

Championing inclusion: A reflection

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We are shaped by our experiences, and my lengthy journey in education has led me to be a firm advocate for inclusive teaching and learning. There is no single approach that will serve every student well, of course, but on the whole, inclusion seems the most promising path for schools, and for those impacted by schools.

In my elementary school years, there was a student in one of my classes who had significant learning challenges - a 'visible' handicap in that she didn't quite look like the rest of us, didn't quite speak as we spoke and didn't quite seem to know how to relate to the group. I have two enduring memories from that time. First, our teacher was protective of her, which led me to feel that the girl was fragile somehow and contributed to my sense that she necessarily remained on the fringes of our class. Second, I recall feeling deeply sad in her presence. I couldn't have said why, except perhaps that I'd have felt sad if I had been part of the whole, and yet so clearly apart from it. It was as though I was beginning to understand that just being in the room didn't equate to belonging - that belonging mattered greatly.

Later, but when I was still young and unconscious about the world around me, I remember sitting in my parents' car one warm afternoon in a southern April in the U.S., listening to the radio while they ran a quick errand. A man was explaining that the solution to the dilemma of school integration was providing 'separate but equal' schools. He reasoned that if African American students (then Negroes) went to schools that were as good or better than the white schools, there would be no need to integrate. I listened with the sense that I must be misunderstanding something. He was an adult, after all, and on the radio, so what he was saying must be correct. Still, it didn't seem equal to tell a group of people that they had to stay 'in their place'.

My first teaching job was in the deeply rural South in the U.S. during the first year of mandated school integration. I saw daily the festering pain and injustice embedded in an 'us and them' society - in places and times when those in power craft structures to keep 'the other' at a distance - to preserve opportunity for the 'deserving'.

A couple of years later in another town, another school, my middle school classroom was three doors down from the 'special' room for students still labelled as 'retarded'. The students in that classroom were much older than my students, able by law to attend our school until they were 21. They were also much younger than my students in many ways. Their teacher, eager to break the isolating bubble in which her students lived inside the school, asked if I'd be willing to have twelve-year-olds in one of my classes be 'buddies' with her students. In that capacity, my students visited her students to work

on joint projects a number of times during the year. It was easy to see pleasure and joy on the faces of the 'special' students when we all worked together, and disappointment when the bell rang and took us away. I always had the sense that my students were the greater beneficiaries of the collaborations. Their world was bigger as a result and more empathetic. They often commented on how their ideas changed as they heard those of their neighbour students.

Shortly after I began working at the university, I met Kevin, a young man from Korea who had come to the U.S. as a boy and who spoke no English. His teacher placed him at the back of the room with paper and coloured pencils and told him to draw. All day. All year. His classmates didn't understand who he was, what he was. He didn't talk. He didn't do school work. In time, they taunted him. His mounting frustration at having no voice in school expressed itself as he began hitting his classmates. Because he was 'violent', his teacher recommended him for special education testing, which resulted in labelling him emotionally disturbed and cognitively impaired. He spent the rest of his elementary years in a self-contained classroom for 'troubled kids'. His family moved to a different town as Kevin entered middle school. His school records somehow didn't follow him, and he was assigned to 'regular' classes. By that point, he spoke English relatively well, and he was 'normal' again. I taught Kevin as he was completing his Ph.D. in Special Education. His goal was to research, teach about, and advocate inclusion because he understood with particular clarity how easy it is to label and separate students in ways that can debilitate and dehumanise.

These instances, of course, are representative of a much longer chain of experiences that, along with research findings, led me to be an advocate for inclusive schools and classrooms.

Inclusion is a philosophy as well as a practice. In terms of inclusion and students with identified special education needs, inclusion means creating classrooms in which those students are part of the general education student population rather than housing the students with special needs in separate classes or, in some cases, even separate schools. The goal, however, is not just to 'place' the students in general education classrooms, but rather to create classrooms in which all students can learn well together. In a broader sense, inclusion advocates classroom heterogeneity of many kinds, so that students of varied cultures, languages, races, abilities, interests, and approaches to learning can, under the guidance of an informed teacher, create a learning community that mirrors the diversity in society - one in which students have the opportunity to understand human

differences as both normal and desirable, and in which students are enriched as they grow to understand and appreciate the elements that all humans have in common as well as the differences that make us individuals.

Enacted effectively, inclusion has significant benefits for students, teachers, and the communities schools serve.

