

## **Inclusive Schools**

The debate surrounding inclusion has been in the forum of educators for several years. Some educators have strong views on either side of the fence but the bottom line is that our students should not be marginalized. Draper (1999) indicated that the nation could not afford to have disposable children. He felt that we should no longer entertain these systems and policies that restrict, restrain and categorize children who do not fit our profile of a successful learner. I am of the view that while streaming or ability-grouping had its place in the past, our new knowledge based on research regarding how children learn dictates that we reassess our practices in education and allow each student in spite of race, ability or religious persuasion to be accepted and regarded as an important member of his/her school.

Inclusive schools are promoted as exemplifying the very best in education and children benefit developmentally and socially from an understanding that all children will learn. A web search on Merriam-Webster Online links to a top search site which states that Inclusive Education means that all students in a school, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, become part of the school community. These students are included in the feeling of belonging among other students, teachers and support staff.

I submit however that effective schools promoting inclusion will not develop overnight. There must be logistics put in place to enable development. The training of teachers must be a priority. Teachers and administrators who are accustomed to working in an environment with students of high ability will not easily adjust to having mixed abilities in their classes. If appropriate training is not done it can result in frustration for teachers and administrators, and the students will be made to feel inferior.

Originally students in the traditional Barbadian classroom were grouped according to ability because it was felt that the brilliant students would be able to proceed at their level and students of lesser ability would be given more attention. This process seemed to have been the best at the time, but there were a few significant factors that I observed as a young teacher in the early seventies. I realized that inevitably their peers in the perceived 'brighter groups' ridiculed the students streamed in the lower ability groups. I saw the frustration and the shame exhibited on the faces of these students. They were demoralized and it was therefore not uncommon to find high absenteeism in this group of low achievers.

I had the mistaken impression that if these students were not of high intellectual standard they would require qualified, well-trained teachers to empower them. I was perplexed that these lower ability students mainly encountered teachers who had just started to teach or in some cases were substituting. The most qualified and effective teachers were assigned to the classes with students of higher ability. In my view this defeated the entire process of ability groups. The teachers with the lower ability groups just seemed to be babysitting and waiting anxiously for each day to pass. Obviously there was much trial and error and these students seemed doomed to continue to fail, as their full potential could not be realized. It remained a case of both teacher and student frustration.

When I was first assigned to teach in 1973, after a four-week induction course, I was assigned to teach ten-year olds with low intellectual ability. I stumbled through the

process of teaching these students. It was only after going through Teachers College and having the experience of studying and practicing the teaching of reading that I was able to really assist these students. I recognized that one of the main components for success with lower ability students was 'self-esteem'. After having successes with the teaching of what was called *Remedial Reading*, I was asked to take on the remediation program with all the students who were having difficulty with reading. In essence these students were also those with challenged ability who were being ridiculed by their classmates.

My first order of business with these students was to encourage them to believe in themselves and build up their self-concept. When positive signs were realized in that area progress started with the reading. It was significant that after the exciting programs commenced in the classroom with these students their more intellectually endowed peers began to value them. The more intellectual peers were willing to assist their colleagues with reading and no longer had any difficulty in associating with them. This was a startling revelation in my early career as I recognized that mixed ability grouping made teaching and learning more interesting and exciting. I realized also that teacher preparation and training is vital for the maximum success of this form of inclusion.

Most teacher training programs in recent years prepare teachers to cope with mixed ability students and students with various challenges. Careful planning, research and class organization techniques are essential. Some teachers might feel daunted by the thought of teaching in this environment. Surveys of teachers by Scruggs and Mastropieri reveal that most teachers accept the idea of inclusive schools but they are not as willing to teach in such schools. This is a fear that can only be relieved by exposing teachers to best practice situations. Having teachers visit schools where the inclusion process has been successfully undertaken will motivate and empower them to attempt the process.

In order to ensure that inclusion is successfully realized, members of the school community have to remember that inclusion should not be limited to students with disabilities and their teachers. McLeskey and Waldron writing in the book *Inclusive Schools in Action* indicated that schools are too complex, and the various components of the schools are too interdependent for isolated change to occur. They suggest that in the discussion on inclusion, teachers and administrators often reach two conclusions regarding how schools must change. They conclude that the change should address the needs of all students not just those with disabilities. They also realize that many students do not fit into traditional general education classrooms and schools, and therefore inclusion must be about how schools and classrooms become more accommodating toward the diversity.

Administrators are the key to any successful inclusion program. If the administrator/principal has not bought into the philosophy, any attempt to bring about change or reform will be unsuccessful. McLeskey and Waldron indicated that change can be initiated by anyone in a school setting but change must be ultimately supported by the administrator/principal and teachers. The administrative team has to ensure that all the necessary support is in place to accept the challenges of an inclusion program. If there is reluctance the process will be punctuated with issues that will undermine any well-intentioned intervention. The bottom line will be chaos, negative fall-out and worst of all the students would be scarred.

Over the years more schools have been embracing inclusion. Even with students that are severely challenged provision is being made for them to 'rub shoulders' with their counterparts in 'normal' schools. On the island of Barbados there is a school for the hearing impaired and visually challenged but there is an excellent initiative to have some of these students spend time in the normal school setting. Traditional teachers were very apprehensive about such an initiative as they thought of all the negative aspects. They felt that the sighted or hearing students would take advantage of the challenged students and the sighted and hearing students would be distracted by the differences in their challenged schoolmates. The reality is that this aspect of inclusion has worked very well as the challenged students have impacted positively on the school. The sighted and hearing students are anxious to assist their colleagues and are eager to take sign language classes to communicate with them better. The principals involved in the exercise have lauded the process and have spoken highly of the positive intellectual and social impact for all involved.

This experience is in sharp contrast to what happened in earlier years. Finally educators have started to embrace the fact that 'each person doesn't know what everyone knows'. Having inclusive schools is an excellent opportunity to teach students how to deal with challenges and more so, accept all human beings in spite of their class, religion, color, physical or mental challenge. Previously, challenged students were stigmatized and segregated for life. They had difficulty in relating to others and in most cases got only menial jobs. This new and refreshing effort of inclusive schools will ensure that the self-esteem of all students remains intact and they are given their due as they have the right like anyone else to make their invaluable contribution to society.

While recognizing the value of inclusive education there is a need for specific strategies to ensure that these schools continue to function effectively. There is a need to have an inclusion planning team in each institution to review the process annually with the task of making required changes. There is the need to ensure continuity among the teachers of inclusive schools. There is a need to have a sense of community where teachers trained specifically in special education can share with their colleagues. In-service training is essential and every effort should be made to keep staff highly motivated and equipped.

Teachers should be allowed time to plan day-to-day collaboration and plan for interesting inclusive class lessons. Special services should be incorporated in the normal class setting except in the cases of extreme challenging circumstances. Inclusive schools are prime sources for technology integration and teachers can plan to use web resources to assist them in catering effectively to varying abilities. Planning, according to McLeskey and Waldron, improves the effectiveness of the collaborative relationship and allows teachers the opportunity to change when the situation requires it.

The flexibility of the curriculum in the inclusive school is crucial to the success derived. The constructivist philosophy is usually the bedrock on which all students are viewed as active learners and thinkers. Assessment and instruction are interwoven and group work result in student exhibitions and portfolios. The teacher facilitates students' skills at becoming more self-reliant learners. Certainly the inclusive school model should be the model for all learning institutions for the future.