Winning and Re-Winning: Recommendations for Inclusive Education Reform for Students Labelled as Disabled in Alberta's Schools

W. John Williamson, University of Calgary
Chris Gilham, St. Francis Xavier University

Abstract

Alberta Education has been engaged in reviews and reforms of special education, and attempting to describe and move toward more inclusive ways of supporting students with disabilities since 2008. These efforts have, at times, resulted in more progressive and inclusive education policies and, at times, seemed somewhat halting. The obstacle to realizing policies that are more consistently inclusive, the authors believe, has been a continuing tendency toward deficit understandings of disability. In this paper, the authors critique recent inclusive education reform and current policy documents in light of ongoing barriers to inclusion, both in practices in schools and in continuing deficit-based tendencies in some current policy statements and resource manuals. The authors conclude by making a series of recommendations, including a consideration of the activist discipline of Disability Studies in Education, to guide continuing reform efforts along more genuinely inclusive lines.

Keywords: inclusion, education, Alberta, teachers, students, disability, reform

Introduction

We offer this paper to anyone interested in the inclusion of students labelled as having disabilities in Alberta's K-12 school system. In doing so, we recognize that Alberta Education now defines inclusion as a concept and value involving the belonging of all students (Alberta Education, 2016b; 2013b). Supporting resources now also frequently mention students in sexual and gender minorities, First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI) students, English Language Learners, and refugees along with students with disabilities[1] (Alberta Education, 2012; 2013b). We do not mean to sound divisive in only addressing inclusion of students with disabilities, rather we point out that people with disabilities remain one of the largest minority groups in the world (Pearson et al., 2016) and in Alberta's schools (Alberta Education, 2016d). Furthermore, many students

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1We follow Alberta Education's (2015) recommendations here in using people first language to describe people with disabilities. At the same time we mention that scholars such as Titchkosky (2001) and Collier (2012) have pointed out that the increasingly ubiquitous use of this term has done little to reduce attitudes towards or social oppression of people with disabilities and in some ways risks obscuring these issues in bureaucratic politeness. In using people first language, we also acknowledge that these attitudes and forms of oppression are disabling, and a very pernicious aspect of the lived experiences of many people with disabilities.

who experience marginalization have identities characterized by intersectionalities in which disability is one aspect (e.g., a student is diagnosed with a mental disorder and is identified as an "English Language Learning" student) (Alberta Education, 2012). For both of these reasons, we contend that robust dialogue about including students with disabilities remains a crucial aspect of the larger inclusion conversation.

We take the stance of Ferri (2015) and others (Pearson et al., 2016; Hodge, 2016) that inclusion is never fully arrived at, but must constantly be re-won. We take this position because of past and current lived experiences and testimonials from people in the K-12 school system in Alberta that speak to what needs to be won, or re-won (Alberta Education, 2009; Alberta Teachers' Association, 2014). The need for continued critique and revision of school inclusion in Alberta is also suggested by the gap between high school completion rates of students with diagnosed disabilities and the provincial composite rates, particularly when it comes to students with emotional / behavioral disability diagnoses, less than half of whom complete high school in the three years most students require (Alberta Education, 2016a).

We believe that the people involved in inclusive education at every level want K-12 students to flourish in their schools, communities, and homes. Despite these best intentions though, there are ongoing barriers to inclusion at the government level and in Alberta's schools. In this paper we will point to possible ways to see, understand, and begin to remove some of these barriers as an ongoing process of attempting to do what is best for students.

We will begin with two short but powerful vignettes from teachers and a statement from a school administrator. These vignettes personalize and enliven Albertan Teachers' concerns with inclusion as it stands (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2015) while also revealing barriers we describe as concealed or taken for granted. We will then turn to the recent past to juxtapose these lived realities with the troubling and inconsistent history of Alberta Education's work on inclusion. Following this, we will look at the government's position on inclusion now, which seems to outline a more inclusive system and yet undercuts it, concomitantly. Finally, and most importantly, we will make recommendations that hold the potential to strengthen the better parts of Alberta Education's attempts to support inclusion while jettisoning those parts that cling to a model of understanding human differences as deficits that occur primarily in the minds and bodies of individuals (Danforth & Gabel, 2006).

Lived Experiences

Despite seven years of attempted inclusive education reform in Alberta, many of Alberta's teachers feel unsupported in their efforts to offer inclusive classroom instruction. A University of Alberta survey of 1420 teachers and administrators commissioned by the Alberta Teachers' Association (2015) found that 2014's teachers felt less supported on multiple indicators of school inclusion they were asked about compared to the group of teachers that was surveyed about the same indicators in 2007 (pp. 16-17).

This finding is borne out and poignantly explicated in these statements from one of the author's (Gilham & Tompkins, 2015) interviews with two first year teachers working in specialized classrooms located in community schools in Alberta:

> my kids are supposed to go out and do inclusion in options and phys ed but with the time, where they are scheduled, we do not follow the schedule like the rest of the school does, we have our own timetable but when they can go in is when my staff's breaks are so either I do not get a break and I go the entire day but I was just exhausted at the end of it or the kids don't get it.

