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# Inclusive Schooling for Students with Disabilities: Redefining Dialogues of Diversity and Disability in the Canadian (Alberta) Agenda

**Abstract:** *Inclusive education for students with disabilities is beset by foundational problems often related to conflicting definitions. UNESCO, a lead agency, speaks to accommodating diversity; a parallel conversation is preoccupied with disability. This paper is situated at the intersection of diversity, disability, and inclusive schooling. It focuses on the present tendency to conflate disability with diversity to conform with UNESCO's version of inclusive schooling. As a case study, we use the Canadian province of Alberta where a recent set of proposals aimed at reforming special education rebranded disability as diversity and promised inclusive schooling as a solution to mounting diversity in the schools.*

*We explicitly argue that Alberta's sustained muddle of intent related to inclusive schooling arises, at least in part, from efforts to follow UNESCO's broad prescriptions and assimilate disability into diversity. Misassumptions about the uniqueness of disability relative to other forms of diversity and difference have spilled over to blanket disability and diminish the importance of schooling for those disabled in the political space. Implicitly, the data are generalizable to other countries pursuing an inclusive agenda, particularly those in Europe.*

**Key words:** *diversity, disability, inclusive schooling, province of Alberta*

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**摘要** (Margaret Winzer & Kas Mazurek: 残疾学生的全纳教育：加拿大[阿尔伯塔省] 议程中关于多样性和残疾对话的新定义)： 残疾学生的全纳教育通常受制于与矛盾的定义有关的一些基本问题。领头机构联合国教科文组织支持多样性并与残疾进行平行对话。本文处在多样性，残疾和融合教育的交界处。它着眼于当前将残疾与多样性结合起来的趋势，以符合联合国教科文组织关于融合式学校教育的模式。作为案例研究，我们列举加拿大的阿尔伯塔省，在那里的一系列特殊教育改革提案中提出了残疾作为多样性的说法，并承诺融合教育可以解决学校日益增长的多樣性。我们明确指出，阿尔伯塔省与全纳教育有关的持续性困惑至少部分是由于遵循联合国教科文组织的一般规则，并将残疾纳入多样性的努力。与其他形式的多样性和差异相比，对残疾的独特性的误解已扩大到一般残疾，并降低了在政治舞台上为残疾人提供学校教育的重要性。数据可隐式地推广到追求包容性议程的其他国家，特别是欧洲国家。

**关键词：**多样性，残疾，全纳教育，阿尔伯塔省

**摘要** (Margaret Winzer & Kas Mazurek: 殘疾學生的全納教育：加拿大[阿爾伯塔省] 議程中關於多樣性和殘疾對話的新定義)： 殘疾學生的全納教育通常受制於與矛盾的定義有關的一些基本問題。領頭機構聯合國教科文組織支持多樣性並與殘疾進行平行對話。本文處在多樣性，殘疾和融合教育的交界處。它著眼於當前將殘疾與多樣性結合起來的趨勢，以符合聯合國教科文組織關於融合式學校教育的模式。作為案例研究，我們列舉加拿大的阿爾伯塔省，在那裡的一系列特殊教育改革提案中提出了殘疾作為多樣性的說法，並承諾融合教育可以解決學校日益增長的多樣性。我們明確指出，阿爾伯塔省與全納教育有關的持續性困惑至少部分是出於遵循聯合國教科文組織的一般規則，並將殘疾納入多樣性的努力。與其他形式的多樣性和差異相比，對殘疾的獨特性的誤解已擴大到一般殘疾，並降低了在政治舞台上為殘疾人提供學校教育的重要性。數據可隱式地推廣到追求包容性議程的其他國家，特別是歐洲國家。

**關鍵詞：**多樣性，殘疾，全納教育，阿爾伯塔省

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**Zusammenfassung** (Margaret Winzer & Kas Mazurek: *Inklusive Beschulung für SchülerInnen mit Behinderungen: Neudefinition des Dialogs über Vielfalt und Behinderung in der kanadischen [Alberta] Agenda*): Inklusive Bildung für Schüler mit Behinderungen wird von grundlegenden Problemen heimgesucht, die oft mit widersprüchlichen Definitionen zusammenhängen. Die UNESCO, eine Lead-Agentur, spricht sich für die Berücksichtigung der Vielfalt aus; ein paralleles Gespräch beschäftigt sich mit Behinderungen. Dieses Papier befindet sich an der Schnittstelle von Vielfalt, Behinderung und integrativer Schulbildung. Es konzentriert sich auf die gegenwärtige Tendenz, Behinderung mit Vielfalt zu verbinden, um der UNESCO-Version der integrativen Schulbildung zu entsprechen. Als Fallstudie verwenden wir die kanadische Provinz Alberta, wo eine Reihe von Vorschlägen zur Reform der Sonderpädagogik die Behinderung in Vielfalt umbenannt und eine integrative Schulbildung als Lösung für die wachsende Vielfalt in den Schulen versprochen haben.

