

# **Conversations for Moving Forward: Stories of Inclusion**

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### **Abstract**

The practice of inclusion has traditionally been concerned with the education of students with special needs. However, there has been a shift by the Ministry of Education in British Columbia to explore the ideas of diversity and removing barriers to learning for all students. This has sparked discussion amongst Resource Teachers about their roles and responsibilities to create inclusive environments within their schools. The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the experiences of elementary Resource Teachers with inclusion, how those experiences influenced their definition of inclusion and how their definitions impacted their support of inclusive practices within their schools. Qualitative research data was gathered through interactive interviews with five Resource teachers and four themes emerged: the role of the Resource teacher, the definition of inclusion, responsibilities of the Resource teacher to inclusion and roadblocks to inclusion. The findings were then blended into four short stories. By linking the stories and current research on the topic of inclusion, this study has shown the importance of time and space for collaborative dialogue about how to move forward in our effort to create more inclusive classrooms in our schools. Discussion regarding the implications of this research for Resource Teachers, classroom teachers and school/District leaders is included.

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## **Chapter One: PROBLEM TO BE INVESTIGATED**

### **Background and Context**

My years as a student were spent in a mid-sized rural community in Alberta. During that time, students with special needs received support in a “resource room” and while I recall seeing these students on the playground or moving through the hallways, I do not remember sharing a classroom with them. My classmates who did not seem to do very well in math or reading would sometimes disappear for short periods of time, but I never thought about where they went or with whom. They would simply reappear and we would move on. I never asked and they never told. The classmates I remember most vividly are the ones who would act out, become aggressive or otherwise misbehave. I remember just wanting peace so I could learn and thinking that my teachers probably felt the same way.

When I began my journey to become a teacher in the 1990’s, one of my required courses at university was The Educational Psychology of Exceptional Learners. Prior to this course, my vision of teaching was based on my own very self-absorbed experience as a student. I pictured my classroom full of a homogenous group of children who were socially, cognitively and physically ready to learn. Everyone was equally prepared for his or her learning journey and I had only to lead. When I stopped to consider students with special needs at all, I only thought about those students who were born with a visible disability. Since I had never experienced sharing a classroom with them as a student, I assumed I would not have to share a classroom with them as a teacher. The psychology course changed that. It was the first time I had heard the word inclusion used in an educational sense. My vision had to change.

My teaching years have taken me to four different provinces and territories. I have taught in remote, Northern communities accessible only by air, in rural communities and am currently teaching in a larger center. I have taught all subjects from Kindergarten classrooms up to Grade eight. Over those years, I experienced and supported a range of “inclusiveness”, but had always considered the term more of a descriptor of “location” rather than giving any real thought to what it meant in an epistemological sense. To me, inclusion addressed “where” we

taught students with special needs- in a regular classroom as opposed to a separate classroom or school. Being inclusive was as simple as having students with special needs in my classroom. At the same time, I struggled with how best to include these students while meeting the needs of all my learners. I questioned whether I had the skills, the resources or even if it was actually my job to do so.

After several years as a teacher in a regular classroom setting, I accepted a position as a Resource Teacher in a small, rural elementary school. I was completely unprepared for the shift that would be required in my understanding of teaching and learning, the new collaborative nature of my role and the move from being responsible for a single classroom to being responsible for students at every grade level and in every classroom in my small elementary school. As a Resource Teacher, my job description included being responsible for students with identified special needs, students who needed learning assistance and students who received English as a Second Language/Dialect support. The first few years in this role, I spent the majority of my time questioning the “how” of my job. How exactly do I provide support to the students on my caseload? How do I support the teachers in my school? At every level- school, District and Ministry of Education, the term “inclusion” was used, but what I quickly realized was that, while there were some attempts to define inclusion, there was by no means any consensus.

Recently, I accepted a new position in our District. I began teaching a program for students with Severe Behaviour designations (Categories H and R). In this small setting of no more than ten students, we provide short-term intensive intervention with the intention of reintegrating the students back into their home classrooms and schools. At the same time, I agreed to serve on the executive of the British Columbia Provincial Special Education Association. These two new roles have compelled me to look at my values and beliefs about teaching, learning and inclusion in new ways. I now find myself beginning to ask different questions. As someone whose role is to support teachers and students in an inclusive environment, I struggle to define it for myself. How can I support something I do not understand? What does inclusion mean to me? Is it simply the “where” or is it something more? Are we being inclusive when we take students out of their classrooms for intervention? Are we being

inclusive if we don't? How do we meet the individual needs of students within a general education classroom?

Who are we talking about including, and are we leaving anyone out?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The *School Act* articulates the purpose of the British Columbia school system: to enable all learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.

To achieve this purpose, the school system must strive to ensure that differences among learners do not impede their participation in school, their mastery of learning outcomes, or their ability to become contributing members of society.

(British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2008)

This legislation guides our work as educators and provides the framework for understanding inclusion within our schools in British Columbia. It addresses both our need to include and also the assurance that we will not exclude learners as they move through our system. How we tackle this at a classroom, school and system level is dependent on how we define inclusion and exclusion.

I believe one of our duties as teachers is to advocate on behalf of all our learners and support the development of inclusive practices within our buildings. Resource teachers, in particular, should be among those leading the charge. The role of Resource teacher is complex and unique; a blend of teacher, specialist and manager. The practices we engage in while working with our students are fundamentally a reflection of our values and beliefs about learning and children. It becomes imperative then, to examine what those values and beliefs are in regards to inclusive education. How do we define inclusion and what does this look like in our schools?

It is also necessary to explore what inclusion does *not* look like in order to shed light on practices that may be impeding our growth in this area. Teaching and learning do not take place in a vacuum. An awareness of our beliefs and assumptions around learning is required if we are to change and improve the way we do things. In the

case of inclusion, there may be a variety of ideas around what this means and inclusion as a practice is very context-oriented. It is essential that we define what this means for us; first, as individuals, second, as a school, and finally, as a system. Inclusion as a practice is unlikely to be successful if we attempt to implement it in any other way.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Resource Teachers and how those experiences relate to their definition of inclusion. It will also endeavor to explore how such definitions shape the support given to inclusive practices within their schools by Resource Teachers, while acknowledging that this is only one group of stakeholders for whom this issue is relevant.

### **Definition of Terms**

In this study, a **Resource Teacher** is defined as a non-enrolling teacher who is responsible for students with identified special needs requiring an Individual Education Plan (IEP). These teachers are also involved in providing learning assistance to students who need support with their learning objectives as identified by their classroom teachers. Some of the Resource teachers interviewed also provide English as a Second Language/Dialect (ESL/D) support to students in their schools, although this role is not always tied to the Resource teacher position in my current school district.

The term, **students with identified special needs**, refers to those students who meet the criteria for a special needs category from the British Columbia Ministry of Education and receive funding support.

**Learning assistance** describes the support provided to students who have been identified by their classroom teachers as requiring short-term intervention to meet their curricular objectives. These students may or may not require an IEP.

**English as a Second Language/Dialect (ESL/D)** students either have a first language other than English or have parents whose first language was something other than English. These students receive additional funding from the British Columbia Ministry of Education to support their language development.

**EA** is the term used in School District #57 to refer to Educational Assistants in the classroom.

**SBT** refers to School Based Team, School District #57's problem-solving model for planning around students.

**IEP** refers to the Individual Education Plan, a ministry-mandated document that outlines specific goals and services for students with identified special needs.

