

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

The Inclusive Education Policy (the Policy) was officially released in early September 2019. Our findings are from interviews taking place just prior to and following the release of the Policy and as such, reflect a very early moment in time in the life of the implementation.

It follows, then, that our discussions with key informants are situated within a range of awareness with respect to the Policy, from those who had not yet seen nor heard of it, to those deeply involved in the consultations and development process. To some informants, the Policy was understood as the Student First report and to a lesser degree, the Glaze report. The perceptions of key informants at this stage of the process of implementation reflect this varied understanding of the Policy.

As well, we engaged most deeply within one Region of the province and our findings may not reflect the diverse perspectives of system leaders, educators and professional association leaders - this will be part of our work over the next 2.5 years.

KEY FINDINGS

1. There is shared agreement across multiple institutions and roles that the Policy is important and necessary. There is a shared belief in most of the guiding principles.
2. There is a common belief that the potential of the Policy in effecting change for Nova Scotian students hinges on its implementation.
3. Many participants are seeking clearer detail to guide implementation and to establish lines of expectation and accountability.
4. Some of this specification might be provided by a more robust and clearly structured process of collaboration at all levels.
5. Most participants described the need for substantial shifts in culture and practice and for collaborative professional learning for teachers and school leaders for implementation to be successful. Using and growing more leadership capacity, including thought leadership, from within Nova Scotia resources, is seen as a key priority.

Supporting Findings

Accountability

Some participants appreciate the local flexibility that they understand to be present within the Policy. However they have concerns regarding accountability, both in terms of what they are expected to put in place and be responsible for, and in terms of ensuring impact through consistent implementation of key elements (e.g. MTSS, CRP, UDL). A few participants suggested that there needs to be an EECD lead specifically responsible for the Policy in order to bring together the multiple branches necessary – for accountability within and beyond the EECD and also to ensure coordination and infusion of Policy elements into all aspects of Education.

I think it's good that there's flexibility in the policy... every school, every region of the province is different. What works in one school may not work in the other. But this policy has to be broad enough, in concepts and ideas, so that it works in every situation...but... there will be certain accountability measures, I would suspect, that would have to work in every situation..

NOVA SCOTIA INCLUSIVE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION

October 2019 -
Update

EVALUATION ACTIVITIES

Design Team Meetings

- July 12
- July 24
- August 23
- September 20

Visits to Nova Scotia

- July 24-26
- September 30 - October 3

Data Collection

- Information-gathering discussions with 12 individuals in & outside of EECD
- Interviews with 21 key informants, including regional senior staff, school leadership and resource teachers, representatives of unions and professional associations as well as multiple post-secondary institutions that offer B.Ed. programs

REPORT PREPARED BY:

Jess Whitley
Andy Hargreaves
Stef Hartlin
Trista Hollweck
Michael Fairbrother

University of Ottawa
Faculty of Education
jwhitley@uottawa.ca
(613) 563-5800 x4963

Supporting Findings

Changes in Cultures, Beliefs, and Processes

The individuals we met with within Regions spoke mainly about the Policy in relation to student services, and in terms of changing processes surrounding providing special education services. Those closest to the classroom described the shift that needs to take place in the culture and practices of teachers. Specifically they spoke about changes in relation to the work of resource and learning centre teachers who might have to spend their time supporting teachers in classrooms rather than working primarily with individual or small groups of students and on the flip side, regular classroom teachers who currently expect students to receive regular remediation elsewhere. One teacher described shifts in understanding related to terms such as 'adaptations' and the onus on classroom teachers to decide who would qualify for these and implications for post-secondary transitions. Others spoke about the shift necessary throughout the school and the need for professional learning, including time for school staff (embedded time is recommended by a few) to come together specifically to develop a greater shared understanding of the Policy. The heavy focus on Tier 1, and on the need to acknowledge that teachers would need much more professional learning to develop their skill set, was highlighted by many participants. The perceptions of parents in understanding the broad nature of the Policy (Inclusion is for everyone, not just my child with special needs) was also noted as important to consider as part of implementation.

In order for this to be effective, it cannot sit with Student Services... And certainly the optics will be that it is still a policy that is targeting a very specific population. So there has to be collaboration at the Provincial - and there is - and at the Regional level in order for this to be truly realized... It needs to be modelled - if you're going to bring in a team to talk about the implementation of this, it shouldn't be Student Service Coordinators... This should be an agenda item on more tables now. They need an assessment coordinator, they need a programs coordinator, Equity consultant, they need a math person... They need representation from across all branches of Programs and Student Services which is huge. And also in any PD that's associated with the implementation of this...You need to be represented as a team approach. Because that's what we're promoting.

Many individuals within one Region described the planning and processes that they had already put in place with respect to MTSS, including the mapping of roles and responsibilities onto their tiered model. This mapping was noted as key to MTSS implementation by many participants. Perspectives were mixed within this region regarding the way in which the 'soft launch' of the Policy was taking place - some appreciated the time this provided to better integrate the new positions (e.g. African Nova Scotian Student Support Worker, Parent Navigator, Behavioural Support Teachers, Learning & Resource Teachers). Others expressed frustration at the release of the Policy in the absence of clear guidelines, terms of reference, or supporting documentation to provide the specificity they wanted in preparing for the full implementation in 2020.