> [Our class] does not get put on the list for any of the assemblies or anything. It works nicely, I have two classrooms and one of the staff bathrooms got changed to my boy's bathroom

so we got that whole little back end of the hallway which is nice but we are in the back end of the school by the basement so physically we are isolated… It is probably a good spot because we can have the two classrooms and a bathroom and I am sure it is only one of the spots that fit but it is one of those things where we are off by our self (sic) and we do our own things all the time so the rest of the school gets modifying days and my boys do 9 to 3 everyday regardless if it is modified or not, everyone else is gone and my kids are still there. The kids eat in the cafeteria, we have our own corner and occasionally other teachers will come by but we never have students come by. We are visible, we are not included but we are visible.

The first vignette describes the teacher of a specialized program being the only staff member with any responsibility for the quasi-inclusion of her students in a physical education program. The second describes the nearly perpetual exclusion of the students in the specialized program, even when they are eating lunch in the same space as other students. The statement made by the second teacher about her class being reasonably well-resourced within their segregated spaces, or the fact that the students from the specialized program were, in both cases, *permitted* the use of common school facilities like the gymnasium and the cafeteria does little to mitigate how starkly these vignettes contrast with the stated mission of inclusive education in Alberta (Alberta Education, 2016b). Alberta Education's (2017a) recent statement promises to "embrace learner difference", create "equal opportunities for all learners" and ensure that educators in institutions take collective responsibility for "all learners" (para. 2). Lest these forms of segregation seem as natural practices regarding students with disabilities in specialized programs, in an interview with one of the authors, in a prior piece of research, a school administrator interrupted this common sense logic of exclusion by noting,

A young man with an intellectual disability, if he was of age, could walk into [a] bar and be served, but as soon as he walked into a school he would be placed elsewhere than with the other students. It's an artificial environment, and that's a complete disservice to anyone in the system. (Williamson, 2016b, p. 43)

As practitioners and inclusion scholars, we have no ideological objections to the use of flexible and dynamic groupings of students, including some use of specialized settings within a larger practice of inclusion when it is truly in the best interest of the student and organized in full collaboration with the student and primary caregiver. We recognize that the inclusion conversation about place is more complex than a debate between arbitrary binaries of specialized and congregated educational spaces. However, the continuing and unquestioned use of segregated classrooms for some students with disabilities within many schools – as these three statements seem to describe – is emblematic of the failures on the part of Alberta Education, many schools, and many educators, to acknowledge and begin to address the many barriers to inclusion that, as scholars and critics have pointed out, continue to haunt the system (Gilham, 2012; 2014; Naqvi & Jardine, 2008; Williamson, 2016a; Williamson & Paul, 2012).

We turn now to describing recent attempts at inclusion reform in the province to contextualize the present systemic barriers to inclusion. While these attempts at reform have resulted in the articulation of a more inclusive vision for Alberta's schools, they have also been characterized by ambiguity, inconsistency, and interruption.

Recent History

During the *Setting the Direction* consultation and reform initiative (2008 – 2010), Alberta Education commissioned a literature review by Mackenzie (2009). Mackenzie cited inclusion scholar Philpott's description of a significant change in society's views of special education. She cited his explanation of society's journey from segregation, to integration, to inclusion and his assertion that there has been a global paradigm shift in methods used to address diverse

learning needs away from a "deficit/medical model toward a philosophy of inclusion" (p. 1). She then highlighted his contention that this shift is very important for Canada given its growing cultural and linguistic diversity. This content, as well as Mackenzie's incorporating the work of this scholar, who has written frequently about the need for systems across Canada to reform to inclusively address student diversity, (eg. Philpott, 2002; 2007) speaks to the ambition and sincerity of the reform effort at the time. The literature review then went on to cite a chart by the same scholar, which contrasted the deficit-based paradigms of special education (founded on the medical model, based on segregation of labelled students, reliant on experts) with paradigms of inclusion (treating the caregiver/student as expert and focused on belonging, collaboration, and capacity-building by design) (Philpott, 2007 in Mackenzie, 2009, p. 1). The tone of this literature review, like much of the rest of the literature produced during the *Setting the Direction* initiative, remained critical and progressive throughout. In addition to Philpott, several important voices in contemporary inclusion scholarship including Armstrong, Jahnukainen, Slee, and Winzer, were cited in the literature review (Mackenzie, 2009, pp. 33-35), and the systemic changes recommended in the literature review and subsequent *Setting the Direction* publications, which the government formally accepted, were "broad and deep" (Gilham & Williamson, 2013, p. 5).

In addition to researching current trends in inclusive education, *Setting the Direction* involved a multifaceted consultation with over 6000 stakeholders in special education, including students, parents, educators, administrators, and scholars from both medical and social justice-oriented fields. We think it would be fair to say that the *Setting the Direction* initiative brought hope to the many stakeholders who were growing increasingly frustrated with the divisive, deficit-based special education system it sought to reform (Alberta Education, 2009). This was how we, as practitioners in the field as well as scholars of inclusive education, experienced it.

