

# Exceptionality Education International

---

Volume 22 | Issue 2

Article 3

---

5-1-2012

## Toward a Unified System of Education: Where Do We Go From Here?

Judy L. Lupart

*The University of Calgary*, [judy.lupart@ualberta.ca](mailto:judy.lupart@ualberta.ca)

### Abstract

This special issue provides a selective overview of topics associated with a pre-dominant trend in Canadian and U.S. schools: moving from a dual system of education in which special education and regular education services are carried out separately, to an effective unified system of service delivery for all students (Stainback, Stainback, & Bunch, 1989). Even though much of the impetus for change has come from proponents in special education (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Porter & Richler, 1991; Villa, Thousand, Stainback, & Stainback, 1992), there is increasing evidence that general education reform and school improvement agendas are beginning to take hold (Barth, 1991; Smith & Scott, 1990). The challenge of creating school environments that promote excellence and equity is daunting but not impossible, and some of the preliminary efforts in this area are very promising. The focus of this special issue is on some of the significant work that is being carried out across the country to support this change. Although the range of topics is diverse, all papers are concerned with the complex problems associated with providing every student (particularly students with exceptional learning needs) with appropriate education that enables each to reach his or her maximal potential.



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

ISSN 1918-5227

---

Pages 3- 7

### Recommended Citation

Lupart, J. L. (2012) Toward a Unified System of Education: Where Do We Go From Here?. *Exceptionality Education International*, 22, 3-7. Retrieved from <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/eei/vol22/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exceptionality Education International by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [jspecht@uwo.ca](mailto:jspecht@uwo.ca).

## **Toward a Unified System of Education: Where Do We Go From Here?<sup>1</sup>**

**Judy L. Lupart**  
**The University of Calgary**

### **Abstract**

*This special issue provides a selective overview of topics associated with a predominant trend in Canadian and U.S. schools: moving from a dual system of education in which special education and regular education services are carried out separately, to an effective unified system of service delivery for all students (Stainback, Stainback, & Bunch, 1989). Even though much of the impetus for change has come from proponents in special education (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Porter & Richler, 1991; Villa, Thousand, Stainback, & Stainback, 1992), there is increasing evidence that general education reform and school improvement agendas are beginning to take hold (Barth, 1991; Smith & Scott, 1990). The challenge of creating school environments that promote excellence and equity is daunting but not impossible, and some of the preliminary efforts in this area are very promising. The focus of this special issue is on some of the significant work that is being carried out across the country to support this change. Although the range of topics is diverse, all papers are concerned with the complex problems associated with providing every student (particularly students with exceptional learning needs) an appropriate education that enables each to reach maximal potential.*

The history of service provision for children with exceptional needs in Canadian classrooms reveals substantial growth and development over the course of the century (Andrews & Lupart, 1993). Early practice, which can best be described as exclusionary, has gradually shifted and advanced through a pattern of progressive inclusion (Reynolds, 1989). What began as a sprinkling of specialized institutions separated from the educational mainstream evolved into *special education*: an educational delivery system for students with exceptional learning needs characterized by features such as categorization, specialized testing and assessment, special class placement, specially trained teachers, separate funding, and specialized teaching methods and curriculum.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper first published in 1992, *Exceptionality Education Canada*, 2 (1 & 2), 1–7.

Litigation, legislation, and parent and professional advocacy groups have all played an important role in the widespread expansion of special education services in schools, particularly during the past four decades. Indeed these efforts have been so successful that special education has become a complex second education system in the majority of contemporary Canadian schools and districts. Ironically, this success has contributed directly to the current dilemma now facing schools. On the one hand, special education has assumed increasing responsibility for students who are unable to achieve in the regular classroom, while general education systematically has catered to the mainstream. On the other hand, broad-based movements such as integration and mainstreaming have attempted to reverse the pattern of categorization and removal of special education students, while general education has experienced increasing numbers of at-risk students and school drop-outs. Coincidentally, there is growing criticism that the public education system has become mediocre and ineffective. How are Canadian schools attempting to address these seemingly paradoxical forces? In response to these concerns, school reform, restructuring, and new concepts such as the regular education initiative, inclusive education, and collaborative consultation have come into prominence in educational thinking and practice. Increasingly, educators are supporting the notion that separate systems of education need to be merged together to create a unified system of education that can meet the learning needs of all students, and at the same time, equip them with the knowledge, creativity, and thinking capability that will enable them to contribute to Canadian society in the 21st century.

