. We strive to be a “fair country”, as John Ralston Saul put it in his book by the same name (Saul, 2008). There is room for everyone. We are *hyphenated Canadians*: German-Canadians, Dutch-Canadians, Japanese-Canadians, Croatian-Canadians, and more. We are *multi-religious*: Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, atheist, and more. We are *multi-coloured*: red, white, yellow and black. We are *multi-cultural*: native, European, Asian, African, and Oceanic.

Of course, things are far from perfect. The original inhabitants – the First Nations Peoples – have often been denied access to the national wealth and prosperity generated over the last centuries. They have suffered from the same racism that continues to plague so many Western countries. But the tide is turning. First Nations Peoples are making a comeback (Saul, 2014). A large majority of Canadians today are disturbed by their exclusion. Some of their strongest allies today are found among churches, ironic because for almost a century they colluded with the government to assimilate Native children into a white European Christian culture. Now many of those same church groups support a First Nations sovereign status within the current governing structure of Canada. They even incorporate within their ecclesiastical structures and practices Native beliefs, values and rituals. First Nations Peoples too belong to Canada.

So while we are not perfect, we are also not continuously burdened by the religious, cultural, ethnic and political strife so often seen and experienced in many parts of the world. To be Canadian entails accommodating the other, even the ethnic and religious other, whoever that might be, and increasingly it is all of us. In Canada, we all belong.

The nature of the human

So what does all of this say about the nature of the human, as seen from a Canadian perspective? How do we understand the human, especially the human other, as we stand in a society and culture of diversity and difference? What does it mean to be human from a Canadian viewpoint?

First, to be human from a Canadian perspective entails the right to *certain basic freedoms*, freedoms well-known in other democratic countries: freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, freedom of movement, freedom of marriage, freedom from discrimination, and more. These are the basic individual freedoms accorded to all Canadians regardless of race, religion, gender and sexual orientation, and they are solidly entrenched in the Canadian Constitution and its Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982. This same Charter included for the first time the same rights and freedoms for those with “mental and physical disabilities”. Canada also later signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007 and ratified it in 2010, which as you well know contains the right to education.

Second, to be human entails the right and freedom to *participate*. This too is a basic human right and freedom found in many democratic countries. Canada is a society where equality is a highly esteemed if not a sacred principle. All are equal before the law regardless of difference, whatever that might be. All have the right to participate in the various aspects of society: education, religion, the economy, the democratic process, health services, and more. Denial of such participation and services diminishes the human and the courts of the land make this quite clear every time.

Third, to be human entails the right and the freedom to *contribute*. This is not specifically mentioned in any constitution, and it goes beyond the right to participate. It is more an expectation – an expectation not only to be seen, but also to be heard. It encourages the ethnic, religious, and racial “other” not to ghettoize but to contribute; to add to the ongoing rich mosaic of society. Diversity in Canada is seen as a blessing not a burden, and hence the celebration of difference: religious, ethnic, cultural, and sexual – from gay parades to cultural festivals to native ceremonies. These are highlighted, encouraged and celebrated. Denying such opportunities diminishes the human for it suppresses the gifts and abilities with which everyone has been endowed, whether abled or disabled.

Canadians learn early that to be human entails such rights and freedoms extended to all. Every attempt to privilege one group above another is received with disdain. Privileging secularists by restricting religious symbols, or privileging “old stock” Canadians by banning facial coverings at citizenship ceremonies, is looked on

with scorn, and heavily criticized. And privileging the abled over the disabled is now reaching public discussion.

Let me say again, however, that Canada is far from perfect. We have our issues, and the rest of the world knows this. We have our share of bigots and racists. Internationally we have dragged our feet on climate change, and we have turned from peacekeepers to peacemakers. Yet, many Canadians are unhappy with this turn of events. They prefer to have Canada seen as a model of human rights and freedoms, and from time to time it plays such a role. John Peters Humphrey drafted the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson played a major role in resolving the Suez Canal crisis in 1957, for which he won a Nobel Peace Prize. UN Envoy Stephen Lewis worked tirelessly to end the recent AIDS pandemic in Africa. And now we have a new Prime Minister who again wants Canada to be seen as a peaceful nation, promoting rights and freedoms globally.

An overriding principle that defines what it means to be human for Canadians is the sacredness of individual rights and freedoms. Those individual rights and freedoms operate best in a context of inclusion and accommodation. In spite of blemishes, it seems to work in Canada. Canada is an inclusive society, and the dominant groups are reminded of this at every turn, and the minority make that clear through their participation and contributions to society as a whole. What it means to be human from the Canadian perspective is to include the “other”, regardless of ethnicity, religion, culture, and at this point I want to add ability and disability. Here Canadians have learned much from one of their own – Jean Vanier, philosopher, theologian, and advocate for the disabled.

