

A QUARTER CENTURY OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN ONTARIO: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS¹

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Understanding the views of the public is an important factor in developing and evaluating policy on inclusive education. This article presents the results of an opinion poll conducted by an alliance of researchers and community partners to measure public perceptions regarding inclusive education of students with an intellectual disability, the related impacts, and obstacles to expansion. Participants were 680 adults across a large region of Ontario. Respondents held divergent views about the best type of schooling for children with intellectual disabilities; 52% viewed some degree of inclusive education in regular schools as best while about 42% believed that education in special schools was best. When asked to first assume inclusion in regular schools was occurring, about one third of respondents believed that it would cause discipline problems, and make it harder for other students to learn. Schools' lack of special resources (79%) and teachers being unprepared to teach students with intellectual disabilities (69%) were seen as obstacles to inclusion. Analyses identified younger age and having known someone with an intellectual disability who was not a family member, as associated with inclusive views. Policy implications are discussed.

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Introduction

Canada's policies on persons with disabilities emphasize inclusion. The executive summary of the 2004 report, *Advancing the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities*, makes the general claim that "Canadians feel that people with disabilities should have the opportunity to participate in life to their fullest potential—that this is part of the 'Canadian way' of doing things" (Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2004, p. 5). A review of the educational policies and procedures in the provinces and territories in Canada shows that inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms is the dominant policy (Hutchinson, 2007), although most jurisdictions maintain segregated classes for those students who are deemed to benefit from such placements (Bunch & Valeo, 2004) or whose parents prefer such placements (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000). Ontario's *Standards for School Boards' Special Education Plans* requires that each school board's plan "acknowledge that placement of a student [with disabilities] in a regular class is the first option considered" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 10).

In recent years advocates for inclusive education have argued that as many as 40% of students with intellectual disabilities are still being educated in segregated settings while they have a right to inclusive education (Porter, 2004). Intellectual disabilities are conditions originating before the age of 18 that result in significant limitations in intellectual functioning and conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Some educators and researchers have critiqued the practice of segregating children with intellectual disabilities from their peers in special classes or schools; they advocate that all children, including those with intellectual disabilities, be educated in regular classrooms that

reflect the diversity of Canadian society and our inclusive values (Lupart & Webber, 2002; New Brunswick Teachers' Association, 2004; Porter, 2004)

While such advocates acknowledge that children with intellectual disabilities may not accomplish the same academic goals as other children, they believe that inclusive education, when adequately funded and supported by educators, enables all students to be treated with dignity and to have their unique contributions recognized, while enhancing inclusion of all citizens in many facets of society (Downing & Peckingham-Hardin, 2007; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002). Those advocating this position cite research findings which suggest children with disabilities who are educated in regular classes are more likely to be engaged with learning (Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, & Goetz, 1994) and to communicate with their classmates and teachers (Foreman, Arthur-Kelly, Pascoe, & Smyth King, 2004). Other benefits have included increased academic skills for students with disabilities (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999) and enhanced awareness and understanding of disabilities for their classmates (Hunt, Soto, Maier, & Doering, 2003). Research shows that those with intellectual disabilities who participate in contexts where they have opportunities to make choices and to develop self-determination are more likely to participate fully in adult life and to fare better across multiple life categories including employment, access to health and other benefits, financial independence, and independent living (e.g., Shogren, et al., 2007; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). The current emphasis on inclusion of children and youth with intellectual disabilities highlights the changes which have occurred in Canadian education in the past century.

The history of education for individuals with intellectual disabilities³ began in Canada in the 19th century when they were consigned to psychiatric hospitals, usually residential

³ 'Intellectual disabilities' is increasingly the term which is replacing developmental disabilities (Canada), learning disabilities (UK) and mental retardation (USA).

institutions (Simmons, 1982). Towards the end of the 19th century the idea of training residents of such institutions gradually evolved with the dual focus of teaching skills that would contribute to the maintenance of the institutions and to equipping residents for eventual economic self-sufficiency (Andrews & Lupart, 1993). Numerous institutions provided care for children who had a wide range of identified special needs from those with physical impairments to poor and orphaned children, and educational exceptionalities were not delineated. School records show that in the first half of the 20th century some public schools began to enroll children with disabilities in segregated classrooms (Andrews & Lupart, 1993). Common labels used to classify children's educational prospects included "educable" and "trainable" (MacMillan, 1982).

