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Championing Inclusive Education in Canada: Voices of Educators, Advocates, and Researchers

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Education

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Abstract

Previously conducted research overwhelmingly supports inclusive education for all students, however inclusive education is not always provided in Canada. This project aims to understand the current state of inclusive education in Canada. Participants included in this study were 33 experts in inclusive education in Canada and can be categorized into three groups: researchers, advocates, and educators. Chats regarding each participant's experiences with inclusive education were transcribed and thematic analysis was used. Six themes emerged: Family; Values and beliefs; Definition of Inclusive Education; Networking/Connecting; Information, policy and implementation; and School systems. Results demonstrated that there are some happenings in inclusive education that are working well and some that require improvement. The participants' varied viewpoints allow for a comprehensive understanding of the current state of inclusive education in Canada, as well as important next steps. Such an understanding is critical to make further progression towards inclusive education.

Keywords

Inclusive Education; Inclusion; Inclusive Policy; Definition of Inclusive Education; Students with Special Educational Needs; Inclusive Teaching Approaches to Learning; Inclusive School Leadership; Parent Movement

Summary for Lay Audience

Previously conducted research overwhelmingly supports inclusive education for all students, however inclusive education is not always provided in Canada. This project aims to understand the current state of inclusive education in Canada. Participants included in this study were 33 experts in inclusive education in Canada and can be categorized into three groups: researchers, advocates, and educators. Chats regarding each participant's experiences with inclusive education were transcribed and transcriptions were analyzed to identify themes within the data. Six themes emerged during analysis: Family; Values and beliefs; Definition of Inclusive Education; Networking/Connecting; Information, policy and implementation; and School systems. Results demonstrated that there are some happenings in inclusive education that are working well and some that require improvement. The participants' varied viewpoints allow for a comprehensive understanding of the current state of inclusive education in Canada, as well as important next steps. Such an understanding is critical to make further progression towards inclusive education and improve learning circumstances and outcomes for Canadian students. A strong, inclusive society requires successful inclusive education.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Jacqueline Specht for her ongoing encouragement. I could not have wished for a more supportive guide in this process. I would also like to acknowledge the participants who graciously agreed to partake in the chat sessions, as well as the chat facilitators, Gordon Porter, Diane Richler and Dr. Jacqueline Specht for their work on the project. Thank you to Dr. Susan Rodger, whose thoughts and edits helped me to put forth my strongest work. I also want to extend my gratitude to Dr. Marguerite Lengyell, Dr. Jason Brown, and Dr. Pamela Cushing for their thoughtful questions and suggestions. I thoroughly enjoyed our discussions on inclusive education and beyond. I would like to acknowledge my internship supervisor, Gillian Villanueva, whose mentorship was invaluable in helping me to reach the finish line of this program. I would like to thank the Keenan, Bota and Smith families for all of their support over the past two years. I would also like to express my gratitude to my partner, Cody, whose patience and good nature I take for granted. Finally, I would like to share a special thank you to my mother, Carolyn, who is always, always there for me and to my sister, Avery, who makes me laugh and reminds me of what is important.

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Chapter 1

1 Introduction

Education is a human right, and all Canadian children have access to education (Council of Ministers of Education of Canada, n.d.; United Nations, 2008). Advocates for inclusive education assert that any form of exclusion or segregation of students within schools, including that based on special educational needs (SEN), is a violation of their human rights (Christensen, 1996; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996, 1999). Nevertheless, inclusive education for students with SEN is not always provided in Canada (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021). The research conducted to date overwhelmingly supports inclusive education for students with SEN and their classmates, thus, understanding the current state of inclusive education in Canada is important in order to provide the best learning circumstances to all Canadian students (Hattie, 2009; Hehir et al., 2016).

There are various definitions of inclusive education. The UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) defined inclusive education as education for all, with a commitment to respond to the needs of individual learners, including children with special education needs, within regular education systems, as compared to special education systems. Though widely accepted, this definition leaves room for interpretation (Boyle & Anderson, 2020). That said, Slee (2011) cautions against becoming preoccupied with the definition of inclusive education, as this may in fact hinder progress made towards inclusive practices.

Like much of the literature on this topic, the language, students with special educational needs (SEN), will be used in this study. The rationale for this choice was that all students have barriers to learning, yet only some students have identified special educational needs. In a report by the European Union (n.d.), a barrier to learning is "... anything that stands in the way of a [student] being able to learn effectively" (Defining the Concepts section, para. 1). With this definition in mind, distinguishing between students with and without barriers to learning is irrelevant, as all students have some sort of barrier to learning. This study will use the language students with and without SEN to differentiate between students that have identified SEN and those that do not have identified SEN.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

A Critical Disability Theory lens will be used when approaching this research. Critical Disability Theory places importance on understanding the systems of oppression affecting those with disabilities (Reaume, 2014). Students with SEN are part of this larger marginalized population, that is, people with disabilities. Like the social model of disability, Critical Disability Theory considers the barriers in place that affect individuals with disabilities, as compared to focusing on individual deficits (Brown & Parekh, 2013). From a Critical Disability Theory perspective, segregated schools are a system of oppression for people with disabilities (Reaume, 2014). Wielding fully inclusive classrooms is a necessary step towards eliminating the oppression of this population that occurs within schools, as well as shifting the focus away from individual deficits and towards dismantling the barriers that those with disabilities face in schools. Further, schools have been identified as institutions which can change society's perception of disability and otherness, so if students with disabilities are integrated in the classroom, perhaps they will not be labelled as outsiders beyond the classroom and throughout their lives (Ainscow, 2020).

Critical Disability Theory considers disability to be a socially constructed phenomenon (Reaume, 2014). This idea can enhance our understanding of why inclusive education systems are the best option for all students. If disabled is a socially constructed category, where is the line drawn between able and disabled? How are students sorted into classrooms based on their ability? If the distinction between able and disabled is completely constructed, it may be more logical to keep all students in the same classroom and modify teaching to and the expectations of each student based on specific circumstances.

1.2 Why Inclusive Education

The following statement from the World Conference on Special Needs Education, Salamanca, Spain, 1994 (as cited in Ainscow, 2020, p. 8) makes a strong argument for inclusive education, "Regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities [and] building an inclusive society..." This statement points to the idea that in-classroom learning extends beyond curriculum studies. Schools serve to socialize young people. A study by Dyson and colleagues (2004) found that there are profound social benefits for students without SEN attending school in inclusive classrooms including less prejudiced attitudes and greater understanding of others. Additional

social benefits of inclusive education for students without SEN include increased appreciation for diversity, increased responsiveness to others' needs and the development of pro-social values (e.g., commitment to others and forming new friendships) (Giangreco, 1997). Students without SEN educated in inclusive settings have also been found to value the inclusive nature of their education, expressing that it is reflective of the communities they will be a part of in adulthood (Allan et al., 2009). If students without SEN experience these social benefits by learning in inclusive classrooms, it is logical to reason that these benefits translate into the community, creating a more inclusive, welcoming, and robust society.

A review by Trembley (2011) considering both inclusive and special education models, demonstrated that learning outcomes for students with SEN were superior in inclusive education models. Research examining specific exceptionalities has found inclusive education to be effective across various populations. Studies have demonstrated effective learning and vocational outcomes for students with autism spectrum disorder (Harrower & Dunlop, 2001), learning disabilities (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011), mild intellectual disability (Crawford, 2005; Myklebust & Batevik, 2009) and general learning difficulties (Kramer et. al., 2021). Education systems that separate students based on ability have been shown to have poorer student performance than inclusive education systems, where the goal is to have all students succeed (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012).

A common critique of inclusive education models is that students without SEN will have decreased academic outcomes when learning amongst peers with SEN (Kalambouka et al., 2007). Kalambouka et al. (2007) considered results from 26 studies on academic development within inclusive classrooms and found that in most cases, students without SEN experienced neutral (58 percent) or positive (23 percent) academic effects attributed to being educated in inclusive classrooms. Recent meta-analyses by Szumski et al. (2017) and Kramer et. al. (2021) confirm the findings of Kalambouka et al. (2007). Szumski and colleagues' (2017) analysis of 47 studies on inclusive education and academic outcomes found that inclusion had a positive effect on academic outcomes for all students, while Kramer and colleagues' (2021) analysis of 40 studies on the topic found neutral academic effects of inclusion for students without SEN and positive effects for those with SEN. With positive or neutral academic effects of inclusion for

students without SEN, and positive academic effects for students with SEN, there is a strong case for inclusive education based on academic outcomes for all students.

