

**Effecting Learning Engagement through Inclusive learning  
Design: An Auto Ethnographic Study**

by

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Submitted to OCAD University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Design in Inclusive Design

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, May 2016  
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## Abstract

Engagement in school and having a “quality education” is a fundamental right for children, yet this right is challenged in the public school system for those who are marginalized. Through auto-ethnography I reflected on and observed my lived experiences as a mother of grade school aged children with multiple exceptionalities. Through the lens of Inclusive Design and Inclusive Learning I examined how labels, identifications and diagnosis mean something different to our family than they do within the school context; how my unintentional advocacy supported my children’s agency; and how unpacking everyday stories, scenarios or ‘incidents’ within the learning context contributed to the self knowledge of my children’s strengths and in turn perpetuated the desire to co-design one-size-fits-one solutions for successful learning outcomes. Finally, I brought the reflections and observations to the three Inclusive Learning Dimensions to explore the depth of inclusion achieved and where the barriers remain. The suggested next step would be to further explore the development of self-knowledge and agency in a broader context and develop a framework to implement Co-design Jams or Co-design Hacks with school children to generate ideas for new ways they want to learn.

**Keywords:** Inclusive classroom, Inclusive learning, Inclusive education, Inclusive design, Education reform, Multiple exceptionalities, Asperger’s Syndrome, ADHD, Gifted, Public school, Co-design, Agency

## **Dedication**

For P.H., C.H and M.H.

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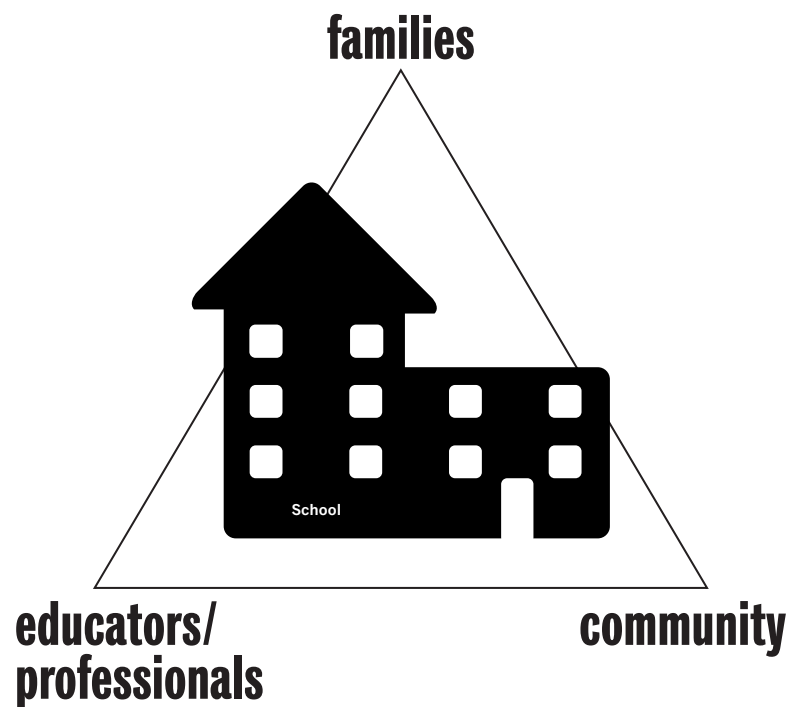
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## Introduction

“The participation of families and local communities is fundamental in assuring a quality education for all. Education is not simply a matter for professionals.”

(UNESCO, 2014, p. 81) (Figure 1)



**Figure 1: Three points of input for quality education. Conceived by author**

What constitutes a quality education? In the following Major Research Project (MRP) I will explore, through auto-ethnography, inclusion in the classroom.

Inclusion in the classroom is defined here as “where all students across a spectrum of needs successfully learn side-by-side” a model the TDSB is working toward

(District & Board, 2014; Parekh, 2013). Using the three dimensions of Inclusive

Design and Inclusive Learning (Treviranus, 2016) I will look at whether 1) recognizing diversity, 2) co-designing learning and 3) broader beneficial impact is possible at the elementary school level for children with multiple exceptionalities. The multiple exceptionalities relative to my auto ethnographic exploration include Asperger's Syndrome (now classified on the spectrum of autism — Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and gifted identification. As a parent to children with multiple exceptionalities, post secondary educator and design professional I will observe and reflect on experiences I've had in my community and with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) through a series personal blog Vignettes from *The Chicken And The Egg: Parenting children with multiple exceptionalities through reflection*, lived experiences and expert interaction. My observations and approach are grounded in Feminist standpoint theory which claims "certain socio-political positions occupied by women (and by extension other groups who lack social and economic privilege) can become sites of epistemic privilege and thus productive starting points for enquiry into questions about...those who are socially and politically marginalized". (Bowell, n.d.)



## **Context**

Much of the literature reviewed, both academic and environmental, speaks to the need for inclusion in the classroom as a human right. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) notes:

“At the core of inclusive education is the human right to education, pronounced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 which states, “Everyone has the right to education... Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”

(art.26 - Universal Declaration of Human Rights)” (2005).

UNESCO’s *Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All* views inclusion as “a dynamic approach to responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning.” In 1966, the Canadian Government formed The Commission of Emotional

and Learning Disorders in Children (CELDIC), commonly known as One Million Children. The subsequent report, The CELDIC Report recommended “that special education should function primarily in the regular classroom and not in segregated classes and schools (Nesbit & Philpott, 2008).

*Paradigm shifts in inclusive and gifted education* by Chris Smith, from the faculty of education at the University of Glasgow in Scotland noted that the reductionist model in education continues to force “schools and teachers to prioritise certain groups more than others. Such prioritisation has served to marginalize and exclude individuals with particular gifts and/or talents.” (Smith, 2005) which supports the findings that “twice-exceptional students are apt to be misunderstood, resulting in students who remain under-identified and, consequently, under-served” (Assouline, Foley Nicpon, Colangelo, & O’Brien, 2008). In my experience congregated classrooms do not solve the marginalization issue; I have seen my children experience marginalization even within congregated special education learning environments.

But if students identified with special education needs are simply moved over into the ‘regular’ stream with existing special education practices “they seem almost certain to lead to difficulties. Indeed they are likely to lead to yet new forms of segregation, albeit within the mainstream settings.” (Ainscow, 1997). As previously noted, I’ve observed this within congregated special education classrooms funded to

support one identified need (the gifted program, for example), this is a classroom of learners with a spectrum of individual strengths and needs. Qualitative research conducted through Wilfrid Laurier University's faculty of education surveyed twice-exceptional learners for their perspectives learning experiences. Negative elementary school experiences included: harsh interaction with teachers and placement in self-contained special education settings. Positive intervening factors included identification of talent and abilities in outside-of-school experiences, parental support, personal qualities and strengths,...self advocacy. (Willard-Holt, Weber, Morrison, & Horgan, 2013).

