

Evidence of Effective High School Inclusion : Research, Resources and Inspiration

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**Conducted by Integration Action for Inclusion
in School and Community (Ontario)
With the assistance of the Centre for Inclusive Education,
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INTRODUCTION

This report describes an investigation into how selected secondary schools develop and sustain their motivation and strategies to teach students with significant disabilities as members of regular classes.

Late in 2007, the Ontario Ministry of Education provided funding to *Integration Action for Inclusion in School and Community, Ontario* (IAI) to lead this research project. IAI has worked in partnership with the Centre for Inclusive Education at the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario. The research report was submitted to the Ministry at the end of February, 2009.

Reasons for the research:

Since September 1998, Ontario law has required the consideration of placement in regular classrooms for students identified with any exceptionality – depending on parental preferences and whether students' needs can be met there. Students with disabilities are entitled to additional support, both accommodations and modifications, related to their unique, individual characteristics. The Ontario Human Rights Commission developed Guidelines on Accessible Education in 2004, after several years' consultation. It has clarified that - before considering "separate or specialized services" - "education providers must first make efforts to build or adapt educational services to accommodate students with disabilities in a way that promotes their inclusion and full participation".¹ This involves promoting inclusive (or universal) design, removing existing physical, attitudinal, systemic and other barriers, and accommodating remaining needs to the point of undue hardship.

IAI's experience is that schools have more power than students or parents to determine student needs and whether or not they can or will be met in a regular class placement. IAI defines itself as an action-oriented association - consisting of parents, educators and concerned citizens - which advocates for change in attitudes, practices, policies and laws to promote inclusion in education and community. Families, educators and allies tell IAI that some schools are more enthusiastic than others about welcoming students of all abilities into regular classrooms. In some places, segregation seems to persist or even increase. For example, the Toronto District School Board website reveals that the number of students placed in its self-contained special education classes increased by 39% between 2002-03 and 2007-08, a time of declining enrolment overall.² Over those same years, the cost of its self-contained schools increased by \$11 million.

¹ <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/resources/Guides/AccessibleEducation> Page 11

²

http://www.tdsb.on.ca/wwwdocuments/about_us/budget_information/docs/080616%20FinancialFacts2008%20-%20Print%20File.pdf Page 21

Currently, students labelled with developmental disabilities are “segregated” and placed in special education classes and schools to a much higher degree than students identified as having other exceptionalities (Weber & Bennett, 2004)³. This is especially true in secondary school. According to the Upper Canada District School Board October report to the Ministry of Education⁴, students with developmental disabilities are much more likely than other exceptional students to be placed in its special classes. Fifty-three percent of students of all ages with this label are segregated, but this increases to 73% of such secondary students and 79% of such secondary male students. There is a long history of individual, family and association advocacy to improve education and career opportunities for such students. Transition plans are required by law in Ontario as part of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students identified with disabilities. IAI members have said that more needs to be done to promote career development, starting with more effective secondary school inclusion.

A great deal of professional development and school change effort has taken place across Ontario because of the 2005 document: Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students With Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6.⁵ Its guiding principles and key themes (found on pages 3 and 4) are:

1. **All students can succeed.** All students can demonstrate competence in literacy and numeracy.
2. **Universal design and differentiated instruction are effective and interconnected means of meeting the learning or productivity needs of any group of students.** Universal design ensures that the classroom and other learning environments are as usable as possible for students, regardless of their age, ability, or situation. Teachers should also aim to respond to the specific learning profiles of individual students with differentiated instruction.
3. **Successful instructional practices are founded on evidence-based research, tempered by experience.** Children with special needs benefit most when teachers deliver programming informed by both professional judgement and domain knowledge supported by empirical evidence. Good pedagogy is based on good research. Basing instruction on sound research will avoid the pitfall of following trends that lack efficacy.
4. **Classroom teachers are the key educators for a student’s literacy and numeracy development.** Students with special education needs may receive important support and programming from a number of people, but the key educator for literacy and numeracy development is the classroom teacher(s).
5. **Each child has his or her own unique patterns of learning.** Patterns of learning may vary greatly within a classroom. Teachers need to plan for diversity, give students tasks that respect their abilities, use dynamic and flexible grouping for instruction, and provide ongoing assessment.
6. **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

³ Weber, K. & Bennett, S. (2004). *Special education in Ontario schools* (5th edition). Toronto, ON: Highland Press.

⁴ Section J, as provided to its Special Education Advisory Committee on January 13, 2009

⁵ This publication is available on the Ministry of Education’s website, at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca>.

resource teacher(s), other classroom teachers, and other professionals. Families and community support agencies are crucial contributors. Everyone has a place in the process.

7. **Fairness is not sameness.** Treating all children exactly the same means that children who need accommodations or modifications to the program in order to succeed will be disadvantaged. Some students require more or different support than others in order.

Unlike many other parent advocacy associations, IAI does not relate to any particular disability or exceptionality. In fact, IAI has advocated against the use of such disability labels, altogether. However, IAI has increasingly seen the need to advocate specifically for students labelled with developmental disabilities. While encouraged by the words in the Ministry's Education for All document, IAI has been concerned that "all" has not always meant "all", and these students have not benefited from related school improvement initiatives. Rather than referring to high levels of cognitive disability, IAI would prefer to consider how such students receive high levels of curriculum modification, particularly in secondary schools.

IAI has worked with The Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education in a series of collaborative projects and activities since 1995. That experience has informed families, schools and communities that some schools and school boards may be more willing than others to examine their classroom support strategies and culture and encourage greater collaboration with families and communities. This research project grew from both the Ministry of Education's and IAI's search for ways to ensure that more students benefit from provincial student success and school improvement efforts. The partnership between the Ministry of Education and IAI on this research project recognizes and encourages the leadership of people with disabilities and their families across Ontario. This research must take place under very collaborative circumstances – among willing schools, supported by their school boards, and willing families, supported by community allies.

The Ministry of Education is interested in highlighting effective educational and organizational practices. The Coalition's experience has shown that opportunities for students with significant disabilities improve when we focus on their strengths and aim higher for their futures. This led to a collaborative action research project focusing on the strengths and targets for improvement the schools identified for themselves. IAI has hoped that a more complete consideration of differentiated instruction - to encourage truly universal curriculum design - can make these schools more effective, and inspire other schools and boards.

The purpose of this project is not to justify the placement of students with significant disabilities in regular classrooms, but to consider how to enhance the effectiveness of education for students of all abilities. The research will consider "how" this happens and will provide some information about "what" inclusion means and evidence about "why" it is important.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: *What does it involve?*

One of the presentations at the 2002 United States President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, Research Agenda Task Force, considered both the

“what” and “why” of inclusive education⁶. Wayne Sailor, Department of Special Education Professor and Associate Co-Director of the Beach Center on Disability at the University of Kansas, outlined challenges facing educators, administrators and researchers and provided pertinent history, background and terminology:

The term *inclusion* became differentiated from integration, largely on the basis of perception of membership, by those involved, whether of a special or general education class. Salisbury (1991; quoted in Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, Smith and Leal, 2002, p. 82) defined it this way:

“In inclusive programs, the diverse needs of all children are accommodated to the maximum extent possible within the general education curriculum . . . Driven by a vision of schools as a place where all children learn well what we want them to learn, schools become creative and successful environments for adults and the children they serve.”

The term *inclusion*... came to be associated with placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms for their primary placement (Sailor, 1991; 2002). The critical features of inclusion were defined as: a) all students attend the school they would attend if non-disabled (with rare exceptions based on medical or forensic considerations); b) school and general education classroom placements are age/grade appropriate; and c) special education supports are provided in the general education classroom.⁷

Tracing historical development up to 2002, Sailor said:

“Inclusive education, and the term “inclusion” now appears to be well on the way to becoming supplanted by signifiers associated with somewhat larger rubrics. For example, inclusion of special education supports and services (as well as the kids) is becoming a critical feature of comprehensive school reform (e.g., Pugach, 1995; Slavin, et al. 1996; Levin & Chasin, 1994; Lawson & Sailor, 2000). Where the term “inclusive education” has come to reflect a shared educational agenda of general and special education, it has nonetheless comprised a policy thrust primarily emanating from special education. A broader rubric that reflects the same policy thrust, but one that is more equally associated with researchers from both fields as well as some others, is the concept of *universal design*.

Turnbull et al. (2002), describes universal design as, “a technique to enhance the learning of all students” (p. 92). Growing out of standards-based reform (e.g., Kleinhammer-Tramill & Gallagher, 2002; Thurlow, 2000), the universal design concept addresses an assumption of the application of high standards for all students. Curricular goals, objectives, adaptations and supports become multidisciplinary team-generated practices focused within the culture and philosophy of individual schools (Orkwis & McLane, 1998; Rose, 2000), to enhance access to and maximum outcomes from the general curriculum and its standards by all students, including those with disabilities (e.g., Wehmeyer, Lattin, & Agran, 2001; Wehmeyer, Lance, & Bashinski, in press; Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), 1998; 1999).⁸

⁶ <http://www.beachcenter.org/Books/FullPublications/PDF/PresidentReport.pdf>. Please see the list of resources cited there.