Special education affects many students across the country. Considering inclusion on a national scale is challenging as education is provincially/territorially mandated and provincial/territorial data collection varies, however Inclusive Education Canada (n.d.) estimates that less than 50 percent of students with some specific types of SEN (i.e., Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities) are in inclusive classrooms across the country. Data collected in the province of Ontario demonstrates the number of students affected by inclusion in schools. Bennett et al. (2019) report that 14.5% of students spend all or most of their day in segregated settings, and a further 20% are withdrawn from their classrooms for learning support, across the province. In 2019-2020, school boards in Ontario reported a total headcount of 364,038 students (i.e., 17.7 percent of students) as receiving special education programming and/or services (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021). Thus, a substantial percentage of students in Ontario are impacted by a commitment, or lack thereof, to inclusive classrooms. Using the province of Ontario as an example, inclusive education has the potential to improve outcomes for students across the country.

1.3 Strengths of the Canadian Education System Regarding Inclusion

Despite segregated placements continuing to occur within Canada, it is still considered a leader in inclusive education on the global stage (Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019). Pockets of excellence regarding inclusion do exist. The province of New Brunswick has a fully inclusive education system, with all students in a common learning environment (AuCoin et al., 2020). The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results demonstrate that if New Brunswick is considered as a country, it ranks seventh in the world for reading, tenth for science and nineteenth for mathematics (Council of Ministers of Education of Canada, 2016; OECD, 2015). These rankings are amongst countries considered to have high academic student achievement, thus demonstrating that inclusive models can have high academic student achievement. Additionally, students in New Brunswick schools demonstrate high-levels of pro-social support and self-report strong feelings of social-connectedness (New Brunswick Health Council, 2019).

The Avon Maitland District School Board in Southwestern Ontario (i.e., Huron and Perth Counties) is a leader in inclusive education within the province (Inclusion Canada, 2015). To ensure success for students with SEN within the classroom, the Avon Maitland board introduced a new role, *Learning for All Coaches*, to work with elementary and secondary school teachers. These coaches work within classrooms, focusing on differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, assessment for, and of learning considering Individual Education Plans. This has resulted in the successful inclusion of students with diverse needs, who used to be in segregated classes, within regular classrooms alongside their peers. The Avon Maitland District School Board continues to strive for a fully inclusive system, recognizing that a commitment to inclusion requires enduring effort.

1.4 Barriers to Inclusive Education in Canada

Although pockets of excellence pertaining to inclusive education exist in Canada, inclusion is not systemic across the country. Substantial barriers to inclusive education remain. The Canadian government's organization of education contributes to some of these barriers. Education is the responsibility of the provinces/territories meaning there is no federal ministry or department of education and therefore no federal policy on inclusive education (Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019). Section 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) maintains equal rights for all individuals, free from discrimination (e.g., discrimination on the basis of mental, or physical ability). Section 15 requires that all students have equal access to education and thus all provincial and territorial education mandates incorporate inclusion (Specht & Thompson, 2022). Even so, there is considerable variation in inclusive practices across the provinces and territories. With an entirely inclusive education system, New Brunswick is often considered both nationally and internationally in the literature (Kopfer & Oskarsdottir, 2019). All students, regardless of their ability are educated in their neighborhood school, in classes amongst their peers (Government of New Brunswick, 2016). In contrast with the inclusive model of education in New Brunswick, the education system in Ontario has segregated placements for students with SEN (Specht & Thompson, 2022). Additionally, Alberta (2004) and Quebec (1999) have outdated documents regarding students with SEN, given the developments in research surrounding this topic (Loreman, 2018). Seemingly, education as a provincial/territorial responsibility and the ensuing inconsistencies regarding inclusive practices pose as barriers to fully inclusive education across Canada.

Educators' familiarity and comfortability with inclusion is another barrier to inclusive education. Loreman (2010) found that Canadian teachers do not always feel prepared to educate students in inclusive environments. Similarly, Slee (2013) states that teachers feel unqualified to teach students with SEN. Lacking preparation is known to contribute to burnout and in turn, negative student outcomes (Forlin, 2001). Even when pre-service teacher training includes inclusive practices, teachers describe a disconnect between theory learned and practice (Levine, 2006). Closing this gap may help to increase teachers' perceived ability to teach in inclusive classrooms, bolster educators' comfortability with inclusion and subsequently improve student learning outcomes. Teacher confidence in teaching students with SEN is a barrier to inclusive education in Canada that must be overcome.

1.5 Current Project

As a topic of interest globally for more than 30 years, research on inclusive education is extensive (Ainscow, 2020; Hehir et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the diverse thoughts and opinions of educators, researchers, politicians, principals, administrators, and parents of children with disabilities have not yet been considered within a single study. Any given analysis in this area of research appears to consider a narrower scope of expert opinions, therefore including a diverse collection of experts is a unique element of this research.

Even with its shortcomings, Canada is considered a global leader in inclusive education. Those working in inclusion across the country have expertise to share. Considering a diverse range of thoughts and experiences of individuals involved in inclusive education can help to understand the current strengths, potential areas of improvement and next steps regarding key topics such as educational policy, teacher training, family involvement, advocacy, and support in the education system to make progress towards inclusive education in Canada. This study seeks to understand the current conceptualization of experts in inclusive education across Canada to determine where the education systems in the country have been and where they must go to support these stakeholder groups in the movement towards inclusive education. How do experts in the field conceptualize the current state of inclusive education across Canada?

Chapter 2

2 Method

2.1 Participants

Participants were experts in inclusive education in Canada and can be categorized into three groups: researchers (16 participants), advocates (7 participants), and educators (8 participants).

Researchers were professors at universities working within the area of inclusive education.

Advocates were people who are family members of persons with disabilities and/or have worked or volunteered to improve the lives of people with disabilities. Educators were teachers and administrators in kindergarten to grade twelve education systems across Canada. Of the 31 participants, 5 identified as male and 26 identified as female.

2.2 Procedure

This research was conducted in partnership with Inclusion Canada and the Canadian Research Centre for Inclusive Education. Inclusion Canada is an organization that works to promote the inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families. The Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education is a group of postsecondary faculty members committed to conducting research that seeks to improve the education system for students with disabilities in Canada. Gordon Porter, Diane Richler, and Jacqueline Specht, who are themselves experts in the field of inclusive education, facilitated 30 chats, each with a different participant or pair of participants. Chats were informal discussions pertaining to the participant's personal and professional experiences regarding inclusive education in Canada. Chat probes included questions such as, how a participant began their work in inclusion, what are some current projects they are working on in the space, if and how they think inclusion has changed in Canadian schools over the duration of their career, what they believe are the logical next steps in the inclusive education movement, and what inclusive education means to them.

Chats were approximately 30 minutes in length. The first of the 30 chats was an introduction to the chat facilitators and the project, thus was not transcribed or coded for analysis. Participants were selected based on their diverse experiences with inclusive education. Participants were asked to participate by Inclusion Canada and agreed to have these chats shared with the public. These chats were conducted online via Zoom and recorded. The chat recordings were edited by a

professional at the request of Inclusion Canada. These chats are publicly available on Inclusion Canada's website for unrestricted viewing (<https://inclusiveeducation.ca/2022/01/14/lets-chat>). The publicly available chats were transcribed, and the transcriptions were the subject of analysis for this project.

2.3 Data Analyses

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the 29 transcribed chats. As per Braun and Clarke (2021), thematic analysis can be described in six phases. The first phase involves becoming familiar with the data. To begin familiarizing myself with the data, I watched the chats. As part of the knowledge mobilization piece of this larger project, I created discussion guides to accompany the chats for their release to the general public. After the chats were released online, I used Otter.ai software to transcribe them. Editing the transcriptions and simultaneously re-listening to the chats enhanced my familiarity with the data. At this point, I had watched, listened to and read the chats/chat transcriptions multiple times.

The second phase of thematic analysis involves generating initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). During this phase, I read the transcriptions again and noted items of importance using NVivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2020). These noted items were considered initial codes for the data and informed the next phases of analysis.

The third phase of thematic analysis requires searching for themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Looking at all the initial codes, I began to see major themes emerge from the data. I sorted and collated the identified initial codes into four overarching themes. During this stage, I formed a code book (see Appendix A) with both the initial codes and the themes to which they were sorted. I also started to develop general theme descriptions.

