

Inclusion (In)Action Within the Province of Alberta

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While Canada has been seen as a global leader in the push for inclusion and diversity (Inclusion Canada, n.d.), there is still much ground to cover in order to meet the calls to action outlined in international frameworks such as Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD; United Nations, 2006) or towards goals such as 4.5 of the Incheon Declaration (ID; UNESCO, 2016). In this paper, the author's goal is to answer the research question: to what extent are Alberta school divisions implementing inclusive education (IE) practices as defined by article 24 of the CRPD through a document analysis of publicly available resources. Recommendations are provided in the hopes of encouraging further resource development, system and policy improvements, and research in the field of IE.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Inclusion, Thematic Analysis, International Targets

Background

Alberta hosts three main public school systems: the (general) public system, the separate (Catholic) system and the Francophone system. In addition to these, charter schools are also open to all Albertans, and generally focus on a niche area (ex. technology, inclusion, STEM, etc.). Publicly funded educational institutions are expected to provide all Alberta K-12 children with an education, however, some school divisions provide specialty education (religion, language) which allows them to offer programming not offered in general public education. In addition to this, policy documents such as the Alberta Education Act (Alberta Government, 2023b), as well as the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, protect the rights of certain minority groups, requiring students to meet specific conditions to participate in certain educational programs, such as with Francophone schools. This study draws representation from all of the aforementioned public systems.

Review of Incheon Declaration Targets

Concerning the Incheon Declaration (ID), the key sustainable development goal four targets that this paper is interested in are presented in Figure 1:

Goal	Description
4.5	"By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations."
4.6	"By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy."
4.a	"Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all."
4.c	"By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States"

Figure 1: Incheon Declaration Goals
Source: UNESCO, 2016, pp. 20-21

The four targets above represent aims that all nations need to work towards. With respect to target 4.5, there is much work to do in Canada to create an equal-opportunity education system that supports all students regardless of race, ability and socioeconomic status. Target 4.6 is also a concern: 13.8% of Canadian Grade 10 students do not have the basic literacy skills needed to function in society (Canadian Children’s Literacy Foundation, n.d.). Early intervention is the effective response in supporting students’ development of literacy skills, however, many schools in Canada struggle to adequately train and staff teachers (see Target 4.c). Finally, one of the more significant, but lesser discussed issues is that of infrastructure (Target 4.a). Much of our existing, aging, infrastructure is not accessible, equitable or inclusive, with limited functionality for those with physical disabilities. While there is still much work to be done to meet these targets, this study sheds some light on current IE practices.

Methods

At the onset of this research, the goal was to collect qualitative data on publicly available resources such as division websites, school board administrative procedures, and division documentation. As the research progressed, this study has expanded to include a quantitative component which will be explained below in phase two.

Phase One

The researcher collected publicly available documents from seven Alberta school divisions. Divisions and schools selected for review span Alberta’s broad educational landscape and include selections from public, separate, Francophone and charter school systems. Selections also reflect Alberta’s urban-rural populations. General Alberta demographics that informed these choices are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: General Alberta Demographics

<i>Alberta Population (as of July 1, 2023)¹</i>	4,695,290
<i>Urban Population (as per Municipal [Census Subdivision] Population Estimates: 2016 - 2023)¹</i>	71.89%
<i>Rural Population (as above)¹</i>	21.11%
<i>Total Public School Authorities in Alberta (does not include Early Childhood Schools [ECS], First Nations Federal Schools, Provincial or Private Schools)²</i>	85
<i>Total Public Schools in Alberta (as above)²</i>	2081

Sources: ¹Alberta Government, 2024a, ²Alberta Education. (n.d.-b)

Based on these demographics, the school divisions analyzed in this project include those documented in Table 2:

