

The New Brunswick Inclusive Education Policy; lessons learned on the way here, what helped get us here, and a possible solution to a major Canadian problem.

by David Jory

So we in New Brunswick finally have a stated policy on inclusive education. Long-awaited.

It is 27 1/2 years since legislation first allowed students with intellectual disabilities (ID) – and students with cerebral palsy (CP) – into the school system; 34 years since some of us parents first started thinking seriously about how to get our kids with labels into schools with our kids without labels. We have come a long way. But as the recent report by Gordon Porter and Angela AuCoin showed, there are still far too many dark corners with respect to inclusive education in our New Brunswick school system – though there are gratifyingly many shining examples of creativity and success as well. The new policy is carefully designed to enhance the good and prevent the bad; I hope it succeeds.

When we started (in my case in October 1979), the discipline of psychology – deeply marked then, as now, by its roots in eugenics – and the medical profession had decreed that our son with Down Syndrome (and all the other kids labelled as having ID or CP) could not be educated. The law agreed. Since schools dealt with education, our kids with labels were banned from it and sent to “Auxiliary Classes”, run mainly by what were then local associations of CAMR-NB, where they got “training and instruction” instead. At that time there were no community services for children with ID, only a fairly new children's institution which was rife with abuse and incompetence. Fortunately it was closed by the government 30 years ago.

In 1979 we wanted people to stop treating our kids with labels so badly and allow them to go to school with their sisters and brothers and friends. We had no clear idea of how that would work, though those lucky enough to have had kids with labels go to “regular” kindergarten knew that with good faith and good attitudes it could work. We didn't even know that what we wanted was called “integration”.

Lessons to be drawn

The story of how we got from there to the new policy deserves to be told but not here. Some lessons can be drawn from it, however.

The first is that advocates in our field must be prepared to keep moving the goal-posts. As we learn more about what is possible and what is right, our vision of where we want to get must change – so we change our goals and move the goal-posts. Admittedly, this can be upsetting for some allies, especially those in government.

For example, it took us a while to realize that if we wanted a school system that would do well by our kids with labels, we needed a school system that would do well by all kids including those without labels. So we changed our goals and moved the goal-posts. Then we realized that too many kids without labels were being badly served by some parts of our school system. So we moved our goal-posts to the needed systemic change and a new focus on individual students throughout the school system. This is what the new inclusive education

policy is designed and intended to produce.

Second, we learned that we need to free our minds from the narrowing and negative effects of using the terminology of exclusion. The new policy has no mention of “exceptional students”, “students with exceptionalities”, “students with special education needs”, “students with special needs”, “special education” or any other labels invented by school systems to enable them to continue to discriminate against our children with Intellectual Disabilities and others. The label I objected to most strongly was “special needs student” because it was meaningless and used by school and administrative personnel to refer to any student they didn't know how to teach. And, of course, it implied that none of the students who were not given this label had any “special needs”. Some of us tended to interrupt whenever the term was used in our presence to point out that ALL students have “special needs” and ask why this was not recognized.

Close study of the new inclusive education policy shows that one of the formative elements in it is the recognition of the need for more personalized and individualized education for ALL students. The closest the policy comes to a reference to labelling is section 6.2.2.1: “The following practices must not occur: Segregated, self-contained programs or classes for students with learning or behavioural challenges, either in school or in community-based learning opportunities”. Advocates for inclusive education need to stop using discriminatory labels invented by those who do not support inclusion. System people who use those terms need to stop doing so. They must stop looking for system change just for students with labels, and recognize that if kids with labels are to get a good education, we need system change for ALL students.

Third, the importance of building allies was another lesson learned over the years. Often when we thought we were struggling on our own, we found out later – sometimes decades later – that we had influential allies we didn't know about, especially within government, elected and non-elected. An “insider” told me (after all concerned had retired) that our early success in the education field was greatly helped by impassioned support behind closed doors by the then-deputy minister of Social Services.

As individual parents, my wife and I would have accomplished nothing without allies within the ACL movement. When we started asking for “integration” we didn't know that Gordon Porter and Julie Stone – unknown allies -- were already “doing integration” 200 km north of us. The ACL movement would have accomplished little without allies. In New Brunswick our then NBACL Executive Director Lorraine Silliphant, and latter Krista Carr, undertook systematic lobbying of the other agencies in the “disability community”. Initially they were more focused on service provision than NBACL and had to turn their attention to the “big picture” policy matters. Once they worked out a common vision for policy goals, first with inclusive education and then with community inclusion, we made real progress.

The importance of this when dealing with government cannot be overestimated. Governments are much more likely to do the right thing if everybody is asking for it than if some groups in the same line of business want the opposite. Solidarity also helps overcome the resisters in government bureaucracies – and there are always a few – from setting groups against each other.

