

Genia: Welcome to the Good Things in Life Podcast. The podcast that helps parents support their children with intellectual disabilities to build a good, inclusive life in community. I'm your host, Genia Stephen. This week's podcast is part of a series about inclusive education. The episode is sponsored by Good Things in Life's upcoming course with Marilyn Dolmage called *Belonging in School: The What, Why and How of Inclusive Education*. You can learn more about this foundations course by going to goodthingsinlife.org/bis.

Genia: Did you know that children with disabilities in the province of New Brunswick, Canada are less significantly disabled than children in other areas of the world? It's true. Gordon Porter explains this startling truth in our interview.

Genia: Gordon is the director of Inclusive Education Canada, an initiative of the Canadian Association for Community Living. He's also a former chairperson of the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission. Dr. Porter is an internationally known expert on inclusive education, who's consulted, lectured, and conducted training in numerous countries around the world. He was invited to make an expert presentation to the United Nations Human Rights Committee in Geneva and in August, 2009 Dr. Porter received an honorary doctorate from the National Pedagogical University of Peru in recognition of his work on inclusive education in that country. Porter has guided the development of policy on inclusive education in New Brunswick, Northwest Territories, Dubai and Nova Scotia. He's edited two books and written numerous articles on inclusive education. In recognition of his long career of distinguished service, he was awarded the Order of Canada in 2010 and the Order of New Brunswick in 2013.

Genia: Gordon, thank you so much for joining me today. I wonder if you would start our conversation by talking a little bit about yourself, your background, your experience with inclusive education and your relationship to people with disabilities and their families.

Gordon: Sure, happy to do that. First, thank you for having me. My involvement is kind of a serendipitous. I was a teacher and a school principal. And very early on I got an invitation to be part of a board running a segregated school in my town. And from that perspective, I started working with parents who had children who were just not included in local schools, including the one that I was principal at. So, I gradually developed first an interest in why this school was needed. And secondly, why we couldn't adapt regular schools so they could attend the schools that their brothers and sisters were going to? So, that was the genesis of me working as a professional

educator and being aware of the issues of segregation and what we called in the late 70s and 80s integration and what we now call inclusion.

Gordon: From the mid 80s, those schools where I worked had a policy to be inclusive and we did it because we saw it as good educational practice. We did our research on best practices and our view was that having children educated by regular classroom teachers and then providing support as it was needed was a much better way and a more efficient way to develop better services than to build separate, segregated programs. So, that's been my focus since early, more than 35 years ago. And gradually as time went on, I did more. I had more and more role in leadership with parent organizations in the Brunswick. I was president of the provincial association for Community Living, did a lot of work on policy with government people and school officials in all parts of the province. And then in the 60s, the 80s, I also became president of CACO, the Canadian Association.

Gordon: And from '86 to '89, I worked with parents all over the country and developed a sense of what was happening on a national basis. In that time I also went away to the United States and did doctoral work on inclusive education. And from 1990 on, I've sort of been quote an expert because I combine these really three things, having a pretty good level of education in the field, being a practical educator and having a deep experience in the parent movement and advocacy movement that has helped shape what we know now as inclusive education. So, that's my background. And from 1990 till now, I just continued to do things, to respond to requests, to write, publish a couple of books, traveled to many different countries, all the parts of Canada, work with some ministries of education on policies. And I just found that there continues to be lots of interest in and a lot of work to do to make our schools inclusive.

Genia: Gordon, you said that, or you just described your involvement in the parent movement in the community living movement. Is that because you are a parent of somebody with a disability? Or did you end up involved because of your role as an educator?

Gordon: No, I'm not a parent of a child with a disability. I've always been curious; like I'm interested in times I don't know much about. And early on when I was principal of a school in this area, some of my colleagues were on the board of this segregated school in our town. And I guess I must've mentioned my curiosity about what happened there and what it was that the teachers at that school knew that the teachers in my school didn't know because I thought my teachers were pretty smart. And I had, I was just curious. I didn't deny that they knew something we didn't

know, but I was curious. And quite frankly, it only took a year or two because within six months of joining that board, I became the chairman of the board. So, I was literally the boss of the teachers working at the school and they came to me with the things that they found issue with. And very quickly, my conclusion was there wasn't very much that they knew that the teachers in my school didn't know or even know better than they did.

Genia: Right.

Gordon: So, I kind of lost, you know, it didn't take long for my curiosity that lead me to think that wasn't, we didn't need that school. And I was part of an effort to close the school and gradually move the kids back into their community schools, which we did in the early 80s.

Genia: Okay. So, what, I'm interested in, what's kept you involved in this particular aspect of education? And it connects I think to also, why did you close down the segregated school? Like if you've got, you know, if you've got too good teachers in both spaces, what is it about this that has kept your curiosity and sparked this work over the many years that you've been doing it?

Gordon: Well, I've always had an interest in equality and human rights. And I don't know really where that might've come from in the first place, but I have. And when I was a member of the board of that segregated school, the only thing that we got from the province was the salaries of the teachers. Everything else had to be raised by fundraising efforts. And I was part of with parents and family members and other volunteers. So, we had to get the money through charitable efforts to fix the roof, to have the plumber come in to buy materials, to pay for the transportation. And again, the only thing that providence paid for was the salary of the teachers and my sense that this just isn't fair. This isn't right. Like I had two children at the time in school and I thought, well, I don't have to do this to have my children educated.

