Ontario College of Teachers

Ordre des enseignantes et des enseignants de l'Ontario

Exploring Accessibility, Inclusion and Belonging

Overview

This resource gathers vignettes based on the lived experiences of an Ontario Certified Teacher (OCT) with a profound sensorineural hearing loss. Each vignette is followed by critical reflections intended to encourage dialogue about accessibility, inclusion and belonging. These unique experiences challenge OCTs to reflect on how we can adopt an inclusive anti-oppressive stance in our professional practices and pedagogies.

The reflective inquiry framework below (Figure 1) is inspired by the work of Dr. Kevin Kumashiro (2000), former Dean of the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. It provides a critical lens to examine professional practice, as well as opportunities to explore concepts in the following areas:

- Fostering Spaces of Inclusion and Belonging
- Challenging Attitudes and Beliefs
- Advancing Pedagogical and Systemic Change
- Cultivating Critical Consciousness

Anti-Oppressive Stance

- Fostering Spaces Of Inclusion and Belonging
- Challenging Attitudes and Beliefs
- REFLECTING ON LIVED EXPERIENCE
- Advancing Pedagogical and Systemic Change
- Cultivating Critical Consciousness

Fostering spaces of inclusion and belonging

- What do my professional practices reveal about my attitude towards accessibility and inclusion?
- How do I create learning spaces that are supportive and empowering for all learners?
- What might engaging with the margins of my classroom and school community reveal about anti-oppression and inclusion?
- How can I identify voices and perspectives that are excluded in my school community?
- What do I understand about incorporating culturally responsive practices and their role in encouraging inclusion?
- What are the possibilities for advancing change by challenging existing practices and policies?

Challenging attitiudes and beliefs

- To what extent do I understand the presence of conscious and unconscious bias, misconceptions, and stereotypes in my professional practice?
- How does bias impact daily interactions and decision making with students and colleagues?
- What assumptions and biases might my positionality be bringing to my professional relationships and practices?
- How do I model accessibility and inclusion to disrupt prevailing myths, attitudes, and beliefs?
- How do I co-construct knowledge with students that disrupts and challenges oppressive perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs?

Advancing pedagogical and systemic change

- What will an examination of my positionality reveal about my pedagogical practices in relation to the identities and lived experiences of members of my school community?
- How can I embrace opportunities to further my knowledge and pedagogythrough critical examination of school- and system-based curriculum, policies, and practices?
- How can I teach in a way that encourages students to surface and challenge prevailing oppressive attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes?
- How can I engage students in sustained inquiry that challenges dominant myths, stereotypes or incomplete knowledge or perspectives?
- What perspectives are missing from the development of school and system policies? What perspectives are privileged?
- How do classroom and school community experiences reflect the diversity of identities and lived experiences of all members?
- How can existing pedagogies reproduce marginalization and sustain oppressive harmful histories in our school community? What needs to change?

Cultivating critical consciousnes

- To what extent do I understand the presence of conscious and unconscious bias, misconceptions, and stereotypes in my professional practice? How does bias impact daily interactions and decision making with students and colleagues?
- What assumptions and biases might my positionality be bringing to my professional relationships and practices?
- How do I model accessibility and inclusion to disrupt prevailing myths, attitudes, and beliefs?
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Connecting to our Ethical Standards and Standards of Practice

The Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession and the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession are foundational to the examination of accessibility and inclusion as they relate to anti-oppressive education

The Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession represent a shared vision of professional practice. A commitment to students and learning is at the heart of a strong and effective teaching profession.

OCTs, in their unique position of trust, must always demonstrate responsibility in their relationships with students, parents, guardians, colleagues, educational partners, other professionals, the environment, and the public.

The Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession identifies principles that support the goals and aspirations of the profession. Together, they articulate a collective vision of professionalism that guides the daily practices of OCTs.

Figures 4 & 5: *The Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession and the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession*

Introduction to Vignettes

The vignettes shared in this resource reflect the lived experiences of an OCT while he was growing up in a small Northern Ontario town during the 1980s. At age 14, he was diagnosed with severe to profound hearing loss that was a result of a childhood viral infection. By Grade 13, his condition had progressed to a profound sensorineural hearing loss.

Barriers associated with his diagnoses were heightened by the challenges of geography and the technology of the era. The closest audiologist was two hours away and screening for hearing loss was not as advanced as it is today. Though he lived in in a close-knit and supportive community, that environment also created unintentional barriers since most people had limited experience with hearing loss.