Current school reform efforts are complex and multi-faceted. The merging of regular and special education systems will undoubtedly impact on all dimensions of school practice, from philosophical frameworks to professional preparation and instructional delivery. Transformation in contemporary schooling, according to Passow (1986), “must involve changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, understanding of staff; in the organizational relationships of the school; in the climate and environment of the school; and in the transactions between teachers and learners” (p. 216). In addition, providing for an increasingly diverse student population in inclusive classrooms will require “the reform of the current classification system, the building of a closer relationship between regular and special education, the identification and use of finely graduated interventions, and a greater emphasis on prevention” (Reschly, 1987, p. 51).

There are no simple solutions to the numerous challenges that school reform and inclusive education create. All facets of Canadian education systems stand to be affected, from the federal and provincial level, to school division level, to individual schools, classrooms, teachers, and students. Successful transition will require the optimal utilization of all the resources available to us. This includes making effective use of relevant theory, research, financial resources, and most importantly, human resources. Top-down initiatives such as provincial legislation can be instrumental in setting the direction and for establishing a framework for educational change. However, classroom teachers are the front-line professionals who will have the major responsibility for making inclusive education work. New roles will need to be defined for special educators and regular classroom teachers, and greater emphasis will need to be given to collaborative consultation. Flexible use of a variety of instructional methods, formats, and procedures will enable teachers to meet a diversity of student needs in the general classroom.

Change of this magnitude is necessarily long-term, slow to effect, and often times piecemeal. While accepting the fact that much work still needs to be done, the papers in this issue contribute substantially to a promising start. They can be roughly grouped into three themes. The first theme, *provincial profiles and policy*, is concerned with existing legislation, special education policy, and the impact this has on day-to-day practice. Efforts to better serve the needs of

students with exceptional learning needs can be markedly affected by the legislative framework, as has been demonstrated with the U.S. federal legislation of Public Law 94-142 (1977). The second theme, *categorical reflection*, refers to an in-depth analysis of a particular area of exceptionality as a means of forecasting possible future direction and change. The third theme is more broadly defined as *teachers dealing with diversity*. This theme reflects the central role of general classroom teachers; their readiness and the support they require to create successful inclusive classrooms and schools. Interweaving through all themes is the implication that past and present experience in serving students with exceptional learning needs in Canadian schools can inform planning and decision making, as well as facilitate change during this critical transition period.

### **Provincial Profiles and Policy**

Even though there are federal, provincial, and local levels of jurisdiction which influence the system and delivery of education in Canada, primary responsibility and control over educational policy and practice is established at the provincial level. Every province and territory has its own school act, regulations, policies, and collective agreements. As a consequence, there is considerable variability across the country with respect to the development and provision of educational services for students with exceptional learning needs. Important matters such as funding, teacher certification, identification, assessment and placement, legal rights, and parental involvement can be prescribed in provincial legislation or policy, with the potential to enhance or limit the type and quality of service provided. As Canadian schools begin to struggle with the changes necessary to meet the demands of effective inclusive education, it will be important to know what works and what doesn't work. Whereas the reality of considerable variation from province to province makes it difficult to assess Canada's progress with inclusive education, there is a richness of experience to be mined by studying the advances and set-backs of each of the provinces and territories. In the first paper of this issue, Little presents a comprehensive overview of the issues and status of inclusive education policy and practice across the country. On the basis of the results of his Canada-wide research survey, Little concludes that even though progress toward inclusive education is evident in many schools and districts, there are many identifiable barriers that serve to maintain the status quo in the form of a dual education system. Information based on cross-Canada school experience is relatively limited and as such, Little's paper makes a significant contribution in this area. This theme is further developed by Smith who uses a case study approach to effectively address the issue of provincial funding policies and their impact on educational services for children with special needs. Using the example of Quebec funding policy, Smith extrapolates to the broader arena of Canadian schools and spells out the implications important to consider in formulating policy to promote inclusive education.

### **Categorical Reflection**

Traditional efforts in serving students with exceptional learning needs have been categorically based; in theory and in practice. There is some concern that, in the move toward a unified system of education, the unique contributions of this work will be lost. The importance of preserving the special education knowledge base and experience within a holistic, unified education system cannot be overstated. Two papers, by Shore, Rejskind, and Kanevsky and Lusthaus and Lusthaus, provide an in-depth analysis of a particular area of exceptionality as a means of examining the patterns of development and change in educational service provision. Shore, Rejskind, and Kanevsky predict the continued erosion of educational provisions for students who are gifted

if Canadian educators maintain the promotion of separate policies and programs for gifted and regular education. Their analysis of recent Canadian literature in gifted and general education points to a viable alternative to this problematic outcome. They identify several areas of common ground where combined efforts or interactive dialogue between the two systems may serve to strengthen and improve current practices. Most importantly, the discussion makes a strong case for the potential contribution of gifted education in advancing educational excellence in the schools. The Lusthaus and Lusthaus paper focuses on the evolution of school and community services for individuals who have a mental disability. Their historical analysis of the six major stages of growth and development over the course of this century reveals a gradual and generally forward movement toward full inclusion for these individuals. Capturing the importance of both moral and ethical considerations in these advances, Lusthaus and Lusthaus challenge educators to hear the voices of people with mental disabilities and those who advocate on their behalf.

