

Defining Inclusionary Education: A Review of Recent Literature

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to explore the various constructs and perspectives surrounding the integration and application of the inclusive model of education on a global scale. The article begins by exploring the most common definitions of “inclusion” within the context of education and learners within current literature. It then continues its exploration in a discussion of the focus several education systems have placed on support services to address student areas of challenge. The article concludes with a call to action for the continuation of progress in the realm of inclusionary education through the promotion of student strengths. This article imposes critical considerations for the identification, amplification, and application of these strengths in all areas of learning within the inclusionary model of education.

Keywords: inclusionary education, strength-based approach, universal design for learning, response to intervention

Introduction

Inclusionary education models affirm that all students can learn (UNESCO, 2017). A key driver of inclusive educational practices has been the intent of removing barriers to learning for students (CAST, 2018). Similarly, there has been a push to ensure that educators and school personnel have access to effective strategies, resources, and approaches to enable the successful operationalization of educational structures (Haug, 2016; Mitchell, 2015). Initial efforts to implement the paradigm of inclusion have resulted in an emphasis of targeted accommodations, interventions, and curriculum modifications within traditional classrooms to support learning for a wide range of student needs. Resource teacher roles and student services teams emerged within most school environments, focusing on determining areas of challenge to learning and providing intervention strategies for remediating or problem solving such areas of concern (Goodall, 2018; Porter & Aucoin, 2012). This article consists of a review of current literature which highlights the varying interpretations and applications of inclusionary approaches within educational models as well as guiding frameworks for providing access and targeted support and interventions to students. While such efforts are crucial to student learning, progress, and success, recent perspectives among the educational community suggest the need to move beyond this solely support-oriented approach towards one which also incorporates students’ strengths, interests, and motivations (Morrison & Peterson, 2015; Whitley et al., 2021).

Common Definitions

Inclusion’s foundational ideas of maximizing the quality of education for all students stems from the various philosophies surrounding development and learning such as those found in the works of theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1952). There are, however, other elements necessary to provide a truly inclusive educational system. There are varying definitions highlighted throughout the literature, justifying current practices, and validating beliefs on the subject of inclusion across the globe. These varying definitions could serve to explain the inconsistencies being examined and practiced globally. Paju et al. (2018) explained these inconsistencies in defining inclusive education to be a result of the fact that these definitions – and by extension, practices – are developed from cultural and policy-driven interpretations. Walker and Musti-Rao (2016) found it equally important to note, when attempting to define a term as important as *inclusion*, to also identify what it is not. Their research depicts inclusive education to be more than advocating for additional resources, infrastructure, technology, or equipment as well as merely adjusting the curriculum without consideration to student ability and existing competency (Walker & Musti-Rao, 2016). Educators, administrators, and the general public need to move away from these preconceptions in the pursuit of the development of a universal definition of inclusion as well as a framework to work within, allowing inclusive education to become an effective mainstream approach to education around the world.

The main themes that come from attempts to define inclusion primarily reflect a deficit-based assumption that it is the students with physical, cognitive, and learning disabilities who need to be included within the mainstream classroom (Kershner, 2016; Schwab, 2015). This limited view of inclusion alludes to it as being merely a shared physical space among students with various needs (Kershner, 2016). Göransson and Nilholm (2014) stated that while placement is a crucial element of inclusion, it is only one of many methods to implement inclusive education

and defined it as meeting the needs of all students. Pearson and Tan (2015) studied the perspectives of educators, finding that inclusive education is viewed to be about schools ensuring that all students, regardless of social, physical, and economical differences participate in learning experiences that include a non-differentiated sense of belonging, nurturing, and education.

Kershner (2016) defined inclusion as an applied practice which provides numerous benefits to learners as well as educators, allowing students to access content in the way in which they best learn. Empathy, acceptance, and tolerance are just a few of the qualities listed within research as being acquired or enhanced in students through the successful practice and implementation of a truly inclusive classroom environment (Partridge, 2018; Williamson et al., 2017). In this way, inclusion can be seen as a concept or value involving the belonging of all students (Göransson & Nilhom, 2014; Williamson et al., 2017). In much the same way, Veck (2014) defined inclusion to be when “specialized instructional practices and settings are eliminated in education” (p. 452) focusing instead on embracing learner differences, creating equal opportunities for all learners, and ensuring that educators take collective responsibility for all learners. Biamba’s (2016) research determined that inclusion should “occur within the framework of the ordinary class, social feelings of solidarity and time together are prioritized and differences between children are accepted and respected” (p. 120). Using this statement, all students — not only those with a learning deficit or disability — are to be included and considered during instruction. More progressive is the definition provided by Movkebayeva et al. (2016) having seen the impact that an involved and inclusive community presence can have on students. Movkebayeva et al. (2016) stressed the need to establish an educational environment within the education system and its individual schools where children could be allowed to realize their full potential and feel connected to the community and larger world around them.