The unique circumstances that shaped this OCT's educational and professional journey inspired the sharing of these reflections on accessibility, inclusion and belonging.

Critical inquiry into the following vignettes offers opportunities to examine personal assumptions and professional practices to identify actions that advance systemic change.

Vignettes

Vignette 1: Falling Through the Cracks

I began to lose my hearing at age five as a result of mumps. My hearing loss went unnoticed throughout my elementary school years. At 14, I was formally diagnosed by an audiologist with having a severe to profound bilateral sensorineural hearing loss. I was told that my hearing loss would continue to get worse. Not only was this shocking news for me, it happened as I was transitioning to high school. I faced the same anxiety many students feel in transition while also struggling to accept my hearing loss.

Imagine how I felt.

Throughout my elementary school years, I sensed that something was different about my hearing. However, I was afraid to tell anyone, including my own family. I tried to hide it by avoiding conversations, especially in groups.

When I did engage in conversation, I pretended that I understood what was being said, even though in most cases I could not.

While I was in Grades 6, 7, and 8, my teachers repeatedly gave me detentions because, from their perspective, I failed to stop talking when they asked me. I tried to explain that I did not hear them, but my teachers concluded that I deliberately ignored their instructions. My parents sided with those conclusions. From my perspective, my hearing loss was interpreted as misbehaviour. I was viewed as a student who did not listen or was not paying attention.

After my diagnosis at age 14, I did not wear my hearing aids out of embarrassment. This continued my pattern of hiding my hearing loss, which made it more difficult for those around me to understand the challenges I was facing.

Itinerant and special education support was not available to me since I was not identified as an exceptional student. Because of my ability to speak and my outgoing nature, I engaged in many extracurricular activities. For example, I was named Athlete of the Year and was President of Student Council in Grade 12. My academic success and participation in school activities likely caused others to overlook the barriers I was experiencing.

I did not have any peers, teachers, or family members who shared this disability, which deprived me of a support network. It was not until I began preparing for university that guidance counsellors realized my hearing loss was quite profound.

When it was time for me to apply to university, I did not have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), making it even more complicated to receive accessibility services at the postsecondary level. At that time, accommodations for hearing loss focused on the use of an FM system that was of limited value to my specific condition. My experiences are unique to me. I am able to speak, but I am unable to discriminate speech without visual aids and I rely on supports like voice to text, written notes, and Teletypewriter relay service for telephone conversations.

Throughout my school years, my teachers and peers did not understand what it is like to live with hearing loss. In my final year of high school, my vice-principal confirmed this marginalization and recognized that I was someone who fell through the cracks. As a result, I often felt as though I was an outsider, but I persevered and continued to do well in most academic subjects.

As an OCT, I continue to be caught between the hearing world and the deaf and hard of hearing world. On the one hand, I face pressure to fit into a dominant hearing culture that expects me to hear because I speak very well. On the other hand, my lack of signing prevents me from communicating with individuals who communicate primarily by sign language. The repercussions of both minority statuses get played out both inside and outside the classroom.

Reflections

1. What assumptions and practices contributed to marginalization in this case?

2. What questions might you ask this student about his school experience? What questions might you ask the educators who were involved?

3. If educators had looked to the margins in this student's case, what impact might that have had on changing the practices that led to his exclusion?

4. What are some concerns you have as an educator related to accessibility and inclusion in your school community and beyond?

5. What are some avenues you can explore as a professional that might lead to the identification and elimination of barriers for members of your school community?

Vignette 2: Exploring Inclusive Mentoring

My lived experience as a teacher with a profound sensorineural hearing loss, gives me a unique perspective on mentorship.

During the first years of my teaching career, I often had thoughts of leaving the profession. A mentor would have better prepared me to deal with the unique challenges and barriers that prevented my full participation as a certified teacher with hearing loss. My school did have a new teacher induction program. However, I did not feel included for two reasons: it was not accessible to me (e.g., access to a notetaker); and of all the wonderful mentor-teachers, none had a disability. Without a plan for communication access, I felt excluded. I would have benefited greatly from a mentoring relationship with an experienced colleague who had lived experience and an understanding of being an educator with hearing loss.

My own experience with mentoring a first-year teacher, who self-identified as having a disability, reinforced how important it is to support colleagues who are deaf or hard of hearing, both personally and professionally. Drawing on my lived experience as an educator with a disability, I provided guidance and support for a new teacher to acknowledge and respond to the attitudinal and systemic barriers that marginalize people with disabilities.

