

Recently I was offered an opportunity to provide a two-hour keynote about inclusion in youth programming for the Regional Cadet Support Unit (Pacific) Fall Leadership Conference. As an educator and elementary Vice-Principal, I am very familiar with the core pedagogy of inclusion. It is an integral part of my day-to-day routine and experience. Our work as leaders in education provides us with a front-row seat to how inclusion works in the education system, yet we don't often have a window on how our work influences programs in the community. Having no prior connections or experience with National Defence, I was completely honoured by this opportunity.

As educational leaders, we are acutely aware of the multi-faceted approaches used to stretch and strengthen inclusion in our systems. Until this offer came across my desk, I hadn't truly reflected upon how far we have advanced in our understanding of how students learn, feel, and are connected to the adaptations and modifications we provide for success inside our school communities. To be honest, it sometimes just feels like 'what we do', a complete and total norm in our day-to-day operations. The opportunity to support one of the largest youth programming providers in our nation in their development of inclusion standards, pedagogy, and practice was a deep moment of critical reflection for me. It provided me with an opportunity to really consider the development in our system in comparison to other long-standing youth programs.

My belief is that all things in life connect. I recognize that this is not exactly a profound belief, nor is it truly profound to know that our story as an educational system connects to all other aspects of youth experience. However, when we start to apply this ideology to our collective story as leaders in our community, it becomes something very critical and deeply meaningful. Working with outside systems can help us – especially new leaders like myself – to look outwards in order to understand and reflect upon the

work we do within. Our students, experiences under our leadership in our system become the first pages of the story they will tell themselves and each other about what educational experiences feel like and what they mean; further layers are added to that story of experience when students participate in community programs. All of their experiences, individual or shared, connect to the work we do. Some stories are great but, for many students with complex needs, that story can take on different tones if inclusion is an after-thought instead of a forethought. So, I wondered: what happens when our work weaves into the story of other programs? My experience with this keynote presentation highlights how all of our connections become stronger when inclusion is recognized as a societal norm, rather than a unique microcosm that only exists in the scripted reality we create between the brick-and-mortar walls of our school buildings.

Something that I share with the staff and students I support is that when you are faced with adversity, a challenge, or a situation that requires reflection, start with what you know. Taking on a two-hour keynote presentation for more than 280 people working outside the world of elementary or secondary education definitely fit the bill for the 'start with what you know' mantra. So, I took my own advice and spent a few days holding space for what I know about the strategies and systemic ways of doing that make inclusion work in our system. I considered what would be most valuable to share with leaders in the Army, Sea, and Air Cadet programs. And then I began the threads of my keynote with my own understanding of inclusion.

For me, inclusion requires an understanding of a triangle approach: head (knowledge), heart (feelings), and hands (tangible efforts and actionable measures). In my head, inclusion is deeply rooted in a philosophy developed by Indigenous Education scholars Verna J. Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt (2001), and Dr. Jean-Paul Restoule (2008). This philosophy is called the "5 R's of Indigenous Education", and it centers on Reciprocity, Relevance, Responsibility, Respect and – most importantly – Relationships. In my heart, inclusion is an opportunity to showcase the beauty and strength of diversity. Finally, in my hands, inclusion

WEAVING TOGETHER:

School Leadership in the Community

by
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is the day-to-day adaptations and modification in my school environment, and the teaching strategies and programming that are developed according to the strengths and needs of the individual learners we support.

Relationships are what make the story of inclusion real and meaningful. This keynote was an opportunity to develop a new relationship with a community group, and to share some of the impact of the relationships I've developed with inclusive learners over the years. I believe that the power and momentum of relationships carries all of us through those times when we face our most difficult situations. Relationships help us bridge our work between our schools and our communities. I continue to practice and believe that no student will ever remember the lessons that I have taught, but they will forever remember how I made them feel; they hold on to all of the feelings that emerge through our relationship as educator and student. This is the

message I shared with British Columbia's 135 Corps & Squadrons of Army, Air, and Sea Cadets.

The Cadet Corps and Squadron members heard, received, and celebrated this message with undivided attention and support. For me, weaving community and school leaders together is about connecting the relevance of our shared work in supporting youth. Cadets and school districts are two systems that have reciprocal relevance. We share a set of common goals for students in our community, and encourage successful participation in programming that leads to passion, opportunity, and self-actualization. The pathways that we follow in developing relationships, diversity, and inclusion have led us to share collective program goals that focus on teamwork, service, adventure, learning, skill development, gaining experience, and addressing challenges. The Cadet leaders asked questions that reflected a core understanding of the responsibility



Christina Chase with Chief Petty Officer First Class Mike Miller (L) and Commander Steph Gresmak (R)

we hold as school and community educators, ensuring all children have access to programming that is facilitated in welcoming environments, and led by a core and shared understanding of the power of inclusion.

My takeaways from the experience were that the work we do as educators to support inclusion in this province is deeply impactful outside of our educational settings. As educational leaders in British Columbia, we are integral as resources that – when tapped – can change the course of broader work in the province. What we know about how learners learn, and the development of inclusive programming, can serve as a bridge for supporting best practices in youth programs in our communities.

After the keynote on September 11, 2021, I had the honour of being recognized for my contribution to Cadet Leadership programming. In October, I was presented with a paddle to take with me on my journey of leadership and inclusion in our province.

During the ceremony, Chief Petty Officer First Class Mike Miller, MMM, CD, Regional Chief Warrant Officer, Regional Cadet Support Unit (Pacific), and Commander Steph Gresmak, CD Commanding Officer, Regional Cadet Support Unit (Pacific) shared the impact of my work for their teams and members. They shared that their learning has benefited their programs immensely in terms of the work they have ahead, ensuring that the recipients of their programs can connect in a way that reflects relevance and reciprocity. They shared a strong desire to further develop the relationships between our two systems: school districts and Cadets Programs. They spoke about their new-found understanding about the power of visual learning, support strategies, and how to start with what they know in order to build greater opportunities for inclusion in their systems. They shared the story of what I taught them through the creation of images on the paddle they presented. They stated that all the members of their team have continued to engage and reflect upon what they had learned from the presentation.

The story told through the paddle is something I will cherish for the rest of my career. The braided cords on

the top of the paddle reflect my three achievements in education: Community Support Worker Certificate, Bachelor of Education, and Masters of Education.



The three colours spun together on the bottom of the paddle represent the three strands of the Cadet program: Army, Air, and Sea.





How they described the middle of the paddle will forever be held in my heart.

The middle weave represents the message that their members took away from my work, and the core concept that together we weave our stories to provide strength, support, and community for youth in our province and country. The weave represents the bridge of support that our work as community leaders creates between systems of education and broader opportunities for experience, skill building, and relationships in our communities.

The work we do as leaders is critical in ensuring that the upcoming generation carries on the 5 core R's of inclusive practices in every aspect of our community.

“There are often many roads that lead to the same destination. This can make the journey interesting, challenging, unique and worthwhile. Sometimes, in fact, the journey becomes more significant than the arrival at any particular place and the distance travelled, and the lessons learned along the way are the purpose of the voyage. Sometimes the work of reconciliation is done on our own, and sometimes we come together and share the parts of the journey forward.”

**Aimee Craft and Paulette Regan
(Pathways of Reconciliation).**