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Student attitudes toward peers with disabilities in inclusive and special education schools

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Attitudes of elementary and secondary students toward peers with disabilities are explored. Reference is made to friendship, abusive behaviour, advocacy, and acceptance of special education or inclusion, as supportive of education of students with disabilities. Thirty-one students from special education schools and 21 from inclusive schools were interviewed. Qualitative investigation of interview data was undertaken. Findings indicate development of friendships and lower degrees of abusive behaviour in inclusive schools. Though students in both systems advocated for peers with disabilities, advocacy was more routine in inclusive settings. Most believed the approach taken by their schools to be appropriate for education of peers with disabilities. Findings were related to structural aspects of the schools, to social learning and social referencing theory, and effects of special education and inclusive structures on school life.

Inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms is a controversial international educational reform. It is a distinct departure from the special education model, which calls for integration into regular classes for only some students with disabilities and retains the possibility of segregation if progress is seen as insufficient. Advocates of inclusion consider this a flawed approach. Under inclusion, recourse to settings other than regular classrooms would not occur except in exceptional instances, such as danger to oneself or others. Special education, in addition, is criticized as not resulting in regular classroom teachers taking responsibility for students with disabilities. Instead, many look to special education teachers to assume functional ownership. Inclusive education calls for regular class teacher ownership of all students, although collaboration with others for planning and programme delivery is encouraged.

It is argued that inclusion is in keeping with social justice and human rights. Advocates of inclusion consider it to be the right of all students to be educated in the company of typical peers, and believe that inclusion will result in stronger social and academic achievement, advance citizenship and the development of a stronger community (Staub & Peck, 1994; Karagiannis *et al.*, 1996; Bunch & Valeo, 1997;

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Bunch, 1999). Advocates of special education, who view specialized settings as necessary, reject such arguments.

One aspect of education is friendship. Advocates of inclusion believe that friendships between students with disabilities and typical students develop best in inclusive settings. Downing and Eichinger (1996) cite Bishop and Jabala in concluding that, for any student, one of the most important outcomes of education is 'that he or she will have friends'. Forest and Lusthaus (1989) agree. They suggest that friendship leads to a variety of other positive outcomes: 'Children's cognitive growth and social development are optimized when they feel they belong and have relationships with others, especially friends' (p. 45).

Downing and Eichinger (1996), however, note 'the dearth of literature on the development of friendships in inclusive settings' (p. 141) when it comes to supporting those who advocate inclusion. A confounding factor is research pointing to negative effect on friendship development for students with disabilities in regular classroom settings.

Simpson (cited in Wood, 1998) states 'Students with disabilities traditionally have lower positions of status than their nondisabled peers, and this pattern of rejection holds both in general or special classes' (p. 152). Martlew and Hodson (1991) detail higher levels of teasing/bullying than experienced by other children and fewer friends for students with mild learning difficulties in regular classes. Thomas (1996) and Hutt and Gibby (1979) agree and note that this group of students becomes the butt of jokes, taunting and teasing. Both sides of the discussion bring up issues around friendship and abusive behaviour, with both arguing that the literature supports their position. The literature is anything but clear and definitive.

Both sides of the discussion find flaws in the arguments of the other. Interestingly, both sides may be seen as basing their views on the same theoretical positions, social learning and social referencing. As Bandura (1986) states, 'many behaviours are learned quickly through observation and imitation of others'. Inclusive advocates believe typical peers provide students with disabilities with positive role models. They argue that placing students with disabilities with similarly challenged students provides role models for unacceptable behaviour. Advocates of special education believe typical students will tease and insult peers with disabilities. This view seems to arise from social learning theory as well. Typical peers will observe peers with disabilities as not exhibiting acceptable behaviours and reject them on that basis.

Related to both reactions is social referencing theory, which suggests that one gains information about a social setting from a familiar, trusted person. If a teacher, for instance, responds to a student with disability in a manner marking that student as different from typical students, typical students also would see the student as different. This would lead to lack of friendships and, perhaps, abusive behaviour, and, thence, to students with disabilities needing to be protected by a special setting. If a teacher accepts a student with disability, typical students would also be accepting. This would lead to students getting to know and accept each other. In both scenarios, typical students learn their behaviour through observation and imitation of peers, and through reference to authority figures.