At the middle of the 20th century, Canadian parents were still encouraged to place their children with intellectual disabilities in residential institutions commonly, according to a former administrator at a large Ontario institution, via relinquishing them first to child welfare agencies (Betty Skinner, personal communication, November 1999). However, the institutional era began to draw to a close with the rise of organized parental and other pressure groups in the 1950s (Brown & Radford, 2007). These groups' growth in numbers and effectiveness in the 1960s, led to the birth of the community living movement. Parents strongly advocated for expanding options to provide specialized classes that were designed to meet the needs of students with intellectual disabilities who were remaining with family in their home communities. By the 1970s separate special education classes located in regular schools were increasingly the norm (Hutchinson, 2007).

In Ontario, a major public policy shift occurred in 1980 when Bill 82 introduced significant amendments to the Education Act. Bill 82 recognized the rights of students with disabilities to receive an appropriate education at public expense and permitted parents to appeal

the identification of their child as exceptional and the placement of their child (Hutchinson, 2007). This meant that students with intellectual disabilities were entitled to an education in Ontario. Their inclusion in mainstream classrooms as well as into wider school culture, although often controversial, continued to be championed by many parents and community living advocates. Since the 1990s, students with intellectual disabilities have enjoyed greater participation in mainstream classrooms. However, there continue to be myriad approaches to inclusion from one school board to another across Ontario, as well as among schools within boards (Crawford, 2005; Porter, 2004) only in part accounted by the fact that students with intellectual disabilities vary markedly in their need for educational accommodations (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007). Since 2000, the level of accountability for planning for students with intellectual disabilities has increased in Ontario. All Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for exceptional students in Ontario must meet standards in a number of areas including a clear indication of the student's strengths and needs, and the special education strategies, accommodations, and resources that will be used to meet those needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000).

Groups such as the Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education and the Canadian Coalition for Inclusive Education have been advocating in many contexts to further expand inclusive education opportunities so that all children with intellectual disabilities can enjoy complete school inclusion with their specific needs fully accommodated. These advocacy groups believe that inclusive education is what Canadians and Ontarians desire for students with intellectual disabilities. There is some evidence to suggest that Canadians support inclusive education, but not necessarily for students with intellectual disabilities. In 2004 the Environics Research Group conducted a national opinion poll on attitudes toward disability issues generally. Nearly 2,000

Canadian adults responded to a survey which included questions about children with disabilities in the public education system. The poll concluded that Canadians viewed the needs of children with disabilities as being only partly met by the educational sector. Furthermore, most respondents believed that while children with physical disabilities “should be taught alongside other children [although] this is a minority view in cases of mental and developmental disabilities” (Environics Research Group, 2004, p. 24). The poll respondents who supported the inclusion of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers, regardless of the type of disability, tended to be younger and in higher income brackets.

A number of international studies measuring attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities have reported similar findings, that is, that factors such as age, income level as well as gender, education level, , and personal contact with persons with intellectual disabilities are associated with positive views (Antonak, 1982; Henry, Keys, Balcazar, & Jopp, 1996, Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Henry, Bradley & Leichner, 2003). For instance, an Australian study of 421 adults reported that younger respondents, those who had attained higher levels of education, and those who had prior or ongoing regular contact with people with intellectual disabilities held more positive views toward people with intellectual disabilities (Yazbeck, McVilly & Parmenter, 2004). Little is known about how the Canadian public specifically views inclusive education for children with intellectual disabilities; even less is known about the attitudes of Ontario citizens on this topic. As Yazbeck et al. (2004) argued, identifying and addressing the public’s views on inclusive education for children with intellectual disabilities is an important step in developing means to promote further inclusive efforts.

