

## THE MOST BULLIED OF ALL

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As schools get into rhythm for the new school year, some students enjoy the school experience even less than does the average student. These are the students with disabilities. They are, as research consistently point out, the most bullied group of all.

We know that some of their school peers bully them. They make fun of them. They tease them. At times they push and hit them. Generally the other students turn their backs, and pretend it isn't happening. They don't want to be bullied in their turn.

Anne Snowdon of the University of Windsor recently completed a study of children and youth with disabilities in Canada. The major finding of Snowdon's "Sandbox Project" is that the majority of children and young people with disabilities live lives of isolation and loneliness. Parents of the children have known for years that their children often have no close friends. Parents try to promote friendships. They involve their children in community activities. Unfortunately, too often the results still leave most young people with disabilities isolated and lonely. They are natural targets for bullies. As one mother in the Snowdon study said of her son, "He's a walking target".

Do schools play a role in loneliness and isolation? Parents told Snowdon that "the level of professional support accessed by families of children or youth with disabilities is only moderate and appears to be related to 'the essentials' or 'the necessary'. This does not mean that teachers and educational assistants deliberately ignore the social needs of their students. However, the system pushes teachers to stress academic learning. Little time is left for the social side, particularly for those considered "low achievers". Add to that, that teacher preparation programs do not prepare future teachers well for learners

with disability. Most teachers graduate believing that special education teachers will take care of students with disabilities, that they are not their responsibility.

Even though United Nations has declared that the best place for all children and youth is with the other kids in regular classrooms, segregated settings for those with disabilities abound. Research consistently states that the learning of the other students is not negatively affected by inclusion of students with disabilities. Research also says that students with disabilities benefit immensely socially by inclusion and that their academic learning is at least equal to that found in special education settings, and often is higher in inclusive settings. Most schools seem unaware of this.

The Ministry of Education has a policy of inclusion for all learners. School systems are working hard to achieve the best for groups defined by race, sexual preference, ethnicity, and other differences from the dominant student group. Somewhere along the line, however, the Ministry and most school systems seem to be missing the point that only one group of students, those with disabilities, can be excluded from regular classroom settings without question.

When the federal government not long ago ratified the U. N. Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, it reserved on (did not accept) the part that guarantees inclusive education in regular classroom settings. In Canada, though there are a few inclusive jurisdictions, most provinces continue to support the special education model. Lack of positive action on inclusion creates a void into which bullies can step.

If one wanted to change this situation, the first question would be, "Where do the children of any community meet each and get to know each other?" Only schools take in all young people of the community five hours a day, five days a week, ten months a year

for years on end. It would seem logical that schools would be the focus of supporting students with disabilities in becoming full members of our society. But research, such as that of Anne Snowdon, documents that schools are not responding well to the challenge of disability.

Most present school systems mark out students with disabilities as different. Practices such as being taught in segregated settings having different school arrival and departure school times, and sitting students with disabilities at segregated tables in the cafeteria all mark them out as different.

Another marker is that of a charitable approach to students with disabilities. Though designed as supports, certain school programs work on a “giver-receiver” model. These programs can be of an academic support nature (peer tutoring) or of a social support nature (students volunteering to become a friend). Guess which students tutor/volunteer and which receive. Students with disabilities can never become full members of schools operating from a charitable, giver-receiver model, which, by its nature is inequitable.

Lest some doubt the idea that schools mark out certain students, an example might help. An Ontario school system recently has been in the news for its treatment of students with autism. This system, in fear that some students with autism might strike out at others, decided that typical students should carry large “blocker shields” for safety when near students with autism. This is perhaps the most outright way of some schools marking out students with disabilities as different.

These comments paint a dark picture. It need not be so dark. The Ministry and school systems can set in place a plan for moving to inclusion. There are people, parents

and professionals, who know how to assist. Many teachers are willing. Inclusion can be achieved. After all, the first school system in the world to move completely to inclusion for all students is in Ontario.

The dark situation for learners with disabilities documented by researchers such as Anne Snowdon, can, at least, be lessened. Simple social justice suggests that action be taken for the most bullied group of all.

Gary Bunch

# **Appendix (A)**

## **Human Participants Research Protocol**

**(Non-funded AND at Minimal Risk)**

**(Revised on November 30, 2009)**