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Inclusive education in Canada¹

Abstract

The article presents the education system in Canada, specifically in the province of New Brunswick, and the steps taken in the area of educational inclusion, highlighting some practices that promote the spread of an inclusive approach. In addition to students with learning difficulties and disabilities, we also present provincial and institutional policies related to the support of Indigenous peoples, as well as the support for their implementation. A brief historical summary is provided to facilitate an understanding of the current context. The study is based on a review of relevant literature.

Keywords: inclusive education, special educational needs, Canada

Inkluzív oktatás Kanadában

Absztrakt

A cikk Kanada, azon belül Új-Brunswick tartomány oktatási rendszerét, az oktatási inklúzió területein tett lépéseit mutatja be, kiemelve néhány olyan gyakorlatot, amely a befogadó szemlélet terjedését segíti elő. A tanulási nehézségekkel küzdő és fogyatékossgal élő tanulók támogatása mellett bemutatjuk az őslakos népekhez kapcsolódó tartományi és intézményi szakpolitikákat, valamint azok megvalósításának támogatási mechanizmusait is. A helyzet megértéséhez rövid történeti összefoglaló készült. Kutatásunk releváns szakirodalmi forrásokra épül.

Kulcsszavak: befogadó nevelés, inklúzió, sajátos nevelési igény, Kanada

¹ Certain sections of the current study rely to a large extent on the bachelor's thesis of Barnabas, J (2024).

Inclusive education in Canada

Introduction

Canada is widely regarded as one of the leading countries in inclusive education. This study examines the implementation of inclusive education within the Canadian education system, with particular attention to the province of New Brunswick.

The study is based on a literature review; no empirical data were collected. It draws on publicly available sources, including reports from educational authorities and professional organizations, peer-reviewed articles, relevant databases, and archival materials. Sources were identified through targeted keyword searches in academic databases (e.g., Google Scholar) and official institutional websites. Priority was given to peer-reviewed studies, policy documents, and authoritative reports focusing on inclusive education in Canada, particularly at the provincial level and in relation to New Brunswick.

The paper first outlines the general characteristics of Canada and its education system, followed by a detailed analysis of inclusive practices in New Brunswick.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is inclusive education conceptualized and implemented across Canadian provinces?
2. In what ways does New Brunswick represent a strong model of inclusive education in terms of policy, structure, and practice?

Conceptualizing Inclusive Education

The concept of inclusive education has evolved significantly over time, reflecting broader social, political, and human rights developments. Historically, four major phases can be identified: exclusion, segregation, integration, and inclusion. During the period of exclusion, individuals with disabilities were denied access to education, while segregation introduced separate institutions for their education (UNESCO, 1994; Booth & Ainscow, 2009).

From the late twentieth century onwards, integration allowed students with special educational needs to enter mainstream schools; however, this often required them to adapt to existing structures. In contrast, inclusion represents a paradigm shift in which educational systems are designed to accommodate diverse learners from the outset (UNESCO, 1994; Booth & Ainscow, 2009; Rodriguez & Garro-Gil, 2015).

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) marked a key milestone in the international understanding of inclusive education, emphasizing that all children have the right to learn together in mainstream educational settings. In this sense, inclusion extends beyond disability and reflects a broader commitment to equity, participation, and diversity (UNESCO, 1994).

From a Canadian perspective, inclusive education is shaped by the country's decentralized education system, in which provinces are responsible for developing



their own policies and practices. As a result, there is no single, unified national definition of inclusion; instead, its interpretation varies across jurisdictions (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). Nevertheless, a common principle across Canadian provinces is the commitment to educating all students within the same learning environments, supported by flexible teaching approaches and multidisciplinary collaboration (UNESCO, 2021).

In this context, certain provinces—most notably New Brunswick—have developed comprehensive inclusive education models that go beyond integration and aim to create fully inclusive school systems. These approaches emphasize system-level transformation, collaboration among professionals, and the removal of barriers to participation for all learners (UNESCO, 2021; Dworet & Bennett, 2002).

This conceptual framework provides the basis for analysing inclusive education practices in Canada, with particular attention to the case of New Brunswick.

Canada's geographical and social characteristics

Canada is the second largest country in the world (after Russia), occupying approximately two-fifths of the North American continent. Stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the east to the Arctic Ocean in the north and the Pacific Ocean in the west, the country covers an area of 9,984,670 square kilometres (McColl, 2005). Despite its large size, it is one of the most sparsely populated countries on Earth, with an average population density of approximately three people per square kilometre.