The present study was undertaken as part of a larger opinion survey. We sought to increase our understanding of public attitudes a quarter century after the major policy shift in

favour of inclusive education in a region of Ontario and thereby help shape and target future public education strategies to foster enhanced inclusion.

Method

Sample Selection

We collected a stratified, random sample of adults (aged 18 and older) residing in a six-county area of Ontario, Canada. At the time of the survey, the population in this area was estimated to be approximately half a million, of which 410,219 were adults (Statistics Canada, 2007). Following stratification of the region into 27 geographical areas, a random telephone contact list was created using InfoCanada's electronic databank of white pages residential phone numbers (i.e., Select Phone Canada). To ensure representation from each area, sampling across strata was based on the following quota rule: one in 440 households or a minimum of 25 households per geographic area. In total, 2,949 potential participants were contacted. The final sample included 680 participants. The proportion of participants from each county very closely approximated the proportion of citizens living within each county. The actual completion rate was 23%. Research on the decline in response rates to telephone surveys has found that participation rates of this order do not necessarily invalidate the results (Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves & Presser, 2000). In fact, our sample characteristics very closely approximated those of the underlying population. The margin of error for a sample of 680 is +/- 3 percentage points for most responses, 19 times out of 20.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire, used in the *Multinational Study of Attitudes Toward Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities* and originally developed by researchers at the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts at Boston (Special Olympics, 2004), was modified for use in Ontario. Developed for administration by telephone, the interview measured public perceptions of the competence of individuals with intellectual disabilities and beliefs about their inclusion in schools, the workplace, and the community. This paper focuses on the public's views about inclusion in schools and asked about which kind of schooling was best for children with intellectual disabilities and whether these students should be taught in special classes or in integrated classes with non-disabled students. Participants were also asked about three specific impacts and about four potential obstacles to integration efforts. They also reported their gender, age, highest level of education achieved, and income level. In addition, as a measure of contact with individuals with intellectual disabilities, participants were asked whether they had a close family member with an intellectual disabilities. The modified survey was pilot tested with five adults and completion required about 16 minutes. The protocol for this study was reviewed and approved by the Queen's University Research Ethics Board.

Analysis

Responses were tabulated to reflect the public's perception of (a) the best kind of schooling, (b) the three potential impacts, and (c) the four possible obstacles. To better understand factors contributing to attitudes, we compared those who favoured inclusive educational settings (schools in which children without disabilities also attend) to those who favoured segregated settings (special schools for children with intellectual disabilities) in terms

of gender, age, level of education, income, geographic area, whether or not they currently had children in school, whether or not they had a family member with an intellectual disabilities, and whether or not they had known someone with intellectual disabilities personally other than a family member. The relationship between perceptions and respondent characteristics was examined using proportions, Chi square statistics, odds ratios and confidence intervals. A significance level of 0.05 was set a priori for all analyses conducted. All statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS version 12 for Windows.

Results

Approximately 50% of respondents chose the inclusive setting as the best types of schooling arrangements for children with intellectual disabilities. Within this inclusive setting, respondents predominantly favour regular classrooms or a choice of either a regular classroom or a separate classroom. Table 1 includes frequencies for each of the options presented.

Table 1

Which kind of schooling is best for children with intellectual disabilities? (N=680)

Schooling type	Overall n (% of 680)	Subset n (% of 351)
Be educated at home	9 (1.3%)	-
Attend a special school for children with ID ¹	288 (42.4%)	-
Attend a school in which non-disabled children attend	351 (51.6%)	-
- Integrated in classrooms with non-disabled students		197 (56.1%)
- Both special classes and integrated classes		105 (29.9%)
- Special classes in regular schools		49 (13.9%)
Refused to answer/ didn't know	32 (4.6%)	-

¹ Abbreviation for intellectual disabilities.

Participants were asked about the likelihood of impacts if the children with intellectual disabilities were placed in classrooms with students without disabilities and responded by indicating ‘very likely’, ‘likely’, ‘not too likely’, and ‘not at all likely’. A minority of respondents believed having children with intellectual disabilities placed in a classroom with non-disabled students was likely or very likely to cause discipline problems (34.8%), to make it harder for the other students to learn (34.1%), and to create safety problems (15.2%).

