



BCTF Research Report

Andrée Gacoin | January 2020

The landscape of inclusion: How teachers in British Columbia navigate inclusive education policy and practice

Over the past ten years, the landscape of inclusive education in British Columbia, Canada, has shifted in complex and often contradictory ways. Changes include: revisions to the Ministry's Special Education Manual (BC Ministry of Education, 2016b); the ongoing development of a re-designed curriculum (BC Ministry of Education, 2015); the privatization of special education services (e.g. BCTF, 2017); the promotion of inclusive education delivery models such as Response to Intervention (e.g. Cavendish, Menda, Espinosa, & Mahotiere, 2016); the development of a new Individualized Education Plan template (BC Ministry of Education, 2016a); and a review of the provincial education funding model (BC Ministry of Education, 2018). Layered over these changes are ongoing challenges in restoring Collective Agreement provisions related to class size and composition and acute shortages of both teachers and educational assistants (CBC News, 2018).

This paper invites us to think across these changes by focusing on where they come together: the classroom. It is in the classroom where teachers, who support the principle of inclusion, all too often find themselves caught between the needs of their students and the realities of educational conditions. By exploring the possibilities for and challenges to inclusive education in BC, this paper presents teacher perspectives that invite us into a conversation about how to advocate for teaching and learning conditions that support all students with diverse learning needs.

Methodology, methods and data sources

How do teachers actively navigate policy, taking on multiple and potentially contradictory roles, within the dynamic context of the school?

This paper is part of a three-year research project on inclusive education in BC that is guided by a social justice lens. Following Denzin (2017), critical qualitative inquiry, based on “an ethical framework that is rights and social justice based,” mobilizes research for “public education, social policy making, and community transformation” (p. 8). This is underpinned by a view of teachers as policy actors (Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011). Here, the focus is on how teachers actively navigate policy, taking on multiple and potentially contradictory roles, within the dynamic context of the school. Focusing on the classroom, in turn, disrupts the “black-box” of educational practice by explicitly engaging factors both inside and outside the classroom that shape policy implementation (Cuban, 2013).

The paper draws on two sources of data. The first is a report on the *Meaningful Inclusion Summit* that was organized by the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation in October 2018. Teachers applied to the summit from across the province, and the 24 selected participants reflected a range of specialist teaching positions.¹ As participants were part of an organized event aimed at shaping policy and practice, there was a reasonable expectation that views would be shared publicly. At the same time, to mitigate any potential risks to participants, the resulting Summit report focused on broad themes and recommendations and does not include identifying details of participants.² The data analysis software MAXQDA was used to identify themes for the report based on notes from the focus groups discussions held during the event.

The second source of data are semi-structured interviews that took place between November 2018 and February 2019. Here, interviews are understood as “accounts” of sense-making within particular moments and contexts (Talmy, 2010). 15 participants were recruited from 5 districts in the province, representing urban and rural teaching locations. An email was sent to potential participants through the local union office. Interested participants contacted the BCTF researcher directly and were provided with an informed consent form prior to the interview. The interview invited participants to share their perspectives on the key conditions necessary for inclusive education in

¹ For the purposes of this paper, “specialist” position refers to teachers who work specifically in roles related to inclusive education. These roles have different names in different districts, and can also vary in terms of whether they are enrolling or non-enrolling positions.

² The report from the Summit is currently not publicly available. However, a participant did summarize key themes in an article for the Federations’ teacher newsmagazine. See: bctf.ca/publications/NewsMagArticle.aspx?id=52405

BC, and the opportunities for, as well as challenges to, achieving these conditions. This paper uses pseudonyms for all participants and any identifying information has been changed or removed. All interviews were transcribed, and participants had an opportunity to review their transcripts. Transcripts were coded using MAXQDA for key themes in an iterative process of data analysis (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

Challenges for teachers navigating inclusive education policy and practice

In BC, the Ministry of Education’s special education policy manual outlines a “continuous and flexible” process for identifying students with special needs and then providing the necessary supports (BC Ministry of Education, 2016b). Broadly, a student with observed exceptionalities in learning and/or behaviour should be referred to a school-based team. This is a team of teachers and other professionals (e.g., counsellors, psychologists, speech and language psychologists) who come together to discuss and problem-solve how to support specific students and the classroom teacher (Shields, 2018). Teams may request further assessments (e.g., psycho-educational) and these assessments are used to assign students to Ministry-defined special needs categories.³

