Defining Inclusion: What It Is, What It Is Not, and Why It Matters

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Inclusion in education is often championed in policy but remains misunderstood and inconsistently applied in practice. This paper examines how inclusion is defined, implemented, and experienced, particularly for students with disabilities in Canadian schools. Drawing on Critical Disability Studies (CDS), legal policy analysis, and lived experience, this critique examines how segregation and deficit-based language continue to reinforce ableist structures despite claims of equity. Through personal narrative and a case study involving a student excluded from an art class, this paper illustrates how systemic design—not individual impairment—often disables. Key frameworks, including Kearney's concept of hospitality and Krischler's work on educator beliefs, are used to reframe inclusion not as mere placement but as a political and ethical commitment to transformation. This paper advocates for a paradigm shift—from integration into existing systems to the co-creation of inclusive spaces where all students are valued and feel a sense of belonging.

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Introduction

Inclusion in education remains one of the most debated and misunderstood concepts in contemporary educational discourse (Armstrong et al., 2011; Graham & Slee, 2006; Slee, 2010). Globally, educators and policymakers continue to grapple with how to build systems where all students are valued and supported (Haug, 2017). Over the past three decades, international efforts—such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)—have aimed to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], n.d., para. 2). Ainscow (2020) emphasizes the importance of shared understandings of inclusion and equity within policy. Yet despite formal commitments, a significant gap remains between inclusive policy and everyday practice (UNESCO, 2024). This gap is especially stark between the Global North and Global South (Kamenopoulou & Karisa, 2023), where structural barriers such as limited resources and technology continue to hinder progress (Sharma, 2020). These disparities raise questions not just about implementation, but about what inclusion really means—and for whom.

Canadian Context

In Canada, the policy-practice gap also persists. Inclusive education implementation varies across provinces and territories (Towle, 2015), ranging from full inclusion to segregated models that are still labeled "inclusive." In many classrooms, inclusion exists in rhetoric but not in design (Slee, 2010). Haug (2017) states, "No country has yet succeeded in constructing a school system that lives up to the ideals and intentions of inclusion, as defined by different international organizations." (p. 206). Some scholars argue that Canada has failed to do so. Lord (2020) argues Canada has failed to meet its obligations under Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD; 2007), which guarantees the right to inclusive education. Despite being a signatory, Canadian practices often fall short of ensuring equitable access to education. In some cases, students are placed in self-contained classrooms, provided with limited academic pathways, and excluded from meaningful peer interaction—all while systems claim to uphold inclusion. This disconnect calls for more than improved implementation; it demands a re-examination of what inclusion actually requires.

As an educator and researcher, I have had to ask: What does inclusion genuinely mean in practice? This paper draws on personal experience, policy critique, and Critical Disability Studies (CDS) to reflect on that question and explore more equitable educational possibilities that move beyond compliance toward transformation.

Positionality and Lived Experience

I did not grow up identifying as disabled, nor did I come from a family with lived disability experience. I entered education believing I was an ally—committed to inclusion, yet outside the margins. That changed when I began to understand my own non-apparent disability. Living with an invisible disability made me aware of how schools reward conformity and penalize difference. Navigating educational spaces while masking parts of myself deepened my understanding of the subtle forces that shape who is seen, supported, or excluded. This experience now grounds

my approach to inclusive education.

I intentionally use the term "disabled students" rather than "students with disabilities." While person-first language reflects the medical model—implying that disability is a condition separate from the individual—identity-first language aligns with CDS. It emphasizes that systems, not bodies, create disabling experiences (Goodley, 2014; Retief & Letšosa, 2018). This is a political and theoretical stance that signals a belief in systemic, rather than individual, reform. Identity-first language affirms disability as a valued part of identity, rather than something to be minimized or erased. For me, it is an act of solidarity and clarity: if schools are to become inclusive, we must name the ways they currently disable students.

My introduction to inclusive education was unplanned. I was hired to teach a class of 14 disabled students—without a curriculum, expectations, or resources. These students had been grouped based on diagnostic labels rather than learning needs or strengths. They represented a wide range of experiences, strengths, and goals, but the system treated them as one homogenous group to be managed rather than supported. That experience revealed how exclusion is built into the structure of schooling, even when inclusion is the stated goal. The classroom was physically separate, pedagogically undefined, and administratively invisible. It was clear to me then that inclusion was not about adding students into existing systems—it was about reimagining those systems from the ground up.

Kearney's (2003) *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* helped me articulate what I had felt but couldn't explain. He describes how societies construct "others" to reinforce dominant norms. Disabled students, positioned as "monstrous" disruptions to order, are often managed rather than welcomed (Kearney, 2003). Kearney's analysis of the stranger as a threat to identity, safety, and order mirrors the way many schools treat disabled students—as potential disruptions rather than valued participants (Kearney, 2003). Kearney's concept of hospitality reframes inclusion as an ethical imperative: not to assimilate the stranger, but to transform the system in response to those who unsettle it (Kearney, 2003).