Conversely, of the four potential obstacles presented to respondents, a majority felt there were two major obstacles to inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities into classrooms with children who are not intellectually disabled. The two issues presented that were most frequently deemed to be major obstacles (i.e., versus ‘minor obstacle’ or ‘not an obstacle at all’) were “schools don’t have the special resources needed for them” (79.0%) and “teachers aren’t prepared to teach them” (69.4%). “Children with intellectual disabilities having difficulty learning” and “attitudes of other children” were perceived as major obstacles by fewer respondents (46.8% and 45.2% respectively).

Table 2 notes all of the significant results from our comparison of those who favoured inclusive educational settings (schools in which children without disabilities also attend) to those who favoured segregated settings (special schools for children with intellectual disabilities) by participant characteristics.

Table 2.

Factors associated with views of schooling best for children with intellectual disabilities

Respondent Characteristics	Kind of Schooling Best for Children with ID ¹		Odds Ratio (95% confidence interval)	Significance value
	Inclusive ² n (%)	Segregated ³ n (%)		
Gender (n=635)				$\chi^2=11.702$
Female	251 (72%)	170 (59%)	1.78 (1.27-2.48)	d.f.=1
Male	97 (28%)	117 (41%)	1	p-value=0.001
Age Category (n=622)				$\chi^2=17.070$
18-24 years	18 (5%)	19 (7%)	1.34 (0.64-2.77)	d.f.=3
25-44 years	128 (38%)	72 (25%)	2.51 (1.60-3.92)	p-value=0.001
45-64 years	138 (41%)	112 (40%)	1.74 (1.14-2.65)	
65+ years	56 (16%)	79 (28%)	1	
Level of Education ⁴ (n=632)				$\chi^2=28.235$
Low	101 (29%)	142 (49%)	1	d.f.=2
Medium	144 (42%)	97 (34%)	2.08 (1.45-3.00)	p-value=0.000
High	99 (29%)	49 (17%)	2.84 (1.85-4.35)	
Currently has Children in School (n=622)				$\chi^2=14.644$
Yes	115 (34%)	57 (20%)	2.04 (1.41-2.94)	d.f.=1
No	224 (66%)	226 (80%)	1	p-value=0.000
Has Personally Known Someone with ID other than a Family Member (n=636)				$\chi^2=20.654$
Yes	258 (74%)	163 (57%)	2.16 (1.54-3.01)	d.f.=1
No	91 (26%)	124 (43%)	1	p-value=0.000

Note: ID is used as an abbreviation for intellectual disabilities.

¹ Excludes a small number who responded 'at home', ² Regular school, regular or special class, ³ Special school, ⁴ Low=High school or less, Medium=post secondary other than university including community college and trade school, High=university degree.

These characteristics included, being female, those 25 to 44 years of age, those who had attained higher levels of education, those who had children in school and those who knew someone with intellectual disabilities other than a family member. Since several of the dependent variables were strongly correlated with age, the associations were re-examined after stratification by age group. After controlling for age in this way, having children of school age was no longer associated with choice of setting for schooling. No factors were identified as significant among the 18 to 24 year olds (likely due to the small number of respondents in this category; $n=37$). Having personally known someone with an intellectual disability other than a family member remained significant across each of the other age groups. However, level of education and gender remained significant only for those 45 to 64 years (see Table 3).