In the fourth phase of thematic analysis, themes are reviewed (Braun & Clarke, 2021). During this review, I ensured that the coded items within each theme formed patterns. I also considered how individual themes represented the overall data set. Keeping the themes in mind, I reread the data to confirm the data was accurately represented. While rereading, I ensured that none of the data was overlooked and that there were no missing themes. During this phase of analysis, I split one large theme, originally labelled as 'How-To', into three sub themes (i.e., Information, Policy, and Implementation, Networking/Connecting and School Systems). Upon considering the entire

data set and all the themes, I decided that these three sub themes represented the data more accurately as main themes, thus I dissolved the 'How-To' theme. The six subsequent themes include ideas regarding how to move towards inclusive education, so instead of having 'How-To' as a theme, it is actually interwoven throughout the remaining themes.

In the fifth phase of thematic analysis, themes are defined and renamed (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I defined and renamed themes based on the review conducted during phase four of the analysis. An analysis for each theme was written-up.

The final phase of thematic analysis centres on the production of a report, accounting for all the data and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To conclude the thematic analysis, I wrote the results and discussion sections of this project. This included an analysis of all the themes and how they related to the overall research objective, as well as previous literature on the topic. During this phase, excerpts from the transcripts that represented each theme were selected and included in the results section.

To ensure credibility when analysing the interviews, the guidelines from Nowell et al.'s (2017) approach to achieving trustworthiness in thematic coding were followed. Lincoln and Guba (1989) explained that establishing a research project as trustworthy allows both researchers and readers to confidently consider the findings worthy of attention. The criteria of trustworthiness (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) parallel quantitative research design's reliability and validity. At each stage of analysis, Lincoln and Guba's (1989) criteria for trustworthiness were ensured as per Nowell et al.'s (2017) recommendations.

During phase one, prolonged engagement with data, data triangulation (i.e., referring to the body of research on inclusive education), documentation of reflexive thoughts and ideas about potential themes was done to ensure trustworthiness (Nowell et al. 2017). In phase two, researcher triangulation and the use of a coding framework aided in developing trustworthiness. Further researcher triangulation and notes on theme connections and the developments of hierarchies of concepts were taken during phase three to guarantee trustworthiness. During phase four, researcher triangulation was done again to vet themes by all team members. To confirm that the themes accurately reflect the entire data set, a comparison of themes to the raw data set was done. In phase five, researcher triangulation, documentation of theme naming and team

meetings, as well as a consensus on theme naming occurred. At the sixth and final stage, peer debriefing, as well as checking in with members of the research project ensured that the descriptions of respondents' views align with what they meant. At this stage, the process of coding and analysis was described to ensure transparency and trustworthiness.

Chapter 3

3 Results

The purpose of this study was to understand how experts in the field are currently conceptualizing inclusive education across the country. Thematic analysis was used to gain an understanding of what experts expressed regarding inclusion during 29 chat sessions. The overarching themes that arose from the thematic analysis were: Family; Values and beliefs; Definition of Inclusive Education; Networking/Connecting; Information, policy and implementation; and School systems. Each theme will be presented within the results section using quotes to support the ideas taken from the coding. Participants from each of the three participant groups spoke to each of the six overarching themes, thus all themes are relevant to researchers, advocates and educators, respectively.

3.1 Family

Family was one of the themes that arose during thematic analysis. Participants shared that families are a crucial part of inclusive education and the movement towards inclusive education. According to participants, individual families, as well as parent organizations push the movement forward.

Well, I think the biggest promoter has been advocacy, and advocacy, first and foremost, from parents and parent groups. - Zana Lutfiyaa, Researcher

That being said, participants remarked that the struggle for families looking for inclusive education remains. Families need to be listened to, given a seat at the table, and have their opinions valued. Communication between schools and families is important for inclusion on an individual basis and inclusive education on a larger scale as well. Good communication between schools and families can be a challenge.

I think one of the really big things that we've struggled with as a family with inclusive education has been that even just access to education has been unreliable. For us, it has required me to step away from the labor market, so that I can be home full time, I had to pick my youngest up from school today at 9:46. - Anna MacQuarrie, Advocate

Also parent involvement. I've been spending the last three or four years really digging into [parent engagement]. Successful schools care enough about engaging those families.

- Tanya Whitney, Educator

In order for families to play the part the movement needs them to play, they must be supported, by one another, by their communities (i.e., those involved in inclusive education and those not currently involved in inclusive education) and by leadership (e.g., school leadership, politicians, other advocates).

I think the reason why I am so involved is that I needed the support myself, and there wasn't a current support system in place. So what better reason than to make one up and you know, with another parent, founded our family support organization here in our area. And it is very similar to supports that you might find with Inclusion Saskatchewan, or Inclusion Canada. And it's just a small regional version of that.

- Blusette Campbell, Advocate

I think an important question to ask is, even if a parent knows that their child has a right to be part of the education system, are they going to take up that fight? And I would actually argue that we need to start thinking about ways where parents don't have to be the ones to do that. There's bigger responsibility, social responsibility to create that.

- Kathryn Underwood, Researcher

Everyone should have a network of support, we need to build that for people. But we need to be there for them, attending school meetings for them, finding them resources, we need to give parents enough information so that they're not totally intimidated when they enter into a school meeting. And they need people with them who will speak on their behalf when they're too sad or too upset to know what to do next.

- Marilyn Dolmage, Advocate

3.2 Values and Beliefs

Across all participant groups, participants spoke a lot about their personal values and beliefs about inclusion and more generally the importance of values and beliefs in the inclusive education movement. During thematic analysis, it was evident that a theme embodying this

content was required to represent the data. The idea that disability rights are human rights is at the core of this theme. Participants explained that inclusive education matters because education is a human right and therefore all students, must have access to education provided alongside their peers.

And when they were meetings with the Premier and saying, this is a human rights issue, you shouldn't be segregating children based on disability. He fundamentally agreed with that. - Ken Pike, Advocate

[Inclusion] is a model that works. And every student should have the right and access to it. - Amy Kipfer, Educator

Participants also spoke about the value of human difference and how they believe we are a stronger society when we are diverse and inclusive. These ideas form a strong argument for inclusive education.

...over time, we've probably learned that society does better with diversity. And diversity in all of its forms. - Cathy Montreuil, Educator

So this idea if we can build into our very young students, when they first start noticing that people are different from one another to not say, oh, that's bad, and we shouldn't talk about it, but to say, let's talk about it. And let's celebrate it, because that's actually how the world is. And that's how the world works. And that's what makes it so rich. And let's not make it something that's awkward and unusual. - Kimberly Maich, Researcher

I fully believe that inclusive education is vital in the success of all children as I see the classroom as a microscopic version of community. And so if you don't have it in the classroom, how we expect as a society for inclusion just to magically happen after a student graduates would be preposterous. So it's essential that we create as much as possible the community that we envision for society, within the classroom of schools. - Bluesette Campbell, Advocate

Unfortunately, many harmful ideas regarding students with SEN persist in society today. Some of these harmful ideas include, othering, normalization, trying to treat or cure disability and tolerating segregated settings for students with SEN. Given that these ideas continue to exist, moving away from inclusion in schools and towards special education/segregated models continues to happen in some instances. Participants spoke about dispelling some of these negative values and beliefs to mitigate threats to inclusive education, halt any further regression from occurring, and to make progress in the movement.

...so that there isn't that us and them idea, that othering that's so harmful, there's that tide or current of segregation. It's hard to work against it, when it's better to stop it. Right? For children. - Marilyn Dolmage, Advocate

So last week, it was announced that those students with special educational needs will have to continue in person support as they require additional support that can't be accommodated through remote learning. Well, why can't it be accommodated through remote learning is my question. So I think in this province, we still have this, at least at the ministry level and clearly, school boards who are still offering segregated settings, still have the mindset that these kids are other. And the rules are different for them. - Tiffany Gallagher, Researcher

...inclusion becomes a bit of a scapegoat. And it becomes the catch all for all of our concerns like, we don't have enough staff, it's because of inclusion. We have kids that are out of control. Inclusion isn't working. - Tanya Whitney, Educator

...looking at a whole person and their culture and language and all of it, the multiple identities. I think that's a much better place to be than just thinking that we're into person fixing... - Lynn Aylward, Researcher

Seemingly just as important as dispelling negative thoughts and beliefs about students with SEN and inclusive education, is cultivating and strengthening positive views about students with SEN and inclusive education. Participants spoke about believing in the possibility of change, inclusion being at the core of schools and education systems, having a shared vision within schools, and having long term vision as necessary values and beliefs when working towards inclusion.