It is clear that opinion is divided on whether regular class placement of students

with disabilities has a positive or negative impact on friendships and related dynamics. The picture is obscured in that inclusion is a recent approach and so much of the available literature speaks of the affect of integration, a part of special education, and not to the affect of inclusion. The theoretical frameworks mentioned suggest opposing possible explanations of why typical students react to peers with disabilities as they do and why alternate educational approaches are advanced.

The present study examines attitudes toward peers with disabilities developed under the special education and inclusive models. Of interest is whether typical students know school peers with disabilities, whether they are friends, whether peers with disabilities are treated appropriately, whether typical students become advocates and whether they accept the model for education of students with disabilities chosen by their school system.

Participants

Participants were elementary and secondary pupils from Grades 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13, ages 6 to 18, based in Ontario, Canada. Participating schools were selected from a special education system (placements for students with disabilities ranging from full time special class to full time integration) and from an inclusive system (regular class only). Two inclusive schools, one elementary and one secondary, and four special education schools, three elementary and one secondary, participated. In Ontario, as a result of the British-North American Act establishing Canada as a nation, all areas of the province support two types of publicly funded school systems, one with students from all sectors of the community (public) and one drawing from the Catholic population (Catholic). Both school systems in this study are located in south-central Ontario. The special education system is a public board and the inclusive education system a Catholic board. Both have urban and rural populations. The communities of both support major universities. At the time of this study, median annual incomes in the inclusive education and the special education system areas were \$27,556 and \$27,230, respectively. Total student numbers in each system were 29,729 in the inclusive education system and 25,248 in the special education system. Approximately 8% of students in each system were identified as disabled. Both systems support provincially required anti-discriminatory and anti-bullying programmes.

Each school was requested to select three typical students randomly from class lists for each grade. Typical was defined as capable of working with adequate success within the provincial curriculum, not identified with a disability and working acceptably in the English language. Thirty-five students were interviewed and 21 retained from the special education elementary schools compared to 12 interviewed and 12 retained from the inclusive elementary school. Nine special education secondary students were interviewed and nine retained, with students representing all secondary grade levels. In the inclusive secondary school 10 students were interviewed and nine retained. All those not retained either had a disability themselves, or were from elementary grades not requested as part of the study (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of participating students by type of school system

Grade level	Special education model	Inclusion model
1	3	3
3	5	3
5	6	3
7	7	3
9	2	3
10	2	
11	1	3
12	1	
13	3	3
Total	30	21

Method

Interviews were conducted by a teacher experienced both in elementary and secondary schools, and in both special education and inclusive systems. Guide questions framed interviews. Questions were of two types: general questions designed to assess knowledge of disability and overall attitudes of students toward peers with disabilities, and more specific questions if a student with disabilities was placed full or part-time outside the regular classroom. In a preamble to the interview the interviewer stated to each participant, 'I'm interested in people learning in school and making friends in school. I'm very interested in how children with a disability get along in school'. Disability was defined during the preamble as follows:

Do you know some people can't see well? Well, not being able to see well is a disability. We don't call just wearing glasses a disability. But, if you really have trouble seeing things, that is a disability. The same with being able to walk. If someone really has trouble walking, that is a disability. The same thing with being able to hear, being able to talk, being able to behave, and being able to do school work well.

Interview responses were coded and categories of interest developed using the constant comparative method.

Four categories emerged:

- friendships (whether typical students and peers with disabilities were friends);
- abusive behaviour (whether typical students harass peers with disabilities);
- advocacy (whether typical students defend peers with disabilities);
- exclusion-inclusion (whether typical students accept the model under which peers with disabilities are educated in their school systems).

Categories are discussed individually and selected quotes provided.

Friendships

Considerable difference existed between students in special education schools and

inclusive schools in terms of whether students had friendships with peers with disabilities and whether students with disabilities had friends in general.

Students in special education elementary schools tended to know of one or more students with challenging needs, but few indicated friendships. Many did not know the names of students outside their own classes. When asked if they knew any peers with disabilities in their own classes the typical response was:

Brigette, grade 7 None in class. There's two kids in grade eight.

However, friendships between regular students and their peers with disabilities did exist. Bert, grade 1, said 'Dave is one of my friends'. Conversely, other students in grades 1 and 3 did not know whether peers with disabilities were friends with other students. However, by grades 5 and 7 students stated that peers with disabilities did have friends, but that these friends were other students with disabilities:

Brigette, grade 7 They all hang out together. Like, you see them, they all run out in this big group and they go out and play in the field together.