In addition, I have made a difference by assuming a leadership role in advocating for accommodations that would have helped me early in my career. For example, I helped the new teacher successfully advocate for a TTY. I also helped train teachers about the relay service and how to place calls. I advocated for visual alerting systems such as lockdown drills and modelled how to use assistive technologies to help with communication. These actions fostered a sense of belonging and raised collective awareness about inclusive practices with members of the school community.

Reflections

1. Within your professional context, how might you anticipate, challenge, and dismantle potential barriers to accessibility?

2. What are some strategies for facilitating inclusive, accessible, effective mentoring practices? Consider both formal and informal strategies for educators with disabilities at all career stages.

Vignette 3: Leading Change: Putting Professional Learning into Practice

As a person with profound hearing loss, I have encountered barriers to my education that were clearly systemic. Nevertheless, I always managed to find ways to engage in ongoing professional learning. I pursued a Master of Education as I was guaranteed access to Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART), or captioning. This accessibility accommodation made my educational journey less stressful and much more meaningful. The degree program also helped me to develop as a reflexive practitioner who strives to initiate change and consistently applies my own learning to contribute to the professional learning of others.

While I was taking a graduate course on disability, I invited a first-year teacher to speak to the class about the barriers he was experiencing because of his hearing impairment. The sharing of his lived experiences unearthed day-to-day issues that confronted him in his professional context. His insights raised the awareness of everyone in the class, including the course instructor.

My Master's research related to mentoring teachers with disabilities made it clearer to me that the needs of employees with disabilities are frequently overlooked. When I first started teaching, I often found that not only were there no answers to my questions, there was no one to even address them. In many ways, things were just left up to me. Based on my research, I wrote a letter to the school board Superintendent of Human Resources to address the challenges faced by employees with disabilities. I suggested it would be helpful to create a network for employees with disabilities to provide individuals with a safe space to talk about issues facing them. The Superintendent responded by inviting me to join the school board's Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC).

My ongoing professional learning and research have shaped my actions in facilitating deeper understanding of accessibility, inclusion, and belonging in various school communities. I hope the leadership and advocacy opportunities I have embraced will contribute to effecting change in professional and systemic practices and ease the way for educators with disabilities.

Reflections:

1. Identify existing practices and structures within your school community that are inequitable, oppressive, or marginalizing. What strategies might address these practices and structures?

2. What kinds of professional learning would support your school community in surfacing embedded assumptions? How can such learning advance inclusive, accessible, and equitable learning and teaching environments?

3. How can we support the in-school application of such professional learning to disrupt inequitable and marginalizing practices and structures?

Vignette 4: Making Staff Meetings Accessible

Oftentimes, we find ourselves in new situations in which we are forced to adapt and try new ways of doing things —this has always been my reality. For example, I remember a time when the principal hosted an in-school virtual staff meeting using a video conferencing platform that we were piloting. This was the first time that many staff had used a video conferencing tool, so we were all learning together. Video conferencing is an evolving technology that offers a range of accessibility features that allow me to fully participate in meetings.

In advance, the principal emailed me the main meeting points as a well-intended accommodation. Unfortunately, the closed captioning feature was not enabled during the meeting. Instead, I relied on the goodwill of a colleague sitting beside me who volunteered to take handwritten notes. The notes gave me access to meeting content I otherwise would have missed, including comments and questions made by other staff.

After the meeting, I emailed the principal with step-by-step instructions on how to enable the closed captioning feature. Once again, I found myself educating and raising awareness of an accessibility support, even though I was still learning about the platform like everyone else.

That's OK. I survived the meeting.

Reflections:

1. What conscious or unconscious assumptions, biases, beliefs, and positionalities are illuminated in this vignette?

2. How does this vignette surface personal and systemic privilege and barriers?

3. What dimensions of accessibility and inclusion can be expanded or acted upon to transform the experiences of all participants in this vignette?

4. How can the concept of inclusion inform professional practices to deconstruct systemic barriers and foster an inclusive culture?

Vignette 5: Planning for Family Accessibility and Inclusion

We all wear many hats. I am an educator livng with hearing loss and I am also a parent. I want to be there every step of the way to support my children.

