A British Columbia Teacher Union and School District Collaboration to Support Inclusion

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Processes of collaborative inquiry carried out in partnership by practitioners and academic researchers are increasingly being recommended as a means of encouraging the development of more inclusive practices in schools. This is seen as being an alternative to approaches that are focused on individual students who are defined as 'having difficulties' and, as such, is in line with paradigm shift recommended by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). (Deppeler, 2006)

**This research aimed to address four objectives:**

- To contextualize the study within the literature on the evolution of Inclusion and on professional learning
- To describe and reflect on a three-year collaboration focusing on Inclusion between a teacher union and an urban school district and to consider the impact on supporting inclusive education.
- To consider how the use of facilitated professional conversations in multiple school sites engaged teachers in both reflection and action.
- To assess the use of video and technology to share inclusive practices as a first base in creating networked learning communities

**Inclusion in Canada**

Andrews & Lupart (2000) describe a series of changes in societal thinking and education systems over two centuries that have evolved to the development of the philosophy of inclusion promoted currently in many Canadian school systems. They describe the institutionalization of the 19th century accompanied by a medical model of diagnosis and referral, followed by a period between 1900 and 1950 where segregated schooling became the norm. They describe an increase in categorization in the 1950s and ’60s, separating high and low incidence categories, with most of the students categorized as low incidence still being educated separately, and high incidence students educated in separate classes but not separate schools. Subsequent shifts in thinking came with notions of integration (1970s), stressing education in the least restrictive environments, while mainstreaming (1980s) promoted the placement of high incidence students in regular classes. They consider inclusion to have emerged more commonly in the 1990s, where all students are included in the full range of academic and social aspects of neighbourhood schools.

The above provides some context on evolving philosophies in Canada’s education systems, while Stanovich and Jordan (2004) outline four premises forming a rationale for ongoing teacher professional development linked to inclusion:

- Inclusion is a world-wide phenomenon and is not a passing fad.
- Classroom teachers are key to the successful inclusion of students with disabilities.
- Successful learning in inclusive classrooms rests on foundational principles of effective teaching.
- Professional development can be a major benefit for the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms.

Pivotal to Stanovich and Jordan’s argument is the claim that teachers can take greater responsibility for all students, but that an attitudinal shift is required toward understanding that it
is the responsibility of teachers to meet the needs of all students. We suggest in this paper that teachers’ attitudes (in the locus of our study) are such that they support Inclusion, yet they and the school districts in which they work are finding themselves increasingly challenged to meet learners’ needs when wider systemic support is lacking. Willms (2002) also stated:

The research suggests that successful communities are those that succeed in bolstering outcomes for their least advantaged children. We need to design programs and policies that integrate children of all backgrounds and abilities rather than segregate them from one another. (p. xi)

In this context, the school district administration together with both the provincial and local teacher unions have initiated action to offer some support for inclusive approaches which will be outlined in this paper.

**Teachers’ professional learning**

The focus on Inclusion reflects one of two areas of focus in this paper—the second being the professional learning of teachers. Thus, in addition to considering the evolution of Inclusion in Canada, we have also drawn on the wider professional literature on professional learning and learning communities to guide our approach. A few influences from this literature are shared below.

Elmore (2004) argues that the best professional learning is collegial and discursive, reflecting with peers rather than having teachers pressured into directed learning:

> The problem (is that) there is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the settings in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in other schools confronting similar problems. (p. 127)

Hargreaves (2007) reinforced the need for teachers to control their own professional learning:

> Teachers will be the drivers, not the driven - using objective evidence to help them improve, but never undervaluing their own experiential knowledge because of it. Professional learning communities will not be places for devising quick-fix solutions to disturbing data exposed by test score results, but places where wise and critical teachers engage with each other over their accumulated (though not unquestioned) knowledge using a wide range of data (not just test scores) to devise more powerful strategies that help all children learn. (p. 37)

Webster-Wright (2009), in a paper which explored professional learning across a range of professions including education, stated:

> During the past two decades, empirical research has demonstrated that effective professional learning continues over the long term and is best situated within a community that supports learning. (p. 703)

A recent Canadian publication (Porter & Smith, Eds., 2011) has focused on professional learning in support of inclusionary educational practices, and the philosophy of Inquiry outlined in this book closely matches the intent of the Inquiry approach outlined in this paper:

> Engaging in diverse inquiry processes helps educators to deepen professional knowledge, consolidate professional identity, strengthen sensitivity towards moral
responsibilities and activate actions based on social justice principles. The professional inquiry methods that are incorporated in this text include reflection, collaboration, case analysis, commentary critique and making connections to professional practice. These methods invite further investigation into principles, concepts, pedagogies, processes, decisions and practices associated with inclusion. (p. 3)

Porter and Smith, along with other authors, have encouraged us to consider professional learning as collaborative and inquiry-based, supportive yet encouraging critical discourse. We believe that working collegially we might use Inquiry group spaces as safe places to share uncertainty about practice while also celebrating what we feel might be practices that are working well. The British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) has published a series of papers outlining its understanding and perspectives on teachers’ professional learning, including its approach to teacher inquiry¹, a review of the literature on Professional Learning Communities² and teacher autonomy³. The union has also designed and created web pages aimed at supporting inclusion⁴ and teacher leadership⁵.

**Methods**

This paper traces several phases of an urban school district’s ‘Inclusion Review’ and the involvement of both local and provincial teacher unions in the process. It focuses on two key stages:

- the training of facilitation teams to initiate professional conversations and dialogue about Inclusionary practices in both elementary and secondary schools
- the exploration of promising practices through the use of video as a precursor to building networked learning communities.