Also important in the discussion of inclusion is how explicitly biased the education grading system is toward neurological differences: children's success in school is measured one against the other based on a constructed average. I know families who choose to not show their children a report card with the hope that they focus on the process of learning and not the end result. I myself have consoled teary-eyed children when they received a B when they thought they deserved an A on a project, the process of their learning long forgotten. Perhaps we are evolving to be more "neurodiverse" humans, as Steve Silberman suggests in his book *Neuro Tribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*. Neurological differences are simply a "variation" and "autism, dyslexia and ADHD are not errors of nature or products of the toxic modern world but the result of natural variations in the human genome" and we will need to "reexamine our education system and initiate a deep

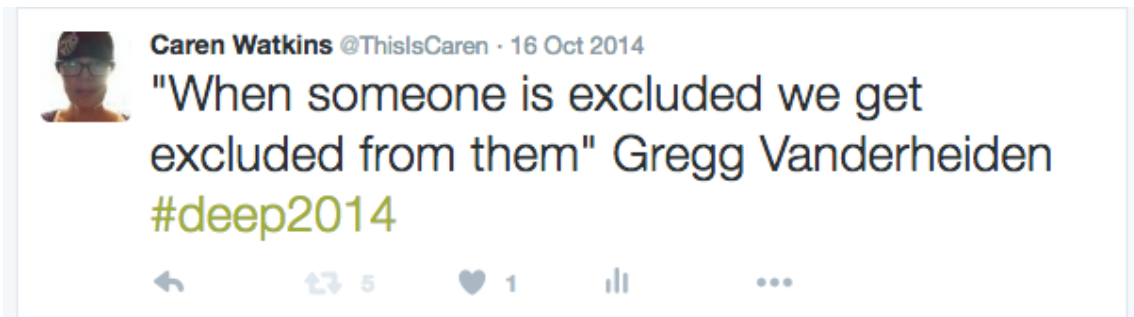
cultural change that recognizes and celebrates a wider range of forms of human intelligence.” (Silberman, 2016)

Temple Grandin continues to be a model of the importance of neurodiversity. Dr. Grandin “thinks in pictures” which is not typical of the “humanist ability to survey, organize, and master space...but rather a figure of disability” (Wolfe, 2008). Dr. Grandin has said that “I would be denied the ability to think by scientists who maintain that language is essential for thinking.” (Wolfe, 2008)



**Figure 2: Tweet and photo of Dr. Temple Grandin’s talk at MIT**

Without the acceptance of different ways of processing information within one classroom we are depriving the experience from both perspectives. Quoting Gregg Vanderheiden at the 2014 DEEP Conference in Toronto, Canada: "When someone is excluded we get excluded from them."



**Figure 3: Tweet from DEEP CONFERENCE 2014 in Toronto, Canada**

What becomes evident is, Yes, we should have inclusive education, but, No, we can't use existing systemic process and approaches. By using the Inclusive Design principle of co-design, diversity and broader impact we can effect sustainable change with a bottom up approach.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with Treviranus, Director, Inclusive Design Research Centre and Instructor, Master of Design program in Inclusive Design.

## Path to auto-ethnography and the design challenge

I began exploring the challenges we as a family were facing; I visualized our place and interaction within the community through a mind map (figure 2) and found that the most severe pain points were connected to school. This led me to reflect on many of the pain points from the perspective of my children, my partner and myself.

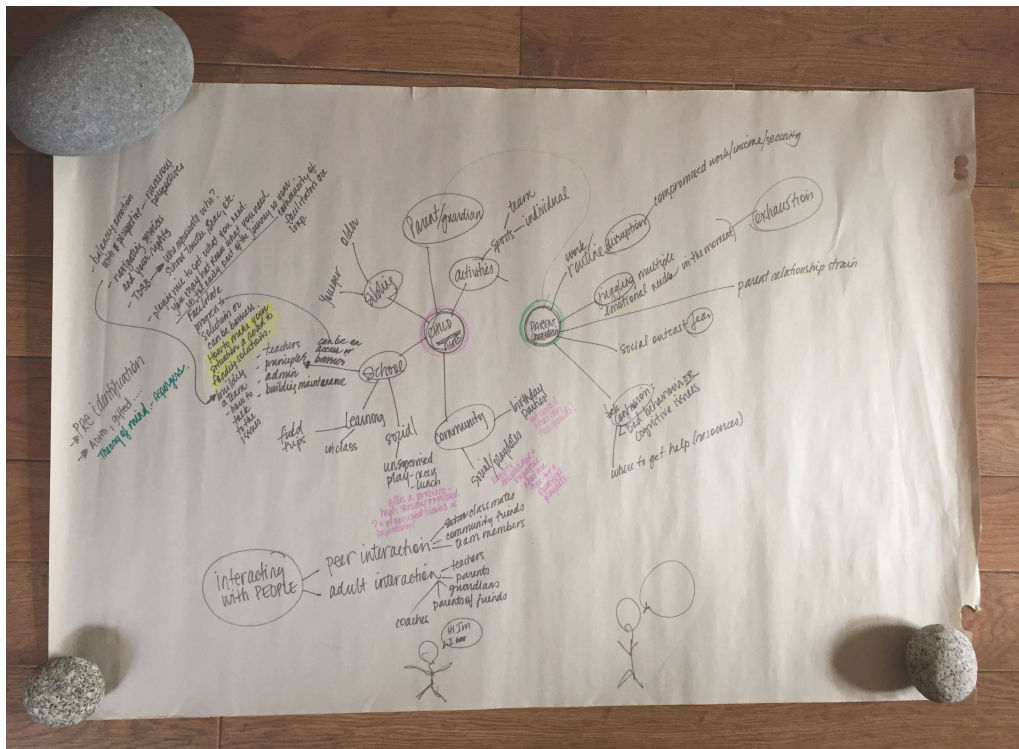


Figure 4: Mind map of multiple pain points. Spring 2015, by the author

When I became a mother I knew once my children entered the public school stream it would be the beginning of their autonomy. External influences would contribute to their development; there would be deeper questioning, playground disagreements, swear words and, of course, feedback on learning progress. The swear words didn't come until grade two but teachers were already pointing out that classroom expectations in kindergarten were not being met — letter forms were not up to standards and sitting on the carpet listening was consistently a challenge. It was kindergarten, early days in their school journey, so how bad could it be? They were five.

Every child is a complex collection of unique abilities and when faced with a learning environment built around a set of constructed norms that inform curriculum and teaching methods most children will face a barrier in reaching their potential. My children's unique set of abilities has created severe mismatches in the classroom. They have been challenged with meeting output requirements, such as scribing book reports or writing out math equations that have lead me to the following design challenge question: *What tools can support a child with multiple exceptionalities to consistently engage with school and produce output within the defined pedagogy?*

As we moved through kindergarten to grade four I continued to try and answer this design challenge question. I thought I could, and should, find ways that my children

could seamlessly slide into the system without drawing attention to special needs. However, it became clear that this was not possible because the system does not consider each child as a spectrum of unique strengths, but rather prescribed groupings that they must fit into. But something had to be disrupted and I was determined that it was not going to be my children.

