

**A LESSON PLAN FOR BELONGING:
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IMPARTS MORE THAN JUST THE CURRICULUM**

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 there is more to belonging than the family. To feel complete and accepted 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".

David Pitonyak commented on the connection of disability and loneliness in his January, 2010 paper "*The Importance of Belonging*". He emphasized that many people experiencing disabilities live lives of extreme loneliness and isolation. Many depend almost exclusively on their families for companionship. Some have lost their families and turn to their care workers for support and a sense of belonging. Since support workers come and go in one's life, the resulting social emptiness can be devastating. This is what happens for too many people experiencing disabilities for whom finding good friends has been a lifelong challenge.

Our circle of friends, especially when we are young, is made when we enter school. Next to the family, school is the most important agent of society in determining whether you develop a sense of belonging to your community. School teaches us more about how our society works and how to get along with each other than does anything else. Teachers believe that students go to school to learn. Children know they go to school to make friends. School is where we all first develop our sense that we belong to the larger community beyond our family. It is not unusual to have good friends we met in school as part of our lives.

I say "all" above, but the school system does not have a strong record for creating a sense of belonging for many young people who happen to experience disability. Unfortunately, the way our schools tend to operate makes outsiders of many young people experiencing disabilities. Learners with disabilities are held at arm's length by most school systems. To me, this is not the fault of the teachers. Teachers have been taught in their professional preparation programs and by their teaching experiences that learners experiencing disabilities need special treatment, special teachers, special busses, special programs, educational assistants, and segregated environments in which to learn effectively. All of these are barriers to the development of friendships with other children. Though there are limited exceptions, most school systems model behaviour that convinces other students that their peers with disabilities are to be treated differently. Nothing on the above list of special supports works to create a sense of belonging to the

larger community. Everything on the list acts to create barriers between young learners experiencing disabilities and their potential friends. How do you develop a sense of belonging when your interaction with your typical peers is limited at a time when you need it to be maximized? How can you learn how your typical peers operate? How can they learn that you operate very much as they do?

These are significant questions. Earlier I mentioned that David Pitonyak wrote of people experiencing disabilities who live lives of loneliness and isolation when they no longer have a family to which they belong. Once the family is gone, they become dependent on paid support workers. It is tragic that many come to see these workers as their friends because they have no one else. It is not the fault of the support workers. It is the fault of a society that distances its members from some people due to perceived differences.

An answer may be found in school systems that bring all the youth of a community together in equity during their socially formative years. Educators practicing inclusive education have done away with most of the barriers to friendship and belonging that are common in school systems clinging to the special education model. This model may have been acceptable in the past when we felt it was the only possible answer. As our understanding of the dynamics of the special education approach and the values of educating all learners together have increased, we have learned that segregation in school has unfortunate and unnecessary results. We know that an inclusive approach which recognizes need for the optimum individual academic achievement for all students and also need for optimum social achievement as well, avoids many of these results. Taken together, the dynamics of inclusive education increase the potential for development of a strong sense of belonging in all students. Additionally, research is documenting the fact that learners experiencing disabilities reach higher academic and much higher social achievement levels when educated in inclusive settings. There also are spin-off benefits for the typical students. That is why the United Nations has turned to inclusion as a stronger response than that of the special education model in meeting the needs of all learners.

My friend and colleague, Crystal Chin, who has physical challenge, describes her regular classroom experience as “present but not participating”. She observed her typical peers interacting, becoming friends, and developing a sense of belonging in the classroom and to the school community. Crystal’s experience was one of watching all this happening but not being part of it happening. Perhaps it is missing out on these earlier and continuing social experiences that lead to loneliness and isolation in later life. If one is placed in the role of observer rather than participant in equitable social interactions from an early age, perhaps a pattern is set for life.

It would be unfair to suggest that early school experience is the only, or the major, determinant for development of a sense of belonging. However, it is not unfair to say that experience at school impacts all students. For most, that experience contributes to development of a sufficiently strong social network, and the social skills to

intermingle, to escape loneliness and isolation in later life. For others, particularly in the case of disability, the experience may be less successful.