Following the government's acceptance of all of the recommendations of the *Setting the Direction* consultation process, the ministry initiated *Action on Inclusion* to strategize the actual reforms the recommendations would involve. In an invited letter to the Alberta Teachers' Association *Leadership Update,* representatives from *Action on Inclusion* promised "a complete cultural transformation [away] from the special education and [toward] an emphasis on achieving outcomes for all students", further noting that "a two-stream education system—one that physically and socially isolates a certain population of students—is neither effective nor just" (Alberta Education, 2011a, p. 1). In other documents, *Action on Inclusion* promisingly followed up the values articulated in *Setting the Direction* by defining inclusion, among other attributes such as shared responsibility and acceptance, as something that could occur only in "one inclusive education system where each student is successful [and in which] all students have equitable opportunities to be included in *typical* [emphasis added] learning environments and programs of choice" (Alberta Education, 2010b, p. 1). These words seemed to hint at a questioning of the preferred use of specialized settings where students are slotted or placed by disability status and / or IQ score, streamed course offerings, and other historical practices that "speak of marginalization and segregation" (Gilham & Williamson, 2013, p. 6). Alberta Education espouses differentiated instruction (Alberta Education, 2010a), as do we. Hence, the use of "typical" in this sense could be read as a progressive move away from segregated settings to inclusive classrooms where differentiated instruction is the pedagogical standard.

Funding Reform

Despite all the content within the *Setting the Direction / Action on Inclusion* documents, there was only one significant structural change to inclusive education policy in Alberta. Whereas the prior model of funding specialized services for students with severe disabilities attached these funds directly to individual students (school boards could still decide how this money was distributed, however), with the institutional interpretation of the level of severity of student dis-

ability determining the exact per-student funding, the new model is no longer based primarily on individual diagnoses. An equal amount of inclusive education funding is attached to every K-12 student attending a public school in Alberta, regardless of whether or not they are labelled as disabled (Alberta Education, 2013b). Differences in levels of need are determined and funded not on the basis of individual students with disabilities but on collective demographic factors related to perceived vulnerabilities and needs in communities (Alberta Education, 2013a). We cautiously note that one interpretation of the potential consequences of this change is that it may support more flexible understandings of student diversity and less planning under the rubric of the individual disability deficit. Jaqueline Skytt, then the Alberta Teachers' Association executive secretary and the ATA representative on the *Setting the Direction* stakeholder working group, described the change as "a good-news budget story" for these reasons (Svidal, 2012, para. 3).

Termination of Project

Other than the change to the funding model, *Setting the Direction / Action on Inclusion* has seemed to occasion no other concrete changes in inclusive education policy (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2014; Gilham & Williamson, 2013). *Action on Inclusion,* the initiative tasked with implementing the *Setting the Direction* reform recommendations, was arbitrarily and abruptly terminated in 2012, the website chronicling the "Action*"* as it progressed was replaced with the following terse message, "Action on Inclusion no longer exists as a project or initiative, but the work continues as part of our collective practice to build an inclusive education system in Alberta" (Alberta Education, 2012, para. 4 in Gilham & Williamson, 2013). The fact that the only significant structural change the ambitious reform initiative realized was a financial one invites an additional interpretation of its intent and consequences.

The change in the funding model suggests the promise of reduced stigma and more flexible provision of services. However, a less generous and entirely possible interpretation of the change in the funding model is to see Alberta Education's dropping of per pupil funding based on disability as cost saving measures of the government of that time. The trend toward increased societal levels of disability diagnoses, particularly in diagnoses under the rubric of the American Psychological Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (2013) is well documented (Rosenberg, 2013; Timimi & McCabe, 2016; Winzer, 2011). Specifically, a few years before the initiation of the reform process, between 1998 and 2003, Alberta's schools saw a 64% increase in students identified with severe disabilities and a 140% increase in students with mild to moderate disabilities compared to an increase of only 5% in general student population growth (Winzer, 2011, p. 51). This rapid increase in students diagnosed as special or exceptional combined with per pupil funding formulas has even been described as reflecting a "bounty phenomenon" (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011, p. 277) whereby funding becomes a primary site-based institutional motivation in diagnosing students. It is not difficult to see how this might have suggested the risks of spiraling costs, deemed as potentially unmanageable, for Alberta Education.

True to the trend of increasing rates of diagnoses, in a five year period overlapping the discussion of and eventual change in the funding formula (2010-2015), coding for severe emotional – behavioral needs in the province has increased 52%, coding for mild-moderate emotional behavioral needs has increased 155%, coding students for identified mild-moderate physical or medical needs has increased 82%, and coding students for severe physical or medical needs has increased 14% (Edmonton Catholic Schools, 2014). Since 2012, the overall inclusive education budget increased as well for two years but more modestly: 2% in 2013-2014 and then 2% again in 2014-2015 (Alberta School Council Association, 2014). The next budget then involved a proposed cut of 1.9% which was unrealized because of a change in government (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2016). Due to the differences in funding philosophy, a straightforward numerical comparison between what the funding would have been under the two models would not be

very meaningful. However, under the new formula it seems fair to suggest that optically impressive increases can be declared without as strong a reference to actual system needs based on increased amounts of diverse learners. Additionally, under the new funding system reductions of the budget such as the one that nearly happened in 2014-2015 do not evoke the impact on specific groups of diverse learners as strongly.