Inclusion benefits students

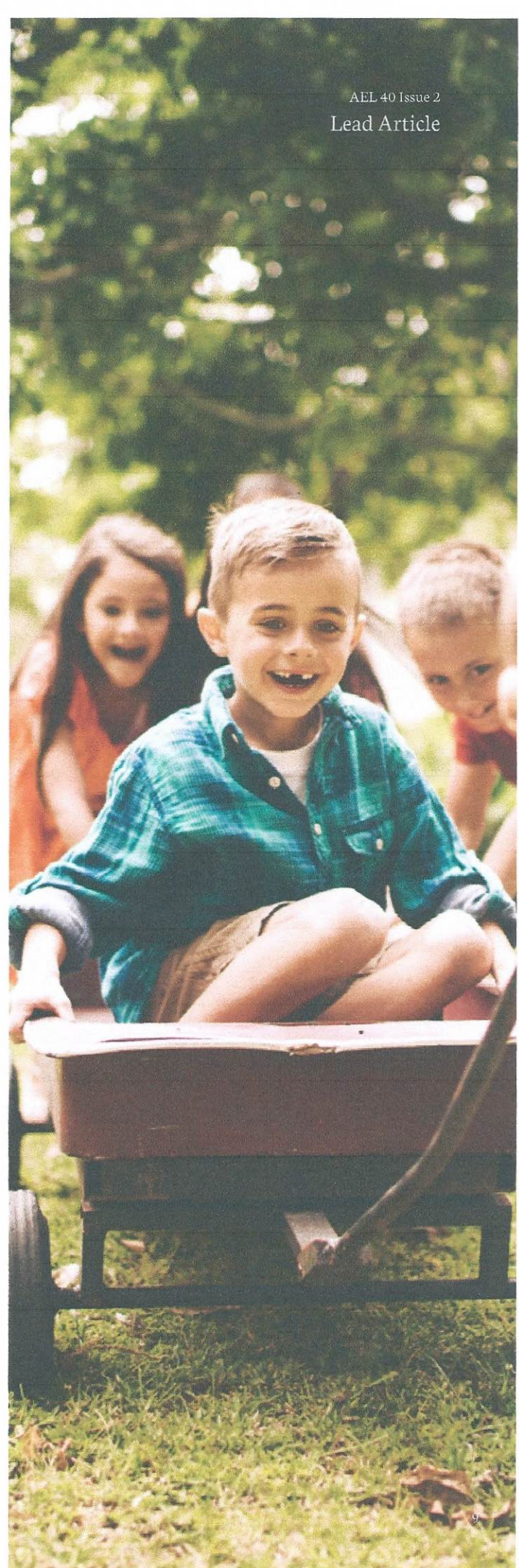
Inclusive classrooms can benefit students with special needs on personal and academic levels. Good intentions notwithstanding, young people often suffer deeply when they are segregated as learners. When a student gets a message that he or she is so different that they must leave the general education classroom and go to 'resource rooms' in order to learn, feelings of disappointment, loneliness, inferiority, rejection, shame, and resentment often follow and only intensify if the students are assigned to separate, full-time classrooms. It's difficult for those students not to feel as though they are unwanted by and substandard in the eyes of the larger school community (Villa & Thousand 2005). The long-term effects of those feelings are pernicious.

If it were generally the case that students in such settings were likely to reap major academic benefits from segregated placements, it might be easier to argue for segregation. In general, however, research indicates otherwise. For example, in the U.S., the landmark legislation that opened the way to more inclusive practices (Individuals with Disabilities Act, or IDEA) notes that more than twenty years of studies show that ensuring access to regular classrooms, services and related opportunities to the maximum degree possible, and providing support in those settings, benefits the education of students with special learning needs versus services provided in segregated settings.

Looking at the impact of segregated classes on students more broadly, researchers conclude that instruction in lower track classes is of lower quality than instruction in higher tracks, and that continuing placement in those segregated classes has a negative cumulative effect on students in those classes over the years (Donaldson, LeChasseur & Mayer 2016; Mickelson 2015; Reeves 2009). Thus for many students beyond those with special needs identification, segregation and stratification are often negative influences on learning as well.

The potential for skilfully taught heterogeneous, general education classes to benefit a broad range of students is illustrated by a de-tracked high school history class I observed over an extended time a few years ago. The class contained several students with varied, identified special education needs, English language learners, and students from broadly divergent economic backgrounds. The teacher made the case from the first day that every student in the room brought with them a unique set of experiences and perspectives, and that students in the class would be poorer if they did not regularly hear from and share with everyone. The teacher shaped the content around 'big ideas' that were relevant to the students' different backgrounds. She guided discussions in a way that involved each student and caused students to listen carefully to one another and build on one another's thinking. She also regularly provided time for guided individual and small group work based variously on students' interests or needs.

In addition to frequent checks to get student input on ways in which the class was or wasn't working for them and responding accordingly, she conducted a year-end student evaluation of the class as well. Two themes were evident and compelling in student responses. One came from students who had generally identified positively with school. That response went something like: 'When I started the school year, I thought only some of us in this class were smart. I've come





to understand that everyone has a viewpoint that's worth listening to, and I have learned much from listening beyond my ideas'. The second theme came from students who had been in self-contained, pull-out, or lower track classes in the past. That theme went something like: 'This is the first time I have ever thought I could do school,' or, 'This is the first time I've ever been treated like a real student,' or, 'In this class, I felt like I made a difference'. In this well-conceived inclusive classroom, it generally appeared to be the case that there were many wins and few, if any, losses.