**SSSTM** stands for Student Support Services Team Meeting

**ICM** refers to Interagency Case Management meetings.

### **Brief Overview of Study**

This study explores the experiences of inclusion of Resource teachers in School District #57. This narrative study consists of qualitative data that was collected through personal interviews with five Resource teachers who work in elementary schools in School District #57 and my personal reflective journal where I explore my own experiences with inclusion. Throughout our conversations, I listened for evidence that related to defining inclusion and the experiences that led to those definitions. After the interviews, I examined the data (transcribed interviews and my journal) to uncover common themes related to inclusion. The data is presented in the form of fictional short stories that help to illustrate those experiences. The aim of this study is to foster a deeper understanding of how Resource teachers experience inclusion in their practice and how they have come to define it for themselves. The definition of inclusion has a significant impact on how these teachers support the development of inclusive practices within their buildings. The work of defining it is, therefore, seen as essential. The results of this research will be used to advocate for the creation and support of a professional learning community, which will invite Resource Teachers in School District #57 to explore the topic of inclusion in greater depth.

### **Research Questions:**

How do the experiences of Resource teachers influence their definition of inclusion? How does their definition impact their support of inclusive practices within their schools?

## Chapter Two: LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a great deal of research on the topic of inclusion in education. However, despite all the attention and focus devoted to the subject, a clear and concise definition continues to be elusive. Much of the research literature on inclusion tends to approach the definition of inclusion in one of three ways: the education of students with special needs in a general education classroom, the removal of barriers to learning for all students, or an argument against the need to define it at all.

First, there are those who treat the term inclusion as being primarily concerned with the education of students with identified special needs. There are countless studies examining issues surrounding inclusion such as teacher attitudes toward inclusion (Ross-Hill, 2009; Horne & Timmins, 2009), the changing roles of special educators (Florian, 2008) and how best to support the development of inclusive practices for students with special needs (Thousand & Villa, 2000; Zollers, 1999). All of these authors present a definition of inclusion that centers around the “placement” of students, specifically, the mainstreaming of students with identified special needs within general education classrooms. In their study, *Inclusion Confusion: Putting the Pieces Together*, authors Lynne Snyder, Pamela Garriott and Mary Williams Aylor, compiled data from interviews conducted by students in an inclusion course at Central University Michigan. The students interviewed 28 teachers from the state of Michigan who described themselves as “currently teaching in an inclusive classroom” (Snyder, Garriott, Aylor, 2001, p. 200). The study included a mix of both general and special education teachers and teaching experience ranged from one to twenty-nine years. Participants were asked a number of questions designed to elicit “...their perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about inclusive education” (p. 200). The authors found that the respondents’ definition of inclusion fell into three broad categories. 49% of the teachers interviewed defined inclusion as educating students with special needs in a general education classroom, 39 % described inclusion as educating students with special needs in a general education classroom with the support of special education teachers (co-teaching) and 18 % defined inclusion as educating students with learning disabilities or students who were able to function close to grade level in a general education classroom (p. 201-202). The authors of this study found that the definitions provided by the interviewees were consistent with the literature on the subject and that a common

definition was particularly important in settings that provided placements for student teachers. One limitation of this study was that the criterion for selection was the teachers interviewed had to be teaching in an inclusive setting and this was pre-defined as a “general education classroom in which students with special needs received instruction along with general education students” (2001, p. 200). Therefore, the researchers, allowing little room to explore alternative meanings, had already set the definition of inclusion.

The second approach to defining inclusion offers a much broader characterisation of inclusion in education such as in the Open File on Inclusive Education:

Inclusive education, therefore, is not simply about reforming special education and an inclusive school is not simply one which educates some disabled children. Rather, inclusive education is about reducing all types of barriers to learning and developing ordinary schools which are capable of meeting the needs of all learners. It is, indeed, part of a wider movement towards a more just society for all citizens. (UNESCO, 2001, p. 20)

Advocates of this shift in thinking look at inclusion through a human-rights lens and proponents define inclusive education as a shift from a deficit-model where the child is focus of the problem, to one that seeks to embrace difference (Ainscow, 2007; Corbett, 2001; Parr & Campbell, 2012). In *Improving Schools, Developing Inclusion* (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006), the authors describe their work with a national network of the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme out of the United Kingdom. Teams of researchers from three universities partnered with separate Local Education Authorities where they worked with several schools, both primary and secondary, to explore the development of inclusive practices.

The authors identify several barriers such as race, gender, behaviour/discipline, school or government policies, funding and perhaps most crucial, our own assumptions about how students learn. They argue that if educators are to truly embrace inclusion as a “way of being” in their schools, then they must define it. Through a collaborative action research process, researchers worked with teachers and school districts in an attempt to explain the factors, which can either facilitate or inhibit the development of inclusive practices within schools. What they found was that “clarity of definition” was one factor that appeared to stand out from all others (Ainscow, 2005,

p.117). While recognizing that inclusion is very context- oriented, there were four common themes arising from their work with the schools that Ainscow believes can be used to open debate on inclusion and lead to wider understanding of its' principles: inclusion is a process, it is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers, it is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students, and it emphasizes those learners who may be most at risk of exclusion (Ainscow, 2005).

From a more local perspective, *Diversity in British Columbia Schools: A Framework*, published by the BC Ministry of Education in 2008 reflects this same approach to defining inclusion. The *Diversity Framework* defines diversity as an “overarching concept that relies on a philosophy of equitable participation and an appreciation for the contributions of all” and outlines its' goals as “encouraging understanding, acceptance, mutual respect and inclusion in order to make school communities and society as a whole more equitable for all people” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2008, p.7). In particular, the *Diversity Framework* refers to removing barriers to learning in the areas of language education, Aboriginal education and special education.

Finally, there are some who caution against attempting to define inclusion in any specific way. Authors like Hegarty (2001) and Farrel (2000) write about the complexity of a concept such as inclusion and confront the concern that the push to define inclusion in more concrete terms may, at best, result in confusion amongst stakeholders and, at worst, lead to the needs of students being ignored in favor of adhering to a rigid definition of inclusion. Hegarty argues that defining inclusion presents both conceptual and practical problems. For example, discussions around inclusion should raise questions like, “Who is being included? Into what? By what means? With what impact on others? ” (2001, p. 244). From a practical standpoint, he asserts that inclusion is not always possible or even desirable, certainly not without careful consideration of the needs of the student and the above questions. Farrell agrees that there is a risk students with special needs will simply be “swept along on the ‘inclusion’ bandwagon” and lost in the shuffle (2000, p.154). He argues that while social justice and the human-rights perspective are important principles in education, one must also ask whose rights are being upheld by implementing practices such as full inclusion of students with special needs into general education classroom.

Farrell suggests that research should be carried out to seek empirical evidence both for and against inclusion in order to make informed decisions with regard to improving the experience of all students in the education system (2000). Hegarty goes further by suggesting that definitions like Ainscow's are often simply characteristics of "good schools" and that inclusion is just one principle among many that should be embraced for the benefit of all students (2001, p. 244). He concludes that if the "easy sloganizing of inclusion is abandoned, there is likely to be a clearer focus on learning and teaching" (2001, p. 248).