It's partly about changing operational structures & procedures, but also around changing beliefs about how broad inclusion is and how important and meaningful it is for... it actually is for all learners... and I don't know that that's ... it's not like that's latent knowledge sitting in teachers and administrators that has just been untapped until this new policy has come around... I think there's substantial professional development that has to happen in order to give people the tools to envision and then create that in their building...

Equity

A few informants expressed concern about how the shared focus on groups specifically named in the policy (e.g. African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw students, students with special needs and those living in poverty) might serve to dilute and confuse the focus on any of the groups individually. For example, considering how to provide specific supports for those with complex disabilities, while ensuring that culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogies are deeply embedded within schools. Equity in the wording and implementation of the policy was also discussed with respect to desire to see a greater focus on increasing diversity among teachers and school-level leadership.

It talks about children seeing themselves reflected in the resources and those types of things. But it never mentioned children seeing themselves reflected in the adults in the building. The only time it mentioned African Nova Scotian or Mi'kmaw was around support staff. Nowhere around leadership or teachers. Which, to me, sends the wrong message.

Sharing Knowledge & Promoting Local Expertise

Many participants described the opportunities they currently have to collaborate with colleagues at the regional and provincial level, particularly within similar roles groupings. Some spoke of the responsiveness of consultants in their region in responding to requests for information or professional learning. Some key informants expressed a desire for more specific connections within and across regions as they move forward in implementing the Policy in order to collaborate in sharing and examining practices and discussing common challenges. Challenges in connecting and collaborating were more pronounced at classroom vs. leadership or system levels. There is a belief repeated in many different ways by those in a variety of roles that the expertise necessary to enact this Policy exists within Nova Scotia and that expertise related to the Policy should be drawn upon, showcased and leveraged rather than bring in outside experts who don't have local understandings.

Like, I wonder if certain schools will do a better job of others because it depends on... Like, I'm working, we all work in isolation. We don't get a chance to meet with other professionals. So I'm, I don't know how our school compares to the junior school or a high school in Cape Breton. You know, I'm telling you that I had to print this out {the Students First report} myself and I'm concerned that I'm here being left behind... but I also know that {Principal} will support me and if I can't get the money {to get coverage for October 25 UDL PD}, he'll probably pay this up. Because I, {they} will agree with me that it's important. I do feel supported. And I think we have a very strong team. And we have a team of veteran teachers and a strong VP - the student service file is very important to {them}. So I'm, I have no doubt that we will get at the other side of this.

Inspiration, Shared Understandings & Pressures

Many informants pointed to their engagement in activities offered by Dr. Sharroky Hollie on Culturally Responsive Pedagogies and Practices as an example of the ways in which the Policy could be rolled out. They share a belief that all staff/roles/levels of the region need to be involved in order to have shared messaging and understandings and to allow for collegial support and pressure to implement practices and processes associated with the Policy. Participants also suggested that an inspirational launch event could serve to energize school and regional staff, as well as related associations and families, around a common goal of inclusive education.

You know what they did for Dr. Hollie. And they really just took everybody and they gave us all one common message...I think, if there was any way at all to do that with this new Inclusion Policy somehow, I just feel like that would be helpful. If you could find someone or something that would really get people excited, especially about UDL. I think the Universal Design is just key. Because the focus, correct me if I'm wrong, is really Tier 1...80-90% of your students, their needs can be met by the classroom teacher, with supports, so if Tier 1 is the focus, then if we could get some really fabulous Tier 1 PD for teachers...and get them excited about it... And really, everyone got the same message, so if someone came back, and said 'well I think it was about this', then you've got like, 15 other people in the staff room to say so.

Communication & Voice

Some key informants described the role they had played in previous consultations and in the development of the Policy. Others described being left out of regular communication and consultation channels, and learning about the Policy through news releases. A need for greater involvement, partnership and collaboration between EECD and community partners (e.g. post-secondary institutions, professional associations) was expressed by some.

IMPLICATIONS

- The findings support the need for a system wide learning community that is explicitly focused on aspects of the Inclusion Policy. Such a community could meet about 4 times/year, over a ½ or whole day, as part of a learning event that involves cross-role stakeholder & multi-level facilitated discussion stimulated by local expert input. The community (40-60 participants) would be engaged in the co-construction of implementation.
- In planning for the official 2020 implementation of the Policy, it would be helpful for system and school leaders in particular to know what the specific goals are for the 1st year of implementation. So for example, in terms of curriculum materials, coaching/mentoring for Tier 1 practices and frameworks (e.g. UDL, DI, CRP), leadership guidelines and professional learning, processes for the student and teacher teams. Participants wanted to know “What will the Policy look like when it’s implemented effectively in its early stages?”.
- Findings also point to the need for a mapping of existing and upcoming roles, activities, responsibilities, teams and processes, particularly in relation to MTSS. Participants wanted to know “How do we get there and how does it fit with what we’re already doing?”.