Gordon: Why should the parents of these kids with disabilities who are already facing all kinds of challenges that I wasn't in my family life? Why are they having to go and do this extra when in fact, we have what's supposed to be a highly professional, competent group of educators that are paid by the tax payer to educate the children in the community? So, it just struck me as really, really outrageously unfair. And you know, the other thing that I became aware of quite quickly was a high proportion of the families who were forced to use the Peter Pan School, which was the name of our school. We're not among the more wealthy people in the community. There

were some people obviously from different levels of society, but a lot of them were poor. A lot of them lived in socioeconomic, very challenging situations.

Gordon: And that added to the sense that isn't it strange? That these kids who are poor, come from families maybe who are not a part of the mainstream themselves, are forced to have their children go to what to me was clearly a second-class kind of a learning institution and one that they had to find ways to pay for themselves. So, it just, it didn't fit with my sense of what was fair and right. And of course not too long into this journey, we had the effort to get intellectual disability and disability itself as part of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms 1982. So, in the early 1980, '81, '82, there was a lot of effort to make sure that Pierre Trudeau at the time and whoever supported them included intellectual disability and disability generally within the Charter of Rights and Freedom.

Gordon: So, it wasn't there. It took a lot of effort to have that put in the charter. And that sort of, I think, coalesce thinking across the country because I was a member of the CACO board at that point. And there was a lot of recognition that this was a human rights issue. It just wasn't an issue about how to educate these particular children best. Like that's, you can isolate this as a simply a question of how do we teach this child most effectively? And of course behind that is, well, why do we think it's important to teach them? So, once you decide what you think they should learn and then you decide what's the best way to teach them that, you can often go down pathways that have very little to do with the quality and human rights. It's a very maybe pragmatic kind of approach focused on me on the straight educational questions not on people's right to be part of the society, part of you know, the culture and the peer network of people.

Gordon: It comes from going to a public school. So, that's sort of part of it. And I think as time went on, you become part of a movement. And I became part of that and through unique circumstances, being a volunteer leader of CACO, the national organization that represented families and folks with intellectual disabilities; it was something that I encountered over and over on a regular basis as the issues. What are the rights that people should have? How should they be included in our society? How do we go about advancing this? So, that was all happening along my work where I got a paycheck working within the school system.

Genia: Right. So, the idea of, or one of the ideas inherent in the idea of a right, any right, is that it's a good thing for people. And I think that very few people, or at least very few people that frankly I would care to talk to, would argue about whether or not children with disabilities ought to receive a quality education. But what constitutes a

quality education is still an outstanding, well, I'm not saying it's an outstanding question in my mind, but in what you're saying, like every people were arguing for the right of children to have a quality education. So, now after the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, we've established at least that children with disabilities have a legal right to that, that education.

Genia: So, then what does that look like? And there's sort of, this is interesting for me because I think that there's been lots of really provocative, valid critique of our school system in general as far as, you know, are we offering Canadian children a quality education in the way that schools are structured? And you know, how was curriculum? What curriculum should be included? All of those kinds of things have been up for public debate in the last little while. So, it's made for interesting conversation. So, when we think about, so that would be kind of one conversation that I think would be very interesting, but probably that's a different podcast episode, perhaps a different podcast. When we think about what constitutes a quality education for a child with a disability, then what do we know about that? What's a quality education?

Gordon: Well, I think the quality education for any child is the same. And that is number one; children go to school in order to become part of their community and having peers, having relationships with people that you're growing up with in your community, perhaps the street around the corner. That's a fundamental thing. You're socialized to be part of your community. Second, you need to develop and nurture your communication skills so you can share with people whether other people your age or adults, what you think and what you wonder about the world. And third, there are lots of discrete academic things that one can learn, but the fundamental thing is to learn how to listen, how to process information, how do we identify things you're curious about or that you think are problems and then be able to work with other people to come out with some kind of approach that'll take you a step further than you are already.

Gordon: During my lifetime, there's been an absolute transformation of knowledge and information because of the computer, because of the information technology we have now. I spent many hours memorizing, including the university, number of course on the history of education where we had a professor who just basically read notes about let's say the 20 most influential people who had developed particular ideas about education throughout history. And we had to make notes and then be able to cite. And he'd say, well, what were the eight critical things that this particular person said about education provision? And you'd have to be able to recite the eight things in order to pass your course. Well, that world's over because I can type in the

name of that person and get an answer to that information in five seconds on Google.

Gordon: I became aware of it as a professor when, let's say around the year 2000, 2005. In that time period, students started to come to class and we had Wi-Fi. And when I'd say something, let's say about the characteristics or the challenges of including the child with autism in a regular class? Well, some of the students are able to pull up information and as I tried to represent myself as being this font of knowledge, some of them were looking at the real experts on this in the world that previously they didn't have access to. In many ways the old form of education was simply that the teacher had 10 books on the subject while the student only had one. And that's what defined the difference and hopefully the teacher do something about it. But we're now at a stage where the focus is people who can function effectively with their peers in the community as adults. And that's what our education system needs to get our children ready for.