Wir argumentieren ausdrücklich, dass Albertas anhaltende Absichtslosigkeit im Zusammenhang mit integrativer Schulbildung zumindest teilweise auf Bemühungen zurückzuführen ist, den allgemeinen Vorschriften der UNESCO zu folgen und Behinderungen in Vielfalt zu integrieren. Missverständnisse über die Einzigartigkeit von Behinderungen im Vergleich zu anderen Formen von Vielfalt und Differenz haben sich auf eine allgemeine Behinderung ausgeweitet und verringern die Bedeutung der Schulbildung für Menschen mit Behinderungen im politischen Raum. Implizit sind die Daten verallgemeinerbar für andere Länder, die eine integrative Agenda verfolgen, insbesondere für diejenigen in Europa.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Vielfalt, Behinderung, inklusive Schulbildung, Provinz Alberta

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**Аннотация** (Маргрет Винцер, Кас Мазурек: *Инклюзивное обучение для учеников с ограниченными возможностями: к вопросу о трансформациях в дискуссии о многообразии и детях с нарушениями здоровья – на примере проекта в канадской провинции Альберта*): Инклюзивное образование для детей с ограниченными возможностями связано со многими принципиальными вопросами, которые, в свою очередь, порождают достаточно противоречивые определения этого явления. ЮНЕСКО, коммуникационное агентство Lead выступают за то, чтобы концепт «многообразия» учитывался на всех уровнях; параллельно разворачивается дискурс о нарушениях здоровья. Проблема находится на стыке концептуальных областей «Многообразие», «Нарушения здоровья» и «Интегративное образование». В данной работе обозначается тенденция совместить две концептуальные области – как это находит свое отражение в положениях ЮНЕСКО относительно интегративного школьного образования и как это влияет на целевую группу «школьники», а также приоритеты, направления, ежедневный практический опыт реализации данной концепции.

В качестве примера рассматривается канадская провинция Альберта, в которой было сделано сразу несколько предложений по реформе специальной педагогики; словосочетание «нарушения здоровья» было заменено на «разные возможности», а интегративное школьное образование стало рассматриваться как способ решить насущные вопросы, связанные с увеличением количества «особых» детей в школах.

Мы настаиваем на той точке зрения, что выбранный в Альберте подход к интегративному образованию в определенной степени объясняется желанием следовать общепринятым предписаниям ЮНЕСКО и стремлением подвести вопросы нарушения здоровья к концепции многообразия. Разногласия по поводу специфичности нарушений здоровья по сравнению с другими формами многообразия и дифференциации перебрались на общую проблематику, связанную с нарушениями здоровья; тем самым они умаляют роль школьного образования для людей с ограниченными возможностями, а это важно в том числе для политической повестки. Данные, полученные в результате изучения опыта канадской провинции, могут быть экстраполированы для исследования данного вопроса в других странах, где обсуждается концепция интегративного обучения; особенно это касается европейских государств.

**Ключевые слова:** многообразие, нарушения здоровья, инклюзивное школьное образование, провинция Альберта

## Introduction

As part of a general global demand to establish social justice, equity, and diversity as center pieces in policy making, inclusive schooling for students with disabilities (special education needs) has emerged as a widespread reform. Given its lengthy pedigree and increasingly central place in global and national education policy discourses, it is not surprising that the inclusive schooling movement has enthralled special education and involved many levels of general schooling.

That said, a universally accepted definition or any legal consensus about how to define inclusive schooling does not exist (de Beco, 2014). Rather, sharply different and often non-compatible versions ask different questions. As examples, but far beyond the scope of this paper, is the human rights ethos propagated by the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* that, in fundamental ways, differs from the American thinking that students with disabilities receive education in the most appropriate settings, referred to as the least restrictive environment (LRE). Other versions ask 'How much inclusion is a good thing' and pit *partial inclusion* (related to the LRE) against doctrinal and extreme positions known as *full inclusion*, represented by the idea that all students with disabilities, at all times, and at all levels, must be taught in general classrooms.

