

Integrated/Inclusive Kindergarten Program Proposal for Sunny View Junior and Senior Public School

Background

In June of 2017, six senior kindergarten students graduated from the Integrated Kindergarten Program (IKP), a partnership between Bloorview School Authority (BSA) and the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study Lab School (JICS). These are the last graduates of the 21-year-old reverse integration program; a program that integrates students with and without disabilities in a classroom located on-site at Holland-Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital. As of June of 2017, the program was suspended due to low enrollment from JICS.

Unlike usual integration efforts where a physically challenged child is placed as a minority into a mainstream educational setting, the IKP offers **reverse inclusion**, i.e., placing children without physical disability directly into a congregated school. Special needs children do not lose their group affiliation and they are not placed in the position of entering extant social groups in community school settings.

The program was recognized internationally as an example of successful integration; the founding teachers were awarded the Premier's Award in 2011; and the classroom was used as training site for teacher candidates from the Master of Arts in Child Study and Education program (MA CSE) candidates at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE).

Costs

There would be a number of benefits to see this program reintroduced at Sunny View Public School starting the fall of 2019. These benefits will be explained in detail later. The reintroduction of this program would come at the following costs:

- one FTE primary teacher (see appendix 1 for Program structure)
- one classroom space at Sunny View Jr & Sr Public School
- inclusion of an optional attendance excerpt outlining this program in the before/after school surveys at the neighboring schools

Benefits

1. A Question of Equity

In 2009 the Ministry of Education released 'Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy'. The document outlines the plan to improve outcomes for students at risk, including students with special needs.

The strategy recognizes our province's growing diversity as a strength. It aims to promote inclusive education, as well as to understand, identify and eliminate the biases, barriers and power

dynamics that limit our students' prospects for learning, growing and fully contributing to society. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 11)

The IKP classroom at BSA long acted as a pillar of excellence when it came to the successful implementation of integration of students with and without disabilities. The IKP removed the barriers that exist for students with disabilities, physically and socially, so that they could experience a true sense of belonging in a setting that mimics the broader community. The IKP also contributed to the collective climate of diversity at BSA. Students with and without disabilities were integrated not just in the IKP classroom, but throughout the school during assemblies, at events, in the gymnasium and the library and during other school-wide activities. What the IKP achieved over the course of twenty-one years was a direct reflection of the values that the strategy aims to promote.

We know that stigma happens when people don't understand or when they make assumptions without having all the information.

People without disabilities often possess extensive gaps in their understanding of disability, including the tendency to overestimate the negative impact of a disability and to underestimate how much those with disabilities value and enjoy their lives (Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, "Dear Everyone Campaign 2017", p. 4).

The IKP classroom, the only one of its kind in Ontario, was leading the way with its active approach towards educating students without disabilities as early as possible about what lives of students with disabilities are really like; lives that have so many similarities to their own. The IKP provided a safe, supportive, inclusive and respectful learning environment for students with disabilities to be themselves, demonstrate their expertise and in turn educate their peers on their abilities and attributes, not just their deficits. These interactions between peers in the IKP classroom helped reduce or even remove the stigma that existed around what people with disabilities can or can't do. The attitudes of students without disabilities significantly changed as a result of their time spent in the IKP classroom. Sally Lindsay, senior scientist at Holland Bloorview research institute explains:

The research on this shows that shaping positive attitudes towards people with disabilities early on is critical (Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, 2017, p. 12).

While there is no question of the advantages of the IKP classroom for students with disabilities, there are also life-changing benefits for students without disabilities. Paul Alcamo, one of the founding IKP teachers who has been teaching in the classroom since its inception in 1996, has been witness to the impact the program has had on children from the community. Furthermore, recent research specifically outlines the impact of the IKP on graduates and their families:

*The **meaning**/impacts of the IKP experience as described by graduates and parents interviewed include those that can be characterized as: expanded awareness or understanding (e.g. of dis/ability, friendship); attitudinal shifts (e.g. towards self-confidence, tolerance); and behavioral changes, specifically in the realms of social interaction (e.g. more helpful, communicative), academics (e.g. heightened interest, performance) and risk-taking (e.g. increased self-advocacy, independence). (Volpe, 2017, p. 8)*

Access to the IKP classroom at BSA offered every student an insight and perspective of themselves and the world around them that they would not have experienced otherwise. The curriculum of the program based in inquiry and experiential learning was noted by different parents of graduates as enriched and engaging. These parents describe the IKP academic experience as a critical turning point in the way their child problem solves and makes decisions. Limiting or blocking students without disabilities from accessing such rewarding learning experiences brings up a question of equity of access; even though their experiences will be different with different outcomes, shouldn't all students, with and without disabilities, have access to such unique and special opportunities?

The over-arching goal of the project is to support children to achieve their full potential within a diverse, least restrictive setting such that it would stimulate new ways of thinking about diversity and the environments associated with school efforts to be more inclusive. Traditional normative concepts of development have proven themselves of limited value in dealing with these issues.

2. Teacher Training

The presence of community children in the IKP makes it possible for teacher candidates to use this classroom as their placement in an inclusive classroom. Under current regulations teachers candidates are not able to have their placements in Intensive Support Classrooms (ISPs). MA CSE students have been part of the teaching team in the IKP since its inception. MA CSE students have been able to gather variable insights into best practices for inclusion and working with children with special needs that will support the learning of all children when they become full time teachers themselves.

3. Research Potential

The IKP can be seen as a demonstration program that can be used evaluate how to achieve successful integration and inclusion in regular classrooms. The learnings can be used to enrich the dialogue about inclusion in a meaningful direction. It would provide an opportunity to continue to evaluate the IKP and enable research projects, theses and dissertations to continue. It would provide the TDSB with the opportunity to engage in JICS's longitudinal research on executive functions and socio-emotional development. In essence, the kind of research and subsequent dialogue that gets to the heart of what is true inclusion.

Timelines

- September 2018: Proposal presented to Academic Council for approval
- October 2018: Before and After School Survey Excerpt sent to Communications for Approval
- November 2018: Reach out to neighbouring schools to explain the program and the recruitment process
- January 2019: Information Meeting for possible students
- March 2019: Staffing process begins as usual with an additional primary allocation
- June 2019: School Organization and placement processes as per usual with newly created IKP class

Appendix 1: Program Structure

- 1 Sunny View Jr & Sr Public School Intensive Support Program (ISP) classroom team consisting of 1 teacher, two Educational Assistant level K for a hard target of 8 children
- 1 additional FTE primary teacher for the IKP
- To be optimally effective the reverse inclusion program requires less community children than the children from the ISP. Therefore, the proposed structure for the classroom would be approximately 6 to 8 children from the community and 8 children from the ISP program. Numbers could be adjusted through regular classroom organizational processes.