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IMMEASURABLY MORE *than* **WE CAN ASK** *or* **IMAGINE**

Leading Inclusion in Our Schools

The more we become people of action and responsibility in our community, the more we must become people of contemplation. If we do not nurture our deep emotional life in prayer hidden in God, if we do not spend time in silence, and if we do not know how to take time to live from the presence and gentleness of our brothers and sisters, we risk becoming embittered.

~ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*

What is Inclusion in the Context of Ontario Catholic Schools?

Inclusion is not an ideology. Inclusion is not a place. In schools, inclusion is a learning practice in relation to a specific student or group of students and is therefore, dynamic and contextual. Inclusion is a moving target and if it is to be authentic, it must remain so. How then can we know if we are inclusive in our schools? Reflection on my work with parents, students, teachers and staff, has led me to believe that we can know we are inclusive by the fruits of inclusive practices. Students experience inclusion when:

- they are safe;
- they are able to learn in the place and context that they are assigned;
- they are learning;
- they are able to share their learning with their peers;
- their learning is assessed and they are provided genuine feedback about their learning; and
- their learning is evaluated and reported in light of a set of known expectations.

As school leaders, it is our responsibility to ensure that all students experience inclusion.

Safety is the first condition for learning and for inclusion. As school leaders, we need to structure safety for students on all levels: physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual. We need to be models of safety in the way that we relate in our community. We provide a safe learning environment for our students when we treat everyone in our community with dignity and respect, and when we listen to their voices on issues of common concern. What is most challenging for us as leaders occurs when we face those who either disagree with or misunderstand our vision of inclusion. At these times, we must model inclusion in a manner

that provides them with safety to unfold and thereby, transform their story and ours. Our presence as mediators of the experience of safety gives credibility and genuine authority to our school codes of behaviour.

The health of a community can be measured by the quality of its welcome of the unexpected visitor or of someone who is poor, by the joy and simplicity of relationships between its members, by its creativity in response to the cry of the poor.

~ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, p.143

Who are the poor in our schools? The answers will be different for each of our communities: some are students, some are parents, some are staff. All will be marginalized from the dominant culture. We must think at once broadly and specifically about who are the marginalized in our schools. We must be willing to ask, "What is the experience of the student with a different sexual orientation, culture, race, religious belief, colour or ability?" How do our structures sort and categorize students based on their perceived deficit and difference from the norm and do we know how students' sense of themselves is affected by this? The extent, to which we build relationships of equality with the poor and marginalized in our community, is the degree to which we mediate safety.

The poverty of some in our schools is that they are unable to learn in the place where they are required to be. When we timetable for our schools, do we timetable for the most difficult to serve students first? Do we ensure that the least able students in our schools will have access to courses and pathways that build on their strengths and abilities to learn, as well as the most able? Do we allow students to be in classrooms where they cannot access

the curriculum on any level or share their learning with their peers? Do we require students to demonstrate success in subjects in which they cannot experience engagement before we allow them to study something that touches their passion? Do we allow structures such as terms or semesters to define success or failure rather than the process of learning over time? Do we provide students with appropriate withdrawal for support delivered by qualified teachers and supported by educational assistants? Do we provide teachers with the tools and background knowledge required to teach the students we entrust to their care?

To be silent by one's choice is to have an opportunity to listen to the voice of God. To be silent because there is no opportunity to be heard is to disappear slowly. Every student who is learning and cannot be assessed in their classroom, who cannot receive feedback on their learning in their classroom and share their learning with their peers, remains silent in the worst possible way. When learning is authentic, students' voices are liberated. Do we allow learning for any students in our schools to be so assisted that it is no longer theirs? Students know when their learning is authentic and they know when it is not. Learned helplessness can be a product of the silencing of learning regardless of who the student is or how good our intentions are.

Students need to know that we have expectations of their learning that are rigorous and attainable, and they need to know what they are. Students expect to have their learning evaluated after it has been assessed and they expect to receive credible reports about their learning. Are there students in our schools who if we asked them, "What are you expected to learn in this classroom?" would have no answer because they have never been told or shown? Evaluation of students' learning and reporting their learning in reference to a known set of expectations as the culmination of the experience of inclusive learning are a celebration not just of the individual student, but of the community, the classroom and the school.

Students who are not capable of learning in the places they are assigned in our schools face a terrible experience of

exclusion that undermines their human dignity. I suggest to you that they know it and if we are fearless in our reflection, so do we. Nowhere is this reality more clear than within our special needs student population. Too often the program for students with special needs is driven by an ideology of inclusion that paradoxically creates an experience of exclusion for the student. Simply because a student is in the room with other students does not mean that they are included. When an educational assistant or a teacher is assisting a student, to such an extent that the learning is no longer the student's, they are excluded from learning and they and everyone else around them knows it. This is particularly harmful to the experience of inclusion because it witnesses to the community of the classroom that this person cannot learn in a way or to a level that is acceptable for assessment, celebration, evaluation or reporting. When a student is able to learn and share their learning in a meaningful way with their peers and have that learning assessed, evaluated and reported in a safe environment, then they experience inclusion. The experience of inclusion is liberating regardless of who the student is or how gifted or challenged they may be.

Together we can address the myriad of complex questions surrounding the delivery of inclusive education to all of our students. Creating inclusive communities in our schools is a joyful task set in the context of finite resources. This is a reality that we cannot deny or pretend is not important. Yet there are resources within our community that are liberated each time we structure authentic inclusion for our students. I have never met a teacher who did not delight in the learning of a child, any child. If I believed for a second that I was alone in this work, I would be too afraid to get up and go to school! We are ministers not messiahs. Empowered by a clear vision of what the fruits of inclusion are, we must commit to the work of inclusion by being leaders of action and responsibility that flows from our deep relationship with "the one whose power now at work in us can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine." (St. Paul)

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