These two versions are at the heart of this paper which sets out to provide an example of the changing dialogue on diversity and disability within the context of inclusive schooling. We have spoken to the challenges that lie at the intersection of disability, diversity, and inclusive schooling previously (Winzer & Mazurek, 2017). This paper recharges the conversation but moves away from the theoretical underpinnings to largely practical aspects. The discussion is set in our home province of Alberta where a recent series of proposals sought to rebrand disability as diversity and promised inclusive schooling as a solution to mounting diversity in the schools.. Alberta Education, the responsible ministry, claimed that the new agenda promoted the co-existence of diverse students in schools by moving "from tolerating difference to valuing diversity" (Alberta Education, 2010b).

This brief paper explicitly focuses on the proposals, explains the core ideas with reference to the underlying notion of subsuming disability under umbrella concepts of diversity, difference, and disadvantage, and spotlights some salient outcomes. Implicitly, it illustrates the tensions between education reforms that promote equality for all and those that are more concerned with the needs of individual consumers. We broadly conclude that Alberta's set of reforms were muddled, plagued by a lack of coherent interplay between legislation and practice on pivotal issues. The agenda seemed to be largely fruitless in consolidating inclusive schooling although there is evidence that it did create a significant reduction in official initiatives and urgency about disabled students and their needs in the political space.

Alberta Education's ambitious policies to handle disability and diversity within one inclusive system offer an important lesson. The ensuing dilemmas are mirrored in other countries where the dynamics of diversity have become an increasingly important category for action and where many jurisdictions have undertaken the mission to welcome and engage all marginalized and disaffected groups and to support diversity in the schools.

## Case study

From the late-1980s on, the province of Alberta underwent reform activity in the direction of an inclusive schooling agenda, but one with disabled students as the center piece of policy making. In 1993, inclusive schooling was officially codified when Alberta Education crafted a policy that emphasized

the general classroom as the first placement option to be considered for identified disabled students (see Alberta Education, 2004). Official endorsement of inclusive practices subsequently led to the dismantling of separate settings such as resource rooms and special classes; many, but not all, special schools were closed in favor of students sharing the mainstream. The possibility of greater general classroom access led to significant increases in the diagnosis of disability, particularly within the severe range. The numbers of disabled students in the general system grew from almost 10 percent of total enrolments in the late-1980s to 13.4 percent by the mid-2000s. Students were identified and funded within a complicated coding system that recognized many different types of disabilities and degrees of severity. The number of eligibility categories for special services increased from 13 in 1992 to 19 in 2008 (Alberta Education, 1989; Alberta Education, 2008b, c).

At the same time, Alberta's changing demographic scenario saw schools developing into complicated settings of racial, linguistic, ethnic, cultural, social, and religious difference with twice the level of classroom complexity compared to the average of all other jurisdictions in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; ATA, 2015). To add even more complexity to the mix, cycles of austerity routinely appeared. The 1990s in Alberta were characterized by a long chain of conservative economic policies that saw systems increasingly endorse market forms and accountability dynamics. Concerns about public spending increased, together with significant demands to reduce costs through greater efficiency and accountability.

Beginning in 2005, Alberta Education seriously embarked on a series of far reaching and fundamental reforms that spanned a decade. The multiple proposals linked a number of pressing policy issues into one debate. They addressed ideological commitment (social justice and equity), needs within the education system (diversity), individual needs (disability), structural changes (inclusive schooling), and external pressures (the politics of austerity). In the reform mode, policy makers formed at least temporary alliances with ideology and social goals; they spoke to "value-based" approaches (Alberta Education, 2010b). But, whatever the anchoring mechanisms, financial calculus was the driving force. Reform was largely proxy for what commentators described as an exercise in "how best to manage and plan for the cost of the other" (Gilham & Williamson, 2014, p. 557).

There are 375 distinct jurisdictional authorities (districts or divisions) in the province of Alberta (Alberta Education, 2016). In 2001, Alberta Education handed the responsibility for making funding decisions about individual disabled students to the school authorities. But government spending had become leaner and meaner and the resources devoted to education seriously declined. In their remit to balance aid for general education and to fund inclusive practices, Alberta's schools developed a habit of identifying mounting numbers of students within the severe categories of disability, particularly emotional disturbance and behavior disorders. Why? Because a designation of severe disability produced high financial rewards- a bounty of \$16,465 in additional funds for each identified student (Charette, 2008; Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011).

In the fall of 2007, Alberta Education undertook a review of the 16,000 files that school boards claimed met the severe disability criteria. Analyses of the funding arrangements found markedly inconsistent application of severe disabilities identification across the province; only 56 percent of students had bona fide severe disabilities that matched funding criteria (Alberta Education, 2008b). As a direct result, the Alberta government underlined the need to improve the entire education system and specifically called for a thorough examination of the special education enterprise (Alberta Education, 2008a).