**Data sources**

Three sources of data were accessed:

- planning notes and reflections of the facilitation trainers, school district and union staff related to the initial professional conversations
- data from a semi-structured discussion involving teacher union and district staff focusing on the facilitation training, the school-based conversations, and the documentation of practice using video
- data from a project Wiki and web page outlining approaches in the following areas: education plans that work (IEPs etc); understanding and responding to behavioural challenges; differentiating instruction/Universal Design; collaboration between classroom teachers, specialist support teachers and Education Assistants; supporting the classroom, school-based teams, and other approaches.

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⁴ [http://bctf.ca/TeachingToDiversity/](http://bctf.ca/TeachingToDiversity/)
⁵ [http://bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=22473](http://bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=22473)
The culture of the school district

Collaboration and change takes place within a context, and one important context is district culture. School district culture can be easy to define but a hard topic on which to generate consensus. So there may be disagreements over what constitutes this particular school district’s culture. However, the following are tentatively suggested:

- It’s not explicit but there is a sense that this district welcomes and facilitates shared enterprises with its trustees, staff and community, so that change initiatives tend to be widely discussed and open to amendment.
- There’s an attitude that collectively and collaboratively, education and change can be a journey of exploration, with the end destination not always clear and rarely exactly defined, but with a confidence that it will appear if there’s enough dialogue and good will.
- Processes are explicitly co-operative and non-hierarchical so that different people/groups will see that the processes are invitational and participatory.
- Actions reflect the values described above, with cross-organizational working groups and committees which work without district control but with district support.
- Tensions exist as part of work and life in an urban school district, but for the most part they are accepted and dealt with rather than the tensions controlling processes and agendas.

An additional and important part of the school district culture is the collective agreement clause on professional learning which is discussed later in the paper.

The Inclusion Review process

For a graphic representation of the Review process, see Appendix 1.

The first phase of the school district’s review of its approach to inclusion involved the hiring of an outside consultant to review the district’s approaches and processes. Her methods, developed with a district management/union/parent Class Composition Committee, included on-line survey and in-person focus group data collection from teachers, principals and vice-principals, district staff, Education Assistants, and parents. Once data were collected and collated, they were reviewed and discussed with the above groups prior to a series of presentations and discussions. While this reflected the process, the following categories outline the main content of the Review:

- Historical background
- Review process
- Respondents’ views of Inclusion—meanings and values
- Public perception of Richmond’s schools
- What’s working well
- Areas of concern
- Resources to support Inclusion
- Alternative settings
- Promising practices

While nine areas were identified as ‘working well’, sixteen areas of concern were raised, reflecting some successes, yet more challenges. Positive results included appreciation of diversity, empathy and tolerance, many positive experiences for students, and improved collaboration. However, it was clear that many areas of concern centred on four main areas:
the lack of resources and support for Inclusion
systemic expectations, particularly in secondary schools, when many respondents believed that expectations of academic achievement collided with the stated philosophy of Inclusion
a perception that ‘central office’ staff were ‘disconnected from the realities of classrooms and schools’
limited knowledge and training to support Inclusion.

In terms of action steps, the Review recommended:

- advocacy for increased allocation of resources to support Inclusion
- a reconsideration of the provision of alternative and separate settings for some students with severe needs
- focusing and strengthening ‘promising practices’ within the school district.

Moving from a consultant’s review and report into an action phase is where many school district reviews of Inclusion falter. Reviews often include extensive data collection from multiple sources, leading to a report which outlines the successes and concerns across a wide range of services. Many reports recommend courses of action—courses which many regard somewhat skeptically, a sentiment echoed in the Review’s final word:

By initiating the Inclusion review, Richmond School District has begun a long-term process that will need on-going action and support. In both focus groups and surveys, people have expressed their appreciation for being asked their input. However, they are skeptical about whether the report will “go anywhere.” The value of the review process so far, and the Inclusion Review report, will depend on what happens next.

To the credit of both the school district and the local teacher association, what happened next was that both decided they would continue the district culture of collaboration and, on receipt of this report, the district and union started to develop its action plan to move beyond the data, with three steps which primarily addressed the first and the third action steps, with, to date, minimal focus on the alternate and potentially separate settings.

**Step 1: Advocacy for increased resources to support Inclusion**

The practice of “inclusive” education in Richmond has evolved over the past twenty-five years to the point where the staffing and financial resources needed to support its full implementation represent a significant portion of the District’s total resources. Not surprisingly, the decision to include all students in their neighbourhood school, and end the practice of placing children with special needs in segregated education settings, led to efforts on the part of the teachers’ union to negotiate provisions that would help teachers fully support the learning of all students.

In 1998, the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) concluded negotiations with the provincial government on a new collective agreement that included extensive contract language to limit class sizes and establish specialist teacher ratios for English as a Second Language teachers, Teacher-Librarians, Learning Assistance Teachers, Counsellors, Speech/Language Pathologists, and Special Education Resource Teachers. The intent was to ensure adequate

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staffing and financial resources would be in place to support the unique learning needs and experience of all students. The implementation of these provisions was costly, and teachers agreed to a wage freeze in order to secure these improvements to their working conditions and their students’ learning conditions.

In 2002, the newly elected provincial government under Premier Gordon Campbell passed legislation to remove all contract language related to class size and specialist teacher ratios. The result was that class sizes increased, along with the number of students with special needs in each classroom, while the number of specialist teachers decreased. The BCTF strongly opposed this legislation, but was unsuccessful in stopping its passage. However, it has continued to advocate publicly and through a variety of lobbying efforts to have the issues of “class size and composition” addressed in a meaningful way.

