

## **Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools. Building our future one step at a time.**

*(Fortalecer la inclusión para fortalecer las escuelas. Construyendo nuestro futuro paso a paso)*

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Páginas 22-35

ISSN (impreso): 1889-4208

Fecha recepción: 11-03-2014

Fecha aceptación: 01-05-2014

### **Resumen.**

*Para eliminar desigualdades y crear escuelas inclusivas se requiere un cambio sistémico. Maestros, padres, directores, políticos y académicos han de compartir un proyecto colectivo que se esfuerce en superar las barreras y crear capacidades. Se presenta una reflexión personal sobre la experiencia de trabajo de una profesora universitaria con una visión optimista que piensa que cambiar nuestro futuro es posible, aunque se haga lentamente, paso a paso.*

**Palabras clave:** *Escuelas inclusivas, Cambio sistémico, Proyecto colectivo.*

### **Abstract.**

*If the promise of eliminating inequalities and creating inclusive schools is to be achieved, a systemic change must take place. Together teachers, parents, school leaders, politicians and academics need to take part in a collective project which strives to overcome barriers and build capacity. A personal reflection of a work experience leaves a young university professor with the optimism that changing our future is possible, even if it is to be done slowly, one step at a time.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusive schools, Systemic change, Collective project*

## Introduction.

It is with honour and great pleasure that I stand before you today to present the closing keynote of the XI Congreso Internacional y XXXI Jornadas de Universidades y Educación Inclusiva. For more than a quarter of a century, you have assembled professors from your faculties of Special Education to share successful practices and strategies. You have organised a meeting place where academics gather annually to ponder on different pedagogical techniques and discuss the latest research in Education. Since 2004, you have planned along with these jornadas, an international congress where you invite other university partners to meet with you in hope that your efforts will eventually have an impact on academic, scientific and social progress. While the specifics of the discussions may have changed over the years, you have always strived towards the goal of including schools, teachers and students in your nation's dream of building a better tomorrow for every single citizen of this country.

The theme of this year's congress, *La escuela excluida*, was inspired by the story of a teacher's courageous stance during the conflict in Sarajevo in the early 1990's (Congreso Internacional y Jornadas de Universidades y Educación Inclusiva, 2014). Faruk Jabucar and his colleagues chose to risk their lives by walking to school every day to greet their students in hope of providing them with a temporary shelter from the chaos of the war. I was inspired to hear that amidst the turmoil of a devastating civil war, they chose hope instead of despair. They chose to inspire instead of choosing to hate. However, what inspired me most is that they chose to meet in a school. They chose the school as the gathering place to help the children feel safe, and to try to rebuild their confidence in their future and that of their nation.

A school is often the focal point of a community. In the village where I grew up in Canada, it is at a school Christmas concert that my grandparents saw me sing and dance for the first time; it is where my parents and friends gathered to celebrate my success as a graduating high school student before seeing me off to university in a different city; and when we were faced with devastating news such as the loss of a young person's life, the school is where we all gathered to grieve.

Schools however, are more than just a gathering place. As important as it is to the social fabric of a community, a school is also a primary component in a young person's education and social development. To that end, schools must embrace strong, empirically based practices founded on philosophies that encourage all of its members to strive and flourish. In order for young minds to be inspired to grow and develop, teachers need to become experts not only in their subject matter, but also in applying the different learning processes with their students. Teachers need to be open to new ideas and accept that the teaching profession is changing. They need to engage in ongoing professional learning opportunities

that will support them in supporting their students. However, teachers should not be the only ones targeted in this changing process. Communities are made up of parents, politicians, academics, civil servants and citizens that must collaborate in order to make the school become more than just a gathering place.