Lorne, grade 5 Q: Does he have a lot of friends too?

A: I think he probably does.

Q: You don't see them because they spend most of their time in a special class?

A: Ya. I think they spend all their time there.

This general picture extends to the secondary school level:

Ken, grade 13 Everyone knows who the special people are and they'll talk to them if they approach them ... But I think most of their friends are within the [special] classroom.

Joyce, grade 9 Q: Do you see them around?

A: Ya. It's just usually in the 100 hall though, 'cause that's where their classroom is ... But I see them with plates of food that's different from everyone else's and they don't eat in the cafeteria.

No secondary student claimed friendship with any peer with disability. Secondary students also believed that students with disabilities had friends, but that these were other students with disabilities. The following points summarize findings on friendships in special education model schools:

- Structures such as grouping and special treatment of students with disabilities acted as barriers to relationships.
- Social and academic separation existed between regular students and peers with disabilities with few exceptions.
- Typical students believed peers with disabilities had friends, though these friends were other students with disabilities.
- Few instances of awareness of friendship status beyond school were noted.
- Instances of friendships were limited to the early elementary level.

In comparison in inclusive model schools, degree and quality of friendships were

significantly different. All elementary students interviewed were friends of peers with disabilities and were aware of the quality of friendships their friends had in class, school, and the larger community:

Carol, grade 1 I know she has lots of friends because some of her friends come and play with her. And when I play with her, I see lots of her friends.

Katie, grade 7 Because she's with us, so we consider her as our friend, and she considers us as her friends.

However, friendships did not exist in every case:

Kevin, grade 5 He's got people who he thinks are his friends, but they're using him, kind of. Because he's got very good Pokemon cards. And I think his friends just act like they're his friend to get his cards. They, like, use him.

Elementary students in the inclusive system know students in other classes by name and are aware of their friendship status. They have valuable insights into the quality of friendships and know when they are real or contrived. There is evidence of awareness of friendships in the larger community.

These patterns repeat at the secondary level:

Marilyn, grade 9 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 quiet. He's like everyone else.

Interestingly, a number of students in inclusive schools commented on effect of inclusion on development of friendships. Carol, grade 1, said she wanted her friend Alexandra in class 'because you make new friends' in the regular class. Sue, grade 13 student, noted, 'I think it's a good idea for them to get more interaction. 'Cause I know, with Suki, she didn't have as much interaction with other people as she would've liked. So that gave more opportunity'.

Plentiful evidence of friendships between typical students and their peers with disabilities was apparent:

- elementary and secondary students claimed friendships with peers with disabilities and knew names of peers with disabilities in their own and other classes;
- students were aware of the status of peers with disabilities in the school as a whole;
- students evidenced familiarity with friendship status beyond school as well;
- students were aware that some friendships were superficial or contrived to the advantage of one or more typical students;
- some students connected the inclusive model and development of friendships.

Abusive behaviour

Concern with teasing and insulting of students with disabilities often is advanced as reason to place students in segregated settings. There, the theory suggests, they will be protected from unpleasant encounters. Proponents of inclusion believe that no

such protection will exist in a special education environment, but that inclusion will reduce teasing and insulting behaviour.

Abusive behaviour was a part of life in elementary schools under the special education model. However, such behaviour was not generalized. The majority of elementary students indicated they were not aware of such behaviour.

Ted (grade 3), Ed (grade 5) and Brian (grade 5) all indicated that teasing and insulting were not elements in their classes. Brian responded, when asked whether it was appropriate to call other people names, 'No. Everybody's a human being'.

Nevertheless, other students were aware of teasing and insulting. Such behaviour appeared not uncommon. Dawn, grade 7, said 'Some people do make fun of him 'cause he has disabilities', describing the behaviour as covert and behind the individual's back. Lorne, grade 5, agreed that name-calling occurs at school, saying 'People I know call them different things'.

At the secondary level higher degrees of abusive behaviour were apparent. Only one secondary student, Patty, grade 11, stated unequivocally that people in her group did not name call.

Other students mentioned negative interactions, often stating that they halted such behaviour if they could. Jane, grade 9, said that some students would tell peers with disabilities 'something that's not true' simply to take advantage of them. Such behaviour was both overt and covert. Joyce, grade 9, knew people who dismissed peers with disabilities saying, 'Oh, he's retarded. He shouldn't be in here'. In Ray's (grade 10) experience, abusive behaviour was hidden at times, but was in public view at others. Tormentors liked 'to see how they react They talk to them and say things to see how they react'.