Unsurprisingly, what this looks like in practice can vary widely. At the district level, the 69 locals that make up the BCTF have different collective agreement language related to school-based teams, class size, and class composition. This language was stripped in 2002, and then restored by the Supreme Court of Canada in November 2016. Teachers celebrated the restoration of this language, recognizing the language’s importance for establishing the necessary conditions to better meet the needs of all students. However, as stressed by one interviewee, many districts don’t have “language around their class-size and composition” and for many specialist teachers, “caseload gets changed every year, with no rhyme or reason” (interview with ‘Jenny’). This view echoed the perspectives shared by many specialist teachers: the day to day reality of inclusive education in BC continues to be in a state of crisis.

The day to day reality of inclusive education in BC continues to be in a state of crisis.

The reasons for this are complex. Across the province, only about a third of locals have class composition in their collective agreements

³ As of December 2019, these categories are: Intellectual disabilities; Learning disabilities; Gifted; Behavioural needs or Mental illness; Physically dependent; DeafBlind; Physical disabilities or chronic health impairments; Visual impairment; Deaf or hard of hearing; Autism spectrum disorder.

that provides guaranteed service levels for class composition. This language is key for driving services into schools for students and addressing teacher workload. The other two-thirds of the collective agreements are either silent on the topic, or don't guarantee service levels. This language varies widely because all of the composition language was originally negotiated from 1988 and 1993 between individual union locals and individual school districts. Because of the unconstitutional stripping of teachers' collective agreements in 2002, there have not been opportunities, until the current round of provincial negotiations, to meaningfully address the gaps in the existing language. This has led to an ongoing situation for specialist teachers where, as Jenny explained, "I'm really doing the bare—not even the bare minimum, of what my position should entail. And my kids just aren't getting the service that they deserve. So, it's really, really disheartening and it's really frustrating."

Working with the reality that the restored language alone cannot fix a system in crisis, the rest of this paper identifies three themes that are shaping the experiences of specialist teachers in BC. These are: (1) "putting out fires" (2) the stress of "so much to be put on the shoulders of one person," and (3) the need for a school culture that enables "having those hard conversations."

"Putting out fires"

Amidst 15 years of chronic underfunding of public education, many inclusive education teachers feel like they are constantly "putting out fires."

Across the interviews, participants spoke to an inclusive education system where, amidst 15 years of chronic underfunding of public education, working and learning conditions have deteriorated. Lacking systematic and adequate supports for all children, inclusive education teachers can feel like they are constantly "putting out fires" (interview with 'James'). Betty, a specialist teacher who also previously worked as an educational assistant (EA), described this as "running spot to spot where people are calling for help, because, you know, kids are having very very challenging moments." Many of these challenging moments relate to the social emotional needs of students, and the behaviours that may result when these needs are not met. For instance, Helena described being called to address "any sort of behavior" in her role as a support teacher at an elementary school. Furthermore, Helena described how "sometimes people bring kids down to me because they're not just coping well in the classroom. They need a neutral space. A space to work, a space to calm down, whatever it is." As summarized by Wanda, who is now an elementary classroom teacher after leaving a specialist role because she was "burnt out," "I can differentiate all I want, but if somebody's having a meltdown, they need help."

Specialists also find themselves called on when the supports that are supposed to be in place are inadequate or not working. Jenny is a relatively new teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. While technology can be very helpful to the students she works with, she can also be called away from supporting students when technology fails. As she explained, “with the group of students that I work with, a huge barrier in the classroom is access. And most often there’s technology that not working that has to be troubleshooted, or that has to be dropped off. Those are the biggest reasons that I get called away.” Another potential reason that teachers can be called away is to cover a classroom when there are no teachers teaching on call available. Betty explained that, “with the teacher shortage, we are the ones who end up covering classes,” adding that in these cases, “our kids will just get put on hold.”

Constantly being pulled to put out fires can lead teachers to feel like “we’re just simply trying to get by” (interview with ‘Louisa’) and burning out when “we are constantly being asked to do more with less” (interview with ‘Wanda’). Molly described this as “support teachers are in this awful position where their colleagues are kind of expecting them to do the impossible.” She continued on to say that the district needs to take some leadership in that area instead of “expecting their support teachers to step in and fill those gaps” caused by inadequate funding and a lack of support services for inclusive education.