In 2005, teachers were again engaged in contract bargaining, and the focus was again on the issues around class size and support for students with special needs. Teachers voted overwhelmingly to take strike action to back their demands for the reinstatement of the lost contract language negotiated in 1998. In its place, the government passed statutory limits on class sizes for the primary grades K–3, along with Bill 33 (the School Act, Section 76.1, enacted May, 2006), that placed some limits within a flexible framework on class sizes in grades 4–12, and limits on the number of students with Ministry identified special needs that can be placed in the classroom. The BCTF believes that the experience with Bill 33 has been largely unsatisfactory, mainly because the provincial government has not provided sufficient financial resources to ensure that the limits set out in Bill 33 are met in all cases. There are still thousands of classrooms across BC that exceed the limits set out in the legislation.

The five year contract negotiated in 2005–06 expired in June 2011, and once again the BCTF has made “class size and composition” a central issue at the current bargaining table. It has been advocating strongly for the reinstatement of the 1998 contract language, especially in light of the decision in April 2011 by the Supreme Court of BC. The Court declared the government’s 2002 legislation (School Act, Sections 27 and 28) “unconstitutional” and a violation of the collective bargaining rights of teachers. The judge gave the parties one year to resolve the matter.

Providing adequate levels of staffing in classrooms and schools to meet the learning needs of all students is primarily a public education funding issue. Teachers, through their unions at both the provincial and local levels, have argued that funding has not kept pace with the rising costs of providing a first class education system for our children.

It is not only teachers who are advocating restoration of adequate funding. All stakeholder groups in Richmond, for example, including parents (through the Richmond District Parents' Association), school support staff including Educational Assistants (through the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local membership), school administrators (through the Richmond Association of School Administrators), and the trustees of our board of education, have on several occasions written joint letters to the minister of education, submitted briefs to the Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, and held regular meetings with the Richmond Members of the Legislative Assembly, in an effort to advocate for increased funding for public education. These efforts have, for the most part, been unsuccessful, with the result that Richmond School District has had to make substantial cuts most years to staffing levels. For example, the number of specialist teachers provincially (teacher-librarians, counselors, special
education teachers, English Second Language teachers and Aboriginal education teachers) declined by 19.66% over the period 2001/02 to 2010/11 while student enrolment declined at a much lower rate.\(^7\)

It is important to remember that “inclusion” in Richmond is meant to be a much broader concept than integrating children with special needs into neighbourhood schools. It is meant to represent the value of acknowledging and understanding individual differences and diverse learning styles that characterize all classrooms. Our ability to fully support all learners in the diverse classroom requires an ongoing commitment from government to provide the financial resources to create appropriate class sizes, to fund professional development programs for teachers and to adequately staff schools with learning specialist teachers and Educational Assistants. All stakeholder groups (teachers, administrators, support staff, trustees) have a very important role to play in continuing to advocate for public education funding.

**Step 2: Facilitated school-based conversations (April—June 2009)**

The District Class Composition Committee held several meetings in late 2008 and early 2009 to plan the work required to interpret the Report’s findings and develop constructive system responses, particularly at the school level. It was at this stage that the local teacher union, the Richmond Teachers’ Association (RTA), suggested the involvement of professional staff from the provincial British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) because of their experience with developing school-based facilitated conversations amongst school staffs, with a view to answering three questions:

1. What is working well?
2. What needs to be improved or changed?
3. What can be done to make improvements in a time of limited resources?

The planning of school-based conversations progressed in discussions which involved both the BCTF and the local RTA which is a BCTF local. The third partner was School District #38, Richmond\(^8\), an urban school district in the metropolitan area of greater Vancouver. One difference between this and some union-district collaborations is that the provincial teacher union was requested to provide training in the facilitation of school-based conversations, thereby providing professional expertise rather than just a representational presence. A second focus within the overall project where the BCTF provided both expertise and funds was in supporting the conversations as part of its teacher inquiry which was jointly funded by the school district and the union while the inquiry facilitators were provided by the BCTF. The BCTF’s *Teacher Inquiry* program offered local associations like the RTA the opportunity to apply for small grants ($5,000) to be provided by the union if matching grants were supplied by the district. In addition, the union would supply facilitation support at no cost to the RTA or the school district.

A basic philosophy leading to the decision to hold school-based conversations was the belief that while systemic support can assist effective Inclusion, Inclusion occurs at the school site. Thus, if any evolution and improvements were to occur, they needed to do so at the school level. Rather than simply ask school staffs (including Education Assistants and principals/vice Principals as

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\(^8\)http://www.sd38.bc.ca/
well as teachers) to hold a discussion based on the review’s findings, it was decided to facilitate
the discussions. A one-day training session was held for prospective facilitators with training
provided by the union’s staff with experience and expertise in facilitation. Any educator was
eligible to apply for training, and the facilitators included classroom and specialist support
teachers, Education Assistants, principals, and vice principals. It was hoped the school-based
consversations would generate dialogue. Graybill (2008) distinguished dialogue from discussion,
arguing that “genuine dialogue is a reflective process in which group members seek to
understand each others’ viewpoints and deeply-held assumptions.” (p. 132) Lipton and Wellman
(2003) base much of their approach to learning-focused relationships on building skills for
engaging in professional conversations. Both these approaches influenced the training of
facilitators during the Inclusion Review.

Notes and the Agenda from the training meeting reflected a day where participants received
information, training and resources relevant to facilitation. In one part of the day, participants
split into groups of three so that they could engage in dialogue (one administrator, one teacher
and one Education Assistant per group). It was intended that roles would be those of speaker,
listener/responder and observer, with each person taking every role. This approach allows a set
time for speaker, listener, and observer so that articulation of ideas, active listening and some
reflection on both speaking and listening/responding occurs. Prior to this, some essential
elements of facilitation were introduced, with supporting resources, and a ‘fish-bowl’ exercise
was modeled by the union session leaders where they demonstrated techniques. Participants then
offered reflections on the approaches before undertaking a triad exercise where they tried out the
methods and received input and suggestions from peers.