And somehow the people involved were so positive, that we knew they were going to win. I mean, it was just, we just knew that this was an incredible opportunity. - Lynn Aylward, Researcher

...it's not an add on, it's how we frame our schools. It's the very foundation... - Tanya Whitney, Educator

I think you might have called me a zealot. At one time, I really believed it could work. And I was determined that it was going to work even on sometimes very stressful days where colleagues that I had worked among and beside for years, resented me and sometimes it felt a little cool there. - Julie Stone, Educator

If you believed in the why, you had that sort of moral imperative, then you would work hard and get the job done. - Missy Pfaff, Educator

3.3 Definition of Inclusive Education

The theme definition of inclusive education arose during thematic analysis. Participants spoke about the challenges in defining inclusive education, what not having an agreed upon definition means for the movement, as well as aspects of the concept that they believe are critical. As participants explained, the definition of inclusive education is not yet agreed upon by stakeholders.

...because I think even the definition of inclusive education is misunderstood. - Marilyn Dolmage, Advocate

We're still debating what the word inclusion means. Which is always to me sort of a red herring, you know, if I can keep debating the meaning of inclusion, I don't actually have to take any action. We can keep on kicking that action piece down the road. - Tim Loreman, Researcher

Now, you know, what people mean by inclusive practices is still kind of open to debate but you have a starting point. - Donna Barrett, Educator

Regardless, there are components of inclusive education that many participants spoke about as being crucial to successful inclusion in schools. They believe it is possible to move towards inclusive practices without necessarily having a concrete definition of it.

At the beginning, integration, it was as long as you could look normal, be okay, you were good to go. So I think we're still fighting that one for sure. Especially when we think about children with so called behavioral norms that don't fit. Yeah, there's a there's a judgment made, and a value judgment made. That's, that isn't, isn't fair. And it is in no way respectful of their human rights. - Lynn Aylward, Researcher

But I always have the question, in the back of my mind about inclusion into what, so what exactly are we asking parents and children to be included into, because if we still maintain ableist structures, and there's ableism, and exclusion that are rampant in classrooms, and rampant in schools, that's not going to be successful either, right? So I think that there has to be real attention to more than just putting children together and being like, alright, it's done, we've done it, or removing special education, now we're defacto inclusive, that also will not work. - Gillian Parekh, Researcher

Because these are the same things that our families often encounter, pre-pandemic, shouldn't, wouldn't homeschooling be better or I don't really think that your child is suited to our classroom. So it's not about at times providing more support, but just saying, you know, it's not a good fit. - Kimberly Maich, Researcher

So my conclusion to all that is that inclusive education is really, really important for us to see that perspective of kids getting literacy, numeracy alongside their peers, as well as all the life skills, not the traditional, sometimes special education, life skills, but life skills of being with their peers in regular classrooms is so so critical. - Missy Pfaff, Educator

Well, I guess leaving out the social, you know, not being clear that [inclusion is] both social and academic, maybe that's the best way to, to sum that up. - Marilyn Dolmage, Advocate

Additionally, some participants expressed concern that ‘ability’ is being overlooked when considering inclusion. They urged stakeholders not to consider inclusion without acknowledging ‘ability’ as a central pillar.

Because it's almost, to me anyway, in my work in looking at all of these issues of identity, that disability still seems to get left out, and that disability is still bad. Right? - Gillian Parekh, Researcher

And the whole social justice movement can't leave people behind. We don't and it's doing that right now. - Vianne Timmons, Researcher

That being said, all facets of individuals’ identities must be considered when conceptualizing inclusive education. With what classrooms across the country look like today, successful inclusion will require inclusive practices that account for the multiple identities of all students.

3.4 Networking/Connecting

Participants spoke about the importance of connecting with others, both within and beyond the field, to move towards inclusive education. These ideas are encapsulated within the theme, connecting. Effective communication between stakeholders in inclusive education, such as school boards and researchers at post secondary institutions, families and schools, families and ministries of education, is critical to making progress. This networking allows for the sharing of knowledge, resources, and experiences alike. Meaningful connections may provide support to those who find themselves struggling for inclusion. Cultivating relationships can also bring inclusion to the attention of those that are not currently considering it, so they can realize its importance and create positive change. Connections between those with disabilities and those without can create opportunities for life-changing experiences. These formative experiences can result in strong beliefs in inclusion, helping the movement towards inclusive education.

And so there's this, there's this space, and if you allow it, there's the ability for people to innovate and find the new ways. And then we need to connect them so that we grow the new, who we are, and how we do things around here. - Cathy Montreuil, Educator

And then I think the other thing people can do is connect with other people who are fighting the same fight in order to shoulder that burden together. - Genia Stephen, Advocate

And I think the more that we collaborate with school districts and individual schools, to do the research, to work with the practitioners, to have the policymakers included, right, then it's going to change, it's not changing fast enough. - Gillian Parekh, Researcher

No matter where we're at, it's about relations, and trying to influence who wants to pay attention and, or who will pay attention to make change happen. - Jody Carr, Advocate

I started working with, as an 18 year old working with children with disabilities in Australia, just in sort of summer camps, and after school care and those sorts of settings and went on to train as an elementary teacher, but I always wanted to be a special ed teacher... - Tim Loreman, Researcher

The idea of social proximity and its benefits for inclusive education also came up in the chats. As social proximity increases, so does the likelihood of relationships forming between people. Participants shared that whether in rural or urban centres, knowing one's neighbours can positively impact inclusive education efforts.

...first the smaller cities, even we have small cities, but versus rural, that proximity really makes a difference. And I think that's how we grow. When we're together, we start to realize that even though we're different, we're okay. And so the smaller the school is, the smaller the community, we're like, we're all here together, we have got to figure it out, be good, together. The bigger the schools are, the harder that is to deal with for sure. And I think there's lots of research around that, that talks about how we can maintain smaller communities. And I think part of it is just this whole social proximity, that the closer we are, the more we know each other, the more we're apt to be forgiving of otherness... - Tanya Whitney, Educator

I often say though, that what I learned in small communities about those relationships actually fits in urban environments as well. So I live in Toronto, in one of the densest

neighbourhoods in the country. But it operates like a small town. So I see the same people at the grocery store as well, people who work with my children. So I guess there's this difference in relationships... - Kathryn Underwood, Researcher

3.5 Policy, Information, and Implementation

A theme representing the ideas that participants shared, regarding information and policy surrounding inclusive education, as well as the implementation of it in schools, was needed. Some participants said that although disability awareness has increased, families and other stakeholders are not always aware of what students with SEN are entitled to in terms of education alongside their peers. Participants encouraged families to seek out support to find out the rights of their child with SEN and how best they might have those rights respected.

...for example, getting as much information as you can in terms of what your child's rights are, what kind of supports are available, what types of processes that are available, you know, what are your options... - Rob Lattanzio, Advocate

Participants also shared that there is strong evidence for inclusive education and that they feel we have the tools to make inclusion happen. Some shared their confusion as to why inclusive education is not happening across the country, given the knowledge we do have, as well as their frustration that this is the case.

I mean, you say that research in the 90s wasn't there, but we know the research is there now. What are the barriers to really have inclusion happen? - Tim Loreman, Researcher

...we've got the tools, the big struggle is to get people to pick them up and use them. But we have the tools, you know, that's fabulous. We didn't have them back, you know, 30, 40 years ago. We do know them now. - Marilyn Dolmage, Advocate

A sentiment that arose frequently in the chats was that in order for education systems to become inclusive, inclusion must be embedded into policy and legislation. Evidence and tools for inclusion have not proven to be successful at overhauling education systems across the country, but strong policies have forced change in some provinces.

Yeah, we go over the policy, there's still, the British Columbia policy still has that little bit of an out in terms of inclusion. So, that needs to change. It's a 2016 policy, and it has not changed. - Donna McGhie Richmond, Researcher

Well, we were very lucky when the Territorial government said that we could no longer have segregated classrooms, and they moved into the model as a territory of full inclusion. - Liz Baile, Educator

The idea that political leadership can help to bring inclusive education to the forefront and create real change also came up in some chats. Leadership that has inclusion on their agenda can lead to policy changes that will progress the inclusive education movement. Further, participants explained that in order for new policy and legislation to create change, implementation of said policies must be a focus. Evidence for inclusion and having the tools for inclusion are important, but there is still a critical step between theory and practice.

I think one of the challenges we have found with policy is its translation into practice... - Bluesette Campbell, Advocate

And then, as I said, concretizing that vision, like putting specific steps into place to say, over this period of time, we are going to ensure that every child feels belonged and feels loved, feels cared for no matter what in their local context. - Steve Sider, Researcher

And so it's that sort of practice, theory gap... - Tanya Whitney, Educator

Participants' belief in the importance of sharing the positive stories around inclusive education also came up in the chats. Participants said that highlighting what is going well can help to motivate those working towards inclusion. It may also help to convince those who have doubts regarding inclusive education that it can be successful.

