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Globally Defining an Inclusive Education Standard

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Abstract

This paper identifies the need to establish a global standard of *inclusive* education for those of us with disabilities to meet goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations.

Keywords

K-12 Education, Higher Education, Government.

Introduction

As we move into the era of a human rights model of disability, (Marcia Rioux) inclusive education has become the goal of many advocates and international organizations, including the United Nations. Goal 4 of the Post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stipulates that we must: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

While the term inclusive education is representative of education for all (leave no one behind), we have yet to define what that term means for those of us with disabilities in a global context.

In many models of education, the terms *accommodated for*, *mainstreamed*, *special education* and *integrated* education are used interchangeably with inclusive education.

However, *accommodated for*, *mainstreamed*, *special education* and *integrated* education remain dependent on inserting a person with a disability into an inaccessible learning environment and attempting to *make them fit* (Harman). *Non-inclusive* learning environments create barriers to students with and without disabilities.

This paper establishes the need for a global standard that defines the implementation of inclusive education in developed and developing nations (Global North and Global South).

Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities

While the CRPD outlines the need for accommodation when necessary, it fails to provide more guidance and definition to facilitate the creation of a global inclusive education standard. We must also add tertiary education to article 24.

Juxtaposed against the call for inclusive education is the current call for quality education (Education International). Although the need for quality education is referred to primarily for those of us without disabilities, the elements of quality education discussed in a global context can be incorporated into a global inclusive education standard. For example, models of quality education are holistic and bring together safety, psycho-social well-being, access to the built environment, access to learning material (whether that material is physical or digital), a standard for teacher qualifications, and substantive equity (Grima). All are components of inclusive education.

As we move toward establishing a global inclusive education standard, we are faced with several seemingly interchangeable terms: *accommodated for*, *mainstream*, *special education*, *integrated*, *quality* and *inclusive*. Unfortunately, many of these terms have negative connotations for those of us with disabilities.

The Legacy of Mainstreaming

Most current articles on mainstreaming acknowledge the legacy of attempts to insert those of us with disabilities into the *regular* classroom, either full or part-time, with little or no supports. Even the contributors to the Wikipedia definition of mainstreaming begin the article by stating that “mainstreaming is not to be confused with inclusive education” (Wikipedia).

The very definition of mainstreaming precludes an inclusive learning environment. The focus of mainstreamed learning is that those of us with disabilities spend only part of the day in a *regular* classroom and are withdrawn for special education for some subjects.

The focus of *accommodated for*, *mainstreamed*, *special education*, and *integrated* education fosters a dependence on external supports for those of us with disabilities. This eradicates accountability of the teacher toward multi-modal teaching techniques, maintains a distance between those of us with and without disabilities, and perpetuates a segregated social model of disability with remnants of the medical model of disability.

In Canada, *mainstreaming* has been replaced by a model of *integrated* education (Statistics Canada). The concept maintains an equal but separate learning environment.

Although some provinces have their own human rights based legislation containing language specific to those of us with disabilities, there are no provincial or national standards defining inclusive education. The focus is on *accommodation for* those of us with disabilities (Government of Ontario).

The term *special education* is discriminatory as it relates specifically to those of us with disabilities and does not include those of us who are gifted or require other types of learning environments (Wikipedia).

If we are committed to inclusive education and learning environments, those of us with disabilities must be accepted as equals with the same rights as other students and teachers. We must begin to leverage technology when available to support learning and inclusion.

The Role of Technology in Inclusive Education

In an inclusive education model, the focus is not on technology but rather on options for learning. When learning assets are accessible, and students seamlessly use their adaptive technology, a significant barrier to learning is removed.

For example, the use of adapted learning tools such as *Learning Path* (LeaP) by Desire2Learn provides a framework for students to have additional learning material presented to them based on goals and objectives set by the teacher and based on responses to the learning assets presented (Desire2Learn). The focus is on learning the concept, and the technology is a responsive means toward that goal. The technology is not the goal itself.

An inclusive education model must contain clearly identified international guidelines and standards of accessibility for the use of technology in teaching and technology used by those of us with disabilities to access learning material.

A global inclusive education standard must recognize that not every country or region has access to the same level of technology, connectivity and digital learning material. As the availability of technology increases, a global inclusive education standard will assist countries and regions ensure that technology is accessible, and students and teachers with disabilities have access to adaptive technology.

Creating a Global Inclusive Education Standard

First, we must agree on the elements of inclusive education in the global context. This is a difficult but not impossible task. A priority in creating the global inclusive education standard is the consultation and participation of those of us with disabilities in creating the standard.

In order for us to be successful as a global community in achieving an inclusive education standard by 2030, we must begin moving toward learning environments with all of the following elements:

- Any tool used in any learning environment must be accessible to international guidelines or standards. For web content, applications and apps this means WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) and the Authoring Tool Accessibility Guidelines (ATAG). PDF (Portable Document Format) is identified in ISO 14289 (International Standards

Organization). There are international guidelines for captioning and video description, accessible multimedia and other formats.

- Tools used in a learning environment include but are not limited to administrative software, grading software or software used to communicate with parents.
- To promote role models and include those of us with disabilities in the learning environment, we must hire teachers with disabilities.
- Teachers with and without disabilities must receive education that establishes them as inclusive educators who are able to teach those who want to learn. (This may include professional development programs in sign language, Braille, adaptive technology and so forth.)
- The built environment must be accessible to students and teachers with disabilities. This includes sports fields, areas of athletic activity and auditoriums used for physical education.
- A by-product of this component is in providing opportunities for Paralympian's to train and compete locally nationally and internationally.
- Any deliverable/assignment produced by any teacher or student must be created to be accessible. Principles of universal design must be present in all deliverables produced in any learning environment.
- A by-product of this is that graduates with and without disabilities will be more competitive in a global employment environment because employers will not have to train or educate them on established accessibility/inclusive standards.
- Additionally, any funding for any educational project must include language that moves the learning environment toward the global inclusive education standard. This includes monitoring and evaluation protocols that ensure the above mentioned components of inclusive education are implemented in a timely manner.

Conclusion

In 2016, despite the promotion of *inclusive* education as it pertains to those of us with disabilities, we are no closer to establishing what *inclusive* education means in a global context.

There are exponential benefits to establishing a global inclusive education standard for those of us with and without disabilities. If the SDGs are to be realized by 2030, we need to begin graduating students who are already able to create, design, deploy, and invent products, physical and digital environments that are inclusive/accessible. Moreover, these graduates need to be able to accept those of us with disabilities as part of all professional practices.

Developing a global inclusive education standard creates the infrastructure for a human rights model of disability. It will ensure that those of us with disabilities are an integral part of our communities socially, professionally, and politically.

Author's Note

In this paper the term “those of us with disabilities” purposely replaces the more generic “people with disabilities” to promote the use of a more inclusive language.

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