School-based conversations were to last one hour, and focused on two questions (adapted from
the three questions initially developed and stated on the previous page) with a variety of
approaches (engaging activity; think/pair/share; mini open-space process) to involving school
staffs in discussing them. The two questions were:

- How have you been successful supporting Inclusion in your school?
- What are some possible future directions and actions for your school program to begin this
  school year and bridge into next? (do-able, concrete)

Most schools participated in the process, and many stated that it proved constructive and
valuable. Teachers reported strong interest in the conversations they held. Many felt that time for
conversation was too limited in the regular teaching week, and that few opportunities occurred to
engage in discourse. They also reported that facilitation was crucial and enabled professional and
focused conversations to occur and to be productive and engaging within the time allotted for
them.

The conversations fulfilled two functions. First, they engaged teachers in focusing and reflecting
on inclusionary practices. Second, they identified a number of priorities for future action, which
allowed the Inclusion Review to move from the initial data collection phase into an action phase.

The Action Phase was generated from a wide-ranging and comprehensive data collection
approach which used professional conversations as data to identify starting priorities for action.
Such action was to take place within a contractually agreed approach to professional learning
articulated in the school district and the local union’s collective agreement. The importance of
this clause in the collective agreement is that it reflects the spirit of respectful collaboration
between employer and those professionals working as teachers in the school district. The clause
language is shown below:

To this end the Board and the Association further agree to the following principles:

a) Professional growth is a process of adult learning and professional development programs are most effective when the following principles of adult learning are acknowledged in planning and implementing such a program:
   i) past knowledge and experience is taken into account and built upon;
   ii) the ideas and shared experiences of the participants are validated;
   iii) the process is interactive and social;
   iv) participation is voluntary.

b) Any new professional development initiative should begin with an explicit goal setting process by the participant(s) which not only considers present needs and interests but also attempts to build on previous experience.

c) Planning for professional development should consider needs for material resources, human resources, organizational support and time for learning.

d) Professional development activities should provide for a cycle of presentation, discussion, demonstration or modeling, individual practice, practice with feedback and reflective analysis both individually and with colleagues.

e) All professional development programs should be evaluated for effectiveness by the participant(s).

Data from the sites were centrally collated. From these data emerged some common areas of focus for action across school sites. These were:

- education plans that work (IEPs, etc.)
- understanding and responding to behavioural challenges
- differentiating instruction/Universal Design
- collaboration between classroom teachers, specialist support teachers, and Education Assistants
- supporting the classroom-based and school-based teams and other approaches.

**Step 3: Action Plan Phase 1, January to June, 2010**

How then to proceed within this philosophical and contractual frame and with a focus on the identified starting points? All schools were invited to consider sharing their approaches in any of the priority areas for action, and six schools were selected for Phase 1 of the Action Plan.

‘Starting small’ became one of our guiding principles. The union-district group considered how to move into the action phase, and decided to ask staff in schools if they might be prepared to share their experiences and learning in a process that began documenting, sharing, and networking those ‘promising practices’ identified in earlier discussions that might be useful as a focus for reflection (for those using the practice) and sharing with those who may wish to consider its application in their own practice.

Inquiry teams were formed, consisting of staff at the schools, union and school district staff and researchers. The basic approach was to ask teachers, school administrators and Education Assistants (EAs) to reflect on their work so that individuals or teams described their approaches. These reflections and conversations were videotaped, and any supporting documentation collected. Video and documents were combined by these teams and the teachers and EAs in schools to describe approaches to IEPs, behavioural challenges, etc., and these have been placed
on a web page. All the video is shot by the teams and is deliberately ‘amateur’ in its technical quality so that other teachers see ‘real life’ discussions, not staged performances with sophisticated lighting and slick editing. Other teachers, once the web pages are all completed, will be able to print out the documents, watch the videos and gain some sense of how one school approaches making education plans that work, from creating class profiles to writing full IEPs, and synthesized one-page IEPs for classroom teachers’ use. They will also be able to make contacts with other teachers and develop networks to discuss practice and exchange strategies and approaches to support inclusive learning.

For a graphic showing Phase 1 of the Action Plan, see Appendix 2. Our focus was on four areas:

- documenting
- sharing
- building community
- developing networks

‘Promising’ practice is a term used to differentiate from the term ‘good’ or ‘best’ practice. In this research, we found a multiplicity of what we as an Inquiry team considered exciting practices and a reluctance of teachers to label their work as ‘good’ practice. There was a sense in many of the earlier discussions that in many cases, teachers, school administrators and EAs were finding ways to meet students’ needs through pedagogical, organizational, and collaborative strategies. Yet at the same time those same teachers and EAs identified challenges, especially in their efforts to meet all students’ needs when resources and supports were limited. And so, while many teachers, administrators, and EAs were prepared to share their ideas and approaches, there was no sense that all approaches were perfect, hence the preference to identify practices as ‘promising’—some approaches worked well, others might be a ‘work in progress.’ Many felt it was preferable to make a start in talking about and sharing practice, and then to extend those earlier conversations and move them from the general (inclusion) to those specific practices that enable the philosophy of inclusion to be realized. But how to do that? What tools might be utilized?

It was at this time that the group started reflecting on the use of video and Web 2.0 technologies such as Wikis for use in the Action Plan.

The Wiki was used to share ideas about documenting practice, with examples of what we considered were innovative ways of documenting practice and sharing information, including text, visual images and Web 2.0 tools:
The use of video is considered as both a reflective tool (for teachers to discuss their own practice) and as a tool for dissemination (so that others can access information about the practice) with both as precursor to networking. In talking about practice on video, the teachers, EAs, and administrators articulated their approaches while also engaging in conversations that extended their thinking about their practice and how it might evolve. ‘Articulation’ often involved many stages, reflected in multiple video ‘takes’. Each ‘take’ further refined and clarified the thinking about practice, as those filming provoked ideas and asked questions of those being filmed.