Teachers are feeling that they are “simply trying to get by” and “constantly being asked to do more with less.”

Participants at the *Meaningful Inclusion Summit* echoed the views shared in the interviews, speaking to what one participant described as a daily reality in which “we triage the system.” This includes trying to fit supports in through creative scheduling, “piggy-backing” support targeted at one student to multiple students and cobbling multiple small supports together. Speaking about the challenges in their work, one participant reflected the views of many when they said, “I believe in inclusion but...” This leads to a situation where many participants feel that they are working in a system that fails kids every single day.

The stress of “so much to be put on the shoulders of one person”

The physical and emotional impacts of working daily in a system in crisis can lead to high levels of stress for specialist teachers. Multiple interviewees spoke about potentially leaving their role as a specialist teacher, and several had left a specialist role for a classroom position. Key reasons for either leaving or having left the role were increasing caseloads coupled with decreasing staffing. For example, Kristen was on an educational leave at the time of the interview and had taken

that leave partly due the stress of her previous teaching position. For Kristen, that stress came from how “it’s so much to be put on the shoulders of one person. And the expectations are very high. But the support—the support isn’t there.”

While many interviewees and participants at the *Meaningful Inclusion Summit* spoke passionately about working directly with students, this can be a very small part of the role of a specialist teacher in an under-funded education system. For instance, participants discussed how the Individual Education Plan (IEP) has become more of an administrative burden than a tool for teaching and learning: jumping through Ministry hoops, getting bogged down in paperwork, becoming a “cookie cutter” approach rather than a living document for the student and teacher. A key concern for participants was how the ability to meet the needs of students decreases because so much time is spent “pushing paper.” This was echoed by James, who explained that he has seen an increase in caseload, large amounts of paperwork, meetings that “tend to be outside of school time,” and an expectation that “as a learning support teacher, you’re expected to be available after and before school frequently.” For Louisa, these pressures lead to a feeling that “there’s not enough time” which can then become “there’s no work-life balance.” Louisa said she “tried to make it a point of finding, like, exciting things or joyful things in the work day or something. But if you’re not finding those, then it’s just really—it becomes negative. It’s too much, you know.”

The often extremely high workloads of specialists can lead to stress and burnout, especially when “the expectations are very high,” but the “support isn’t there.”

The often extremely high individual workloads of specialist teachers is in tension with what drew many of them to the role: relationships. For many specialist teachers, this is the relationships that they form with their students, as Molly described when she described inclusion as “people know you. They know who you are. They know, what you like, what you don’t like, what you need to succeed and how to help you thrive and flourish.” This can also be relationships with colleagues and the broader school community. For instance, Susie said that “the piece that attracts me most to the job is probably the relationship pieces” that are “not only with the student and their parents” but also “the relationship that I get to build with lots of district staff and people who support the kids.” However, the time and space to build these relationships necessitate supportive school conditions.

The need for school conditions that enable “having those hard conversations”

For the interview participants who did feel supported in their role as a specialist teacher, having time and space for meaningful collaboration was key. This included collaboration with multiple stakeholders including parents, classroom teachers, other specialist teachers, and EAs. For this to occur, most interview participants described how “strong leadership” by administrative staff is crucial to creating an inclusive school environment. Having this leadership can be a key support to specialist teachers, such as Jenny who felt that she “can have an honest conversation” with the administrator about student needs and how best to meet them. In contrast, participants described how having ineffective administrative support, or constant change in administrators at a school level, can undermine the relationships that are crucial to an inclusive school culture.

Another key factor is time. As Molly explained, “obviously you need time to collaborate. I think that’s what it really comes down to. It’s not a lack of willingness, and it’s not even a lack of training, because there are people that can tell us how to do this, it’s how do we get the time to sit down and plan together and make it work for the kids? And I think that, that’s what we’re really missing, is time.” For Molly, this time needs to be provided not only at a school level, but also to create “broader conversations” at a district level about inclusion. As Annette said, time “makes everybody relax a little and think a little deeper.”

“We don’t have the collaboration time. We don’t have the funding to do it. We don’t have the time to do it. And I think that becomes really frustrating.”

