

Inclusive Postsecondary Education—An Evidence-Based Moral Imperative

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Abstract Although today many more examples of postsecondary educational opportunities being made available to students are expanding for adults with intellectual disabilities (ID), the majority of these opportunities are either segregated or partially segregated with few accommodating students with significant disabilities or challenging behaviors. In this article, the authors take the position that the desire for inclusive education and the beliefs and principles of inclusive practices must be the foundation for inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE). The rationale for such an approach is based on positive outcomes derived for young adults where opportunities for inclusion in the context of universities, colleges, and technical schools offer a powerful context for embedding students in the normative pathways that can lead to positive lifelong outcomes. As inclusive schooling remains a controversial issue even after 40 years of supportive published research and demonstrated practice, it is not surprising that full IPSE opportunities are limited. The authors hold to the principles of inclusion as the foundation for postsecondary education given the known failure of segregated education to result in positive social and economic outcomes. The authors explore the means of achieving better futures for students with ID through IPSE. This article highlights the findings of 25 years experience across the province of Alberta in implementing 18 IPSE initiatives for young adults with the full range of ID, including those with severe and multiple disabilities, and outlines the challenging behaviors thus strengthening evidence for adopting inclusive practices. The supports required for an authentic student experience in all aspects of postsecondary academic and social life are described with employment, academic, economic and social outcomes highlighted. IPSE has been shown to be an important and effective means of launching students with ID into adulthood, but by itself, IPSE is not sufficiently powerful to sustain an inclusive pathway over time. The authors note that student experiences in campus life and relationships reveal we are not close to finding the limits to where and how inclusion can be achieved; the challenge is to create opportunities.

Keywords: evidence-based, inclusive postsecondary, intellectual disabilities, moral imperative

INTRODUCTION

For almost 25 years, students with intellectual disabilities (ID) in the province of Alberta, Canada, have been participating in postsecondary education. These students, including those with severe and multiple disabilities, have been fully included in regular courses, labs, and field studies within a growing array of postsecondary institutions, faculties, departments, and programs of study. Professors, peers without disabilities and families consistently report students with ID achieve positive social and academic outcomes. One of the most promising outcomes has been a rate of employment for completing students that exceeds 70% (Hughson, Moodie, & Uditsky, 2006). The participating students with ID have reported on the value of forming friendships and learning alongside their peers without disabilities in regular

university, college, and technical institute courses, and their peers without disabilities have echoed these statements (Hughson, Moodie, & Uditsky, 2006; McDonald, MacPherson-Court, Franks, Uditsky, & Symons, 1997; Uditsky & Hughson, 2008).

Access to postsecondary institutions for young adults with ID is increasing across Canada as it is in other countries (Grigal & Hart, 2010). However, in contrast to the inclusive approach and resulting positive outcomes experienced in Alberta, some of this growth in access is framed in more traditional special education structures. A number of new programs provide a physical presence on campus, but may segregate or group students with ID together to learn life and social skills, and vocational readiness (Papay & Bambara, 2011).

The degree of inclusion embraced by any postsecondary initiative is often a function of the values and knowledge of the architects of these efforts. There is a risk in the fast-paced growth of new postsecondary education options for people with ID that implementers may repeat some of the errors evident in past efforts by creating less than fully inclusive practices that succeed-

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ing generations will then have to struggle to alter. Postsecondary environments are highly valued, and many individuals and their families are thrilled to simply be allowed on campus. This leads to a further risk of their accepting being segregated at college, which may override the need for critical appraisal and advancement of authentic inclusion. Culturally, the term “inclusion” has become increasingly ambiguous. The word is frequently attached to all manner of policies and initiatives, making it difficult to ensure that all parties are clear on the practices being discussed or implemented.

In developing “inclusive postsecondary education” (IPSE) in Alberta, the principles of full inclusion were informed by a moral perspective as well as an understanding of the “social model of disability.” Such theories of disability, equity, and equality guided the early efforts (Frank & Uditsky, 1988; Uditsky & Kappel, 1988) and remain relevant as we shape such initiatives today.

