

Providing Education for All

[Editors's Note: In order to be assured of protecting the identities of the children described in this article, the author has chosen to remain anonymous.]

Thirteen years ago, when I was in teachers' college, we were shown a film entitled *Cipher in the Snow*. Based on a short-story by Jean Mizer, and made into a film by Brigham Young University in 1973, it's the story about a boy who died mysteriously after stepping off the school bus, and no one at school had been aware of his existence at all. We were supposed to absorb the message that everyone is important, not to let any student slip through the cracks.

This is the same message delivered by *Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students With Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6 (2005)*. For all its good intentions, it's a message that might just not be heard by all who need to hear it.

Consider, for example, Bobby (all students' names are pseudonyms) who is in Grade 5. He has autism spectrum disorder (ASD) but is verbal and high-functioning. However, he is working approximately three grades below academic level. Thanks to some very attentive educational assistants (EAs) who have worked with him since senior kindergarten, he functions well in a school environment. He is compliant, and polite, a bit of a cipher who draws little attention to himself, generally managing the work given to him that is modified to his ability level.

Next year might be a different story though. He may not have the same amount of EA support, if he has any at all. EAs are assigned to schools for students who have severe physical needs, or are a danger to themselves and others, not for academic support. This is a big problem because Bobby has already fallen through the cracks, though not in the usual way. Until now, no one has questioned his need for support, or the way it was delivered. Subsequently, he has become EA dependent.

Roy is in Grade 8. He has been diagnosed with mild intellectual disability and has lived in foster care several times throughout his life. He works at three to five grades below level in language and math. He has long qualified for special class placement but his moves from home to home and school to school have meant the process for getting him into the right program has been interrupted multiple times. Now, he works out of the resource room, as he had done in his last school where he could not manage regular class work and, out of frustration, developed conflicts with teachers which led to his being removed from the regular class. Luckily for him there is light on the horizon; there are high school pro-

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Keywords

inclusion,
special education,
children,
intellectual and
developmental disabilities

grams developed specifically for students like Roy. Until now, he has spent most of his time in resource-room limbo, barely surviving elementary school.

Then there's Sara. Like Roy, Sara has lived in several foster homes. She had been identified with a behaviour exceptionality as well as a learning disability. At one time, in another board, she attended a special class for kids with behaviour problems. Now, her behaviour isn't extreme enough to warrant special class placement and the behaviour identification has been removed. She has made progress. But, her long-standing response to stress is verbal aggression. She has conflicts with adults who haven't been trained to handle her behaviour. Her performance anxiety leads to tantrums which make it impossible for her to succeed in regular class, and instead she often can be found working in the resource room.

Sara's capable of grade-level work, but emotional issues prevent her from consistently making gains. Like Roy, she's headed to high school. But, her choices of regular or vocational high school don't give her enough options. She can do more than will be required of her at the vocational school. To be successful in an academic program, however, she will need a great deal of patient support, more than a typical high school can afford.

Brent has obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) as well as a language-based learning disability. Just getting to school is a challenge. His absences have caused him to miss work, which stresses him further, so that he doesn't want to come to school at all. Allowing him to come to the resource room instead of his Grade 8 class has gotten him into the building regularly. He is missing much of the curriculum though, and Grade 8 social life. While there are self-contained classes for students with extreme behaviour and emotional needs, there aren't any programs at the elementary level for Brent. In high school, he will be allowed to participate in e-learning and do some classes from home, but in elementary, attendance is necessary.

As a learning resource teacher, I work with all the students in the entire school at one time or another, but spend a significant amount of time with exceptional students like the ones

above. These include those with learning and physical disabilities, from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing child, to the adolescent with OCD and Tourette's Syndrome, children on the autism spectrum, and many with attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Often, their learning and social/emotional disabilities are paired with the experiences of a fractured family. Several are foster children who have suffered many forms of abuse.

In my role, I can provide a temporary place of respite, and limited academic support for students who have been placed in regular classrooms, but have special needs. I am the only resource teacher in a junior kindergarten to Grade 8 school of 260 students. This means that the resource room, which is an oasis for exceptional kids, is not always available to them.

Rightly, or wrongly, the reality is that most of their day is spent integrated into the mainstream according to the philosophy of inclusion, where they might be wrongly-supported, under-acknowledged, or in conflict with peers and authority as they try in unproductive ways to get their needs met.

Debates rage as to how well inclusion of exceptional students in the regular class really supports equality. Inclusion is here to stay, but financial resources are limited. Money often is the scapegoat when things aren't going as well as they should. However, money is not the only reasons that students are "falling through the cracks."

