

**College and University? You've got to be kidding: Inclusive
post-secondary education for adults with intellectual
disabilities**

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This paper reports the results of study undertaken to describe a new adult education phenomenon called Inclusive Post-Secondary Education (IPSE). From interviews with senior staff members of three IPSE programs in Alberta, Canada, an operational definition of common practices across IPSE programs was developed. Interviews also produced a listing of benefits and outcomes for students attending these programs. Results of this study indicate a common operational model that could be replicated elsewhere; as well as describing some philosophical premises that appear to be inherent in the operation of IPSE programs.

1 Introduction

There is a group of students in our public education system who are being denied a fundamental opportunity granted to hundreds of thousands of other high school graduates each year – post-secondary education. Rather than considering going to college or university after high school, students from the special education stream are moving into an adult life of limited choices and isolating opportunities. This means that on an annual basis, thousands of young Canadians are being denied the opportunity to participate in a natural pathway into the world of employment and community participation, solely because they have an intellectual disability.

However, over the last 13 years, a new adult education initiative has been gaining interest and popularity nationally and abroad. Originating in Alberta, Canada, Inclusive Post-secondary Education (IPSE) programs are supporting the inclusion of adults with intellectual disabilities to be included into mainstream college and university campus life. This represents a radical departure from traditional adult education opportunities for these learners. IPSE demonstrates that adults with intellectual disabilities no longer need to be isolated from their non-disabled peers who are also continuing their education. IPSE signifies a new vision of adult education for adults with intellectual disabilities.

The purpose of this study was to describe how three IPSE programs in Alberta, Canada, utilize inclusive education philosophies and practices to create a model for providing an education to adults with intellectual disabilities in colleges and universities.

Allan's story: Allan was a graduate of the public special education system. When he finished his high school program he moved into what all might consider a traditional job for someone with an intellectual disability. He was doing janitor work in a local restaurant and fitness centre, but still dreamed of working with young children in a classroom setting. He wanted a job much like the Teacher Assistants he had seen in all of his special education classes. When his mother told him of a new opportunity to go to college and learn to work with children, he realized that he might be able to achieve his dreams.

Allan was accepted into an IPSE program at a local college that offered a one-year Teacher Assistant program. Allan knew he would not be able to work at the same pace as other students and would need extra time to get his work done. With the support of his parents and the staff of the IPSE program, Allan was confident that four years would give him enough time to succeed in class and field placements and decided on courses he would like to audit. Allan also decided on a schedule that would allow him time to be in class, to meet with staff to get work done, to find time to continue his interest in weight lifting and to spend some time with classmates and others during his free time.

IPSE staff recruited classmates to help him out by taking notes that could later be adapted to meet his reading capabilities, and by including him in group work and discussions. They also talked to his instructors to find out the most important things Allen should be getting from their classes.

Allan needed numerous modifications to his texts and other learning materials as he could not read or write very well. Staff developed notes that incorporated pictures and very plain language, which worked well in relation to his reading skills and spent time with him daily going over these modified notes. Rather than giving Allan marks for his work, his instructors would either meet with him to provide feedback or write comments on his work.

Allan went to classes, studied, worked on modified assignments, went to field placements, worked out, “hung out” with other students, went to parties, met students from other college programs and got involved in the student association. His time at college, other than being in a four year program (all other programs were one or two years long), looked a lot like any other active student.

By his fourth year, Allan had become very accustomed to going to college and learning. He had improved his reading and writing skills. He had met friends that he kept in touch with and made new connections with others each year. Over his time at college he had built skills that would enable him and the staff of the IPSE program to carve out a role for Allan in a kindergarten or grade one classroom. Even though he had not received a certificate, he was able to take what he had learned in and out of the classroom and turn it into a paid job at an elementary school.

Allan convocated in his fourth year and received a tremendous applause from the audience. The classmates, instructors, and other students he had met recognized all of the work and effort he had put into realizing his dream.

He still works at the same school and is seen as a valuable employee. He is in touch with people from past college days and is moving out of his group home into a condominium by himself. He hopes that his fiancée will one-day move in with him and the two of them will enjoy a long life together that includes work, friends, family, and community.

Because of the opportunity he had to continue his education, Allan was able to realize his dream and to enjoy a life that very much resembles what other adults would experience. IPSE enabled him to do something that is taken for granted by his peers, yet is very uncommon for an adult with an intellectual disability: to go to college or university and to enjoy and benefit from this experience as hundreds of thousands other adults do.