Teachers and others engaged in the filming and conversations gained insights into practice in school sites other than their own. They joined in conversations, some filmed, others not, and during those conversations were able to reflect on and ask questions about the practices being shared. What were the values of such practices? How might they be applied in another setting? What parts were clearly understood and which not? If an approach was not understood, a discussion frequently clarified the steps, the documentation, or the collaboration.
And so for each of the areas, groups edged towards developing a product that could be shared. As we engaged in the conversations and filming, we realized that it might be useful to document our ideas and approaches on how we engaged, sharing these ideas with others. These are shown in Appendix 3 and included stating the ‘big idea’ and explaining why another educator might be interested in exploring it; finding relevant documents; explaining step-by-step approaches etc. One team piloted a web format that combined access to video, graphic organizers, text documents describing practices, and links and references to useful sites. The intent was to document and share practice, but also to have the web page not as a ‘stand-alone’ resource where teachers would be told to ‘go to the web site,’ but as a starting point for connecting. Essentially, those who provided the information about their approaches are saying, ‘Here we are and this is what we are doing. Take a look and if you want to chat about it, give us a call. Or if you are doing something different, let’s have a chat about that and maybe try and get that practice documented with some video, some graphics, and supporting documents. That way we can find out what we’re all doing, learn from each other and extend our work.’

The screen shot below shows one of the projects as a work-in-progress, with two approaches identified connected to ‘Education Plans that Work’. The top section shows video and documents linked to developing a class profile, while the lower section considers individual planning and profiles. It’s easily accessible, straightforward, and documents several teachers’ ways of planning while also accessing resources they have used.

The web page is intended as a catalyst for networked conversations. By ‘starting the ball rolling’ with one set of promising practice from one school, it is hoped to connect teachers at that school with another school where different approaches may be operating, so that teachers from different sites will be sharing ideas and reflecting on practice, building learning and networks of learning communities (Katz, Earl, Jafaar, 2009).

Because the videos are low-budget and filmed in schools, teachers, EAs, and administrators are reporting that they have utility to:

- **Encourage reflection on practice by the teachers at the six school sites.** Several teachers said they rarely had time to reflect on and discuss practice, but that both the conversation
phase and the Action Phase allowed them some time and space to think about their practice, and to consider how this might evolve.

- **Show ‘real life’ practices.** The videos are not perfect, and no claims are made that the educational practices are either. But the videos’ raw qualities include recognizable people, real schools and approaches to inclusion that are engaging and respectful, while also being one way to start new conversations about practice.

- **Demonstrate that Inclusion is a team approach, and that where it works best it involves collaboration.** A better understanding of roles in collaboration is seen as emerging both in terms of interactions and in ways of managing and creating time to facilitate collaboration.

- **Show that a school district and a teacher union can build a constructive partnership** to develop approaches to support both teachers’ professional learning and inclusionary approaches in a public school system.

The use of video and technology has been critical to the success of the project, partly for the reasons articulated above but also because knowledge dissemination has been aided by being able to combine video, short text items, PowerPoint presentations, and graphics with links on web pages that are easily accessible and comprehensible for teachers and others in the district. The goal has been to create easy access to information by using video, quick reading and potential contacts for anyone interested in sharing ideas about practice.

**Lessons learned: What have we gained in terms of understanding from the collaboration to date?**

Because this paper primarily focuses on collaborative processes, the key areas of learning that will be addressed here are in terms of collaboration and professional learning, but with some reflection on our approach to supporting inclusive practices. Seven ‘lessons learned’ are shared below:

1. **We believe that our best learning together has occurred in safe yet challenging spaces.**

   Teams reported that they felt supported to learn through a process that paired them with familiar professionals as well as including professionals from outside of their particular school site. Trust developed quickly due in part to the fact that everyone on the team, including the facilitators, were learning during the collaborative time. The use of digital media as an ethnographic tool played an important part in our ability to “focus on collaborative theory-building rather than on an individualistic approach.” (Goldman-Segal, 1995, p. 164) As teams continued to reflect on their practice, it became evident that learning was also occurring—through the review of video, video artifacts and fixed artifacts. Goldman-Segal’s paper on Configurational Validity states, “Multimedia ethnography can be a platform or forum for the ‘social construction of knowledge’.” (p. 166) This learning, as it occurred in a safe environment was also fun and engaging. Comments made by team members centered around how much fun they were having while they were working together and learning about each other’s practices and approaches. Participants told their stories, but they also participated in reflection on discussion about the stories of others.

   From the outset, the project was collaborative and all voices were respected and included in the design and implementation of the Inquiry. The support from the BCTF was valuable as it provided time, space and opportunity for district staff to be as fully engaged as the school based participants. It also modeled, in a subtle, yet elegantly profound way, that district staff were
learners too and could take off their proverbial ‘administrative’ hats and demonstrate care and commitment to good outcomes for students. The projects provided forums that fostered improved bonds between school based and district staff and between teachers, EAs and administrators.

2. **We have developed greater trust in the Inquiry process and in each other while accepting that learning is a journey with the destination far from clear.**

This trust has been engendered by experience. Inquiry has been used over some years and has in several cases been facilitated by the teacher union staff and facilitators. This has allowed for a shared collaborative experience where both district and union staff have been able to build trust in each other and in the Inquiry process. While learning is, in our view, a journey, we are still unsure as to whether we ever quite reach the destination. This may be because teachers’ practices are always evolving and changing, as students, communities, curriculum, and society also change.

The projects have helped us move a long way from finding the ‘right answer’ to trusting in the process of asking the ‘right’ questions. Participants eventually learned that they had both insight and information that was valued and valuable. This realization contributed not only to enhance confidence but also increased zeal.

