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Alberta Experience of Inclusion.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the Alberta experience of inclusion. It is an honour and a privilege to discuss the benefits and challenges of including children with disabilities in the regular classroom. In this presentation I will introduce a successful program that we have developed over the past 20 years at Grant MacEwen College. It prepares educational assistants to work with the teacher in an inclusive classroom. Our graduates provide the essential day-to-day support necessary for a teacher who has the added responsibility of working with children with disabilities.

The philosophy of inclusion is a belief that every person with a disability should have an education and living environment as close to normal as possible. They are included in our lives, schools, neighbourhoods, and communities. They are regarded as equals B deserving of the respect and acceptance that we all share as members of a community.

In Canada, as in most countries, persons with disabilities had not been encouraged or allowed to participate in the community. They have been set aside, isolated, feared and seen as deficient and deviant because of their difference. This isolation, segregation, and institutionalization contributed to the fear and prejudice that our society exhibited when the plans were made to bring persons with disabilities into our regular classrooms. Teachers like many in the community had these prejudiced attitudes as well. It was the school children who were the most accepting. The earlier we are introduced to people who are different (physical, social, intellectual, cultural) B the easier it is to **accept, respect, and accommodate** that difference. Our society improves with that acceptance and respect. Most students who have shared their classroom, their learning, and their social activities with those who have disabilities mature into a person who is more accepting of peoples' differences. They are more capable of adapting to and assisting

others, and they develop a healthy understanding and appreciation of their own strengths and weaknesses.

In the inclusive classroom, a child with a disability learns appropriate social skills which improve relationships and increases independence, he develops friendships and a sense of belonging which increases his self-worth, and he improves his academic knowledge even though it may not meet the standards of his peers. Student's intrinsic need to belong provides the motivation to learn new skills. An inclusive classroom provides that opportunity.

Supportive parents who communicate with and encourage the teacher, who participate in their child's learning at home, and who communicate the success of inclusion to their community will create a positive, accepting attitude within the school and community.

Who will determine the success of inclusion? Most children with disabilities will not meet the exact academic standards of each grade. For most children if they experience a sense of belonging, learn how to communicate and get along with their peers, and continue to develop skills that will enhance their independence, inclusion is successful. They should continue to move from grade to grade with their classmates.

Allow me to digress briefly and speak from personal experience to illustrate my point. Our youngest child was born with moderate cerebral palsy and has learning disabilities. He was the first child in the city where we lived to be integrated. Except for three years, when we moved, he went through the school system in an inclusive classroom. I found as a parent that positive communication with the teacher several times a week initially, and then less often as the year progressed, helped us all become more comfortable with the expectations, problems and successes that we all experienced. I shared with his teacher, my son's progress at home and we reinforced the skills he learned at school. Because of our on-going communication our son knew that he was very much loved and cared for. Each year we reassured his new teacher and educational assistant that we were aware that his academic progress would be slower but that we and they

would observe progress. His association with typical classmates taught him excellent social skills and he became a good communicator. He was unable to walk or talk until he was six years old. He uses his wheelchair to get to work (approximately one kilometre) but uses only the support of walls to walk when at work or at home. He works in a large grocery store three hours per day, four days a week. His physical disability prevents him from working full time. He has developed healthy relationships with his co-workers and enjoys his work. He is confident, considerate of others, and shares with his family a wonderful sense of humour.

We are very proud of our well-adjusted, pleasant, and happy son. Inclusion with the cooperation of teachers, educational assistants, and our family has contributed to our son's remarkable school experience and a well-adjusted productive life as an adult.

Fifty years ago, Canada did not provide (legally, financially, or philosophically) an education for children with disabilities in the school system. Parents were instrumental in acquiring an education for these children. Initially they funded separate schools outside the regular school system. There was no association with the regular students & they were isolated. This separation and isolation contributed to the community's prejudice and fear of persons with disabilities. These children were labelled as "special" which unfortunately was translated by most people as deviant, difficult, and pathologically different. Slowly, ever so slowly, meeting resistance all the way, we progressed from separate schools to separate (segregated) classrooms in the regular school, to the inclusive settings that many children with disabilities experience today. That is, learning in a regular classroom in their neighbourhood school with children their age. It is an embarrassing and shameful history of education in Canada & a history of lost opportunities.

At Grant MacEwan College, we have a program that prepares educational assistants with the knowledge and skills necessary to support the instructional, behavioural, and social needs of a student as set out by the teacher in a classroom. This post-secondary program has evolved over the past 20 years into a very effective and well recognized 10 month certificate

program. Under the direction of a teacher, our graduates work directly with students individually or in small groups to deliver activities that reinforce and advance the education of typical students as well as those with disabilities. They are capable of adapting curriculum materials and learning activities, documenting students' needs and academic progress, and providing clerical, technical, and supervisory support to teachers. Our program combines experiential learning and lectures to help students develop an understanding of the role of the educational assistant; child development and psychology; the acquisition of sound behaviour management techniques; education curricula; specific special education techniques and strategies; and technology. Two field placements provide a valuable supervised practical experience.

I have been an instructor at Grant MacEwan College for 20 years. Permit me to briefly describe two, 45 lecture hour courses that I have designed and taught in this program. The text *Disabilities and Health Issues in the Classroom*, was written to compliment the courses. This book is a user friendly text that makes medical and educational terminology understandable, while providing educational assistants and teachers the necessary foundation of knowledge. Parents who read the book find the information helpful when relating to educators and the medical profession.

The two *Students with Exceptionalities* courses develop an in-depth knowledge of strategies and interventions that are helpful to children who have difficulty learning or learn differently. Learning and behavioural characteristics of children who have disabilities are discussed. The effects of medication on behaviour and learning are presented. Course content also includes study in the areas of metacognition, seizure disorders, cerebral palsy and other physical disabilities, developmental delay, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), asthma, schizophrenia, depression, autism, hearing and visual loss, severe behavioural disorders, fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), and Tourette syndrome. The course examines the history, philosophy, and educational concepts associated with inclusion. Students recognize and learn the appropriate response to many common health issues within an inclusive classroom. They understand the development and implementation of individual student program plans.

These courses have also been adapted for distance (self-study) delivery. We have students across Canada learning the course content and applying it to their experience in working with children with disabilities. I hope you may find these courses a helpful model for your transition into inclusion.

Our educational assistant certificate program provides a very strong foundation of knowledge to the graduates who wishes to continue their education or expand into similar fields. It is transferable to other two-year diploma programs within our College. Those graduates laddering through diploma courses can then transfer to baccalaureate programs. We provide students with opportunities to take university courses as credit within our program for which our graduates receive university credits when they pursue their university degree studies. There are several options for students to continue their education. Depending on their needs, our students may choose to attend full-time day classes, part-time evening classes, or complete the program through our distance (self-study) delivery program.

We hope this presentation is the initial phase of a long and mutually beneficial association with those of you committed to the philosophy of inclusion in Ukraine. We welcome the opportunity to share our experience in the development of our educational assistant program and look forward to continuing participation in discussions that will allow for the exchange of information and ideas.

In conclusion I will leave you with a thought from Norman Kunc, *When inclusive education is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children have to become typical in order to contribute to the world. Instead, we search for and nourish the gifts that are inherent in all people. We begin to look beyond typical ways of becoming valued members of the community and, in doing so, begin to realize the achievable goal of providing all children with an authentic sense of belonging.*