Table 2: Selected Divisions and Respective Demographics

<i>Order of Review</i>	<i>Division Name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Number of schools¹</i>	<i>Percentage of AB Schools²</i>	<i>Demographic Notes³</i>
1	Edmonton Public School Division (EPSD)	Central/ North Alberta	213	10.24%	Urban
2	Calgary Public School Division (CPSD)	Central/ South Alberta	250	12.01%	Urban
3	Palliser Regional School Division (PRSD)	Southern Alberta/ Calgary	53	2.55%	Rural, some Urban (Calgary Schools)
4	The East Central Alberta Catholic Separate School Division (ECAC)	Central/ East Alberta	11	0.53%	Rural
5	Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence (CAPE) Institute ⁴	Southeast Alberta	1	0.048%	Urban
6	The Northwest Francophone Education Region (NWFER)	Northern Alberta	3	0.14%	Rural
7	Red Deer Catholic School Division (RDCSD)	Central Alberta	23	1.11%	Urban

*Sources:*¹Alberta Education (n.d.-b), ²Based on the total of 2081 public schools, as calculated in Table 1 (Alberta Education, n.d.-b), ³Divisions are listed as urban based on those areas noted as a city (CY) (Alberta Government, 2024a), ⁴CAPE is an Alberta charter school, one of 36 in the province

Data collection began in October 2023 with the intent to thematically review multiple documents from each school division. As per Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework, the process began with familiarization by iteratively scrolling through division websites to find and identify philosophies, policies and documents about IE, with a focus on locating and identifying content related to: “inclusive education,” “special education,” “wellness,” “mental health,” and “programs of study.” Not surprisingly, there was a great degree of variation in terms of content and terminology. Regardless, the familiarization process provided the foundation for codes and themes outlined in the methods. These preliminary findings were shared during the 2024 Canadian Society for the Study of Education conference and are outlined in the findings section below.

Following the conference, the researcher narrowed the focus of phase one to the coding and analysis of the Annual Education Results Report (AERR) for each division. The AERR was chosen as the focus due to it being a mandated Alberta Education (AE) document that requires divisions to report on the category “Learning Supports,” including “access to supports and services” (Alberta Government, 2022, p, 138). In addition to being made publicly available, AERRs are also a piece of stakeholder accountability, so it would follow that these documents should paint a fulsome picture of a school division.

Coding. Coding for phase one of the study was conducted using the Atlas.ti web software, version 8.3.0. The researcher approached the AERR documents with the research question in hand, therefore, as will be discussed in the limitations, only select information was of interest for this study. Coding began with the key search terms (and their derivatives): “inclusive,” “inclusive education,” “diverse,” “mental health,” “special education” and “specialized.” These terms were chosen due to their relatedness to IE, and the number of codes used by the researcher expanded

quickly at first, with some minor revisions in subsequent reviews of the AERRs. The initial key search terms were informed by both the research question and the researcher’s familiarization process noted above. Codes continued to be amended throughout the review process, but most codes were compiled after the fourth AERR was reviewed. See Figure 2 for a timeline of coding iterations.