⁷ Ibid pp. 5-6

⁸ <http://www.beachcenter.org/Books/FullPublications/PDF/PresidentReport.pdf> pp. 6-7

Whereas he suggests special education “has grown into a separate and parallel system which has all too often become fully disengaged from the rest of public education (Hassell & Wolf, 2001; Lyon, et al., 2001)”, Sailor says:

The debate over inclusion... has really been about separateness of special education vs. belongingness with general education. As pointed out by Pugach and Warger (2001), even though there has long been agreement that the general education classroom “is the placement of choice for most students with disabilities, the heart of what goes on in these classrooms – that is, students learning curriculum has seldom been part of the conversation” (p. 195).⁹

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: *Why is it important?*

Sailor reviewed a number of studies pertaining to outcomes for students with high-incidence disabilities (such as Learning Disabilities), and found “striking evidence that innovative teaching practices that are validated for students with disabilities hold promise for general education students as well, when applied in inclusive educational settings.” He suggested that research into the teaching and learning of such students “should be organized within a universal design rubric”.¹⁰

Sailor also considered students with low-incidence disabilities (severe, cognitive and multiple disabilities) and the “small body of empirical evidence for positive skill acquisition outcomes in inclusive educational programs”:

McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998) reported: 1) that students with disabilities demonstrate high levels of social interaction in settings with typical peers, but that placement alone is insufficient to assure positive social outcomes (e.g., McDonnell, Hardman, Hightower & Kiefer-O'Donnell, 1991); 2) social competence and communication skills improve in inclusive settings (e.g., Hunt, Alwell, Farron-Davis & Goetz, 1996); 3) academic skills improved (McDonnell, Thorson, McQuivey, & Kiefer-O'Donnell, 1997); 4) skills improved in interactive, small group contexts in general education classrooms (e.g., Hunt, et al., 1994); and 5) the quality of IEP's is improved in inclusive programs compared to self-contained programs (e.g., Hunt, et al., 1994).¹¹

Social outcomes are of particular importance for students with low-incidence and severe disabilities since poor social skills become the basis for segregation and a more restrictive quality of life in adulthood (Turnbull, et al., 2002). The studies reviewed indicated: 1) friendships develop between students with disabilities and their typical peers in inclusive settings (i.e., Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997; Meyer, et al., 1998); 2) teachers play an important role in facilitating friendships among disabled and typical students (i.e., Janney & Snell, 1996); 3) instructional assistants placed in general education classrooms who maintain ongoing physical proximity to their included students can actually inhibit positive interactions with their students and general education peers (i.e. Giangreco, et al., 1997); and 4) friendships and memberships are facilitated by longitudinal involvement in the classroom and in routine activities of the school (i.e., Schnorr, 1997).¹²

⁹ ibid p. 7

¹⁰ ibid pp. 13

¹¹ ibid p 13

¹² ibid p.14

How are other students affected?

Sailor also considered the impact of inclusive programs on typical peers, and found:

The evidence can be summarized as follows (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998): 1) inclusion does not compromise general education students' outcomes (i.e., Sharpe, York, & Knight, 1994; Salisbury & Palombaro, 1998; McDonnell et al., 1997); 2) typical peers benefit from involvement and relationships with students who have disabilities in inclusive settings (i.e., Kishi & Meyer, 1994; Helmstetter et al., 1994); and 3) the presence of students with disabilities in general education classrooms leads to new learning opportunities for general education students (i.e., Evans, et al., 1994; Salisbury, et al., 1997).¹³

What about the impact on families?

Sailor said:

Parents are often caught in conflicting streams of opinion and information on inclusive programs. McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998) summarized available evidence on parental impact as follows: parent support for inclusion is enhanced by experience with inclusive programs (both parents of general and of special education students) (i.e., Diamond & LeFurgy, 1994; Palmer et al., 1998), but that parent attitudes are strongly shaped by their perceptions of teacher attitudes (i.e., Green & Shinn, 1994; Giangreco, et al., 1991).¹⁴

What do teachers say?

Sailor found:

McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998) discussed evidence from teacher impact investigations under three themes: 1) teachers gain confidence in their ability to run inclusive classrooms over time (e.g., Giangreco, et al., 1993; Bennett, DeLuca, & Bruns, 1997; Wolery, et al., 1997); 2) support from other teachers is essential (e.g., Pogach & Johnson, 1995); and 3) inclusion is facilitated by teacher abilities to make on-the-spot judgments concerning support to encourage participation (e.g., Olson, et al., 1997).¹⁵

What about cost effectiveness?

Sailor also summarized research about cost effectiveness:

McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998) ... conclude, "while start-up costs may initially increase the cost of inclusive services, the costs over time decrease, and are likely to be less than segregated forms of service delivery" (p. 69) (e.g., Salisbury & Chambers, 1994; McLaughlin & Warren, 1994; Halvorsen, et al., 1996).

Lipsky and Gartner (1997) conclude their review and analysis of evidence in support of inclusion with a quote from the *Final Report of the Inclusive Education Recommendations Committee: Findings and Recommendation* (1993), Lansing, Michigan State Department of Education: "When one contrasts such [positive] indicators [regarding inclusion] with the fact that there appears to be little, if any evidence in research to support superior student outcomes as a result of placement in segregated settings, one must seriously question the efficacy of spending ever-increasing sums of money to maintain dual systems" (p. 198).¹⁶

¹³ ibid p. 14

¹⁴ ibid p. 14

¹⁵ ibid p. 14

¹⁶ ibid p. 15

Overall, Sailor's 2002 summary showed "mounting evidence that innovations introduced into general education classrooms to accommodate students with a variety and range of disabilities directly benefit general education students (Manset & Semmel, 1997). This finding parallels the review of available evidence for high-incidence disabilities by Fisher, Shumaker and Deshler (1995)."¹⁷

Back in 2002, Sailor said the work done concerning broader school reform should stop the debate among special educators over placement and encourage special and general educators to talk together about how the resources of schools can be arranged in ways that all students benefit.

Attitudes versus Outcomes:

Recently, Queens University conducted an opinion poll to explore the views of the public in south-eastern Ontario, about inclusive education of students with an intellectual disability.¹⁸ Fifty-two percent of respondents were positive, and those agreeing with inclusion were more likely to be younger and to have known someone with an intellectual disability who was not a family member. However, 42 percent believed that education in special schools was best. Respondents said that if such students were actually included in regular schools there may be discipline problems; other students would find it harder to learn; schools would lack resources; and teachers would not be prepared. The researchers show that such attitudes defy both advocacy efforts and research evidence:

Some educators and researchers have critiqued the practice of segregating children with intellectual disabilities from their peers in special classes or schools; they advocate that all children, including those with intellectual disabilities, be educated in regular classrooms that reflect the diversity of Canadian society and our inclusive values (Lupart & Webber, 2002; New Brunswick Teachers Association, 2004; Porter, 2004). While such advocates acknowledge that children with intellectual disabilities may not accomplish the same academic goals as other children, they believe that inclusive education, when adequately funded and supported by educators, enables all students to be treated with dignity and to have their unique contributions recognized, while enhancing inclusion of all citizens in many facets of society (Downing & Peckingham-Hardin, 2007; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002). Those advocating this position cite research findings which suggest children with disabilities who are educated in regular classes are more likely to be engaged with learning (Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, & Goetz, 1994) and to communicate with their classmates and teachers (Foreman, Arthur-Kelly, Pascoe, & Smyth King, 2004). Other benefits have included increased academic skills for students with disabilities (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999) and enhanced awareness and understanding of disabilities for their classmates (Hunt, Soto, Maier, & Doering, 2003). Research shows that those with intellectual disabilities who participate in contexts where they have opportunities to make choices and to develop self-determination are more likely to participate fully in adult life and to fare better across multiple life categories including employment, access to health and other benefits, financial

¹⁷ *ibid* p. 17

¹⁸ Burge, P., Ouellette-Kuntz, H., & Hutchinson, N. (2008). A Quarter Century Of Inclusive Education For Children With Intellectual Disabilities In Ontario: Public Perceptions. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 87, 1-18.

independence, and independent living (e.g., Shogren, et al., 2007; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

The positive impacts of having direct contact with people who have intellectual disabilities have been described in the research over three decades and in many countries including the United States, Australia, and Japan (e.g., Begab, 1970; Tachibana & Watanabe, 2004; Yazbeck et al., 2004).

Results from prior attitude studies have suggested that when contact is minimal or non-existent individuals tend to hold the dominant, usually negative, societal views toward people with intellectual disabilities.¹⁹

Burge et al. conclude that “the benefits of educating children with intellectual disabilities alongside those without disabilities must be better communicated to the public in order to further strengthen support for inclusion and increase available educational resources to address the remaining challenges.”²⁰

IAI welcomed this research project as a way to go beyond that old debate about “why” and to explore “how”, in partnership with people interested both in reinforcing positive attitudes and promoting effective practices.

METHODOLOGY

With the assistance and approval of the Ministry, two Ontario schools were selected to participate in the research. Both expressed interest in examining and improving their motivation and strategies to include students with significant disabilities in regular high school classes.

Brockville Collegiate Institute (BCI), in Brockville, has never had “lifeskills” classes for students with developmental disabilities. It is in the Upper Canada District School Board which provides segregated lifeskills classes for most of its secondary students with developmental disabilities. Because their families sought an alternative to segregation, BCI has included such students, in regular class placements, since September 2007. Furthermore, BCI has no students in special education class placements of any sort.

St. Anne’s Catholic Secondary School, in Clinton, is in the Huron Perth Catholic District School Board, where all segregated lifeskills classes were phased out five to six years ago. This school board now has no special education class placements for any of its students; this means they have experience educating students with significant disabilities in regular classrooms.