Another common perspective is that inclusion is a process rather than a practice. Inclusion is not one-size-fits-all (Lilley, 2015). For this reason, there is no algorithm through which inclusion can be implemented for every student. Each student has a variety of unique learning needs. For this reason, it is important to view inclusion as a continual process (Sanagi, 2016). Schools must take steps to implement inclusive processes and continually review and change these processes as the needs of their students’ change. Kozleski et al. (2015) echoed the perspective of inclusion being a never-ending journey. They viewed inclusion as a principle of practice and that effective practices were to be at the heart of inclusion itself. Schools at various stages of the implementation process of inclusive education practices do not need to change in entirety overnight.

Though there are many inconsistencies in terms of defining inclusion, it is clear through the various definitions that the key values are present and shared among educators worldwide. The process of inclusion must evolve with its ever-changing clientele, the students entering the schools. This evolution must also occur within the belief systems and educational philosophies of the educators. The idea of inclusion being a process rather than a program is a promising notion that can allow continued growth within the education system globally.

Support-oriented Dimension

Synthesizing the findings in the recent literature allows for some concrete statements to be made in regard to inclusion as a practice. Much of the implementation of inclusion to date has been concentrated on the use of a support-services model, delivering necessary resources and interventions to students based on need. There is immense value in having an educational system cognizant of the need to have a working model in place, not only to identify student needs but also to deliver interventions of the right intensity to students at the appropriate time. Various existing models provide these responses to intervention supports and services.

Response to Interventions (RtI) models work under the assumption that students receiving targeted interventions of appropriate intensity at the appropriate time will progress, whether academically, personally, or socially, within their perspective educational settings. Though initially designed with the focus on academic learning, RtI offers a comprehensive model for early intervention of both behavioural and academic delays being exhibited by students within the inclusive education system (Fox et al., 2010). RtI is a continuum-based process that focuses on access to high quality, evidence-based instruction and data-driven decision making in order to facilitate

early intervention on behalf of the students requiring support (Howery et al., 2013). The practices and interventions rely heavily on evidence-based research and practices in order to best serve students in need or at risk. Through consistent monitoring, evaluation and data collection, student progress is tracked by an in-house student support services team in order to plan and guide further interventions. Most commonly, these tiered interventions are presented in the form of a pyramid of intervention such as the one featured below.

This three-tiered system identifies the various degrees of intervention that are available to students based on the strategies having already been attempted as well as the degree of need that is being reported or exhibited by the learner and their educational team. The majority of student needs exist within the bottom tier of the pyramid of interventions. At this level, there are universal accommodations available to all students in an effort to support learning taking into account the varying needs of students. Differentiated instruction, adjusting methods of instruction, accepting different individual learning patterns (Fox et al., 2010), as well as social-emotional centered learning are just some of the effective teaching strategies available in the first tier of the pyramid model. Howery et al. (2013) noted the metaphor surrounding the pyramid of interventions to be that “the higher levels of support are ineffective without a solid base” (p. 279). For this reason, many schools and districts put a great deal of time, money, and support into properly funding and implementing universal interventions at the classroom level to support the learning and development of all students.