My initial design challenge question hung on existing pedagogy, which was forcing retrofit solutions. I stepped back and rephrased the design challenge question to be: *How can each child successfully engage with learning?*

### **Lived experience and Feminist standpoint theory**

My standpoint cannot exist without my lived experience. By way of auto ethnography I am developing new perspectives through reflection of lived experiences. My lived experiences feed my standpoint; I cannot have one without the other. The very process of “achieving a standpoint offers critical insights that give rise to a new perspective on reality” (Bowell, n.d.) and by virtue of being a female doesn’t simply grant a feminist standpoint. “A standpoint is earned through a collective struggle” (Bowell, n.d.) and while the dominated and dominant both have perspectives on an issue, it is the “dominated who are much more successfully placed to achieve a standpoint” (Bowell, n.d.). While this is an auto ethnographic approach to research it is not a solitary lived experience that has brought me to this point. There has been ‘collective struggle’ within my standpoint. I have intersected



the paths of many people. My children and partner are, of course, the constants that ground my standpoint. But there are also numerous experts I have connected with such as educators, social workers, physicians and occupational therapists, and then there are friends and other parents who have also, perhaps unknowingly, contributed to my standpoint. They have all become part of the 'collective' of my 'struggle', which has brought me to this point in time, this standpoint, for which I am grateful.

### **The value of context and emotion in inclusive research methods**

Parenting children identified as exceptional or disabled can be overwhelming and highly emotional. Taking a stand counter to a community or the systemic approach of a large organization such as the TDSB can layer time and stress on to a family.

A counter narrative in these contexts driven by emotion can perpetuate exclusion and isolation within community and will likely not address the design challenge question with sustainable and broader impact solutions. The emotional impact and texture of lived experience is valuable to the learning that can impact positive reform. By editing out emotion would be intellectually dishonest. On the other hand academic research that is grounded in data driven 'factual' results tends toward groupings and generalizations, void of emotion and individuality. That is not to say data is not valuable. But rather 'thick data', the qualitative and emotional data, the contextualized data, that is counter to 'big data', is more conducive to developing

sustainable solutions; solutions that create virtuous cycles to support inclusive learning. Context is imperative in learning about my children and them learning about themselves. Traditional research isolates conditions, which eliminates context. Further, traditional research requires simplification and reduction with the intention of uncovering a factor that cause a behaviour from which the solution is transferred to others<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Jutta Treviranus on May, 6, 2016.

## **Inclusive Design and Inclusive Learning**

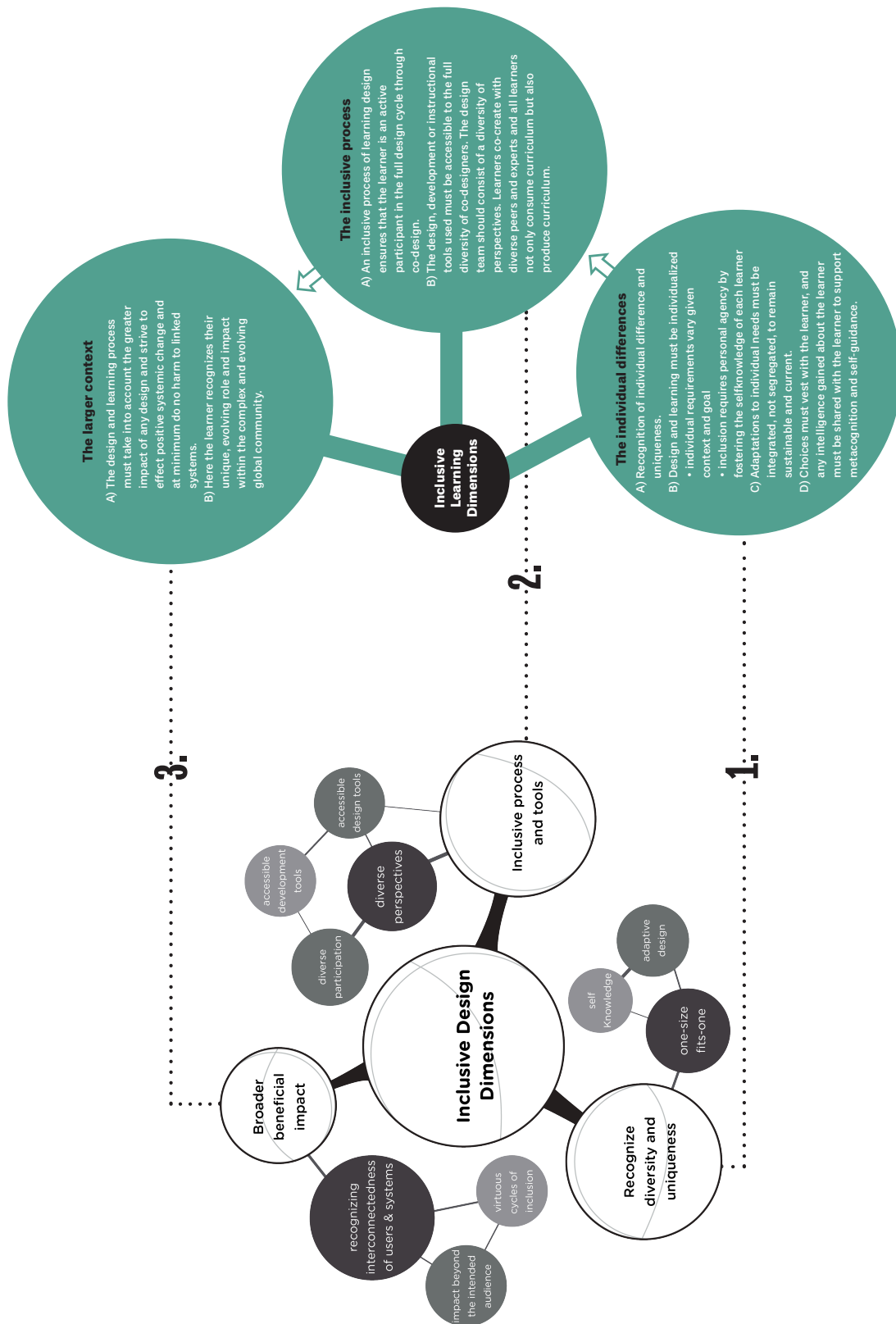
The dimensions of Inclusive Learning and Inclusive Design (figure 3) is founded and supported through the IDRC (Inclusive Design Research Center).

The three dimensions of inclusive design define an inclusive education framework (Treviranus, 2016), most importantly; 1) the philosophy that one-size-fits-one through adaptive designs and agency; 2) the processes of developing inclusive tools are inclusive themselves; and 3) inclusive design has broader impact that supports “healthier, wealthier and wiser societies” which leads to more equal communities (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011). In other words students are recognized for their unique learning abilities, they themselves should be involved in the creation and/or adaptation of inclusion tools and processes and all students and families have access to inclusion tools and processes.

Inclusive design has “flexibility and adaptation at it’s core” and “any criteria, principles or guidelines cannot be *absolute* but need to be *relative* to the user, the context, and the goal.” (“Inclusive design research centre,” n.d.). Inclusive design is grounded in the theory that one size fits one; therefore, agile, adaptable and customizable tools and processes would be the guiding principles of the inclusive classroom and it’s support tools and processes.