3. **We are trying to respect all voices as having something to contribute, and accept that we all have something to learn.**

The inclusion of teachers, Educational Assistants, school Administrators and district staff is not tokenist. This was not a single event, as there were approximately six Inquiry groups across the district with representation from different unions (BCTF and CUPE) and management. We had a single frame with flexible processes within that frame. Included in the frame were some release time, facilitation, video filming and editing, web design, and refreshments. When groups met, they had the flexibility to focus their discussions in ways that worked for them while also having facilitators present to manage time and support/extend the discussions.

Educational Assistants were trained as facilitators alongside principals and vice-principals, so that EAs also facilitated school-based conversations, were filmed as they discussed practice or reflected on process, and formed a crucial part of the collaboration. Union and district staff were quick to recognize that they too had ‘learning curves’ as they started to question, then understand teachers’ and EAs’ practices. As the process uncovered and made inclusionary approaches more overt and more public, it became clear that almost all such practices relied on the various skills within those collaborating in schools. Thus in order to understand practice, we had to listen to the different voices of practitioners, and realize that it is the additive voice of each person that builds the understanding, much like a jig-saw puzzle coming together over time. We would argue that providing a frame, while offering multiple processes, values and respects professional learning and autonomy by creating spaces where all voices can be heard, and where the collective knowledge can provide avenues for extending and communicating ideas on how to better include all students in learning.

One district staff participant stated, “The Richmond School District has an articulated value system of inclusion and collaboration. While these values are often difficult to actualize, this project brought them to life. Teachers, EAs, school administrators and district staff came together in collaborative and synergistic ways to engage school staff’s conversations about the values and practices of inclusion. While some of these conversations were difficult, they were all authentic. The challenge was to report back to the staffs so that they knew the outcome of their
participation and input. They wanted to know that they were contributing to making a
difference.”

We believe there is evidence that the hierarchical roles people play were subsumed within this
inquiry experience. We often observed that once discussions on practice were in full swing, it
was very difficult for the external facilitators to know who in the group was the administrator,
teacher or EAs. Perhaps those most empowered were the Educational Assistants, because they
worked on an equal basis with district staff and teachers.

We believe that individuals came to the inquiry process with the accumulated skills from their
experience but not with the traditional status of any given position. The importance of this lesson
for us was that we could each contribute our knowledge, express our uncertainties, question each
other, and gradually piece together a better collective understanding of practice, and, as we do,
then our status (but not our experience) becomes less relevant.

4. **Participants expressed strong interest in the focus of the Inquiry but did not
claim expertise, an approach which we believe facilitated better understanding
of practice.**

When participants expressed strong interest in a topic, we noticed that they were reluctant to
claim expertise, so the conversation started with existing knowledge, and built shared
understanding of practice through dialogue. It was as though a claim to expertise might suggest a
level of smugness—that no improvement is possible. But by ‘stating what they knew’ in terms of
inclusionary practices, and by assimilating what others knew, we started to feel that better
practices might emerge. By not claiming expertise, participants also felt more free to express
doubts or concerns over practice. It is, after all, somewhat difficult to be an ‘expert’ in a practice
and be uncertain of it at the same time. The refusal to express expertise was not explicit but
implied in many exchanges where participants articulated approaches which they believed had
merit (thereby reflecting some level of confidence in the approach) while still searching for
improvements (thereby reflecting both uncertainty and a willingness to change).

We also felt that this reflected a level of strength and humility which invited others into the
discussions about practice: strength in the sense of confidence in many current practices;
humility in the sense that most practice was not perfect and could be better. We felt that many
participants wanted to see and understand the strategies used by peers, yet implicit within the
early stages of sharing and discussion was the sense that such practices needed to be worth
sharing: that there was something to discuss and someone to learn from. Ethically this is
somewhat difficult ground—teacher ethics generally assume professionalism and competence in
teachers. This is not to suggest either may be in doubt, but we sensed that teachers,
administrators and Education Assistants may ‘filter’ their view of others in an Inquiry group, and
therefore their approach to and participation in Inquiry. If the filter reveals that there are things to
share and to learn, then perhaps participation is more likely to continue and to evolve than when
the filter suggests there is little to gain from dialogue with others, in which case a participant
may exit.

This very tentative idea may require further exploration, but if we better understand and can be
explicit about what Inquiry participants may need in terms of the knowledge, expertise, and
experience of peers in Inquiry, it may help to adapt Inquiry processes in the future. For instance,
when might (or might not) it be productive to mix veteran and novice teachers? Advanced and
minimal technology-users? Elementary and secondary teachers? And what Inquiry processes
might be developed or adapted for the varying group compositions?
5. **In different ways, the Inquiry has provided spaces for inquiry that have facilitated professional learning.**

Three ‘spaces’ are explored here. The first involves the ‘space’ created when a teacher union and a district agrees to collaborate, co-fund, and mutually support teachers’ professional learning. Many teachers, administrators, and EAs have spoken of their appreciation that their union and their district are ‘on the same page’ and working together to support teachers, at least in this area. The space created is therefore welcoming and enabling by signaling that union and management support it.

The second space is the physical and resource space. By this, we mean the rooms and facilities that provide an actual meeting place, and the resources such as food when necessary which serves both to save time and to offer something tangible and welcoming to those engaged in Inquiry. However, the major resource provided by the union and management funding was money to release teachers and EAs from their work (and provide substitutes) so that teacher and EAs could meet for most of the meetings during school time. Money buys time and signals respect that Inquiry is not an ‘add-on’ with the expectation that teachers add this to an already over-burdened load.