Sulochini Pather offers another voice to this argument. His research of an inclusive education development project in a secondary school in rural South Africa explores how the confusion over defining inclusion can be a barrier to its' practice by the people most affected by such policies: teachers and students. The author was involved in a four year project begun in 1998 and funded by UNESCO whose aim was to share lessons learned about sustainable inclusive education policies across four different countries: England, Brazil, India and South Africa. The work with their project was based on a broad definition of inclusion, "...incorporating the needs of *all* learners not just those with disabilities" (2007, p.632). The project involved the creation of school-based Learning Support Teams in eight participating schools whose role was to use a community-based approach to initiate and support inclusive practices. Two years into the project, however, one particular school LST was foundering and was down to only one active committee member. Pather found that the teachers at this secondary school were struggling with what inclusive education meant. The LST members expressed concern that teachers were not supporting the project and it was difficult to get them to return forms or attend meetings. The staff at the school, and the LST members themselves, appeared to focus their attention primarily on students with disabilities. The works of the LST was viewed by the staff as being about including students with disabilities and, therefore, separate from the other developments within the school. The school was making significant improvements to the learning opportunities for all students, such as partnerships with local businesses to accommodate students with more vocational interests. The problem was that moves such as these were not viewed as part of the project's goal of inclusive education development and therefore the LST was not involved. As an intervention, the author chose

to “demystify” the term inclusion by simply substituting it with the word, “change” in his work with the school

(Pather, 2007, p. 638). In his conclusion, Pather states:

The aim of such change...is to ensure a happy, productive environment where all pupils can achieve, and it should be an ongoing, reflective process. This surely is what inclusion is about, and not simply bottled with complex labels and definitions which confuse and marginalize teachers who are meant to engage with it ,and who may have already the same desires at heart. (2007, p. 641)

Overall, the literature suggests a lack of conclusive definition of inclusion with which teachers can inform their practice. The need to define inclusion is necessary in order to support its practices, however, there are cautions. It is important not to allow students with identified special needs to be lost in the shuffle while turning attention to all the learners in schools and it would appear that the majority of teachers equate inclusion with this particular group of students. Adopting a broader lens through which to view inclusion should not water down the services necessary to ensure success for these students, however, acknowledging the diversity of the students in our schools means looking at inclusion in a more expansive way. What the literature does suggest is the need for honest, reflective discussion amongst stakeholders in order to move inclusion forward. This finding reinforces the need to conduct this study and begin one such conversation with Resource Teachers in my current school district.

## Chapter Three: RESEARCH DESIGN

### Methodological Framework

In order to begin to define inclusion, we must go beyond looking at it as a set of educational practices and get to the heart of it- the philosophy that underpins those practices. An honest exploration of our understanding of inclusion means we must be willing to also examine our experiences of exclusion. This means confronting our deeply held values and beliefs around students, teaching and learning. Work of such a truly personal nature requires a methodology that respects and represents that work in a meaningful way.

My goal in this research was to develop a greater personal understanding of inclusion and also to delve more deeply into how other Resource Teachers define this concept. As a new Resource Teacher, I struggled to support inclusion within my school without truly understanding what I was supporting. I do not believe this work can be done in isolation. The decision to investigate this particular topic through narrative inquiry was due, in part, to my deeply held belief that through sharing our experiences we can come to greater understanding. By sharing our stories, examining our values and belief systems, and revealing the emotions and complexities of our daily work as Resource Teachers, we can embark on a journey of understanding. Brunner says, “Through personal experience, we come to know. Through story we make it known. In narrative we weave the fabric of our lives (and others) connecting information with experience to construct knowledge” (1994, p.58). In this case, I am attempting to construct a definition of inclusion based on the shared experiences of Resource Teachers in my current school district.

Listening to stories is an integral part of my practice. I listen to the stories of our families, our students, and our teachers in my efforts to support the educational success of the children within my school. On a daily basis, I listen to stories and then tease out the said and the unsaid in order to make changes to goals, shifts in programming, or to problem-solve around a specific concern. The need to define inclusion for myself led me to seek out my colleagues and begin a dialogue about this topic. I quickly realized that one could not separate the practice of

inclusion from the values and beliefs that inform it, making this research emotional and intensely personal. It would, therefore, be difficult to research this topic using more traditional methods (Sparkes, 2002).

I was not seeking to quantify inclusion in any way, rather, I wanted to hear about others' experiences, compare them to my own and, hopefully, arrive at some way of making meaning from such a complex topic. As Polkinghorne suggests, "The storied descriptions people give about the meaning they attribute to life events is, I believe, the best evidence available to researchers about the realm of people's experience" (2007, p. 479). The stories I collected from my colleagues and myself are woven together in an effort to both examine and create, "...narratives of what it means to educate and be educated" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12).

The reasons I chose to represent the data through fictional stories were threefold. First, the desire for this research to not only have an impact, but also to be engaging. As Watson states, "In order to enlarge the understanding of those we seek to influence we must first get their attention" (2011, p. 402). In order for educational research to influence policy and practice, it must naturally be read. Therefore, the use of fiction can provide an engaging way to interact with the data.

Second, the stories leave room for the reader to interpret and make sense of them. As the author of each story, I inevitably brought my own biases to the content. I have chosen what was included, what was highlighted and what was ignored. However, the aim of those choices is, as Barone explains, "the generation of a conversation about important educational questions" (1997, p. 223). In an effort to connect with the reader, I have attempted to create honest representations of "the life of a Resource Teacher" while also attempting to entertain. As Barone states, "Good stories rattle commonplace assumptions; they surprise and disturb taken-for-granted beliefs to generate thought and discussion" (1997, p. 223). It is my hope that the stories in this paper will spark just such conversations.

Finally, the use of fiction has allowed for an exploration of a challenging and emotionally charged topic while protecting the confidentiality of the participants. It is impossible to share the experiences of inclusion without including both the successes and the failures. To only focus on the positive would be irresponsible and false. Fiction often mirrors truth, and while the stories each provide an honest portrayal of our collective experiences, they do not reflect any one person or situation. In his work, *Opportunity House: Ethnographic*

*Stories of Mental Retardation*, Michael Angrosino used fiction in order to feel confident that, "...I have gotten to the heart of the situations without unduly breaking any confidences" (As cited in Sparkes, 2002, p.150).

### **Research Design:**

For the purpose of this research, I chose to interview four Resource Teachers from School District #57 in Prince George, British Columbia. Each participant volunteered to participate in a semi-structured interactive interview. The questions in the interview were designed to explore the experiences of the participants with inclusion, both positive and negative, as well as investigate how each individual defined inclusion within their role as a Resource Teacher. The participants were asked to reflect on their careers to date and share stories where inclusion (as defined by them) was working and where it was not. Each teacher was also given the opportunity to share their thoughts on how important a "definition" was to their practice and how they thought we might improve on inclusive practices in our District. All participation was voluntary and the data from the interviews were kept strictly confidential. The interviews were transcribed and, along with my journal reflections, analyzed for common themes. Based on the themes, the data was then woven into fictional stories that illustrate our experiences of inclusion.

### **Participants:**

Each participant in the study is currently employed as a Resource Teacher at an elementary (kindergarten to Grade 7) school in School District #57, Prince George. As defined earlier, a Resource Teacher in School District #57 is a non-enrolling teacher responsible for students who have been designated as having a special need by the Ministry of Education, students who receive Learning Assistance and students who receive English as a Second Language/Dialect support. The participants ranged in experience as Resource teachers from two to thirty years. Some participants had experience in both general education and special education roles, while others had only a special education background. The participants were chosen from a pool of Resource teachers when I presented the framework for this study at a District Resource teacher meeting. All participants were selected on a first come, first served basis.

**Procedures**

The interviews were conducted in February and May of 2013. Each hour-long interview was held in a private and neutral location. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and their responses would be kept strictly confidential. The purpose of the study was explained and each participant signed a consent form. Please see Appendix B for the complete form. The interviews were semi-structured and were designed to elicit stories and shared experiences. The researcher was also interviewed by one of the participants and that data was included in the synthesis. For a complete list of interview questions, please see Appendix A.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Following the completion of the transcription, each audio-recording was deleted. The transcribed interviews were then critically analyzed for themes. Key words and phrases were identified in the transcriptions and given labels. As this process was repeated several times with each transcript and the researcher's personal reflections, four common themes emerged: the role of the Resource teacher, the definition of inclusion, the responsibility of the Resource teacher with regards to inclusion and roadblocks to inclusion. Sorting the data repeatedly in an effort to determine patterns or commonalities then further developed each theme. The stories in Chapter 4 were written as a reflection of each of the four themes. The content of each story was chosen based on the frequency with which certain key words or phrases occurred in the synthesis of the interviews.