Vanier began the first L'Arche community for people with disabilities in France in 1964. Vanier witnessed first hand the institutional marginalization of people with severe intellectual and physical disabilities. He invited two young men to live with him, and then a few more, and then more. Today L'Arche communities can be found worldwide, integrated within local communities, with 30 in Canada alone.

From his religious convictions Vanier felt that “even the least of these” are children of God and hence must be dignified. But he discovered even more. He discovered that many of the “least of these” had been ill-treated, neglected and isolated in institutions. He further discovered that because of their neglect and social isolation, all too many lived wretched lives, frustrated to the point of physically abusing themselves in hopes of getting even minimal attention.

The most important thing Vanier discovered, however, is that to be human is to belong, to be included (Vanier, 1998). We are not a society comprised of individuals competing for space and scarce resources; we are communal beings sharing a variety of gifts and abilities. Community grounds the human; we need each other. To become human, he argued, is to be open to everyone, even the transcendent. A vibrant community includes everyone, for we can learn from everyone – everyone has something to contribute, regardless of abilities or disabilities. That contribution is in the form of giving or receiving, and often in both, and here I want to make the link to inclusive education

Inclusive Education

In the early 19th Century Western nations embarked on public schooling – often called “common schooling” – so children would become productive citizens, contributing to the wealth and prosperity of a nation. Those with the greatest abilities, or from the most prominent families, attended the most prestigious schools, and generally were rewarded the most prominent jobs. A great many children with average intelligence, from average family incomes, from average situations were educated for average jobs in the burgeoning industrial machine that was sweeping the Western world.

Those who fell outside these parameters, those with intellectual or physical disabilities, had little or no place in that great march toward prosperity. It was assumed that they had little to contribute; they were deemed unproductive. In many countries, Canada included, special schools or institutions were built for the disabled. According to the logic of the day, these institutions would better assist disabled children and adults in their special needs. All too often, however, they were excluded, hidden away and mostly forgotten by mainstream society. In certain periods some suffered an even worse fate. Their social inclusion was not deemed necessary or valued, either by society itself or even for their own benefit.

They were, in effect, victims of a kind of education still with us – a highly competitive individually oriented educational system designed for a highly competitive individually oriented society. Such a society teaches us that humans are individuals competing for scarce resources, and the educational system exists to advantage people in that competition. At its worst, however, it results in a race to

the bottom; a downward spiral society that shares not its wealth with others but hoards it for the fortunate few. The powerful determine the fate of the powerless. As societies become richer they do become more charitable, but only if it does not impede their race to the top. The story is a familiar one, I'm sure. But it is also largely denied.

The educational system in Canada was for the longest time designed in this manner. It streamed students, after about the 10th grade. I was educated in this system. However, I reached a particular professional level not because I came from a prominent family (I didn't), nor had any wealth to speak of (I experienced social welfare). I reached the level I did because Canadian society was changing. Whatever social stratification existed, or had been imported from Europe, that would determine my future began to wane in the 1970s, and the public school system began to open up. I could choose my own educational path; it was not determined for me. It was really up to me. I had a right to a good education, I was expected to participate, and even more so, I could contribute as much as I wanted.

Today that choice has increased even more in Canada. An individually oriented education still exists but learners of all kinds can choose their own path, and can even change their paths mid-stream. And parents have the right to choose the kind of education they deem best suited for their children.

That right has now been extended to children with physical and mental disabilities. Special institutions for the disabled hidden away from the public are being eliminated. Group homes for those who need special care exist, but they are integrated within communities. We have an organization called "Community Living"

that assists those with disabilities to develop certain skills so they can contribute to society. Further, the public school system is now obliged to include and accommodate children with disabilities. The Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been fought for and implemented in the schools. It's a new day. And why this turn of events? It is now recognized that we are all social creatures; we all belong. We grow, develop and thrive when we are included in our social surroundings, not isolated from them.

The Province of New Brunswick, where I live, is a model for inclusion. Inclusion, not exclusion, is the operating principle; every student belongs and is accommodated. The public school system must provide a place for all children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Teacher assistants are now hired to support students with disabilities so they can participate and contribute to the class dynamic.

Of course, the situation is far from perfect. Individualism still rears its head. Exclusion still occurs even within an inclusive system. Insufficient funding is directed to those who need assistance, and full inclusion is highly dependent on innovative and creative teachers. Parents still need to assert their rights for their disabled children. But the law is on their side, as is the Canadian Constitution. Belonging and accommodating the other is the Canadian way, whether that is a new immigrant, a different sexual orientation, a religious request, or a person with disabilities. And if we do not find an immediate solution, we discuss with one another until we do.

One last point. From Jean Vanier I learned that to become human entails opening up to the other. It is from the social *other* that we learn so much. From the L'Arche philosophy comes the notion that we are all interdependent, and that every person has gifts to contribute to society at large. From this perspective there are no disabilities; there are only gifts to share.

Thank you.

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