Genia: That's really insightful. I mean both on the shift of the process of education. You know, when we go to school now, what are we going for really has changed. And so as the pedagogy, although not some core pedagogies, but sort of the perhaps I should say processes actually as opposed to pedagogy. So, what, when we're talking about one of the things that you said is that kids go to school to be part of their community, to establish themselves as part of their community. Also, that there are some discreet academic purposes related to education. And it seems to me, certainly my experience is that there's this whole field of special education that implies that the teacher, the special education teachers do in fact know something that the general education teachers don't. And I'm interested in hearing more about that. And on the one hand, I would imagine that your answer would be the same as it was when you first started out, which is that general education teachers in fact are very skilled, you know, well educated in a good position to teach. But I also recognize that lots of educators don't feel well prepared to teach students with disabilities. And so, there's some gap there. I wonder what,

Gordon: Well, some, I think some of the gap is what I originally had, which is the lack of knowledge. Like my curiosity was based on the fact that in the school that I went to, kids with disabilities didn't attend. That wasn't something that happened. They stayed home or they went off somewhere else. So, I was curious. And I think most teachers, if they haven't encountered or been involved in inclusion, then they're naturally hesitant because they're not sure they know. One of the things that I've always found useful in coaching teachers to move ahead with inclusion is to be confident that they just had to do sensible things with the child. Because many of

them think that if you want that particular child included in their, let's say in their sixth grade Math class, that the parent is expecting that that child will learn sixth grade Math, the same kind of operations, solving problems, doing calculations, but maybe most of the other children do.

Gordon: And the fact is, that's never been the case. That's not what parents want. If they have a child who has significant challenges, but they do want the child in that sixth grade Math class. You know, like, so I think that we have to give teachers the license to do what's sensible to do as much as they can, but not have them think that they've got to take this child who is working at a certain level. I can certainly learn something about Math, about numbers and so on, in a Math class, but not necessarily the calculations are the things that some of the other kids do. And once you release that tension, like the teachers don't think that by being included, we think the child is going to be cured. Is going to be, the disability will disappear. And that's all related, I think to fear and misunderstanding and miscommunication because I've never met a parent who wasn't fairly realistic about what their child would gain from the class.

Gordon: There are a few. Occasionally, you meet a parent who just insists that their child should be able to do something that nobody else in the world thinks they can. And that's okay because we can cope with it. And I think we can try and see if that in case is possible. But my experience is 99% of parents want their child involved. They want them engaged in the classroom and they're very real. They're very realistic and generous. The teachers, if they think that they're doing their best to move their child from where they are a little bit further along on some of these key things of a developing relationships with peers, communicating effectively, making choices, those kinds of things that are fundamental to being a citizen in the community after school.

Genia: So, what you just said makes me think, so I agree with you. I think most parents, you know, there's a bit of a narrative that goes on sometimes about, "*Oh, well. The parents are just unrealistic.*" Or the parents, they don't see it because they're the parent. And I think actually the parents are so very concerned about how their children are doing that. That very, very often parents are the, they're acutely aware of where their children are struggling. Or you know, where their child's might have an impairment. But the other thing that comes to mind about when you talk or when you're speaking about this is the power of low and high expectations or the power of expectations in general. And it's been interesting for me to see that when low expectations are set, they're generally met and when high expectations are set, kids very often achieve more than people with low expectations thought they could.

Gordon: That's been my experience. So, that was one of my early, early experiences with this as I was kind of guiding, not doing all the work because teachers are doing the work. But as I was working with them on inclusion in the early days, say the first five years that we were doing this in schools, that I was the Director of Student Services, the teachers gradually figured out how to do what we're talking about. And they had to be quite flexible. And I know myself that I went into the class; I remember this one incident where one of the children with the most significant disabilities in our whole district was included in elementary school classroom. And so, I went in and was going to spend like half an hour, an hour, see how it was go. And I went in and sat down and observed and the student was not really involved with the other kids very much in the first hour, the teacher assistant was in fact the person interacting with that student.

Gordon: And I started to develop a sense of disappointment and somewhat fear that maybe, you know, I asked myself, *"Have I tied myself to an approach that's not really achieving its goals and I'm going to end up being an abject failure in this experience that I've kind of been really advocating for and pushing our district to do now for several years?"* And I was feeling sort of down about it, but I was sufficiently unnerved that I just stayed there in the classroom and I stayed till after recess. And then they changed and they were doing social studies or something and the student was involved. The teacher had found ways to have the student involved in this. Other children were around, they were engaging, they were doing things. And as that time period went on, I thought, okay, well it isn't all the way it was in the first hour.

Gordon: We are seeing real involvement and inclusion here. And I guess I stayed a little longer and then I had a chat about that to the teacher at lunchtime and I came to realize that, you know, we can't, a teacher can't necessarily plan and engage things so a student with a disability is engaged the way we might like all the time every day. And that's okay. As they go along, they'll become more proficient then they'll be able to do it more and with greater effectiveness. But even the best teachers in the best circumstances are not going to be able to ensure that kind of perfect inclusion that those of us might dream about. But that's okay because it doesn't have to be five hours a day as long as it's a portion of the day. Let's hope a major portion of the day that the child is actually engaged and included in a meaningful way.

Gordon: There'll be positive outcomes because that's really what inclusion is about. It's who is the child being included with - the other kids in the class. Inclusion doesn't work because of teachers. It works despite teachers. When you have good teachers, the

obstacles are reduced, but what really make inclusion work are the other students in the class. If a student is in a class with 20 other students, 25 students, five hours a day, five days a week, week after week after week after week, this year, next year, the following year, the power and the influence of peers is the defining thing that will affect their sociability, their social skills, their communication skills, their sense of confidence, their sense of engagement. Good teachers are great bonus, but it's the kids that power success with inclusion. And I think we have to really help professionals and adults get out of the way and cry, create conditions for the kids to be able to be this powerful influence as they can be if we give them the freedom to do it.