2 Literature Review

In 1997-1998, there were 37, 064 students in high school special education programs. In the province of Alberta, there were 1,968 students in special education programs. Of

these 1968 students, 76 (3.8%) went on to some form of post-secondary education. In the same year, there were 43,950 regular education high school graduates in Alberta (Statistics Canada, 1999). Of this number, approximately 7,471 (17%) went on to continue their education in a post-secondary institution (Canadian Education Statistics Council, 2000).

The 76 graduates of special education were enrolled in Alberta's eight Transitional Vocational Programs, the only post-secondary education opportunity available to adults with intellectual disabilities. Transitional Vocational Programs (TVP) are the closest opportunity for adults with intellectual disabilities in Canada to continue their education. These adult basic education programs are generally one-year college programs, available exclusively to adults with mild developmental disabilities whose educational experiences are segregated from other learners. With a focus on academics, career and life skills, and supervised work, these one to two year placements prepare students far too quickly for a life of work. A recent review (Gowdy, 1998) of these programs found there is little emphasis on education for its own sake and minimal interaction with non-disabled students. These programs are primarily segregated and recommendations by external consultants have strongly urged them to increase the amount of time that students are included into other college classes. Aside from this separate and segregated learning experience for a very few, post-secondary education opportunities are non-existent for adults with intellectual disabilities.

For the thousands of other graduates of special education the traditional experiences of high school education have not seemed to adequately prepare students for life beyond high school (McArthur, 1996). Most options for graduates of special education programs revolve around supported employment, vocational rehabilitation, sheltered workshops and enclaves (Morrison & Polloway, 1995) all of which keep them separate from the normative experiences of their non-disabled peers. After years of inclusive experiences, youth with disabilities are thrust back into segregated experiences (Haring & Lovett, 1990). It is at the high school level and the transition beyond high school and into the community that inclusion meets its biggest obstacles. Research indicates a lack of opportunities in post-school employment, living arrangements and social outcomes, for graduates of special education programs, which all too often leads to social isolation and unemployment (Guy, Hasazi & Johnson, 1999; McLaughlin, Schofield, & Hopfengardener Warren, 1999).

Thus, there is a severe disparity in opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities to continue one's education that needs to be addressed. Finding ways for these learners to participate in a post-secondary education, either at college or university, is imperative. Advocacy organizations are now looking at this issue of continuing education for adults with intellectual disabilities as an education and human rights issue (Roehrer, 1996), emphasizing that past barriers to college and university participation need to be systemically dismantled.

Inclusive post-secondary education (IPSE) is seen as one strategy for addressing this issue and demonstrates that virtually any adult with an intellectual disability is able to participate meaningfully in the same college and university experiences as hundreds of thousands of other Canadians. With proper supports and utilization of educational and individual modifications to learning materials and experiences, IPSE programs are creating opportunities in the world of adult education that were previously unavailable. At the same time, they are creating a new paradigm of what is possible for graduates of special education programs in Canada and elsewhere.

3 Methodology

This study used a descriptive, qualitative approach to data collection. I chose to invite senior staff of three IPSE programs in Alberta to participate in the study through an interview. The seven senior staff were full-time employees within their respective

programs and assumed leadership positions. Their responses to the interview provided the foundation of my data analysis.

After each of the interviews, the audio from the videotapes used to record sessions was transcribed. After the transcription process, emergent topics and themes were categorized, which enabled the researcher to develop a history of IPSE, an operational definition of IPSE programs' principles, and practices, as well as a description of student outcomes. These practices, principles and student outcomes are derived from the opinions of the interviewees.

4 Inclusive Post-secondary Education in Alberta

The following section describes the history, practices and principles, and key benefits of Inclusive Post-secondary Education.

4.1 History of inclusive post-secondary education

While investigating what might be available for their sons or daughters who were approaching graduation from special education programs, a parent group in Edmonton, Alberta began to realize the limitations available in the community. When they began to discuss the options available to other young adults upon leaving high school, such as college or university, they questioned why this was not available for their children as well. With the support of the Gateway Association for Community Living and the Alberta Association for Community Living (AACL), a provincial advocacy organization for adults with developmental disabilities and interested allies from the local university, they began to actualize their vision and called it Inclusive Post-secondary Education (IPSE).

In February of 1987 the first IPSE program in Alberta was created, called the On Campus Program. Since that time, other IPSE programs have been created modeled on the On Campus Program. These programs now exist across Canada and in continents as far away as Australia.