After multiple consultative reviews and public forums that involved approximately 1000 stakeholders (Alberta Education, 2010a), a framework titled *Setting the direction*, later *Action on inclusion*, emerged.

The documents were part of and prologue to a continuing chain of reform proposals (e.g., Alberta Education, 2009, 2010b, 2011, 2012b, c). All were peppered with platitudes about diversity and inclusion. All promised to address the massive diversity in the schools, expand and refine inclusive schooling, streamline special education, rethink fiscal arrangements for students with disabilities, and stem unsustainable public spending. There was lots of talk about classification, coding, labeling, and assessment.

Overall, the set of proposals designed to fundamentally alter the directions of inclusive schooling in Alberta articulated a number of notable discontinuities from past practice. We identify those most germane to the present discussion below.

***Diversity is a foundation of inclusive schooling.*** The original conceptual blueprint to guide inclusive schooling in Alberta was built solely on the need to accommodate disabled students based on the American model of the least restrictive environment. *Action on inclusion* and later documents changed course by downplaying the disability variable in favor of a broader set of reforms with a different policy intent.

Alberta Education's new proposals essentially dismissed the classic concern for students with disabilities in favor of privileging diversity. Policy makers held that "Inclusion is not just about learners with special needs;" rather, inclusive schooling is "an attitude and approach that embraces diversity and learner differences and promotes equal opportunities for all learners in Alberta" (2017, p. 1). Loreman (2018) describes the target audience laid out by Alberta Education as "a laundry list of categories of diversity" (p. 2); that is, "race, religious belief, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, family status or sexual orientation, or any other factors" (Alberta Education, 2015b).

***Disabilities are neutralized.*** The diversity framework characterizes disability as simply another identity representation to be pursued alongside common markers such as culture, gender, ethnicity, language, and social class. Such a model makes diversity proxy for commonality and tends to neutralize disability. On one hand, it overlooks the uniqueness of disability relative to other forms of diversity, implies that disabilities are not really problems to learning, and fosters a perverse disinclination to confront the real challenges facing students with disabilities. On the other, diversity demands uniform treatment. Because all students are diverse and in need of various supports and practices, disability does not really mean special needs. Under a new Alberta *Education Act* (2012a), for example, there are no longer students with disabilities but students "in need of specialized supports and services."

***Reform would restructure schools and build a single inclusive education system.*** Alberta Education (2009) proposed a system in which diversity and disability would function within "one inclusive education system where each student is successful" (Alberta Education, 2009). Later, it spoke to "shifting from a dual system of mainstream education and special education to a system that takes responsibility for all students" (Alberta Education, 2012b). The documents also promised that all students would "have equitable opportunity to be included in the typical learning environment and program of choice" (Alberta Education, 2010a). *Typical*, referring to students in classes with their age peers with instruction modified within the Alberta Program of Study (Alberta Education, 2010b) soon morphed into *an appropriate learning environment*. Now inclusion did not "necessarily mean that every student registered in the Alberta school system will be placed in a regular classroom" (Alberta Education, 2012a). It seemed that a variety of settings, from segregated classes to the general classroom would serve.

## Outcomes and consequences

The above sketch of the attempted changes show that little about Alberta's reform agenda was linear or precise. On the contrary. Researchers critique "Inclusion's confusion in Alberta" (Gilham & Williamson, 2014) and characterize the education landscape as riddled with a muddle of changes in definitions and directions. The so-called reform climate is marked by lack of coherence, short horizons, unfulfilled promises, and repeated calls for events that do not happen, and few notable successes. The agenda is consistently an object of re-recognition. The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) chides that since the mid-1990s Alberta Education has been on a cycle where it is "just doing the same thing over and over" to the extent that its reform agenda is "continually reoccupying the same space with an unending series of revisions, scribbling and new texts" (ATA, 2014, p. 54).

Alberta's decade of reform for students with disabilities ended rather abruptly in 2015 partly because of the election of a new provincial government, partly because changing political discourses elevated other priorities and dampened enthusiasm, and partly from what seems to be a pervasive ennui with the whole concept of inclusive schooling for those with disabilities. Following, and since 2015, Loreman (2018) complains that there has been an "almost complete absence of action in policy and legislation with respect to improving inclusive supports for learners with disabilities." Inclusive education, he holds, has dropped "to be the lowest of government priorities" (Loreman, 2018, pp. 3, 4).