Factors which helped us

Support from allies in unexpected quarters is one of the factors which favoured our cause in New Brunswick. In 1981, when the Minister of Education appointed a “Ministerial Advisory Committee under the Auxiliary Classes Act” with representation from all stakeholders, I was the Anglophone representative. I was amazed to discover how wide the support was for the “integration” of our children with labels into the school system. This included among others: the representatives of the provincial Home and School Associations; the principals association; the superintendents association; the Auxiliary Class teachers union – even though they knew they would lose their seniority if they were included in the regular teachers’ union; the Department of Education staffer who supervised the Auxiliary Class system. In included everybody except the representatives of the Anglophone and francophone teachers associations (NBTA & AEFNB) and the Anglophone university, the University of New Brunswick (UNB).

Over time, the NBTA and AEFNB came around but UNB did not. Since it graduates most of the teachers in the province and as the government had granted UNB graduates teaching certificates, this has allowed the provincial university to fail to train young teachers for the jobs they went to in the provinces “inclusive” schools and classrooms mandated unanimously by the provincial legislature. This has continued now for 27 years and to me it is unconscionable UNB bears a heavy responsibility for this. I say this understanding how the system works - I was a professor in another faculty at UNB for over 30 years.

Our cause was also helped by the fact that we had a succession of premiers with a deep and abiding commitment to human rights and the rights of people with disabilities. They have all understood the desire for inclusion, even if economic circumstances and other constraints have often stopped them from acting as we wanted them to. They have sometimes hired senior staff with the right attitude to do what could be done, quietly and effectively, under the radar.

It was also helpful that there was an absence of any organized opposition to inclusive education among parents, especially in the early stages. Except for a recent small faction that remains the case. When legislation abolished the Auxiliary Classes in 1986, local branches of NBACL and the parents in them, willingly gave up control of the education of their children with ID to school boards. This was a brave gesture of faith, taken in many cases with a great deal of trepidation. Some parents were opposed to “integration” for some good and some bad reasons. However they never organized themselves into a lobby group, even after it became clear that in some schools not all of our children benefitted from “integration” because of negative attitudes.

It was also helpful that “integration” was implemented quickly and in not too systematic a fashion. This meant that those who were not supportive did not have time to organize resistance. By 1989, when a Special Committee of Legislators toured the province seeking submissions on “School Integration” - partly in response to teacher union pressure – experience in schools and classrooms was showing the significant advantages of “integration”. Almost everybody was in favour of it, and the leadership of the teacher unions were increasingly isolated and shown to be on the wrong side of history.

The relative lack of power of school boards in New Brunswick, relative to the central government was also a plus. While the Department of Education did not always use the power it had to stop poor practices in school districts and individual schools, but it did have

that power. In some other Canadian provinces school boards operate almost as separate entities from central government.

A major problem remaining and a possible solution

The lack of support from New Brunswick's primary Anglophone teacher-training institution (UNB) remains a problem. In fact it is a problem which is common across Canada and in other countries. On a national level, the failure of so many of our Canadian university Faculties of Education to graduate teachers fully trained to teach in an inclusive education system is possibly the most important obstacle to inclusive education. While tribute must be paid to the few Faculties which do produce graduates willing and able to teach inclusively, it is not enough.

We should recognize that many of those Faculties which do not prepare graduates for inclusive classrooms would be incapable of doing so even if they wanted to or were directed to. Too many Faculty members don't fully understand the concept of inclusion. They don't understand the systemic changes required in school systems for inclusive education to work for all students. They don't know how to teach prospective teachers what they need to know and show little interest in finding out. As a former university professor who has been involved in hiring and promotions at all levels, I understand why this is so, but it is still inexcusable

My strategy to address this issue:

- 1) draft (after appropriate consultation) a list of requirements (to be reviewed every five years) of what a teacher in an inclusive education system needs to know and be able to do; then -
- 2) require the provincial bodies which grant teacher licences or certificates to ensure that all prospective new teachers meet all the requirements on that list before they receive a licence to teach in that province. You can't tell Faculties of Education what to teach or they will talk about academic freedom" and you will lose. But they will change if their graduates can't get a job in Canada. If Faculties of Education have an undue influence on the teacher certification process in any province, the Ministry/ Department of Education must take steps to remove that influence.
- 3) undertake a systematic and compulsory professional development/up-grading process for existing teachers so that they eventually meet all the requirements on the list.

And finally –

- 4) draft similar lists of requirements for principals, superintendents and other administrative staff, and appoint only those who meet the requirements.

Why not? Our children – all of them – deserve nothing less.

- David Jory, Parent, Advocate and Retired Professor, Saint John NB