...we have to share those stories of what has worked for others. Because sometimes it's just a little glimmer of hope that keeps you going. - Maylin Dolmage, Advocate

3.6 School Systems (early education to post-secondary)

Across all participant groups, participants spoke extensively about school systems in relation to inclusion and the inclusive education movement. Many participants spoke about inclusive

teaching approaches to instruction. Overall, the approaches discussed were centered around the idea of teaching in a way that allows all students in the classroom to learn something from and/or participate in a lesson. Whether lessons be in person or online, using assistive technologies or aids or not, participants expressed that teachings should engage the diverse range of learners in an inclusive classroom. Teaching instruction should also support social emotional learning, so that students learn more than academic skills in the classroom.

But certainly, we were looking to determine how we could provide more universally designed experiences in the classroom for students... - Lesley Trudel, Researcher

I think that when we're using Universal Design for Learning and differentiated instruction, to create those entry points, I believe we're not benefiting the target student, but actually a lot of students are accessing that entry point and finding that success. Students that perhaps, may or may not have, done as well academically based on traditional ways of assessment, but provided with opportunities to kind of showcase their learning in a different way allows them to actually be really, really successful. - Monique Somma, Researcher

And from what we learned even about neurosciences, we know that everybody learns differently. Even if you're super smart. You will learn differently and you learn things differently from day to day, from what you are learning, so you can learn math from a way and then French or English in another way. - Maire-Elaine Desmarais, Researcher

A team approach was also brought forth by participants as a way to successfully implement inclusion within classrooms. This may involve team teaching, or collaboration between teachers, school leadership, other school staff or stakeholders beyond schools, like researchers and advocates.

And I think that's quite interesting, because we've seen a move towards seeing co teaching, where a resource teacher and a classroom teacher work together. - Gabrielle Young, Researcher

The high level practice of a really great inclusive school is if you can really integrate, so there's a lot of co teaching going on, between your specialist teachers, the support

teachers, like your resource teachers, and even guidance and anytime a specialist is in the bigger schools, and you're working alongside teachers, and you're looking at your children as a whole cohort. - Tanya Whitney, Educator

Participants also shared the idea of having a holistic view of students while implementing inclusion. If we are trying to make schools places where all students belong, then it is critical to consider the multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status, English as a second language) of students when creating inclusive spaces. Students' identities may inform teaching instruction and content when appropriate.

New teacher candidates are looking deeper than, you know, a person has a learning disability or a person has a particular label, they're looking at a whole person and their culture and language and all of it the multiple identities. - Lynn Aylward, Researcher

I think that we're moving towards inclusion from an equity and diversity standpoint, and I think we do a better job perhaps thinking about how school is perceived as a place where all individuals belong, where they feel welcomed and accepted. - Gabrielle Young, Researcher

Some organizational realities of education systems and schools were discussed as hindrances to the inclusive education movement. For example, education in Canada is overseen by provincial/territorial governments, so there are large discrepancies between provinces/territories, with some jurisdictions providing inclusive education successfully and others continuing to operate segregated institutions.

And there's the jurisdictional realities that we have to deal with. There's no doubt, so there are limitations, right. But there can be a role to some degree for a national strategy, for example, on inclusive education... - Rob Lattanzio, Advocate

Participants also explained that inclusive education is not the default in most provinces/territories. Special education models of education and other segregated models have been heavily invested in and continue to garner a lot of support, making the movement towards inclusive education more difficult. Additionally, because segregated models are often the

default, when there are issues in inclusive systems, there continues to be a risk of going back to segregated instruction.

So I think that in some of the urban systems, there's a great deal of energy over the years has gone into creating special education programs. And so there's that great belief within the school system that that's where children get the best service. - Donna Barrett, Educator

...when I arrived [in Ontario] to do a tour of a few schools, when we were going through the job application process, I came across the spaces in which there were self-contained sites for special education. - Gillian Parekh, Researcher

An idea that also surfaced in the chats is the disconnect between the early years and school aged years. Before a child enters school, family members and other stakeholders have often amassed valuable knowledge about a child. Participants shared that currently, school systems do not consider much of this information, instead having children come into the school system as blank slates. This process may result in challenging transitions into school for many children, families and teachers.

There's this very clear line between the early years in the school system. And I think that's a structural problem. So I think that could be addressed. And transitions are challenging, in part because of those structural issues. But of course, children don't have a hard line in the sand at age six with a transition into school. They don't all magically become different human beings. - Kathryn Underwood, Researcher

Participants also voiced their opinions regarding the importance of inclusion in the early years. Children learn about difference in the early years, therefore it makes sense to model acceptance and inclusion as early as possible. Early childhood educators are key in fostering inclusive environments during the early years and should not be undervalued. Inclusive early childhood education settings will better allow for successful inclusion in kindergarten and beyond.

So this idea if we can build into our very young students, from when they first start noticing that people are different from one another, to not say, oh, that's bad, and we shouldn't talk about it, but to say, let's talk about it. And let's celebrate it, because that's

actually how the world is. And that's how the world works. And that's what makes it so rich. And let's not make it something that's awkward and unusual. - Kimberley Maich, Researcher

Inclusion at the post secondary level was another topic that was brought up by participants. Opportunities for students with SEN at the college or university level are available and participants shared that the outcomes for these students, their peers and professors have been positive. With the successful demonstration of inclusive education at post secondary institutions, participants shared that they hope these opportunities will continue and increase in number.

...the opportunity for adults with intellectual disabilities to come to university as auditing students, which is a role that's available to any Manitoba resident, and so we built on that we use that existing role. And we now support in any given year, 9 to 11 students... And that really has helped us put into practice our own beliefs. - Zana Lutfiyaa, Researcher

Many participants spoke about their expectations for the role of a teacher. The sentiment that arose regarding teachers' roles is that teachers should be teaching all students, aiming to meet student needs within the classroom. They also shared their beliefs about what teachers can do for their students beyond teaching the curriculum. For example, teachers can empower the students in their classrooms, support student strengths and interests and help them to build relationships with one another.

...personally, and also professionally, because I feel that our job as teachers is to meet the needs of all the students we have in our class. - Monique Somma, Researcher

And we're always reviewing children, we're always looking at what they can do, and bolstering that because that is really where we know that children with special needs, feel that they have student agency, that they have a sense of belonging that they can contribute, and that they have an identity and a sense of community in first of all their individual classroom and then within this schools themselves. - Liz Baile, Educator

...to keep their identity intact, their sense of self, in terms of who they are as a person, we do want to support children to learn and grow and develop. And we want to do that for all children. But we don't want them to come out at the end of that feeling like they have their identities embedded and entrenched in a deficit view. - Kathryn Underwood, Researcher

Participants shared that they believe teachers can meet the needs of all students, if given enough support. This support may come in the form of inclusion coaching, strong leadership, resources, such as access to technology and support staff, professional development, preparatory time, and support in dealing with individualized education plans (IEPs) etc.

...supporting teachers, because teachers believe that they can do it and many of them just need a little bit of our support and ideas or coaching, to use the tools that they have and the ideas they have, and maximize the time that they have to provide all their learners with the best environment in the classroom. - Tiffany Gallagher, Researcher

They're either the teacher's assistant or the educator's assistant. And start looking at what a model like that would do and how you would fund it, and what roles that person would have. And I would look at a blended roll of, how can we release teachers from some of the things that they have to do, that don't require an educator to do and let teachers work on the things that you need a degree to do. Planning, building the capacity of others, the professional development opportunities, across classrooms, I'd really work on that part of it. And would you need, I don't know in sum total, if you would need more EAS, but they would be very differently distributed than I think they are now. - Donna Barrett, Educator

So it was really a coaching approach and digging in and problem solving with teachers who would present as perhaps the science teacher expert and the coach would come in and say, well, I understand the profile of the student, let's share our knowledge, reciprocate our knowledge and come up with a solution. - Missy Pfaff, Educator

Participants spoke a lot about new teachers and teachers in training. For the needs of all students to be met within the classroom, new teachers must be taught approaches to instruction

that facilitate inclusion. Participants also shared the difficulties new teachers can face when entering systems that are not inclusive. These new teachers, having just learned about inclusive practice, must either go against the non-inclusive system, or have to succumb to the status quo.

