

## ***DISABILITY & STUDENT HEALTH AND WELL-BEING: IMPACT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION***

***Canadian society in general*** and the education system in particular do not appear aware that inclusive education is good for the health of persons experiencing disabilities. In my view, the school system approaches education and disability as a problem of “fitting in” academically and behaviourally. Fitting in is so valued by educators that many learners experiencing disabilities continue to be placed in segregated special education settings on a full or part-time basis. They are not seen as not learning in regular classes and as not benefiting from being educated with their typical peers. In popular educational thought segregation is what will benefit these students. It is believed that they will learn more strongly in the company of others about whose learning teachers have concerns. For instance, it is believed that learners with intellectual concerns will learn better when with other learners who share these concerns. Likewise, learners with behavioural or other concerns will learn better and behave better when educated with similar peers instead of mainstream students.

***These beliefs run counter*** to common sense and the increasing strength of research and teacher experience that prove the opposite. Students experiencing disabilities do better academically and socially when educated with their typical peers, and less well when educated in segregated settings. This point, especially as it applied to learners experiencing intellectual concern, was emphasized by Susan Hall, Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission in a presentation to educators and trustees at a recent Ontario Ministry of Education conference. She made no bones about it. She stated that many educators continue to support segregation when they know there is a stronger answer. Another incorrect belief is that the learning of other students will be lessened by the presence of learners experiencing disabilities. Again, research and experience prove that the learning of the typical peers is not lessened by well-designed inclusion. In fact, there is evidence that these students are learning lessons about themselves and humanity not taught in their textbooks.

***These incorrect, but convenient, beliefs***, however, are not the most significant reason for change to inclusion of all learners in the regular classrooms of any school. Academic learning is not the most significant aspect of choosing special education and segregation for many or inclusive education. The most important point is that all learners are healthier when they learn with a diverse set of others and develop social networks.

***Solid links have been made*** between learning with their typical peers and the health of learners with disabilities. Acquaintance and friendship with a variety of others means social capital, acceptance by others, for all children. Halton, Kandyce, and Russ in the Healthcare Quarterly of 2010 remarked on the “explosion” of interest around the concept of social capital saying that valued resources lie within and are by-products of social relationships. They go on to note “Social relationships also impact health and are included in social determinants frameworks through constructions such as social cohesion, social support and social exclusion”.

*In any comparison* of the special education and inclusive education models, two differences stand out. Social cohesion and the development of social support networks is connected to inclusive education and interaction with typical peers, whereas special education is characterized by distancing from the typical peer group and impoverished social networks. There is little opportunity to develop social capital unless one is among one's typical peers.

*Underwood* (2004) of Ryerson University is outlining a case for inclusive education as a determinant of health states:

*The benefits of inclusion evident in the educational research are improved teaching, and better academic, social and behavioural outcomes. These benefits logically provide other benefits outside of school. These include access to better jobs, and thus income and food security and reduced poverty, as well as access to social networks through school and work and thus better housing, reduced risk of violence and increased access to health care.*

*This beneficial domino effect* of inclusive education has been recognized by the United Nations in its calls for inclusion of learners experiencing disabilities in community schools. Even before this positive UN policy was formulated, at a 1989 Toronto meeting convened by the Marsha Forest Centre, a group sat down to consider how to find a stronger social response than the special education model to meet the academic and social needs of learners identified with disabilities. By the end of the evening, the term "inclusion" had been introduced and agreed on as a way to signal, with particular reference to the role of education, an equitable position in society for all. The concept of "inclusive education" now has spread around the globe. Though some use the term rhetorically as a theoretical or attitudinal concept not calling for regular classroom placement for all, others have realized the importance of regular classroom membership. They know that practice can follow theory, because they are doing it.

*Society can change* for the better. International research increasingly is documenting that education under the special education model not only causes social isolation, but also does not result in the levels of academic achievement possible through inclusive experience. There is negative impact on the health of this group of learners. Around the globe, for example in places such as India, Malta, Italy, Croatia, and parts of Canada, governments and educators are moving toward inclusive education because they see the benefits for all.

*Unfortunately*, not nearly all governments and educators are willing to change from past practices. The kindest explanation is that they are unaware of the benefits of inclusive education. How this can be possible, given the growing research and experience documenting benefits of inclusion, is difficult to understand though. A less kind possibility is that governments and education systems prefer the status quo to the effort required to put more progressive policies and practice in place.

Blog, April 2011