While inclusive education is now funded more collectively, documents such as Individual Program Plans (IPPs) for all students with disabilities (Alberta Education, 2004a) continue to require per student administration. Therefore, within the actual levels of funding, the disconnect between funding based on collective inclusion and programming that is frequently based on individual's diagnosed deficits (Towle, 2015) creates the ongoing potential for impressions of scarcity. This is because, with the pervasiveness of deficit thinking, many educators continue to view inclusion as primarily special education or exceptional needs vis a vis supporting students who appear to them as having the highest needs. As shown, under the old model a significant amount of funding usually would have been granted specifically and tangibly towards supporting these students and their teachers. Whether the new model has led to services for students with severe disabilities being reduced or just administered in ways more difficult to track to specific students, it is not difficult to see how the disconnect between funding for broad inclusion and programming based on medicalized individual deficits could easily create the perception among many teachers that they have been abandoned in the inclusion project.

Moving into the present, *Action on Inclusion* has since been replaced on the Alberta Education (2016b) website with an extensive set of recent writings about inclusive education, statements of policy, values, and links to resources. This work sometimes seems promising but it suffers from a decidedly confused overall direction. We now offer our interpretation and review of Alberta Education's currently stated position on and supports for inclusion.

Alberta Education's Inclusion, Now

Alberta Education's (2016b) most recent public statements and supports for Inclusion begin directly, here, from their website:

> What is Inclusion? Inclusion is not just about learners with special needs. It is an attitude and approach that embraces diversity and learner differences and promotes equal opportunities for all learners in Alberta. Alberta's education system is built on a values-based approach to accepting responsibility for all children and students. (para. 1)

We can see in this definition that the concept of inclusion has, rightfully, begun to emphasize consideration of the needs of all students. Despite the broad definition, however, the phrase "special needs" appears very early in the definition. Thus, the very mention of a still-in-use but highly traditional and contested educational label most often related to students who have been seen as having special needs that require "special education," "special activities," and, often, "special environments" (Snow, 2002, p. 1) may not encourage a very expansive definition of the possibilities of inclusion for the only group of students the definition actually singles out. Can this definition support the consideration of possibilities for freer and more inclusive spaces and practices for the teachers and students described in our anecdotes, or will the many students with disabilities that the system, as suggested by its completion statistics, continue to fail?

Alberta Education's (2016b) website goes on to elaborate on this definition of inclusion by mentioning six key principles of inclusive education including:

1. Anticipate, value and support diversity and learner differences
2. High expectations for all
3. Understand learners' strengths and needs
4. Reduce barriers within learning
5. Capacity building [and]

6. Shared responsibility

The fourth link on the first of Alberta Education's inclusion pages elaborates further on the definition and principles of inclusion with a document describing *Indicators of Inclusive Schools* (2013b), modelled after the widely used and respected work of inclusion scholars Booth and Ainscow (2011) and incorporating research from Canadian inclusion scholars such as Dolmage, Young, Strickland, and Specht (2009). A sampling of these key indicators is suggestive of how they support the definition and principles' statements: "Staff, students and parents share a commitment to creating inclusive learning experiences for all students", "Diversity is valued as an enriching aspect of the school environment", "All school staff take responsibility for success of all students in the school", "All decisions are made in the best interests of students", and "School staff identify and work toward reducing barriers to participation and learning" (Alberta Education, 2013b, p. 8). Reading these two documents, the principles and the key indicators, we see language (e.g., high expectations, reducing barriers, enriching, interconnected) that, unlike the somewhat problematic initial definition of inclusion, clearly challenges marginalizing thought and practice. The detailed indicators of inclusive schools particularly may begin to theoretically "re-win" some of the progressiveness of *Setting the Direction*.

Unfortunately, despite the promising talk in these indicators, the message Alberta Education is sending is less certain. The momentum in realizing any of the changes the *Key Indicators* imply is interrupted almost immediately by the many exclusionary statements Alberta Education is simultaneously disseminating. Perhaps the introductory definition of inclusion permits these two parallel streams. For example, the page that immediately follows the definition and six principals of inclusive education is not the promising *Indicators* (Alberta Education, 2013b) which are linked later in the document, but a further page of definitions that attempt a problematic clarification of what inclusion looks like. This clarification is achieved by demarking various forms of inclusive learning environments including: Instruction and support in a grade-level classroom with same-aged peers; Individualized instruction in smaller group settings; A specialized classroom or setting; and One-on-one instruction (Alberta Education, 2017b, para. 3). As mentioned, as practitioners and inclusion scholars we have no particular objections to the use of flexible and dynamic groupings. Scholars including Hobgood and Ormsby (2010) have discussed how to group students to meet their needs under a more inclusive and strength-based rubric. If grouping is strongly linked, however, with the unproblematized understandings of special needs mentioned in the overall definition of inclusion, we worry that it may work as a tacit invitation to maintain exclusionary class placements (we suggest an extreme form of grouping) based on disability diagnosis and / or IQ scores. Remarking on the ambiguity in Alberta Education's statements on inclusion, Towle (2015) wrote "the potentially segregating interpretation has not been challenged by the Ministry of Education, which means that, in practice, segregation is in place" (p. 37).