Genia: So, that seems to lead nicely into a question that I had thought about asking when I was preparing for this, and that question is thinking about how to help parents think through placement decisions when inclusion and a good solid inclusion option is not being offered is not available. You know, maybe the school is not enthusiastic about it. Or the school, the principal or the resource teacher or the school classroom teacher, whoever has said, *"Well, this person is going to like, I'm not sure what to do. The student's going to be too hard for me."* So, there's a sense on the parents' part that basically that segregated education placement by it'd be better than a mediocre or poor inclusive classroom.

Gordon: Well, I think the thing that sort of defining either on one side or the other is the attitude of people. I do think that there's a certain level of acceptance, welcoming, embracing the fact that a particular child will be in the school or be in the class that one would want to make sure is there before taking that inclusion is better no matter what. I mean, if you have a really, really hot style, teacher, hostile school, kids that aren't going to get any support to be generous with their peer, then you need to think about that carefully. But assuming sort of typical levels of acceptance, then I don't think in my mind there's any circumstance when an inclusive class and the promise of what would happen from that over time wouldn't outweigh whatever benefits there are of a segregated placement.

Gordon: Now, that doesn't mean that the child has to be in a regular class all the time no matter what. And again, I don't think that people, very many parents take that position. There are times, but again, it's all driven by student need. It's not driven when a child would not be in the regular classroom. It should be driven by the needs of the child that are clearly articulated and accepted among the people that know and care for the child, which includes the parents. And you know, I say that in the context that, you know, members of my family, there have been members of the family who are high school students that needed an hour of tutoring on Math when

they got the grade 11 on a Saturday. And if you're able to purchase a tutor, engage with them and have that tutoring, the student does a whole lot better in Math the rest of the week.

Gordon: Well, you know, if we can do that in some areas, our kids with special needs can get the benefit of something like that as well. And it can be provided within the school day within school. I mean, somebody may benefit from an extra hour or two a week of a particular intervention that makes a real difference. That's obvious. And everybody agrees as in the child's interests. It's not just saving the teacher from a difficult situation or making things easier for the teacher. So, I think given that exception, I think that the inclusive classroom is the only place where the child is going to develop the knowledge, the skills, the social skills, the peer relationships that are going to give them a chance to be part of their community when schooling's over.

Genia: Right, even when it's imperfect.

Gordon: All, it's imperfect for every kid anyway.

Genia: Right.

Gordon: I mean, who's, when I work with teachers who are skeptical about inclusion, I asked them, "*Well, what about your experience with your kids?*" So, if you say, "*Have you had the experience when you're somewhat typical child was in sixth grade and did great and then moved on to seventh grade and had one heck of a time and then back to eighth grade that was all better again?*" Well, what was different? Could be something about the child, but more likely and they would all agree it was really the interaction between the teacher and the student, which may have been related to the skill level of the teacher, or maybe it was just about the chemistry between the two. But in any case, teachers make a big difference on that. And I think that schooling is never perfect. There's always a challenge here and there and some of them are greater than others, but if you're not in there, you're not going to experience the real benefit of inclusion, which is the developing relationships with other kids, which we must be realistic.

Gordon: It doesn't mean that it's all going to pay off when they're 20 years old or 25, but generally speaking, it's going to create different conditions in the community than if inclusion didn't take place.

Genia: Right.

Gordon: I have a granddaughter now who's a, who never experienced anything other than inclusion, and she's in her mid twenties now. And she still doesn't quite understand why I travel many different parts of Canada in the world to talk about inclusion because it just seems like so natural to her. Why would these kids be in my class? So, you know, it's the reality that we can create if we choose to do it.

Genia: Right. And that then also speaks to your granddaughter's perception of, well, why wouldn't people also be in my workplace and my

Gordon: That's right.

Genia: My extracurricular teams and memberships and clubs and you know, my friendship circles.

Gordon: Yeah. And again, I don't think she has a relationship with very many of the kids she went to school with, but there is a person with a disability who worked in the same work location she does. And I know that she's proactive and positive about that relationship. Now, did that depend on her being in an inclusive school? I don't know, but it couldn't have hurt.

Genia: Right, right. Some of the, some of what you were saying about the pulling out of a child from a class really has to be about the child brought just a flood of memories for me. You know, when I was in high school, in our cafeteria, there was something that I called the label table. And you know, it was the place where every kid that had a disability was required to eat because they then only had to staff one support person to, you know, sit there. And that was just a really very clear example of, you know, pull out in segregation for the convenience of the staff and organizing staff.

Gordon: And of course the solution isn't more money to hire more staff, it is engaging peers to be part of that.

Genia: That is exactly what I was going to say is that one of the, I got in trouble a lot when I was in high school for these kinds of things. But

Gordon: Really?

Genia: Yeah. I didn't temper myself particularly well in my critique. So, one of the, this was a rule, even though there were people who wanted, like I wanted to eat lunch with one of my friends who was sitting at the label table, but I didn't necessarily want to eat lunch with all the other people that were there. I didn't know all those people. I wasn't friends with all those people. And, but there were other people that were,

you know, this could have been solved so, so easily. It was really a mindset issue. And then I, and another thought that came to mind. My son attends a French language school in a primarily English community.

Genia: And what that means is that there are the, all the children are educated entirely in French and, but then they go home to English households. And so, there are a lot of students in this school who are not keeping up with, they're not keeping up academically because their French skills are not at grade level, or at least they're just, you know, they're just squeaking by. So, the school has all kinds of pull out services to maintain French language competency levels for their students. But that is so embedded in the fabric of the way the school functions, that

Gordon: It's not a stigmatizing thing.