A Project Steering Group was created, bringing together people motivated and knowledgeable about inclusive education. They met in January and March, 2008 to make decisions about research plans, in conjunction with staff of the Ministry’s Special Education Branch. Included were parents who have been leaders in previous projects of IAI and The Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education. Both principals and one resource teacher from the two selected schools participated, as well as the director from one board and a student support services principal from the other. Another group member had expertise in post-secondary training of educational assistants, particularly concerning communication accommodations and assistive technology. The executive director of the Brockville Association for Community Involvement brought the experience and motivation of families in that community to develop inclusive networks and

¹⁹ ibid pp 2-3.

²⁰ Ibid p. 18

opportunities for people with disabilities and their families. A teacher from the Hamilton Wentworth Catholic District School Board had extensive experience with inclusion, transition planning, and job development and coaching for secondary students with intellectual disabilities. A PhD student and the Professor who directs the Centre for Inclusive Education, in the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario have been IAI's research partners throughout. The process received the ethical approval of the University, so that they will be able to communicate about the research in peer-reviewed publications.

After the steering group meetings, it was decided that action research was a suited methodology for the project as we desired a, "systemic study that combines action and reflection with the intention of improving practice" (Ebbutt, 1985 p. 156, as cited in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).²¹ It was unusual to have researchers from a family association, with the support of a university, come in to study schools. It was potentially sensitive that this outside association had a clear advocacy stance, promoting educational change. An action research method was seen as helpful because:

people learn best, and more willingly apply what they have learned, when they do it themselves. It also has a social dimension - the research takes place in real-world situations, and aims to solve real problems. Finally, the initiating researcher, unlike in other disciplines, makes no attempt to remain objective, but openly acknowledges their bias to the other participants.²²

A collaborative process was established whereby schools were asked to host focus groups and welcome researchers to facilitate and record discussions. It was important for the researchers to clarify that they were not coming to evaluate the schools or their staff. The researchers would not tell them what needed to be changed; rather, each school could engage in self-evaluation and take responsibility for its own change process, perhaps to augment its existing school improvement agenda.

The research process was planned through a process of appreciative inquiry, whereby collaboration for organizational change was promoted by concentrating on the solutions sought rather than the problems to be solved. This has been called "the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential".²³ IAI knew how motivating and proactive such an approach to educational and life planning could be for students with disabilities – to help them work towards the goals they wanted for themselves, and to focus on personal strengths. Similarly, it was hoped that this research process would recognize the strengths and respect the goals schools identified for themselves.

The Steering Group decided to apply the Essential Best Practices in Inclusive High Schools indicators which were developed by Cheryl M. Jorgensen, Michael McSheehan, and Rae M. Sonnemeier from the Institute on Disability/UCE, University of New Hampshire. These 12 Indicators, attached in Appendix 1, provide a framework for

²¹ Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in Education* (6th Edition). New York: Routledge. p. 297

²² <http://www.web.net/~robrien/papers/arfinal.html> Rory O'Brien, Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto, 1998

²³ Cooperrider, D. L. and Whitney, D. (2000). A positive revolution in change: Appreciative inquiry. In D. L. Cooperrider, P. F. Sorenson, D. Whitney, & T. F. Yeager, (Eds.) *Appreciative inquiry*_(pp 3-28). Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing.

conceptualizing inclusive, effective education for students of all abilities at the high school level. Within each Indicator there are a number of items or aspects that define the issues more closely. Metaphorically, this might be seen as a way to strengthen the richly woven cloth of inclusive education by identifying and examining more closely all of its threads.

Funding was granted in December 2007. Both schools decided that they could not be ready to proceed with other research activity during second semester of the 2007-08 school year. In the meantime, researchers continued discussions with the schools and their boards, engaged more partners, designed research tools, and conducted a review of the literature. A variety of sources were explored and reviewed to understand and substantiate evidence for the 12 New Hampshire Indicators to be considered “essential best practices in inclusive high schools”. See Appendix 1.

The School-Wide Inclusive Education Best Practice Indicators Rating Scale was adapted based on a version created by Anne Denham and her colleagues from the University of Kentucky, for the Inclusive Education Initiative. Sections in the questionnaire followed the list of New Hampshire Indicators, with the same descriptors and sub-items. The questionnaire (attached in Appendix 3) was adapted with the addition of a question column, so that research participants would respond in three ways:

1. checking aspects of the 12 Indicators which they didn't understand or about which they needed more information.
2. evaluating their school's practices by indicating how much evidence they saw of each aspect of the 12 Indicators – using a 5 point scale ranging from no evidence, to exemplary evidence
3. selecting Targets for Improvement from among the Indicator aspects

At the end of last school year, the principals of both schools were promoted to superintendent positions. Time was needed to discuss the research with both new principals after the 2007-08 school year began. Each school was given the liberty to select its own focus group, following discussion with the researchers. In one school, people were invited by the principal; in the other by a resource teacher. One school's group was composed of principal, several classroom teachers, a resource teacher and several educational assistants. The other school's group was composed of one resource teacher with classroom teachers. Neither school chose to involve students or parents, although one school did include a community agency staff member who supports the families of its students with significant disabilities. By October, each school had chosen its research team and set dates for its focus group.

Both school boards provided release time for all meetings and project activity in the schools. All members of the focus groups first reviewed a Letter of Information and signed their consent to participate. They were assured that their names would not appear in any report of the study, and that all identifying information would be removed from the transcriptions of the tape-recorded discussions. They were informed that the Ministry of Education funded the project, and so might wish to disclose the names of the participating schools. If this was problematic, people were asked not to participate in the focus groups.

Each participating educator completed the questionnaire on an individual basis and they were returned to the researchers. To interpret feedback for the focus group discussions, the researchers reviewed questionnaire responses in the following ways:

- Issues surrounding respondents' questions were listed.
- We did not use statistical techniques to evaluate the rating scale. Instead, the number of times each respondent checked each of the 5 points on the scale was counted, within each of the 12 Indicators. The number of checks marked by the whole team was totalled for each of the 5 points of the scale, under each Indicator. This provided a general impression about how well both the individual members and the school team felt they were doing relative to the Indicators. For example, if many responses showed Exemplary or Adequate Evidence, it was concluded that the school judged itself as having a strength relative to that Indicator. If many responses showed No or Minimal Evidence, a problem was apparent.
- Under each of the 12 Indicators, researchers looked to see whether team members' responses seemed similar or whether respondents seemed to have differing perceptions about the school's practices.
- Targets for Improvement were listed, as identified.

The researchers facilitated initial focus groups in each school during October. In commencing the focus group sessions, the researchers explained the parameters of the research and explained why each school had been selected to participate. Participants were provided with their questionnaires, so that they could reflect on their responses and address any questions they may have had. The researchers relayed information surrounding the Indicators which were found to have exemplary or adequate evidence. These areas were identified as the school's "strengths" and educators were asked to share their experiences surrounding the demonstration of these school strengths. "Concerns" were identified as those areas where minimal or no evidence was found by the group. As a group, participants discussed perceptions about their school and classroom practices, and potential strategies to address some of the identified concerns were discussed. When presenting the strengths and concerns inconsistencies were noted. The researchers did not make reference to the individuals whose responses may have differed, but respondents could refer to their own responses to see whether their scores differed from those of the group. The researchers identified the primary Targets for Improvement which were indicated in the questionnaires and participants were asked to identify why those targets had been selected. Based on the focus group discussions and selected Targets for Improvement school goals and next steps for the project were considered.

Several weeks later, after discussion with one of the researchers, each school determined what assistance they would seek - through involvement in this project - to address goals related to the targets they had identified for improvement. That researcher visited each school again in December, and met with a team of school staff. While not all of the previous individuals were able to attend, these groups contained some of the same people as were in the first focus group and the schools each brought new people into the process. No parents were involved, but the one family support worker participated. The researcher led school team discussion about practical ways to apply the general principles of differentiated instruction (for daily lesson adaptation) for students with significantly modified learning expectations. As well, the teachers explored new ways to prioritize IEP goals, work together on transition planning and promote career development. A resource and a guidance teacher from one of the schools travelled to visit the other, and attended and participated in this team meeting.

Focus groups were reconvened in January, before the end of first semester. Both schools chose who would participate and all participants were asked to complete the questionnaire. One school included the family support worker but no students or families were invited to take part at either school. One school involved its principal, teachers and educational assistants; the other, only teachers, with a strong representation of department heads. In both schools some of the teachers who participated in the first focus group were not able to attend the second focus group, and new teachers were included in the second focus groups at each school.

The researchers analyzed the questionnaire feedback for the second focus group in the same way as had been done for the first focus group. Some people who participated in the October focus group did not fill out the questionnaire for the second time and new people filled out the questionnaire for the first time in January. In conducting the second focus group, completed questionnaires were returned and the researchers reviewed participants' questions, strengths, problems, inconsistencies, and targets for improvement. In doing so, they provided some general comparison between the responses of the differently-composed October and January focus groups. Goals and progress were discussed and next steps were considered – both for the school and the research project. To prompt discussion, two additional questions were asked at January focus groups: *“In what ways have the community, educators, and school board developed their motivation and strengths to support inclusive practices?”* and *“Do you think that providing considerable adaptations for students with developmental disabilities helps in your understanding and practice for teaching all students?”*

In January, the researchers also met with a group of parents of students with significant disabilities attending one of the schools and their family support worker from a community agency. The parents had been given the indicators and the questionnaire but were not asked to complete it. They discussed the experiences they and their sons and daughters had at the school since September 2007, and the researchers related these discussion to the indicators.