Inclusion benefits teachers

The premise that teaching in inclusive classrooms benefits teachers may seem more difficult to support. Some teachers feel imposed upon when asked to teach a broad range of learners. Some are afraid of the challenge. Some worry about time that would be involved in developing inclusive classes. Some are uncertain about dealing with potential parent concerns. Some feel they lack expertise needed to respond to students with complex needs. There are plenty of 'Yes, but's' to illustrate concerns about inclusion, at least from some teachers.

Still, teachers on the whole want to do what benefits their students. Further, teachers need to grow in all aspects of their work if schools are to stay apace with the needs of new generations of students and of a rapidly changing world. Experts on classroom inclusion (e.g. Janney & Snell 2013) explain that effective inclusion calls on teachers to: teach flexibly, build curriculum around big ideas that have high relevance and help students make meaning of content, respond to students' misunderstandings in ways that are supportive rather than critical or punitive, use on-going assessment to understand where students are in their learning and to adjust instructional plans accordingly. They need to ensure that teaching and learning draw on multiple modalities, establish organised but flexible classrooms, use time flexibly, teach students the skills of independence, and modify tasks to account for students' varied entry points. They also advise that it is important for teachers to 'teach up' (Tomlinson 2017), that is, to plan for advanced students first, then scaffold other students to enable them to work as effectively and fully as possible with the

same rich ideas and skills. These are competencies that ought to be foundational in all classrooms. To support teachers wisely and consistently over time in developing confidence in these areas would professionalise teachers to a greater degree. As competence and a sense of self-efficacy in these areas would benefit so many students, my experience suggests that teachers would find their work to be more satisfying.

Inclusion benefits society

We live in a time when diversity is a hallmark of society – a time when one of our greatest challenges is shedding centuries-old suspicions of 'the other'. Schools in which we determine that some students are smart and others are not, in which class assignments effectively create a caste system, and in which we position success as a zero sum game (where my child must lose in order for your child to win), reinforce divisions beyond the schoolhouse door that diminish us all.

By contrast, we have the capacity to create spaces where we hear one another, learn from one another, and work side by side to the benefit of all of us. When schools and the classrooms in them present diversity as opportunity rather than as impediment, when they dignify each life, when they model appreciation of all members, when they define success as broadly available, when they are catalysts for development of empathy in the young, and when they teach skills of effective collaboration and teamwork, they prepare each of the young and, all of the young for the world in which they already live and the world which they will increasingly shape.

Our goal ought not to be that every student, no matter what his or her needs, must be in inclusive classrooms all of the time. That's a wooden and unrealistic goal. We would benefit, however, from focusing our best energies on creating classroom and school environments in which our primary goal is creation of environments that are as welcoming as possible, as humane as possible, and as responsive to both shared and individual needs as possible so that the great majority of students can have equity of access to the best learning opportunities we know how to create – and can access those opportunities side by side.

The challenge ahead

All around us, we have exemplars of classrooms that champion diversity and meaningfully inclusive learning. All around us, we also have schools that continue to embrace segregation of students by perceived ability, which, in the end, also becomes segregation by economic status, language, culture, and disability.

We have the capacity as human beings and educators to move from the latter to the former. We know how to create curriculum that engages a full range of learners with important ideas. We know how to guide students in applying those connective ideas to a range of needs, issues, and problems in their world. We know how to tap into students' strengths and interests. We know how to create classrooms in which all members travel a common highway of learning, and how to create exit ramps all along the highway to make time and opportunity to address individual learning trajectories and to bolster individual interests and strengths. We know how to use formative assessment to benefit teaching and learning. We know how to establish classrooms in which elements of time, space, resources, and student groupings can be flexibly deployed. We know how to use specialists in ways that have significant and lasting impact within general education classrooms rather than only or largely outside of those classrooms. We know what it looks like and why it matters to provide sustained, classroom-based professional growth opportunities for teachers. We can decide to carve out time for teachers to plan collaboratively.

The critical questions we have before us as educators are not whether inclusion is beneficial, or how effective inclusion looks in action, or how we might deal with instances in which inclusive communities of learning are the wrong decision for a given student at a given time. Rather the critical questions before us are ones of will. How do we find it in ourselves to create schools that mirror and foreshadow a world in which belonging, achieving, and succeeding can be realities for each individual born into that world?

My journey in education leads me to agree with Grant Wiggins (1992) who concludes:

The challenge of schooling remains what it has been since the modern era began two centuries ago: ensuring that all students receive their entitlement.

They have the *right* to thought-provoking and enabling schoolwork so that they might use their minds well and discover the joy therein to be willing to push themselves farther.

They have the *right* to instruction that obligates the teacher, like the doctor, to change tactics when progress fails to occur...

Until such a time, we will have no insight into human potential. Until the challenge is met, schools will continue to reward the lucky or the already-equipped and weed out the poor performers (pp. xv-xvi).

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