

# **Inclusion for All: Bridging the Gap Between What We Know and What We Do**

**Megan Sloik**

## **Abstract**

*Classroom teachers are responsible for creating inclusive classrooms wherein every learner has the opportunity to succeed. Challenges include insufficient training and education in the areas of student exceptionalities, changing funding models and potential budget cuts, and effective co-teaching. Steps must be taken to bridge the gap between what is known to be best classroom practice, and what is actually taking place. Collaboration with teachers and administrators to address these challenges seems to be the most important role of today's resource teacher.*

Years ago, Canada mandated inclusion for all learners within the classroom (Sokal & Katz, 2015). Teachers are therefore obliged to embrace the idea of an inclusive classroom that addresses the unique needs of each student and sees that students succeed to their individual potential. However, our educational system works against itself in that it encourages the inclusion-for-all model, but continues to accept "pull-out" programs. Research shows that these types of programs are neither efficient nor effective (Tomlinson, 2014). Bridging the gap between proven practices of inclusion and what is happening in classrooms is critical. Some problematic areas that keep us from bridging this gap are insufficient teacher training and education in the areas of exceptionalities that students have, changing funding models and potential budget cuts, and proper implementation of co-teaching (Sokal & Katz, 2015). Successful inclusive classrooms are dependent on creating solutions to these problems.

## **Teacher Training and Education**

Insufficient teacher training and education impede authentic inclusion. The classroom teacher must thoroughly understand the individual needs and exceptionalities of all students in the class. This seems like a simple concept but is much more complex once teachers take over responsibility for those students. Teachers are responsible for meeting not only the academic needs of each student in their classrooms, but also the social-emotional needs, and dealing with any behaviour situations that often accompany students with exceptionalities (Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson, & Scott, 2013). Many teachers identify that they are not properly educated about the particular exceptionality that they are programming for (students with autism or ADHD, EAL learners, etc.). In addition, many teachers also express that they are not trained on how to manage some of these students' behaviour needs. As seen in my school, knowing what was in place for students with exceptionalities previously is potentially a good starting point when making considerations for academic and social programming. However, increased teacher training and education is what will help students progress from that starting point.

Additional training for teacher candidates is essential. New teachers must arrive to their first classroom with a solid knowledge base about inclusive education and the associated teaching practices. This knowledge base will shape a novice teacher's perspective of the role of the teacher to one that must design meaningful learning opportunities for every student in the classroom regardless of cognitive, physical, or emotional disability (Schwab, Holzinger, Krammer, Gerhardt, & Hessels, 2015). When teachers are new to my school, they are matched with an experienced mentor. The mentor can offer practical guidance based on his or her experience to support the new teacher's educational base.

When teachers find themselves unprepared for programming for students with exceptionalities, despite their educational background, in-servicing is necessary. Teachers

express frustration with in-services that teach about an exceptionality generally, but offer no practical applications for the classroom and do not reflect their classroom composition (Alborno, 2017). In addition to accessing in-servicing, teachers must connect with any outside resources available. Providing an inclusive classroom is a team effort that involves contribution by the classroom teacher, student, parents, and outside community professionals (occupational therapist, speech-language pathologist, counsellor) to make necessary modifications and accommodations (Srivastava, de Boer, & Pijl, 2017). I often see teachers planning and teaching in isolation. Teachers feel inadequate when they are new to teaching and are often self-conscious to ask for help. Feeling equally inadequate are teachers who are experienced in the field and do not feel comfortable trying something new. Inclusive classrooms have students with changing needs, and both pre-service and experienced teachers must be prepared to learn, work with the necessary team members, and try new things to accommodate those needs.