This afternoon, as we complete three days of thoughtful and inspiring discussion, I invite you on a journey that is helping change the schools in one Canadian province, one step at a time. New Brunswick is home to approximately 750 000 citizens. Roughly one third of its population is French Acadian, while the remaining part is made up mostly of English speaking citizens. I believe it is fair to say that New Brunswick is an inclusive province. In 1969, the provincial government voted to make New Brunswick Canada's first official bilingual province. Today, it is still the only province that volunteered to become bilingual. While such a move in New Brunswick did not come without controversy, the government of the day believed that it would lead to a better understanding and representation of the province and its cultural and linguistic diversity.

New Brunswick's schools have been part of an inclusive jurisdiction since 1986 with the passage of Bill 85, which amended the School Act and repealed the Auxiliary Classes Act. For almost thirty years, New Brunswick superintendents, school principals and teachers have been legally required to include all students in the regular classroom (New Brunswick. Department of Education, 1997). The last segregated school for children with intellectual disabilities was closed in 1984. Today, while teachers and principals may still struggle with how to include all students in the regular classroom, most of them understand the importance for them to do so.

Many of our community leaders strive to adopt policies and implement social practices that will provide safe and prosperous communities for all of its citizens. For example, the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission promotes equality and protection from discrimination. Another example is the New Brunswick's Association for Community Living which is a non-profit organization that works on behalf of children and adults with intellectual disabilities. The members and volunteers of the organisation strive to help every person with an intellectual disability live a meaningful life and participate in their community as a valued and contributing citizen (NBACL, 1999).

While governments, organisations and communities have promoted inclusiveness in New Brunswick for decades, I believe it is in the schools that the most significant changes must occur and it seems that our political leaders have also understood that this is where it must take place. As early as 1892, New Brunswick passed legislation that allowed for people who were visually impaired to be educated. In 1903, they adopted a bill that endorsed the education of people who had a hearing and/or speech impairment. Over time numerous bills and laws were passed and amended to bring New Brunswick's schools to where they are today. I consider the latest policy on inclusive education that was signed

in September 2013 (New Brunswick, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development) to be one of the most progressive pieces of legislation for our educational system. It addresses the key components of an inclusive educational system based on these premises:

In New Brunswick, "inclusive public education:

- Recognizes that every student can learn.
- Is universal – the provincial curriculum is provided equitable to all students and this is done in an inclusive, common learning environment shared among age-appropriate peers in their neighbourhood school.
- Is individualized – the educational program achieves success by focussing on the student's strengths and needs, and is based on the individual's best interest.
- Is requiring school personnel to be flexible and responsive to change.
- Is respectful of student and staff diversity in regards to their race, colour, religion, national origin, ancestry, place of origin, age, disability, marital status, real or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity, sex, social condition or political belief or activity.
- Is delivered in an accessible physical environment where all students and school personnel feel welcome, safe and valued" (p. 4).

My presentation will introduce you to New Brunswick's latest school project. It will be divided in two distinctive but complementary parts. First, I will provide you with a picture of what our schools looked like when this process began in 2011. Secondly, I will share with you the challenges and triumphs of striving to create change at the system level and with the individuals working in the system. I will outline some of the steps we undertook to provide support to teachers and professionals all the while respecting the individual difference of students, teachers and cultures. Finally, I will conclude by explaining how this process changed me as a potential leader in inclusive education.

### **1.-Step one: A picture of our schools.**

In 2011, New Brunswick's Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development requested a review of inclusive education. While recognizing that New Brunswick's schools were already advanced when it came to creating inclusive classrooms, the Minister understood that inclusion is an ongoing process and that to achieve it means that you must continuously work at it.

I had the privilege of being part of his team alongside my colleague Gordon Porter who was to be the primary leader of the project. My role was to direct the review process in the Francophone sector of the province. At the time, New Brunswick had 80 Francophone schools located in 5 districts. The review lasted a full school year and involved hundreds of people. With a team of well qualified assistants, we interviewed and collected data from every school district. We visited 22 Francophone schools and 32 Anglophone schools. In each school, principals, teachers, resource teachers and educational assistants were interviewed in person. Parents, students and educational partners were also part of the consultation process. A list of successful indicators guided our observations as we visited schools and numerous classrooms.