The third space is the conceptual space—the ability to open up thinking in one’s teaching, collaboration etc. The inquiry space proved different than the traditional spaces we find in schools where multi-tasking is the norm because Inquiry focused on specific practices over an extended time on any given day, and over time, for several months. By focusing in this way, participants avoided the multiplicity of issues requiring teachers/EAs’ attention and concentrated on the issue at hand: developing an education plan; dealing with behavior etc. It also utilized experienced facilitators who were able to support, question and extend participants’ thinking and reflections so that the areas of focus might be considered in depth. An analogy in terms of comparing everyday multi-tasking with Inquiry processes might be the difference between ‘grabbing a quick sandwich on the run’ and sitting down for a fine meal where one might enjoy both the food and the conversation. Sometimes we have to do the former but we generally prefer the latter. The quick lunch may keep us going for a while but the fine meal is savoured and better remembered.

6. **The inquiry groups have laid a foundation for the future use of Inquiry processes and for future networking.**

There was evidence that participants valued the processes used in the inquiry and were willing to transfer these processes to other inquiry projects. District staff have noticed that there have been requests to utilize Inquiry approaches with other district/union collaborations, in particular a focus on assessment practices in both elementary and secondary schools.

Somewhat limited networking has already occurred within the Inquiry groups, and we have learned from the experience so that we believe there does exist a foundation for future networking. Yet the foundation still needs the development of future networks, which we intend to be ‘real’ in the sense that people will meet face-to-face and ‘virtually’ with the accessing of web-based resources and on-line discussions. We will also be examining the existing structures and funding of professional learning in the district and support from the union to consider how best to support networking, and also considering what technology support may be required. So in terms of learning in this area, we have to confess we have much to learn, and the foundation, while present, may need to be recognized as an early stage in a long and future process.
We have also found the literature on networking to be limited and of minimal utility in our efforts to form a foundation for networking. While there exists considerable discussion about roles and relationships, the ‘how to’ piece seems largely missing. Perhaps with good reason, as networks may have to fit local contexts rather than fit a pre-determined mould.

7. Lessons learned about inclusion

While the focus of this paper has primarily been to reflect and share our thinking about teacher union and school district collaboration, its primary content focus was on Inclusion and supporting the learning needs of all students. As we progress with our future stages of collaboration to support all educators’ efforts to meet the learning needs of all students, we have also learned some lessons which we hope may guide us in the future. The first of these is that addressing inclusion has to be a collaborative exercise. As we reflected on practice we increasingly understood that most inclusionary practices are collaborative—classroom teacher/EA, specialist support teacher/classroom teacher, and that while each individual teacher, EA, or administrator plays a role, it is when they collaborate and work together that the most effective inclusion takes place. A second learning may be described as ‘starting small’ to focus on areas where inclusionary practices might be shared and extended. While building on success, we also needed to be open about where issues and difficulties existed, so that the complexity and uncertainty around including all students was addressed through the professional learning we developed in Inquiry groups. A third lesson is that describing and building on those practices which appear promising is better than searching for the ‘holy grail’ of perfect practice which we suspect does not exist. By opening up the practices of those educators willing to share, we offer an invitation to a conversation, and to consider a philosophy that better practices might be possible if we share and extend our thinking.

Discussion

Analysis of previous reviews of Inclusion in school districts has identified a number of reports, often rich in data, and offering multiple recommendations. Most have been shelved and the ideas forgotten. This research describes and explores a different approach, combining a will to support Inclusion with the desire to build partnerships between a teacher union and a school district to take a review beyond the data collection and reporting and into action. Understanding more about how this evolved has contributed to our learning and thinking as practicing teachers, administrators, school district staff, education assistants and teacher union staff and researchers. Sharing our learning with the international research community of AERA will, we hope, generate external discussions and possible networking in terms of Inclusion, professional learning, and partnerships. While this research is at an early stage we hope also to make future contributions to the academic literature, and to develop approaches to research that do improve education and serve the public good by building more inclusive schools.

Kosko and Wilkins (2008) found that many teachers felt unprepared to teach students with disabilities, while also discovering that minimal school-district training was taking place to support a wider use of inclusionary practices:

The implications from the review of literature and the results of this study cannot be understated. Teachers do not feel they have been prepared to teach students with disabilities (DeSimone & Parmar, 2006b; Maccini & Gagnon, 2006). What they want is more training on specific teaching strategies (Pindiprolu et al., 2007). However, DeSimone and Parmar (2006b) and Maccini and Gagnon (2006)
suggest this training is not taking place. From here there are several objectives worth pursuing: One is to identify inclusion-based teaching strategies that general educators can apply to their specific content areas; another is to find the best ways to teach these strategies to teachers so that they can properly implement them. The current study found that teachers who had more professional development in adapting instruction for students with IEPs felt more skillful in adapting instruction. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that one major objective should be to provide extended professional development on adapting instruction for students with IEPs.

The processes used in the Richmond School District offer one way to offer forms of professional development that might increase teachers’ strategies to support all learners while also offering an approach building on teachers’ strengths and collegiality. Our experiences to date have shown us that we can build on strengths while also recognizing imperfections and understanding the need to change. Yet we strongly believe that the work to date has informed us that teacher and other professionals’ learning appears best when controlled by those participating and when using effective processes that facilitate dialogue and understanding of practice. That’s when the ‘buy in’ occurred in this project and when networking at least started to develop because the motivation to share was neither forced nor mandated, but was both voluntary and based on the collective interests of those involved.