Abusive behaviour at the secondary level took a variety of forms: name-calling, embarrassment in public, whispering and active rejection. Most secondary students indicated awareness of abuse by typical peers.

Abusive behaviour was an acknowledged aspect of life in elementary and secondary special education schools. However, it did not involve all typical students, being limited to relatively few individuals, particularly at the elementary level. Overall:

- the majority of students from grade 5 to OAC mentioned instances of abusive behaviour;
- teasing and insulting were both overt and covert;
- abusive behaviour tended to take the form of name-calling, public embarrassment, whispering and making faces when those with disabilities were nearby, though less direct harassment also was noted;
- teasing and insulting behaviour was attributed to student focus on differences in peers with disabilities, opportunities to create situations humorous to other typical students, and sheer dislike;
- a number of students indicated disagreement with abuse of peers. At the secondary level some students indicated that they would intervene to halt such behaviour.

Abusive behaviour was not apparent to any extent in inclusive schools, although

minor evidences of such behaviour were present. The picture was starkly different from special education schools:

Rose, grade 11 Our school is pretty respectful with the disabled and they don't make fun of other kids going in there.

Almost no suggestion of abuse among elementary students was found, although two were mentioned. Kevin in grade 5 spoke of typical peers pretending friendship to get Pokemon cards. Desiree, grade 5, speaks of rejection of a particular student with disability who 'may pick her nose ... She's not treated very well by some other students who say "Eew. Go away" '.

However, the response of most inclusive school elementary students is best described by Diane, grade 7:

Well, my opinion is I don't think that some of the students should make fun of [students with disabilities] because it's not really their fault. She was born that way, born with a disability.

Comments of secondary students were almost entirely in defense of their peers with disabilities and the value of inclusion. Edith, grade 9, indicates that some students 'are sort of paranoid by the fact that [a particular student] has a disease and you really don't know what to do'. Wayne and Rose (both grade 11) refer to students who joke at the expense of students with disabilities as 'immature'.

The majority of inclusive model secondary students offered comments such as:

Francis, grade 13 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. People just don't realize what they're saying.

There appear to be a small number of students in the inclusive schools who would abuse peers with disabilities. There are many more who would not tolerate such behaviour as it violates the principles of inclusion and relationships with others:

Although abusive behaviour was known in inclusive schools, it was a minor element:

- abuse, when it did exist, was reported to be both overt and covert;
- abusive behaviour tended to be credited to immaturity and lack of knowledge;
- a number of elementary and secondary students indicated they did not accept abuse of peers with disabilities.

Advocating

Some students defend the rights of peers with disabilities to be in regular classes. A common form of defence is to be reactive, to speak to and correct the abuser. A second form is proactive, wherein peers ensure that abilities and challenges of those with disabilities are understood through educational programmes. Comments indicating an advocacy position were almost entirely restricted to the secondary level.

As noted, abusive behaviour in the special education schools did not appear to be

a dynamic in the earliest grades. Few students in higher elementary grades indicated they would take advocacy positions:

Alex, grade 7 Some of my friends make fun of people, but I just tell them that it's not nice. I don't want to be part of it.

An approximately equal number of others said that they declined such roles, electing a passive response:

Laura, grade 7 Q: What do you do when you hear somebody calling them names. You ever do anything?

A: No. I just go on.

The situation was quite different at the secondary school, almost half the students interviewed indicating they would actively intervene. In most instances, reaction was in direct response to witnessed abuse:

Miro, grade 13 Ya. I tend to interfere. I'll just walk up to my friends and just say 'Leave him alone'.

Sara, grade 10 I would defend the person because it's not fair that they're getting picked on for something that they can't help.

Owen's (grade 13) response introduced a passive response category much like that noted at the elementary level. Other responses of this type appeared in grades 11 and 13:

Q: Did you ever feel inclined to say 'I've gotta end it here, because this is wrong the way they're treating the kids?'

A: Sometimes I sort of feel like it, but I never acted on it.

Secondary and higher grade elementary students in special education schools indicated knowledge of inappropriate behaviour directed at peers with disabilities. While a number indicated they would prevent such behaviour, an equal number would not:

- half of the secondary students indicated they would actively intervene in instances of abusive behaviour;
- half would do nothing;
- the need for advocacy was not mentioned in early elementary grades. At higher elementary grades it either was not mentioned or preference for passive response was noted.

