

A Beautiful Partnership

A Day in the Life of...

I have a great job.

My day today begins with a visit to a middle school in the district of Acadia where we are working in a *Character Education* class in two grade nine classes; then I get to work with my leadership students. The administrative team at the school has expressed interest in offering a more *inclusive* environment to students, and within that, learning and utilizing different approaches to prevent bullying. In the afternoon on this day, I will also visit an elementary school in southwest Calgary where I will provide support to both a child with special needs and his teacher as they deal with his challenging and complex learning needs. And tomorrow...well, tomorrow will bring yet another interesting day when I'll conduct a book study around the subject of 'explosive children' for an elementary staff group.

Not your ordinary day. Not your ordinary job.

What Do You Mean, 'Inclusion Facilitator'?

That's right, I'm an *inclusion facilitator* – an interesting title for an interesting and unique role. My job is one of being a change agent where I help to build capacity in schools to become more inclusive environments – fancy language that essentially means environments where *all* students can feel that they *belong* and where parents feel assured that their child's individual educational and social needs are met. I have been afforded a great opportunity to work within a very important partnership between the *Calgary Board of Education's Area 5* schools (all the public schools south of Glenmore Trail) and the *Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre of Calgary (DDRC)*. My job is completely supported through DDRC's fundraising efforts, yet two of us are full-time *Calgary Board of Education* teachers.

Our little group of *inclusion facilitators* – three of us - consist of one former school principal, one special education teacher, and myself - a former teacher and administrator in a private, special needs school. Each of us has an extensive education and background in special education and an understanding of the rights and responsibilities a school has toward *all* its students, including those with diverse needs.

Introducing...The Partners

The Calgary Board of Education

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The *Calgary Board of Education (CBE)* has *End Statements*: goals that set the direction for the board's requirements in accordance with the wishes and needs of Calgarians. The 'Ends', as they are called, provide the framework for all the decision-making, planning, programming and monitoring of student progress within the CBE.

Essentially, 'success' according to the CBE, can be defined not only through academics but also through citizenship, personal development and character development. The board of trustees and the chief superintendent of the CBE create the 'Ends' as guidelines for everything that transpires across and within the entire system.

The Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre of Calgary (DDRC)

The *Inclusive Schools Project* at DDRC now falls under **everyone belongs™** - a social marketing effort initiated by DDRC. The fundamental meaning of *everyone belongs* is that genuine connection is essential for *all* people and that quality of life is deeply linked to quality of relationships. Communities are more vibrant, healthy, safe, strong, and satisfying when *all* people, regardless of disability, ethno-cultural background, age, socioeconomic class, etc are welcome and able to fully participate in and contribute to the ordinary things of life and in everyday settings.

A Synergistic Partnership

Yes, the synergy between both entities is, well...beautiful. Both value inclusion? Check mark. Both value personal development and character education? Check mark. Both partners are interested in and dedicated to creating a more harmonious society where people with diverse abilities and talents are indeed accepted and valued? Check mark. Both value strong, rich and inclusive communities and partnerships and strive to reflect the values of a democratic society? Check mark.

Gold star.

The partnership can also be described as one that demonstrates outside-the-box thinking. This type of thinking requires various skill sets and qualities, namely: creativity; active listening; support; respect; openness; and responsiveness. We strive to **create** value in new ways through **listening** to others and **supporting** and **respecting** new ideas and ways of thinking. There has to be an **openness** and willingness to do things a little differently than was done previously; there has to be **responsiveness** to the needs of all students, teachers and schools. This partnership has been predicated on all of these qualities.

The partnership isn't a brand new one; in fact it began almost a decade ago (before my time) with many visionaries working hard towards a common goal. And that goal has never changed.

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Naomi Johnson is the director of Area 5 at the CBE, and has been very instrumental in creating the original partnership with DDRRC. (Note: Naomi is very humble; however, it is largely due to her that such a positive working relationship exists). Naomi says, “the role is about recreating our democratic culture. The more inclusive our understanding of diversity, the gentler our society will be.”

The two parties agreed many years ago that they share many common goals and could achieve more significant results *together* than they ever could alone. What originally began with only a few south Calgary schools, today, has grown to include over 20 schools in Calgary!

We think this is really inspiring.

What’s Up Now?

The partnership has created some interesting projects. For example, the administrative team at one of the schools wanted the students in the *Character Education* classes (the grade nine students who are partaking of this) to develop more empathy to help stem some of the negative behaviours both at school and in their neighbourhoods. The school administration asked me to work with the teacher in one of the classrooms to help foster student empathy. To develop empathy you have to have an understanding of others. The teacher and I listened to students as they talked about feeling stereotyped and devalued by the adults in their lives. We came up with a plan to connect the students with others in our society who also often feel stereotyped and devalued. They worked on a six-month project which began with them visiting a seniors’ facility in Calgary, and delivering holiday cards and handwritten letters. Needless to say most of the seniors were thrilled. The students will return to interview them about their lives, and subsequently write about the senior’s life as part of a social studies assignment. A printing company has donated binding so that the stories can be published and students will present the copies to the seniors. The *Neighbours* section of the *Calgary Herald* plans to photograph and publish stories in the spring when students “give back” their stories.

And a few more highlights of other projects for the inclusion facilitators...

- At another school students are working on a *peer mediation* project. In this project the students are taught how to intervene and support their fellow students on the playground when problems occur.
- In Shawnessy, DDRRC has supported a book study on Dr. Greene’s, *The Explosive Child*. DDRRC, through the generous support of donors, bought a book for each teacher. An inclusion facilitator will help staff and teachers to find new ways to effectively deal with behavioural challenges.

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- There is also a drama bullying project in two middle schools; two other peer leadership groups are currently focusing on the challenges of being teenagers; and a high school is exploring new ways to meet the needs of “at risk” students.
- Some of the most exciting work occurs when we get to work one on one with students and teachers. Many of the students in the CBE have complex learning needs, and understanding individual learners’ differences and learning styles is complicated work. Helping teachers modify and adapt curriculum and teach in ways that reach their students more effectively builds capacity in individual schools and positively impacts students’ learning outcomes.

The Future Looks Bright...So Bright

Odette Dantzer, chief executive officer, DDRC says, “Area 5 is well on its way to supporting the learning of diverse students and really has the leadership and commitment to continue on its own.” As such, DDRC will transition out of the partnership with Area 5 over the next several years and will explore how best to support inclusion in other areas of the CBE, as well as with other school boards.

Pretty exciting stuff!

Have I mentioned that I have a *great* job?

For more information about the *Inclusive Schools Project*, please call (403) 240.7321, or via email at inclusiveeducation@ddrcc.com.

Website: www.everyonebelongs.com and www.ddrcc.com