In the TDSB report, “A Case for Inclusive Education”, a list of values for an inclusive classroom includes “noncategorical lexicon (i.e., special education labels are not used in school discourse)” (2013, p5). In this context, students are supported by their individual strengths and needs and not by identifications.

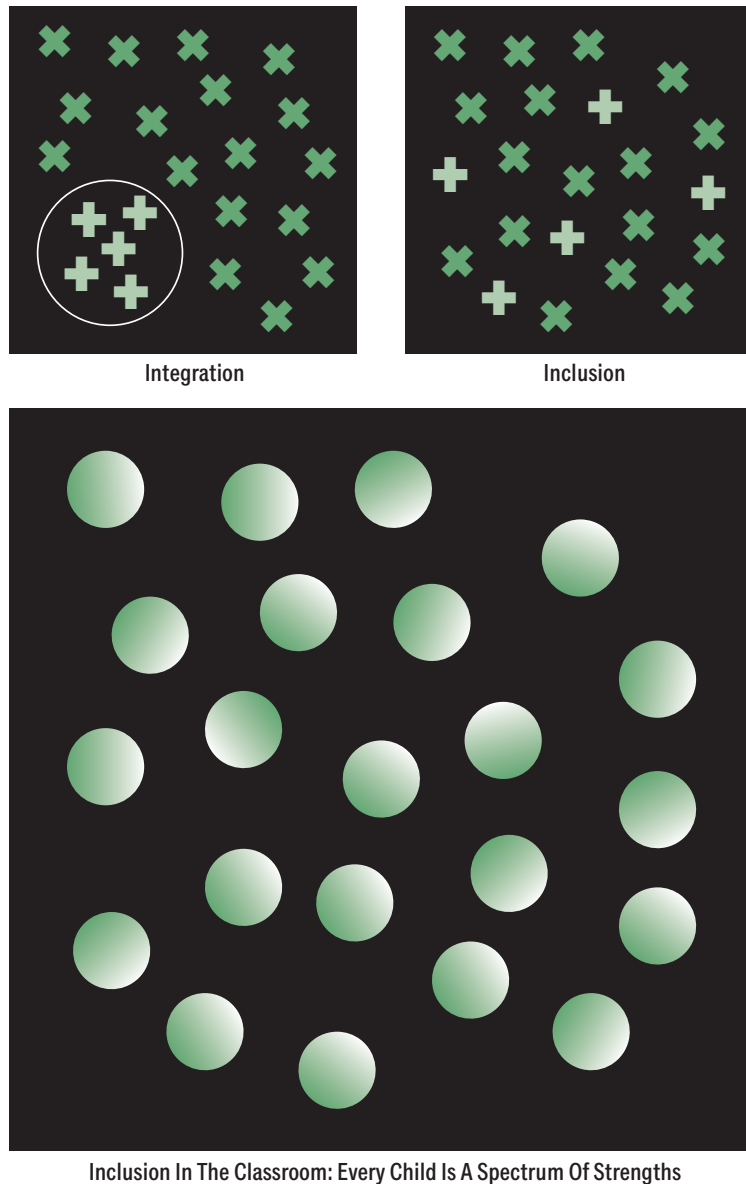
By removing identifiers within the discourse, theoretical frameworks change from imposed categorization and segregated learning (absolute) to individualized learning profiles within cohorts of diverse learners (relative) — aligned with Inclusive Design principles.



**Figure 5: Inclusive design and learning dimensions**

## **Inclusion in the classroom**

Consider inclusion in the classroom from the perspective of the child, because every child is a spectrum of strengths. What is the difference between integration and inclusion? Inclusion includes everyone's needs, while integration focuses simply on the individual(s) with special needs. An adaptation made for one student should potentially benefit and be available to all learners or participants ("Inclusive design research centre," n.d.) thus resulting in an environment focused on a spectrum of strengths.



**Figure 6: Every Child is a Spectrum of Strengths**

Figure 6 illustrates a graphic representation of the difference between the concept of integration and inclusion with further clarification of what inclusion in the classroom looks like.

## **A reluctance to label**

As my children entered the school system I started experiencing the informal grouping of learners within the classroom — it isn't clear to me what the purpose was other than a protocol embeded in legacy (I remember being grouped the same way some 30-40 years ago). Sometimes groupings were by gender (in lineups as boy and girl) or by who had finished an exercise and who had not (accomplished a task and those who had not), for example. By grouping my children under these labels, they started to identify themselves by a place in a social construct (gender) and by personal failures and accomplishments.

Later formal identifications and diagnoses at the board and physician level were used in context of my children and their unique personalities. By agreeing to formalize identifications I was making decisions for my children that would follow them for the rest of their learning. Having labels seemed to, by default, identify my children as 'different' in an environment that rewards similarity. Yet, in order for my children and me to understand how they are 'different' the 'labels' seemed necessary.

Labels for us act as a functional need. Labels are reductionists with provisos to not be constraining but rather to be a functional component toward one-size-fits-one solutions. (Treviranus, 2016)



By understanding the 'science' behind a label my family learned how both the outside world (community, school) was navigating our "disability" and how the inside world (family, guardians and self) chooses to project our 'abilities'. This understanding helped the navigation through the friction between our 'inside world' and the 'outside world'.

### **Labels, Identifications and Diagnoses defined**

The term 'Identification' is often used in the school system, for example 'identified gifted'. The definition of the word 'Identification' from the Merriam Webster dictionary is "the act of finding out who someone is or what something is: the act of identifying someone or something". (Merriam-Webster, 2015)

The term 'diagnosis' is "a concise technical description of the cause, nature, or manifestations of a condition, situation, or problem." More specifically a medical diagnosis is a diagnosis "based on information from sources such as findings from a physical examination, interview with the patient or family or both, medical history of the patient and family, and clinical findings as reported by laboratory tests and radiologic studies (Farlex, 2003). For example a medical practitioner may diagnose a child as ASD.

The term "label" can be pejorative and used disparagingly and in a derogatory manner when describing both an 'identification' and a 'diagnosis', with no positive intentions. For example, a child who engages in stimming (a repetitive motion or

rocking that children engage in for sensory control, for example children with ASD may engage in stimming) may be singled out and labeled autistic by peers, which in turn could lead to further marginalization within their community.

All of these definitions in context of learning differences suggest a grouping of “traits” that can be categorized in an attempt to find solutions — predetermined, prescriptive and formulaic. What is missing from these definitions is the voice of the person being ‘labeled’, ‘diagnosed’ or ‘identified’.

The TDSB is committed to eliminating identifiers within school discourse and instead using the terms and categories ‘strengths’ and ‘needs’ for each child (Parekh, 2013). I see the value on one hand, for example the identification ‘exceptional’ is to identify someone as different. As a society focused on an end result, whether it is a math test or an art project, measuring against each other (grading), the term exceptional in this context, means someone’s process and end result is different relative to someone else.

The problem may be that for children with multiple exceptionalities (neurodiversities, invisible disabilities) who have behaviours that are often misunderstood (Assouline, Foley Nicpon, Colangelo, & O’Brien, 2008), educators, family members and community members may not interpret behaviour as a neurological difference that requires different approaches to navigate.

