STUDENT ATTITUDES — MAKING FRIENDS, OR MAKING FUN?

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SPECIAL ED VERSUS AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH IN SCHOOL

How do typical students feel about their peers with disabilities? Does it make a difference if they are in a school following the "special education" model or a school that is inclusive? Are friendships made, or are insults endured? Do typical students advocate for their peers with disabilities?

These questions motivated York University Faculty of Education researchers in Toronto to study attitudes of typical students toward peers with disabilities in schools with inclusive and special education structures. Which is more positive, the special education setting or the inclusive setting?

What happens academically is a big question. What happens socially is perhaps even bigger for students with disabilities.

Typical elementary and secondary students in two Ontario school systems, one with a special education model and one with an inclusive model, took part in the study. A total of 51 students in grades one, three, five, seven, nine, eleven and OAC were asked about relationships between peers with and without disabilities in terms of friendships, discriminatory behaviour and advocacy.

Friendships was a revealing area. Elementary-level typical peers in special education model schools tended to know, or know of, one or more students with exceptional needs. Some friendships existed, almost all in the earliest grades. As Bert, grade one, said: "Dave is one of my friends."

However, friendships were the exception. A basic special education principle is that it is academically and socially better to separate certain students from the mainstream. When grade-five student Brian was asked if peers with disabilities were in his class, he responded, "Not in my class." Though typical students knew that

some students with disabilities were in their schools and might even know the name of a peer with a disability, friendships were uncommon.

The reverse was the case in the inclusive elementary school studied. The majority of students interviewed had friends with disabilities.

"...Because she's with us. So we consider her as our friend, and she considers us her friends." (Kim, grade seven)

This pattern between schools was repeated at the secondary level. Students' comments suggested that their school's special class separated students with disabilities both physically and socially. Ken in OAC commented:

"For sure, most of their friends are within the [special] classroom. Everyone knows who the special people are, and they'll talk to them if they approach them and there's a conversation or something. But I think most of their friends are within the [special] classroom."

No secondary student claimed friendship with any peer with a disability. They saw students with disabilities in the school, but had only a remote acquaintance with them.

Typical students in the inclusive model secondary school routinely referred to friendships with peers with disabilities. As Marilyn in grade nine said:

"Yeah. A lot of people talk to him. Like, when I come in, I say hi to him all the time. And other people talk to him. Like, the guys talk to him... He's like everyone else."

When we switched our focus to whether teasing and insulting behaviour are part of social life between typical students and students with disabilities, a second area of difference was found. Discriminatory behaviour existed in both special education and inclusive model schools, though with different frequency.

In the special education model elementary schools, many students, particularly in the earliest grades, reported no teasing and insulting. Brian, grade five, when asked if such behaviour went on, responded, "No. Everybody's a human being." However, some inappropriate behaviour does occur. Dawn, and Diane, grade seven, and Lorne, grade five, reported that some students made fun of peers with disabilities and called them names.

Almost no mention of teasing and insulting behaviour was made by elementary students in the inclusive system.

A different picture emerged at the secondary level, most

particularly in the case of the special education model school. Ray, in grade 10, described some peers teasing students with disabilities. Tormenters liked "to see how they [peers with disabilities] react... They talk to them and say things to see how they react." Owen, in OAC, recalled non-disabled students saying to a student with disability, "Go ask that girl out. She likes you," simply to laugh at the girl's reaction.

Again, although a degree of discriminatory behaviour was apparent in the inclusive model secondary school, fewer instances were noted. The majority of students offered comments such as:

"We don't have the nicest people here, but I have never heard anyone say anything...I would speak out against any derogatory words. I don't tolerate that. It's not in my nature." (Francis, OAC)

However, this did not mean that nothing occurred. Barb, OAC, was aware of occasional inappropriate behaviour.

"I think all kids at one point probably don't understand it and then they react by making fun of them and stuff. I definitely feel against it. I would be completely against it."

The picture changed between the earliest years and secondary school. In the earliest grades, minimal teasing and insulting behaviour was reported. In later elementary grades, discriminatory behaviour was noted, with more occurring in special education school settings. By the secondary level, it was clear that inappropriate behaviour toward peers with disabilities occurs when a special class is a part of the school. Teasing and insulting occurred in the inclusive secondary school, but with much less frequency.

How about the issue of advocacy? Do typical peers advocate for peers with disabilities? As discriminatory behaviour occurred at some level in both inclusive and special education school systems, interviewees were asked if they would intervene in the face of harassment of peers with disabilities.

Responses in special education model schools indicated that, whereas some might intervene and advocate, most would not.

"Some of my friends make fun of people, but I just tell them it's not nice. I don't want to be part of it." (Alex, grade seven)

"Well, Greg knows that he's made fun of terribly...I just don't get in the way. I just try not to say anything." (Dawn, grade seven)

Secondary students in both school systems were aware of discriminatory behaviour, and it was a significant reality in the special education setting. The majority of typical students interviewed stated

they would intervene and advocate for their peers with disabilities. The response of Jane, grade nine, was typical. "Yeah, like, I mean, although I've seen a lot of people insulting them and doing all kinds of stuff to them, but usually I try to stop it." Some others, when noting discriminatory behaviour, told us they would elect not to advocate. As Owen, OAC, said, "Sometimes I sort of feel like it, but I never acted on it."

In inclusive secondary settings, students responded much as did their peers in the special education model secondary school, except that all students indicated advocacy would be their response. Karl, grade 11, was typical. "I could try to correct them. Some people might call them retards or something, and that's wrong."

Other responses suggested that the students in the inclusive setting were trying to understand why discriminatory behaviour existed and what might be done about it.

"And the ones who laugh at them, they're just immature." (Rose, grade 11)

"Other kids don't know enough about him. They're not educated that way. We could educate other people." (Karl, grade 11)

Two findings are of interest here. The first is that students are aware of when peers with disabilities are being tormented and recognize the unfairness. The majority would actively intervene and advocate for peers. Others would walk away without doing anything. The second point of interest is that all inclusive-setting secondary students would intervene in some way. Some even suggest possible sources of discriminatory behaviour and how to work to eliminate them.

This overall discussion of the three issues related to social relationships between typical students and their peers with disabilities is based only on this one study and a modest number of students. Caution must be used in generalizing results. More studies are needed to test whether similar patterns are found in other schools. The questions underlying this study are simply too important to rely on one study.

Given that caution, findings support inclusive structures more so than they support special education structures in schools. More friendships were reported at elementary and secondary levels. Less inappropriate behaviour was mentioned. Typical students in both system types recognize the unfairness of peers with disabilities being tormented, but some, particularly in the special education situation,

would not intervene.

If one accepts that students in the two systems are simply people who have no inherent bias against peers with disabilities, one must ask what causes the differing relationships. Could it be, at least in part, that the way the two systems are structured creates the differences?

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