Researchers have warned that incorporating broad views of inclusion designed to encompass all forms of diversity creates the risk that the interests of those with disabilities may become secondary or be overlooked in favor of other minority interests (e.g., Norwich & Koutsouris, 2014). Prescient words for the Alberta scenario where inclusive schooling went from being a very specific focus with a very specific audience to a focus on simply providing children with disabilities an education (ATA, 2014). For example, what had previously been a separate department for inclusive learning within Alberta Education was rolled into the general operation of the schools (ATA, 2015). Alberta's present Inclusive Education Policy (Alberta Education, 2015a) "represents the bare minimum" (Loreman, 2018, p.3). It is a mere two paragraphs long and Loreman (2018) suggests that the actual policy is, in fact, not really a policy. The language used is vague and broad, it does not guide practice, does not actually require schools to do anything, and does not foreclose any and all other options.

What Alberta Education describes as inclusive schooling is often decoupled from meaningful policy and practice. Critics carp that "inclusive education in Alberta continues to be stuck in the 1990s" (Loreman, 2018, p. 3). Alberta's schools still rely on the Ministerial Order first developed in 1993 (mentioned earlier), and reiterated in the 2004 *Standards for special education* that specify that students are entitled to inclusion in the general classroom as the first option on a menu of options. At least some jurisdictions interpret the 2004 regulations to mean that segregated special education programs are acceptable provided consideration is first given to placement in inclusive contexts. Moreover, prescriptions about physical placement in the reform documentation are vague, flexible, and changeable, with various mentions of 'typical,' 'appropriate,' 'grouped programs based on specific needs,' and 'a mix of the two experiences' (Alberta Education, 2011; ATA, 2011; Gilham & Williamson, 2014).

Certainly, Alberta boasts a remarkably broad public education system with much school choice. But it is unclear exactly what inclusive schooling means. In general, traditional mechanisms remain doggedly in place in an unchanged school system. Often, so-called inclusive practice is little more than reconstituted integration. For example, although Alberta Education (2010b) promised to move away from medical models, identification, classification, and placement are often steeped in notions of individual

pathology. Further, any intent of all students within general settings is far from being realized. Instead, an actual approach of segregated and inclusive forms of education is maintained in both policy and practice (Gilham & Williamson, 2014; Loreman, 2014).

Alberta Education's list of diversity categories (2015b) included mental and physical disabilities but elided specific references to students presenting with emotional or behavioral challenges, an increasingly visible problem in contemporary classrooms. To accommodate children with such difficulties, segregated special education programs, anomalies in an inclusive system, are flourishing, particularly in urban areas. For example, Edmonton public schools have dozens of distinct sites for special education. Many are segregated classes that cater to students with behavior disorders, severe emotional problems, and autism. Similarly, the Catholic district has new plans for students with substantial behavior problems and severe autism who are not functioning well in typical classrooms. Some will be congregated in a designated school building; others will be referred to private schools (French, 2017).

## Postscript

This paper set out to discuss aspects of diversity and disability in inclusive schooling. We used Alberta's recent reform record as a case study to illustrate an increasing trend in contemporary special education- assimilating disability into diversity so that inclusive schooling caters to the vastly mounting diversity seen in the schools.

Alberta's inclusive education reform objectives seemed to be woven around varied currents of educational thought, social goals, and economic considerations. Issues surrounding equality, diversity, and the growing population of identified special pupils and their schooling were refracted through the prisms of financial calculus and the imperatives of the fiscal restraint. Attempting to reconcile the twin realities of diversity and disability within climate of austerity produced different paths to describe and direct inclusive schooling that hobbled a coherent vision. Even after a decade of initiatives to change the focus of inclusive schooling by rebranding inclusion as diversity, inclusive schooling in the province of Alberta remains a contested domain with a host of unresolved questions about which inequalities are the most important to address, who individuals with disabilities are, what is meant by inclusion, who is to be included, and what 'all' means on an everyday basis.

Alberta Education documents prioritize diversity while the field remains preoccupied with students with disabilities. Despite equity as the conceptual preference, the balance tips to disability as the priority. This continued tendency to focus upon students with disabilities and to downplay the needs of other diverse groups is a relatively common focus in countries of the global North. For example, while most European countries express an intention to realize inclusive education in accordance with the UNESCO vision, "the results of its implementation in practice are not at all convincing" (Haug, 2016, p, 14).

As a final note, we can say that Alberta Education idealizes the inclusion project as a process well underway. This paper argues that the promises became mired in a muddle of changing intent. There is presently insufficient policy attention to the ways in which disability is being addressed as the system dedicates itself- or attempts to- to diversity. Inclusion is a term employed at the level of policy making but features of provision chime with traditional forms of special education. A multilevel architecture remains in place that sustains a special system parallel to general education.

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