The audio files for both focus groups and parent discussions were transcribed verbatim and all personal identifiers were removed. The researchers read each transcript to gather a preliminary synopsis of the experiences and the emerging themes. Focus groups and parent discussions were coded according to the twelve identified Best Practice Indicators, as well as the relevant strengths, targets for improvement, goals of each school and the suggested resources and supports. Interview transcripts were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software program ATLAS.ti allowing the similarities and differences between the schools and amongst the two focus group meetings to be easily observed.

RESULTS

The questionnaire provided a way for participants to review the New Hampshire Best Practice Indicators, and ask questions about them. It was a quick way for them to consider and rate their experiences, and provide input about what change was needed in their schools.

The issues raised, questions, impressions about strengths, and targets for improvement and goals of the 2 schools were remarkably similar. After visiting the other school, a teacher commented:

Well what I found interesting was that they actually were.... encountering the same things we were, it didn't matter where you were, what board you worked for, but the issues were pretty well the same... you know, everybody's up against the same thing, or trying to solve the same problems... and trying the same strategies....

Feedback from the two focus groups and the one parent meeting were pulled together for coding. Research results are thus considered around commonly occurring themes, and supported by direct quotations.

Questions

A separate column had been put into the Questionnaire so that respondents could indicate questions about either the meaning of any item or their ability to respond to it.

These questions were considered at the start of each focus group.

- Both schools had questions about “person first language”, a term which appeared at the very start of the questionnaire as item 1.1. In discussing this term, one participant said, “*I opened the survey and question number one... I went “I'm in serious trouble”... I mean, I know what first person language means, but I thought “I don't even know what they're referring to.”*” Discussions were had surrounding the importance of addressing an individual first by their name, as opposed to by their ability level. Although some participants had difficulty with the terminology used in the questionnaire, many were relieved that some of the questions they had were surrounding practices they were already following.
- Both schools had questions about Augmentative and Alternative Communication but discussion revealed that they have not had much experience with students using such accommodations.
- Focus group members seemed unclear about the meaning of “curriculum”, in terms of what is dictated by the province and what teachers can adapt. Participants said: “*we don't write the curriculum... we follow the curriculum*” and “*we deliver the curriculum, we don't write it. What's there is there.*” Some asked what was meant by “common content standards for all students”.
- Universal Design for Learning was not a term used often in the focus groups. One group asked what it meant but there were many nods of agreement after a researcher explained its concept.
- In regards to futures planning, some educators expressed uncertainty about whether students between 18 and 21, should stay in high school longer than high school students typically do. Some participants said that this item's reference “discharged from special education” sounded like segregation. One of the schools had not yet had experience on which to base responses surrounding the granting of sufficient credits so that students who required considerable modifications could graduate. In

addition, some teachers were not sure about the services the guidance department provided.

- Some teachers said they did not have enough information to respond concerning Family School Partnerships, perhaps because they completed questionnaires early in the school year, before meeting at parent teacher night. Some teachers wondered why they would communicate to parents about “behavioural interventions” and said they did not know about “family’s cultural practices”
- Participants also asked the researchers to define “natural supports”.

Strengths

Near the start of each focus group the researchers provided feedback surrounding the questionnaire items for which respondents said there was adequate and exemplary evidence.

1. High expectations and least dangerous assumptions:

Participants demonstrated that they understood the intent of the term “person first language” and were aware that disability labels should be avoided.

- *I don't think we do that, I think we say... we address them as who they are... They're all individuals, it's (each student's name).*
- *There's not one teacher in the school that doesn't talk directly to the student and... doesn't go up and say... “Well how is she doing today.” to the EA.*

Members of all the focus groups talked about the importance of setting higher expectations for student learning:

- *And I would hope that everybody on our staff has that expectation for every kid we teach. You know? You set the goal here, the majority of kids will do everything they can to reach it. You set the goal there, they're not going to do it.*
- *You know, and there (were) high expectations from the beginning that not only would they be doing the academic work, but they would be involved in all the extra curricular stuff. And had that not happened... we'd be in a completely different situation than we are now. ... And if we know the assumptions are faulty then everything that follows that's going to be faulty, right?*
- *Well I think the whole intention when we started this program was to start with the least dangerous assumption that you talked about. I mean I had access to their IEPs, I have access to the testing, I had all that, and I said... tell you what, let's not even put this out there. Let's put these students in... they're just students at [our school] and that's how we approached it. And if we have to make adjustments, fine we'll do that, but for the most part, let's just leave 'em and see where it goes.*
- *The information from the elementary panel is essential for us to make a seamless transition, but let's not assume that there hasn't been some changes since that point in time, that we could become myopic if we spend too much time focusing on what the testing has said as opposed to where that student has developed.*
- *If a student wants to learn, keep that door open.*
- *We need to build on that idea of assuming competence.*
- *'High assumptions' is really a strength at this school. Speaking with the parents, just saying... you know, teachers at the school didn't have any assumptions of what the student couldn't do... kudos to all of you for having those high expectations... and not placing limits on their academic abilities.*
- *Students don't get away with things because of their disability either, like, they're*

under the same behaviour, expectations, they get detentions if they're late... things like that. Like sometimes... students with disabilities, you want to, you know, coddle them too much, but I had to really focus on that just for (a school team), and they had to be disciplined too.

- To take part on a school team he still has to make sure he gets caught up on what he misses and everything else just like everybody else. And it seems to work really well 'cause he loves it and he... you know the second I say "Make sure you're getting your stuff done at school" he knows that I mean business 'cause he's seen me... deal with the other guys the same way.*
- My greatest irritant - both as a parent and as a teacher - is that we make this assumption that if you have an intellectual disability, some how something has to be done that doesn't need to be done for anybody else, and that's so ridiculous. What we do for [a student] we should be doing for every single one of the students we have at [school] regardless of any challenges or gifts or abilities that they have. You know, and... I think that's what irritates me is we talk about them as if we're doing something for them that we don't do for others. And I don't think that's true... each of them brings gifts and abilities and challenges - that's my point, there is no difference, they're all students in my class. But when we talk, we always talk as if [this student] is somehow special. ...It irritates me, you know?*

2. General class membership and full participation:

Questionnaire feedback showed strong evidence for items under this indicator. In questionnaires completed before the second focus group in one of the schools, there were no concerns expressed, and much evidence was found.

- There's an assumption "Oh yes, this is where we all go to school." And... you know, I think... that's what we want for this generation. Right? Of course you come to this school, why wouldn't you come to this school?*
- The students in this community are growing up... not looking at the student beside them with disability as... and thinking "you shouldn't be here." There's an assumption "Oh yes, this is where we all go to school." And... you know, I think... that's what we want for this generation.*
- You don't have a special ed team or department, you know? ... if you ask most of the teachers in here who the special ed team is they might not know that, which, I mean... from my perspective, and from the families perspective - that is perfect. Because what you see is when there is a very concrete special ed, you know, teachers or section - then it's those kids and, you know, they're different and... they need these teachers and there's that separation created. So because that isn't here I think that's made a huge difference here.*
- I can only speak for my very limited amount of experience, they really enjoy having her. You know? There's never, ever a comment when she plays out of time - which she can do, without a doubt. Not in band when the kids are working hard to perfect stuff and know eventually we will go to a competition situation - never. Whereas, you know... my gosh, they just accept her and they... you know, "c'mon, it's choir, let's go." ... so it's nothing... I've never seen anyone forced to be friends with her either.*
- If you ask a question and their hand goes up, I would accept, or ask them to answer just as easily as I would ask anybody else. And... the answer is different, the answer takes a different amount of time, and everybody in the class benefits from that because everybody learns patience and understanding and tolerance. I*

mean, it's amazing what can happen in a classroom when that occurs.

- *I know I had to go to some teachers and say "Listen, this is... the second time [this student]'s late, please treat her like you would everybody else and say to her when she comes in the same thing you would to everybody else" and she was shocked, but... sometimes people need to be reminded of that.*

A parent said her son was "ecstatic with the welcome he got in high school, from the teachers, from the EAs, like everyone was working ... to make it work. Where he was in a situation prior where they shoved them all in the corner, they do their thing and we do ours. You know? And it's been... marvellous." One parent had talked to a high school student who was aware he had changed his attitude – he was friendly with a student with disabilities now, but knew he had been disrespectful before they were classmates.

However, families were also wary:

- *I guess it's too soon for me to give them too big of a pat on the back 'cause I saw the same thing in elementary school. It was good... then got worse.*
- *... nobody wants to create waves, nobody wants to create, this... as long as everybody thinks that everybody's needs are getting met, then nobody rocks the boat. And what I see, within the school system is that... they're tolerated. You may get some teachers that will be innovative, but on the whole... they've got their own issues to deal with in the classroom, and they've got, you know, 25 or 30 students, so... that's what they're doing.*
- *I'm slightly offended by the word inclusion because 'cause I don't think to include means... you're already suggesting that children with learning disabilities are already outside the scope of the program... I would say that they belong, they belong with their peers, they belong in those classrooms with those other children because it's just not the teacher who is teaching in the classroom, it's the children also.*

The focus groups talked about the general strengths of both schools:

- *This school is a very giving school, and it's a very compassionate school - I have been in three high schools and I've yet to see the same compassion exhibited by the students in the school as compared to some other high schools. It's just... it's a special school in that regard, I think the students here are very accepting of people that... walk their own walk.*
- *the level of love and care... when we do rock climbing in the Phys Ed classes, a couple of the students with disabilities were up above, coming down from a zip line, so they've climbed up a scaffolding, and they're at the top basically touching the roof, and they're going to come down the zip line. And last year we went into the staff room just before we knew the kids were going to go, and 24 teachers came down to watch on their own time just to cheer on the kids. And a couple other staff members had to help coach them up 'cause they were getting a little scared, but people take timeout of their busy... the business of their lives and their work and... they go that extra mile for the students. And I'd say that's for all students.*

Targets for improvement

When they filled out the questionnaires, some respondents checked three Targets for Improvement overall, and some checked three per Indicator. However, there was

considerable discussion about Targets for Improvement in all focus groups, in three key areas.