Table 3

Significant associations after stratification by age

Respondent Characteristics		Kind of Schooling Best for Children with ID			Significance value
		Inclusive n (%)	Segregated n (%)	Odds Ratio (95% confidence interval)	
25-44 years	Has Known Someone Personally with ID other than a Family Member (n=199)				$\chi^2=4.616$ d.f.=1
	Yes	93 (73%)	41 (58%)	1.94 (1.06-3.58)	p-value=0.024
	No	35 (27%)	30 (42%)	1	
45-64 years	Gender (n=250)				$\chi^2=4.521$ d.f.=1
	Female	99 (72%)	66 (59%)	1.77 (1.04-3.00)	p-value=0.023
	Male	39 (28%)	46 (41%)	1	
	Level of Education (n=248)				$\chi^2=27.809$ d.f.=2
	Low	35 (26%)	59 (53%)	1	p-value=0.000
	Medium	52 (38%)	41 (37%)	2.14 (1.19-3.83)	
	High	49 (36%)	12 (11%)	6.89 (3.22-14.71)	
	Has Known Someone Personally with ID other than a Family Member (n=250)				$\chi^2=6.761$ d.f.=1
	Yes	107 (78%)	70 (63%)	2.71 (1.19-3.60)	p-value=0.007
	No	31 (22%)	42 (37%)	1	
65+ years	Has Known Someone Personally with ID other than a Family Member (n=135)				$\chi^2=6.572$ d.f.=1
	Yes	38 (68%)	36 (49%)	2.52 (1.23-5.15)	p-value=0.008
	No	18 (32%)	43 (51%)	1	

Note: ID is used as an abbreviation for intellectual disabilities.

Discussion

Constituents from a variety of sectors, including parents of children with intellectual disabilities, have been very vocal and forceful in their efforts to expand inclusive practices in education. While other researchers have examined the perceptions of children (Bunch & Valeo, 2004; Martlew & Hodson, 1991) and educators (Cook, 2002; Edmonds, 1998; Martlew & Hodson, 1991) toward inclusive education, there remains a paucity of attention in the professional literature paid to the views of the general public. After a quarter century of inclusive education, it is important to take stock of attitudes held by the public. The current study may be the first in over a decade to focus attention squarely on public perceptions held by a cross-section of Ontario citizens towards inclusive education of children with intellectual disabilities.

The most important finding of the study relates to the degree of support for inclusive education. Clearly the public is almost evenly divided on whether to support inclusive education or segregated schooling. While the nature of telephone opinion polls limits the depth of information which can be gathered about underlying views and influences on respondents, our approach allows us to place our results in an international context. Only 42.2% of our Canadian sample favoured special schools, which is much lower than has been found in other western countries; for example, the *Multinational Study of Attitudes Toward Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities* reported rates of 65% in the United States, 71% in Ireland, and 61% in Germany (Special Olympics, 2003).

Perhaps the most troubling result we found was the public's perception that teachers are not prepared to teach children with intellectual disabilities. Notwithstanding a limitation of our paper, that we are only measuring the public's perceptions and it is therefore beyond our scope to comment on whether these are *real* or *only perceived*, it is imperative that boards of education

consider ways to further explore and ultimately address this lack of preparedness perception. Our education system is publicly funded, and while boards of education and the Ontario Ministry of Education strive to implement inclusive education policies and practices they must reassure the public of their teachers' ability to meet this challenge. Boards of education and the Ministry of Education may need to convince the public that schools and teachers are well prepared and appropriately equipped to implement inclusion. Ontarians may be unaware or unclear about recent policy developments within the Ontario Ministry of Education (e.g., Education for All, 2005) meant to enhance monitoring of student progress, needs identification and the allocation of resources to enhance children's differential learning opportunities. Furthermore, the Ontario College of Teachers' (2006) report, *Preparing Teachers for Tomorrow*, recommends "regulatory adjustments: to adjust the content of the program of professional education to identify special education as a required component" (p. 101), and this regulation is expected to come into force in 2010. Communicating changes like these effectively to the public may go some distance to assuring citizens that regular schools are up to the challenge of inclusive education.