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 continue to support special education structures and methods that, for most, do not lead to a sense of belonging. Ask people who have experienced special education if this is not their experience.

It would improve many lives if parents and others were to pressure politicians and others to move to inclusive education for all without playing word games. We know inclusion leads to a stronger sense of belonging to the school and to the larger community. If we start now, we can change the future.

Article, 2010

- Pairing for Book Reviews: (Use to expand range of readings and general knowledge.) Students interview each other about books they have read, main characters, plot significant events.
- Reading and Listening Partners: (Use to increase reading comprehension.) After completing an assignment, partners read what they have written to each other to check comprehension, story line, clarify points, enrich vocabulary.

Mathematics Adaptations

Certain subjects may call for specific types of support for some students but not all. Mathematics is used here as an example.

- Teach key terms and vocabulary in advance. (Use other students, parents, others).
- Create a terms/vocabulary dictionary appropriate to topics being learned. Review with partner.
- Tape numberlines or other routinely needed information to student desks for quick reference.
- Real Situations and Materials. Use real money, measure aspects of the classroom, play card games dependent on math knowledge. Have parents shop with children and to involve them in comparing prices, how much can be saved, and whether they have enough money.
- Simplify language when teaching mathematics. Be as concrete as possible.
- Set up a Mathematics Friend (partner or helper) among classmates.
- Use calculators.

Homework

Academic homework is routine through the school years for typical learners. It should be routine for those with disabilities as well. However, teachers must consider the type and amount of homework for some students. Also, parents should be encouraged to monitor homework without actually completing it for the students. Some advice to parents here might be of value.

- Consider attention span of student when assigning homework. Work with parents to set up homework period with routine breaks.
- Set clear, simple directions. Have peer orally check understanding and to write out directions if necessary.
- Provide a few examples of types of questions and answers to refresh knowledge in student's mind.
- State a timeframe for homework with student and parents.
- Individualize amount of homework according to student characteristics.
- Allow alternative homework formats. Questions read aloud to student by parents. Responding recorded format rather than in writing.
- Encourage choosing which question to do first, second, etc.
- Pair student with a homework friend.

Enabling Adjustments Checklist

Preparing Student to Follow Directions.

- Use a prearranged signal to gain attention before giving instructions.
- Make certain student is attending and facing you when instructions are given.
- Change your tone of voice to alert student to sustain attention.

- Provide student with a schedule for each day.
- Set up partnerships among students.

Student Requires Help While Instructions are Given. (Use peers to assist.)

- Combine oral directions, pictures, simple vocabulary, diagrams, physical cues.
- Provide a set of written or recorded directions.
- Describe critical parts of task individually.
- Model expected behaviour.
- Have student repeat task instructions.
- Simplify and repeat if necessary.
- Break task down into smaller parts if necessary.

Student needs help following instructions

- Set up a peer to assist.
- Walk by the student's desk to see if more direction is necessary.
- Go through instructions with student.
- Ask student to repeat each instruction and then complete it.

POINTS TO THINK ABOUT RE. TASKS FOR INCLUDING

	POINT	YES	NO	?
1	Are nondisabled peers in the setting?			
2	How many learners with disabilities are in setting?			
3	Will nondisabled peers & disabled peers interact ?			
4	Is a minimum of peer to peer assistance needed?			
5	Can natural and nonintrusive supports be used?			
6	Does the setting match the age of the student?			

7	Are the materials matched to student's age?			
8	Is the activity appropriate for student age?			
9	Is activity familiar to the student?			
10	Can the student start, or be taught to start, activity?			
11	Need the task be adjusted to facilitate participation?			
12	Can the materials be adjusted for participation?			
13	Is special equipment needed?			
14	Is peer support available?			
15	Is the setting accessible?			
16	Is the activity based on the general curriculum?			
17	Is support needed from a special education teacher or other person?			
18				
19				
20				

Teachers may wish to add to this checklist to ensure that important aspects of learning for all are covered.