The need for advocacy was not mentioned by inclusive model elementary students. Responses from secondary students tended to be proactive:

Karl, grade 11 I could try to correct them. Some people might call them retards or something and that's wrong.

Some students dismissed as immature those who teased or insulted their peers with disabilities, but also corrected them or took other action:

Wayne, grade 11 There's some kids that are immature, but we just ignore them. If

you ignore them, they don't say anything ... If it got really bad, I'd probably tell the bus driver or principal.

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

An insightful suggestion by a few secondary students was that educational programmes to reduce abuse be introduced:

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

One OAC student extended this suggestion to the teacher level:

Sue, OAC We should be working with teachers on how to address issues. Some teachers are great, but some they ...

The picture that developed in inclusive schools is summarized below:

- abusive behaviour did not appear a factor at the elementary level;
- secondary students reported few instances of abuse. Advocacy responses tended to be phrased hypothetically, implying that they were not based on witnessed events;
- the majority of secondary interviewees indicated that they would actively intervene;
- a subset of secondary students would not intervene directly, but would tell a person in authority;
- secondary students suggested that abuse was related to immaturity and/or lack of knowledge, and recommended that such behaviour could be reduced through an educational programme.

Acceptance of exclusion-inclusion

Interviewees accepted with little question the structures developed in their schools for peers with disabilities, though some special education school students questioned the value and effect of segregation:

Brigitte, grade 7 Q: So they don't have a regular class like yours?

A: No. They join other classes for gym. That's all.

Q: What do you think about that?

A: I think it's a good idea because if they can't keep up in regular classes, then they should have special teachers to try to get them to understand it because they might have more troubles than other people.

Alternately, some students pointed to value of regular classroom experience as a complement to special education:

Lorne, grade 5 But it would be better if they could do half time in our class. And another time in a special class.

Laura, grade 7 Q: So, somebody was in grade seven and they had a learning

disability problem, they wouldn't be in your class. They'd be in that [special] class. What do you think of that idea?

A: I think it's pretty good because, so then they'll understand what they're learning better if they're in a class that has extra help.

Q: How do the kids themselves feel about being in there?

A: I think they feel sort of weird because people call them names. Like they're dumb and stuff.

Despite the fact that students in the special education secondary school did not spontaneously question segregation, when asked, some found concerns with it. Also, when asked, they found positive aspects to peers with disabilities being placed in regular classes for part of their learning:

Joyce, grade 9 I think it would be good because you have all these kids who are sitting there and they're making fun of them because they have a disability. I just think it would be better. 'Cause then you could get to know them better if they were in regular classes.

Views in special education schools were mixed regarding appropriateness of separating typical students from their peers with disabilities:

- elementary and secondary students were supportive of segregated placement for peers with disabilities believing they needed help available only in special classes;
- the help available would result in more learning than in regular classes and they would 'catch up' with regular peers;
- a number of students suggested that peers with disabilities might not enjoy being selected out by special class experience and that their learning there might not be the best;
- a subset of students believed experience in both special and regular classes would result in peers with disabilities getting the help they needed, and also in interaction with regular students.

In inclusive schools, inclusion was the norm for all, with the exceptions of short-term withdrawal for some elementary students and a resource room at the secondary. Special classes simply do not exist, so few mentions of them were made. Those few comments, however, indicated that special placement was inappropriate:

Karl, grade 11 Q: [Do] some think Ralph should be in a segregated school for the blind?

A: Other kids don't know enough about him ... If they got to know him, they might change their views. I believe he should be here.

Francis, grade 13 Q: Does Lucy have friends in your class?

A: Yes. It's just like anyone. I don't think they belong in a special school ... I would be very upset if they decided to move them out of this school into another school.

Barb, grade 13 Q: What do students think of peers with disabilities going to the resource room at times?

A: It kind of gets some negative connotations toward it. 'Cause, you know, if you're going into a separate room, it's not really what everyone else is doing.

No student suggested that peers with disabilities should be anywhere but in regular classes. The one secondary student who felt a peer with disabilities should not be in her class due to the academic nature of the work, did not suggest special placement, but simply placement in a less academically orientated regular class.