For my family and me it was important to learn the biology, neuroscience and social science behind some of the medical diagnoses and identifications. By doing this, I embraced 'labels' in an effort to know more about behavior, sequencing of behavior and socially constructs as part of the path to supporting my children as they met friction within their community and classroom.

## **The advocate I didn't want to be**

As my children moved out of the younger years of kindergarten and grades one and two I resisted 'identifications' for fear of confirming that my child was dis'abled' in a world that enables disability. When my children were little they were given social affordances for interruptions and meltdowns but this was slowly dwindled, as they grew older. I was starting to experience the divide widen between 'able' and 'disable' the further they got from the cute kids in grade one or two.

Over the past several years I have been advocating in the classroom and at the school board for recognition of neurodiversity in the classroom. Becoming an advocate isn't something I planned to do, was prepared to do, or even wanted to do, it just happened. I became an advocate for inclusive design of learning because I was witnessing one of my children being consistently unsuccessful at school. Our child's behavior was not compliant with expectation. 'Behaviours' my child believed should not get them 'into trouble'.

My child was consistently explaining why they behaved the way they did, often weeping because they felt their classroom or school 'community' did not understand them, their way of being — in short they felt their community did not respect who they were.

By consistently presenting as a ‘contrast’ in the prescriptive education system and not fitting into a system that function around constructed measures of success, “formula over play, sequential competencies over discovery or unbounded creativity” (Treviranus, 2016) is how I became an advocate for my child’s — my children’s — voice and agency.

Most importantly through advocating for and with my children I learn how my children learn. I’ve been discovering what unique ever-changing one-size-fits-one solutions support their ability to learn and feel successful. And this is the information that they must know and carry with them in order to have agency over their learning as they become young adults, toward independence and further away from my support and guidance.

Unintentionally, advocacy became their empowerment. With open conversations my children are learning about themselves and not focusing on the stereotypes often associated with labels. They are understanding what can help facilitate their learning, what tools, processes even what times of the day they best engage in certain types of learning. It is knowledge, their knowledge, about who they are and how they can best learn. My advocacy is contributing to their agency.

## **VIGNETTES**

### **Vignette 1: The Chicken and the Egg Blog**

#### **Lessons in hockey lessons**

Posted on February 22, 2016

Skating lessons started in parent and tot classes when our children were three. As the little ones on the ice gained balance mini drills were introduced, for example skating from one side of the boards to the other. We started to see frustration in one of our little ones when they were not first in the group to reach the boards, often resulting in a full meltdown. We persisted with lessons and eventually placed the children into hockey lessons — but drills were a large part of these lessons. Our child consistently had concerns with fairness; they felt they would perform drills as instructed, but that others would ‘cheat the rules’ to be first; they felt that if they passed the puck to a teammate then the teammate should pass it back to them. When the puck wasn’t passed back there would be a meltdown

Over the course of three years my partner relentlessly brought our child to hockey classes, I would cringe and just hope the meltdown was not too bad this time around. I stopped going to the rink, I couldn’t stomach seeing my child so deeply upset. I wanted to pull them out of skating. I also had a hard time with the idea of how our child was being perceived by other families.

But my partner persisted. Persisted through coaches who said our child shouldn't be playing hockey to coaches who were indifferent, and at times chose not to interact with our child on the ice because of the difference in need. Eventually a coaching team was found that seemed to be a comfortable fit. My partner spoke with them openly. "I wanted the coaches to know that my child saw things differently and that their emotions are a coping mechanisms that we are all learning to manage — including our child. Also, our child is bright and articulate and they shouldn't be surprised when critiques of what is being said or done is offered up without them asking."

Eventually our child became the regular goalie for the team. And this was an exemplary discovery. The ability to keep laser focus on the puck, be prepared when a shot was taken on their net and to have solitude and individuality while still being part of a team proved to be the sweet spot for our child on the ice. Managing emotions came to them much easier now that they were in a space that suited their abilities.

#### REFLECTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS:

1) Learning about my child through other eyes. I began to understand there are times when I need to step back and let my partner take the lead. My partner is fierce and protective in a different way than I am. When I thought I needed my partner to understand how our child fit in the community I realized that they embraced our

child for who they are and not how the constructs in the community 'dis' ables them. I saw how my partner was going to help our child find paths that were accepting and kind and if the paths were not they'd push back until it wasn't worth it and move on.

2) Being persistent needs support. Whether on an ice rink or in the classroom, one person alone cannot change norms or processes that are systemic. Together my partner and the coaches supported each other in the process they forged to include a team mates needs while maintaining the broader benefit of the whole team. (The team made is to the finals, loosing 1-0)



## **Vignette 2: The Chicken and the Egg Blog**

### **Non-prescriptive learning and pumpkin carving**

Posted on November 9, 2015

Before Halloween I volunteered as a parent facilitator for a pumpkin carving activity in my child's grade one classroom. The experience was wonderful and curious at the same time. The curious point for me was when the classroom teacher noted with much surprise how engaged our group was; our group didn't want to stop the exercise. This caused me to reflect on why our group was so engaged. Why were they enjoying the exercise?

I was assigned a group of about 4 children, given a pumpkin, a variety of carving tools (including a little saw from the dollar store) and a few photocopied papers with curriculum based exercises such as counting with seeds and guessing if the pumpkin weighs more than you. We introduced ourselves and used playful names, like Dude, Princess, and so on. I was Mama—we all chose our persona in the spirit of Halloween. After I cut the top off the pumpkin and the children dug out the guts, they started in on the “face” they were going to carve. I encouraged the group to come up with a design for the pumpkin carving, something that they could all agree on. What became clear to the team was that one design could be agreed upon if each person contributed a “section” or “piece” to the design. A wonderful, original and unconventional design was born from the process — black marker lines,

mismatched eyes and lots of carving marks represented the fun and individual expression of each team member.

Everyone had a stake in the result; even though it was a group project they each had agency. The process kept them engaged and enthusiastic and ultimately proud of their project. The end result was about learning to work as a team through two exercises: 1) a community based exercise (pumpkin carving) and 2) conventional school based exercises (curriculum numeracy questions on paper).

#### REFLECTION AND OBSERVATION:

- 1) Processes anchored by an end result expectation, whether explicit or implicit results in sameness and convention. The exercise was intended to support curriculum requirements, like hiding spinach in meatballs. Through experience you can chop the spinach so it is still visible, with risk of being rejected by young palettes or you can completely liquefy it and virtually eliminate the risk of a turned up nose. I wonder if we had a successful module of learning because at the beginning of the exercise I, as facilitator, didn't mark the end with a success criteria or expectation (verbally or mentally).

### **Vignette 3: The Chicken and the Egg Blog**

#### **A Valentine for everyone?**

Posted on February 16, 2015

Just before Valentine's Day I checked with my children about creating cards for their class, a tradition the younger grades take part in. In the past they either made cards or we printed something from the Internet and they signed them. This year my oldest had a note sent home that included the usual list of classmate names and a reminder that if you bring cards to class everyone must be included. My child had decided they weren't going to hand out cards because they didn't "like" everyone in their class. They focused on peers they felt had mistreated them or another classmate. I listened. I asked them to consider how they might feel if someone gives them a Valentine and they don't have one to give back. Off they went to think this through. My impulse had been for them to just be like the other kids and have cards to hand out.