The area that is now Canada was originally inhabited by Indigenous peoples who developed complex social, cultural, and economic systems prior to European colonisation (Historica Canada, n.d.). Indigenous peoples include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, who currently make up about 5% of the population (Parrot, 2023). Colonization significantly shaped the Canadian education system, particularly through assimilation policies affecting Indigenous peoples (Hele, 2026).

Canada is a federal state in which responsibilities are divided between the federal and provincial governments. Education falls primarily under provincial jurisdiction (Legislative Services Branch, 2024a; Nicholson et al., 2024). Canada has a highly diverse population shaped by immigration and multiculturalism (Statista, 2024). This decentralized structure plays a key role in shaping the development and implementation of inclusive education across provinces.

Historical development of the education system

To understand the importance of inclusive education in Canada, it is necessary to consider the historical development of the system. The establishment of Canada's early education systems (1600–1800) can be traced back to French and British colonizers. Canada's Confederation in 1867 (Section 93 of the Constitution Act)



laid the legal foundation on which modern Canadian education is based. This legal framework placed responsibility for education primarily with the provinces rather than the federal government, resulting in significant differences between provincial education systems that remain today (Di Mascio, 2019; Legislative Services Branch, 2024b). The ten provinces and three territories regulate education policy and special education in different ways (Dworet & Bennett, 2002).

Early education systems were strongly influenced by French and British colonial and religious structures, which shaped the organization and values of schooling (Gaffield, 2015; Fisher & Axelrod, 1999). For a long time, the education of Indigenous peoples formed part of assimilation policies, most notably through the establishment of residential schools. For over a century, Indigenous children were placed in these institutions, often experiencing cultural loss and significant harm (Miller, 2026). This historical legacy continues to influence contemporary approaches to inclusive education.

These historical developments provide important context for understanding the emergence and current forms of inclusive education in Canada.



Current characteristics of the school system

Despite some similarities, the Canadian education system varies significantly across provinces. Education is a provincial and territorial responsibility, meaning that each jurisdiction develops and administers its own policies and practices in line with its specific geographic, cultural, and linguistic context (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, n.d.).

Compulsory education typically begins between the ages of 5 and 7 and continues until approximately age 16–18 (Canada, 2023). The system is generally structured into elementary, lower secondary, and upper secondary levels, although specific arrangements may differ by province (Canada, 2024; Immigration, 2022a). Higher education includes universities, colleges, and vocational institutions (Immigration, 2022b).

Despite the country's official bilingualism, English is the primary language of instruction in most provinces, while French dominates in Quebec. In addition, increasing attention is being paid to linguistic diversity, including the revitalisation of Indigenous languages and the support of migrant languages through educational initiatives (Duff & Li, 2009).

Inclusion in Canadian schools

In recent decades, Canada has taken significant steps to create an inclusive education system characterized by the acceptance of diversity. According to the 2021 Global Education Monitoring Report, Canada is considered one of the most advanced countries in terms of innovation in inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021; Inclusive Education Canada, n.d.-a; Towle, 2015).

As the country does not have uniform federal-level regulations in education policy, inclusion has developed in various ways across provinces. Differences in geographical, cultural, and political contexts have led to varying levels of implementation. Some provinces, such as New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, have developed strong inclusive models, while in others—such as Ontario (particularly Toronto)—many students continue to be educated in segregated settings (Carr, 2016).

In its early stages, as in many other countries, inclusion in Canada primarily focused on students with disabilities; however, it has since expanded to include other marginalized groups, such as linguistic, cultural, racial, and sexual minorities. In some provinces where inclusion is more advanced (e.g., Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick), special schools have largely been eliminated, whereas in Ontario, segregation remains more common. This variation may be attributed to factors such as population size and the influence of professional interest groups that benefit from maintaining existing structures (AuCoin et al., 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2009; Carr, 2016; UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO, 1994).

Due to its well-developed model, New Brunswick is further examined as a case study of inclusive education.



General information about New Brunswick

New Brunswick is one of Canada's smallest provinces, covering an area of 73,440 km² and bordering Quebec and Nova Scotia (Government of New Brunswick, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). According to 2021 statistics, it has a population of 775,610, with approximately two-thirds living in urban areas and one-third in rural regions (Statistics Canada, 2023a).