A number of students indicated that they understood many peers with disabilities required assistance in regular classes. They were comfortable with such supports and participated in their provision:

Katie, grade 7 She sits beside me. Sometimes she needs help with a certain word. What does it say or what does it mean? Or she doesn't understand a question, what the work is asking.

Francis, OAC Ernie has been in a few of my classes throughout high school in English and Religion mainly, and they write the same test almost. They participate the same. They're marked a bit differently overall.

- inclusive school students rarely mentioned segregated provision and, then, only to reject it;
- need for a secondary resource room was questioned on the grounds that it separated students;
- students accepted that included peers with disabilities should work at their own pace;
- students believed it was part of their responsibility to support peers with disabilities with their work.

Discussion

Findings indicated differences and similarities in attitudes of typical students toward peers with disabilities in terms of whether students attended schools operating under special education or inclusive models of education.

Though advocates of both types of education service delivery for students with disabilities claim that their approach is superior in the social area, a search of the literature did not yield research studies focused on differences and similarities between inclusive and special education models in the social sphere. The present study explores effects of special education and inclusion, and suggests that differences and similarities exist. Why they exist will not be answered by one study. However, sufficient difference was found to warrant cautious exploration of this question.

Friendships

The salient finding in this area is that, in general, students in inclusive schools have friends with disabilities, whereas students from schools with special education

structures do not. Difference in friendships is apparent from grade 5 through secondary levels.

What lies behind this fundamental difference? Student responses point to simple routine contact, in the case of the inclusive model, between typical students and peers with disabilities, and lack or disruption of contact under the special education model. As Katie, grade 7, states, 'Because she's with us, so we consider her our friend, and she considers us her friends'. In the special education schools students noted disruption or lack of such contact. Grade 5 Lorne, who attends a school supporting a special class, in response to a question asking why he did not interact with peers with disabilities said, 'I think they spend all their time there [in the special class]'. Taylor (grade 3) attends a school with a part-time special class/withdrawal programme. He comments that two students in his class 'always go out' and 'read different books than us.'

Such comments underline the reality that social and academic interaction between typical students and their peers with disabilities are markedly different in schools with different structures for educating students with disabilities, and that these structures have an effect on friendship development and related dynamics. They also have before them the examples of authority figures, teachers and administrators, who do not question these different structures.

In this study, when educational service delivery is based on encouraging contact in all aspects of school life, friendships develop. When structures separate students due to differing abilities, friendships tend not to develop.

Abusive behaviour

Those who favour inclusive settings and those who favour special settings differ on which setting results in less abusive behaviour toward students with disabilities. The findings of this study support those who argue for inclusion. From grade 1, students in inclusive schools had friends with disabilities and abusive behaviour was rare. From grade 5 onwards, in special education schools, fewer friendships and more abusive behaviour existed.

In the special education schools, 14 of 23 students from grade 5 to grade 13 mentioned that they had witnessed abusive behaviour. Catalysts for the behaviour were differences apparent in peers with disabilities, opportunities to entertain other students at the expense of peers with disabilities and sheer dislike of peers with disabilities. In the inclusive schools, only 3 of 15 students over the same grades had witnessed typical peers abusing peers with disabilities.

How might this difference between differently structured systems be explained? Again, the answer may point to the structures themselves. One system has structures that bring students together. The other separates students on the basis of disability. Students in the inclusive system find little inappropriate behaviour directed at peers with disabilities. The majority of students in the special education system have personal knowledge of such behaviour. Students in the first system report that they have friends who are disabled. Such reports are rare in the second system. The analysis which comes most readily to mind is that we do not tease and insult those

whom we know, but we might with those we do not know and whom the system centres out as different. While a necessarily tentative analysis, the evidence points in this direction.

Advocating

Little mention of advocacy by typical students for peers with disabilities was made prior to grade 7. From that point on, obvious differences appear. A number of students in the special education secondary school (five of nine) indicated that they would react as advocates if witnessing acts of abuse. The others would ignore it. Similar findings were made at higher elementary grades. All students in the inclusive secondary school indicated that they would advocate directly or would report to school officials were they to witness inappropriate behaviour.

A note of caution is required here. The issue of personal accountability in the face of abusive behaviour is a sensitive topic. It may be too sensitive for some students to speak forthrightly in response to interview questions. Interpretation of advocacy or non-advocacy between students in the two systems must be cautious given this possibility. A minimal analysis is that responses of a significant number of students in both systems suggested awareness that abusive behaviour toward peers was inappropriate and unacceptable, and that it was their responsibility to intervene.

