



Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education Symposium

PANEL C SUMMARY: Equity for Disabled Students

PANELISTS

Dr. Maria Karmiris
Teacher and Lecturer

Luke Reid
Human Rights Lawyer

Ingrid Palmer
Founder, Focus on Ability, IDEAL Chief Officer at Realize Canada, Speaker, Parent

Three panelists came together to discuss the importance of understanding that inclusion extends far beyond having diverse individuals together in the same place. People from historically disadvantaged communities understand too well what it feels like to be in the room yet excluded from the conversation. Equity for disabled students begins with moving away from the mentality that disability is a problem that needs to be solved and instead embracing it as an integral element of our human relationships. Currently, the conflation of spatial inclusion with inclusion is continuing to sustain practices of exclusion wherein children with disabilities are perceived as problems. Changes are needed in inclusion policies in ways that move beyond the tiered model of inclusion that ultimately reproduces the conditions for exclusion.

Reading [Ontario's Human Rights Code \(OHRC\)](#) and adopting a [rights-based approach](#) (i.e., all humans are equal and entitled to rights without discrimination of any kind) are two tangible ways to work towards equity for disabled students. However, learning cannot happen without connection and positive relationships. To achieve this,

we need to place the views and ideas of disabled people, their communities, and their caregivers at the forefront of how we practice and develop policies. For example, schools need to reflect on whether their policies welcome students in meetings and decisions about their education. Educators need to regularly check-in with students about their sense of belonging, and develop interventions based on feedback. Staff meetings should include, on an ongoing basis, group discussions about identifying and addressing ableism (i.e., discriminatory attitudes towards people with disabilities) in schools.

High-conflict situations are complex and usually work against equity for students with disabilities. Instead of focusing on helping the student, these situations often result in power struggles and adversarial stances, where the focus becomes winning the argument and/or shifting blame to others. In these instances, it is of utmost importance to recognize biases, revisit the [Human Rights Code](#), use thoughtful communication, and engage students and their caregivers in the conversation from start to finish.

“Somehow in education, we’ve conflated spatial inclusion with inclusion. I can share the same space...and not feel included.”

- Dr. Maria Karmiris

“The discomfort of disability comes more so from people without disabilities than the person with the disability.”

- Ingrid Palmer

“I don’t think there’s enough apologies in these sorts of situations. People don’t do that early enough.”

- Luke Reid

Ingrid Palmer shared the acronym I.D.E.A.L. (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, Leading to belonging) to help remind us of the kind of environments that can better support learning for all students, particularly those with disabilities.

Students with disabilities need to be sufficiently equipped to resist low expectations and negative attitudes, and this kind of support requires thoughtfully designed resources that are accessible to all. Once a concrete foundation of inter-connectedness and sense of wellbeing is developed, it can facilitate overall success for students with disabilities, who may also find themselves at an intersection of other identities.

RESOURCE SUGGESTED BY PANELISTS

- [Project Inclusion](#) (educator modules on disability, accessibility, and inclusion)

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