

"A must-read for all educators and those who work in policy."
– John P. Portelli, co-director, Centre for Leadership and Diversity,
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Principals of Inclusion

Practical Strategies to Grow Inclusion in Urban Schools



Darrin Griffiths, Ed.D.

Book Excerpt

In **Principals of Inclusion: Practical Strategies to Grow Inclusion in Urban Schools**, Ontario principal Darrin Griffiths writes about the interrelated components of inclusion.

This excerpt is from Chapter One of the book. Other chapters cover growing inclusion with teachers, students, and parents as well as cultivating allies and reconceptualizing the principalship. *Principals of Inclusion* can be purchased on Amazon. For information visit: principalsofinclusion.com

Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me the you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.

Henry David Thoreau

About the author

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Growing inclusion in schools involves six main interrelated components. Each of them is critical for long-term success. I like to use the analogy of a tree. Inclusion, like a tree, depends for its strength and health on the soil, the seed, the roots, the trunk, the branches, and the leaves.

1) The Soil:

The Purpose of Education

Without the proper soil, a tree will not grow. Without a clear understanding of the purpose of education, inclusion will not grow either. A solid grounding in the soil will anchor our thoughts and beliefs about what education can do and should be doing for our students.

The purpose of education is much more than simply training students to read, write, and perform well on standardized tests. An inclusive definition contains four key elements.

1. Students are ends in themselves. Students are not just future workers in training; they are individuals with particular histories, talents, hopes, and beliefs. Yet the incredible pressure on schools today to improve test results nearly always comes at the cost of seeing the students in a limiting way. Inclusion depends on schools adapting and changing to support the needs of students, not on students conforming to the traditional practices and knowledge systems of the school.
2. The goals of education are holistic. A holistic approach recognizes education as a synthesis, in which personal, social, and moral developments are key. It is crucial that schools promote, more than simply assess, the intellectual growth of students. Without multifaceted support, many students will fail to reach their potential as contributing citizens in a pluralistic democracy.
3. Education should prepare students to understand and shape the world. Smith et al. (1998) assert that primary purpose of education is to prepare students to understand and share the world (in Portelli and Solomon 2001). In order to do that, students need to learn how the identi-

ties of individuals and groups are socially constructed and maintained through various forms of communication and practice. Are students able to discern how race, gender, sexual orientation, *etcetera* are applied through practices in our institutions, including in schools? Do they understand how to challenge the systems that maintain privilege for certain groups and individuals? Helping students to develop a critical eye aligns neatly with the inclusive purpose of education. Non-dominant-culture students, when they encounter exclusionary barriers, need to understand why and how those forces operate. This knowledge will help them to navigate societal complexities while, at the same time, limiting their internalizing of societal stereotypes and messages.

4. All students are included. Too often democracy in schools is defined as the “majority rules.” That’s not the kind of democracy I’m aiming for as an educator. Instead, when we’re making decisions or having a discussion, I want continually to ask whose voice is missing. For example, the current composition of a student council or leadership group might not reflect the

diversity of the school. In an inclusive culture, all voices are represented.

2) The Seed: An inclusive Vision for your School

Rooted in the soil, the seed in the analogy is an inclusive vision for your school that is specific to the needs of students, staff members, and parents. A vision like this is both utopian and pragmatic: in a perfect world, what would make all of the groups involved feel they are “*of*” the school and not merely “*in*” it?

Here’s an example drawn from my current experience of working in a school with a significant number of Aboriginal students. Our long-term goal is that Aboriginal students will see themselves reflected in all aspects of the school, be it physical structure, curriculum, events, pedagogy of daily practices. Our goal for the first year was to ensure that all classrooms had at least one daily practice that acknowledged or was based on Aboriginal teachings. Staff, students, and parents provided input, and we backward-mapped from our long-term goal to see what the short-term steps would be. The seed was our collective vision for our students. Our goals were specific to those students, and they aligned with the soil, the inclusive purpose of education.

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3) The Roots:

The Sources of Information to Support Your Knowledge and Understanding of Inclusion

Roots derive nourishment from the soil and deliver that nourishment to the tree. They are the highways that continually support information moving back and forth between the soil and the trunk. Using my analogy, the roots supply evidence to support the “why,” the rationale for promoting inclusion in schools. These roots can include personal stories of inclusion and/or exclusion; ongoing dialogue with students, parents, and staff members about issues of equity and social justice, specifically those relating to inclusion; readings in critical social and educational theory, the gathering of both qualitative and quantitative information about student achievement and personal reflections on how the school is meeting the needs of students, parents and staff. This list is not exhaustive, but all of these elements will serve to feed and nourish the tree.

Continuing with the example of my current school, the roots are: 1) knowledge of Aboriginal histories, cultures, languages, and experiences; 2) awareness of Aboriginal people’s oppression, both past and present; 3) readings in critical theory on the subject; 4) ongoing dialogue with Aboriginal staff members, students, parents, and community members; and 5) data generated from report card marks, reading levels, attendance, and secondary school graduation rates. All of these roots support the trunk – our “why” for inclusion – with crucial information.

4) The Trunk:

The “Why” of Inclusion

The trunk nourishes the whole tree, allowing the branches to grow and expand. In my analogy, the trunk represents the “why” of inclusion: our reason for promoting inclusion, with specific reference to students and their families. The “why” comes from us, as educators, understanding the social and political complexities involved. The “why” for promoting inclusion for Aboriginal students in my current school is that after hundreds of years of forced assimilation of their people by Western dominant culture, many students are not aware of their cultures, their histories, or their people’s traditional teachings. In other words, many of the Aboriginal students do not know who they are.

Fed by the roots – our knowledge and understanding – the trunk is strengthened by our passion for growing inclusion.


5) The Branches:

Strategies and Practices for Growing Inclusion

In this analogy, the branches represent the “how” of inclusion. Each branch represents a strategy or practice used to achieve our goal. The strength and reach of these branches depend on our clear understanding of why inclusion is important.

6) The Leaves:

The Individual Included in Your School

The leaves represent the individuals included and are directly connected to the branches – practices or strategies. Visualizing, engaging with, and analyzing these can determine whether our strategies are actually working. The six components described above – the soil, the seed, the roots, the trunk, the branches, and the leaves – will give you a framework for growing inclusion in your school. 

Cover Story



Our cover art this month is by Jacquelyn Biggs who was a grade 12 student at North Island Secondary, Port McNeill, when this spray paint art with trees and water was completed. Our thanks are extended to Jacquelyn, her teacher Kathleen McArthur and Lauren Deadman, Principal, for sharing this work.

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