Systemic Barriers: Language and Segregation

Deficit-based language and segregated programs sustain ableist structures by normalizing separation and lowering expectations (Titchkosky, 2011; Ainscow, 2020). These practices frame difference as a problem to manage, not an opportunity to reimagine education. When systems pathologize variance, they not only exclude—they make inclusion seem impossible. This is particularly true when students are evaluated solely through narrow academic lenses, with limited recognition of diverse ways of knowing, expressing, or contributing.

Emily—a disabled, Indigenous, transitioning student—makes this issue painfully concrete. Exceptionally gifted in art, she was denied access to a high school course due to staffing and scheduling. Her exclusion wasn't about ability; it reflected a system unprepared to include her, despite its stated values. Her story illustrates the compounding effects of intersectionality, where multiple layers of identity—disability, Indigeneity, gender,

poverty—interact with systemic barriers. Emily's absence from the art class was not an isolated oversight. It was a failure of the system to respond flexibly, creatively, and equitably.

This echoed other forms of exclusion. Canada's last racially segregated school closed in 1983 (Walker, 1997). While racial segregation is now rejected, segregation by disability remains normalized—often reframed as support. These parallels are not metaphorical; they are structural. Just as racially segregated schools were justified under the guise of "separate but equal," special education spaces are often described as necessary for "meeting needs." Yet they often operate as containers that isolate, restrict, and diminish students' access to broader educational opportunities.

Theoretical Foundations of Inclusion

A law and ethics course pushed me to analyze key policies: the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982), the *Education Act* (2023a), the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018), and the *Alberta Human Rights Act* (2023b). Together, these documents affirm that inclusive education is both a legal right and ethical responsibility. Section 15 of the *Charter* guarantees equal protection and benefit under the law, including on the basis of disability (Canadian Charter, 1982, s 6(2)(b)). The *Education Act* mandates inclusive environments, while the *Teaching Quality Standard* requires that teachers foster them. The *Alberta Human Rights Act* prohibits discrimination in public services—including education. Yet despite these legal frameworks, daily practices still reflect entrenched ableism, especially when policies are implemented inconsistently or interpreted through a deficit lens.

UNESCO (2020) defines exclusion as the denial of "life prospects needed for learning" (p. 26). In schools, this occurs through inaccessible curricula, streaming, and segregated programming. Segregation, often framed as support, is the deliberate separation of groups, limiting access and opportunity (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Dixon, 2005). It creates parallel systems in which students are provided with "different" rather than equal experiences. By contrast, differentiation can promote equity when used to adapt instruction in shared spaces (Tomlinson, 2014). But when differentiation justifies separation, it risks reproducing the very inequities it seeks to challenge. It becomes a tool of exclusion dressed in the language of accommodation.

CDS helps reframe disability as a product of exclusionary systems rather than individual deficits. Paterson and Hughes (1999, as cited in Lebenhagen, 2024) argue that even integration can enforce assimilation. From a CDS perspective, inclusion requires transforming the system—not merely adjusting it to accommodate some. It involves unsettling foundational assumptions about ability, intelligence, and success. This lens also clarifies the difference between inclusion and belonging. Inclusion ensures presence; belonging ensures recognition, value, and connection (Schuelka et al., 2019). A student can be in the room and still feel profoundly excluded—physically present, but socially and emotionally absent.

Krischler et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of active participation. Inclusion isn't just about placement; it's about engagement. Students must have agency in shaping their

learning experiences. Dixon (2005) supports this, describing inclusive classrooms as places where diversity is embraced through thoughtful design. Participation is not an add-on; it is the foundation of meaningful learning. While strategies like co-teaching and trauma-informed practice are valuable, they're not enough. Inclusion is not a checklist—it is a political project. As Krischler et al. (2019) argue, teacher beliefs shape classroom realities. Embracing CDS means shifting from the question "How can this student fit in?" to "How can we build a system where they already belong?"

Conclusion

Inclusion in education must move beyond rhetoric and tokenistic practices. It must be rooted in systemic change, informed by critical theory, and grounded in the lived experiences of those most affected by exclusion. As educators, researchers, and policymakers, we must ask not how to fit disabled students into existing structures, but how to reconstruct those structures altogether. Genuine inclusion requires rethinking norms, redistributing power, and recognizing diversity as a strength rather than a disruption. This paper offers both a personal and critical reflection on what inclusion is, what it is not, and why getting it right—ethically, legally, and practically—matters more than ever.

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