The province has a diverse population shaped by immigration, with 5.8% of residents born abroad (Statistics Canada, 2023b). Linguistically, 57.2% of the population speaks only English, 8.6% only French, while 33.9% are bilingual (Statistics Canada, 2023c). In addition, Indigenous peoples—including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit—represent approximately 4.4% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2023d). Historically, relations with Indigenous communities in the province were often characterised by attempts at coexistence rather than forced displacement (Three Nations Education Group Inc., n.d.).

In New Brunswick, public education begins with kindergarten and comprises 12 school years, which are compulsory until the age of 18 or until completion of high school. The system operates through a dual structure of English and French schools. Early childhood education is integrated into the ministry's mandate, ensuring policy coherence from early childhood through to graduation.

Governance is shared between the provincial government—represented by the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development—and locally elected District Education Councils. While the minister establishes policy frameworks and standards, district councils oversee implementation and school operations. The province is divided into seven school districts, four English-speaking and three French-speaking (Gov. of NB, 2005). School-level governance is further supported by Parent-Teacher Associations, whose members are elected for three-year terms (Gov. of NB, n.d.-c).

The development of inclusive education in the province

Early policy developments

In New Brunswick, the first step towards inclusive education was taken in 1986 with the introduction of Bill 85, which made it compulsory for all students, including those with disabilities, to learn in the same institutional environment (Province of New Brunswick, 1986). This marked the beginning of a process that led to the elimination of segregated education. Today, there are no special schools in the province, and students are not separated from their peers. As a result, New Brunswick is often considered a leading model of inclusive education internationally (AuCoin et al., 2020).

The MacKay Report (2006) and conceptual clarification

The development of inclusion was further shaped by the *Connecting Care and Challenge Report* (MacKay Report) in 2006. This report highlighted the need to clearly define inclusive education and emphasised that all students should learn in environments that recognise and value diversity in culture, language, ability, and socioeconomic background (MacKay, 2006).

The report also identified several key challenges and priorities:

- the need for adequate financial resources,
- the availability of trained support staff,
- the importance of flexible teaching methods and curricula,
- the role of early intervention,
- the necessity of ongoing teacher training and professional development,
- the importance of coordination between services,
- the role of strong and accountable leadership,
- the impact of class composition (MacKay, 2006).

As a result, a formal *Definition of Inclusive Education* was introduced in 2009, promoting the concept of a shared learning environment in which all learners participate fully (Province of New Brunswick, 2009).

Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools (2012)

Another key milestone was the 2012 report *Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools*, which provided practical guidance for implementation. The report was based on extensive fieldwork involving teachers, principals, and other professionals across both English and French school districts.



Its findings emphasised that increasing inclusion capacity improves not only the outcomes of students with disabilities but also the overall academic performance of all students (Porter & AuCoin, 2012; AuCoin et al., 2020).

Policy 322 and system-level implementation

Policy 322, developed on the basis of the 2009 and 2012 reports, serves as the central policy framework for inclusive education in New Brunswick. It provides clear guidance for all public education institutions across both English and Francophone districts.

The policy ensures that schools address the diverse needs of all learners and promotes inclusive teaching approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL encourages flexible curriculum design and rejects “one-size-fits-all” approaches by offering multiple ways of presenting content, engaging students, and allowing them to demonstrate their knowledge (CAST, n.d.; AuCoin et al., 2020; IEC, n.d.-b).

Importantly, Policy 322 avoids the use of terms such as “disability” or “special educational needs,” instead emphasising that all students’ individual needs should be addressed regardless of their differences (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013; AuCoin et al., 2020).

To better highlight the differences between the general Canadian context and the case of New Brunswick, Table 1. provides a comparative overview.

TABLE 1. COMPARISON OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN CANADA AND NEW BRUNSWICK

Aspect	Canada (general context)	New Brunswick (case study)
Governance	Decentralized, provincial responsibility	Strong provincial leadership and clear policy framework
Policy framework	No unified national policy	Policy 322 provides clear guidance
Implementation	Varies significantly across provinces	Consistent province-wide implementation
Inclusion model	Mix of inclusive and segregated practices	Fully inclusive system (no special schools)
Support systems	Differ across provinces	Structured ESS teams and tiered support
Teaching approaches	Varying use of inclusive methods	Systematic use of UDL and differentiated instruction
Focus groups	Initially disability-focused, now broader	Holistic inclusion (all learners)
Outcomes	Uneven across regions	Considered a leading model internationally



Key elements of successful inclusive practice in New Brunswick

A study by AuCoin et al. (2020) identified three key elements of successful inclusion in New Brunswick: leadership, collaboration, and personalized education. These dimensions are closely interconnected and supported by policy frameworks such as Policy 322.