Genia: Not even a little bit. And it meets the student's needs for that extra intensive French instruction. But, you know, and in a way that meets also the concerns of staff, you know, it's mutually a better a workable system. But, in addition to that, the way it's done, as I said, is kind of woven into the fabric of the way the school functions. And so, one of the benefits of that is that there's no stigma around not having the French language competencies. That I think is just because most of the kids don't care that much about French language competency. Like they all kind of get that they don't speak French at home. And so, you know, this is an issue, but it also then allows for all kinds of other targeted pull out attention for students around all kinds of other things because the kids are coming and going out of their classrooms in a way that the school has really made just very typical. And it's all, it all happens in a really pure focused way. So, it's very little pull out of one student. So, it's just an example of, you know, as a way of school has successfully accomplished pull out services without one, sacrificing peer interaction and two, without making it stigmatizing.

Gordon: That's a great example. I'll try to remember it.

Genia: Yeah. So, why do you think that we in 2019 are still having a conversation about inclusion?

Gordon: Well, I think there are a number of reasons. One, it's hard work and second, in many parts of Canada, there's just so much built up infrastructure and special interests, but it's hard to break through. One of the reasons that New Brunswick, it has been cited as being a leader of inclusive education in Canada, is because in the early, the late 70s, early 80s, we did not have a sophisticated special education system. We had a scattering of special schools like the one that I described to you here in my town, but we didn't have a very sophisticated system in Ontario school districts,

particularly the urban ones and the bigger centers, they have very sophisticated systems. They have experts in all types and every one of those programs and the people that work in it believe deeply in what they do and think of it as good and a lot of it is very good.

Gordon: They're very competent people. They do their best to do a good job every day. So, those people have to capture a vision that they can do their work and accomplish most of what they think they need to accomplish with the students they work with in an inclusive classroom. They've not done it before. They haven't seen it happen much. And so, they're not confident that that can happen. So, that's the professionals. The parents are the same. Most parents have not met regular school teachers and principals who think that their child with a significant disability can be well served in their school because they never done it. You know, I've heard a story from a worker who worked with parents in one school district in Ontario, one of the big, big, big city school districts where they walked into the school to register the child and the school secretary looked at the child and said, we don't do Downs here.

Gordon: Oh, okay. That was the secretary.

Genia: Oh, my goodness.

Gordon: And send her, you know, tried to send the family on their way. Fortunately, the family had an advocate with them, so that wasn't the end of the discussion. But, that's the reality. So, parents have not found regular schools either welcoming or very confident that they can handle their children effectively. So, even though they might have a feeling that being excluded, being in a self contained program maybe isn't really a great thing, they may easily conclude that that's the best option they have. And many parents are not willing to take on the system and fight many, many battles as many of them have to. So, between the fact that it's hard work when you undertake it, second, that professionals are not confident they can do it and they'd haven't seen many examples. In many cases, parents who haven't felt that public schools or regular schools welcome their children.

Gordon: And then there are the whole issues of resourcing. And the current system in many places, including Ontario, is that when you have a system that largely doesn't, includes kids with special needs, then you have to invest money into the separate system that serves them. And as we move from the 20th century to the 21st, the sense of kids' diversity and the need for attention to diversity has increased, which means that there are more and more kids that the families feel need something different than just the plain vanilla education program that's offered. So, the system

is being challenged. You know, there's a sense that there are many, many more kids with special needs than they're used to be. And with that comes a demand. If you have a system built on establishing separate funded special programs, you have to drain more and more money out of the regular system to invest in this separate standalone special system.

Gordon: Which means that that's controversial. It's hard to come up with the money. But provincial government sets a certain standard. They provide the districts with that money and then the districts, because their teachers and parents are demanding more and more service have to divert money. You see it in the headlines all the time but music programs being closed down because they have to use the money to pay for more teacher assistance or you know, some other changes happening. They say they're \$10 million short of funding because they're overspending their special needs budget. Do you see these things where you live and work?

Genia: Yeah. Yup.

Gordon: So, this is all part of a parcel, which means that it's very difficult to get people to realize that there's only one way out of it. And that is that children go to the school that they would naturally go to the one that their brothers and sisters who don't have a disability would go to and to invest in strengthening the capacity of that school to serve all of the children who attend. That's where the investment needs to be made. And in many places in Canada, they've tried to support a little bit of inclusion, not very well, and not with enough money to make a difference while maintaining the separate system to a large extent for most students. In some provinces that has ended. And in terms of doing it completely, the conversion be to Brunswick and the northwest territories, as far as I know, I'm sure there may be other examples, but in New Brunswick, we don't provide money for special services. All the money that's available is spent to support inclusion with a little bit of individual attention that may be needed, but within the regular school.

Gordon: And that's what the money goes to. Now, you imagine in a school district where they're spending 80% of the special needs money on self-contained programs and only 20% to support inclusion, inclusion isn't going to go very, very well. And so, you continue to have a sense that this isn't working, we can't make this work. So, the end of this story is the only way out of this is if we'd have brave leaders at the political, at the administrative and at the school level who say, we know what we need to do to go a different path. These are the steps that will take us there. And then the next three to five years we're going to do them. And that hasn't happened. You know ministries of almost to a fault across Canada. We'll say they're in favor of

inclusion, but the problem is they don't put any teeth in the requirement and they allow local school districts to continue to do things that had the money spent on something else.