According to *Education for All*, it has only been in the last 30 years that school boards have been required to offer special education programs and services. Until Bill 82 of the Ontario Education Amendment Act of 1982, educating "exceptional" pupils was largely the domain of the family. In that same year, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms brought out the concern that placing students with special education needs in a separate class might be a violation of their equality. Six years later, Regulation 181 required regular class placement be the first consideration for an "exceptional pupil" (*Education for All*, p. 2).

In only a few short years, the matter of educating "exceptional" students has gone from a private to

public matter, and the system within which educational reform must be made hasn't yet caught up with the current philosophy of learning.

Teachers today are scrambling to keep up with the changes being thrown at them. The decade-old curriculum is already being revised. Best practice is now evidence-based and data-driven, and often seems to conflict with what seasoned educators consider to be tried and true methods of teaching. Many teachers often model their own teaching practices after the ones they experienced as students. Teachers newer to the profession who have received some training towards Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI) have not yet begun to have their influence felt.

The size of the system itself is partly to blame. Ontario alone has 2 million students, 120,000 teachers, and nearly 7400 administrators (principals and vice-principals). That's a lot of educators to educate in the ways of successful integration. Change happens slowly.

Blaming the time lag required for change helps almost as much as blaming lack of financial resources for the system's failure to serve everyone equitably, however. We can't do much in the short term about either, especially in today's economic climate. What we can do is try to understand why kids do fall through the cracks.

Bobby became EA dependent because his needs weren't fully understood or communicated to the people assigned to help him. Procedure was followed to the letter, but procedure alone is not enough. A thorough understanding of a student's IEP (Individual Education Plan) is essential, and not as simple to achieve as one would first think. Teachers need ample time in which to confer with team members, parents, and educational specialists in order to successfully differentiate instruction for all, especially the exceptional student.

A lack of thorough understanding of a students' needs results in a poor understanding of how to address them. I believe this is due to a lack of suitable teacher training. Elementary teachers are generalists; they are expected to know how to teach everything. This leaves little room for the average teacher to have time to thoroughly learn how to teach exceptional children. While

teachers' colleges address the topic of special education, it is like all areas of education, vast and complex, requiring a great deal of "time on task" to be properly understood.

Consider that a mechanic must apprentice before receiving his credentials. Doctors do residencies. Lawyers article, and B.Ed students do practicums, it's true. However, if their associate teachers have not mastered differentiated instruction, or how to effectively implement individual education plans (IEPs), these very important skills remain untaught, relegated to the realm of the theoretical, where they do little good to the front line worker who's already overwhelmed with directives and initiatives put before them.

The single most influential factor in determining if a student will receive equitable service is the specific school's culture, or community. This is determined by the board's prioritization of initiatives, the school's leadership, effectiveness of professional teamwork, and personal philosophies of teaching. In a learning community without ongoing and strong communication between its members, there will be a lack of unity in direction, and a lack of effectiveness in equitably educating everyone.

For exceptional students in particular, a common goal and the unified approach to reaching it is essential. This is outlined in Belief #6 of *Education for All*, which states that

Classroom teachers need the support of the larger community to create a learning environment that supports students with special education needs... Teachers need support from their principal, special education resource teacher(s), other classroom teachers, and other professionals. Families and community support agencies are crucial contributors. Everyone has a place in the process. (The Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education, 2005, p. 4)

We have to provide more and better training to educators. It's one thing to demand we offer differentiated instruction and educate everyone equitably, and another to give only token support to teachers trying to do so. Consider also that differentiated instruction doesn't take into consideration that teachers too are students with differing strengths and areas of need. Yes,

we are professionals, but like our students, we are human, with limitations. Like our students, we need thorough and varied instruction if we are to master necessary skills to educate everyone equitably.

How can we better train educators? It would be easy to say we need more money for professional development, or paid training time. But realistically speaking, that's not going to happen. Maybe it's not more training but different, or better, an approach that is less theoretical and more practical that can be done during teacher's pre-service year, or during our mandated Learning Community days.

Reality is that despite the fact that economies are meant to support people, in fact people support economies. Taxes pay for education and taxpayers' pockets are empty. Smaller class sizes, more Special Education resources are unlikely to appear any time soon. In this economic climate, education needs people to support people, because the money isn't there. Education is a bureaucracy like any other, a huge system in which change moves slowly. Money alone is seldom the answer. A shift in approach and in attitude, though, might just be.

A great deal of time needs to be spent planning curriculum for all students, not just those considered exceptional. Time spent is attitude dependent. All of us need to change our priorities if we are to make inclusion successful. People, the public, and other advocates for our students have voices that can influence the people who set priorities in education. Until more money can be found for Special Education services, let's find ways to educate the educators through a community of learners. Be the squeaky wheel, and train the trainers how to achieve successful inclusion so that "Education for All" becomes a reality.

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