Leadership

Leadership committed to inclusion plays a decisive role in the transition to inclusive education. Principals are expected to articulate a clear and consistent vision of inclusion and communicate it across the entire school community (AuCoin et al., 2020; IEC, n.d.-c).

Their responsibilities include:

- allocating resources (staff, equipment, support services),
- ensuring professional development for teachers and support staff,
- supporting data-informed academic and behavioural interventions,
- reinforcing the central role of classroom teachers,
- overseeing grouping practices and limiting ability-based grouping to temporary arrangements,
- ensuring appropriate allocation of special education assistants (DEECD, 2013).

School leaders are also responsible for:

- coordinating School Development Plans and Individualized Education Plans,
- supporting the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, and multi-level teaching strategies,
- ensuring equal access to extracurricular activities,
- monitoring accessibility and reporting emerging needs.

To support these processes, schools operate Educational Support Services (ESS) teams composed of teachers and other professionals. These teams meet regularly (at least biweekly) to review student progress and address emerging challenges (DEECD, 2013).

Roles of educational professionals

Inclusive education relies on clearly defined and collaborative professional roles:

- Classroom teachers are responsible for the well-being and development of all students. They apply inclusive practices, collaborate with ESS teams, use co-teaching models, and guide the work of teaching assistants (IEC, n.d.-d).
- Educational Support Teachers (ESTs) provide consultation, co-teaching, and mentoring. They also lead the development of Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs) in cooperation with ESS teams and may provide targeted individual or small-group support (IEC, n.d.-e).

- Educational Assistants support students individually or in groups, assist with learning tasks, behaviour management, communication, and the use of assistive technologies. They also contribute to monitoring student progress and supporting classroom activities (IEC, n.d.-f).

Collaboration

Collaboration is a cornerstone of inclusive practice both within and beyond the school.

- Within schools, professionals work together through structured collaboration, including regular ESS meetings.
- Models such as “teachers helping teachers” enable peer problem-solving and reflective practice (AuCoin et al., 2020).
- Schools also collaborate closely with parents, community organizations, and advocacy groups to support students’ long-term outcomes, including transition to the labour market (AuCoin et al., 2020).

Personalized learning and planning

The development of Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs) is a central element of inclusive education.

- PLPs are initiated through collaboration among teachers, ESS teams, and other professionals (e.g., psychologists, speech therapists, social workers) (DEECD, 2019).
- Plans are developed when students require modifications, behavioural support, or alternative instructional approaches.
- The process includes assessment, goal-setting, and continuous evaluation.

Importantly, PLPs focus on students’ strengths, interests, and abilities rather than deficits. Plans are regularly reviewed and adjusted to support ongoing development (IEC, n.d.-g).

Support system and pedagogical approaches

Inclusive education in New Brunswick is supported by a structured system of interventions and diverse teaching approaches.

- The three-tier support model includes:
 - universal support for all students,
 - targeted small-group interventions,
 - intensive individualised support (IEC, n.d.-h).
- Teaching approaches include:
 - Universal Design for Learning,
 - differentiated instruction and multi-level strategies (CAST, n.d.; IEC, n.d.-b),
 - peer learning and collaborative methods (IEC, n.d.-i),
 - self-regulation strategies (e.g., Zones of Regulation) (IEC, n.d.-j).



These approaches aim to support diverse learning needs while promoting student autonomy, engagement, and participation.

Overall, inclusive education in New Brunswick is characterised by the integration of leadership, collaboration, and personalized support within a coherent and system-level framework.

Supporting Indigenous rights through inclusive education

The integration of Indigenous culture into modern Canadian curricula serves to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and to strengthen the identity of Indigenous students. In addition to cultural support, educational support for Indigenous youth also plays a significant role.

To achieve these goals, the province's Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development signed a memorandum of understanding with First Nations communities. This agreement aims to support academic success, develop culturally relevant educational materials, and allocate targeted financial resources. As a result, the Office of First Nation Education (OFNE) was established to promote the well-being, academic success, and career readiness of Indigenous students, while also educating the wider society about First Nations culture, history, and contemporary realities (Gov. of NB, n.d.-d).