They returned about thirty minutes later with a plan for their in-class Valentines exchange and asked if I would print out one-sided Valentine cards for them. With blank cards in hand they set off for the dining table to sign them. Later that evening they took me through each of the more than twenty cards: This one has a drawing of a book and says 'Happy Valentine's day, enjoy a book' because she really likes to read, actually she always has a book in her hands; And this one has a soccer ball on

it because they loooove soccer; on this one I drew #1 because they believe they are the best at many things; and so on.

They had created a Valentine message customized to each child's interest. Instead of following the standard ritual of a Valentine card exchange, they embraced what it meant to them. In class the next day they handed out each card and explained the drawing to each classmate, feeling comfortable engaging in a group tradition.

#### REFLECTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS:

1) Generalizing is not something my child does easily. And grouping things or people is also not something they're comfortable with. This creates a mismatch with an environment of data driven solutions, of generalizations intended to create efficient solutions for large groups of things or people. Through my child's eyes everything and everyone is different. They see and sense the difference with heightened observation skills. I often find a disconnect in how I 'expect' a child to process and output information and what my child is in fact comfortable with.

2) My first impulse wanted my child to 'fit in'. I was not considering their unique perspective but rather I did not want them to stand out, to be different within their classroom community. I was guiding them in a direction they were not comfortable with, but with open conversation, they took agency and found a solution that was their own.

## **Vignette 4: The Chicken and the Egg Blog**

### **The basketball goalie**

Posted on March 23, 2016

It was the dreaded call from the Principle of the school: Please call me back. Your child is ok but we need to talk about an 'incident' that happened today. This isn't the first call or the second call I've had from the school. In fact over the last few years I've lost count of the number of calls. I go through a day expecting either a call or a note sent home, always at the ready to tackle yet another 'incident' where my child didn't conform to the rules.

I call, the principle is not available. I wait for what seems like hours but it's more like twenty minutes.

We finally connect and I'm told what is known about the incident: They were playing basketball and our child climbed the pole up to the basketball net. They sat on the basket and wouldn't come down. Other kids came along and pulled his leg and told him to get down. He gave them the finger. They used the F word. My child said the F word back. The bell rang and the principle and gym teacher finally convinced them to come down. They went to the gym teacher's class instead of their regular class to help out with a younger grade level.

My child came home sat down and told me what happened from his perspective.

“I was playing basketball with these three friends and two of them are much bigger than me and the game was 100 to nothing and I thought How am I going to score or not let them score any more? So I climbed the pole and became a basketball goalie, deflecting the balls as they came to the net. Then older kids came and started yelling at me to get down. I said no, they could go play on the other two nets. They pulled my leg and I got angry. I gave them the finger and then they swore and I swore back. I got down and went in the gym to help the gym teacher with a younger class. It was great.”

#### REFLECTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS:

1) My children own their experiences. They have the right to explain the nuances of actions, reactions and sequences of events, from their perspective.

2) Who owns the story? Is it the school because it happened on school grounds and the leads of the school are the adults? When something happens at school how is it recounted to all stakeholders? What is a safe environment for a child to honestly recount and discuss ‘choices’ that they made?

## **Vignette 5: The Chicken and the Egg Blog**

### **The midnight co-design**

Posted February 22, 2016

I heard little footsteps come down the stairs at 11pm last night. Moments later a little face peeks into my office: Mommy, I can't sleep.

Not an unusual scenario for parents. Nevertheless, what I have come to learn from the many late night chats with my child when he can't sleep, is what his worries and wishes are.

This particular night we chatted about expectations at school and how learning and content was disseminated. These are big pain points for them. In their gifted classroom, children are given modules to work on over a number of weeks, sometimes up to six weeks long. The new module topic had to be about Canadian heritage and the students were to build their presentation from topic selection to presentation. The stakes were high for my child because the result was to be displayed in the gym amongst many other student work—and there would be judging. Judging to determine who would move on to the next level, and compete at a community level.

What a great project to have kids involved in...and all kids were involved in this project, not just the gifted stream.

However, my child became overwhelmed with prescribed steps to achieve the result. They focused on being the 'winner', yet to produce the project there seemed to be tangled weeds of instruction that disabled my child's ability to move forward; to engage in the process, to learn. I asked them to think about what might help them through all the steps. And an impromptu co-design process began.

"Are you getting too much or not enough direction? No it's just that there isn't step by step stuff so it would be easier if I was given a step and then some time, then once I'm done that I wait until the time is done and then I'm given another step and some time. Actually it's step, description on how to do it, and then some time. If you're supposed to do a full and proper bibliography then it would be: a step, advise on how to get the full and proper whatever it is and some time. And put it all together. And once you're done that you put it all together and ya, you memorize it and you present. And time to spend on one step. How to get higher grades. Marks are important because I really want to get my first A+. In school, I would like longer periods to continue working on projects. When I put my mind to it I can do it like that (snaps fingers) but since I'm bombarded by other stuff.... So it's like this: here's your project, now do math. Here's your project you get two periods now do math. You should be given the whole day not including French and gym since they are out of the class anything out of the class like recess will be done but the rest should be 2



or 4 periods...so you can do it quicker. No one gets that time with the teacher. You get a tiny bit of time to say you're done. Assistant teacher tries to help. They're not really there much anymore, they're usually sick. Assistants usually are too late and I don't need help anymore."

So the next day we set up a document with each step on each page to help them visualize their processes, we called it Project Management Zone (figure 5).

The next item we designed was an outline (wireframe) of the display board for the final project (figure 6). Having a visual reference that they could rough in where content was going, (especially helpful because it was a group project and each of the three students had to contribute content to the project. The thought was they could map out sequence and estimate space on the wireframe printout).