1. Curriculum, instruction and support:

Other participants echoed the feelings one teacher expressed:

You do get a panicked feeling if you've never had a high needs student in your class, 'cause you really don't know "Well what am I supposed to do?" You know? Because you want to include them, but... you're wondering, like, "How do I do this?"

Participants expressed concern about how to deliver meaningful instruction in classes where a student requires significant modifications.

- *Give us some more ideas as how to get them right in with the other kids in the classroom, instead of being separated then just working with their EA all the time 'cause I find that's what's happening in my classroom.*
- *If you're studying... something in science... that student would also do the same thing at a modified level. She or he would not be working on, you know, colouring... like a weather sheet or something.*
- *I tried to pick the strands, and I tried to find things that were applicable to her, but she's functioning at such a low level mathematically that I am finding it hard. And then she gets down on herself and she gets frustrated, and then she gets upset and she's pouting.*

Some teachers suggested others should feel less constrained by rigid expectations about course requirements:

- *I think that's when it scares the bejeezus out of people that, (with) 27 kids in my class, I'm going to be doing 27 different (lessons)... no you're not... we spend far too much time trying to teach the whole bloody curriculum and the whole document, we don't need to be doing that. There are things we can do to streamline that and then it's going to allow us some more flexibility. But those are things, it's not just the students we're talking about here, it's all of our kids that, you know, are going to be able to benefit from that...*
- *I think teachers are very uncomfortable with changing too much because they think the curriculum police are out there and they're going to come... and I keep telling them like it's not going to happen... you've got to get beyond that.*
- *I think we also have to remember as teachers that a lot of the learning that goes on in our classes - it's not curriculum driven.*

Focus group discussion about instruction was logically linked with questions about more flexible Authentic Assessment, one of the other Indicators.

- *So ... they're in the course, what do they need to know? What do you feel comfortable with them knowing? ... can they demonstrate all those?"*
- *Why do you need to do 20 questions when they can demonstrate it in five because they're physically unable to write all those questions down - if they can show you in two questions they understand the concept and move on.*
- *I'm talking about the academic progress that students have in a class, I'm a teacher, it's my job to measure the academic progress, and I'm saying I know [a student] has academic progress, but I have no way to measure it, that's all I'm saying... one of my greatest challenges as the educator is to get [him] to communicate the academic things he's picking up. It's just I find it very frustrating as a teacher.*

While considerable concerns were expressed about this Indicator in one school at the first focus group, questionnaire responses before their second focus group were very

positive. Respondents found some, adequate and exemplary evidence - and expressed no concerns. One respondent was glowing – noting exemplary evidence for 17 out of 17 items!

2. Collaborative planning time:

Questionnaire responses about this Indicator were very scattered, which showed that people came to the focus groups with differing perceptions about how much team collaboration happened in their schools. People said planning needed to be a priority, although fewer concerns were expressed at the second focus groups about this issue. However, discussion revealed that teams wanted to find better ways of conducting meetings, problem-solving, making decisions and evaluating their own effectiveness. Someone said:

Currently it's just kind of a one to one thing where the resource teacher supports the classroom teacher... They need some background on... what to do, and how to teach and how to modify... it's really very practical ... Because, you know, some teachers have never taught these students.

Focus Groups called not just for more planning time, but also for better planning processes to help them engage students better in classroom learning. Teachers wanted time to speak with previous teachers, parents, as well as the student, to determine students' interests as well as abilities.

While both boards had transition processes to share information as students move out of elementary school, gaps had occurred when students transferred from another school board. Timing of planning meetings was said to be important. Especially if their school is busy with graduation ceremonies then, teachers wanted to know which students were on their class schedule well before the end of June. Turnaround times between first and second semester were problematic too. Teachers indicated that:

It would be nice just to even to have... the time table a couple days before... earlier, just so that if you have a high needs student, that you could go to special ed or go to the teachers that have taught them before and ask what worked, what didn't work.

Teachers said they would like to know students with disabilities better - even if they were not in their classes. It would be good to get past saying just “hi” in the halls, and for teachers to help engage other students and make connections.

Some group members said they wanted more training about their students' specific exceptionalities, as long as, for example, “*we're all professional enough to know that this is a broad range of what autism is, and certain individual children will be to the left or to the right of that, but... broad based knowledge and understanding and then the specifics of individual children.*” One participant provided a story of a student who wrote her a letter (with the assistance of her parents) about herself and what she is good at and likes to do. This teacher noted that this information was invaluable because it enabled her to know “more than just the label” to better adapt, motivate, and connect with the student.

Some of the planning might involve consideration of Individual Education Plans (IEPs). One teacher said that the resource teacher had helped her understand what an IEP goal actually meant. People said that the accommodations section of IEPs might be more useful if a group of teachers discussed how they are applied. This would make the IEP list of accommodations more practical and useful in the classroom.

Rather than see this as a special education issue, department heads suggested meetings among subject specific teachers to discuss curriculum adaptations and what is,

or is not working, for a specific student. Someone said that school teams could apply Universal Design for Learning better through a series of meetings with teachers from another school in the same subject area:

So you might have, you know, a music teacher from [one school], and a music teacher from [another school] getting together, and... walk through the whole process of even just developing a unit, as opposed to looking at a whole course. And so you'd be basically spending probably a good full day learning the process. You're going back, spending some time thinking about that back at your school. Then you're going back and spending some time sitting down again... Well, dammit this is something that they should be doing at teacher's college, you know?

Whether it is pre-service or in-service, participants said that useful professional development should be collaborative and reflective:

I don't think what we need is more resources sitting on a shelf... and resources in our learning lab, we are creative people, you know, teaching is our craft, what we need is to dialogue.

One group said their school has Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) about "everything else", and suggested that a new type of PLC was needed. This would involve all the teachers who have a student in one semester talking to each other and to all those who taught the student last year. This time would be spent sharing ideas, reflecting on what has been working and planning for the future. Previous teachers could provide information about specific students' interests and ways to best engage that student. Each teacher in the PLC would be thinking about different goals for the student - because none of the students with significant disabilities are working towards alternative learning expectations; all IEPs involve only subject-specific goals that are modified. Teachers also thought it would be useful to share ideas and find strategies in common. For example, it would help to talk about computer accommodations or about students' interests and strengths across the curriculum. An example was given of a student who was interested in hockey and how that interest could relate to learning in a variety of subjects.

School teams said they wanted more collaboration and reflection, information-sharing and mutual support. However, the parent group questioned whether the schools would involve parents and students in this:

I think classrooms are a hierarchy for the teacher, it's a pyramid - you are entering their domain. And because it is their territory, they are not going to be very receptive to any change or innovations within that structure of how they deliver that material. You will get one or two teachers, if you're lucky, within a year who will really show some determination in interacting with your child; who will actually listen to the suggestions that you are making for using the material in a different way in order to encourage that level of education.

In discussing family-school partnerships it became evident that the majority of communication with families was conducted with the resource teacher as opposed to the general education teachers. However, teachers in focus groups noted the importance of speaking with parents, as well as the student and previous teachers, to determine the likes and dislikes of the students. At one of the schools, early in the school year, staff noted that they had been thanked by parents.

Participants expressed appreciation that their boards had provided the release time for focus group discussions. Right then, one team decided to set a date for a further meeting and suggested that the family support worker join them again. A subsequent meeting was suggested: *“another reflective kind of thing on what's going on, like, maybe two thirds of the way through semester two [because] we don't want to leave as this project, you know, being the end.”*

3. Futures planning:

The parent group talked about the need to aim higher concerning their sons' and daughters' futures.

But life skills are so unnecessary because we teach them all the time at home. You know? Like my son will never starve 'cause he knows how to fix his own sandwich, he can't work the oven - he can... he doesn't choose to... he knows how to wash his clothes and stuff... But the life skills are such a waste of time, you know?... when he started high school, he wanted to work as a janitor in the grade school, because... he was out hanging out with the janitor who was very nice to him. He went into high school with that attitude - now, he wants his diploma, the college at our church has shown interest in him, he's been down there, he's seen what they have to offer... And he's interested in the ministry now. ... He's aspiring for something higher... he wants to go to college, and that's the best... as soon as said that I was like “Thank God.” You know? He's opening his mind.