And also that will shift the focus from a really more special ed exceptionalities based focus to a really inclusion disability studies focus, so really to look at practices such as Universal Design for Learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, etc., etc. So that we actually also start training our teachers much better than we've done so far. - Cornelia Schneider, Researcher

What I find hardest is when students leave the classroom space where they're like, yeah, you know disability justice, we're on it, we're going to make this happen. And they go to practicum. And then they come back, and we have to hold sessions where we grieve together about, oh, my gosh, like I walked down the hallway, and someone was like, you wouldn't believe what I heard, you wouldn't believe how kids are spoken about or how they're talked about, in front of other kids, it's just by other kids, by people within the school, like it wasn't at all what they were expecting. And, and it's hard, it's hard as a new teacher to go into cultures that have already kind of adopted that ableist attitude, right? - Gillian Parekh, Researcher

A key idea that surfaced in the chats was the importance of school leadership for the inclusive education movement. Participants spoke about how school leadership and the beliefs and actions of school leadership can either facilitate inclusion or segregation in schools. Those in leadership positions in schools and boards have the ability to set the tone of an environment, so that it is one that values inclusion. They can also ensure teachers are supported in inclusion efforts, listen to families and their wishes for their children in school, foster collaboration between staff members and other stakeholders in inclusion etc. Participants shared their belief that school leadership plays a major role in progressing the inclusive education movement in Canada.

...if the leadership wants to collaborate and also provide a vision. Like, if inclusive education is not a choice and that is clear and [they say] we're going to support you,

we're going to teach you how to do it, we're going to give you resources, it works. - Marie-Elaine Desmarais, Researcher

... the review has really focused on the very beginnings of the policy and how people were understanding the policy which has really broadened the view of inclusive education to involve all communities and really thinking about all learners. So really getting a sense of what were people's perceptions and understandings about the inclusive education policy, and getting the perspectives of those who are in leadership roles. So those who are really working to plan the implementation. - Jess Whitley, Researcher

And then on the leadership piece, that is, without a doubt, in my mind, the leadership piece is the number one thing that can change in a school. - Bluesette Campbell, Advocate

Ideas surrounding resources and how they can help or hinder inclusion within schools were also shared by participants. Having schools, teachers and families supported and resourced is important, but participants also shared that in some cases, having greatly resourced schools and boards can lead to challenges for inclusion. Access to specialists and specialized services in schools has led to exclusionary practices. Participants shared that less resourced, rural or remote communities often have more inclusive practices.

So, I would say in many of the rural schools that we visited, those students were all fully included. They had no choice but to be included. There wasn't a separate classroom to send them to. There wasn't a separate school to send them to. So the teachers had to do it, they just roll up their sleeves, and they do it. - Donna McGhie-Richmond, Researcher

I'm originally from the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, from a small rural community. So growing up, there was lots of community membership in our classrooms, because we only had that one space. So even though we had a small population, if somebody within that population learned differently or interacted in schools differently, we were all in the same class. - Sheila Bennett, Researcher

Lastly, the notion of supporting schools and education came up in the chats. Supporting schools may involve ensuring adequate resources (e.g., financial or staff and other personnel) as well as bringing education to the forefront, so that it remains to be a priority in society. Without continued support for education, inclusion within schools will not be achieved.

If the school doesn't have the support they need, they can't be successful either. - Anna MacQuarrie, Advocate

Chapter 4

4 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to consider a diverse range of thoughts and experiences of individuals involved in inclusive education. The findings have the possibility to expand our understanding of the current strengths, potential areas of improvement and next steps regarding key topics such as educational policy, teacher training, family involvement, advocacy, and support in the education system to further inclusive education in Canada.

When considering the data, I noticed that within each of the six themes (i.e., Family, Values and beliefs, Definition of Inclusive Education, Networking/connecting, Information, policy and implementation, and School systems) participants shared happenings regarding inclusive education that are working well or helping to progress inclusion, as well as those that are not working very well or hindering inclusion. The discussion section has been organized based on what participants said is working well in inclusive education and what is not working well, with the six themes discussed in each subsection.

4.1 What's Working Well

The results indicate that currently in Canada, there are jurisdictions experiencing success with inclusive education. Participants shared their passion for inclusive education, as well as the dedication and hard work of others that they have witnessed while working in the field.

Participants spoke about some of the amazing work being done to propel the inclusive education movement forward regarding each of the six themes identified in the results section (i.e., Family, Values and beliefs, Definition of Inclusive Education, Networking/connecting, Information, policy and implementation, and School systems).

Fitting with historical and global perspectives, results demonstrate that families continue to act as a driving force in the inclusive education movement across Canada (Engelbrecht et al., 2005). There are success stories of families who have fought for inclusion for their children and won. Wins like these can lead to larger changes within schools, resulting in more inclusion. Critical advocacy and support for families with children with SEN is being provided across the country

(e.g., parent organizations, legal advisory services) so that children can learn in inclusive environments and progress in the inclusive education movement can be made.

The positive values and beliefs of participants were very clearly portrayed in the results. Participants believe strongly in inclusive education as a human right and something that must be available to all students. They also shared the belief that human difference is a strength of society and something to be celebrated. They explained that they work with people in education and other stakeholders that hold the same beliefs about inclusive education and how important these beliefs and values are in the movement to make schools more inclusive. These findings align with Sharma's (2018) work on educators' values. According to Sharma, a critical aspect of successful inclusive education is educators believing in inclusion, as well as educators holding positive beliefs about students with SEN. Maintaining and strengthening stakeholder's positive beliefs regarding inclusion and students with SEN will help to support inclusive education across the country.

Participants also shared some progress being made regarding the definition of inclusive education. Participants explained that there are facets of inclusive education and its definition that are being agreed upon by people in the field. Like Krischler and colleagues (2019), participants explained that inclusive education should not simply be defined as the placement of students with SEN in the regular classroom, alongside their peers. Participants also explained that successful inclusion will require more support within the classroom for teachers and students alike. Like Göransson and Nilholm's (2014) framework, participants shared that inclusive education must consider the social aspects, along with the academic aspects of school for students. Participants also shared that the inclusive education movement and inclusive methods of instruction are starting to take a more holistic approach to students. As previous research has advocated (Bradford et al., 2019), participants noted that the concept of inclusive education is shifting, so that all aspects of students' identities are considered. This shift will help to ensure that all students can learn and participate effectively in the regular classroom. With core aspects of inclusive education agreed upon by stakeholders, there is a clearer idea of what needs to be done to achieve successful inclusion.

Participants shared that impactful connections are being formed across the field of inclusive education. These connections can help to make progress towards inclusion within schools, by sharing knowledge, resources, and experiences. They can also help to provide support to those who are struggling to achieve inclusion and increase awareness surrounding the importance of inclusive education. The literature supports the idea that connections between educators improves inclusive education outcomes (Hang & Rabren, 2009; Murawski, 2010; Boyle et al., 2011b; Florian & Rouse, 2010; Kaldi et al., 2013). Findings also align with Grima-Farrell and colleagues' (2011) review on moving from research to practice, which highlights the importance of researchers connecting with practitioners and other stakeholders in the field in order for successful inclusion to happen. Fitting with the results of this research, previous research has shown that social support networks for parents of children with SEN are critical to parent wellbeing. Harpur (2012) explains the importance of connecting with people with disabilities and increasing the general population's familiarity with the findings of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to improve inclusion, similar to what participants in this research project shared. Participants also spoke about how social proximity can positively impact inclusive efforts. According to participants, closely knit communities tend to have more inclusive practices within their schools. Overall, connections and networking between those involved in education and beyond will lead to greater support for inclusive education and a better understanding of how to achieve it.

Participants shared many thoughts on information, policy and implementation regarding inclusive education. They spoke about the importance of being aware of information that is available on the topic, whether it be research on inclusive practices or what students are entitled to in schools. Aligned with the work of Hardy and Woodcock (2015), participants explained how critical they believe inclusive policy and implementation of practices to be to have successful inclusion in schools. Participants spoke about progress they have been a part of or witnessed regarding policy and implementation and how these factors can lead to real change. They spoke of the province of New Brunswick, when the legislature unanimously enacted Bill 85, which mandated the inclusion of all students within the public education system (AuCoin et al., 2020; Porter 1995). This policy, Bill 85, required that students with SEN be educated in regular classes alongside their peers and was the first major step towards a fully inclusive education system for the province. Participants suggested advocating for inclusive education with their local

politicians to bring about policy change like that in New Brunswick. These practices can help to develop momentum in the inclusive education movement.