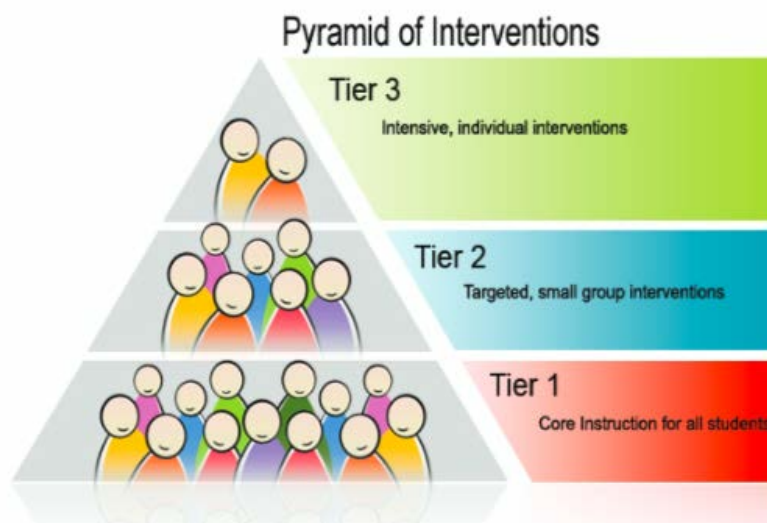


Figure 1 - Pyramid of Interventions

New Brunswick Health Council, 2016

Such supports include the establishment of Education Support Services Teams (ESST) which are school-based structures led by a school’s administration that assists classroom teachers in the development and implementation of instructional and/or management strategies as well as facilitates the coordination of support resources for students. These student services teams consist of professionals within the field of education, each possessing strengths, skills, and expertise in various areas of support, intervention, and service delivery. Generally consisting of methods and resource teachers, guidance counselors, educational assistants, behaviour mentors as well as school psychologists, the primary role of each team members is to provide coaching, mentoring, training, and support to the classroom

teacher in accommodations, instructional strategies, and other related classroom practices to ensure access to inclusive services for all students as well as to provide the necessary personalized services as may be required to meet the needs of individual students (New Brunswick Health Council , 2016).

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a model that has been implemented as one type of inclusionary framework with the purpose of address learner differences by removing certain barriers, both curricular and environmental, to meet the needs of all students within the common classroom setting (Katz & Sokal, 2016). It stands to reason that students, regardless of physical, social, and academic abilities, would require learning to happen in a variety of ways within an environment that promotes the various needs and learning styles of all students. Educators, until recently, were not provided with professional training to meet all of these needs. This resulted in some students being *left behind*. Students require an element of choice in their instruction to maximize meaningful learning. The framework is divided into three key principles of education: engagement, representation and action, and expression. Engagement, defined by Lowrey et al. (2017), addresses the *why* of learning. Representation, in contrast, addresses the *what* of learning (Lowrey et al., 2017). Finally, the principle of action and expression addresses *how* learners are able to learn. Within the examination of UDL, Lowrey et al. (2017) focuses not simply on student engagement and achievement but also on the impact this framework has had on the educators using it. Teacher perception reflects the efficacy and their observable ability to reach learners in need increased dramatically. As well, the promotion of teamwork among staff to ensure student and professional success was heightened. This teamwork and collaboration necessitated the discussion about inclusionary practices available and being used as well as other possible strategies (Lowrey et al., 2017).

