
Inclusive Education: Advantages and Overcoming Barriers

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Abstract

Schools and other learning environments have increasingly promoted equal educational opportunities among all students in recent years to create more inclusive learning environments. Inclusive education has impactful benefits on all students, not just those with diverse needs, as it is "the gateway to full participation in society" (United Nations, n.d, pg. 3). However, barriers to inclusion such as staff training and funding are necessary to consider in order to create and maintain meaningful, inclusive learning environments. To overcome these barriers to inclusive education, educators have been encouraged to integrate aspects of both *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) and *Differentiated Instruction* (DI) to maintain the least restrictive environment while tailoring to individual student needs. The integration of UDL principles into classroom/learning environments promotes inclusion through supports for all students, including those with diverse needs. Educators can utilize strategies like the *Three-Block Model of Universal Design for Learning* (TBM) and *ADAPT* to aid them in the integration of UDL.

Introduction

Inclusive education is an approach that encourages diversity and promotes equal educational opportunities among all students, despite any differences one may possess (Government of Alberta, 2021). Inclusive education has become a norm in our Canadian society, with its origins tied partially to the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020) and its goals of equality. The Inclusive Education approach is one that has education programs that should adapt to the individual needs of all students with support and compassion in the least restrictive environment. Effective inclusion practices in an educational environment are essential in making meaningful learning accessible to all students. There are many advantages and disadvantages involved in inclusive education, which mainly depend on the school environment. Educators and stakeholders need to understand strategies available that will ensure success among all students.

Benefits of Inclusion

The advantages of inclusive education are abundant: fostering social relationships, community building, providing access, unconditional acceptance, creating goals based on individual ability and needs, motivation through peer connections, parent involvement, and promoting an atmosphere of respect and belonging (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020).

The United Nations Toolkit of Disability (n.d.) explains that the educational inclusion of students with diverse needs is "the gateway to full participation in society" and "promotes inclusive and tolerant societies" (Module 14, p. 3). Alberta Education (2021) echoes this sentiment by

"...promote[ing] equal opportunities for all learners in Alberta...[and] accepting responsibility for all children and students" (para.1). Furthermore, research reveals that inclusion creates an advantage for all students, increasing the opportunity for friendships to arise and preparing students for inclusion outside of the classroom (Mieghem et al., 2018).

Barriers to Inclusion

When discussing the topic of inclusive education, it is crucial to understand and awareness of its many impactful benefits, not just on learning but also on schools, students, and society. So why is it not the universal standard form of education? To fully develop an inclusive education environment, the whole education system is transformed (UNICEF, 2017). This is a complex and time-consuming process and as such, possesses many barriers that need consideration.

Ahmad (2012) acknowledges physical, attitudinal and communication barriers that negatively affect inclusive education. "One of the most significant barriers is the attitudes of parents, teachers and students" (p. 3). Lack of access to infrastructure, training, support staff, and funding were some of Brown's (2018) significant concerns (para. 2). Despite government policies and norms emphasizing inclusive education in Canada, practices and funding have not kept pace with these changes. Improving the education of educators and documenting student outcomes and experiences can be a valuable response to improve this barrier (Cologon, 2013).

Thoughts and Needs for Inclusive Education

The idea of tailoring learning may include modifications or accommodations, least restrictive environment (LRE), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), or Differentiated Instruction (DI) (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020). Influenced by universal design in architecture, the goal of UDL is to support equal opportunity and promote structure and success among all learners within the classroom (CAST, 2018). UDL encourages teachers to provide means and pedagogical materials that can meet the needs of all students (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020, p. 6).

Jennifer Katz's (2013) *Three-Block Model of Universal Design for Learning* (TBM) details a block system comprised of 3 main ideas to support inclusion successfully.

- **First Block: *Social and Emotional Learning*** (Respect Diversity Program). Building learning environments that utilize respect, compassion, and democratic classroom management (as cited in Katz, 2013, p. 158). Katz claims "results show profound impact in terms of social inclusion and engagement for both students and teachers" (as cited in Katz, 2013, p. 158).
- **Second Block: *Inclusive Instructional Practice***. Firstly, ensuring access to learning opportunities that address the individual needs of students and then planning academic instruction involving evidence-based practices (as cited in Katz, 2013, p. 158). For example, building rubrics "...that reflect multiple developmental levels of understanding, and can be used to assess multi-modal expression and understandings" (Katz, 2013, p. 159).

- Third Block: *Systems and Structures*. School leadership holds a critical influence on how students are supported by how they support their staff. Creating policies within the school, professional development to educate staff, and moving away from segregated practices are a few ways that school leadership can begin prioritizing inclusion (Katz, 2013, p. 192)

In Katz's 2013 study, classrooms implementing the model showed "promising" results (p. 182); students were significantly more engaged academically and socially. The Three-Block Model of UDL shows a potential framework educators can use to increase universal support in their classrooms while reducing potential stress and worries about UDL implementation.