Focus groups discussed whether students with significant disabilities should stay in high school until they are 21 – longer than other students. It was acknowledged that *“the reality is they do stay till 21 because the government has not provided other resources for families with children who have disabilities.”*

Someone said course selection should be guided by student *“destination”* planning – past graduation - with guidance departments playing an important role. Attendees noted that educators often try to *“piecemeal courses together”* but that students should instead enrol in courses that are of interest to them, and that work towards the future they want. Co-op courses were deemed important as a means to provide *“hands on work experience, so they can explore those different possibilities and perhaps then decide for themselves what they would like to do”*. One focus group talked about developing *“a more comprehensive pathway for... our students with disabilities through guidance, so that we don't get into situations where this student has nothing to take, or this student is taking the same courses they've taken before”*. One school was thrilled to know that a former student had just enrolled in college; although he had not earned enough credits to officially graduate, he had come back after the celebrations and the guidance department had found new possibilities and assisted with his application. It was suggested that future planning should be connected to curriculum planning, on the agendas of collaborative teams that listen to students and consult with families. One of the teachers most motivated - who took the project up on a chance to visit the other school - was a guidance and co-op/business specialist.

One participant said:

Certainly it is the goal of student services to get these students beyond this building into the community. That's my biggest concern right now, I think that... we're kind of getting this educational part in hand in bits and pieces, but... any program is only as successful as the type of person that goes beyond your

building and then keeps on going. And for it to go beyond the building and then stop... that's not right... we're not achieving what we've set out to do. What we're trying to do is to get them to go to the next step, whatever that step may be. Certainly it's their choice... but whatever that step might be.

There was discussion in the focus groups about credits and graduation. Although this related to the General Class Membership and Full Participation Indicator, participants saw it as an important issue concerning their students' futures. They talked about Ministry of Education policy concerning the number of credits required for graduation with a diploma or a certificate. Staff in one of the schools expressed concern about other schools' practices whereby students with intellectual disabilities, as well as other students, are prejudged as incapable of graduation and put into K courses. Someone asked how there can be a policy of "Education for All" if some students get the message that they will not get "a legitimate diploma"; that teacher also said: "*then we need to think about how we make that happen for all, that's all I'm saying, it's very simple to me*". The other school discussed ways to achieve credits by repeating the same subject, and taking several semesters or years to work through all of the curricular expectations. Such ideas were shared when this project enabled staff from one school to visit the other.

Several other topics provided for heated focus group discussions. These discussions surrounded which questionnaire responses revealed differing experiences, perceptions and opinions among each focus group participant.

A. Social relationships and Natural Supports :

While the families said they were positive about the welcome that kids had received and the progress that they were making, this Indicator seemed to relate to their biggest long term concerns. They said:

- *Strangers come up to us in the street and say hi ... because they know him from school, (but) nobody's calling him at home, he's not going out to movies and stuff with them... he's not hanging out... I really question how much interaction there really is in the school. Is it really genuine?*
- *Does it go past just the acquaintance kind of level?*
- *You can't make kids hang around him, I know that, but I think if there was more interaction in the school... whether they're working on a project or... as a group... like more group stuff...*
- *Half of his conversations probably start with "My friend..." But I mean, if you go deeper into that... it's just somebody he knows, and... yeah that's a friend, but it's not near as much of a friend as he looks at it as being. And that's just going to almost shut off like a tap when he leaves school. And that's going to hurt him.*
- *At 3:30, the lives of the students that I know do not look the same as the other students. And just because kids are talking in class doesn't mean that that's carrying over. And I really think, what I heard was that they thought it would all just magically happen and somebody talked to [a student] in Science so therefore he must have best friends.*

Furthermore, parents said schools had not shared such concerns:

Well, probably every meeting I've ever been to... schools say that... social stuff is not our area, we're here for academics and we don't get paid for that...

In fact, school focus groups did express similar frustrations as well as understanding of parents' concerns.

I'll be honest with you, one of the most painful things for any parent is if they have a child that is totally not befriended by anyone. Okay? And I don't know how you deal with that, but I think that's why the parents are.... scared of that piece because that's the underlying emotional thing for parents when kids are at school... not how much did they learn, it's how well are they developing as people that can live in a community and have friends like everybody else does, et cetera. You know, that's your number one concern, right?

School personnel did say “the challenge is to create natural social interaction relationships”, and expressed concern for students too:

I do believe... if we brainstorm on a long term basis, we can begin to think of natural ways to make that happen more often. And we have to do that ... with other people from outside the school, to make us think outside the box because... if it's that painful for families, and for parents particularly... I don't know how painful it is for the individuals, I sometimes wonder...

One focus group member said:

Social stuff has sort of been a priority to me and... what I can say undoubtedly is that life ... does not look anything like, socially, the typical child... they are involved in lots of things, which is fabulous... those are the environments where friendships grow, but... they do not have friends outside of school. [One student] has millions of acquaintances, he talks to everybody. But people aren't calling him.

Someone else said “I would see the school having a role in creating opportunities where friendships could be fostered” and focus groups considered re-kindling elementary school friendships, ways of making new connections, and the time some students take to build trust.

The focus groups talked about natural supports that exist within their classrooms.

- *The EA is not working with her, I'm not even working with her, it's the students working with her and it worked perfectly.*
- *My gym class is totally different... I have said nothing to any of the girls, and every day a different girl steps up and partners up with her... you know, takes a leadership role and steps right in and does stuff with her. No matter what... In the middle of a game... she takes the ball and goes and scores, and they all just... you know... sit back.*

Before one teacher had time to know the class and who to ask to provide peer support, the students found ways to involve everyone in phys ed sports activities; “they clicked right away”.

Teachers suggested that some of their collaborative planning should involve “how we can further include students as mentors” since “there's got to be... at least one kid in every single class in this school that would be somebody who could be a peer support, be a peer mentor to the... to any of the students, like, this school is tremendous with kids like that.” Discussion ensued about who might be willing and why.

B. The Role of Educational Assistants:

It was a big change for some teachers to have another adult in their classes:

I'll be honest, I had taught 30 years and never ever had had an EA near me, and all of a sudden I was going to be told I had a student coming into my ... class,

and they would have an EA. Scared me. Scared me beyond belief. Not because I was scared of the person, or the student... it was intimidating, I thought "oh my gosh... am I going to measure up to their expectations of what I should be doing?" Like, it was a whole head thing with me.

Parents were concerned about the training and mindset of EAs, especially if they have been trained to support younger children, but work in a high school. Parents wanted the EA to be a good match for the student, because they noticed this can make a difference in their child's approach to school:

He's up in the morning and... he wants to go to school... he hasn't asked for any holidays. Now I think a lot of that has to do with the set up, with the educational assistant. There's a very good relationship there between the two of them. They work very well together. And the consistency of that relationship is so critical.

A teacher said things improve "when you have an EA who cares about their kids" and success has to do with "the EAs attached to these students". But questions about whose student this really is and attachment to EAs were contentious. The school that included EAs in its focus group had more discussion about this. A teacher and an EA had the following exchange:

I think that the dependency that we create because of an EA being there actually stands in the way of progress for many students, not just [this student], okay?...

(Response) You be careful because I don't want you to say I'm standing in his way. I'll take you on there.

(Response)... I'm not saying... no no not you personally, but the fact that there is an EA tagging along with him all the time stands in his way.

Others said:

- *I want to be clear about it, has nothing to do with who the EA is. It has to do with the fact that when we make an assumption that someone has to have an EA a hundred percent of the time, we are restricting his ability to grow and develop. And I am passionate about that because I see it...*
- *Right, if other people perceive that that person is so significantly impaired that they have to have somebody with them one to one, maybe that means "Oh, well I couldn't spend time with them" or "I couldn't teach..."*
- *I'm saying a little more than even that, I'm saying that when there is an EA attached to a person one on one all the time, that person automatically is restricted in - for instance - interacting with other students because the EA is sitting beside the student*
- *it can be dangerous if EAs have to look busy all the time directly with students, because that means that other kids will stay away, or there won't be as much cooperative learning happening in the class.*

There was also considerable discussion about how EAs facilitate student learning:

- *A parent said EAs "re-teach" information, checking "that the teacher is okay with the way that she's delivering the information... The teacher doesn't innovate... it's the EA that is innovating."*
- *A teacher said that EAs are responsible for success in the classroom: "They work hard, they care... we have to deliver the curriculum. It's not their job to know the curriculum... But they're the ones who are helping... no, they're the ones who are making it accessible, more accessible than I am."*

Parents expressed concern that EA support might diminish. One focus group member asked whether the school board would pull funding and remove support if someone noticed that students were not “receiving one on one”. Another person’s response was: “that is the reality. That reality stinks. And that message needs to go to the Ministry. Okay?”

While provincial special education funding is no longer allocated to school boards according to how negatively students’ disabilities are described, the boards may still use such a system to determine how resources are allocated among its schools. A participant said: “if you make the kid look really bad, you know, then you’re going to get more money... that whole thing is sickening to parents.”

In one focus group, teachers discussed changing EA roles:

I was thinking even on days when the student is in class... if the EA's not necessarily needing to be there can the EA be doing something to help support...? I mean, I'm not going to say "Go write me a lesson plan for tomorrow" or whatever. But "Find some resources that relate to the curriculum." 'Cause I've got her to do that a couple times when she's been away and I've gotten some amazing stuff that won't only benefit her but the whole class. She's still supporting the student in doing so.

Another team member readily agreed, saying “I actually prefer that”, then added:

One thing we've been working on this semester is EA proximity, and... some work on it to a greater degree than others, but... the EA backing away when possible, I'm not saying abandon the student, but allow that student to be integrated as much as possible. And of course we have some... a couple of very high needs students who it is more challenging to do that, you know? But just... physical presence, moving to the back of the room and allowing the student to sit up at the front with his or her peers. And I think... that is successful in your class to a certain degree... and can be in others.

Focus groups also said it was a good idea for EAs to assist in class with other students, not just those with disabilities.