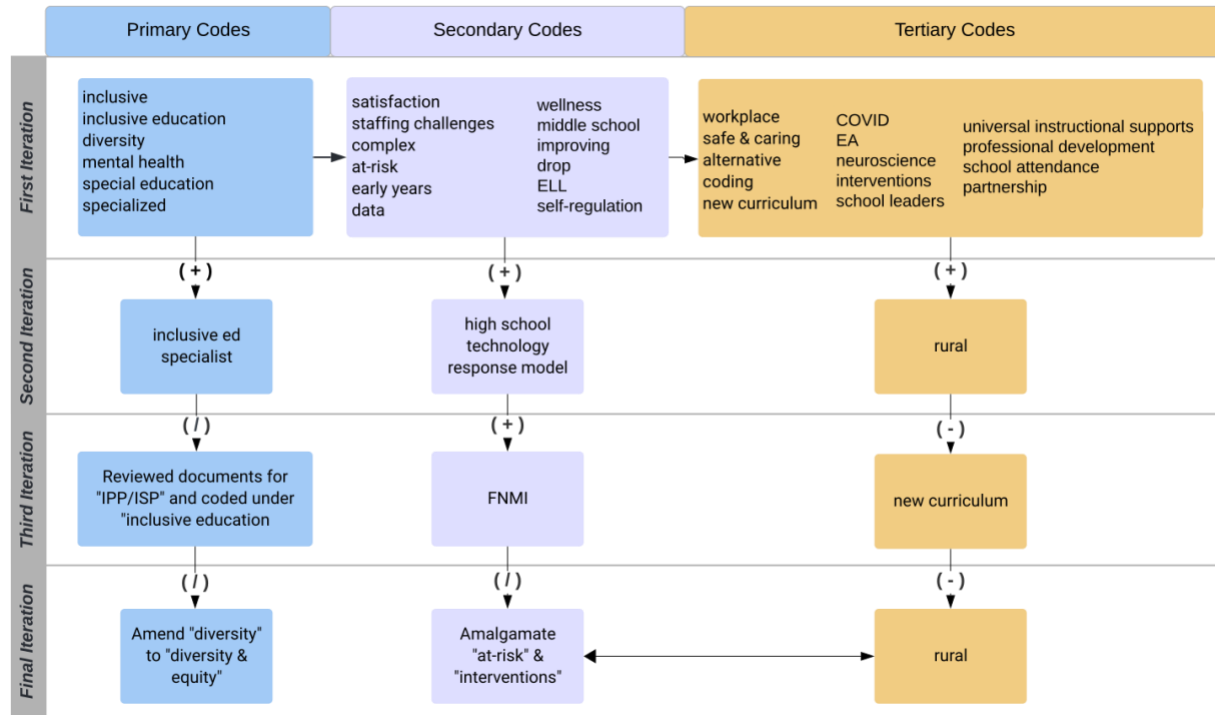


Figure 2: Coding Evolution

Themes. As per Braun and Clarke’s model (2006), the process was iterative. The grouping of themes started during the coding process, with utilitarian code groups being created initially, which included: primary, secondary, policy & administration, programming, and health & wellness, with the primary group representing most of the key search terms. Following this, using Atlas.ti, the researcher refined codes and explored themes using the software’s code management and visualization options; this led to the final code evolution pictured above in Figure 2, and allowed for further familiarization.

Using these initial utilitarian code groups, and the code visualization tools, four themes emerged: inclusive education, wellness, programs & policies (PP) and workplace. Codes were initially organized as per Figure 3, however, many secondary codes were orphaned and set aside in the attempt to organize them in this model.

Inclusive Education	Wellness	Programs & Policy	Workplace
coding complex inclusive education special education specialized learning supports specialized programs	mental health safe & caring schools self-regulation wellness	ELL diversity & equity FNMI inclusive universal supports	EA inclusive education specialist professional development school leaders staffing challenges
Orphans alternative, academic interventions, COVID, data, drop, early years, high school, improving, middle school, neuroscience, partnership, response model, resources, satisfaction, school attendance, technology			

Figure 3: Hierarchical Theme Model

Themes were refined over time. For example, while it was expected that an IE theme would emerge, the coding method allowed for the data to direct the process. For example, soon into the first AERR, it became apparent that the concepts of “inclusive education” and “inclusion” needed to be separated as there were many generic references to inclusion that were unrelated to classroom practices. This separation contributed to the creation of the “programs & policy” theme, as it became clear through the review of the documentation that some of the reported information was largely to meet the requirements outlined by AE.

After cycling through phases three through five of Braun and Clarke’s model (2006), it quickly became clear that most codes did not belong to only one theme, and once a four-set diagram was used, many of the relevant orphaned codes also found a home. Consequently, a second thematic diagram was created to represent the intertwined nature of the themes generated from the AERR documents (Figure 4). The resulting diagrams and the related findings are discussed further in the findings section.