Codes

Despite no longer funding on the basis of individual disabilities, the Alberta Education website continues to frequently group students by disability-based special education codes, for the sake of demographic tracking, to publish profiles of the shared learning needs these codes try to describe, and to help disseminate best practice information about supporting these students (Alberta Education, 2016c, p. 1). The termination of the coding system which often doubly stigmatizes students, first by specific disability and then by institutional codes designed to group similar disabilities, was a key recommendation of *Setting the Direction* (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 18). Yet, the coding system remains the overarching bureaucratic system of organizing institutional practices, including Individualized Program Plans for supporting students with disabilities. Codes also frequently form the rubric that determines specialized services for students

including specialized programs such as those for students with disability diagnoses related to behavior/emotions, intellect, or learning disorders (Alberta Education, 2016c).

In addition to facilitating segregation, codes can, in their easy use as everyday ways of talking about students, directly hinder inclusion. The aforementioned recommendation to terminate the coding system was no doubt informed by how stakeholders, particularly parents of students with diagnosed disabilities, frequently raised the concern during the *Setting the Direction* consultations that codes stigmatize students (Alberta Education, 2009). As a coordinating teacher of inclusive education and a consultant regularly visiting schools, we have often heard the derisive reference to students' codes in team meetings and even more so in staffroom conversations. Students were and are often reduced to their codes. Moreover, the reduction of the broad range of diagnosable disabilities which describe very diverse ways of being in the world (a claim that both clinical and activist discourses would likely agree on) to a handful of clumped codes potentially dulls the degree of precision with which educators might be encouraged to learn about disabilities. In this regard, though this is obviously in breach of systemic guidelines (Alberta Education, 2004a) we have sometimes seen Individual Program Plans (IPPs) provide the number of a student's code but fail to provide the diagnostic information that led to the code. In a particularly egregious example, Alberta Education's Severe Medical Disability Code 44 could refer to autism or leukemia (Alberta Education, 2016c) and is bereft of useful content for educators unless accompanied by actual diagnostic information. Finally, though the use of "codes" functions as currency in schools, we have often seen colleagues, students, and parents wince at the very mention of the word "disability" even though, unlike codes this word at least better captures the range of voices on disability issues including both clinical and activist, rights-based discourses. Coding also potentially undermines activist connections between communities of students with disabilities and their families as disability-rights communities do not speak in Alberta Education's codes (Williamson, 2012), but often gather around critical and inclusive interpretations of diagnostic labels. Conceived of as a method for organizing the sorting, tracking, and resourcing of disability, with the changes in the funding system, codes' only continuing influence are as euphemisms that blunt communication while doing little to inhibit stereotypes. While we are a little more optimistic than this philosopher on the subject of "truth", the original target of his analogy, we feel Nietzsche's (1873) words are well applied to Alberta's special education codes, they are "coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins" (para. 7).

Despite the two important statements supporting progressive visions of inclusion, and notwithstanding some more progressive texts such as *Making A Difference* (Alberta Education, 2010b), most of Alberta Education's recently produced best-practice resources for supporting students with disabilities primarily incorporate medicalized, deficit discourses (see Alberta Education, 2011b). Moreover, Alberta Education (2002; 2004b) continues to reference many resources from the early 2000s, when discourses of inclusion were even less prevalent to support students with diagnoses such as Fetal Spectrum Disorder or Learning Disabled.

Inclusion is a concept with critical and progressive roots: it arose out of a community of activists and scholars who decried as unjust policies of segregating students with disabilities and who sought alternatives to such practices (Gabel, 2005). The Alberta Education model as it stands often demonstrates some awareness of the progressive theory of these activists. The prevalent use of deficit-based language simultaneous to these statements, however, seems to suggest that within a working definition of inclusion both deficit-based special education and progressive visions of inclusion based on acceptance, belonging, equity, and honoring diversity as a social good remain equally viable alternatives (Towle, 2015). As Florian (2014) noted, "special education cannot pass itself off as an unproblematic ally or as a branch member in the inclusive education fraternity" (p. 14).

Thus far we have identified potential failures of inclusion as revealed in school sites, through the concerns of Alberta's educators, and in some of the current deficit-based discourse Alberta Education continues to disseminate which undermines its progressive and evolving vision. As inclusion reform continues in Alberta then, what might be done to address these concerns? How might inclusion reform act to address both these theoretical and concretely manifested failures to better realize Alberta Education's progressive vision?