**Chapter Four: FINDINGS**

*“Stories are powerful. They are a journey and a joining. In a tale we meet new places, new people, new ideas. And they become our places, our people, our ideas.”*

- Jane Yolen, *Favorite Folktales from Around the World*

The following stories are the synthesis of the interviews completed and my own personal reflections. Each story begins with a direct quote from the interviews and ties the fiction to the reality. Further discussion of each story is found in Chapter 5 as I felt it essential to let the stories stand on their own as much as possible.

The stories are both connected and separate. They can be taken to describe a “day in the life” of a Resource Teacher or viewed as individual stories from different teachers. I chose to use “I” in each story, both to avoid any one participant from being identified and also to reflect my own participation in this process. It is impossible to remove myself from these stories and to become an objective outside observer. The process of writing these stories was intensely personal and even though each one is an integration of our combined experiences, I am very present.

The importance of dialogue is reflected in all the stories, as “conversations” was one of the most frequently occurring key words from the interviews. While all of the participants identified listening as a key skill in their roles, talking to others followed closely behind.

The stories have intentionally been left open for each reader to interpret in their own way. As Sparkes says of fictional narratives, “The end result is a powerful story that has the potential to provoke multiple interpretations and responses from readers who differ in their positioning to the story provided” (1997, p. 33). My hope is that these stories will become a springboard for the reader to reflect on their own experiences with inclusion and the practices within their schools.

## Putting Out Fires

*“Most days teaching the students is the smallest part of what I do. Most days I feel like I am a crisis manager.”*

I sit at my desk early in the morning writing the last of my dayplan. I love this time of day. No one else is here yet and it's quiet- I love a school like this. It always seems the most hopeful then, full of possibilities. There are no fires, yet.

I look down at the lined paper I've just finished writing on and my calendar lying next to it. My dayplan does not resemble anything like what I learned to write during my undergrad. There are no goals and objectives, no learning outcomes, no assessment. It would be more accurate to call it a “to-do” list and the only goal is to cross off more than one of the fifteen items on it. But, I'm a realist. There are always fires.

I go back to my list and cross-check it against my calendar to make sure I'm on track for deadlines. IEP meetings, SBT meeting, SSSTM meeting, ICM meeting...I smile to myself as I think back to my first years doing this job and learning the alphabet soup of acronyms. Who could be expected to learn all this? Now, it's like a second language and I have to constantly remind myself that one of my jobs is to cut through the jargon for teachers and parents. Just because this has become my language, doesn't mean everyone else speaks it.

I will begin my day with a meeting and I will end it with a meeting. My first IEP meeting is at 9 am. It's going to be a tough one, I think to myself. These are parents of a kindergarten student

and they are just learning to navigate the education system. They are still grieving the head injury that has brought their child to my world. They are still fragile, still angry, looking for something to **do**. A piece of me grieves with them. A piece of me grieves along with all of my families. I wonder how many pieces I have left? But, they are also hopeful and fierce advocates for their child. Now begins the balancing act between what I want to give this family and what I know we can realistically do. Sometimes, we get it just right. Sometimes it feels like it will never be enough. I quickly check through the file to make sure I have everything. I read through my sticky notes attached to the medical reports; another language I've learned.

I grab another stack of files and sneak a quick peak at my clock. I have about fifteen minutes to spend on paperwork. I quickly sort through the stack of notes, assessments, reports and work samples from students. I stuff them into the labeled files and make a promise to myself to get these files organized next time. This is the part of the job I avoid like the plague. I'm more of a people person and while I like to have things organized, I would much rather spend my time listening and problem-solving with others. I reach into the battered orange and red file cabinet and pull the three files we'll need for the Student Support Services Team Meeting at the end of the day. Each one has a larger sticky note on the front where I have scribbled questions for the team. On my to-do list, near the bottom, is my hope to spend some time going through each of these files again in order to be better prepared. I take another quick peak at the clock. Do I have time now?

There's a quick, quiet knock at my door. It's our school secretary.

"Sorry to interrupt, but we just got word that two of the EA's are not getting coverage for today, the handi-bus double-booked so they'll be late picking up the students for their swim time and

the meeting you had scheduled for nine needs to be bumped back by about thirty minutes- something about the family being stuck in a medical appointment.”

Behind our secretary, another head peaks around the corner.

“Do you have a minute? I’m doing a quick-write today with my class and I’m not sure how to include Mason.”

I spend two seconds looking longingly at my to-do list. I knew I smelled smoke.

**The Hallway**

*“Inclusion is when you see everyone together; working together, socializing together, feeling responsible for each other...it’s part of learning how to be part of the world. Isn’t that ultimately what we’re hoping to achieve as teachers?”*

The hallway stretches out ending in a set of green steel doors with small windows. The classroom doors are staggered on either side, some are open, some closed. The bulletin boards in the hall are covered with student work- handprints in the shape of flowers, student names patterned in wild colors, acrostic poems with a seasonal theme. There are posters announcing upcoming events and reminders: the annual Terry Fox run, Open House night (with a dance!) and a large white poster board with hand drawn pictures that illustrate how to walk down the hallway safely. One entire wall is covered with photographs of children and adults. It looks like they were taken in a gymnasium. There are a lot of pictures of people laughing. You can tell some of the students are shy, some even look a little grumpy to have been caught on camera, but they are here.

There is noise, but it’s not loud. It’s the muted sounds of children talking, laughing, books dropping, papers shuffling. There is the sound of someone crying and one of the closed classroom doors opens. A small boy comes out holding the hand of an older woman. She walks past me and I hear her whisper to the sniffling child, “Let’s take a walk outside and when you are ready to come back, you can rejoin your friends.”

Through one of the open doors a group of five older students emerge. They are carrying books and pencils and laughing loudly. They drop their things and settle themselves in a semi-circle on

the floor. “What are we supposed to be doing?” asks one of the girls. The others all giggle as a young man comes out of the classroom and seats himself on the other side of the hallway from the group. He folds in on himself, wrapping his arms protectively around his body and dropping his head. A man pokes his head around the corner and speaks quietly to the group. “Your group is in charge of chapter three. After you read it as a group, you’ll need to decide how best to share the information with the rest of the class. Make sure everyone has a job.” The man returns to the classroom and the group gets started reading. No one speaks to the boy and he does not look up.

As I walk down the hall, I glance into one of the classrooms. It looks like an early primary class. The students are sitting in a circle on the carpet and one child is standing beside the teacher holding a wand with a large plastic hand on one end. As the children count the child is pointing with the wand at the calendar. A small girl is on the edge of the circle sitting in her wheelchair. She is clapping to the beat of the chanting and squealing. A young boy is standing beside the chair pointing to a calendar taped to the table in front of the small girl. “Ms. Gibbons! Claire just pointed to 5!” the boy joyfully shouts to his teacher.

Further down I come across a small alcove furnished with a table and three chairs. At the table there is a young woman and two boys. The woman sits across from the students with a deck of addition flashcards in front of her. She holds up a card and waits for one of them to shout out the answer. One of the boys lays his head down on the table and says quietly, “I’m not doing it.” The young woman sighs, “Josh, you know you have to finish these before we can move on.”

“Why do I have to always miss gym? I hate doing this. I want to go to gym with my friends!”

I turn around and retrace my steps back to the school office. The door to the principal's office opens and I'm beckoned inside. I'm here for a job interview and I'm quite nervous. I've never done Resource before but I think I'd like the challenge and I know I need the contract. I take the chair across from the principal and we get the small talk out of the way. Finally, I can tell he is ready to ask me the real questions.

“So, we practice inclusion here. Can you tell me a little about your thoughts on that?”

