Gary Bunch

ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD PEERS WITH DISABILITIES

A recent study indicates considerable differences in attitudes of students in special education model and inclusive model elementary and secondary schools toward peers with disabilities. Most marked were differences at the secondary level. Findings were based on one on one interviews with students in grades 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and secondary graduating year in Canadian schools.

Friendships:

In Special Education model schools students were aware of peers with disabilities but social and academic separation was apparent. Secondary students knew few peers with disabilities by name and friendships were rare. Elementary students did know the names of some peers with disabilities when integration programs were in place. Friendships were uncommon.

Students in inclusively structured schools knew the names of peers with disabilities. Academic and social relationships were the order of the day. Many elementary and secondary students indicated that they were friends of peers with disabilities. Some students were known to pretend friendship in order to gain some type of advantage.

Teasing and Insulting Behaviour:

Teasing and insulting of peers with disabilities was a dynamic in Special Education model schools, particularly at the secondary level. Name calling, planned public embarrassment, and negative physical reactions to the presence of peers with disabilities were reported.

Teasing and insulting behaviour was attributed to a focus on differences, opportunities to set up situations humourous to non-disabled peers, and active desire to avoid association with peers with disabilities.

Teasing and insulting behaviour occurred in Inclusive model schools, but was described as rare. Those who tormented peers with disabilities were considered to lack maturity.

Advocacy for Peers with Disabilities:

Many students in Special Education model secondary schools reported that they actively intervened when peers with disabilities were tormented, though some chose not to be involved. Elementary students reported few instances where advocacy was required.

As few instances of tormenting behaviour were reported in Inclusive model schools, responses tended to be hypothetical, "if I were to see something", scenarios. Within that context secondary students indicated that they would intervene personally or report an incident to authorities. A number of interviewees suggested that peers acting inappropriately might be helped by an educational program which discussed disability and its effects. A subset volunteered the view that some teachers might benefit from such a program as well.

Support for Exclusion or Inclusion:

Students in Special Education model schools supported full time or part time segregation for peers with disabilities. Students with disabilities were believed to need help which could be provided only in segregated environments. Few questioned the Special Education model. None suggested an Inclusive model.

Inclusive model students rarely mentioned placement other than in the regular classroom for peers with disabilities. It was accepted that peers with disabilities could succeed at their own level and that it was a peer responsibility to support them in their work. The few mentions of Special Education placement indicated that such placement was inappropriate and not needed.

It is hoped that this study soon will be reported in the literature in fuller form. The recentness of completion has not permitted the time needed to draft a full report. Findings presented above are prelimary in nature.

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Dr. Gary Bunch is a professor and researcher at York University in Toronto. He has been working tirelessly for decades to create the possibility for full inclusion for all. Presently, he is completing a critical new piece of research which confirms with hard data all the hunches and wonderful anecdotal evidence which most of us are familiar with. It confirms that there are dramatic attitudinal changes as a result of inclusive education. The final formal paper is still being created, but Gary has released this preliminary report. We hope it is useful to you. Contact Gary directly if you want to be informed about when the full and final report is completed.