Five Action Recommendations

#1. Embracing Disability Studies In Education

Our first recommendation involves not a structural reform but the consideration of an as yet un-acknowledged source of wisdom that could frequently offer crucial guidance during the complex and difficult conversations, decisions, and planning involved in inclusion reform. We recommend the wisdom of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) (Gabel, 2005) in all new inclusive education work including any reviews of inclusive education policy in the province, in the creation of new materials about inclusive education for teachers, as a resource Alberta Education recommends in all teacher-education and graduate programs involving inclusion, and in on-going professional development about inclusive education for teachers. Despite the incorporation of the work of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) scholars in the literature review for *Setting the Direction* (Mackenzie, 2009) and *Indicators* (Alberta Education, 2013b) and the reference in *Setting the Direction* documents to a shift away from the medical model of understanding disability (Alberta Education, 2009), a full acknowledgement of this activist discipline has yet to occur anywhere in Alberta Education's various statements on inclusion.

By way of a working definition, when they initiated their collective research and advocacy efforts, The Disability Studies in Education special interest group, which is part of the American Educational Research Association, described their interests as follows:

> Disability studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field of scholarship that critically examines issues related to the dynamic interplays between disability and various aspects of culture and society… When specifically applied to educational issues, it promotes the importance of infusing analyses and interpretations of disability throughout all forms of educational research, teacher education, and graduate studies in education. (in Gabel, 2005, p. 1)

Disability Studies in Education has guided much of our analysis of the current state of inclusion in this paper. A crucial example of this involves a discussion on "values" initiated by Alberta Education's (2016b) definition of inclusion as a "values-based approach." Disability Studies reminds us to look beyond this seemingly objective statement and ask, whose values are we embracing within our understanding of this definition? If the medicalized, deficit-based values inherent to special or exceptional education are not openly questioned, and an alternative framework for thinking about human differences is not provided, a definition like this can simply reinforce our own personal values about inclusion. Without this values examination, even apparently highly inclusive statements such as "equal opportunities" and "responsibility for all students" stand the risk of being undermined by our own concealed or taken for granted deficit framings of human difference. There is extant work exposing the values inherent to special education, and how those values operate tacitly, at concealed or taken for granted levels of awareness. As a specialist and a former consultant working in many schools and across a range of special education settings, we agree with Ferri (2015) in her claim that:

> …the most important barrier to realizing the promise of full inclusion has less to do with imperfect laws or even errors of implementation, but the failure of these laws to disrupt the medical or deficit models of disability that remain embedded within current educational

reforms. In other words, the current models of inclusion or integration have not shifted deficit-based views of disability; they have failed to consider disability as a socially produced and equally valid way of being in the world. (p. 12)

"Socially-produced" is the contention that people with disabilities are disabled most severely by exclusion from full participation in society (Ferri, 2015), and is a very important concept here. Alberta Education seems unwilling to directly acknowledge the social model of disability and how important it has been in the history of disability rights activism. Disability Studies in Education when taken seriously, can transform the dominant yet tacit values that, if made explicit, say something akin to, "Yes. We must take responsibility for all students, and some students are valued more than others." Again, it is not that people actually say this, but practices reveal this, as demonstrated in the quotes from the first year teachers. This "values work" – not just the prima facie statement of values – is the most grave omission in the system of inclusive education as Alberta Education has portrayed it. Reflecting on the values work that still needs to happen, Towle (2015) wrote, "Residential institutions have been closed, so let's not keep students with disabilities separate and segregated any longer" (p. 31). We would emphasize that this statement invites not only the consideration of more generous forms of programming than the unreflexive use of segregated spaces under a deficit rubric, but a consideration of alternatives to all the ways that deficit thinking currently excludes and devalues students.

The perspective of Disability Studies in Education is especially crucial because, as mentioned, most of Alberta Education's resources to support inclusion of students with disabilities remain highly informed by the medical model of the individual deficit and, while the knowledge set this way of thinking generates has its uses, it is crucial to incorporate other discourses to balance and challenge this model. Abrams (2014), a disability studies scholar who identifies himself as having muscular dystrophy wrote, "I, like many other disabled persons, benefit from medical knowledge and intervention. We do not need to get rid of biomedicine. We need a free relation to it" (p. 142).

Similarly, while it seems a valid statement to suggest a practitioner with a duty of care should be fairly well versed in the diagnoses students might have from a medicalized perspective, it is equally important to note that medicalized discourse in its norm-based analysis of impairment and detailed descriptors of symptomology is ill-equipped to speak to issues of equity and inclusion. Its very function is to document difference, framed as deficit, for the purpose of study, remediation, treatment, cure, or accommodation (Mackenzie, 2009).

Educators interested in reducing the exclusionary barriers students with disabilities experience would do well to consider research that specifically seeks to reveal these barriers (e.g., Ferri, 2015; Hodge, 2016; Towle, 2015). Without the inclusion of DSE research, and with the overreliance on medicalized discourse, the inclusion conversation seems at risk of constantly circling back to the deficit understandings it wants to transcend. This recommendation has been taken to heart in Atlantic Canada, where pre-service teachers learn about both the biomedical and DSE paradigms (Gilham & Tompkins, 2016).