The New Brunswick curriculum incorporates Wabanaki culture and history and emphasizes the importance of preserving Indigenous languages. It states that all learners should develop an understanding and appreciation of Wabanaki histories, cultures, and ways of knowing, while Indigenous students should see themselves reflected in the curriculum and learning environment (Gov. of NB, n.d.-e).

The OFNE considers it a priority to embed Indigenous perspectives—particularly the Wabanaki worldview—into the general curriculum. This includes developing language learning opportunities and providing experiential learning both in-person and online (Gov. of NB, n.d.-d). Digital platforms also support this work. For example, the World of Wisdom website provides teaching materials, professional development courses, and access to “Knowledge Keepers,” who visit schools and share Indigenous knowledge through personal narratives (World of Wisdom, n.d.).

These visits provide experiential learning opportunities that go beyond theoretical knowledge. They help students engage with Indigenous languages and cultural practices while fostering curiosity, respect, and understanding. At the same time, they support Indigenous students in recognising themselves within the education system and contribute to reconciliation processes. These practices are closely aligned with the Wabanaki “Wholistic” Learning Framework, which was developed in collaboration with First Nations communities (Gov. of NB, 2019).

The framework provides structured guidance for integrating Indigenous perspectives across all grade levels, including themes such as identity, community, treaty relationships, and anti-racism (Gov. of NB, 2019).

Overall, Wabanaki people, texts, cultural practices, and objects are not only present in the curriculum but are also actively integrated into everyday school life. Indigenous languages are used in classrooms and school environments, and guest



speakers further support this process. These efforts promote respect for Indigenous cultures and treaty relationships (Gov. of NB, n.d.-e). At the same time, they contribute to acknowledging historical injustices and support the restoration of dignity among Indigenous students.

Summary

This study examined the development and implementation of inclusive education within the Canadian education system, with particular focus on the province of New Brunswick. Based on a review of relevant literature, the paper provided both a conceptual and historical overview of inclusive education, as well as an analysis of Canada's decentralized education system.

Canada is the second largest country in the world, characterized by low population density and increasing demographic diversity driven by migration. The integration of immigrant children represents an important dimension of inclusive education. At the same time, the country's historical development, shaped by French and British colonization, has contributed to its bilingual nature and continues to influence its education system.

Education in Canada is a provincial responsibility, resulting in differences in policies and practices across regions. Nevertheless, inclusive education is broadly guided by the principles of the Salamanca Statement, emphasizing equity, participation, and the idea of educating all students together. Inclusion extends beyond students with disabilities to encompass a wide range of marginalized groups. This is particularly significant in the case of Indigenous peoples, whose historical experiences with residential schooling and forced assimilation continue to shape contemporary educational approaches. At the same time, increasing attention is being paid to the protection of Indigenous languages and cultures and to processes of reconciliation.

The case of New Brunswick illustrates how inclusive education can be implemented in a coherent and comprehensive way. Since the introduction of inclusive policies in 1986, the province has developed a fully inclusive system supported by Policy 322. The model is characterised by strong leadership, professional collaboration, and personalized educational planning. School leaders play a key role in coordinating inclusive practices and fostering cooperation among teachers, assistants, and support teams, while collaboration with families and community actors further supports student outcomes.

Personalized Learning Plans focus on students' strengths and are developed collaboratively and reviewed regularly. Their implementation is supported by inclusive pedagogical approaches such as Universal Design for Learning, co-teaching, collaborative learning, self-regulation strategies, and a three-tier support model.

Overall, the study demonstrates that while inclusive education in Canada is shaped by structural diversity, the example of New Brunswick shows how coordinated policies, professional collaboration, and inclusive practices can contribute to the development of an effective and equitable education system.



Limitations

This study is based on secondary sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and publicly available reports. As no empirical data were collected, the findings rely on the interpretation and synthesis of existing research.

In addition, the decentralized nature of the Canadian education system means that practices may vary significantly across provinces, which limits the generalizability of the findings. While the study aims to provide a comprehensive overview, it does not capture all regional differences or recent local developments.

Finally, the analysis focuses primarily on documented policies and reported practices, which may differ from their implementation in everyday educational settings.

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