

Belonging

A sense of belonging is something that all of us want and need. We want to be surrounded by those who love us, by friends, and by the members of our larger community. Our family, of course, is the closest to us. They are the first who love us and give us an unconditional sense of belonging. But we all feel the need to belong with others, not simply our family. To feel complete and accepted in society we must be a part of the larger community. We need friends who care for us just because they like us. Without a circle of friends we feel incomplete. There is an emptiness that a family alone cannot fulfill. Not to be accepted, not to be included as a member of the wider community, means a life of loneliness and pain for which there is no cure. Society has known about the negative effects of loneliness for many years. Many medical and sociological studies have documented and re-documented the negative effects of loneliness. Mother Teresa may have understood these effects intuitively. She once said, "Loneliness is the most terrible poverty".

Teachers have been taught in their professional preparation programs and by their teaching experiences that learners experiencing disabilities need special treatment, special teachers, special transportation, special programs, educational assistants, and segregated environments in which to learn effectively. All of the items on this list are barriers to development of friendships with other children. All block the acquisition of cultural capital.

Almost all Canadian school systems now claim to be inclusive. Some are, and good things are happening. Most continue to believe that some students cannot benefit from being educated with their typical peers. They need “special” treatment in order to learn. Most educators continue to support special education structures and methods that, for most, do not lead to a sense of belonging. Ask people who have spent time in special education settings if this is not their experience.

Differing approaches have characterized research endeavour in of inclusive education. Though some issues have received a larger amount of attention, no one area has been developed in depth. There is a strong tendency for research to be focused on individual conditions of disability, such as intellectual or behavioural challenges, rather than on social issues that are common across conditions. Guralnick and Groom (1988) described research through the special education lens generally as indicating lower frequency of social interactions in young children with disabilities than in typical children. This situation puts “children with disabilities at risk for fewer peer relationships and fewer mutual friendships”. With the advent of inclusive education, research began to focus on the social and academic effect of this new approach to education and disability.

In general terms, as indicated in publications arising from the Civil Society deliberations leading up to the St. Petersburg 2006 G8 meetings, interaction between learners with and without disabilities can be regarded as relating to theorist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital as an important factor in the success of children from certain social backgrounds in the educational system". Some groups of children, including those with disabilities, are regarded as possessing little social cultural capital. Bourdieu was noted as arguing "that schools do not promote equality, but function to reproduce and sanction ascribed inequalities".

Many believe that an inclusive approach to education and disability will result in acquisition of cultural capital for those with disabilities. The following are statements of social effect from various thought pieces and research studies exploring ways to foster positive social relationships between learners with and without disabilities.

The move toward cooperative and inclusive education is part of a larger move out of social oppression for individuals with disabilities. It is part of a groundswell of social reform that holds as a central tenet that all children, including those with disabilities, are capable of learning and contributing to their classrooms and communities.

Despite the optimism of Van der Klift and Kunc, a recent major Canadian research project with the purpose of “Strengthening Communities for Canadian Children with Disabilities” concluded that up to 60 to 70 % of young adults with disabilities live lives of loneliness and isolation. The recent research literature in the area of inclusion tends to regard inclusion as stronger than special education, but not markedly so. The personal story of Andreas suggests the social potential of inclusive experiences. Later, you will read the story of Jennifer, a story that makes the same suggestion.

Lamport, Graves & Ward (2012): Special Needs Students in Inclusive Classrooms: The Impact of Social Interaction on Educational Outcomes for Learners with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities.

It is obvious from the research discussed that properly practiced inclusion method has benefits for all students in both academic achievement and social interaction. Overall, both disabled and non-disabled students view co-teaching in a positive manner and seem to make progress in academic classes. Socially, disabled students have the opportunity to interact with their non-disabled peers in order to learn academically and behaviorally. They also seem to maintain adequate self-esteem levels, which are comparable to their non-disabled peers.