Trying to build relationships without time and support can contribute to making the role of a specialist teacher incredibly complex. As more experienced specialist teachers retire, or move out of the role, teachers with less experience move into a role that is “really hard to step into because it’s so multifaceted and it’s so complex, and there’s so many, kind of, moving parts going all the time” (interview with ‘Susie’). Participants suggested potential ways to foster collaboration, from taking on a “mentorship role” with colleagues (interview with ‘Lauren’) and including dedicated time for IEP meetings in the school schedule (interview with ‘James’). However, participants also recognized that these individual strategies fail to address the systemic lack of funding and supports. As Jenny said, “we don’t have the collaboration time. We don’t have the funding to do it. We don’t have the time to do it. And I think that becomes really frustrating.”

Crucially, collaboration and relationship building is seen by specialist teachers as central for meeting the needs of the students in their

classrooms and schools. Lauren was one of the few interviewees who described her current situation as her “ideal job.” Resonating with research literature that positions inclusion within the entire school environment, Lauren described the school where she is a specialist teacher as having an “inclusive culture” that plays out in collaboration, shared responsibility and a strong sense of community. Lauren explained that

there will be moments when you can group [students with special needs] in large group. And there will be some really effective strategies, and brilliant teaching modules, but, in the end, there will also be a massive number of moments that are about someone having the time to work directly with the child. Or a colleague having time to work directly with a colleague to have them understand how to adapt and—in a mentorship role to move forward with things, and to have time collaborate and *talk* about things.

A state of crisis

While teachers across the province have different perspectives and experiences, they broadly share the view that inclusive education in BC is in a state of crisis. Almost 30 years after the philosophy of inclusion was introduced in the province (O’Neill, 2018), and despite a landmark court ruling in 2016, the complexity of student needs has increased at the same time as supports to meaningfully address these needs have decreased.

“We have to do what’s best for the kids in our schools and classrooms and there is not a one size fits all solution.”

This paper illustrates some of the effects of an under-funded public education system, one in which it is estimated that the funds allocated for special education services cover just over half of what school districts ultimately spend on these services (Rozworski, 2018). Amidst current changes to education funding in the province that will further alter what inclusive education looks like in BC, it is crucial to learn from teachers’ experiences and perspectives in order to advocate for teaching and learning conditions that support all students with diverse needs. As Wanda cautioned, specialist teachers “can’t keep accommodating because we are being asked to do more with less. We have to do what’s best for the kids in our schools and classrooms and there is not a one size fits all solution.”

References

- Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., Braun, A., & Hoskins, K. (2011). Policy actors: doing policy work in schools. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(4), 625-639. doi:10.1080/01596306.2011.601565
- BC Ministry of Education. (2015). *Introduction to British Columbia's redesigned curriculum (draft)*. Retrieved from curriculum.gov.bc.ca/sites/curriculum.gov.bc.ca/files/pdf/curriculum_intro.pdf
- BC Ministry of Education. (2016a). *Individual Education Plan Order*. Victoria, BC.
- BC Ministry of Education. (2016b). *Special education services: A manual of policies, procedures and guidelines*. Retrieved from www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/special_ed_policy_manual.pdf
- BC Ministry of Education. (2018). *K-12 Public Education Funding Model Implementation*. Retrieved from www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/resource-management/k-12-funding-and-allocation/funding-model
- BCTF. (2017). *Distributed Learning Trends, 2006-07 to 2015-16*. Retrieved from bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/ResearchReports/2017-DL-01.pdf
- Cavendish, W., Menda, A. M., Espinosa, A., & Mahotiere, M. (2016). Implementing response to intervention: Challenges of diversity and system change in a high stakes environment. *Teachers College Record*, 118(5), 1-36.
- CBC News. (2018, August 31). B.C. schools get record funding but teacher shortage remains. Radio Canada International. Retrieved from www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/b-c-schools-get-record-funding-but-teacher-shortage-remains-1.4806289
- Cuban, L. (2013). *Inside the black box of classroom practice: Change without reform in American Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (2017). Critical qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(1), 8-16. doi:10.1177/1077800416681864
- O'Neill, E. (2018). From institution to inclusion: A history of special education in BC schools. *Teacher Magazine*, 31.

Rozworski, M. (2018). *BC's inclusive education funding gap*. Retrieved from bctf.ca/publications/ResearchReports.aspx?id=51999

Shields, K. (2018). Use the power of your school-based team to help yourself and your students. *Teacher Magazine*, 31.

Srivastava, P., & Hopwood, N. (2009). A practical iterative framework for qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 76–84.

Talmy, S. (2010). Qualitative interviews in applied linguistics: From research instrument to social practice. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 30(1), 128–148.