After careful analysis of thousands of pages of data, verbatim and observational field notes, 12 themes emerged as being important to the success of inclusion in New Brunswick's school system. Of these twelve themes, I'll only present those that are directly linked to our profession as university professors. I'll begin by identifying the theme, the results of our analysis and some of the recommendations that we specify in the report. The report *"Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools (2012)*, gives a detailed account of the results of our analysis in both linguistic sectors as well as a list of recommendations that relate to these twelve themes.

### 1.1.-Leadership.

Leadership is one of the most important factors in creating inclusive schools (Fuller, 2012; Kose, 2009; Riehl, 2000). Our study illustrates that inclusive education is proportionally related to the educational values of managers and administrators. In other words, the more importance a district superintendent or school principal placed on inclusion, the more staff and resources were directed towards inclusion and ultimately the more students were included. Conversely, when the commitment of managers and administrators was rather uncertain, teachers and staff reported feeling unsupported and not encouraged to practice inclusive education. When school principals valued inclusion, it became visible in the schools. For example, one school's mission posted at the entrance of the school referred to "each student" and the posters throughout the school valued diversity and the potential of each student. The teaching staff talked about including everyone and all students participated together in various educational and social activities.

Our study illustrates that leaders at all levels of the educational framework need to believe in inclusive education and understand it. Furthermore, they need to recognize the importance of their role as well as understand their responsibilities in making their schools more inclusive. The school principals shared with us some of the challenges they were facing. Foremost, they mentioned not being sufficiently trained in inclusion. They all pointed to the fact that the Masters of School Administration program at l'Université de Moncton, the only Francophone university in New Brunswick, does not offer any courses that prepare principals on how to manage inclusion. Also, it was brought to our attention that leaders rarely share a same vision. Too often, leaders at the department of education, at the districts and in the schools do not communicate or work together in order to share ideas and create a common vision.

From these findings, we made recommendations to enhance the leadership skills of managers and administrators that work in and around schools (Porter and Aucoin, 2012, p. 146):

1. Core requisites for individuals holding positions in the New Brunswick school system are the attitudes, knowledge and skills required for inclusive educational practice. Evidence of such knowledge and skill must be a component of the recruitment and appointment process. (Recommendation 1.2)
2. Within each district, a director of education support services should be appointed to provide leadership for this critical program area. This director should report directly to the

- superintendent and should be at the same level as all other directors on the administrative team. (Recommendation 1.5)
3. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should negotiate an agreement with provincial universities to ensure that Graduate/Master's programs in school leadership/administration include one or more mandatory courses relating to student diversity and school inclusion. (Recommendation 1.7)
  4. The provincial improvement plan, district improvements plans and school improvements plans should be required to include and have clearly evident actions to support, reinforce and elevate the capacity of all schools to be inclusive and to accommodate student diversity and differing student learning needs. (Recommendation 1.9)

As a member of a university faculty, I asked myself how I could personally contribute to the training of school principals. Is there any way I could influence their beliefs and values? Can my role be influential in attempting to help leaders better understand the responsibilities they must undertake for all schools to become inclusive?

The second theme that we present in our report is that of roles and responsibilities of the different individuals that must work together to ensure that both teachers and students receive the support they need to succeed.

## 1.2. -Roles and Responsibilities.

During the consultation process, we have interviewed and in most cases observed school administrators, learning specialists, resource teachers, classroom teachers, educational assistants, guidance counsellors and school psychologists. Of all these staff members, the resource teachers seemed to be the most stressed with inclusion. They attributed this situation partly to the increasing number of students being diagnosed with learning difficulties or behaviour problems. For every diagnostic, a special educational plan must be developed, implemented and reviewed to determine if the plan is effective. If the student is not progressing, the plan must be revised.