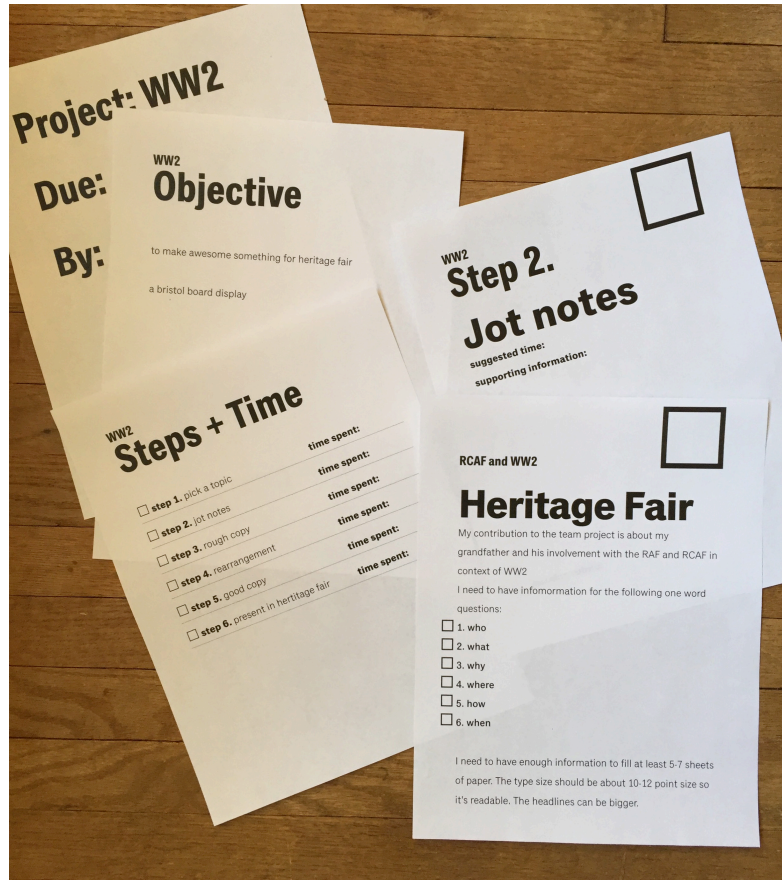
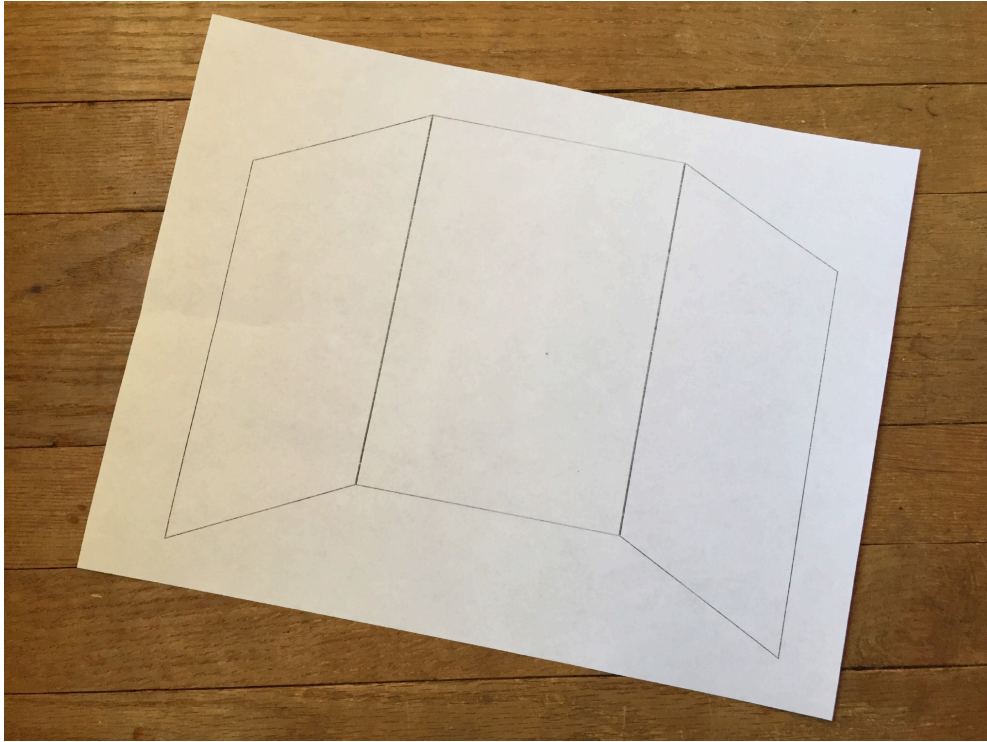


Figure 7: Printout page samples of the project management tool co-design



**Figure 8: Printout of the wireframe for a display project**

**REFLECTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS:**

1) A virtuous cycle can happen when one-size-fits-one ideas, solutions and tools get shared. We printed out a bunch of the wireframes and passed them along to the teacher for others to use if they wished. The day I volunteered in class I saw a few other students using the wireframe to map out their content and visualize how their project would look — they were in effect, prototyping their project. The classroom teacher now has the file to print out for future projects and classes to use. My child's need (and strength in communicating what they needed to help them be successful) created a solution with broader beneficial impact.

2) One person's perception of time is different from another person's perception of time. While the measure of time is absolute and the measure of time is the same for all who reference it for measuring purposes, "perception of time is something different from events, we do not perceive time as such, but changes or events in time." [cite Stanford Plato site—retrieved May 6, 2016]. For my child changing events, or in the lingo I often hear at school, 'transitioning' is not something they are comfortable doing. My child is strong in becoming deeply involved in an activity, a point of complete satisfaction where nothing else matters and they implicitly tune out the world around them.

3) One person's logic can be another person's confusion. Even though there was a typed document of 12-point type, black on white letter sized paper noting all the requirements, including the linear steps and the marking rubric it meant very little to my child. By arranging, the information in a different manner and creating contrast of size, white space (a relaxing effect that my child seemed to appreciate) my child was better able to understand the sequencing. By including estimated time, a check box and the marking rubric on each of the pages of the project management sheets focused on the areas my child needed the most support. The project management pages and their content can be adjusted to be relative to an individual and their context rather than the solution being absolute without flexibility for a child to customize.

## Results

After reflecting on lived experience and participating in finding ways to assure “a quality education” for my children within the existing public school system, I cross-referenced my observations against the three dimensions of Inclusive Learning to study how they reflected or contrasted them. Most of my resulting observations support the values of the Inclusive Learning dimensions; co-design leads to agency, recognizing individual differences eliminates the need to “fit in” and virtuous cycles naturally happen when co-design process and solutions are shared, amongst others. What was not a check mark in my cross-reference was in the third dimension: The Larger Context. This is where I asked the question: How did the process and learning have broader benefit? Yes, there were virtuous cycles within the classroom that began through shared co-designed resources and there were conversations with experts such as teachers, social workers and principles where ideas were shared. But where the gap is deep is, not surprisingly, systemic. I continue to know my children for the wonderful individuals they are while the education system continues to categorize them in deeply entrenched groupings — perpetuating a dichotomy of family (inside world) and community and school (outside world).