**Hard Questions**

*"I do think it's part of my job to not let things get swept under the rug or forgotten. Sometimes that means asking hard questions. Then I think we just help build the foundation for inclusion: the resources, the program planning, the schedules."*

"What's preventing her from being part of the classroom?" I ask.

We are all sitting around a small round table. The team. My question is directed at everyone. We've sat at this same table three times already this school year and the frustration is beginning to show. Gwen's mother sits with her arms folded and her face is turned away from the group. She isn't looking in anyone's eyes. Her father's body language is the opposite. He's leaning in, elbows on his knees, eyes searching. The principal and classroom teacher sit opposite them and are flanked by the District specialists- Speech and Language, School Psychologist, District Behaviour Team. I'm sitting somewhere in the middle, as usual.

No one speaks at first and I struggle against my natural inclination to fill the silence with solutions or more questions. This is a problem-solving meeting, but that would seem to imply that there is only one problem and that there is, in fact, a solution. Instead, what we have is a complex set of concerns, some successes, some setbacks, some issues we haven't even begun to define yet. We've only just sat down and already the room is a minefield of emotions.

Gwen's classroom teacher is the first to speak.

"Gwen is an awesome kid and we love having her in our classroom. But, it's hard when she's having a bad morning or her medication is late. She can't settle, she makes a lot of noises and

she interrupts the learning of the other students. I firmly believe that she is better served by working in a quiet space with her EA.”

The words come out in a rush and I know how nervous this teacher is. We’ve had so many conversations over the last few months, some in meetings, but more often just connecting quickly in the staff room or the hallway. We’ve talked about teaching in general terms, like when we were reading the same book on differentiation. We’ve also talked about teaching in more specific terms, like when we had to adapt some of her math work for students. This is a teacher with a generous heart and a gentle nature. She is open to suggestions and has worked very hard for Gwen and her family. This is not a woman who doesn’t want “this” student in her room. I look down at my notepad and write, “touch base/morning” to remind myself to drop by and see where I can help. If I don’t get to the classroom, I don’t know what questions to ask.

“Our daughter has a right to be in her classroom with the other kids. She doesn’t deserve to be ostracized to some closet. None of this is her fault.”

Gwen’s mother is teary and her words come out through clenched teeth. At our last team meeting, she agreed to have her daughter work in a separate room with the EA with the understanding that we would be working toward bringing her back into the classroom when her behavior was more appropriate. I’m not sure what she’s feeling now but I do know that she trusts us with her little girl and she is not unaware of Gwen’s behavior. She is just as lost as the rest of us on what to do and she is looking to us for answers.

“We have to consider not only Gwen’s needs, but the needs of the other students. I know you want her back in the classroom; it’s what we all want. Now, how are we going to get there? Let’s try to focus on what is going well and build on that.”

The principal looks around the table after speaking, encouraging everyone to think positively. She knows that this is a delicate balancing act. She and I have had a number of conversations about the difficulty of meeting everyone’s needs: student, teacher, and parent. And then there are the “others”: other students, other teachers, and other parents. She and I both agree with inclusion as a philosophy- where it gets tricky is how to make it work in practice.

“How often is she out of the classroom right now?” I ask the classroom teacher. I already know the answer, but the team needs to hear it and this way it gets into the notes being recorded by another teacher, a fellow School Based Team member.

“Only when she is really restless or needs more attention than I can give her with her work. She has a really hard time with group activities, sitting still, not interrupting, so she does a different activity with her EA when we do those types of things and then she rejoins us.”

“When was the last time her doctor looked at her medication? If she’s had a growth spurt then maybe its time to revisit that?” asks the Behaviour Specialist. Gwen’s parents glance at each other, but don’t answer.

I glance quickly at our recorder to make sure that gets noted. I’ll follow up on that with the family later. I’ll need to do some research on the medication Gwen is taking.

“What about if the time she’s with the EA out of the classroom was focused on learning the skills she needs and then she can come in and practice them with the group? Could we set up a program for that?”

This question comes from the school psychologist and I see Gwen’s father nodding his head. I write “program” on my notepad with a question mark to remind myself to look into this. I remember an email recently about teaching executive function skills. Maybe this is something that I can help the EA with. I try to visualize the EA schedule to see if there is someone else I can pull in to do this work.

“Would that help?” I ask Gwen’s parents. Gwen’s mother nods, finally makes eye contact with me and says, “I just want to know there is a purpose to her time away. That she’s not just being punished for being different.”

“Would that help?” I ask Gwen’s teacher. “Can I set something up with the EA and then you and I can get together to plan some time for Gwen to come in and practice those skills with a small group?”

“Absolutely, I think that would really help. Especially if we plan it out and we can help make sure she’s successful. I have a group art project planned for the end of the month that might work really well for this. Gwen loves art! Do you want to meet tomorrow after school and we can look at what group work skill she might focus on?”

“So, it looks like we have the start of a plan.” I say, looking around the table. “Is it enough for now? Let’s review in, say...two weeks?” I want to end this meeting on a hopeful, positive note. I

want to end this meeting with some concrete tasks for us to follow up on. I want to end this meeting feeling like we aren't just spinning in the problem.

I ask our recorder to recap the meeting, ensure everyone is clear about the tasks they've agreed to and then thank everyone for coming. I walk Gwen's parents to the school doors and assure them that I'll be in touch within the next few days to follow up on our meeting and ask them to call me if they have any questions. Gwen's mother is subdued and looks exhausted. I congratulate her on doing such a great job of advocating for her daughter and acknowledge that it wasn't easy.

I meet Gwen's teacher in the hallway on the walk back to her classroom and assure her we will meet tomorrow. I ask her if I can drop in tomorrow morning and check in with Gwen and the EA. I thank her for her honesty in the meeting and acknowledge the difficulty of doing that.

I take a moment to acknowledge that we have only made a plan to resolve the most pressing of Gwen's issues. I begin to troubleshoot the plan as I walk back down the hallway to my room.

I walk back to my room and take a deep breath. I ready myself for the next parents, the next teacher and the next set of hard questions.

**Conversations**

*“I can’t physically do what needs to be done for 300 students. We need to be working as a team and remember what our endgame is: creating healthy, functioning members of society.”*

A new school year.

Is there anything better than the day before the students all arrive? The building is clean, the classrooms are free of clutter, and the teachers are rested. You can almost feel the excitement, a buzz, as we stand around chatting about our summer vacations. I always have trouble sleeping the night before school starts. I think I’m almost as nervous as the kids are.

It’s time to gather as a staff in the library. It takes awhile for us to settle down and find our seats. It’s hard to quit visiting. I gather up the agenda, school calendar and other papers that will mark our first official meeting of the year. I glance through it quickly and realize immediately that it is very different than usual. There is no list of business items – photocopier rules, cleaning duties in the staff room, who is going to take care of the coffee fund. Instead the words ‘school goals’, ‘collaboration’ and ‘plan’ jump out at me. Well, this is new.

Our principal welcomes us back and then informs us that today is going to look different than what we are used to. We are going to be spending the day looking at our school goals and what our vision for our students is. He reminds us that the Ministry of Education has been using terms like individualized instruction, differentiation, response to intervention and inclusion. While these may not be new terms, he was thinking over the summer that he didn’t know what we understood them to mean and how we were implementing them in our practice. He

is not expecting us to come to any grand conclusions by the end of the day, but rather was hoping to start the conversation. Hallelujah!! I love conversations!! I look around the room expecting to see my excitement reflected back in the faces around me. Instead, I see a mixture of fear, curiosity, boredom and interest. This might be tougher than he thinks.

We break into smaller groups and gather around tables. In the center of my table on a small blue piece of paper is written, INCLUSION. I actually physically rub my hands together in anticipation.