Collaborative Inquiry such as this involving both teacher union and school district personnel has been noted as ‘not a straightforward process’ by Deppeler (2006):

In this paper, I set out to look constructively at collaborative inquiry as a professional learning initiative in relation to the inclusive education agenda. Although the CI process has empowered teachers and leaders to move inclusive practices forward, as we have seen, this is not a straightforward process. In the early stages both partners may need to tread cautiously in observing and understanding conditions in their respective organisations and to clarify expectations particularly the values placed on research inquiry. Despite our declared focus on student learning and participation, the CI process was not sufficient by itself to interrupt existing practices or change teachers' beliefs about student difference. (p. 357)

Our analysis reaffirms Deppeler’s statement that such collaboration can be complex but we argue that the impact on practice is more significant than claimed by Deppeler. This project has engaged and motivated teachers to engage in reflection and conversation about inclusionary approaches, indicating strong interest from participants in the approaches of other teachers, EAs, and administrators, and it has the potential to create and build networks so that more teachers can engage in the sharing of ideas in school networks within and potentially outside the school district in a sustainable manner, as described by Herner-Patnode (2010):

Once the groups begin to share their information and successes, this type of professional development creates a collaborative and supportive atmosphere that can sustain itself for many years. Teachers who are empowered are important stakeholders in their school, which can result in an improved and collaborative school climate. (p. 29)

The work discussed in this paper is similar in spirit to that discussed by Eisenman et al (2010) who described ‘enhancing instruction by establishing a professional learning culture’. (p. 102) Such a view of culture goes beyond collaboration over a fixed time to a way of being that
enables collaboration to become a permanent norm of practice rather than an occasional event. In our experience we believe the ‘culture’ we aim to create and extend is explicit: respecting teachers’ knowledge and practice within an environment that provides some space for reflection, discourse and constructive challenges; sharing practice in ways that are relevant, accessible and meaningful; and finding ways to document practice as a first step to building real and virtual networks that are flexible and teacher-initiated and controlled. In this culture, both school district and teacher union serve the needs of teachers rather than requiring teachers to consider organizational mandates or policies. Union and district staff facilitate a process; they do not direct or control the content. This in some ways may be a cultural shift in terms of roles and functions, yet one clearly welcomed and valued by many participants in the project. While there is no specific plan to ‘scale-up’ the project at this stage, the hope remains to use our experiences as offering one way forward to better include all students in learning through the collaboration and networking of educators.

While the approach we have shared has been of value and may hold promise for the future, some caution must be exercised in expressing optimism. The work has involved collaboration, with teams of teachers, Education Assistants, school administrators and district staff, thereby encouraging participation regardless of role. Yet the numbers involved are small, so unless this initiative acts as a catalyst to expanded networking, its impact will be limited. In addition, the province of BC is (at the time of writing) locked in a divisive bargaining deadlock with teachers exercising ‘first-phase’ strike action which has stopped most union-management collaborations.

The project has also positioned those who have experienced it to promote a different form of advocacy: one that promotes collaborative inquiry to better understand, share, and improve practice. Thus, instead of having an approach which may be somewhat general (‘better support for Inclusion’), we suggest that both money be provided, and skilled facilitators be engaged, to support self-directed yet collaborative searches for the sharing and further development of promising practices. Such forms of advocacy might result in cross-organizational participation in projects that not only extend teacher inquiry, but also build some desperately-needed bridges in the divisive climate of education in the province of British Columbia.

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References


Appendix 1: From the Inclusion Review Report to the Action Plan

Inclusion Review Report

* Stakeholder committee established
* Facilitated school conversations
* Feedback from range of sources

Action Plan

* 5 key areas for action
* Small scale, voluntary participation
* Networking interested schools
* Expand Study Groups
* Document/share
Appendix 2: Action Plan Phase 1

**Documenting:**
- Text
- Visuals
- Multimedia
- Web 2.0

**Networking:**
- Face-to-face
- Online

**Sharing:**
- Presenting
- Study Groups
- Self-access online

**Building community:**
- Network/facilitators
- Online support
- Future meetings

**Action Plan Phase 1**
Appendix 3: Documenting and sharing ‘promising practices’

There have been several groups looking at how to reflect on and share good inclusionary practices. An earlier stage of the Inquiry focused on school-based conversations where teachers identified areas of Inclusion, while this is more of an action phase of sharing and documentation. A third phase is intended with greater support for networking.

So in this Inquiry the process is essentially all about reflecting on and understanding practice and then considering how to share information about the practice.

Below we share some of the approaches we have developed in one group.

Documenting and sharing: A few ideas

These notes came from reflections after a meeting with one of the Richmond groups looking at how to develop more workable IEPs in secondary schools. We felt that it was important to let people see the ‘big picture’ or main idea first and to stress why it’s of potential interest.

Then we would walk through the approaches developed to date, documenting (in writing initially) and considering exactly what steps were taken, who did what/when, and what documents or resources had been developed to support the process.

Once we have all of this together we would then consider how to tell the story and share the information. We liked the idea of filming an interview with a classroom teacher who was somewhat concerned about how to include specific students but had worked with the resource teacher, used the ideas and resources and now felt much more prepared to effectively include students with special needs.

See if the approach outlined below might be useful for you, and let us know of any ideas you have for documenting and sharing.

Below are the steps we think might work for us:

1. **What’s the big idea and why should another teacher/EA be interested?**

2. **Find relevant documents**
   - These could be:
     - blank templates
     - completed forms (with names removed)
     - resources used (text, computer program, software etc.)

3. **Describe the process/steps**
   - Chronology – starts with……five (or however many) steps….finishes with……
   - Roles – who does what?
   - Relationships – how do the roles intersect/interact?

4. **Simulation/video**
   - Role play a meeting and video it
   - Interview a teacher/EA etc. to: a. summarize and b. describe the process, roles etc.
5. Check the ‘Network 38’ Wiki for ideas on how to tell the story with some options like:
   - Scrapblog pictures of team
   - Short video clips
   - Graphic organizers
   - Other web 2.0 approaches

6. Links to other information
   - Web sites
   - References

The above ideas shared as a graphic:
Documenting and sharing web template

Big Idea

Title

Video clips

Processes

Steps 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Roles/Relationships

Documents

Templates / Completed forms

Video Examples

EA/teacher or teacher/specialist interaction
Teaching Example

Links

SD 38 resources
Ministry
BCTF
Literature