Resource teachers told us that are also expected help teachers find or prepare educational resources for students who have learning difficulties, attend all meetings where a student's progress is being discussed, communicate with parents as well as with other teachers, principals or paraprofessionals and they need to keep records of all the work that is being done with every student that is part of their caseload. With high expectations from all stakeholders, and the myriad of tasks and responsibilities they have, it is easy to surmise why there is a high turnover rate for resource teachers.

Another challenge mentioned was that often resource teacher positions are filled by recent graduates and by the time they have gained even a basic level of experience in the position, they opt to leave and take a job as a regular classroom teacher. This result in few resource teachers achieving the experience needed to fully succeed at their job. Furthermore many resource teachers have expressed that there is minimal training available for this position which may offer further explanation for the high turnover rate.

The fact that there is not an official provincial definition of the resource teacher's role adds to the list of challenges. This situation results in confusion about their everyday responsibilities. For instance, at one school, resource teachers may spend their day working in a classroom with different students, while at another school the resource teacher is tasked to photocopy worksheets for a student's teaching assistant. Despite attempts by districts to clarify the role of the resource teacher, we still saw a large discrepancy at the provincial level of the roles and responsibilities performed by resource teachers.

In order to help clarify the role of the resource teacher and help them establish a robust working routine, we included the following recommendations in our report.

- The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, in collaboration with districts, should develop standards of knowledge and skills for education support teachers, including resource teachers. Teachers who would serve in these positions would need to have at least three years of successful classroom teaching experience verified by the principal and superintendent. A Master's level or equivalent in training in the relevant area should be required and/or a plan to acquire this with a three-year plan submitted to the superintendent. (Recommendation 2.3)
- Current job description should be revised to provide clarity and specificity for the roles and responsibilities associated with the education support teacher position. (Recommendation 2.5)

As a member of a university faculty, I ask myself how I may participate in better preparing resource teachers for their important role. Shouldn't I be helping prepare future teachers be successful with all of their students?

Inclusive education is above all the ability to provide the opportunity for each and every student to learn. In order to achieve this goal, we need to look more closely at the processes that will achieve instruction delivery and thus learning.

### 1.3.-Instruction and learning.

To succeed in our teaching environment today, teachers not only need to be experts in their discipline but also must possess a strong knowledge of the diverse learning processes (Bransford, Darling-Hammond and LePage, 2005). In the report we recognize that:

[...] a solid and common understanding of the philosophy and best practices related to inclusion is essential throughout the education system. Best practices for inclusive education need to influence decisions surrounding professional development, curriculum development and pedagogy. Empirically based research on what is best for the student must be the filter for all pedagogical planning. There needs to be a paradigm shift and accountability for teachers and administrators to examine and reflect on pedagogy for best practices to become everyday practice. Teachers who embrace inclusive practices should be able to support students to learn in their common learning environment with age appropriate peers and assure that personalized learning needs are met. While this would not be an easy task, it would be necessary that each teacher develop his or her approach to attain this goal (xxx and Author, 2012, p. 149).

We observed numerous teachers who know how to meet the diverse needs of their students however, we still want to ensure that all teachers receive on-going training to further develop their level of teaching competency. To ensure this we made the following recommendations in the report:

1. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should develop standards related to effective inclusive practices. This would help establish a clear sense of what inclusive education is and is not. (Recommendation 3.1)
2. The Department of EDEC and districts should develop a joint strategy to validate personalization for students in middle and high school classrooms as a legitimate practice. This would be a significant challenge since the prevailing perspective is often curriculum-focussed rather than student-focussed. (Recommendation 3.3)
3. Enrichment activities stimulate and enhance learning experiences. For this reason, they should be provided to all students through differentiated instruction. Meeting the needs of gifted and talented students should be done in a common learning environment and be accessible for all. Personalized learning plans should be developed for students exceeding the regular curricular outcomes to the point where formal planning is needed. (Recommendation 3.4)

As a pedagogue who teaches the teachers, I clearly understand that as an educator and a researcher, I can and must have an impact on the success of our teachers with regards to instruction and learning. Could this be linked to the next theme which deals with professional learning?