Caruana (2011): A Cross-Sectional Study of Children's Attitudes Towards Peers with Disabilities.

When attitudes were analyzed as a composite component, this study revealed that there is a very slight tendency for the attitude score to fall on the positive end. Observations also revealed a good number of positive inclusion practices. Though this in itself can be considered as quite a positive aspect of inclusion practices and policies in our country the author feels that much more needs to be done in order to say that our students are being truly educated in an inclusive setting.

Hall & McGregor (2000): A Follow-up Study of the Peer Relationships of Children with Disabilities in an Inclusive School

Results revealed that each of the three children with disabilities was selected as a playmate by male and female classmates during both time periods and that some play activities with social behaviours were similar to those of typical peers.

Friesen, Hickey, Brauth (2009): Disabled Peers and Academic Development

We find that peers with learning and behaviour disabilities in British Columbia have a negative effect on the test scores of non-disabled students in B.C., but that peers with other disabilities have, if anything, a positive effect. The results suggest that there may be more adverse spillover associated with peers who have learning and behavioural disabilities.... However, our results indicate that these spillovers may be sufficiently small that they need not be a major concern.

Bunch & Valeo (2004): Student Attitudes Toward Peers with Disabilities in Inclusive and Special Education Schools

Attitudes of typical students toward peers with disability were explored through one-to-one interviews. One group of students had spent their educational life from school entry to secondary graduation in a school system supporting special education. A second group had spent their educational life in a school system supporting inclusive education. Experiences explored dealt with friendship, abusive treatment, advocacy, and reaction to the two models. Friendships with students with disabilities were far more than common in the inclusive schools and rare in the special education schools. Abusive treatment was a significant factor in special education schools and almost unknown in inclusive schools. Advocacy when any abusive behaviour was noted was robust in inclusive schools and present, but not routine, in special education schools. Students in either school system did not question their system's approach to disability, accepting it as appropriate.

Diamond (2001): Relationships Among Young Children's Ideas, Emotional Understanding and Social Contacts with Classmates with Disabilities

Results revealed that children who had social contact with classmates with disabilities had significantly higher scores on measures of emotional understanding and acceptance of individuals with disabilities than did children who had contact only with typically developing classmates.

- The nature of much of the available research is that it tends to focus on discrete areas of disability. That is, there is a focus on individual types of disability conditions, i.e. learning disability, physical disability, visual disability. This approach presupposes that these disabling conditions have discrete types of social impact. In my view and my experience, broad commonalities of social impact exist across various disabling conditions. Taking this view and developing studies including more than one category of disability may lead to deeper understanding of disability of the large group of people characterized as disabled.

- the results may A second possibility is that positive social relationship is not something that can be artificially stimulated. Some argue that friendships must be caught through typical interactions in settings where positive relationships and respect are modeled. Whereas teachers may be able to design ways to teach social interaction, or may not be that positive social relationships occur. It may be that attempting to structure conditions for interaction is quite as likely to promote social relationships based on a charitable model with a result that does not stimulate equitable relationships.

- Another possibility noted in the literature is that students with and without disability may have different ideas of what constitutes friendship. There is some evidence that participation in group activities created by teachers or other care-givers may lead to those with disability considering everyone in the group as “friends. Typical students may see the artificially constructed group for what it is, a teaching tool, and not as whether or not it resulted in friendship among students with and without disabilities. Those with disabilities, having less social experience than typical students, may mistake the passing relationships as one of friendship. Another possibility is that the voices of students with and without disabilities must be heard. If both are not heard equally, whether through interviews or other data gathering instruments, the findings will be skewed.

- My last analysis point reflects on the short-term nature of many studies. There may be reasons that much research is limited in time, for instance short-term funding or researcher time limits, as is the case for many researchers engaged in study programs. My view is that emphasis on short-term studies is not as productive in terms of reliable data as are studies with longer time lines. Conclusions based on a series of short-term studies simply does not have the same weight as those based on longer term studies.