WHY AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH?

In the late 1980s, when the first IPSE initiatives were launching, inclusion was not readily available in public schools. The first IPSE initiatives began with a conscious desire to apply a particular theoretical approach to creating a good life for individuals with ID and a commitment to gathering evidence as to the effectiveness of this approach. Clear evidence of the failure of segregated or partially segregated schooling to provide positive postschool outcomes, and the growing body of research supporting inclusive schooling, suggested the need for something different (Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Dunn, 1968; Wang, Anderson, & Bram, 1985). The unexplored and powerful context of a university, technical school, or college, with their high expectations and societal value, seemed a fruitful proving ground for new ideas about inclusion.

In advocating for IPSE, we were driven by both a moral and practical imperative. The evidence of the relationship of segregation to increased vulnerability to abuse and to a marginalized life characterized by isolation, unemployment, and poverty required, at the very least, a morally coherent and practical alternative to be designed and tested (Blatt & Kaplan, 1966; Canadian Association for Community Living, 2011; McVilly, Stancliffe, Parmenter, & Burton-Smith, 2006; Pitonyak, 2006; Sobsey, 1994; The Roeher Institute, 1996; Wolfensberger, 2005). Continuing to foster the same schooling models that had failed or limited the future for students with ID for decades seemed a less ethical stance when inclusive education practices were showing promise (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Haring & Lovett, 1990; Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2007; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996).

NORMATIVE PATHWAYS OF INCLUSION

IPSE rests on the concept of embedding individuals with ID within normative pathways to the maximum extent across the lifespan. Normative pathways are the life avenues ordinarily pursued by individuals without disabilities (Uditsky, 1993). For

example, the development of a career identity, which directly contributes to future employment, is a process that begins in early childhood for individuals without disabilities. The development of a career identity is encouraged through the efforts of parents and grandparents, early educators and regular classroom teachers, and the business community. This cultural norm starts, for example, with dress-up role playing and questions about what we will be when we grow up, and continues while young people have an allowance, gain an income, and experience professional relationships. Being employed becomes a normative expectation, a given rather than an option.

By deliberately and consciously embedding children with ID within these typical pathways, by facilitating their full inclusion over time, by holding high expectations, by pursuing IPSE and a career, good lives are more likely realized. IPSE is only one example of the many interconnected life pathways that are important to encourage (Uditsky & Hughson, 2008).

Normative pathways provide varied and individualized outcomes, leading to the fascinating diversity of experiences and life choices of people without disabilities. Applying this construct to IPSE necessitates embedding students with ID as individuals in valued pathways of the complete experience of being on campus. It means being able to authentically act on one’s passions, hopes, and dreams, as well one’s academic interests. It is not enough just to be on campus. It is far more necessary to belong, to establish relationships—whether as part of a team, student council, student advisory body, study group, cohort of peers in the same faculty, or faith group.

In this context, IPSE is part of a normative pathway into adulthood. This separates IPSE from standard transition programs, which seldom have the power and utility to forge valued career identities (DiLeo, Rogan, & Geary, 2000). Our collection of narratives and documentary videos over the last 20 years repeatedly captures the benefits of inclusion within normative pathways from childhood to adulthood, as evidenced in the friendships, education, and employment outcomes achieved by young people with ID (Uditsky & Hughson, 2008).

DEFINING THE PRACTICE OF IPSE

Quality IPSE, as described by O’Brien, Bowman, Chesley, Hughson, and Uditsky (2009) and by Uditsky and Hughson (2008), supports individuals with ID to experience authentic student life at a university, college, or technical institute. The standard for authenticity is the experience of those typical students without disabilities who are gaining the greatest benefit from their postsecondary education. Authentic student experience unfolds in at least five contexts that weave together to promote belonging, learning, identity, and contribution:

1. Academic: Students pursue a coherent program of study in course-related activities that develop their capacities.
2. Social: Students make friends, connect with social networks, and pursue a social life in company with fellow students.
3. Associational: Students join and participate in organizations that reflect their interests and concerns.