#### 1.4.- Professional learning.

I believe the theme of professional learning is the section that is most directly related to the work of the professors at our Faculty of Education at l'Université de Moncton. The majority of the people we interviewed for the report mentioned the lack of courses on inclusion being offered at our faculty. Although we currently offer three compulsory courses and four optional courses on inclusive practices for students that are preparing to be teachers, it is evident from our investigation that is still is not enough.

The interviewees mentioned that they wished that the Master of School Administration program would help the principals develop skills in staff support and management as they relate to inclusive education. The resource teachers expressed the desire to take part in curriculum training, specifically in Language and Mathematics. We were told that the courses offered to guidance counsellors do not necessarily reflect the role of guidance counsellors at inclusive schools. However, of all the participants who expressed the need for more training opportunities, the educational assistants raised this issue the most often. They would like to participate in the same training sessions as teachers do because they are often the only ones working directly with the students with disabilities or learning challenges.

The report also states that a lack of funding was often responsible for insufficient training. Furthermore the participants mentioned the absence of Francophone

trainers in the province. We observed that despite teachers' interest in professional development, few seemed to engage in self-learning. The reason we were given for this is that the most recent educational resources are available almost exclusively in English. To help provide better opportunities for staff members to be educated and continue being trained in inclusive education we recommended:

1. The Department of EDEC should monitor university training programs to ensure that they adequately prepare their students for the challenge of teaching in an inclusive school. (Recommendation 4.1)
2. The Department and districts should require focussed training on the implications of inclusive education in their areas of responsibility; this would include staff in: curriculum development, assessment, school review, transportation, finance and community schools. (Recommendations 4.2)
3. The Department and districts should organize a provincially developed and regionally delivered recruitment and training program for the resource teacher. Teachers with a minimum of five years successful teaching experience would be eligible to apply for participation in a 12-month training program. (Recommendation 4.4)
4. Districts should schedule a minimum of four training sessions per semester (eight per school year) for educational support teachers. This would facilitate a robust schedule of knowledge and skill development sessions to assure professional growth. Several factors make this an important priority:
  - a. ongoing staff turnover with the resulting need for orientation and coaching;
  - b. new skills areas to respond to school, classroom teacher and student need;
  - c. a need to maintain a focus on key role responsibilities and assure effective delivery of support; and
  - d. learning and sharing with peers, doing the same work in different schools, and providing support in problem-solving. (Recommendation 4.5.3)

The need for professional training is imperative if we are to build capacity in our schools and get teachers to successfully overcome the challenge of teaching a growing number of diverse learners.

For this presentation, I chose to present the four themes which are directly linked to our profession as university professors. The other themes in the report include structures for collaboration, equity, funding and accountability, personalized learning plans, positive learning environment, high schools, alternative education and resolving conflict. When the report was published in 2012, the Minister of Education, Jodi Carr, understood that he needed to continue investing in this process if it was to be a success in the schools. The next part of my presentation will explain some of the implementation process that I believe is leading to positive changes.

## **2.-Step 2: An implementation process that leads to change.**

When we presented the final report we were extremely pleased that it was accepted in its entirety by the Minister of Education with the support of his party. The government also committed to finance a three year implementation plan of all the recommendations. My colleague Gordon Porter and I were elated at the idea of working an additional three years with the department, district and school leaders to help enhance our school system. Mixed in with the excitement was trepidation, and I must admit that I was somewhat intimidated as it was clear the government had very

high expectations for success. I certainly did not want to disappoint anyone. I think the biggest challenge on my part was going to be with regards to my leadership skills. Did I possess the knowledge and skills necessary to produce change? Would I be able to rally all those that needed to be involved and trust that they would accept me as part of their leading team? In other words, did I consider myself as a “change leader” (Fullan, 2010)?