Identifying specific pockets of support in our sample to inform further advocacy efforts was a key study objective. Indeed, the study was successful in shedding light on which respondent characteristics were associated with support for inclusive education. The associations between each of the four variables (i.e., gender, age, level of education, and personally knowing someone with intellectual disabilities other than a family member) and supportive views toward inclusive education were not wholly unexpected. Prior research has often reported that respondents who are female as well as younger cohorts and those more highly educated hold more positive views of inclusion (e.g., Henry et al., 1996; Ouellette-Kuntz et al., 2003; Yazbeck et al., 2004). The positive impacts of having direct contact with people who have intellectual

disabilities have been described in the research over three decades and in many countries including the United States, Australia, and Japan (e.g., Begab, 1970; Tachibana & Watanabe, 2004; Yazbeck et al., 2004). Results from prior attitude studies have suggested that when contact is minimal or non-existent individuals tend to hold the dominant, usually negative, societal views toward people with intellectual disabilities⁴. These views tend to underestimate the capabilities of most people with intellectual disabilities (Siperstein, personal communication, May 3, 2006) and support beliefs that people with intellectual disabilities are dissimilar to others and require significant sheltering in daily life and less empowerment (Henry, Duvdevany, Keys, & Balcazar, 2004).

Understanding the views of the public is an important factor in developing and evaluating policy on inclusive education. Ministry planners, educational administrators, and educators need to take note of the general public's equivocal views on inclusive education. While significant progress has been made over the past quarter century, the public's view may indicate that we are at an important crossroad where gains can be built upon or lost. We believe enhanced efforts are needed to educate the public about current policies and how they benefit all children, those with and without intellectual disabilities. Because our poll was designed to ask a variety of questions about the public's perceptions of inclusion in a range of sectors we were not able to ask in-depth open-ended questions or follow-up questions about the reasons underlying the reported views. Further research efforts should be undertaken to consolidate our knowledge in this area by investigating societal views on the potential positive benefits of inclusive education at the classroom, school, Board of Education, government, and wider community levels.

⁴ While some research suggests that enhanced contact under certain conditions among students with and without intellectual disabilities may lead to or support the acquisition of more positive views among those without disabilities this was not a focus of this study.

While the Ministry of Education has a sizable stake in the success of the inclusive education policies they have promoted, they can likely improve their impact in shaping positive public attitudes and the success of their students with intellectual disabilities by partnering with other government ministries involved in such efforts. In Ontario, the Ministries of Community and Social Services (i.e., Developmental Services Branch) and of Children and Youth Services together fund numerous programs for children with intellectual disabilities and their families to promote inclusion. They have formal mechanisms for soliciting opinions of stakeholders and receiving feedback from advocates within the inclusion movement. Inter-ministerial efforts involving the Ministry of Education should be supported.

Disability awareness programs have proven effective in creating more positive long-lasting attitudes in children and adolescents about educational and social inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities (Rillotta & Nettelbeck, 2007). Perhaps starting by intervening with the classmates of students with intellectual disabilities to enhance disability awareness will also enhance the understanding of the parents of these students. Programs to create disability awareness are widely available and have been developed for a range of participants including families and educators (PACER Center, 2001), police officers (McAfee & Musso, 1995), and park staff (Myers, 1991). Clearly we need to consider a range of approaches to enhancing societal awareness about individuals with intellectual disabilities and about their right to and success in inclusive education.

Conclusion

Advocates for inclusion within the education sector and the wider society continue to defend inclusive education where it exists and struggle to expand inclusive options. Knowledge

of public perceptions of the level of support for inclusive education and views on likely impacts and obstacles to further inclusion makes advocates, caregivers, and policy makers aware of potential sources of support in society, as well as challenges which must be considered when promoting inclusion. As these efforts continue, further research into the various perceived and actual impacts and barriers should be undertaken to inform advocacy and to guide steps toward addressing the many perceived and real challenges to achieving fully inclusive educational opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. It is our view that the benefits of educating children with intellectual disabilities alongside those without disabilities can be better communicated to the public in order to further strengthen support for inclusion and increase available educational resources to address the remaining challenges. Boards of education, educators and government ministries can play a key role. It is reassuring that Ontario's professional teachers' college has recognized the need to enhance in-service training efforts with the intention of improving teacher preparedness in educating children with intellectual disabilities and other disabilities (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006). Nevertheless, renewed efforts are needed to regularly inform the public, including current students, about the many potential benefits of an inclusive school environment.

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