### **Teachers Dealing With Diversity**

The ultimate success of inclusive schools in Canada rests with teachers. What teachers know, what they think, and what they do in the classroom are the most important aspects in the transition process. Teacher preparation, attitudes, professional relationships and collaboration, and the continuing development of expertise are some of the key areas of focus. Teacher attitudes toward integration of students with exceptional learning needs have been examined by Bunch. His results suggest that teaching experience in full inclusion contexts tends to promote more positive views of integration than dual system environments. Although the findings provide some direction in this important area, Bunch cautions that more research is required at both the pre-service and in-service level, and in dual and inclusive education schools.

Many Canadian schools have taken steps to initiate the process of transition toward inclusion and there is increasing interest in finding out what factors most contribute to success. Duquette provides a descriptive study of five teachers in a school recognized for its success in implementing inclusive education. The results of in-class observations and interview sessions reveal a number of common and effective teacher behaviours in management, instruction, and questioning. In addition to effective classroom practices, cooperative learning, and student and teacher support were identified as important variables. Fasano and Brown extend the theme with a description of an innovative project to promote collaboration between regular and special education in a secondary school. Combining expertise and resources with the local university, project SCAMP illustrates how existing programs within the community can be effectively redeployed for the benefit of all participants, particularly the students. These three papers underscore the need for more extensive research effort in the areas of teacher development and teachers as change agents. Systematic sharing and reporting of successful teaching practice in support of inclusive education will ensure a smooth transition as schools prepare all their students for the 21st century.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Canadian school systems are currently being challenged to provide equitable and excellent education for all its students. The papers presented in this issue illustrate the kind of creative problem solving required to transform current systems to achieve this goal. As Skrtic (Thousand, 1990) aptly pointed out, the present dilemma can best be resolved by moving toward an adhocra-cy-based education system that invites educators to utilize and share their professional expertise to invent novel and effective ways of meeting the learning needs of all students within their

classrooms and schools. In the final paper of this issue, Lupart, McKeough, and Yewchuk provide an overview of a colloquium series, organized to stimulate this kind of change.

### References

- Andrews, J., & Lupart, J. L. (1993). *The inclusive classroom: Educating exceptional children*. Toronto, ON: Nelson.
- Barth, R. S. (1991). *Improving schools from within: Teachers, parents, and principals can make the difference*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lipsky, D. K., & Gartner, A. G. (1989). Building the future. In D. K. Lipsky & A. G. Gartner (Eds.), *Beyond separate education: Quality education for all* (pp. 255–290). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Passow, A. H. (1986). Beyond the commission reports: Toward meaningful school improvement. In A. Lieberman (Ed.), *Rethinking school improvement* (pp. 206–218). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Porter, G. L., & Richler, D. (1991). *Changing Canadian schools*. North York, ON: The Roeher Institute.
- Public Law 94-142. (1977). *Federal Register, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Vol. 42, No. 163, 121a.13*.
- Reschly, D. J. (1987). Learning characteristics of mildly handicapped students: Implications for classification, placement, and programming. In M. C. Wang, M. C. Reynolds, & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Handbook of special education: Research and practice, Vol. 1, Learner characteristics and adaptive education* (pp. 35–58). Toronto, ON: Pergamon.
- Reynolds, M. C. (1989). An historical perspective: The delivery of special education to mildly disabled and at-risk students. *Remedial and Special Education, 10*(6), 7–11.
- Smith, S. C., & Scott, J. J. (1990). *The collaborative school: A work environment for effective instruction*. Eugene, OR: ERIC/CEM School Management Digest Series, Number 33, EA 021 574.
- Stainback, W., Stainback, S., & Bunch, G. (1989). Introduction and historical background. In S. Stainback, W. Stainback, & M. Forest (Eds.), *Educating all students in the mainstream of regular education* (pp. 3–26). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Thousand, J. S. (1990). Organizational perspectives on teacher education and renewal: A conversation with Tom Skrtic. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 13*(1), 30–35.
- Villa, R. A., Thousand, J. S., Stainback, W., & Stainback, S. (Eds.). (1992). *Restructuring for caring and effective education: An administrative guide to creating heterogeneous schools*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

### Author's Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Judy Lupart, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, T6G 2G5.

Email: judy.lupart@ualberta.ca