4. Employment: Students explore their options for work through internships, career guidance, and part-time and summer jobs.
5. Family: Students assume a new place in their families as their competence, confidence, and autonomy grow and new possibilities emerge.

The authentic student experience offers opportunity to express membership in the distinctive culture of a particular field of study. For example, those pursuing agriculture or hospitality studies typically distinguish themselves from students of fine arts or education in dress, activities of interest, and conversational language. The authentic student experience shapes the rhythms and routines of the day and week with regard to the patterns of class schedules, study, recreation, socializing, and community activities; by the month and term for longer academic projects, plays, art shows, concerts, and sports seasons; and by the year for intensive study periods, holidays, and summer employment. There must be conscious, systematic, creative, collaborative efforts to minimize the differences that can pull students away from these typical and valued pathways.

KEY ELEMENTS OF IPSE IN ALBERTA

The Concept of Inclusion

The inclusion of students with ID begins with their application to the postsecondary institution of their choice (in the province of Alberta 18 postsecondary institutions accommodate students with ID) and to the program of study that interests them within that institution. Students range in age from those recently completing high school (late teens to early twenties) to those in their mid-thirties. Students may or may not have had an inclusive education prior to applying or attending college or university. In addition to a primary determination of ID, students being included have also been labeled with such conditions as autism, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, Williams syndrome, cerebral palsy, pervasive developmental disability, behavioral challenges, sensory impairments, mental health challenges, and multiple and severe disabilities. Attention is given to ensuring that a proportion of the students accepted into postsecondary institutions includes those with severe and multiple disabilities.

The range of faculties, departments, and programs of study open to students with ID has grown to the hundreds, but not every program of study in every institution is open to these students. In collaboration with the inclusion facilitators located on each campus, faculty from the regular program of study interview applying students and decide on admissions. In this respect, the faculty within the regular program of study become engaged and committed, as would be true for students without a disability. As the applying students with ID do not have the academic standing to competitively be admitted to a postsecondary institution, they are accommodated as auditing but fully participating students. This student status ensures access to campus facilities and services to the same degree as is true for their academically eligible peers (e.g., libraries, student healthcare, computer centers, and recreation facilities).

Students with ID take the same courses and are in the same classes, labs, field studies, and practicums as their peers. Students with ID are supported in their classes by their classmates without disabilities, while those requiring support for physical care also have access to personal care staff. Students participate in all aspects of the class, including group projects, assignments, and exams, which are modified as required. Although students typically pursue less than a full course load, they progress in their studies from year to year. At the end of the time taken for most students to complete their studies, the students with ID convocate with their peers and are recognized by the institution for their successes and efforts. Along with a certificate of completion, each student takes away a personal portfolio of completed work and relevant references.

Students also are encouraged to participate in the richness of campus life, and may join clubs, political movements, the student council, and recreational activities. During the summer months, the vast majority of students are employed. Students are required to pay audit tuition fees and other student costs such as books, lab materials, and service fees. Scholarships and grants are available to students and families who do not have the financial resources to cover these costs.

Funding

Choosing an inclusive approach led to a consideration of how to fund IPSE. Although schools were financially responsible for students with ID into their early twenties, the choice was made to secure other sources of funding that were not tied to special education, so as to avoid the restrictions that might be imposed by an education funder. This freedom provided the opportunity for a fully inclusive approach to be developed, without the requirements associated with funding either schooling or adult day programs or vocational training (e.g., students age, activities, duration of program, staff qualifications, etc.).

The funding is specifically designated to hire facilitators, not to fund faculty or the infrastructure of the postsecondary institutions. The term “program” is avoided to highlight that the IPSE initiatives were support services for students *within* facilities and programs of study.

Types of Postsecondary Institutions

The range of inclusive postsecondary institutions in Alberta includes universities and colleges that are faith-based and secular, private and public, rural and urban, with large and small student populations. Increasing numbers of postsecondary institutions, given past successes, are seeking the opportunity to include students with ID. This includes participation with institutes for technical and trade education.

