

Psychology's Role in Inclusive Education: Observations from New Brunswick's Recent Review of Inclusion

Robert B. Williams
Atlantic Baptist University

and

Laurence A. French
University of New Hampshire

Abstract

Psychologists are amongst the professionals who assess children to identify and prescribe for those with learning differences. They currently carry out these assessments in the context of the practice of inclusive education that involves providing for all children's educational needs in regular classroom settings. Recently, some psychologists have advocated for a "psychology of inclusive education" (Kershner & Hick, 2005) and enquired about how psychologists can assist teachers regarding inclusion (Anderson & Klassen, 2005). This paper describes how psychology can support the implementation of selected recommendations found in New Brunswick's recent review of inclusion. Examples of these recommendations include: (1) explication of a comprehensive approach to early intervention and preschool education supporting inclusion; (2) the development of a provincial-level approach to serve children with learning disabilities and autism; (3) the need to develop appropriate educational strategies with Aboriginal and First Nations communities to address the processes of cultural inclusion, discipline and instruction; and (4) evaluating all students in relation to the goals of academic achievement, social skills and citizenship. Finally, selected findings from recent psychological research providing data in support of these recommendations are presented. Cited in *Canadian Psychology*, 48(2a), 83 (Abstract No. 97).

Background

In 2004, after sixteen years of experience with inclusion and "in recognition of the fact that the environment and the challenges have changed significantly" (New Brunswick, 2004), a formal province-wide review of the status of inclusive education was commissioned and launched on the 30th of November (New Brunswick, 2004). Professor A. Wayne MacKay, a former President of Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick, was contracted to carry out the province-wide review of the current status of inclusion in the schools of New Brunswick. The Province of New Brunswick is a unique context for the inclusion of students with exceptional needs with its two educational sectors designated as Anglophone and Francophone.

In the final report, under the rubric of "deliverables," ninety-five recommendations were directed toward responding to the current state of inclusion in New Brunswick and envisioning its future. Five recommendations focused on the government's development of a policy statement on inclusion, five more were directed to the issue of an applicable definition of the exceptional student, 52 recommendations were proposed to inform the development of a new delivery service model, 24 items focused on standards and accountability, and 9 concerned funding and the implementation of the recommendations.

The benefits of this review and audit for New Brunswick were that: 1) residents of the province from a variety of backgrounds were given opportunities to provide input and express their views and concerns; 2) the views and concerns of residents have been included in the review; 3) it provides the basis for advocacy by interest groups who were consulted; 4) the recommendations helped groups learn where support of specific issues can benefit all groups concerned with inclusion and where advocacy for specific issues are needed for a group's particular interests; 5) it resulted in a document to educate the residents of New Brunswick and others about inclusion in New Brunswick; and 6) the results reflect where inclusion has been, where inclusion is, and where inclusion hopes to be in New Brunswick.

At the initiation of the review, the total student body of the Province of New Brunswick between 2003 and 2004 was 118,869. There were 56.8 full-time equivalent school psychology positions. Seventy percent or 83,799 students in the Anglophone districts were served by 18 full-time equivalent school psychologists and 30% or 35,070 in the Francophone districts were served by 38.8 full-time equivalent school psychologists. In this regard, there was a school psychologist for every 2,027 students (MacKay, 2006). MacKay (2006) recommends that there be a school psychologist for every 1,000 students.

Observations

Psychology can support:

- 1) The explication and implementation of a comprehensive approach to early intervention and preschool education supporting inclusion by (MacKay, 2006, pp. 259-262):
 - 1.1) Identifying inexpensive, valid, reliable, and easy to administer assessments to screen children for 'at risk' demographic characteristics (e.g., 3 or more siblings, premature birth, parents without qualifications, unemployed parents, young mother ages 13-17 years, single parent, etc.), developmental and learning problems or at risk for problems by 3 to 4 years of age (e.g., Janus & Offord, 2007; Sylva, Sammons, Taggart, Siraj-Blatchford, Melhuish, & Hall, 2003).
 - 1.2) Identifying tests to assess more completely any problem or risk areas identified via screening.
 - 1.3) Recommending, when possible, trials of evidenced-based educational interventions to remediate the problems or risk areas identified (Cutspec, 2004a, b; Dunst, Trivette, & Cutspec, 2002a, b).

- 1.4) Assisting educators in the identification of evidence-based educational resources for problems, risk areas, and general instruction (Cf. Buysse & Wesley, 2006; Smith, 2003).
 - 1.5) Alerting educators to the practices of evidence-based inclusion (Anderson, Klassen, & Georgiou, 2007; Cameron & Rutland, 2004; Kershner & Hick, 2005; O'Brien, Forest, Snow, Pearpoint, & Hasbury, 1989; Savage, 2006).
- 2) The development of a provincial-level approach to serve children with learning disabilities and autism by (MacKay, 2006, pp. 271-272, 273-275):
- 2.1) Collaborating in the identification of learning disabled students and recommending trials of evidenced-based educational interventions.
 - 2.2) Supporting the consistent implementation of evidence-based educational interventions and practices (Cf. Hunsley, 2007; Smith, 2003).
 - 2.3) Encouraging educators to implement evidenced-based inclusion practices for children with learning disabilities and autism (Cf. Kemp & Carter, 2006; Williams, Johnson, & Sukhodoisky, 2005).
- 3) The need to develop appropriate educational strategies with Aboriginal and First Nations communities to address the processes of cultural inclusion, discipline and instruction by (MacKay, 2006, pp. 292-293):
- 3.1) Advocating cultural sensitivity when working with Native-speaking children (Aboriginal, First Nations, Inuit ...) (Cf. French, 1997a, b).
 - 3.2) Avoiding the use of assessment tools that may be insensitive to youngsters' traditional culture including images that may be sacred or taboo to their people.
 - 3.3) Recommending to educators that when speaking to a native-speaking youngsters, even if they know some French and English, allow for at least a 10-second cerebral translation conversion providing a youngster adequate time to accurately encode the message or instructions. English or French time-limited tests may not be adequate for these tasks.
 - 3.4) Assisting educators to understand that western ways of interacting, including direct eye contact and touching (shaking hands, pats on the back ...) conflict with most native cultural ways (Harmony Ethos) as does using hierarchical or tier classroom groupings. The circle is the preferred Aboriginal learning and therapeutic milieu.

- 3.5) Alerting educators to be careful in asking direct or leading questions of native-speaking children given that many native cultures find it impolite to contradict authority figures. Here affirmative responses may only reflect cooperation and not a valid answer to the question.
- 4) Evaluating all students in relation to the goals of academic achievement, social skills and citizenship by (MacKay, 2006, pp. 309-311):
- 4.1) Assisting educators in identifying valid and reliable standardized or curriculum-derived measures of academic achievement (Williams, 2001).
 - 4.2) A willingness to offer guidance regarding measures of social skills and citizenship (Cf. Lickona, 1991).

Implications

The observations and selected recommendations derived from the review of inclusion in New Brunswick offers psychology a unique opportunity to contribute to, advocate for and support an evidence-based psychology of inclusive education.

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Selected Web Sites

- Center for Evidenced-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior.
[www.challengingbehavior.org].
- What Works Clearing House [<http://www.whatworks.ed.gov>].