### **Changing Funding Models**

Changing funding models and potential budget cuts are a major factor when talking about inclusive classrooms. In the case of Manitoba, currently working with a block funding model in which enrolment, socio-economic, geographical, and other factors determine how much funding a school is to receive, school teams can be a bit more innovative with how to implement supports for students with exceptionalities (Sokal & Katz, 2015). Gone are the days when a student who qualified for individual funding would have an educational assistant who supported that one student. In my school, educational assistants are assigned to classrooms that require additional supports, not individual students. Naturally, an educational assistant may spend more time with a student requiring extra support, but he or she would be there to support the inclusive learning of all students. This model provides opportunity to be more fluid with support placement. The complexity of the model can be challenging because needs for support within a school change often, sometimes daily. Budget cuts can also present a problem for inclusive classes. In 2016, Newfoundland experienced a 50.9 million-dollar education cut (Cooke, 2017, "Money Talks," para. 4). The province turned its focus to supporting kindergarten and decreasing resource teachers who had been supporting teachers in their inclusive classrooms. It is evident that in order for teachers to be successful in creating inclusive classrooms, funding models and budget cuts must be managed properly.

In the past, when students were funded on an individual basis, it brought with it the label that the students had a deficit (Banks, Frawley, & McCoy, 2015). As with a school district in Alberta, by using the current block funding model, funds can be attached to classrooms based on supports needed, while still being accountable to provincial legislation and special education (Howery, McLellan, & Pedersen-Bayus, 2013). While there are times when that support is focused on an individual student, it is known that the support is on an as-needed basis. When the targeted student is able to participate in class activities independently, the support staff member is free to assist other students requiring assistance. Early in my career, I witnessed support staff hover over students for which they were funded. It stigmatized the students as being weak and as having a disability. Under our current funding model, it is invigorating to see a student succeed at a task, work in a group, or make a new friend without being attached at the hip to a support staff worker. However, the most logical solution would be to change the funding model to provide adequate financial support, therefore addressing the problem of budget cuts.

### **Co-Teaching**

Proper implementation of co-teaching strategies means that students can access two teachers in one classroom (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). Problems arise when considering co-teaching, especially for teachers accustomed to the one-teacher model. Before co-teaching even starts, teachers have to see merit in the concept that students will be better served by the

collaboration of co-teaching practices than by pull-out programs. In my school, I have seen that when teachers are committed to the one-teacher model, it can be difficult to switch their mind set to something new. Another problem is that co-teaching requires time to build the trust necessary for entering a co-teaching relationship with a colleague (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016), to learn and experiment with different models of co-teaching, and to plan for co-teaching. As a teacher, I know that time can be hard to come by in a teaching workload. Nevertheless, a teacher investing time in co-teaching partnerships would be of the utmost benefit to students.

Possibly the greatest challenge may be reaching the teachers who have been educated, trained, and experienced in the one-teacher model of teaching (Běsić, Paleczek, Krammer, & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2016). Teachers who fit into this category will only “buy in” to the co-teaching model if they are aware of the different co-teaching styles and witness it successfully implemented in a classroom environment. To ensure successful implementation of co-teaching, my resource partner and I created a “Request for Co-Teaching Support” form in which teachers could request co-teaching support from one of the resource teachers. On the form, they are asked to make considerations for which outcomes or goals they have for the class, individual students that will need to be considered, and the roles that the two teachers will play. The goal of identifying the roles that the two teachers would play in the class is to reduce the likelihood that the resource teacher would simply become an extra set of hands, or be seen as the teacher who comes in for the students requiring extra support (Schwab et al., 2015).

Co-teaching will see greater success when administrators are involved in the planning of co-teaching that takes place within a school (Kamens, Susko, & Elliott, 2013). Administrators can set a positive stage by communicating to staff that co-teaching benefits everyone involved: students with exceptionalities, students without exceptionalities, and teachers. My school is moving in this direction. Up to this point, it has been the resource teacher who would arrange co-teaching partnerships. Our administrators have begun to notice some of these co-teaching partnerships and the success they are having. At staff meetings, administrators will ask co-teaching partners to share ways in which they have been working together in the classroom. They will also cover teachers so that they can go into classrooms to observe co-teaching first hand. Administrators also ensure that same-grade teachers receive some scheduled prep time to accommodate the planning involved with co-teaching.