IPSE has succeeded across all 18 of the Alberta institutions of higher education that have implemented it. This success has not been affected by differences in administrators and administrative practices, block or individualized funding, student and faculty communities, focus of the institutions’ educational mandates, initial institutional allies, or changes in leadership. The following have positively contributed to IPSE at these institutions: clarity

on the meaning of full inclusion, reasonably sustained funding that is not tied to special education or segregated adult programs but to supporting the inclusion of adults with ID, and a provincial advocacy organization, the Alberta Association for Community Living (AACL), which is deeply committed to inclusion across the life span.

Facilitators

Each campus has a small initiative to facilitate the inclusion of students with ID. Initiatives range in size from one facilitator to as many as five, with the larger initiatives having a coordinator who is also engaged in facilitating inclusion. The number of students included on each campus ranges from 2 to 13, and students identify with their institution or program of study, not with a specialized program based within the institution.

The roles and responsibilities of the facilitators include: assisting professors and instructors to modify curriculum and assignments; engaging peer supports (support in classes is provided by fellow students without disabilities); supporting inclusion within study groups or among friends; facilitating the completion of assignments; arranging for peer tutors; encouraging friendships; supporting inclusion in campus life, from sports to clubs to politics; maintaining communication with families; and helping students secure employment during the postsecondary years and upon the completion of the program of studies. Rather than directly instructing students, a facilitator's primary role is to engage the student in campus life, interpret both student and environment when necessary, and remain in the background as much as possible.

Facilitator Education and Coordination

To sustain inclusion and ensure continuous improvement, care was taken to develop the following: an IPSE network of all the institutions in Alberta that meets regularly to share knowledge; a commitment to reflective critique that addresses collective issues; regular in-services for facilitators; biannual retreats with students, faculty, facilitators, and families; a DVD titled *Living the Dream: Inclusive Post-Secondary Education* (Alberta Association for Community Living, 2006) that illustrates IPSE in practice; a peer evaluation tool to support continuous quality improvement now adopted by the Alberta government (O'Brien et al., 2009); mentorship and peer evaluation; and inter-initiative facilitator exchanges.

CONCLUSION

The power of these normative, academic IPSE environments clearly contributes to drawing out the best in students with ID, their peers, and faculty. Faculty and students without disabilities consistently remark on the benefits they derive from inclusion. Some faculty express gratitude for learning how to be better instructors, while some peers note the value of forming lasting friendships. Students with ID demonstrate and report numerous

benefits: securing meaningful employment; gaining knowledge and skills; developing friendships; and increasing their sense of achievement, self-esteem, and self-confidence. Parents report that their sons and daughters with ID have gained in maturity, independence, and capabilities (Hughson et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 1997).

The receptivity of postsecondary institutions, from presidents to faculty to students, has been remarkable. However, institutional receptivity does not negate the need to safeguard inclusion. As with any human service, the capacity to drift from an inclusive pathway is ever present. It is unlikely that IPSE would have expanded or been sustained over decades without the intentional leadership and instrumental advocacy of a provincial advocacy organization (i.e., the AACL).

The value of IPSE has been consistently and repeatedly demonstrated across an array of postsecondary institutions, programs of study, faculty, peers, and students with ID. Facilitating natural supports not only works well, but also demonstrates the capacity of largely untapped generic organizations to offer inclusion and share in the societal responsibility to accommodate and welcome students with ID.

Adults with ID and their families deserve the same opportunities and means to fulfill their dreams as other young people without disabilities. Unfortunately, only a very limited number of individuals with ID are able to access this powerful avenue to a promising future. Limitations in the advancement of full inclusion do not lie with students, postsecondary institutions, or evidence-based knowledge, but with values and commitment. And for many students, the only postsecondary education options available to them are not truly inclusive.

There is no need to move incrementally from partially segregated postsecondary education to full inclusion. It is possible—and, we would argue, an evidence-based moral imperative—for those operating and developing initiatives to ensure full inclusion is realized now and is not simply a future promise or a continuing debate. Students with ID deserve no less.

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