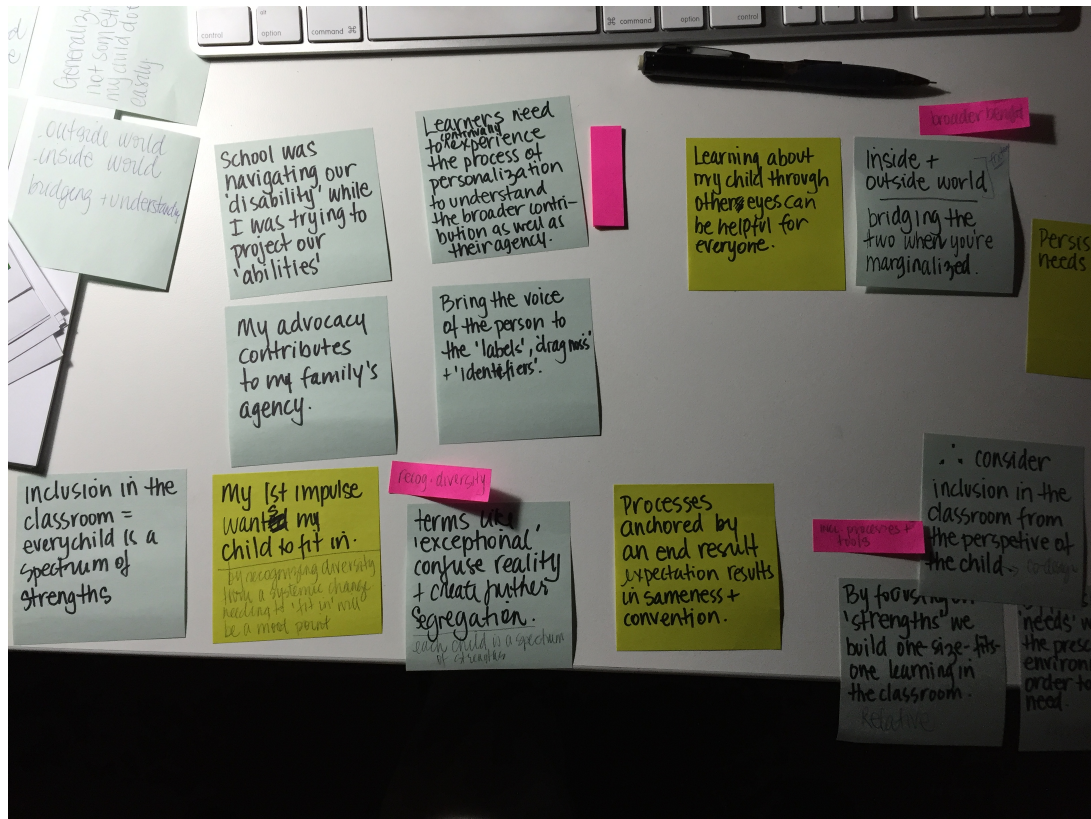


Figure 9: Disseminating reflections and observations

## Cross-referencing auto-ethnographic experiences with Inclusive Learning Dimensions

### 1. What happens when we recognized a child (and the child recognized themselves) as an individual with a spectrum of strengths?

- ✓ Eliminated the impulse for a child to 'fit in'.
- ✓ Eliminated the need for terms such as 'exceptional' (which confuses reality and creates further segregation).

- ✓ Innately moved to one-size-fits-one solutions.

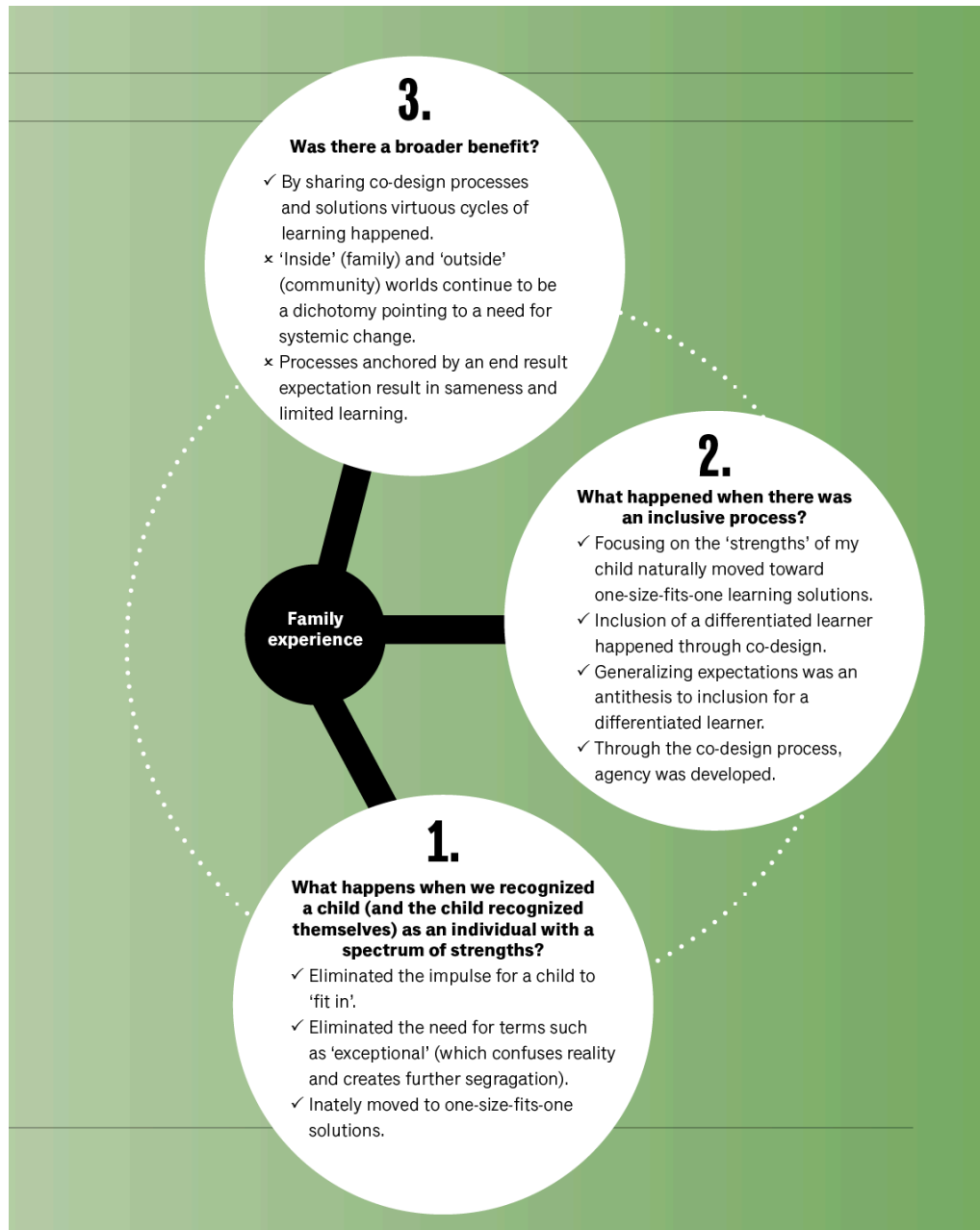
## **2. What happened when there was an inclusive process?**

- ✓ Focusing on the 'strengths' of my child naturally moved toward one-size-fits-one learning solutions.
- ✓ Inclusion of a differentiated learner happened through co-design.
- ✓ Generalizing expectations is an antithesis to inclusion for a differentiated learner.
- ✓ Through the co-design process, agency was developed.

## **3. How did the process and learning have broader benefit?**

- ✓ By sharing co-design processes and solutions virtuous cycles of learning happened.
- × If the 'inside' world and 'outside' world of my family are a dichotomy there needs to be systemic change.
- × Processes anchored by an end result expectation resulted in sameness and the exclusion of those who mismatched the expectation.





**Figure 10: Auto-ethnographic experiences cross-referenced with Inclusive Learning Dimensions**



## **Next steps**

Build agency, help self-identify strengths and learn about differences amongst cohorts in elementary level children in congregated gifted programs, through co-design exercises directly related to curriculum requirements. Co-design Jams or Hacks of new ways to learn, if you will. Teachers, assistants and parents and guardians can be facilitators. Followed by presentations to the class, the school, even the community to share processes and ideas. This model could be iterated at all levels and in any classroom mix.

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