“Well, we hit the jackpot with this one. Thank God the Resource Teacher is in our group.”

“I’ve never really understood this one... I mean do we even need to still be talking about this? I’ve got special needs kids in my classroom, so we are doing inclusion, right?”

“It didn’t used to be that way. Kids used to get the kind of support they needed from people who actually knew how to do it. What do I know about helping a kid with autism? I’m no specialist.”

“Remember Sophie? I taught her when she was in grade four. I think the kids in our school learned a lot from having her here. They loved learning about sign language and I think she certainly enjoyed being part of things. I think all kids benefit from having kids with special needs in our classroom. I know Sophie came with more support than the grey area kids. I didn’t know anything about having a deaf student in my class, but I sure learned.”

“ It isn’t just about special needs, anymore. The Ministry wants everyone to be special.

Everyone will have their own plan, their own learning outcomes. It’s crazy. How are we supposed to report on that? Adaptations, modified programs, differentiation- who can keep this all straight and still teach the regular kids. When did this all become my responsibility?”

“If it’s not about special needs kids, then who is inclusion about?”

“I know this isn’t the politically correct thing to say, but I’m not sure I agree with inclusion. It doesn’t seem fair to anyone, least of all the kids who need more support. Look at the Resource teachers. They are already stretched to the max. They used to be able to actually work with groups of kids but now it seems like all they have time for is paperwork. Isn’t that right?”

“Why couldn’t I have been in the differentiation group? At least I have some idea what that is about!”

I sit quietly. I feel like I’m expected to have the answers, but I often have the same questions. I’ve been waiting for this discussion for a long time. It would be easy to feel discouraged, but at least we are talking. It’s a start.

**Chapter Five: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION****Summary**

This research focused on how the experiences of Resource teachers in School District #57 impacted their definition of inclusion. It also sought to explore how those definitions shaped their support of inclusion within their schools. Through the interviews, four themes emerged: the role of the resource teacher, the definition of inclusion, responsibility to inclusion and roadblocks. The responses from the interviews were then synthesized and interwoven to create four short stories. The discussion in this chapter aims to further the understanding of the stories and connect them to the research that influenced my interpretation of inclusion.

**Discussion**

*Putting Out Fires.* When I began sorting the key words related to the role of the Resource teacher, the phrases “put out fires”, “crisis management” and “dealing with emergencies” were most prevalent in the interviews. The first story is meant to provide a context for the discussion of my research around defining inclusion and while it was not within the scope of this research to look specifically at how Resource Teachers define their role, I felt that some background in this unique position within schools in School District #57 would be helpful to the readers. The role of the Resource Teacher can often be confusing for stakeholders, not least of which is the Resource Teacher herself. While they identified positives in having the space to shape one’s job to their strengths and preferences, the participants felt that not having a set of clearly defined responsibilities was problematic. There was strong agreement that as non-enrolling teachers our job was to support the teachers we work with and the students in the school. However, the methods used look different depending on many factors: caseload, knowledge and experience, relationships, and expectations, to name just a few. As a Resource teacher, I often feel a disconnect between what is expected of me by my colleagues and what I believe my job to be.

Another idea that emerged as a discussion point in the interviews was the notion of Resource Teacher as Specialist. While some of the participants had an extensive background and specific training in Special Education, others came to Resource via the regular classroom. Each school district in British Columbia sets out its own

criteria when hiring Resource Teachers and it can vary widely. In relation to inclusion, this can be problematic.

The very term Resource Teacher has been synonymous with Special Education, making it difficult to move toward a broader perspective of inclusion. As Pather found in his work, “There was a danger of shifting the power of responsibility and independent reflective response from the teacher to the person deemed more ‘knowledgeable’” (2007, p. 640). This is one more delicate balancing act that Resource Teachers have to perform on a daily basis, the idea of being a specialist against the notion of understanding the realities and complexities of classroom teaching.

A clearer understanding of the role may help the reader to gain perspective into the way Resource teachers define inclusion for themselves, and therefore, how they seek to support classroom teachers in creating inclusive classrooms. *Putting Out Fires* seeks to provide a snapshot into the intricacies of the position.

***The Hallway.*** When defining inclusion, the participants shared personal experiences of inclusion, based on their respective definitions and further discussed the values and beliefs that they believed had contributed to their definitions. The following common descriptive words were pulled from those discussions: “community”, “belonging” and “opportunities”. This story begins with a description of a hallway that I believe every elementary school teacher in British Columbia can relate to. While this hallway is meant to give the reader a way to connect to the story, it also expresses the need to look beyond the just the people when we examine inclusion. The way we structure our environments is just as key. What do our entrances and hallways tell us about who is included in our schools? What do our posters or artwork say about what we value? Can our families see themselves reflected in the physical structure of our buildings? If we choose to look at this strictly from a special needs standpoint, we can ask ourselves if the building is physically accessible? Can everyone get to everywhere they need to go? However, if we look at inclusion through a wider lens, we need to ask ourselves if we are excluding people in other ways. Ainscow believes that the work to define a concept like inclusion must take into account our local context as well as a need to challenge “existing ways of thinking”(2005, p.121). Looking at our school population is a place to start. Do our Aboriginal students and families see their faces, their language, or their culture in our building? Do we celebrate our diverse immigrant population? The way we display student success can tell our students very

clearly what we value (and, by virtue of exclusion, what we do not). Are visitors to our buildings met with trophy cases filled with academic or sport related awards? What message does this send to those students whose names are not in that cabinet?

The situations described in this story are meant to show scenes one might typically find in an elementary school. They are also meant to illustrate that the practice of inclusion is incredibly complex. What is considered inclusive in one setting may be seen as exclusionary in another. What one teacher believes about inclusion may differ greatly from the next teacher. What all the participants did agree on is that inclusion can no longer be concerned with only those students with identified special needs. The diversity within our buildings is too great to ignore. This includes not only the diverse learning needs of our students, but also cultural and social diversity. Our students can often come from extremely different backgrounds, bringing with them extremely different needs. This diversity does not only apply to the students. The teachers we work with also come from diverse backgrounds, bringing with them their own understanding of teaching and learning. Another key word in this theme was “continuum”. In their stories, the participants applied this idea to both students and the teachers they work with. The belief that inclusion should lead educators to embrace difference is equally relevant for Resource Teachers’ work with teachers as it is with students. This story attempts to illustrate the tension that arises when we seek to define inclusion. The educational needs of the boys in the hallway working on addition are being served by practicing in a smaller group. But, this begs the question of whether their social or physical needs are being met by missing physical education class? The young man in the hallway is obviously not participating in the group work. He has been offered the *opportunity* to be included, but appears to have chosen to not avail himself of it. Of course, we do not know why. Is it our responsibility to find out, or is simply providing students with opportunities enough? If community and a sense of belonging are key to the definition of inclusion, then how do we as educators ensure that our students experience this? How do we reconcile notions of fairness and equality with inclusion? I believe these are the kinds of challenges to our thinking that are necessary when examining inclusion.

***Hard Questions.*** The idea of responsibilities to inclusion was the third theme that emerged from the interviews. The participants were asked if they felt responsible for inclusion in their buildings and, if so, what they felt those responsibilities were. The most frequent key words/phrases could be sorted into the following categories: “conversations”, “asking hard questions” and “seeing the big picture”. *Hard Questions* depicts a school SSSTM (Student Support Services Team Meeting), a key part of the problem-solving model used in School District #57. These meetings, which are a venue for sharing successes and working toward solutions, are an integral component of the Resource Teacher role. Again, this story is meant to convey the complexity of the concept of inclusion by examining it from the perspective of different stakeholders. This is just one particular situation, with one particular student, but it highlights some of the challenges of inclusion. What do we mean by inclusion? Does it always mean a student is being educated in a “regular” classroom? What if the student’s needs are better served in a different location with specialized instruction? What about the needs of the other students? What if our priorities are competing, such as Gwen’s parents desire for their daughter to be with her peers and the teacher’s desire for Gwen to receive intensive intervention? How do we decide whose priorities take precedence? Farrell argues that this is one of the fundamental problems with using human rights arguments on inclusion; “...whose rights are being referred to, the child, the parents or other pupils? Are the rights of all three groups always compatible?” (2010, p. 155). However, I see this not as an argument against defining inclusion, but rather a caution that we must continue to ask the hard questions. Corbett agrees that research around inclusion may require a new paradigm, one that examines philosophical questions like “what are our values?” and “whose needs take priority?” (2001, p. 7).