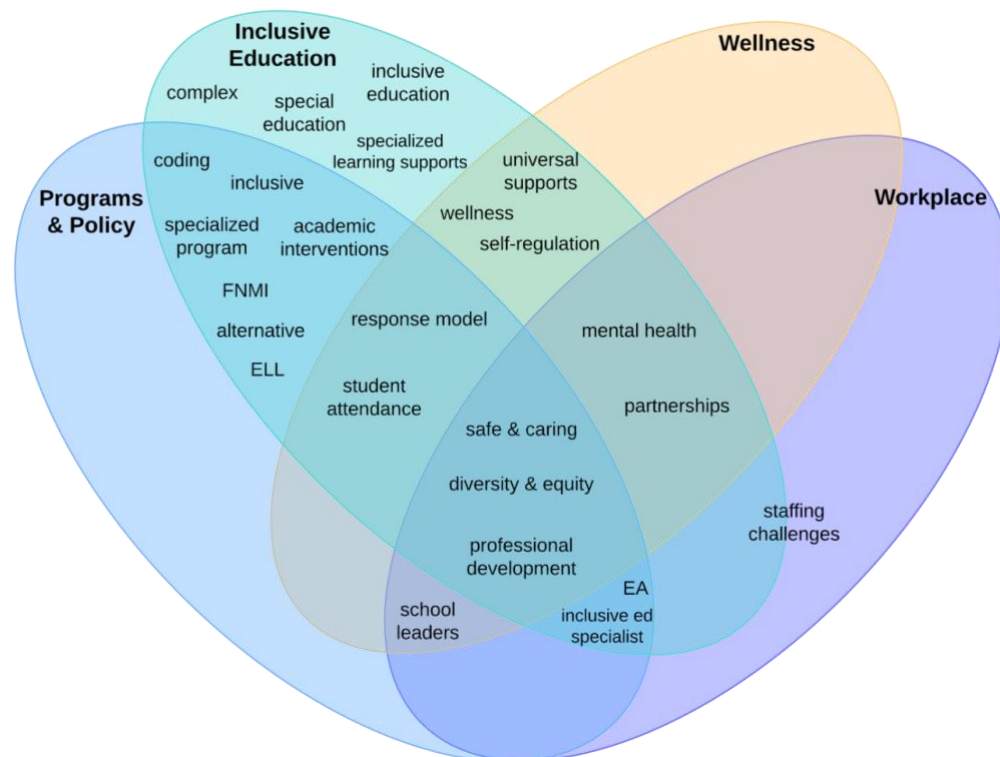


Figure 4: Four-Set Theme Model

Note. The orphan codes: alternative, academic interventions, partnership, response model and school attendance were able to be integrated with the shift to the four-set model. While other orphaned codes could have potentially been added, these remaining codes were used solely for the researcher’s notes.

Phase Two

Shortly into the environmental scan of the seven divisions during phase one, it became apparent that additional qualitative and quantitative data would be required to understand perspectives on inclusive education within educational organizations. Ethical approval was sought and granted to allow the researcher to conduct surveys and interviews in divisions to better understand perceptions of inclusion. AE’s Indicators of Inclusive Schools (Alberta Government, 2013) survey was selected as the tool to assess educators’, staff, and caregivers’ impressions of inclusion within their schools and districts. This data, combined with the data discussed herein, will provide a more balanced approach to understanding inclusion within Alberta schools.

Phase two is set to begin in October 2024, pending division approval. Currently, communications with the divisions’ respective research departments are underway to obtain approval to move forward. Given divisions’ policies concerning research timing (ie. no research conducted in June, August, September, etc.), the timeline for phase two will be data collection between October 1, 2024 and December 1, 2024, and preliminary analyses between December 2, 2024, and January 15, 2025. These results will be reported in a future publication.

Findings

Preliminary Findings of Phase One

During the familiarization process, the researcher found that there were some unique IE findings worth noting. These findings are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Preliminary Findings

Order of Review	Division Name	Notable Findings
1	EPSD	EPSD is the only division identified as having an <i>Inclusive Education Parent and Community Advisory Committee</i> .
3	PRSD	PRSD is the only division to include a vision, goals, beliefs and values specific to IE. PRSD is also the only division to include a parent-facing resource page that is not primarily based on Alberta Education resources.
6	NWFER	NWFER, for being a small division, has a large number of board policies and administrative procedures dedicated to students with special needs (“des besoins spéciaux”). NWFER also appears to predominantly use the term “special needs.”

Having reviewed only seven of the 85 public school authorities, there were already some marked differences in philosophy, operation and administration. While the data collected during this study was by no means exhaustive, it illustrated that there is a broad approach to IE within the province of Alberta. Of particular interest were the differences in terminology (IE versus special education), as well as the general level of content dedicated to IE, such as noted above in the case of PRSD and NWFER.