Gordon: And until they are willing to say, this is what we need to do, we're going to work to do it and we're going to do it in a comprehensive way. We'll continue to struggle with this. I don't see it going away anytime soon. I've been working on this since the early eighties so that's nearly 40 years. And there's progress. Don't get me wrong. Lots of progress. The discussion is totally different than it was in the 80s, the attitudes are different. The professional knowledge is at a much higher level. There's hardly a professional researcher academic in the country that I know of who would say that inclusive practices are not the way to go. Like they would agree it insulated ago.

Genia: Right.

Gordon: So, it's very different than it was in the 80s. But, I think the key thing that has to happen is we need parents who are confident this is what in the best interest of their child. And that's for the parent movement. It's a challenge. So far, we haven't met it. Second, we need leaders who will develop a plan and engage teachers and professionals to do it. And I'm very confident from my experience that they're up to that if they're given the leadership and the support to move from one way of doing things to another. And we need the confidence of the process where we see the success, feel that it's important for children and it delivers a better outcome down the road. And if we can put those things together, then I think we can make it happen. We don't have to spend more money. I do not believe in Canada that you would have to spend a whole lot more money to build an inclusive education system than the one we have now during the two to three years of transition. You might need to invest in the new model while you still nurture the old one, but within a short time you should be able to draw those resources out and redeploy them. So, I don't think it's money, it's leadership, it's commitment, it's confidence that this is what's best for the children.

Genia: Okay. So, I have, I want to ask you a short series of yes or no questions related to New Brunswick's experience of having an exclusively inclusive school system.

Gordon: Well, before you do that, just let me say that while we have an inclusive system, we don't have a perfect system. So, there are all kinds of struggles that, we have 300 plus schools in New Brunswick, a hundred more or less French, 200 English. And I'm

sure every one of them has their own unique challenge, but generally speaking, they're inclusive.

Genia: Right. So, yes. Understanding that imperfection is going to continue to exist for sure. So, you talked about funding and the cost of an inclusive education system in New Brunswick. Is the cost of education per student greater than in systems in other provinces or other places in the world that have a segregated programming model?

Gordon: Not because of inclusion, but in New Brunswick we have English schools and French schools all over the province and that costs money. And we have an infrastructure that goes with it. So, I don't think we're at the bottom of the pile in terms of per student spending, but whatever difference there is, it's not because of inclusion.

Genia: Not because of inclusion. Okay. I'm just realizing that as I'm thinking of these as yes or no questions and yet I'm sure they're not going to be, but okay. We'll continue. So, in New Brunswick and in other areas that you're aware of that have an inclusive education system, are the children in that region less disabled than children in regions that are committed to segregated school programs?

Gordon: Absolutely. From the earliest days when we've had visitors, we've had visitors here in the Woodstock area for years coming to visit schools. And from the earliest times, people would go in the class and say, well, we don't, we have children that are much more disabled than these kids we see here. And you know, you'd almost have to sit them down and say, well, let me tell you about this kid. So, yes. Absolutely. They present themselves very differently when they're in an inclusive setting, much more positively and much, much better.

Genia: Well, that is really interesting because I was kind of being a bit facetious because of course children in New Brunswick, you know, the number of children in New Brunswick that have significant disabilities or behavioral issues or any of the other kind of "ya, but..." issues that come up of course, are going to be equally distributed as compared to other communities. But you bring up a much more interesting point, which is that when children are in inclusive classrooms, their impairment becomes less prominent and their competencies become more competent. And so, they do in fact appear less disabled than what you see in other areas or in segregated education programs.

Gordon: And it's the influence of their peers.

Genia: Yeah. That's, that's really valuable. In New Brunswick because of inclusive education, this is also a question that I know you can't actually factually, like as a researcher, I

know you can't actually answer this question. It is kind of tongue in cheek. You know, in New Brunswick and other areas where inclusion is 100% mandated, do you think that teachers are less happy, more stressed or less satisfied with their work than in areas where there are segregated programs? Like is the burden of making this work harmful to teachers?

Gordon: Well first, if the jurisdiction has organized the supports effectively, it's not more of a burden. But on the other hand, teacher organizations, one of the easiest things that they can do in their advocacy for teachers in their working conditions is point out the difficulty and challenge that comes from diverse student needs. And that's been the case in New Brunswick. I call it inclusion flu. Like every two to three years when the teachers have to negotiate a new contract, the stories about the teachers who are struggling increase and there are more stories in the papers and that happens because it's a very easy thing to focus on to say that we need more resources. And I would say that teachers in New Brunswick and in many other jurisdictions would say that inclusion absolutely is a good idea. And then they would pause and they'd say, but we need more resources.

Gordon: We need more psychologists, we need more educational assistance, we need more planning time. And the thing about that is it's all true. They would have a better system if they had all those things. But, so I don't think we can get carried away with the fact that when they say yes, but parents and teachers together should support providing for some of those things that follow the 'but.'

Genia: Yes.

Gordon: Yeah. Let's work together. If we need more school psychologists, let's work together to see the government prioritizes it and funds it.

Genia: Yeah.

Gordon: So, I don't think it's a right or wrong or positive or negative. It's the job of teacher unions and thus, you know, teachers are only allowed to make public statements that are consistent with their union positions.

Genia: Right.

Gordon: So, what do you expect?