Tied very closely to the idea of hard questions is the necessity of building relationships. The participants all agreed that relationships were key to the ability to carry out our duties as Resource Teachers, but also to the success (or failure) of inclusion. Resource Teachers often act as the “bridge” between parents, classroom teachers and other specialists involved in the lives of their students. In the stories the participants shared about successful inclusion a key theme was that of a strong and respectful relationship with the classroom teacher and the families of the student. Such relationships allow for an open sharing of concerns and ideas, as well as create an

environment of trust in which to ask the hard questions. One concern expressed by the participants repeatedly was that of time. Resource and classroom teachers deal with significant demands on their time, such as paperwork, caseloads, and meetings, which can impede the development of these key relationships. Coupled with the fact that, at least in my current school district, it is increasingly rare to find a full-time Resource position, finding time is increasingly difficult. Many Resource Teachers in my district are combining the work of Resource with other non-enrolling positions or classroom teaching. This makes the work of supporting inclusion more challenging.

***Conversations.*** The final theme that became apparent through the interviews was one of roadblocks to inclusion. No matter how you choose to define inclusion, the fact remains that not all students experience school in a positive way. Whether inclusion is about students with special needs or concerned with all students in our schools, it is critical to explore the obstacles. The participants were asked what they felt was in the way of successful inclusion and what they might need to support it within their schools. The responses were sorted into three main categories: mindsets, training and time. The concluding story describes a typical start to the school year, something we as educators can all relate to. However, despite the fact that all five participants frequently mentioned the need to have conversations about inclusion and the desire for time to do so, none of us have experienced a meeting like the one described in the story. The responses from the characters in the story are ones that the participants and myself have all heard at one time or another in our careers. What is missing from our collective experience is the opportunity that the teachers had in the story, the opportunity to sit down and discuss inclusion, both as philosophy and in practice. Ainscow argues that inclusion is about changing results for students and this cannot be done without changing behaviours of the adults working with them, “Consequently, the starting point must be with staff members: in effect, enlarging their capacity to imagine what might be achieved, and increasing their sense of accountability for bringing this about” (2007, p.6). Corbett shares this view, saying, “Diversity, differentiation and inclusion are not just the concern of special educators, but key issues for ALL educators” (2001, p. xi). It is not just about technical knowledge, although that certainly does not hurt. Teachers need a broad base of skills and strategies to draw from when working with the increasingly diverse students in their classrooms. Some resistance to inclusion may be more about “I don’t know how/what to do” than “I don’t want

to”. But, simply providing more training will not solve the issue. Inclusion can only be truly successful when we take the time to examine what we value and believe about education.

### **Limitations**

As a Resource teacher in School District #57 and a participant in the inquiry, I have been completely integrated in this process. These stories are also my stories as each story is an interwoven account of the experiences of myself and the four other Resource Teachers. While the characters and settings are fictional, they are based on the “lived experiences” of all the participants (Rinehart, 1998). Once the interviews were transcribed, the participants reviewed them to ensure that I had accurately captured their responses. After completing the stories, I shared them with several people, including the participants. As Rhinehart notes, “If we can show our work to friends, to those we study, to colleagues both inside and outside our disciplines, we may perform ‘verifications’...” (1998, p. 207). By reflecting on the feedback of these ‘critical friends’, I was able to ensure a certain degree of verisimilitude. However, the decision to use fiction as a means of representation may be met with criticism. The response to such criticism is best explained in the following quote: “A piece of fiction can be true and still be fiction. Fiction, in the metaphorical sense is ‘true to life’; it helps us to perceive, experience, and understand what we have previously neglected”(Eisner, 1991, p. 108).

Although the interviews were semi-structured and meant to follow more of a “conversation” than question/answer format, it was not surprising to me that the themes that emerged followed the pattern of the structured questions. For example, one of the questions from the interview was, “What do you believe is your responsibility as a Resource teacher in regards to inclusion?” Naturally, this emerged as a theme. When I coded the interview data, I was specifically looking for themes related to defining inclusion; therefore, other experiences of the participants may not be represented here.

Another limitation of this research may be the generalizability of its findings. These stories are based on the voices of five Resource Teachers in one school district in British Columbia, so it is possible that the small

sample size may not accurately reflect the experiences of all Resource Teachers throughout the province. As participation was voluntary, it is possible that the participants were those who felt most comfortable discussing inclusion. The introduction to this research and request for participants was made at a District Resource Teacher meeting, which occurs three times a year. Having attended these meeting for the past five years and having participated in frequent discussions regarding my role as a Resource Teacher and my beliefs about inclusion, it is not unlikely that those volunteers were those who agreed most strongly with my own opinions. As a member of the Executive of the British Columbia Provincial Special Education Association, I have the opportunity to speak with Resource Teachers from around the province and at all levels of schooling. To be sure, there are differences from District to District, even from school to school. However, I would argue that while the reader may not be able to place themselves amongst the particulars of each story, they would be able to relate to the themes.

## **Implications**

*For myself as researcher and Resource Teacher.* Taking part in this research, both as researcher and participant has had a significant impact on the way I view my roles, as Resource Teacher, as teacher leader and as an executive member of the British Columbia Provincial Special Education Association. Through this process, I was able to clarify my own values and beliefs around inclusion and it afforded me the opportunity to work collaboratively with some of my colleagues. It opened the door to conversations. This was rewarding in itself, however, reading current research on this topic allowed me to connect what I believed to what others were experiencing. When I began this journey, I was looking for answers. What I found instead were more questions. While disconcerting, I have discovered that I love not knowing. The not knowing is what moves me forward. The most pressing question now is, “Where do I go from here?” The sharing of stories was incredibly powerful. I would like to take this further. The stories are meant to inspire discussion; therefore, I need to share them out with a wider audience. I would also like to continue gathering stories. In particular, I am keenly interested in how our experiences of inclusion change over time. Relating to my own experience as a new teacher, an experienced classroom teacher, and a new Resource Teacher, I am curious about how others have lived this process.

***For my colleagues.*** The participants in this research were incredibly open and receptive to sharing their stories, even though some were difficult to tell. The position of Resource Teacher can be very isolating. As stated earlier in this paper, the role is unique in that we are part teacher, part manager, and part specialist. It is essential that Resource Teachers find a safe place to share, to garner support and have their voices heard. This research has attempted, in a small way, to be that place. The stories that emerged from this research may serve to encourage Resource Teachers to examine their own understanding of inclusion and to begin to view their practices, policies and environments with a critical eye. It is my hope that the stories shared here inspire Resource Teachers to begin conversations in their schools, not just about the “how” of inclusion, but of the “why”.

***For classroom teachers.*** Classroom teachers are the frontline workers when it comes to inclusion. It is my hope that this research will further the understanding of the role of the Resource Teacher in schools in our District and encourage classroom teachers to engage in a dialogue with us as partners. Teaching is complex work and what this research suggests is that working towards inclusion is also intricate. The participants in this study expressed repeatedly their belief that supporting classroom teachers was their primary responsibility. Therefore, classroom teachers need to be open to that support. This research suggests that a clear understanding of the role of the Resource Teacher, the time to develop trusting relationships with each other and time to work collaboratively for the benefit of the students are paramount to the success of inclusion. While this study focused solely on Resource Teachers, it would be beneficial to share stories of inclusion from a general classroom teacher’s perspective in order to add to the creation of a definition.