In addition to promoting co-teaching within the school, it is imperative that administrators provide ample opportunity for teachers to become educated and well versed in teaching students with exceptionalities by using a wide range of co-teaching strategies (Strogilos, Stefanidis, & Tragoulia, 2016). Lack of teacher training in this area could result in a reluctance to engage in co-teaching partnerships. I had the opportunity to present about the different models of co-teaching at an in-school professional development session. Co-teaching partners in the session had a chance to share their collaborative experiences, and those who seemed less familiar with co-teaching practices seemed engaged and eager to learn more. Supports necessary for pre-service and experienced teachers in co-teaching would include getting all teachers to buy-in to the benefits of co-teaching, administrator participation in planning and delivery, and proper education/in-servicing about co-teaching styles and implementation.

## **Conclusion**

In my new role as a resource teacher, my perspective has moved from supporting the student to supporting the teacher. It is up to me to help teachers access the necessary training and education required for working with each student in their classrooms. Addressing concerns regarding the funding models for the school is crucial in making sure that supports are allocated to the most appropriate areas. Finally, getting back into the classrooms to work with teachers in meaningful co-teaching relationships is how I see myself as being the greatest support. Helping teachers to bridge the gap between these known, best practices of inclusion and what is actually happening in classrooms is one of my primary responsibilities.

## References

- Alborno, N. E. (2017). The “yes . . . but” dilemma: Implementing inclusive education in Emirati primary schools. *British Journal of Special Education*, 44(1), 26-45. doi:10.1111/1467-8578.12157
- Banks, J., Frawley, D., & McCoy, S. (2015). Achieving inclusion? Effective resourcing of students with special needs. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19(9), 926-943. doi:10.1080/13603116.2015.1018344
- Běsić, E., Paleczek, L., Krammer, M., & Gasteiger-Klicpera, B. (2017). Inclusive practices at the teacher and class level: The experts' view. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 32(3), 329-345. doi:10.1037/t25467-000
- Cooke, R. (2017). *From exile to inclusion: Special education makes big strides, but problems persist*. Retrieved October 10, 2017, from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/inside-the-classroom-inclusive-education-history-1.3962410>
- Howery, K., McLellan, T., & Pedersen-Bayus, K. (2013). “Reaching every student” with a pyramid of intervention approach: One district’s journey. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 36(1), 271-304.
- Kamens, M. W., Susko, J. P., & Elliott, J. S. (2013). Evaluation and supervision of co-teaching: A study of administrator practices in New Jersey. *NASSP Bulletin*, 97(2), 166-190. doi:10.1177/0192636513476337
- Lindsay, S., Proulx, M., Thomson, N., & Scott, H. (2013). Educators’ challenges of including children with autism spectrum disorder in mainstream classrooms. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 60(4), 347-363. doi:10.1080/1034912X.2013.846470
- Pancsofar, N., & Petroff, J. G. (2016). Teachers’ experiences with co-teaching as a model for inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(10), 1043-1053. doi:10.1080/13603116.2016.1145264
- Schwab, S., Holzinger, A., Krammer, M., Gerbhardt, M., & Hessels, M. (2015). Teaching practices and beliefs about inclusion of general and special needs teachers in Austria. *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*, 13(2), 237-254.
- Scruggs, T. E., & Mastropieri, M. A. (2017). Making inclusion work with co-teaching. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 49(4), 284-294. doi:10.1177/0040059916685065
- Sokal, L., & Katz, J. (2015). Oh, Canada: Bridges and barriers to inclusion in Canadian schools. *Support for Learning*, 30(1), 42-54. doi:10.1111/1467-9604.12078
- Srivastava, M., de Boer, A. A., Anke, A., & Pijl, S. J. (2017). Preparing for the inclusive classroom: Changing teachers’ attitudes and knowledge. *Teacher Development*, 21(4), 561-579. doi:10.1080/13664530.2017.1279681
- Strogilos, V., Stefanidis, A., & Tragoulia, E. (2016). Co-teachers’ attitudes towards planning and instructional activities for students with disabilities. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 31(3), 344-359. doi:10.1080/08856257.2016.1141512
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

## About the Author

*Megan Sloik lives in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, with her husband, son, and daughter. She is a resource teacher in the Portage la Prairie School Division. The majority of her classroom experience has been in grades 5-8. She is currently completing her Master of Education degree in special education at Brandon University.*