At this time we are just over half way through the three year project. The questions I am often asked by others and by myself include “How are we progressing”? Are we seeing change in our schools? Are they more inclusive? Are current leaders leading the way for the school personnel to achieve high standard teaching for all students? Before answering any of these questions, let me explain some of the most significant changes we’ve put in place in order to help us achieve our goals.

## 2.1 .-Leaders everywhere!

When the Minister asked us to implement all the recommendations of the report, both xxx and I knew we would need a great amount of help. Immediately we set out to identify leaders in schools, at the district level and within the Department of Education. When we found these people we hired them to fill the various roles we thought necessary to help us succeed in implementing the plan. Based on recommendations made by their superiors or their colleagues, these individuals were selected based on their substantial experience in their field, their commitment to inclusive education and maybe most important because they were respected by their peers. To implement systemic change, the people orchestrating the change must have the respect of the people they are asking to change. Furthermore all of these individuals believed that the changes they were about to work on were for the long term. Essentially, these leaders understood that our schools were in need of a deep change. Marzano, Waters and McNulty, (2005) explain deep change as one that “alters the system in fundamental ways, offering a dramatic shift in direction and requiring new ways of thinking and acting” (p. 66).

Even though I realize that some teachers in some schools were achieving great success at including all their students, we now needed all teachers in all schools to become successful at inclusive education. The change had to be systemic. This meant that changes needed to be made within our existing policies, with our current teaching practices, our management techniques and within the organization of our school personnel. To achieve this we had to be able to count on our leaders to find new ways of thinking that would propel the entire school system towards its mandate.

In New Brunswick, we have been fortunate to have a world renowned, recognized leader and advocate in inclusive education working with us. xxx inspires confidence through his expertise and dedication to inclusion and personally, he inspired me by his confidence in my abilities to help bring about the changes we are implementing. Working closely with him through all stages of the report development and subsequent implementation, I believed I could accomplish much more than I would have been able

to on my own. With our leaders in key positions, we started planning the steps for the implementation of the report. However, we soon realized that even the team of leaders we formed, it was not sufficient to accomplish everything we needed to accomplish. Halfway through the first year, we realized we needed more people to help ensure a successful outcome.-

## 2.2 .-Facilitators to facilitate the process.

If teachers are to become experts in their field of endeavour and specialists at applying the different learning processes with their students, they must be trained and assisted throughout the process (Crawford and Porter, 2004). With this in mind, we decided to hire a team of inclusion facilitators that would work directly in the schools with resource teachers and principals and later with teachers. Superintendents agreed to propose the names of some of their most competent teachers and we proceeded in hiring 18 of them for a period of two years. We were looking for teachers who demonstrated the following competencies:

- Commitment to the mandate of building inclusive school environments
- Successful teaching experience, representative of a knowledge of supporting diverse learners through inclusive practice
- Leadership ability including how to support positive change
- Problem-solving expertise
- Coaching competency
- Professional credibility
- Very good collaboration skill
- Understanding of standards of quality professional learning design
- Flexibility and resourcefulness
- Self-reflective and willingness to learn while working

Depending on the number of schools, each Francophone district has either two or three facilitators that work with them on a full time basis. As part of this team, the facilitators need to know and understand every recommendation of the report, be specialized in inclusive education practices and feel comfortable to engage with teachers, resource teachers and principals. In other words, the facilitators need to help us facilitate the change that is needed in our schools.

Since the beginning of their mandate in August 2013, facilitators have attended multiple training sessions with university professors who specialize in collaboration techniques, learning and teaching strategies and inclusive practices. On their own or in small groups, the facilitators have conducted training sessions for school-based personnel in critical areas of inclusive practice and have provided in-school coaching and support to implement specific strategies. Already these facilitators are seen as pivotal to the success of the process. District leaders are now wondering how they will be able to manage once the two-year contracts of the facilitators are over. How will they provide the continuous training that we know is essential for inclusion to really take root throughout the provincial school system?