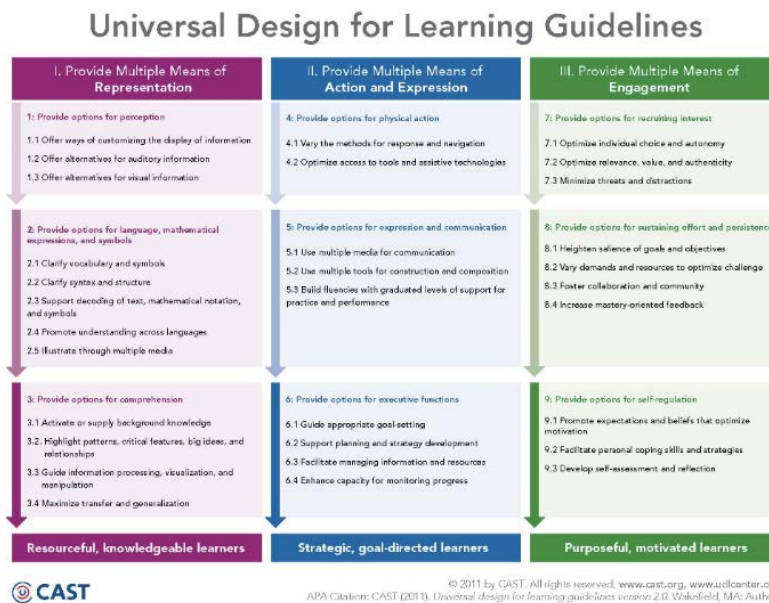


Figure 2: Universal Design for Learning

CAST, 2018

Lessons Learned from COVID-19

Given the more recent context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been many realizations and lessons learned within the educational community in terms of inclusive practice for all learners (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021). Many students around the globe were deprived of the formal and structured education that they had grown accustomed to, as public and private schools closed in response to the virus (Lancet Public Health, 2020). These interruptions to learning served to highlight pre-existing and longstanding misunderstanding of the learning needs of students with disabilities within inclusionary education systems (Inclusive Education Initiative, 2020). In the Canadian context, Whitley (2021) noted that children with specialized education needs make up close to 20% of total student enrollment. Such students were receiving a wide array of educational and developmental services on a regular basis prior to the pandemic. While the majority of these services consisted of differentiated instruction, the provision of universal accommodations, structured daily routines, and pre-established rapport with the professionals in their respective schools (Toseeb et al. 2020), other learners with more complex needs required a broader network of services from external organizations, health care providers, and school staff. During initial school closures and subsequent reopening of schools, many of these services were reduced due to pandemic restrictions (Fontanesi et al. 2020).

While continuous progress of inclusive education initiatives have been made on a global scale, there is still recognition of the continued existence of inequalities among marginalized groups of children. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic served, in many ways, to exacerbate these. Whitley et al. (2021) noted that children lacking access to necessary supports and resources are more likely to struggle in the face of adversity. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, such adversity can include the lived experiences of students such as: the need for physical distancing, repeated school closures, distance learning, and cuts to community-based services and supports all have the potential to weaken the systems of support necessary for children to develop and flourish (Clinton, 2020; Whitley et al., 2021). While educators strived to prepare and deliver meaningful and accessible lessons and learning experiences through alternate delivery methods, much of the support for student learning fell on parents. These increased expectations posed challenges for some parents who were not be able to work from home or “support their children with home-schooling due to their limited education and/or lack of proficiency in the language of instruction” (OECD, 2020, p.6).

While the current landscape of education has been challenging in the wake of the global pandemic, these experiences can serve as an opportunity to enhance focus on reducing existing educational gaps by enhancing inclusionary education efforts (OECD, 2020). International organizations have produced reports delineating the need for education systems and institutions to review approaches to teaching, beliefs about student learning, and the provision of targeted supports for students with identified exceptionalities (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021; OECD, 2020; Inclusive Education Initiative, 2020). Through the adoption of more holistic approaches – that address student learning, social, and emotional needs – educational equity and inclusive environments can be enhanced to limit further educational gaps for these student populations (OECD, 2020).

Inclusion in Education: Deficit and Strength-based Orientations

The various types of global inclusive education policies and implementations apply a primarily deficit-based assumption focusing on students with varying degrees of academic, physical, cognitive, behavioural, and social-emotional difficulties (Whitley et al., 2021). More current research is being published further delving into the area of strength-based approaches, focusing on the development of educators’ relationships with their students, learning of their individual strengths and personal interests.

Principles of Strength-based Education

Literature published in the field of both positive psychology and strength-based practices have identified several fundamental principles of strength-based practice within the early education system (New Brunswick Health Council, 2016; Alberta Mentoring Partnership, 2013; Rapp & Goscha, 2006; McCashen, 2005). These principles

can and should serve both as beacons to guide the development of district and departmental policies as well as tools for educators to use in order to better direct and reflect upon their current practices.

- *There must be an absolute belief that every student has potential.*

With this common belief system in place, school communities are able to develop plans for the benefit of all students, both individually as well as collectively. Acknowledging the strengths and potential of each student is crucial to the attainment of their own individual potentials.

- *What an educator or entire education system focuses on becomes a student's reality.*

In terms of both academic and behavioural performance, many struggling students are already aware of their own deficits. To focus on that same student's strengths empowers them to grow, believing that they are capable of learning and reaching their full potential.

- *Strength-based practices require consistent mindfulness of the language that is being used towards students and within the classroom environment.*

Strength-based practice, particularly in the context of the inclusive classroom, requires consistent monitoring of the use of intentional and strength specific language to further encourage and build a student's capacity for a lifelong love of learning and self-actualization.

- *An absolute belief that change is inevitable and that all students can and will be successful.*

When educators are teaching to a student's strengths, growth and change will inevitably occur. While not all students may have the same potential for learning in terms of specific curricular outcomes or targeted academic achievement, all students, regardless of their challenges, have the ability to learn.

- *These positive changes can only occur through the creation of safe classroom and school environments as well as the creation of authentic relationships.*

To use a strength-based pedagogical approach in education, time must be properly invested in building relationships with students, both in terms of the individual student as well as the entire classroom dynamic. Relationships built on trust, understanding, and respect will lead to the creation of a classroom environment where students are willing to take the necessary risks to learn new things and develop their own skills.