Collaboration between teacher and EA was said to affect classroom dynamics:

..it's also the way we as a classroom teacher treat the situation. If we include the EA in our discussions, if we include them in the planning, if the students understand the way the teacher and the EA have a relationship that is open, the students understand without us knocking them on the head, they understand that they are able to approach.

Planning time needs to be available so that teachers and EA can share insights as a team:

That would mean an awful lot to me. To be able to sit down, not for 5 seconds between classes or as you're shoving a sandwich in your face because five kids are standing at your desk waiting for you - to talk to your other teachers, to include the EA, to sit down and as a team with [name 6] and with whoever "Okay, how is my experience different than yours, what am I doing, what are you doing? Ohmigosh, what a brilliant idea, I never thought of that."

C. Quality Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC):

At the first focus groups, participants said they had little information about AAC and interest in training had increased by the second focus groups. There was realization that students coming to their schools in the future would require such technology. Only if they arrived from elementary schools in the same school board was it certain that such

equipment come to secondary school with them.

Because one student did not use words to communicate, an EA had received training in sign language but that student's teachers had not had that opportunity. This focus group discussed the need to not ignore, or judge as inappropriate, any behaviour which was a student's sole means of communicating. Another focus group talked about the fact that people can and do interpret non-verbal communication and body language for everyone, regardless of ability. Teachers were concerned about not being able to understand a student's communication fully enough to assess learning. School teams would like more information and resources to promote better technological applications and accommodations.

At the second focus groups, two additional questions were asked:

I. "In what ways have the community, educators, and school board developed their motivation and strengths to support inclusive practices?"

This question was the catalyst for some of the focus group discussion about school strengths, targets for improvement and other issues, detailed above. It also generated discussion on what experience taught people about the goals and resources required – not just to develop but to *sustain* their motivation and *enhance* their strengths.

Someone said that having an awareness of the rationale behind inclusive education, and its benefits for all students, was the first step in promoting inclusive practices. The general consensus was that more teachers were becoming aware of and understanding that rationale. However, the depth of awareness was deemed important. People said that with deeper awareness comes greater commitment on behalf of teachers to students with significant disabilities. But this was seen to relate to all students:

I get a little uncomfortable just focusing on students with intellectual disabilities...

I guess... what I'm expressing here is a concern that we look at the big picture...

and make this a piece of what we're doing and where we're going as a school.

One group talked about both younger and older students they knew, whose disabilities seemed greater than those of current students in their school, and who they said "*teach the rest of us is: it is our duty to go out of our way to figure out how to make it work for everyone*".

Both groups articulated similar central **GOALS**, as discussed above:

- to modify and make meaningful classroom instruction and
- to enhance the future of students with significant disabilities.

People said this involves a shift away from traditional special education approaches, whereby schools used to "manage" students with disabilities. A teacher told a story about having two students come into class after the rest of the class was seated. One went ahead and naturally found a seat. The teacher was surprised that the other (a student with a disability) did not take the initiative and only found a seat when directed to do so. The teacher said this passivity, a sort of learned helplessness, could be overcome if teachers set higher expectations for all students. Others said their goal was that students be "*active participants in their own education*" in order to "*build active participants in society*". They said it's also about schools recognizing and encouraging everyone's "*contributions*" so that all students demonstrate citizenship within their local community.

Accordingly, both groups called for similar key **RESOURCES**:

- time to meet for reflective collaboration and
- system support for planning.

Participants said, *“people want to do it as... we've seen here this morning, it's getting the time to do it.”* They acknowledged that they keep asking for “time” but need to clarify why. One researcher summed up impressions gained: *“You want to feel comfortable as teachers in the classroom at knowing your students, teaching your students and knowing what they're learning.”*

One focus group discussed the need for “an inclusion framework for our school” and “a system framework for inclusion”. Someone said “a definition of what inclusion means in the current school board needs to be created” but this should involve “developing a philosophy, not a rigid structure”.

There was an acknowledgement that more than “a few good folks” needed to be willing and involved:

The problem being is that we've got to have the 50/30/20 rule, there's 50 percent who are moving forward on most initiatives, 30 are sitting on the fence, and then 20 are behind and won't buy into it. And it's hopeful... that 80 percent will drag those 20 along.

Another focus group talked about the need for a school leadership succession plan, to sort out how progress can continue “when you guys leave... you guys have so much expertise”.

Setting system expectations was said to be essential, as people said it was with other school improvement initiatives:

With literacy and the elementary panel, not only was there a policy that we are going to make this our focus, but then there was an actual framework of how that was going to fall out, so I think what everyone needs in order to be on board with ... some sort of a framework to say this is how this needs to unroll, and then this happens, and then this happens. I think you get more buy in and there still will be a couple, just like there is in the elementary panel when it comes to... good literacy practices, there'll be a few people who won't be on board, but if you have a framework then everybody feels like they're part of the process and the journey is clear and the vision is... clearly explained for everyone.

They called for a new approach: “we have to make the programs fit the kids and not the kids fit the programs.” Another group said:

Boards need to understand that they resource schools differently that are doing this. That they provide some... more planning time because there isn't a whole special ed department here that's doing everything for these kids and keeping them apart, you're expecting every teacher to be involved, so how do you bring the support to every teacher?

One group called for a five year plan in fear that “when the project is formally completed, that... we all go back to our corners and do our thing and that's the end.” This type of plan is needed to ensure that “all the teachers will readily be able to incorporate students into their class, including a whole range of students”.

People said the practical strategies and philosophies – hands and “the headpiece” – cannot be separated.

People want to know, okay, how do I do it? And then... okay, can you please

give me some time to sit down and get my teeth in this to make it right, because I don't just want... a band-aid... and part of the reason why it's coming out slowly is that the whole key thing about working with differentiation is understanding the process... you can't just give me a lesson plan or a unit plan or a course plan and say here you go. Because if I don't understand the philosophy behind it, it's useless. And I think that's what's happened too often in the past with things like this

II. "Do you think that providing considerable adaptations for students with developmental disabilities helps in your understanding and practice for teaching all students?"

Focus groups provided strong and immediate responses to this question
– in the affirmative!

One teacher noted that including students with developmental disabilities in her classroom has made her a better teacher for all students. Now, she constantly reflects on what did and did not work and is using that information when she plans for upcoming lessons.

In another group, a teacher said

... thinking about connecting with any particular student that has challenges... helps me better do that for everybody else in the class. Including, oddly enough, the ones on the gifted end. That when they're sitting there totally bored because the material is not enticing right? That you better find some way to keep it spicy for them because otherwise you're going to lose them... Because it really... forces me to recognize that every person is an individual student, and every person has to have a way to make education work for them - if you believe that education for all is your motto. You know, and I believe that. Not just because I work for the [school board].

There had been some earlier debate at a focus group and other meetings as to whether the high degree of modification some students require was on the Differentiated Instruction (DI) continuum, or somehow outside of what teachers called DI.

Later, one teacher called it "DI+", clarifying that this means providing differentiated instruction plus "coping mechanisms" – i.e. breaking down assignments into smaller sub-components or helping students become aware of the most important components of the curriculum that they need to understand. He said "DI+" makes teaching "more precise" and beneficial for all students because it is not just students with exceptionalities who may have difficulties grasping content material. There seemed to be general agreement in the focus group that it was both beneficial and necessary to extend understanding about DI and ensure that all students benefit from the concepts and practices.

The parent group talked about the gains they had seen for their children, which they wanted the school board to understand did not happen when they were segregated in the past. But they had heard of benefits to students without disability labels too.

A teacher even admitted to us, she said it's amazing. She says "I didn't realize we could do this." when I... ran into her. I went in for another meeting and I had bumped into her, and she said "Do you know that my grade average last year went up?"

She said "Most of my kids had always a 60% average", she said "Most of my kids did 70 and higher." And she admitted herself that it was because of the new technique, and she's looking forward to the new year with it.

Research discussions seemed to meet one focus group's stated desire to be self-reflective. Educators noted that they now had greater awareness surrounding the participation of all students in their class. They indicated their desire to continue to reflect on ways to provide natural supports to students with exceptionalities. Having been asked to comment about some students' involvement, the teachers continued to reflect on the social inclusion of all students, since they indicated that social involvement is always part of academic progress.

Another group said their discussions had helped them work as a team, gain focus and start "*moving*". They wanted more opportunities to share challenges and resources with others, both locally and across the province.

DISCUSSION

This research considered how two Ontario secondary schools develop and sustain both the motivation and the strategies to teach students with significant disabilities as members of regular classes. The project provided a unique opportunity for people from two different school boards to reflect on their own practices, hear what other schools are doing, and know they are not alone. It provided both schools with time and opportunity to meet, collaborate and be self-reflective, which they said was essential. This project has been a catalyst - calling for reflection about inclusive education practice, considering goals to enhance it, and giving teachers an opportunity to say what resources and supports they need.

This research also underlines the importance of inclusive education. Many studies have shown that outcomes are better for students of all abilities, when additional support is provided in regular classrooms. A recent study²⁴ in Ontario found that members of the general public thought students with disabilities would demonstrate discipline problems; other students would find it harder to learn; schools would lack resources, and teachers would not be prepared. However, people working in the schools studied said that such obstacles can and must be overcome. Furthermore, the high school teams in this study concluded that their efforts to meaningfully include students with intellectual disabilities have helped them to teach students of all abilities more effectively.