As scholar-practitioners, we have taught Disability Studies to graduate, undergraduate, and even grades 10 – 12 secondary classes and found that this perspective greatly increased student's appreciation of diversity, empathy for others facing situations of marginalization, awareness of institutional barriers, and interest in and ability to work and live more inclusively. This has been borne out in Connor's (2014) recommendations to incorporate disability studies in preservice teacher training and in Pearson et al.'s (2016) research with Doctoral Education students that suggested the "alternative ways of thinking" (para. 1) disability studies offers practitioners who engage in it hold the potential to improve their capacity to impact "educational practices and institutions" on a macro and micro level (Pearson et. al, 2016, para. 1).

#2. Owning Up to Ableism

Ainscow and Miles (2008) define inclusion not only as working to increase the participation of all students in shared spaces in public education, but also as "reducing exclusion" (p. 20). Olmstead (2013), one of the authors of the Alberta Teachers' Association publication *Rethinking Equity: Creating A Great School For All,* writes that he "loves" this definition because in addition to containing the sorts of all student statements of principles we have studied so far, the direct acknowledgement that reducing exclusion needs to remain a system goal "keep[s] us honest [in acknowledging] that many of our practices do just that – exclude" (p. 72). Along these lines, if not in their initial definition of inclusion, in the *Indicators* (Alberta Education, 2013b) document Alberta Education at least provides links to some easily accessible resources that offer an honest account of how students in other often marginalized groups, such as FNMI students and students in gender and sexual minorities continue to experience exclusion. When it comes to disability, however, other than an information sheet on Person First Language, a bureaucratic form of polite address that according to some disability scholars does little to address real systemic barriers people with disabilities face (Collier, 2012; Titchkosky, 2001), there is little to actually address ableism. There is little mention in *Key Indicators,* or any Alberta Education document on disability, of present or historical discrimination against people with disabilities. Ableism, the name that activists and disability studies scholars give to this form of prejudice, is an important concept that entails all of the forms of exclusion based on disability that people with disabilities experience or have experienced including for example, eugenics, segregation, inequitable treatment in schools, workplaces, and medical / psychological institutions, arbitrary barriers, exclusionary legislation, perpetuation of stereotypes, school and career limiting prophesies, bullying, and hate speech (Gilham, 2014). With no content to address ableism in schools as a historical legacy, a present reality, or an issue educators need to challenge, it must be asked if meaningful conversations about inclusion of students with disabilities can truly be had without also discussing what exclusion has looked like and presently looks like.

#3. Re-viewing What's Out There

There is a wealth of available resources that either specifically address the contemporary Albertan context, or that are highly relevant to it, to help guide inclusion reform. With a DSE perspective, we strongly recommend re-examining, synthesizing, and planning based on the crucial claims these sources make. Despite the termination of the larger projects *Setting the Direction* and *Action on Inclusion*, publications continue to reveal many systemic barriers to inclusion and provide principled guidance about how to move forward inclusively. For example, the current *Indicators of Inclusive Schools* (Alberta Education, 2013b) are sound and should be frequently used to continually assess site-based inclusion on school campuses. In addition to Alberta Education's documents, the Alberta Teachers' Association has recently published the *Blue Ribbon Panel on Inclusion* (2014), *The State of Inclusion in Alberta's Schools* (2015), and *Rethinking Equity: Creating a Great School for All* (Murgatroyd & Couture, 2013), all of which offer compelling research and thoughtful discussion of school inclusion. Towle's (2015) *Disability and Inclusion in Canadian Education* offers a concise analysis of where Alberta and all Canada's provinces and territories are with inclusion and would be useful both for the claims it makes about Alberta and to review what is being tried in other provinces. These sources, along with some of the disability studies texts we mentioned earlier, require consultation not only by inclusion leaders at the provincial level, but should be used to develop workshops, both online and face to face, to build school board, administrator, and educator capacity to understand DSE perspectives. Given the administrative decisions that led to the statements in our two initial vignettes, and our own experiences visiting specialized classrooms in schools, this specific professional development is very much needed.

#4. "Nothing About Us, Without Us" and System Accountability

This call to inclusion from the disability rights movement (Connor, 2014) demands making space for the voices of first person lived experience. Alberta Education would learn and grow from a well-funded arm's length advisory body of stakeholders with disabilities. This advisory body would include students, past and present, families / guardians, educators, scholars, and other professionals working towards an inclusive education system. The provincial government would be required to consult this third party advisory body on any planning, policies, or programming related to inclusion. Furthermore, the government would need to provide the advisory body with clear rationales for their decision making related to inclusion. In turn, the advisory body would be required to annually review inclusive education in Alberta and to share their report with the public. Likewise, the advisory body will be driven by the "Nothing About Us, Without Us" (Crowther, 2007) slogan by including in their reports the voices of students in the K-12 education system.