Participants shared their thoughts regarding some of the inclusive practices taking place in schools and school systems across the country. Participants spoke about the effective use of inclusive approaches to teaching instruction. As the literature suggests, participants spoke about the use of universal design for learning, assistive technologies and instruction methods that support the social emotional learning of students to facilitate inclusion within classrooms (Amzat, & Valdez, 2017; Galkiene & Monkeviciene, 2021; Hoogerwerf et al., 2021). Like previous research purports, participants shared that collaborative approaches to inclusion within classrooms and schools can be highly effective (Hang & Rabren, 2009; Murawski, 2010; Boyle et al., 2011b; Florian & Rouse, 2010; Kaldi et al., 2013). Participants also voiced their beliefs in the need to consider the multiple identities of students while teaching in inclusive classrooms, which is in line with the research of Bradford and colleagues (2021). Such inclusive practices allow all students to learn effectively in the classroom, with improved academic and social outcomes for all.

Participants spoke about the importance of inclusion at all stages of the education system (i.e., early childhood, elementary, middle school, secondary and post-secondary education). Inclusion in early childhood education is a critical part of inclusive education overall. Participants spoke about the role that early childhood educators can play in facilitating successful inclusion. Quality education for early childhood educators is necessary for inclusive early childhood education, as is supported by the research of Petriwskyj (2010) and this may be supported by the recent professionalization of early childhood educators that is occurring in some provinces, as mentioned by participants. Participants explained that inclusive education in school age years is more easily achieved when it is preceded by high quality inclusive early childhood education. Participants also shared some of the positive happenings regarding inclusion in post secondary institutions, as supported by previously conducted research (Jacklin et al., 2007; Gibson, 2012). Participants said that they hope the opportunities for inclusion at the post secondary level continue to grow in the coming years. Inclusion at all stages of the education system is necessary for inclusion to occur beyond schools. Diverse classrooms provide an opportunity to learn that everyone can contribute to society.

The role of teachers to teach all students and meeting students' needs within the regular classroom, was a common sentiment shared by participants. The literature supports the idea that teachers' roles and how teachers conceptualize their roles are important parts of achieving successful inclusion within schools (Belegu-Caka, 2022; Fry et al., 2009). Training new teachers to teach inclusively was something participants spoke about as an important step in the inclusive education movement. The results of this project reflect the work of Anderson and Boyle (2015) who indicate new teachers should be taught both why inclusive education matters and how to facilitate it within classrooms. According to participants, many teacher education programs in Canada are shifting to have an emphasis on inclusive education rather than focusing on special education (Bateman et al., 2017; Billingsley et al., 2014; DiPaola et al., 2004; Lunde, 2020; Pazey & Cole, 2012; Waldron et al., 2011). Such changes to teacher education should improve teachers' grasp on inclusive education and benefit the students in their classrooms. School leadership was also brought forth by participants as a critical aspect of the inclusive education movement. School leaders and their beliefs about inclusion have the potential to foster inclusion in schools. Participants expressed that there are leaders in Canada championing inclusive education. These leaders are creating school environments that result in better outcomes for all students. Participants in this study also shared that their experiences, working in schools across the country, have shown them that rural or less resourced areas often have more inclusive practices than urban or well-resourced areas. Perhaps this insight demonstrates that more resources are not necessary to implement successful inclusion in schools.

4.2 What's Not Working and How to Fix it

Participants also shared some happenings in inclusive education across the country that are not working. With these problematic happenings, participants also shared their ideas on how to alter non-inclusive practices and beliefs and increase momentum in the movement, so that progress continues to be made in the journey towards inclusive education. The findings on what is not working and the recommendations on how to move forward with inclusion shared by participants were found across all six themes (i.e., Family, Values and beliefs, Definition of Inclusive Education, Networking/connecting, Information, policy and implementation, and School systems).

Participants shared that families across the country are still struggling for inclusion. Participants explained that families need to be supported as the challenges they face are too burdensome to deal with alone. This aligns with previous research, which has demonstrated various negative effects (e.g., stress, mental and physical health) for parents/caregivers of a child with SEN (Churchill et al., 2010; Kersh et al., 2006; Sharpley et al., 1997; Velsson, 1999). Support (i.e., social support and other resources) are a known buffer to some of these negative implications for parents/caregivers (Algood et al., 2013). The findings of this project also demonstrate that families must be supported because they are critical to the inclusive movement (Engelbrecht et al., 2005). Participants shared that in school settings, parent voices are often overlooked and undervalued, as supported by the work of Turnbull and Turnbull (2001). Effective communication between schools and families is critical to students' learning outcomes. As participants shared, there are supports available to families, however these supports can be insufficient and oftentimes, families are not sure how to access them or are unaware of them altogether. Participants called for increased awareness for the support currently available to families and overall, more support for families of children with SEN. This support (e.g., Peer support, support from their communities and support from leadership and changemakers) will allow families to push for the inclusion of their children, contributing to the overall inclusive education movement.

Participants shared that in their experience, some individuals continue to hold beliefs and values that do not align with inclusive education. These beliefs and values harm students with SEN (Campbell, 2009) and hinder inclusion (Beckett, 2009). Participants explained that cultivating and strengthening positive beliefs about students with SEN and inclusive education is one way to challenge or overcome the negative beliefs that continue to exist. Sharing positive stories of inclusion may help to bolster beliefs and values that are in favour of inclusive education. Networking and connecting between people within the field and beyond can also help to change peoples' beliefs and values regarding inclusion according to the participants in this project. As the work of Anderson and Boyle (2015) purports, participants identified training of new teachers and other professionals, who will work in education, as a potential pathway to cultivate and strengthen positive beliefs about inclusion. Training can be developed to foster positive beliefs regarding students with SEN and inclusive education. With those entering the field holding

beliefs and values that align with inclusion, the inclusive education movement will make progress. Successful inclusive education is dependent upon stakeholders' belief in inclusion.

Participants shared that more networking and connecting can be done to progress the inclusive education movement. Networking and connecting are critical to ensure support for stakeholders (e.g., families and individuals with SEN, those working in schools, those at post secondary institutions, leadership) and to share best practices, new research, resources, struggles and successes. As supported by the literature, collaboration between schools and post secondary institutions (Killoran, 2002), collaboration between educators (Katz, 2015), having leadership who listens to and advocates for its constituents (AuCoin et al., 2020) and schools that work alongside families to meet the needs of students (Fishman & Nickerson, 2015) are some examples of networking and connecting that participants said should happen more often to better inclusion within schools and in turn, better the outcomes of all students.

Participants shared concerns regarding the policy, information and implementation of inclusive practices. As supported by previous research, participants explained that in some cases, policies related to inclusion are unclear or outdated (Loreman, 2014; Thompson et al., 2015). Without mandatory inclusion for students with SEN explicitly included in legislation, schools can find ways to exclude learners they deem too difficult to include in regular classrooms. Additionally, participants shared that even with strong inclusive policies in place, there have been challenges in translating policy into practice, as found by Johnstone and Chapman (2009). Although inclusive education can be a challenge to implement and requires ongoing work, participants reiterated that education systems, like that of New Brunswick, demonstrate that the process is possible (AuCoin et al., 2020). Participants shared their hopes that increased exposure to inclusive education and the movement, as well as growing numbers of stakeholders holding values that support inclusion, will help to get leaders and changemakers to make policy changes and the implementation of said policies a priority. These policies have the potential to impact the lives and learning of students across the country.

Participants shared some happenings in education systems across the country that are impeding movement towards inclusive education. Consistency regarding inclusion does not currently exist between provinces/territories and will be difficult to achieve because there is no federal ministry

or department of education. Participants shared that due to the organizational structure of education in Canada, there are no federal policies on inclusive education, as previously stated by Kopfer and Oskarsdottir (2019). Participants shared that they believe some initiatives can happen at the national level to push for inclusion, creating some consistency in inclusive education across the country and ensure all students have access to education alongside their peers.

Participants also explained that some boards/provinces that have strong roots in special education remain tied to this model. Supported by previous research, participants explained that Ontario, for example, a province that heavily invested in special education, continues to educate students with SEN in segregated settings (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021; Parekh & Brown, 2019; Specht & Thompson, 2022). Networking and connecting, increasing exposure to inclusion and cultivating values and beliefs that support inclusion may help to overcome barriers related to systems being rooted in special education programs. Participants pointed to New Brunswick's education to demonstrate that fully inclusive education can be achieved and how beneficial it is to its students (Government of New Brunswick, 2016).

