A LESSON PLAN FOR BELONGING:
INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IMPARTS MORE THAN JUST THE CURRICULUM

A sense of belonging is something that all of us want and need. We want to be surrounded by those who love us, by friends, and by the members of our larger community. Our family, of course, is the closest to us. They are the first who love us and give us an unconditional sense of belonging. But there is more to belonging than the family. To feel complete and accepted we must be a part of the larger community. We need friends who care for us just because they like us. Without a circle of friends we feel incomplete. There is an emptiness that a family alone cannot fulfill. Not to be accepted, not to be included as a member of the wider community, means a life of loneliness and pain for which there is no cure. Society has known about the negative effects of loneliness for many years. Many medical and sociological studies have documented and re-documented the negative effects of loneliness. Mother Teresa may have understood these effects intuitively. She once said, "Loneliness if the most terrible poverty".

David Pitonyak commented on the connection of disability and loneliness in his January, 2010 paper *"The Importance of Belonging"*. He emphasized that many people experiencing disabilities live lives of extreme loneliness and isolation. Many depend almost exclusively on their families for companionship. Some have lost their families and turn to their care workers for support and a sense of belonging. Since support workers come and go in one's life, the resulting social emptiness can be devastating. This is shat happens for too many people experiencing disabilities for whom finding good friends has been a lifelong challenge.

Our circle of friends, especially when we are young, is made when we enter school. Next to the family, school is the most important agent of society in determining whether you develop a sense of belonging to your community. School teaches us more about how our society works and how to get along with each other than does anything else. Teachers believe that students go to school to learn. Children know they go to school to make friends. School is where we all first develop our sense that we belong to the larger community beyond our family. It is not unusual to have good friends we met in school as part of our lives.

I say "all" above, but the school system does not have a strong record for creating a sense of belonging for many young people who happen to experience disability. Unfortunately, the way our schools tend to operate makes outsiders of many young people experiencing disabilities. Learners with disabilities are held at arm's length by most school systems. To me, this is not the fault of the teachers. Teachers have been taught in their professional preparation programs and by their teaching experiences that learners experiencing disabilities need special treatment, special teachers, special busses, special programs, educational assistants, and segregated environments in which to learn effectively. All of these are barriers to the development of friendships with other children. Though there are limited exceptions, most school systems model behaviour that convinces other students that their peers with disabilities are to be treated differently. Nothing on the above list of special supports works to create a sense of belonging to the

larger community. Everything on the list acts to create barriers between young learners experiencing disabilities and their potential friends. How do you develop a sense of belonging when your interaction with your typical peers is limited at a time when you need it to be maximized? How can you learn how your typical peers operate? How can they learn that you operate very much as they do?

These are significant questions. Earlier I mentioned that David Pitonyak wrote of people experiencing disabilities who live lives of loneliness and isolation when they no longer have a family to which they belong. Once the family is gone, they become dependent on paid support workers. It is tragic that many come to see these workers as their friends because they have no one else. It is not the fault of the support workers. It is the fault of a society that distances its members from some people due to perceived differences.

An answer may be found in school systems that bring all the youth of a community together in equity during their socially formative years. Educators practicing inclusive education have done away with most of the barriers to friendship and belonging that are common in school systems clinging to the special education model. This model may have been acceptable in the past when we felt it was the only possible answer. As our understanding of the dynamics of the special education approach and the values of educating all learners together have increased, we have learned that segregation in school has unfortunate and unnecessary results. We know that an inclusive approach which recognizes need for the optimum individual academic achievement for all students and also need for optimum social achievement as well, avoids many of these results. Taken together, the dynamics of inclusive education increase the potential for development of a strong sense of belonging in all students. Additionally, research is documenting the fact that learners experiencing disabilities reach higher academic and much higher social achievement levels when educated in inclusive settings. There also are spin-off benefits for the typical students. That is why the United Nations has turned to inclusion as a stronger response than that of the special education model in meeting the needs of all learners.

My friend and colleague, Crystal Chin, who has physical challenge, describes her regular classroom experience as "present but not participating". She observed her typical peers interacting, becoming friends, and developing a sense of belonging in the classroom and to the school community. Crystal's experience was one of watching all this happening but not being part of it happening. Perhaps it is missing out on these earlier and continuing social experiences that lead to loneliness and isolation in later life. If one is placed in the role of observer rather than participant in equitable social interactions from an early age, perhaps a pattern is set for life.

It would be unfair to suggest that early school experience is the only, or the major, determinant for development of a sense of belonging. However, it is not unfair to say that experience at school impacts all students. For most, that experience contributes to development of a sufficiently strong social network, and the social skills to

intermingle, to escape loneliness and isolation in later life. For others, particularly in the case of disability, the experience may be less successful.

Almost all Canadian school systems now claim to be inclusive. Some are, and good things are happening. Most continue to believe that some students cannot benefit from being educated with their typical peers. They continue to support special education structures and methods that, for most, do not lead to a sense of belonging. Ask people who have experienced special education if this is not their experience.

It would improve many lives if parents and others were to pressure politicians and others to move to inclusive education for all without playing word games. We know inclusion leads to a stronger sense of belonging to the school and to the larger community. If we start now, we can change the future.

Article, 2010

THE INS AND OUTS OF DISABILITY AND EDUCATION

I have been wondering for some time about the often-strained relationships between schools and parents when it comes to choosing the special education approach or the inclusive approach to disability and education. The special education approach is based on a range of placement settings in response to the needs of students experiencing various types and degrees of disability. Each placement is further and further away from the regular classroom and the other kids. This means some students will be in regular classrooms on a full-time basis, others will have their school day split between regular and special classrooms, others will spend the full day in special classes, and still others will be in special schools. Under this model a student can be moved to a more segregated placement if the academic or social achievement of the student is considered to drop.

The inclusive education approach believes all learners, regardless of type and degree of disability, should be educated in regular classroom settings. Under this approach the regular classroom is the student's permanent home and supports are delivered there through a team of regular class teachers, special education teachers, and educational assistants. Other specialists, if needed, provide their services in, or as close as possible, to the regular classroom. A student is not moved from the regular classroom setting on the basis of academic and social achievement. The special education model has been with us since the 1960's. It has close links to the medical and psycho-educational models. Inclusive education is the new kid on the education block. It reflects United Nations educational policy that every learner has the right to placement in the regular classes of neighbourhood schools.

There is something about people's response to inclusion that bothers me. The people of whom I am thinking are the increasing number of parents who want their children to be educated in regular classrooms, and the large number of educators who see a range of segregated special education placements as more appropriate. In too many instances the relationship of educators and parents has been one of "does not play well with others". That is a tragedy when the education of any learner is at stake.

These two groups, parents and educators, are key in reaching a decision on school placement. As education is a government matter, such educational decisions are guided by government legislation and regulations. Prevailing Canadian provincial and territorial government policy on reaching a decision on placement is that educators and parents collaborate. For instance, the Ontario Ministry of Education follows a three point policy: a) Under regulation 181/98 the regular classroom is to be considered as the placement of first choice for all students, b), if the school system believes that the regular classroom would meet the student's needs and c), if the placement is in keeping with parental wishes. In the case of British Columbia, the policy is much the same, except that parents are offered a consultation regarding the school system's choice, during which they may express their choice.

It is clear in both jurisdictions that the preference is for regular classroom placement. The wrench in the works is that the government allows segregated placement

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