Findings from Document Analysis

Coding. As referenced in the preliminary findings, a point of interest is the difference in terminology that is used between divisions to refer to students, or programs, related to IE. Of note is the term “special education.” While the term “special education” has generally fallen out of favour, remnants of use remain, as shown in the AERRs. As per Table 4, there were 20 references to “special education” in the CPSD AERR. Interestingly, and contrary to the preliminary findings, NWFER did not use the term in question at all in their AERR, instead they used terms such as “besoins variés” (varied needs; Conseil Scolaire du Nord-Ouest, 2023, p. 20). One reason for the use of this term is, in Alberta, students are “coded” to specify the type of diagnosis or support they need, and AE calls this framework the “special education coding criteria” (Alberta Government, 2024b). However, when this fact is accounted for, there remain 16 instances of use for CPSD and one use for EPSD—the remainder of the counts remain the same.

The occurrences in Table 4 were converted to an average occurrence per page by dividing the respective number of instances by the number of AERR pages; this can be seen in Column B. In this format, it is easier to compare the themes and codes across the divisions’ documents. As anticipated, the AERR of the largest division reviewed (CPSD) contained the most content related to the IE theme at 0.53 references per page. What is somewhat surprising, however, is that this total is almost double their similar-sized, urban counterpart (EPSD), who had an average reference per page of 0.28.

With respect to the PP theme, the two largest divisions were really the only ones who referenced inclusion, diversity and equity; CPSD made 0.45 references per page, and EPSD made 0.46. One potential reason for this is that these two divisions are the largest urban centres in Alberta, likely also making them the most diverse. What is of particular interest here is the paucity of codes in this theme for the remainder of the divisions.

Finally, concerning the theme of wellness, there was substantially more parity between the divisions; EPSD had the highest number of references per page at 0.59, which is followed closely by ECAC (0.55), PRSD (0.50) and RDCSD (0.45). Given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the acknowledgment of the need for both student and staff wellness is encouraging. However, as will be discussed, it may be beneficial to review AERRs from previous years to compare previous trends to these current results.

Table 4: Division AERR Information and Code Occurrences

	CAPE		CPSD		ECAC		EPSD		NWFER		PRSD		RDCSD	
<i>Number of schools</i>	1		250		11		213		3		53		23	
<i>Report length</i>	28		92		40		68		38		34		33	
<i>Report word count</i>	7928		27,826		19,702*		28,801		11,485		6393		8933	
<i>Average words per page</i>	283		302		493		234		302		266		271	
<i>Codes</i>	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
<i>inclusive education</i>	3	0.11	9	0.10	5	0.13	4	0.06	3	0.08	0	0.00	3	0.09
<i>special education</i>	0	0.00	20	0.22	3	0.08	4	0.06	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
<i>specialized learning supports</i>	2	0.07	12	0.13	2	0.05	7	0.10	4	0.11	5	0.15	5	0.15
<i>specialized program</i>	1	0.04	8	0.09	0	0.00	4	0.06	0	0.00	0	0.00	3	0.09
<i>IE theme total</i>	6	0.21	49	0.53	10	0.25	19	0.28	7	0.18	5	0.15	11	0.33
<i>diversity & equity</i>	0	0.00	22	0.24	1	0.03	25	0.37	0	0.00	1	0.03	4	0.12
<i>inclusive</i>	1	0.04	19	0.21	0	0.00	6	0.09	2	0.05	1	0.03	1	0.03
<i>P&P theme total</i>	1	0.04	41	0.45	1	0.03	31	0.46	2	0.05	2	0.06	5	0.15
<i>mental health</i>	1	0.04	3	0.03	3	0.08	19	0.28	2	0.05	8	0.24	5	0.15
<i>wellness</i>	3	0.11	25	0.27	8	0.20	17	0.25	1	0.03	8	0.24	4	0.12
<i>safe and caring</i>	5	0.18	4	0.04	11	0.28	4	0.06	6	0.16	1	0.03	6	0.18

<i>wellness theme total</i>	9	0.32	32	0.35	22	0.55	40	0.59	9	0.24	17	0.50	15	0.45
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Note. *ECAC has a significant number of tables at the end of their document which over-inflates this number

Themes. While it may be expected that individual quotes might be simultaneously coded, it was unexpected that the resulting themes might also be multidimensional. Despite following the process for thematic analysis, when developing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) there was a level of incongruence when trying to integrate them. To explore this incongruence, a diagram similar to what would be seen in exploratory factor analysis was created, where multiple outcomes (in this case, codes) can load onto one factor (in this case, theme). From here, it became clear that there were relations between all themes, and a more appropriate model to represent the relationships was created (i.e. Figure 4). This finding is interesting in that, while the general IE content level in the AERRs may be limited, this model suggests that there is a strong overall interconnectedness between many of the codes and themes.