Participants voiced their concerns regarding the disconnect between early childhood and school age years. Currently in most education systems across the country, there is very little collaboration or sharing of information between early childhood education and kindergarten to grade twelve education systems. Aligned with the ideas of Iruka (2021) participants explained that because of the division between these two systems, valuable information from the early years is being underutilized. Participants shared that information sharing between early childhood education and kindergarten to grade twelve systems could lead to easier transitions and better outcomes for all students and their families, as supported by the literature (Hurst & Lally, 1992; Kagan, 1994; Peters 1998; Yeboah, 2002). Easier transitions and better outcomes for students moving from early childhood education to kindergarten to grade twelve systems may increase the likelihood of successful inclusion throughout all stages of the education system.

The results of this study demonstrate that the current climate in schools does not always support inclusion. Participants shared that in their experience, this can affect teachers, both seasoned and new, who are striving for inclusion. Consistent with the 2008 report by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in the United Kingdom and Levine (2006), participants explained that

teachers in training or new teachers often struggle to use inclusive practices learned in their teacher education programs while working in classrooms, as the systems in place do not support inclusive education. Research like that of Boyle and colleagues (2013) has demonstrated that many teachers, regardless of their length of service, are pro-inclusion, conditional on adequate resources and support. Teachers must be supported in their endeavours to teach inclusively, as student outcomes lay in the balance. Participants shared their thoughts on how to change the climates within schools to better support inclusion. Some of these ideas include ongoing professional development on inclusive practice (including training on available technologies to support inclusion) for teachers, collaborative teaching models, assistance in implementing inclusive strategies learned and leadership that believes in inclusion. These strategies have the potential to improve the experiences of students across the country.

4.3 Limitations

One limitation of this research project is sample size. Only 31 participants were interviewed, with 16 of them being researchers, 7 being advocates and 8 being educators. With a sample of this size, it cannot be assumed that the data collected exhausts all themes that may exist regarding the state of inclusive education in Canada. That being said, a point of saturation, when no new information, codes or themes result from the data (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Guest et al., 2006) was reached during the data analysis phase. Reaching saturation, sometimes referred to as information redundancy, is widely used to justify sample size and validity in thematic analysis research (Constantinou et al., 2017; Mason 2010).

Another limitation of this study is that participants are not a random sample. Participants were selected for an interview by the facilitators, Gordon Porter, Jacqueline Specht and Diane Richler, who are themselves experts in the field of inclusive education. The facilitators selected participants that they believed would capture a wide perspective on the current state of inclusive education across the country. Though the sample was not random, facilitators ensured that various voices would be heard by including researchers, advocates and educators working in the field. Including various participant perspectives is a defining aspect of this research project.

4.4 Implications for Research

This study illustrates the current state of inclusive education in Canada according to the experts interviewed. The themes found are varied, relating to many areas of research regarding inclusion

and the inclusive education movement. As participants shared, the research conducted to date supports inclusion for all students. Participants explained that future research on the topic should be collaborative (e.g., including schools and researchers, including policymakers and other leadership, crossing provincial/territorial borders) to further progress the movement. Participants voiced their beliefs in supporting strengths within inclusive education. Research that is collaborative in nature may help to support and grow the strengths that currently exist in the field. Participants also expressed the importance of sharing positive stories of inclusion. Mobilizing knowledge gained in future research projects is a potential method for sharing positive happenings in the field of inclusive education. With that in mind, it may be valuable to emphasize knowledge mobilization in future research on inclusive education.

Based on the findings of this study, it may be beneficial to better understand how to move from research on inclusive education to practice in the Canadian context. As previously mentioned, the literature supports inclusion for all learners, yet inclusive practices are not the default across the country. Further research in the area of implementation science, which explores how to bridge the research-practice gap, may help to increase the use of inclusive practices in Canadian schools.

The participant group of this study did not include any self-advocates. The voices of students with SEN, students without SEN, students educated in inclusive settings and perhaps students educated in non-inclusive settings would help to ensure an even broader understanding of the current state of inclusive education in Canada. Future research on this topic might benefit from including self-advocate perspectives.

4.5 Implications for Practice

As participants suggested, making research and information accessible to stakeholders is critical to achieve inclusive education across Canada. The knowledge mobilization component of this project includes the publicly available interview videos and their accompanying discussion guides. This research paper will also be available on Inclusion Canada's website, alongside the interviews and discussion guides. The interviews and discussion guides may be useful to insight conversation on inclusive education within teacher education classes and school staff meetings

alike. As the range of topics discussed is broad, I believe that every individual working in education today will find value in watching the interviews or considering the discussion guides. It is this exposure to inclusive education, the successes, the areas for improvement and the ideas on how to make progress, that will bring about change in Canada's education systems.

As my education is in the area of counselling psychology, I believe it is important to consider the practical implications of this research project related to my future practice in psychotherapy and the field of psychotherapy overall. As a psychotherapist, the clients I will work with will have a range of life experiences. Any information, such as the findings of this study, that can increase my understanding of individuals' experiences, will be beneficial to my practice. This project sheds light on the current strengths and shortcomings of the Canadian education system regarding inclusion. When I inevitably encounter a client who has been affected by inclusive education or lack thereof in some way, the findings of this study may help me to direct the client to services for assistance. Arguably more importantly, the insights gained from this project will help me to empathize with this client. Like myself, I believe all psychotherapists and consequently their clients, will benefit from considering the findings of this research.

4.6 Conclusion

Given the academic and social benefits of inclusive education for students with and without SEN, research that aims to aid in the movement towards inclusion is important. Previous research has never considered the diverse thoughts and opinions of researchers, advocates and within a single study. The participants' varied viewpoints have allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the current state of inclusive education in Canada, as well as important next steps. Such an understanding is critical to make further progression towards inclusive education across the country.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Code Book.

Code:	Theme: Family, Values and Beliefs, Definition, Networking/Connecting, Information, Policy and Implementation, School Systems
Legal advice	Information, policy and implementation
Knowing what students are entitled to	Information, policy and implementation
Political Leadership	Information, policy and implementation
Belief in possibility of change	Values and beliefs
Progressive approaches to teaching and learning	School systems
Transition from early years to school	School systems
Intersection of ability and racism	Definition
Strategies for different types of learners	School systems
Time on task	School systems
Shared vision of inclusion within schools	Values and beliefs
Support for schools	School systems
Teachers as guides in learning	School systems
No tolerance towards segregation	Values and beliefs
Individualized learning	School systems
Early Childhood Educators	School systems
Disability awareness	Information, policy and implementation
Constituents for change	Networking/connecting
Age diverse classrooms	School systems
Inclusion is not the default	School systems
Special education model	School systems

Denormalization	Values and beliefs
We have the tools	Information, policy and implementation
Response to intervention model	School systems
Importance of early years	School systems
Access to resources	School systems
Debunking idea of becoming less disabled	Values and beliefs
Social proximity	Networking/connecting
Valuing human difference	Values and beliefs
Threats to inclusion	Values and beliefs
Community support	Family
Importance of families being involved in movement	Family
Large, resources provinces and boards	School systems
No prerequisite for inclusion	Definition
Tell the positive stories	Information, policy and implementation
Role of parent organizations in inclusive education movement	Family
Social emotional learning	School systems
'Ability' left out of inclusion considerations	Definition
Support strengths	School systems
Jurisdictional realities (Education is at provincial level)	School systems
Assistive or learning technologies	School systems
Ending othering	Values and beliefs
Moving in the wrong direction	Values and beliefs
Inclusion at post secondary level	School systems
Inclusion is good for society	Values and beliefs

Inclusion must be at the core	Values and beliefs
All kids are unique	School systems
Research supports inclusion	Information, policy and implementation
Defining inclusion	Definition
Inclusive education is about more than placement	Definition
Inclusion must start early	School systems
Problems surrounding IEPs	School systems
Disability rights are human rights	Values and beliefs
Educational assistants	School systems
Person power	School systems
Online learning	School systems
Listening to families	Family
Lack of specialists and or resources, small or remote communities	School systems
Importance of first voice and representation	Information, policy and implementation
Cultivating relationships to create systemic change	Networking/connecting
Inclusive schools as basis for inclusive society	Values and beliefs
Universal Design for Learning	School systems
Meeting student's needs	School systems
Inclusion for all, not just some	Definition
Inclusion is a process	Information, policy and implementation
Communication between people in the field	Networking/connecting
Communication between families and schools	Family
Support for families	Family

Team approach to inclusion	School systems
Holistic approach to inclusion	School systems
Teachers teaching all students	School systems
Inclusion as both academic and social	Definition
Going from theory to practice	Information, policy and implementation
Families struggling for inclusion	Family
Long term vision	Values and beliefs
New teachers or teachers in training	School systems
Support for teachers	School systems
Imbedding inclusion into policy and legislation	Information, policy and implementation
Formative experience	Networking/connecting
School leadership	School systems

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