4.2 Timeline of program development

- 1987: **On Campus Program:** University of Alberta. 11 students, 4 staff
1992: **Varsity Education Program:** University of Calgary. 7 students, 4 staff
1994: **On Campus Program:** University of Jvaskyla, Finland. 6 students, 2 staff
1995: **College Connection Program:** Grant MacEwan College, Edmonton, Alberta. 6 students, 2.5 staff
1997: **ACE Program:** University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown. 12 students, 4 staff
Up the Hill Program: Flinders University: Adelaide, Australia. 4 students, 1 staff
1998: **Campus Connection Program:** Lethbridge Community College. 3 students, 1 staff

4.3 Principles of IPSE

In comparing the three programs at the University of Alberta, University of Calgary, and Lethbridge Community College, it becomes apparent that many of the inclusive principles utilized in the public education system are replicated in all IPSE programs. From its inception, IPSE has been guided by the following principles:

1. IPSE is available to any adult with an intellectual disability: "IPSE programs support a diverse group of learners." There are no academic or physical criteria used to select students. This means that IPSE programs are "open to any adult with an intellectual disability" including adults labeled as severely, profoundly handicapped who may not have any formal means of communication and who require personal care for their

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health and transportation needs. Conversely, students who are able to read, write and interact independently with others are also integrated into college or university.

2. IPSE is totally inclusive and is coherent with what other students experience: Students are included in the same academic, social and recreational experiences as others. Respondents indicated there are “no separate classes, classrooms, academic or non-academic activities specifically for IPSE students.”
3. Students in IPSE programs assume Socially Valued Roles: Through their participation in the same activities and environments, (along with modifications where necessary to make their participation meaningful), students in IPSE assume valued social roles. The role of students at college or university, and their participation in the same activities as others, gives them status and legitimacy with their peers and the community that would otherwise be unattainable or at the least, very difficult to achieve.
4. IPSE programs provide Individual Student Support(s): As noted above, the amount and types of supports that students need to participate in college or university activities is dependant upon the individual student and varies from student to student. As well, individual student supports may change from “day to day, term to term, and/or year to year.” In consultation with the student, the people in the environment they wish to be involved in, family and any significant others, a plan centered on the intensity and type(s) of support is formulated and facilitated by program staff. This plan might include:
 - ? volunteers to serve a support function
 - ? Curriculum supports: text revision and modification, peer tutoring, class review and assignment completion with staff support
 - ? Personal supports: informal counseling around decision making and problem solving related to any aspect of their experiences
 - ? Job supports: coaching and connecting with co-workers who would provide natural supportsTo assist students in becoming part of the college or university experience, IPSE staff, referred to as facilitators, are available to provide support and recruit support for students. Facilitators generally have an educational background in rehabilitation or a related field, are full-time staff, and support up to 3 students, each of whom would be involved in different post-secondary classes. Facilitators are responsible for providing direct support to students in ways such as turning text into plain language or graphics, preparing notes, creating modified assignments and/or exams and any other academic modification that might be needed.
5. IPSE programs provide supports to others as well: It is imperative that program staff provide support to the instructors, non-disabled students and others involved in an IPSE student’s program of study (Weinkauf and Bowman, 1998). An orientation to IPSE practices and philosophies is provided with an emphasis on how the individual can support student participation and progress. There is also on-going support and collaboration throughout the term or year to give volunteers the opportunity to seek advice, ask questions, and engage in discussion relevant to a student’s participation. IPSE program staff believe that supporting volunteers is “fundamental to the program” and that they need to be vigilant of “supporting whoever is involved.”
6. IPSE programs encourage Self -Determination of students: “Students gain self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-management skills” (Freeze, 2000, p. 90) through IPSE. Goals associated with involvement in academic, recreation and social

experiences are directed by each student's expectations for him or herself in these areas. How one's weekly schedule might look is directed by each student's interests and desires. Students are asked to share or take responsibility in shaping their participation in college or university. Program staff offers suggestions or advice about these matters. Generally students in their first year require more support in deciding on their involvement in college or university than fourth year students.