In addition to the vital role this advisory board will play, continual assessment of inclusion efforts remains a key factor in moving forward inclusively. With a planned provincial curriculum overhaul (French, 2016) and, more generally, the complexity of working in a system that is always evolving to try to address pressure points as they emerge and set and reset priorities, it is important that the work of inclusion does not suffer from distraction. The quality and specificity of the *Indicators of Inclusive Schools* (Alberta Education, 2013b) document could be very helpful. We feel this document could be embraced as a rubric by which schools could be asked to continually assess where they believe they are with inclusion. Specifically, we think *Key Indicators* could be used to guide a primary report on the state of inclusion at that site to be required of every school in Alberta, every three years. Furthermore, how this work impacts high school completion rates for those identified as having disabilities needs to be studied. Longitudinal studies of DSE related action research in schools, following the Key Indicators, may show strong correlation between this important values-driven work and student success in school.

#5. Focusing on Learning and Strengths

The system needs to transcend the practice of providing services for students with disabilities via a deficit-based retrofitting of otherwise inaccessible teaching, learning, and assessment practices. During a recent graduate research day at a small university in Atlantic Canada, an educator who identified herself as visually impaired presented on the challenges she and her students have faced in the educational system. At the end of her presentation, one of us asked her for her thoughts on the language of disability versus impairment (Gilham & Williamson, 2013). Re-winning the battle for inclusion, she stated (paraphrasing) firmly and succinctly, "Neither work for me. Let's talk about what I can do, what my students can do. Let's talk about our strengths" (S. Jamieson, personal communication, July 13, 2015).

As we previously argued, the current deficit based coding system conceals strengths behind a logic of abnormality as weakness, reinforces stereotypes, and blurs communication. It is time to follow through on the 2009 recommendation of the *Setting the Direction* consultation to eliminate the deficit based coding system (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 18). How should the support for students with disabilities be tracked in the absence of this system? Under the coding system, the most dominant form of this tracking is the Individualized Program Plan (IPP), the legally mandated documents that describe (notwithstanding that they are sometimes turned in incomplete) every coded student's disabilities, required services, and progress (Alberta Education, 2004a). IPPs tend to be overdetermined, deficit-based documents, perhaps owing to their original derivation from treatment plans common to the medical profession (Dechant, 2006). We have both seen strength-based IPPs but they have been the exception. Once a solid base of understanding has been established around Disability Studies in Education, and accessibility for

everyone begins to become the new "normal", our hope is that the system will realize increasingly seamless, strength-based, and unintrusive documentation and tracking practices, when such practices are needed at all. An example of this hoped-for trend, in current practices in other provinces, that still recognizes the actual need for intense supports and services for students is to be found in systems where IPPs are implemented only after a rigorous program planning process provides evidence that an IPP is needed (curriculum must be modified for the student). A recent review of IPPs in Nova Scotia led to the recommendation to make sure identified strengths in IPPs are directly related to the long term goals or outcomes (NS Department of Education, 2016). There may be hope in the two-fold process of moving to an IPP as a last resort – after extensive adaptations have been implemented and tracked – and once the move to an IPP is made, the IPP is fundamentally a strengths-based plan of action that students can move off of once their long-term goals or outcomes are reached. We would see this step as a means to maintaining high levels of system accountability for students whose needs present as requiring particularly careful assistance, while also moving in an overall direction of offering differentiated instruction and eliminating deficit thinking. We would also suggest that, in the spirit of the ongoing renewal of the inclusion project that all bureaucratic processes regarding disability be under constant revision as our classrooms realize increasingly progressive and seamless levels of school inclusion. As Hodge (2016) pragmatically wrote:

> labels should be kept within locked drawers, only to be removed in necessity, with care and the certainty that this is in the best interests of the child. We may not yet be ready for schools without labels but it is time for schools that recognize and resist their disabling effects. (p. 200)

As the system moves away from supporting students under the rubric of the individualized deficit, accessibility for all students can be found in the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which Alberta Education (2010b) has defined as "An educational approach that aims to increase access to learning for all students by reducing physical, cognitive, intellectual, organizational and other barriers" (p. 10). UDL has been shown to be a way of thinking that promotes flexibility, support, and choice in strength-based ways; Canadian research in UDL shows significant improvements for both students and teachers (Katz, 2013, 2015).

Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to show that there is much to be won and re-won in the ongoing inclusion journey in Alberta. The importance of revealing our values and putting them under a Disability Studies critique cannot be overstated. With the best of intentions, Alberta Education may believe we are doing all we can towards an inclusive system, or even that we are already an advanced inclusive system. As long as we continue to rely on such taken for granted policy and practices that support and reinforce a bifurcation of students into the value-laden, gross categories of normal and abnormal (or exceptional), we are not so. Our analysis and recommendations are action-oriented. We have been doing this work in teacher education (Giham & Tompkins, 2016) and Alberta K-12 classrooms (Williamson & Toth, 2016) successfully. At this crucial time, when inclusion and diversity are becoming one conversation with multiple intersectionalities, we must not let inclusion for those who identify as disabled remain concealed under the current deficit-oriented value system. Humbly, we offer our recommendations to Alberta Education and anyone interested in re-winning the inclusion of, for, and with students in Alberta's K-12 school system.

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