### 2.3.- Training modules for the long-term.

Strengthening the capacity of teachers, resource-teachers and principals through training is the main focus of this three-year plan. With the help of various education specialists, relevant training is being developed and offered by the facilitators in the schools and at the district level.—This will continue for the remainder of the project; recognizing the on-going training beyond the scope of the project is critical, on-line computer educational training modules are being created to meet this need.

We're hoping that these modules will serve us in different ways. First, they should help us standardise practices province-wide. Our school visits gave us the impression that too many differing strategies and practices existed in the school system. Second, these modules will provide novice resource teachers with the basic skills they need to successfully begin their career. Third, we expect that these modules will become a valuable resource for anyone who will want to learn more about inclusive education. In the Francophone sector, the eight modules that will be developed respond to the needs of the resource teachers we now have in our schools. Professors from my faculty have shown a keen interest in helping develop these modules and utilizing them in their own courses. Hopefully this partnership will persist once the three year plan comes to an end.

Earlier, I asked the following questions: How are things going? Are we seeing change in our schools? Are schools more inclusive? Are current leaders leading the way for their personnel to achieve high standard teaching for all students? A year and a half into the process, I am optimistic. Even though we have not seen significant changes in our schools, we are noticing that stakeholders are now working together and appear to want to see inclusion succeed.-

In the Francophone districts, six triads of high school principals and their resource teachers will gather four times during the school year to discuss and plan new inclusive strategies for their teachers to use. They also talk about restructuring their schools so that the students with disabilities and special educational needs will spend the majority of their time in regular classes. The triads have already met together on two occasions and the facilitators who lead the meetings are pleased to report that while some principals may feel overwhelmed by the added workload, others have already started making positive changes in their schools and are supporting their fellow principals who seem to be struggling with the changes. A growing number of school principals are making use of professional development days to address inclusive education and are using specialists in their schools to work with their staff. More leaders are asking to be trained and seem to want to be part of the change. With still a year and a half to go, the next steps in the process will need to be focussed more on the classroom and on the role of the classroom teacher. We will need to work specifically with teachers and members of the school team that will assist the teachers in their classrooms.

### 3.-Conclusion.

I feel very fortunate to be part of a collective project that is striving to build a better

future for all of its citizens, especially for those who need it most. Our definition of inclusive education is based on the principle of equity. All students regardless of socio-economic status, sexual orientation, culture, residence, strengths and challenges have the right to an appropriate education in an inclusive, common learning environment shared among age-appropriate, neighbourhood peers (Porter and Aucoin, 2012:154).

This experience has inspired a lot of optimism in myself and others. In a period of just three years I've seen an entire school system province-wide come together with politicians, community leaders and university professors to make our schools safe and inclusive for everyone. If you asked me to identify the essential component that I believe would guarantee the success of this endeavour, I would suggest that developing leaders committed to inclusion at all levels in the school system is paramount. Without these individuals the chances of success would be much diminished.

Another component which is fundamental to this process is the training. Professional development must be research-based, relevant and continuously offered to all members of the educational framework. I have learned that once people feel comfortable in what they should be doing and how they should be doing it, they are much more willing to work with you.

I'll be forever grateful to the leader of the project, Gordon Porter who has been the indisputable leader from the very start. I also think of the politicians who have risked political backlash in order to pursue what they believe to be right and of the school principals who are encouraging change in their schools even though they know that their teachers will find the process difficult. Lastly, I salute all the individuals who have participated in this journey and lead in their own, unique way.

As a university professor, I came to understand that I do have a role to play in this process. I felt comfortable with the first part of the project where we took a picture of our schools. However, as the process continued and I needed to take on the role of a leader I was faced with challenges that sometimes made me feel uncomfortable. It is by taking risks and persevering that I have learned that change is possible. Change is possible on a large scale and such changes usually bring with them changes on a smaller more personal scale. As Faruk Jabucar did for the good of his country, I invite all of us to go forward with the hope and belief that together we can change our future, one step at a time.

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