Differentiated instruction (DI) aids teachers in making decisions that address a student's specific characteristics, skills, experiences, and difficulties (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020, p. 6). DI maximizes learning by considering individual learning styles to support an inclusive classroom and recognizes that some students may require modifications or accommodations to demonstrate learning in meaningful ways. Incorporating UDL and DI in the classroom allows educators to determine ways of removing barriers and engaging students to create access for all.

Hutchinson and Specht (2020) developed an inclusion strategy called "ADAPT" (p. 24). The five-step tool was designed for educators to assist in maintaining an inclusive classroom environment.

- Step 1) *Account of Students' Strengths and Needs*: educators should understand each student's social, emotional, behavioural, physical, and academic strengths and needs through files such as an IPP and observations (p. 24-25)
- Step 2) *Demands of the Classroom on Students*: considering the social, emotional, behavioural, physical, and academic demands is important when adapting the classroom to include all students. For example, think about if respectful interactions are being modelled, if the classroom layout is accessible, especially for those in wheelchairs or are blind, or if each student has the tools needed to access the academic materials like reading a textbook or writing an essay (p. 25).
- Step 3) *Adaptions*: comparing the needs of a student to the demands of the classroom will help educators identify where adaptations are needed to best support that student's learning. Hutchinson and Specht (2020) outline strategies to ADAPT such as bypassing (e.g., spell check to bypass spelling challenges) and teaching basic skills (e.g., "study skills may be an urgent need for students with LD, there are likely to be others in the class who will benefit") (p. 26).
- Step 4) *Perspectives and Consequences*: reflect on adaptations and consider the perspectives of the students and educators. Educators may want to choose simple adaptations that benefit many or all students in the classroom in order to maintain and manage the potential additional demands that adaptations may place on the educator (pg.

26). Reflecting on the user's experience is critical to ensure an adaptation's success; do the students feel comfortable and confident using it? Do they feel like they are drawing unwanted attention? "Ask the student, and ADAPT in a way that is respectful of him" (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020, p. 27).

- Step 5) *Teach and Assess the Match*: assess "how well the adaptation has matched student strengths and needs to the classroom demands" (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020, p. 27). Observations, conversations, and charting marks while the adaptation is in use can help determine whether it needs to be altered or not for future use (p. 27).

Strategies like *ADAPT* have been developed but *ADAPT* is unique in how it includes perspectives of students affected by this strategy (p. 24). Using strategies like *ADAPT* aids educators on how to meaningfully include students with diverse learning needs by creating adaptations that consider the needs and strengths of the student and the demands of the classroom environment (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020, p. 24).

Community, acceptance, and participation are needed for successful inclusive educational systems. A community allows students to feel encouraged by adults who genuinely care about them and their educational success (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020, p. 18). Alberta's education system states that "inclusion is a way of thinking and acting that demonstrates universal acceptance and promotes a sense of belonging for all learners (Government of Alberta, 2021). It is crucial to foster good teaching by embracing community within the classroom to create an opportunity for all students to develop and maintain a sense of belonging. For an inclusive education environment to work, educators must be prepared to play a critical role in "prepar[ing] the next generation to honor our national commitment to inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of Canadian society" (Hutchinson & Specht, p. 5).

Ensuring students' needs are being met can be done by utilizing resources like *Indicators of Inclusive Schools* (2013). The indicators are organized around 5 dimensions (p. 6).

1. *Establishing Inclusive Values and Principles* (e.g., "Diversity is valued as an enriching aspect of the school environment" (Alberta Ed., 2013, p. 8)).
2. *Building Inclusive Learning Environments* (e.g., "The school building is physically accessible to all students" (Alberta Ed., 2013, p. 9)).
3. *Providing Supports for Success* (e.g., "Ongoing assessment identifies when students are in need of additional supports, interventions and services" (Alberta Ed., 2013, p. 10)).
4. *Organizing Learning and Instruction* (e.g., "Teachers provide multiple ways for students to access new information and concepts" (Alberta Ed., 2013, p. 11)).
5. *Engaging with Parents and the Community* (e.g., "Staff and parents collaborate to support student success" (Alberta Ed., 2013, p. 12)).

“Each dimension is supported by sample indicators that provide descriptions, based on current research..., of what each particular dimension might look like” (Alberta Ed., 2013, p. 6). Utilizing resources like *Indicators of Inclusive Schools* (2013) can support educators implement, reflect, assess, and improve learning environments to be more inclusive through a series of tools and surveys (Alberta Ed., 2013, p. 5).

Conclusion

Education programs should adapt to the individual needs of all students with support and compassion in the least restrictive environment. Inclusion is not a privilege. It is a right; every student should be provided with an opportunity to learn and reach their full potential in an environment that promotes community and belonging. The knowledge, beliefs, and values about inclusion create what an educator chooses to represent in a classroom environment and, furthermore in society. Every student is capable of learning and participating when given the appropriate resources and support.

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