***For School/District leaders.*** Discussions around inclusion are often lost in the more pressing demands of the day to day work of our schools. However, inclusion cannot be seen as ‘one more thing’ but rather, as ‘the thing’ we work towards in education. Every decision we make in our schools is impacted by the philosophy of inclusion: curriculum, planning, environment, assessment and reporting. This research supports the idea that opportunities for dialogue, most importantly, time allotted for such discussions are key to moving inclusion forward. In the story *Conversations*, the staff are beginning to mull over what inclusion means for them as a

school, but this work is never truly finished. School and District leaders can provide teachers, parents, students and community members with the time and space to have ongoing debate about what inclusion looks like, feels like, and sounds like. This commitment to working towards a common understanding would have the added effect of creating a sense of urgency around ensuring the success of inclusive practices in our schools. Defining it at a classroom, school and District level can have significant impact on its practice.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Researching inclusion can be difficult. As Farrell (2000) argues there are methodological issues with researching this topic, such as the ethical considerations when working with vulnerable populations or generalizability when the range of both student needs and levels of inclusion are so great. In spite of the challenges, there has been a significant amount of research in this area. While this study only looked at Resource teachers in one school district, it would be interesting to broaden the scope and include the voices of more Resource teachers from around the province. Another area to explore may be to include the voices of parents and students. Offering alternate experiences with inclusion can only add dimension to this critical discussion in education.

This research focused primarily on the definition of inclusion, although the interviews provided a look at some of the roadblocks to its success as perceived by the participants. Future research should concentrate on those roadblocks and possible avenues of moving forward. The issues of time, training and mindsets are not modest. If we are to truly work towards creating a more inclusive education system, then these must be addressed.

### **Conclusion**

When I began this research my desire was to explore my own understanding of inclusion. Through my conversations with the participants, colleagues whom I deeply respect and admire, I was able to clarify and enrich my beliefs about teaching, learning and our purpose. The work of inclusion is never done. It is not something we achieve; there is no finish line. Instead, as I believe the stories illustrate, it is an ongoing process of dialogue,

confronting hard truths, examining our values and principles. The diversity of our students is something to be celebrated and we, as educators, have a unique opportunity to create an inclusive environment in our classrooms and schools that embraces those differences. Although the intention was simply to look at how our experiences shape our definitions of inclusion, the stories have taken on a life of their own. I hope these stories serve as a call to action, encourage the reader to reflect on their own practice and lead to an overwhelming desire to continue this discourse in British Columbia. Each story contains within it some recurring ideas gathered from the interviews: meaningful conversations, relationships and the need to ask hard questions. I believe this is where the work begins.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Script

Appendix B: Research Consent Form

Appendix C: Sample Interview Questions

**Appendix A: Recruitment Script**

As many of you know, I am currently working towards my Master's degree through Vancouver Island University. I am interested in exploring the experiences of Resource teachers in our District with regards to inclusion and students with special needs.

I am seeking participants who would consent to 2 one-hour interviews. The initial interview will focus on questions concerning your experience of inclusion of special needs students, the changing definition of inclusion, and how you experience your role as a Resource teacher in supporting inclusion within your schools. The information gathered from your interview and that of other Resource teachers will be combined into vignettes illustrating inclusion and the experiences of Resource teachers. The second interview will be conducted after you have had an opportunity to review the vignettes. Your participation will require approximately two hours of your time.

The potential benefits of this research are the knowledge and understanding of your own definition of inclusion, what it means in the context of your schools and an opportunity to begin to examine your role in supporting inclusion within your school setting. This could have implications for professional development for Resource Teachers in School District #57.

All records of participation will be kept strictly confidential and the results from this study will be reported in a written research report and an oral presentation to interested School District #57 Resource teachers. The interviews will be recorded and the recordings will be destroyed immediately after they have been transcribed. Information about the project will not be made public in any way that identifies individual participants.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time for any reason without explanation and without penalty. You may choose not to answer any question for any reason.

If you are interested in participating, or would like more information about this study, you can contact me personally at the following email address or by telephone.

Thank you!

[azummack3@stumail.viu.ca](mailto:azummack3@stumail.viu.ca)

250-563-8099

**Appendix B: Research Consent Form**

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM  
"Searching for Inclusion"  
September, 2012

Angela Zummack  
Masters of Educational Leadership, Student  
Vancouver Island University  
[azummack3@stumail.viu.ca](mailto:azummack3@stumail.viu.ca)  
(250)563-8099

Paige Fisher, PhD, Supervisor  
Faculty of Education  
Vancouver Island University  
(250) 753-3245 ext. 2002

I am a student in a university-level research methods course. This course requires us to gain applied experience in designing and conducting research. As such, I have designed a research project to examine the experiences of Resource teachers with regards to inclusion within their school settings.

During this study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview and answer questions concerning your experience of inclusion of special needs students, the changing definition of inclusion, and how you experience your role as a Resource teacher in supporting inclusion within your schools. The information gathered from your interview and that of other Resource teachers will be combined into vignettes illustrating inclusion and the experiences of Resource teachers. Your participation will require approximately two hours of your time. The first interview will be approximately one hour in length and there will be a second one-hour session where you will have an opportunity to provide feedback on the vignettes.

There are no known harms associated with your participation in this research and the potential benefits are the knowledge and understanding of your own definition of inclusion, what it means in the context of your schools and an opportunity to begin to examine your role in supporting inclusion within your school setting. This could have implications for professional development for Resource Teachers in School District #57.

All records of participation will be kept strictly confidential, such that only I and my supervisor will have access to the information. Digital recordings of the interviews will be transcribed and then immediately erased. Transcripts will be stored on a password protected external hard-drive in a locked filing cabinet within my home office. All data will be destroyed by shredding five years from the completion of the research. Electronic files will also be deleted at that time. The results from this study will be reported in a written research report and an oral presentation to interested School District #57 Resource teachers. Information about the project will not be made public in any way that identifies individual participants.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time for any reason without explanation and

If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer, by telephone at 250-753-3245 (ext, 2665) or by email at [reb@viu.ca](mailto:reb@viu.ca).

If you have any questions about this research project, or would like more information, please feel free to contact me at the e-mail address or telephone number below:

Angela Zummack  
(250)563-8099  
[azummack3@stumail.viu.ca](mailto:azummack3@stumail.viu.ca)

I have read the above form, understand the information read, understand that I can ask questions or withdraw at any time. I consent to allow my interview to be recorded and to participate in today's research study.

---

Participant's Signature

Date

### Appendix C: Sample Interview Questions

#### Interview Instructions-

In order to protect the anonymity of your students, please do not share any information that could identify specific students. Do not use names, dates, or locations that could help identify specific students when sharing your answers to the interview questions.

1. How would you define inclusion?
2. Share some of your values and beliefs around learning that contribute to your definition of inclusion?
3. What is your understanding of the broader definition of inclusion? How do you feel about this change?
4. What is your experience of inclusion in your school setting? Can you share a specific example or story that illustrates inclusion working in your setting?
5. Can you share a specific example or story that illustrates inclusion NOT working in your setting?
6. How would you describe your role as a Resource teacher? Has it changed? If it has changed, how do you feel about those changes?
7. What do you believe is your responsibility as a Resource teacher in regards to inclusion? How does this fit with the broader definition, which includes ALL students, not just those with special needs?
8. What would assist you in supporting inclusion within your school setting? What do you see happening in your school that might be working against inclusion?