Genia: Right. Yeah. I think it just brings to mind too, the counterpoint around the strain on teachers of providing education when, to a diverse group of students. My sister is a

teacher. She, for the last several years has taught a grade six, although she, you know, slides around a bit and she's very clear that the student with very, very significant disabilities is not that hard to support when she's caught an otherwise pretty easy class of kids. But when she ends up with a class of kids where pretty much every student has very significant challenges or needs and she's not receiving the kind of influx of resources and supports that she needs to manage that amount of diversity and degree of challenge, then it's very, very hard. But that to me really speaks to like, we're not over resourcing or, sorry, not, I shouldn't say over, we're not, there are not dramatically more psychologists and better resources available in segregated school programs.

Gordon: No, that's true.

Genia: So, when you're congregating all those children together, you're exasperating the needs and the demand on teachers not minimizing it.

Gordon: Well, not to get into it in detail, but one of the issues here in New Brunswick is in many communities there's very high participation in the French immersion classes in English schools. And often it's the case that children who have any kind of learning challenge either choose or our help to choose not to be in French immersion, which means that the English only classes have a much, much higher proportion of kids who have learning challenges than they would if we had natural proportion. So, that can often be the basis for feeling that there just so many problems. And the thing is, it's true, but we've distorted it by public policy and in our province I've always accepted that we have two important principles to fulfill. One is yes; we need to teach children to speak the other language in our English schools. That's a pillar of our province. But on the other hand, we also want to have inclusive schools. So, you have to accept both principles and then try to work out a solution. And that's never easy. It takes juggling and a combination to make it a reality.

Genia: Well, that, what you just said is the exact reality that usually frames my sister's experience as a teacher with having a more challenging classroom. And what I've always found really funny about that is I was mentioning this to you before we started the interview when I was looking at schools for my son who has disabilities. When I sat down and spoke to the principal of the French language school, one of the things that she said is that learning languages is really, really good for developing children's minds. And that through most of the world, people are expected to speak more than one language or at least multiple dialects. And there are people with disabilities all over the world who are managing that just fine. So, she didn't see any reason why my son wouldn't manage being educated in French.

Gordon: Yeah, I agree. And I think that's part of the solution to that, which was to really encourage parents who enroll their child in French version if they have any interest at all. And there have to be supports the French immersion teachers so they can accommodate diversity as well.

Genia: So, I'd like to move the conversation to parent advocacy. When I was growing up, I have a younger sister with a disability. When I was growing up, we were kids through the years that you were talking about when you first became interested in this topic as an educator and across, I'm sure in New Brunswick and certainly in Ontario, people roughly my age were some of the first students with disabilities that were included into their local schools. My sister, you know, my parents drove my sister to a community fairly far away so that she could go to a typical school because she couldn't in our home community. And then that changed over the years. And so, I grew up with parents who were still facing a decision of either I advocate for inclusive education for my child or you know, they don't, like, or they're going to get a substandard education.

Genia: And it seemed really, really black and white to the parents that were around me. Now that's a self selected group of people, right? Because my parents would've surrounded themselves with other parents who felt the same way. But I talked to a lot of parents now who feel like it, I don't know whether they're just tired or they're overwhelmed or they don't see it as such a black and white issue. Or you know, they just don't want to take on the school system. And I don't even know that. I don't have a question for you, Gordon. I'm just, I'm, it seems like there's a difference in the perception of parents around their responsibility for advocacy or opportunity or how important it is or whether it's worth doing. I'm not really sure.

Gordon: Well, we're being with parents back in that era. I can assure you that most parents probably weren't as motivated as yours. So, I don't know to what degree that changed. And I think that you've hit on it. I mean, I think that if parents generally were more confident and understood more fully that having their child included in schooling is the only way that they're going to have a chance. Not that it's guaranteed, but they're going to have a chance for greater degrees of inclusion in society, in the community when schooling's over, is they would, they would be, they would step forward more confidently, they would more effectively. And I think that's what needs to happen. And you can't do that overnight and do it easily. And it's not something you can just spend the little bit of extra money and it's going to happen. It's got to take a lot of work over oh, probably fairly long period of time in order to get to that. And you know, schools can play their part by having success and sharing it with parents. They're always be parents that demand inclusion.

Gordon: And if people who want to see change can help those parents get what they want and then share the success stories with others, maybe it'll increase the confidence they have to step forward as well. But I think that we really need to invest in leadership among parent groups, leadership among the school systems to respond to the requests for inclusion. And in fact, it was to help parents aspire to that as an educator. I don't know how I could be true to my professional athletes to not encourage someone to take the risk of having their child included in a community school where it's not happened before because I've seen the positive results, the things that are good that happens for the child and the family because they have been included. So, you know, I think that there are many different levels with all of the stakeholders that we'll need to work on. It's not going to happen easily because of society. I think we generally think that anything special and specifically special must be good. And you know, when it's stand alone segregated, stigmatize special education, that's simply not the case. But people think it is. So, we have to show them that it's not the right or the most effective path forward.

Genia: You're already speaking to this, but I'd like you to imagine that you are speaking without great sort of buffers or filters speaking to a parent. And your point in the conversation is to convince them that they have every reason to be confident that advocating for inclusive education or just that inclusive education is of benefit for their child. I wonder if you can argue that point. Convince me that I should be confident that an inclusive education is going to be beneficial to my son.

Gordon: Well, the first thing to say is that the special education on offer is not going to provide the learning experiences that are going to be most critical for your child's future. And that's social skills, communication skills, relationships and segregated education simply cannot provide it. Many kids go to school in a special class that brings people from all over a city. And the only place they see that kids are in school with is in school. And that doesn't prepare them for the community life after school. So, that's first segregated education is not going to teach the most important skills that the child needs to function as an adult in our communities. The second is you have to help the process by making clear to teachers that you're not expecting them to create, to do miracles. That they're going to teach your child who has perhaps quite significant disabilities what the other kids in the grade 10 Physics class are doing.