- *What students think about themselves, and their reality is primary.*

While a student's learning trajectory is not concretely predetermined, their mindset can play a critical role in learning, motivation, engagement, and self-actualization. It is through patience, determination, continuous modeling of strength-based language, as well as opportunities for students to display their strengths and grow in knowledge that this reality may begin to shift to one of a more positive, strength-based nature.

- *Students will have more confidence and be more willing to take the first step towards learning if they are invited to begin with what they already know.*

Students are generally aware of the things they are unable to do and what they do not know. While learning is about an individual's ability to take risks, make mistakes and continue learning despite these mistakes, this is not an easy feat for anyone. It is more realistic to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and strengths by inviting them to practice what they have already mastered. From there, a gradual insertion of more complex tasks and concepts can continue.

- *Capacity building is a process and a goal.*

Learning is a lifelong endeavor. Building a student's capacity to learn and build upon their strengths and talents is a process. From this process a student can grow into a productive member of society, with many pertinent competencies to contribute throughout their life.

- *It is important to value differences and the essential need for collaboration.*

One of the most remarkable elements of the strength-based approach is that each individual's strengths can be quite diverse in nature. Recognizing these differences will serve to highlight the importance of collaboration; using each other's strengths to achieve a task or improve upon something that has already been created.

Relevance of Inclusionary Education and Strength-based Approaches

Inclusion is a model that allows all students the opportunity to learn within the same physical environment and participate in activities geared to their abilities as a means to reach their full potential (Kershner, 2016). Further exploration of the philosophy of inclusion and its original intent within the school system looks beyond the struggling student and takes into account what is best for the education of all students within the classroom setting.

There are many relevant applications to what is now being recognized as a strength-based approach to education. Educators must take a vested interest in each individual student and build a rapport with them as a means of uncovering their individual talents. Students will become more motivated and engaged in the learning process if they are learning not only about things of interest to them but also in a way that empowers them through the use of their strengths. Embarking on the educational journey from a student-centered, strength-based approach is also a means of building student confidence. The question then becomes: How can an educator identify and foster the strengths of each of their students, taking into account the various student needs, and overall compositions of today's classrooms?

Call to Action: Moving Forward Through Strengths

Canada's inclusionary education systems currently operate from a problem-focused and support-oriented position. Students' needs are assessed based on what they are lacking rather than on the qualities and strengths they possess that could further support their personalized learning (Laija-Rodriguez et al., 2013). Public education systems have several student supports and services in place for students. Response to Intervention (RtI) models, such as the pyramid of interventions and positive behaviour intervention supports (PBIS), which address both academic and behavioural aspects of learning are invaluable and exist to serve all students as a means of meeting their various needs. Despite these models being embedded in practice, there are still many students who are not thriving within their school environments.

Recent perspectives on inclusionary approaches have emphasized the need to move beyond the current model of student learning to incorporate a more strength-focused and empowering view, drawing on learner strengths, interests, preferences, and motivations. (Abawi, 2015; Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathaban, 2016; Morrison & Peterson, 2015; Williamson & Gilham, 2017). Considerations for the identification and application of students' strengths, interests, and abilities are necessary to promote a more authentic and meaningful approach to learning, enhanced engagement, as well as to provide the conditions necessary for flourishing. Implementing a dual-dimensional approach to inclusionary education is envisioned to provide a new and richer learning experience for students. The intentional and explicit use of individual strengths within the context of inclusionary education would result in established positive classroom cultures, students' developing enhanced coping skills and resiliency, as well as enhanced learner engagement, motivation, and well-being (Calp, 2020; Galloway et al., 2020; Yusof et al., 2016). Most importantly, in a system where students are not only included but accepted for their inherent strengths and interests, students will flourish and ultimately experience success (Garrett, 2022).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Dockrill Garrett: Melissa's doctoral research, entitled "Investigating Strength-based Practices within a Dual-dimensional Approach to Inclusionary Student Learning" promises to highlight key insights to continue the progress and development of inclusionary approaches to education that provide appropriate supports to students while also appreciating the relevance of students' inherent strengths and interests to further engage and motivate them in their learning. Melissa was an elementary French Immersion teacher for over a decade before joining the team at the Second Language Research Institute of Canada as a research associate and sessional professor.