

Community Living Ontario

Discussion of Philip Burge Article on Public Perception on Inclusive Education in Ontario



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New study on inclusive education focuses on public perceptions Author says study highlights areas that can be improved upon Wednesday, February 04, 2009 – Philip Burge says knowing how your community thinks is an important step towards addressing areas where improvements can be made.

That reasoning led him to co-author a new study entitled, *A Quarter Century of Inclusive Education for Children with Intellectual Disabilities in Ontario: Public Perceptions*, which surveyed 680 adults from across Ontario to find out their opinions on inclusive education.

Despite increasing movement towards inclusive education, which he says gathered steam in the 1980s with the introduction of Bill 82, the public's opinion of its utility remains divergent.

When asked what type of school is best for children who have an intellectual disability, 52 per cent of the public viewed some degree of inclusive education in schools as best while 42 per cent believed that education in a segregated setting was best.

Burge, who is an associate professor of psychiatry at Queen's University, says that despite conducting the survey in southeastern Ontario, which provides greater opportunities for inclusive education, these results were unanticipated.

"We know that certain Ontario school boards, especially in the Toronto and Ottawa areas, have a long and ongoing history of favouring segregated schools than do most other Ontario jurisdictions," says Burge.

"Given the norm of greater opportunities for most children with intellectual disabilities in southeastern Ontario (where the survey was conducted) to receive part of most of their schooling in integrated classrooms it was surprising to uncover such a high proportion of respondents who believed (segregated) schools was best for children who have an intellectual disability."

Reasons for the public's opinion may be explained in a follow-up question of the survey. When participants were asked what they perceived as obstacles to inclusion

79 per cent said schools lacked the resources needed and 69 per cent of the respondents believed teachers were unprepared to teach students who have an intellectual disability.

Burge says due to the limitations of the survey he is unable to comment on whether the perceived barriers are real or only perceptions but the study's outcomes should be used to dig deeper into the issues.

“What appears clear is that these perceptions are likely held by a significant proportion of the adult public and these views likely impact their support level for efforts to expand inclusion in schools,” he says.

From the findings the authors conclude that it is imperative for school boards to further explore and ultimately address the lack of preparedness perception held by the public.

The authors further suggest that the public may be unaware of recent policy developments to enhance inclusive education such as Education for All in 2005, meant to strengthen student's learning through greater needs identification and allocation of resources, and a proposal from the college of teachers which recommends adjustments of the content to the program of professional education that would make special education a required element.

The authors add that boards of education, educators and government ministries can play a key role in better communicating to the public recent developments in order to further strengthen support for inclusion and increase available educational resources to address the remaining challenges.

Also important to the study's findings was the positive link between people who know someone who has a disability and their positive opinions of inclusion education. People who know someone with an intellectual disability are more than twice as likely to favour inclusive school environments.

The authors recommend disability awareness programs and personal success stories from children would be helpful to informing the public of the potential benefits of an inclusive school environment.

[For a full copy of the Burge study click here.](#)