7. IPSE programs involve Families: IPSE programs “respect and honor” the family of a student. Families are encouraged to become actively aware of a student's experiences in IPSE. They are kept informed of what is happening for their son or daughter and are asked to contribute to discussion regarding the creation of a meaningful college or university experience. Family input is also sought when necessary to ensure the individual student's experience is directed by people who have a vested interest in the final outcome.
8. IPSE programs view students as adult learners: Students are viewed “as an adult learner and treated as such.” With this comes the right to be included in the determination of what a particular experience will look like and the right to be included in whatever is available to other students. These students are learning, experiencing, and understanding the world through their participation in college or university, which is seen as preparation for adult life in their community. Participation in IPSE is thus a natural transition and pathway to the world of work and community involvement, as it is for any other student in college or university.
9. IPSE programs see Friendships as an Educational Outcome: Part of the IPSE experience is the “opportunity to meet and be with others to establish friendships and relationships.” These interpersonal opportunities are seen as a valuable outcome of their experience in college or university and “part of the bigger picture” to a student's participation. As is the case with other students, these friendships have the opportunity to continue beyond college or university.
10. IPSE is a tool for Community Education: IPSE is seen as a valuable tool in the education of others to the benefits of sharing common experiences with adults with disabilities both at school and the community at large. IPSE is an “instrument of social change that counters traditional and historical perceptions of intellectual disability” and can be a catalyst to acceptance and accommodation of people with disabilities in the community. Through involvement in IPSE, students are seen as participating in college or university for the same reasons as others.
11. IPSE programs believe that Education extends beyond the classroom: Students involved in IPSE are seen as learning from all of the experiences they participate in. A student's “education” is not limited to just classroom learning. This means that their education is facilitated through academic, recreation, and social activities. “These environments all provide a wealth of learning opportunities” (Weinkauff and Bowman, 1998).

4.4 Key Benefits to Students

Respondents believed that there were many benefits for students involved in IPSE programs. These ranged from academic and skill related attainments to personal growth and development. Some of the more salient outcomes for students included:

1. Self Esteem and Confidence: Participating in challenging and interesting experiences and being accepted by peers enhances self esteem and confidence both at school and in the community. Students now “know what they want to do and say what they want

to do” and “they achieve things their parents and others never thought possible.” They have shared experiences with others that provide connections that would otherwise not be possible.

2. Academic skills: “Reading, writing, comprehension and language skills improve” through student participation in course work and study time. The amount of improvement is individual and dependant upon the amount of work one undertakes.
3. Self-determination: Students are encouraged to participate in decisions and to choose “what they want to be involved in and how much they want to be involved.” They choose the types of supports they would like to receive, the people they want to be involved with, and the overall path they see for themselves during and after college or university. With this autonomy comes responsibility for the outcomes of the choices they make. Learning from mistakes and participating in problem solving are seen as part of the IPSE process.
4. Job skills: Students are able to develop and refine specific job skills in a chosen career path. They receive individualized support while gaining these skills and learn about “different workplace expectations than might be in a sheltered or segregated workshop.” Students are also able to make valuable connections while at university or college. These connections could be “students they come to know and who may be future employers”, instructors with connections to the workplace, or opportunities through field placements and summer jobs.
5. Social status enhancement: Attending a college or university is highly valued in our society. Participation in generic post-secondary education gives IPSE students status they would otherwise not have. There is a “reduction of social deviancy” among IPSE students and IPSE “students are often less identifiable to others as one with a developmental disability and more as a university student.”

5 Summary

“Most students with severe disabilities finish school with few dreams and career ambitions; the mechanism for transition from high school to life as an adult are restricted” (Bowman & Skinner, 1994, p. 47). Aside from the extremely limited adult basic education programs available to only a select few, adults with intellectual disabilities can only look forward to a life of segregated employment and community participation. Yet, this needn’t be the case.

Inclusive Post-secondary Education, a relatively new venture in adult education, demonstrates that graduates of special education programs can look to continue their education at college or university. Over the past 13 years, an increasing number of these programs are proving that by utilizing a set of guiding principles, a post-secondary experience can prove beneficial to not only these unique learners, but to the community at large.

For students, outcomes can include “friendship, enriching experiences, employment, ...self esteem, independence, community living skills, and the opportunity to secure employment or supported employment in the community upon graduation” (Ticoll, 1995, p. 24). For the community, IPSE offers “the best opportunity for influencing community attitudes” (Klugerman, 1989, p. 607) and “will have a positive impact in our whole community” (Williamson, 1997, p. 17).

IPSE offers an opportunity for us to re-examine not only what we believe possible for adults with intellectual disabilities in our communities, but to re-evaluate what continuing “education” means to us all. As well, it provides us the chance to

examine the roles and responsibilities we have in ensuring that there be equitable access to post-secondary education for these exceptional learners.

IPSE is a topic that needs to be brought to the forefront of adult education discussions. Existing programs have the potential to influence not just post-secondary institutions, but to also change what families of students with intellectual disabilities believe is possible after high school. It is an endeavor worth exploring, for it could change the post-secondary education landscape in the near future.

*Note: at the time of this article, IPSE programs in Canada have expanded from five to eight, in one year

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