The Essential Best Practices in Inclusive High Schools provided a useful framework for understanding the issues important to this discussion about inclusive education. Within each of the twelve indicators, there are a number of items that helped researchers and participants define the many aspects important to the study, more closely. These indicators and the questionnaire provided a structure to help school teams ask questions, and discuss perceptions about what they thought they were doing well, and what they consider to be areas for improvement.

²⁴ Burge, P., Ouellette-Kuntz, H., & Hutchinson, N. (2008). A Quarter Century Of Inclusive Education For Children With Intellectual Disabilities In Ontario: Public Perceptions. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 87, 1-18.

The literature review provided resources to support the use of these indicators, as factors contributing to effectiveness in inclusive secondary school education for students with significant disabilities. The literature highlights the action-oriented, positive, proactive strategies schools and administrators have already developed for embracing sustained change as inclusive schools. What emerges from this literature is a varied landscape whereby best practices for the education of all students are inextricably linked to inclusive education for students with disabilities.

Rarely is a family-based advocacy association such as IAI ever privy to such intense school team discussion or ever responsible for research into school improvement. An action research methodology gave the school teams some control over the process. The researchers did not evaluate the schools or the teachers; rather they helped the school teams in their observations of and reflections about themselves. Influenced by Appreciative Inquiry approaches, the research guided schools to consider what they thought already worked well, and to look ahead to what might work better in the future.

Limitations of the research:

1. The study took place over a short period of time.
 - Delays were experienced while trust was built between the researchers and the schools. New principals arrived in September, which meant further delays to the start of the project.
 - Focus groups were conducted during the academic school day. Because of this, it took considerable time to schedule meetings at a time when it was convenient for teachers to be away from classes and other school activities. Due to the time lag in booking focus group meetings, there was less time than anticipated for action to take place between focus group gatherings. It was only possible to collect data over one semester. Had the data been collected over the course of an academic year, perhaps more goals could have been set, and the movement towards those goals could be evaluated.
 - It may be idealistic to think that such discussion and planning could be accomplished during two focus groups that were just under two hours in length. However, the logistics of the school day made it difficult for staff to arrange longer meetings. In hindsight, it might have been better to organize more focus group meetings in each school. The first would involve discussion of the indicators; a second would outline targets for improvement and set a plan in place; a third focus group could review whether the targets were met, and discuss additional goals for the future.
 - Action research involves a cycle of planning, action, observation and reflection. Further research is needed to allow the stories of these two schools to unfold more fully over time.
2. Contrary to the research plan, the schools sent different people to attend their two focus groups. Therefore, any differences in focus group discussions cannot be attributed to project activity or the passage of time. Focus group discussion might best be seen as a “snap shot” depicting discussion at different points of time by different groups, in each school.

3. All focus group participants completed the questionnaire once but quite a few did not complete it twice. As a result, the usefulness of the questionnaire as a tool to measure school progress could not be tested. However, questionnaire responses assisted the researchers to facilitate focus group discussion.
4. There was some confusion about use of the questionnaire as respondents were unsure how many targets for improvement they should choose. In addition, it was not clear whether the questions column was meant to indicate questions about the meaning of items or uncertainty about their ability to respond to it.
5. The indicators did not relate specifically to the role of educational assistants, and they provided little direct reference to issues of school leadership. These were both areas for discussion in the focus group sessions.
6. IAI had hoped that focus groups would represent the collaboration of school staff with students and parents. While one school included a family support worker who works with families of students with significant disabilities, neither school chose to involve parents. In order to obtain parent responses, the researchers met separately with a group of parents from one of the schools and their family support worker. However, time constraints prevented the meeting of parents at the other school. Neither school decided to involve students; and parents did not invite students to their meeting. It would have been beneficial to have a meeting with teachers, parents and students to combine perspectives and encourage greater collaboration, especially about social connections, natural supports, course selection and future planning.

Implications of the research:

This research is of value as it sheds light on two schools which are doing remarkably well without "life skills" or "segregated" classes. These stories especially need to be heard so that other Ontario secondary schools can improve, in ways that respect students' rights and promote effective pedagogy – truly for "all". It is difficult to imagine that evidence can be found to support the high - and sometimes increasing - rates of segregation of secondary students with developmental disabilities elsewhere in Ontario. It was 2002 when Wayne Sailor provided the United States Commission on Excellence in Special Education, Research Agenda Task Force with a wealth of evidence of the educational benefits and the cost effectiveness of inclusive education.²⁵ This project supports that pre-existing body of literature which provides ample information about "what" inclusive education is and "why" it must happen. This research explores "how" to sustain and enhance secondary school inclusion, especially from the perspectives of the school staff directly involved.

This research can also support the advocacy of families, who will be encouraged that these schools strongly saw students with significant disabilities as important members and full participants, and had high expectations for their learning and citizenship. Focus group members wanted to make classroom instruction more meaningful, but they also wanted to ensure better futures for their students, which matters so much to families.

²⁵ <http://www.beachcenter.org/Books/FullPublications/PDF/PresidentReport.pdf>. Please see the list of resources cited there.

The results section of this research paper reviewed what participants actually said and construed as important. It is also worth noting what was not said too. No one suggested that students' futures would improve if only special educators learned to write more objective and measurable transition plans within their IEPs. Families who have struggled to open post-secondary education opportunities for students with significant disabilities would appreciate how excited teachers were in one focus group, to help a student apply for college. Participants did not say some students were more important than others. And no one involved in this research ever said that class size was a key factor to effective inclusion. It may not be easy to connect students naturally as members of the wider school community, but parents would want to know that teachers see students responding to and respecting each others' differences in class. Focus groups did not talk about how to document disabilities; rather, a teacher said the best way to learn about a student was through the letter her family helped her write, about her strengths and interests. Surely that is a good start for future career development too.

It is not news that teachers want time for meeting and planning. What needs to be noted 'though, is that both school boards offered much more release time than was used by the participants in this project. The focus groups were brief but apparently meaningful. Educators indicated that they want time because they want reflection and collaboration, but that is because they want to do a better job for all of their students educationally, socially and in terms of future opportunities. Teachers, administrators and educational assistants don't want to feel alone and they know they can help each other. The indicators, questionnaire and focus groups offer ways to organize such collaborative learning and planning as well as ways to measure if these supports are in-fact effective.

Next steps

- Both schools have asked for further facilitation and discussion, for the means to work together and for assistance with system support and change. Trust has now been gained; the collaboration that this project has started can grow, bear fruit and sow new seeds. These schools have barely started working their way through the cycle – of planning, action, observation and reflection - that action research should involve.
- Both schools could share many more practical and detailed instructional, assessment, support and planning strategies with each other – and beyond.
- Participants in this research have mentioned a variety of issues requiring provincial attention: such as how credits are granted, how funding is granted, how supports are allocated among schools in a board, how educational assistant roles are developed, how faculties of education prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms.
- Education stakeholders in Ontario call for evidence-based practice and the policy change that supports it. Where is the evidence to support persistent and even increasing segregation of students with developmental disabilities? This research has brought forward a variety of evidence about inclusive education - what, why and how - that needs to be shared immediately.
- During the short time of this project, twenty other school boards across Ontario have sought information about the research. How can this research reach and inspire other schools and boards? They would need guidance to consider the indicators and try the questionnaire in ways that cultivate the reflection that made this research useful to the schools it involved.
- At the end of the 2007-08 school year, the Ministry of Education consulted with people across Ontario about principles and practices for effective inclusive education

all the way from junior kindergarten to grade 12. The new document - Learning for All – is to be released in late spring 2009. IAI and University of Western Ontario researchers could help the Ministry rebuild momentum. They could assist with the professional development activity planned by the Ministry to promote Learning for All across the province throughout the 2009-10 school year. Communication about the IAI research could help the Ministry ensure that future efforts are truly about “all” – to maximize academic and social learning for students of all abilities belonging together in secondary school classes, where academic modifications become enrichments, where teachers care as much as parents about better lives for their students outside of and beyond school.

In conclusion, this research has assisted these schools to demonstrate their willingness and efforts to improve education for students of all abilities learning together as members of regular high school classrooms. Benefits have been shown in terms of their teaching practice and the outcomes they see for all students.

Burge et al concluded that “the benefits of educating children with intellectual disabilities alongside those without disabilities must be better communicated to the public in order to further strengthen support for inclusion and increase available educational resources to address the remaining challenges.”²⁶ Who knows best: members of the public who do not personally know such students? Or their classmates, families, administrators and educators who do? What about the students themselves? The two schools in this research – one with less experience and one working towards full inclusion for a longer time – do not question what, why or how; they see that they are on the way towards better social and academic learning for everyone. They want others to learn from their experience and reflection, through this research. For them, inclusion means better education for all students of all abilities. The challenge for the future is to connect those who know this and those who care to make it happen.

A website for families defines inclusion in a way that would encourage further collaboration, positive action and change:

“Inclusion is a fundamental belief that considers each person an important, accepted member of the school and community. Inclusion is characterized by an attitude of problem solving to discover what is possible... not placing blame, getting stuck or giving up. Inclusion is ‘solution-oriented’. Inclusion means all school staff, students and parents work together as a team in partnership - not in isolation. Inclusion is something that changes over time – it is a series of small adjustments, not just a replicated model. Inclusion creates opportunities for people to learn together!”²⁷

²⁶ Burge et al page 6

²⁷

<http://www.angelman.org/stay-informed/angelman-syndrome-a-to-z/angelman-syndrome-a-to-z-i/>