There are times when my hearing partner and I must access community supports for our children. On one occasion, a community resource professional would not allow the use of speech-to-text technology in a meeting related to my child's well-being. I later learned that accommodations should have been made available to me and that I could have made a complaint. Because the main priority was my child's success, I let my hearing partner take the lead and attend subsequent meetings without me.

This was a difficult decision and one that parents should not be faced with.

Reflections:

1. As educators, how do we ensure sensitivity towards the lived experiences of the parents, guardians, and families of our students? How can we identify and include the perspectives of our school community to prevent exclusion and marginalization?

2. In what ways do we ensure that parents, guardians, and families are able to fully participate in school- and community-based processes that support their child's learning and well-being?

3. How do we create or re-create classroom and school spaces that are accessible, affirming, supportive, and empowering for all members of our school community?

Vignette 6: Designing for Accessibility and Inclusion

School buildings play a vital role in shaping the community. This must be kept in mind as new schools are built and existing schools are adapted and renovated. I once joined an information session about the construction of a new school that my daughter would attend. Access to computer notetaking was made available on short notice with my assistance, enabling me to participate and ask questions about accessibility in schools.

My questions piqued the interest of the architect who asked if we could explore, in more detail, the development of fully accessible schools.

Following that information session, I took a self-directed approach and organized a meeting with the architect and their team to discuss how to design for accessibility for all. The architect highlighted how our conversation helped identify accessibility considerations and the underlying attitudes and preconceptions that can obstruct the building of fully accessible schools. This was an opportunity for me to contribute to accessibility awareness by emphasizing the need for inclusive design.

Inclusive design applies not only to the physical space but also to all other aspects of teaching and learning (e.g., programming, learning environments, professional practices, and system-level policies). Placing accessibility at the forefront of our decisions involves anticipatory and intentional design that will lead to more inclusive classrooms and school communities.

Reflections:

1. When you think about accessibility and inclusion, what factors come to mind?

2. How do we currently design for accessibility and inclusion in all aspects of teaching and learning?

3. How can we apply anticipatory and intentional design strategies to develop inclusive and affirming spaces?

4. How does this vignette highlight how shared responsibility can facilitate accessibility and inclusion?

5. Develop some success criteria to determine the degree to which our planning results in fully accessible spaces that foster a sense of belonging for all members of our school community.

Vignette 7: Maximizing Communication Technology for Accessibility and Inclusion

As a teacher with profound hearing loss, I require accommodations related to communication access to fulfil my teaching responsibilities. These include text-based telecommunications equipment such as TTY, Computer Assisted Real-Time Captioning, and the assistance of a computerized notetaker. Although there was a school board policy in place, there was a general lack of awareness of this policy and neither of these supports were available to me when I first started teaching. As awareness about the importance of accommodations for accessibility increased, the school board eventually provided me with the technology I needed for communication access to staff meetings, in-services, and other professional learning opportunities.

Educators need to develop an understanding of the communication needs that are unique to individuals with varying degrees of hearing loss to prevent the development of a one-size-fits-all approach that does not honour or respect the lived experiences of people with disabilities.

Despite the potential advantages of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, I have concerns about some of them. There are privacy issues related to third-party services for live or automated captioning. We also need to consider the quality and accuracy of the captions themselves. The fast-paced emergence of new technologies and tools requires ongoing critical review that considers research findings and the lived experiences of people with disabilities to increase awareness of their potential consequences.

Reflections:

1. What are our ethical responsibilities in adopting technologies to support accessibility and full inclusion for those in the school community?

2. What does questioning our assumptions and beliefs about technology reveal about application practices in the school community? What might we need to continue or change?

3. List some considerations that would facilitate a critical review of technology use in the school community.

Vignette 8: Exploring Accessibility, Inclusion and Belonging

I would like to stress that with respect to belonging, there has never been a doubt in my mind that "I am a teacher first" or that "teaching is my passion." I love being a teacher. However, I have never really felt that I belonged in the teaching profession because I experienced exclusion due to inaccessibility and not being able to fully participate. Attitudinal barriers are the biggest culprit.

Accessibility should never be an afterthought. We must prioritize inclusion and accessibility within the structure of the school system. Actions need to be consistently intentional and purposeful so all community members of varying abilities feel that they belong. It takes conscientiousness and an understanding of one's own ethical responsibilities to anticipate and eliminate potential barriers. However, we all understand inclusion differently based on our own biases, beliefs, and lived experiences.