Reports. A rudimentary observation upon reviewing the AERRs of the seven divisions, was the difference in length and format, despite all being beholden to the same requirements. For example, not including appendices, the shortest report came in at 28 pages (CAPE, one school) and the longest came in at 92 pages (CPSD, 250 schools). While it was also expected that larger divisions would produce longer reports, this logic did not mirror the findings; PRSD, the third largest division reviewed, had only 34 pages, while ECAC’s report (third smallest division) was 40 pages long. While much of this variation can be attributed to the design and layout of the report (ex. more tables/images, less text), some of the variation was due to content as indicated by word count. The demographic information of the divisions is compared against their reports in Table 4.

Discussion

Coding

While the term “special education” came up less than initially expected, the fact that it is still used is still of concern and worth consideration. Special education is a somewhat archaic term that is generally associated with the era of education in which students with “special” needs were segregated from their peers in the regular education system, either completely in their own schools, or placed in segregated classrooms (Lupart, 2000). IE, on the other hand, can be used to describe the model of education that began to develop after the introduction of Section 15 (equality rights) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1985 (McBride, 2013). The gradual push for the recognition of all students’ individual needs within the larger educational system, not as a separate or secondary system, brings us to the current-day verbiage. However, despite this push, this terminology still exists outside of AE policy references in the division documents, which is disappointing, but not surprising. Despite this, there are findings that offset that disappointment. In the EPSD document, for example, there are many references to anti-racism initiatives, something which does not come up often in any other AERR outside of CPSD’s.

There were additional findings that were also promising, including a general focus on wellness for both students and staff (second-most quoted theme; see Table 5 for a comparison of quotation frequencies across themes). While the initial key search terms and their derivatives provided the bulk of the initial coding for all themes, the exponential expansion of related codes was surprising. In particular, with respect to the codes in the “wellness” theme, while the coding process began only with “mental health,” “wellness” was added as a code early on and ultimately outnumbered the mental health code (66 to 41). What was also of particular interest to the researcher were the references to self-regulation throughout the AERRs. This, combined with the references to using evidence-based practices and science-informed interventions, is an indication that some of the content in the AERRs is not simply there to satisfy AE requirements and may suggest that schools and divisions are attempting to implement inclusive best practices.

Table 5: Total Codes and Quotations by Theme

	<i>Inclusive Ed</i>	<i>Wellness</i>	<i>Programs & Policy</i>	<i>Workplace</i>
<i>Codes</i>	23	11	13	9
<i>Quotations</i>	533	295	272	219

Note. Codes and theme totals in this table are based on the four-set model and thus some codes & quotations are counted across multiple themes.

Themes

As previously mentioned, it was anticipated that a theme surrounding IE would emerge, but the development of the main themes and sub-themes was dynamic. For example, the “workplace” theme, as discussed in methods, was secondary in nature until the restructuring of the themes into the four-set model. Before this re-visioning, this theme did not add much to the research question; afterwards, the codes relegated to the workplace theme were often ancillary, but still important. One interesting finding related to the workplace theme was the consistent reference to staffing challenges across the divisions. On first review, the staffing challenges directly referenced specialty programs and staff related to IE—however, it was recognized that key search terms may have been biasing that finding. To confirm this pattern, the researcher reviewed the documents for references to general staffing challenges, and while the majority of the occurrences did reference aspects of IE, it was not referenced solely in that context. Hence, when placing the code “staffing challenges” in the four-set diagram, it purposely overlaps the IE and workplace themes.