However, not all determined to intervene as advocates. The difference between special education and inclusive groups in terms of ignoring witnessed instances of inappropriate behaviour is important. The number of students from the special education system who chose to ignore and walk away in the face of abuse by typical peers was high.

The question of why some students choose to defend peers with disabilities and some do not is left to future studies. The present study points to the difficult fact that only some students in special education schools choose to be proactive and others to be passive when peers with disabilities are abused, whereas students in inclusive schools choose routinely to be proactive.

Acceptance of exclusion-inclusion

Both inclusive and special education students accepted the educational approach for students with disabilities approved by their school systems. The reasoning behind this acceptance was diametrically opposite for the two groups of students. Those in the special education system believed that peers with disabilities could not keep up in a regular class, that they needed a special setting and that special education settings were effective in answering their educational needs. Some believed that peers with disabilities would 'catch up' to regular class peers as a result of special class experience. They were reinforced in this belief by school structures and authority figure examples that separated students on the basis of achievement.

In inclusive schools there was belief that the most suitable place for peers with disabilities was the regular classroom. In regular classrooms, all students would come to know and value each other, and make friends. Students in inclusive settings

also realized and accepted that they had some responsibility for supporting their peers with disabilities to do well socially and academically. Little such recognition of shared responsibility was apparent among students in schools with special education structures. School structures and authority figure examples again come into play here.

Finally, whereas no student in an inclusive setting questioned regular class placement, and some strongly rejected segregated placement, some students in special education model settings questioned segregation. These students perceived value in all students being together at least part of the time. A few went so far as to question the instructional effectiveness of special settings, in spite of the model put before them by teachers and administrators:

Owen, grade 13 I think they should almost go to both [regular and special education settings]. 'Cause I don't know what they're learning. But they can't be learning much

Finding that students accept that with which they are familiar was not surprising. It is human nature to accept that which characterizes society around you and is accepted by those in positions of authority. Of interest, in light of this, is that some students in special education schools questioned special placement to the point of complete exclusion of classroom interaction with typical peers.

In summary, under the acceptance of exclusion-inclusion, dramatic differences in the views of students in the two systems were found. Full- or part-time segregation was accepted by one group on the basis of perceived academic need. A few members of this group also suggested that some regular class experience would be of value. The inclusive group supported regular class placement for all without question.

Notes on theory

It is important to explore the roots of attitudes of any group if educators are to provide the most positive education structures possible for all students. Certainly, it is important to do so when the same theoretical positionings are employed in support of diametrically opposed educational approaches. Such tangled webs are confusing and must be untangled.

Social learning theory states that we learn from observation and imitation of those around us. Social referencing theory states that we look to familiar and trusted figures for guidance in our actions. We have, in this study, two quite different educational responses for persons with disabilities. One approach creates structures that separate students in order to provide appropriate programming for all and to protect some students from inappropriate typical peer behaviour. The findings of this study indicate that the result of this modelling through special education structures is the disruption of development, abusive behaviour as a school dynamic and less than routine choice to advocate.

The inclusive approach models that it is beneficial to educate all students in regular classrooms. This study notes that all inclusive system students believed friendships develop, that learning goes on for all, that an amount of abuse, although

comparatively minimal, occurs and that advocacy is routine. A number of students reject the idea that students should be separated for any reason.

These findings imply that educators must be aware of the effects of system structures on social development, and that social learning and social referencing theory may be of value in understanding the effect of structures. If one of the major objectives of education is to promote acceptance of difference, the structures developed by schools become of central importance.

Closing word

Conclusions of this study must be tentative. They conflict directly with that side of the literature that suggests that students with disabilities learn effectively and, at the same time, are protected by special education structures from the slings and arrows they would experience in regular classrooms with typical peers. This, also, is one study of limited size and involves only two school systems. In addition, reports of attitudes must be taken with a grain of salt as some respondents may withhold their true views and answer to please the interviewer. Finally, this study did not attempt to validate statements made about social networks in the school. This is left for future investigations.

Nonetheless, this study suggests support for those who argue that inclusive education compared with special education results in more positive social relationships. This holds true whether one looks at formation of friendships, abusive behaviour or advocating for peers with disabilities. The closing discussion suggests that these differences do not lie in the students themselves, but in the educational arrangements characterizing their education and that of their peers with disabilities.

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