This individual understanding of inclusion and belonging was illustrated to me during an interaction with a colleague who asked me "Have you thought about what to do with your hearing?" It was an unintentionally hurtful comment that was intended to be helpful. I understood it was an attempt at encouraging me to consider how a cochlear implant might help me become a better communicator, listener, and ultimately, a better deaf education professional.

However, these comments also made me feel that if I did not respond favorably, I was not doing anything to help myself. Although his question was not meant to hurt me, it made me feel powerless and reinforced my sense of being disconnected from the group. After learning more about cochlear implants, I concluded that getting one is not for me. I am comfortable the way I am.

Imagine the students who face similar challenges in their own unique way.

Reflections:

1. How does the educator who asked, "Have you thought about what to do with your hearing?" understand inclusion and belonging?

2. How are we thinking about accessibility, inclusion and, belonging in our school community?

3. What would a review of our in-school processes reveal about our understanding of accessibility, inclusion, and belonging?

4. What might be the impact of these findings on fostering a sense of belonging for members of our school community?

5. How do students in our community know that they can be comfortable the way they are?

Vignette 9: Fostering Student Agency and Critical Awareness

How do we create a sense of belonging for our students?

My colleague and I wanted to engage our deaf and hard of hearing students in a meaningful experience that would expose them to possible avenues for continuing education and future career planning. We wanted to create a focused opportunity for our students to experience accessibility in action within an inclusive learning environment, and to learn about different supports, professions, and accessible technologies.

We planned a field trip to a post-secondary institution renowned for cutting-edge technology that supports accessibility. The students toured the campus and participated in interactive sessions. They were exposed to real-time captioning technology and career exploration opportunities, including teacher for the deaf, writer, audiologist, social worker, and careers in the trades.

The trip made a significant impact on the students. In their feedback, they told us they were inspired to see how accessibility opens many possibilities for future post-secondary and career paths. They were encouraged to learn about speech-to-text technology like C-print® and they commented on how this technology could enhance their learning experience. One student said they appreciated learning about how hearing culture can be involved with deaf culture.

It was certainly a trip to remember. I am happy we were able to provide a meaningful real-life opportunity that exposed our students to an environment they could identify with.

Reflections:

1. What is the impact of creating opportunities for students to experience accessibility, inclusion, and belonging? How might these opportunities engage students in surfacing oppressive attitudes, beliefs, and practices?

2. How do I co-construct learning opportunities with students that support them in challenging dominant myths, stereotypes, and perspectives?

3. How do we promote pathway understandings for learners with disabilities?

4. How might we implement programs and pedagogies that foster a sense of possibility for all students?
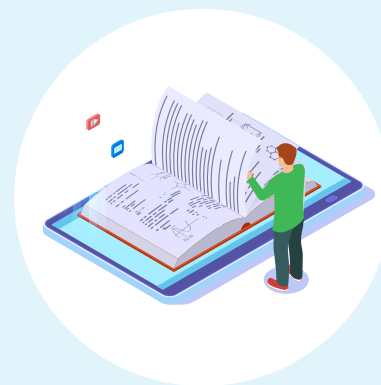
Vignette 10: Tapping into Lived Experience to Challenge Ableist Attitudes

I truly believe everyone has something meaningful to contribute to fostering accessibility, inclusion, and belonging in our school communities. We can all be leaders. Students, families, community members, educators, staff, and system administrators with disabilities are showing us the way. By opening doors and engaging in thoughtful discussions, these amazing leaders are doing their part to promote accessibility and full inclusion.

Learning about lived experiences enables OCTs to advance accessibility through ongoing awareness, understanding, and acceptance. By challenging assumptions and beliefs related to ableism, we dismantle barriers to belonging.

When people with disabilities are invited to fully participate, everyone has the opportunity to fulfill their hopes and dreams and meaningfully contribute to society.

Reflections:

1. How will we acknowledge and honour the lived experience and potential leadership of all members of our school community to foster inclusive and anti-oppressive stances, practices, and spaces?

2. What is our shared responsibility in creating accessible, barrier-free participation in our school community?

3. How can we support the inclusion of students, educators, and staff with disabilities? How will this impact all members of the school community?

4. Whose lived experience might we be intentionally or unintentionally privileging in our school community? How could all members of our school community examine and interrogate dominant cultural beliefs, practices, and perspectives that we privilege?

5. What processes can support the development of critical consciousness about anti-oppressive practices in our school community?

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