Reports

The reports varied significantly across these seven divisions, with some providing a better synopsis of the school year than others. As mentioned in the findings, there was little correlation between division size and the length of the AERR. In addition to this, some of the reports were also more consumable than others, giving some insight into whom the division truly wrote the report for: the government, or their stakeholders as a whole. With respect to AERR recommendations, it would be a worthwhile endeavor for divisions to make a practice of reviewing other divisions’ reports. For smaller organizations, such as CAPE and ECAC, there may be some insights into different ways of organizing and presenting information, as well as additional information that could be included. Furthermore, smaller divisions may not have the luxury of a dedicated staff to create these documents, therefore, it may also be in AE’s best interest to provide funding for divisions to allocate at least one staff member to an analytic position where the required metrics are frequently monitored, evaluated and reported internally leading up to the AERR.

Limitations

While this study presents a thorough analysis of a selection of AERRs, it lacks the initially planned breadth of documentation due to restrictions on time and personnel. This initial analysis of a detailed, mandated document provides a starting point, but other researchers—or division staff—could benefit by either reviewing multiple AERRs to identify trends, or by reviewing a selection of division documents (ie. board policies, administrative procedures, education plans), to get a broader sense of the degree to which inclusive education is being implemented within the division.

Further, while seven divisions provides a diverse and representative sample, it would be of interest to compare this paper’s findings with other Alberta divisions. For example, while not nearly as populous as Calgary or Edmonton, it would be of interest to see if the AERRs of the Lethbridge and Red Deer School Divisions contain more references to “diversity & equity” and “inclusion,” given their more urban demographics. Furthermore, a comparison across different provinces would be equally interesting to determine if the themes identified in this paper persist outside of Alberta.

Recommendations

While there is little doubt that the ethos of inclusion has permeated schools as a policy, there still remains work to be done for inclusion to be fully integrated as a practice. Findings from this study indicate that there is a good deal of

variation among the province's school divisions regarding IE policy. At this time, Alberta is still beholden to the "Standards for Special Education" which was last amended in June 2004 (Alberta Government, 2004). While AE began its shift to a more inclusive philosophy around the 2011-2012 school year with the amendment of its mission statement (see Figure 5), now in 2024, the government has reverted to a vision statement with no reference to inclusion.



Figure 5: Comparison of Alberta Education Mission/Vision
Sources: Alberta Government, 2010; 2011; 2023a

In addition to this, while there have been mentions about an update to the Standards for Special Education being released, it has yet to be delivered. For school divisions to fully embrace the practice of inclusive education, the provincial government must lead the way—starting with the revision of old documents, and old terminology.

Finally, divisions should consider taking a qualitative approach, such as the one described herein, when creating yearly reports. The insights provided in this paper alone suggest that there is much data to be gleaned, and divisions could employ this strategy to inform future education plans. In addition to this, a review of internal documentation could provide insights into areas of strength and neglect.

Next Steps

This paper concludes phase one, and phase two aims to begin with the rollout of surveys to participating divisions and parent groups within school communities in October 2024. At this time, participants will also be able to self-select for an additional interview to further provide insights into stakeholder opinions on the implementation of IE. Upon conclusion of phase two, the researcher will seek to highlight areas where the province of Alberta is, or isn't, meeting the targets outlined in international frameworks, such as UNESCO's ID (2016).

Conclusion

Although IE is an ongoing process dependent upon new research and developing pedagogy, this study reveals a significant gap between current knowledge and what is presented in public documents. Current documents, including the Indicators of Inclusion document (Alberta Government, 2013) and the Alberta Education Inclusive Education Library, are stale dated at over 11-years-old. In such a rapidly changing world, it is important to help educators stay informed and up-to-date on current best practices while supporting their ongoing professional development. With PISA scores on a downward trend, and Alberta recently being called to task for spending the least on education out of all provinces (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2024), much remains to be done. Of the seven divisions reviewed for this project, some present reason to hope that IE, and support for exceptional learners, is prevalent and accessible within Alberta schools. Divisions such as EPSD promoting and fostering an

Inclusive Education Parent and Community Advisory Committee is a unique and important way to bring all stakeholders to the table. Other divisions, such as PRSD, have created internal focus groups to build visions and goals specific to inclusion within the division. With only a small sample of Alberta school divisions reviewed, there are still some promising findings that suggest that some of Alberta's schools may be on track to potentially meeting international inclusive goalposts.

Acknowledgement

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