Gordon: But the child could still benefit from being in that Physics class and being there in the lab when they do experiments and looking and watching and speaking and being part of that process with a group of peers. So, the second point is be realistic about, and I don't mean realistic in a way that means lowering expectations, but don't

expect and don't let teachers think that you're expecting them to be your miracle worker. But being included is going to take away the effects of the learning challenge or the disability. And secondly, be prepared to be engaged yourself in working with the teachers to figure out how to go forward because any plan is going to need amending, is going to need changes. Things will not go as expected. Don't expect the same experience every year. You'll have good years and bad years. She'll have good months and bad months.

Gordon: And what I can tell you is that my experience over many, many years with hundreds if not thousands of students, is that almost always the children who are included effectively and their teachers are supported, do better than people ever expect them to in the areas that are considered important. When you set the goals and kids are included and their teachers are well supported, my experiences that they almost always go further than those goals in their accomplishments. And sometimes very quickly and by substantive degrees. So, give it a chance because that's the only way your child's going to have a chance to be accepted and to participate and to be part of your community when they're through school. If they don't develop what's needed during the school years, which was a period of public supported, taxpayer supported process, what's going to happen when they're 22 and 30 and 35 and 40? So, inclusion is not going to happen then if you haven't made progress towards it when they're school age. So, give it a chance, take the risk, do your best to make it succeed.

Genia: Very well said. My little addition to the expectations and working with your, working with the team, your points around those two things. I think it's also really helpful to over and over again tell your team that you don't expect. Not only do you not expect things that are unrealistic, but you expect the teachers to be flawed human beings who are starting it out and who are going to make mistakes. And that you're eager to hear about them and be part of thinking about the next step as a parse as opposed to, you know, looking to sort of punish errors.

Gordon: Yeah. Or be hyper critical.

Genia: Yeah. Yeah. You know, teachers and educators want to be, they don't want to fail anymore than the rest of us. And it's, it's hard. It's hard to say, I can't figure out what to do here and, or I've done this thing and I think it was actually a really terrible thing to do or it just didn't work out or there was an accident or this or that. So, knowing in advance that you have a receptive audience in the parents I think makes it a lot easier for the teams to see the parent as team members.

Gordon: Absolutely. And my experience is almost all teachers want to be successful.

Genia: Yeah.

Gordon: They want the kid and the parent to be happy.

Genia: Yeah. Yeah.

Gordon: So, assume that.

Genia: Yeah. Yeah. So, one of the things that you said there was that if inclusion doesn't happen in school, it's not going to happen after school and that presumes that people, this is kind of veering off education specifically, but I'm interested in your thoughts on this that presumes that people with kids with disabilities that grow up are in fact going to live inclusive lives in community and that that is a desirable thing. And

Gordon: It was clearly desirable. Absolutely. But the, I wouldn't put it quite the way you did. Like what I should say and if I didn't, I'll correct it. Is that being included during your schooling years gives you a much, much better chance to be involved and to participate after school. It's not a guarantee that it's going to happen. It's not for, you know, for anybody, but you know, the odds are going to be much more stacked against you if you're not included during the years of schooling.

Genia: Yes. I think you were clear about that. I may not have been as I was trying to capture what you said, but what I'm interested in actually hearing your thoughts on just before we close is why is it a clearly desirable thing that people live a life of belonging and community or an inclusive life in the community as an adult? Like, I think that there's still some question in some people's minds about ... So, I know lots of parents believe that their child requires a special education and after their special education, they'll work in a special workshop. And they will live in a group home and they've never had the opportunity to think that there is even a reason to pursue a life included in community.

Gordon: Well, for sure that's the long term vision. And the thing is in Canada today, it can be achieved. There are lots of programs and lots of supports that'll help parents make that a reality for their child. And I think that nobody wants to be cast aside and segregated and stigmatized, which is what happens when you don't participate with other people. You need to be part of the society to be accepted. You need to be out there, engage, and people have healthier, happier lives when they are. And we'll all make our own decisions about what we want to be engaged with and what we

don't, or who we want to be engaged with and who we don't. But generally speaking, I don't think it's too much of a sale to convince people that going to church, being part of a community organization, participating in some kind of recreational activity, walking in the park, being part of, you know, going to a regular place of employment where you have peers who are interested in you and encourage you and support you. All of those things are what makes a rich and meaningful life and people with disabilities benefit from them just like the rest of us.

Genia: That's perfect. Thank you.

Gordon: You're welcome.

Genia: Thank you.

Genia: I really appreciate Gordon's early career observations that the special education teachers didn't secrets that weren't available to general education teachers. And I love that he points out that inclusive education is so powerful that kids actually appear to be and become less disabled than their peers who experience segregation. If inclusive education is something that interests you but you are just not sure how to figure out how to make it happen, get your name on the waitlist for *Belonging in School: The What, Why and How of Inclusive Education*. You can find that at goodthingsinlife.org/bis

Genia: On next week's podcast, I will be speaking with Linda Till. Linda shared her remarkable story with us in episode 10 and 11 of the podcast. If you haven't heard the story or how Linda rescued her daughter from horrific neglect and institutionalization, go back and check that out. This time, Linda talks about winning a human rights case in order to ensure that her daughter Becky could go to her neighbourhood school and Linda explains why inclusive education matters so darn much!