

DISABILITY, EQUITY, & SOCIAL JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS

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**WHAT CAN A TEAM DO TO FURTHER EQUITY & UNDERSTANDING
AROUND DISABILITY?**

- **DEVELOP SKITS**
- **PRESENT MUSICAL MESSAGES**
- **CREATE A SCHOOL EQUITY MURAL**
- **ASSESS ACCESSIBILITY IN THE SCHOOL**
- **CELEBRATE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH
DISABILITIES**
- **PLANT A PEACE GARDEN**
- **FOCUS ON PEACE RESOLUTION IN THE SCHOOL AND
PLAYGROUND**
- **RECOGNIZE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION WEEK**
- **PRESENT A DEBATE ON ISSUES**
- **INVITE A SPEAKER WHO EXPERIENCES DISABILITY**
- **INVITE PARENTS TO SPEAK ABOUT LIVING WITH A FAMILY
MEMBER EXPERIENCING DISABILITIES**
- **AND A MILION OTHE THINGS, LIMITED ONLY BY THE
IMAGINATION OF STUDENTS**

THE PEBBLE AND THE POND EFFECT

A PLAYFAIR TEAM:

- ***EDUCATES THEMSELVES***
- ***EDUCATES THEIR PEERS***
- ***EDUCATES THEIR TEACHERS***
- ***EDUCATES STUDENTS IN OTHER SCHOOLS***
- ***EDUCATES THEIR FAMILIIES***
- ***EDUCATES THEIR COMMUNITIES***

Though school systems across Canada are attempting in various ways and with varying degrees of progressive action to create positive and equitable academic and social inclusion for all, the area of students experiencing disabilities remains a particular challenge. We know from our experience and research work that inclusion of all students in regular classrooms is the most powerful effective way to develop equity in schools. However, we are aware that not all agree with our understanding of inclusion. There are differing definitions of inclusive education, depending on where you live in Canada:

- That inclusive education is an attitudinal or philosophical set. It does not mandate a particular educational setting
- That it is a set of services and does not mandate a particular place in which service shall be delivered.
- That it is both an attitudinal/philosophical mindset and that this mandates placement in a regular classroom setting
- And so on.

These varying views result in different student placement practices under the banner of inclusive education across Canada. Placements range from full-time regular classroom experience supported by services brought to the classroom to full-time segregated experience in centers equipped with special teachers and materials. Whether all of these choices of placement may be considered inclusive is a continuing discussion.

We do not intend to debate what inclusive education means in this presentation. Our concern is developing equity for students experiencing disabilities and their typical peers whenever those students are in the same school. In this presentation we focus on a student leadership strategy, PlayFair Teams, which has the objective of informing students, teachers, and other audiences to issues of **DISABILITY – SOCIAL JUSTICE – INCLUSION**. We know PlayFair Teams to be a powerful agent in developing understanding of these issues. We also know that it has the added strength of creating friendships among typical students and their peers experiencing disabilities where few friendships existed previously. Segregated placement of any group of learners does not lead to friendships with any other group of learners.

PlayFair Teams is unlike other strategies aimed at bringing learners experiencing disabilities together in equity with their typical peers with which we are familiar. We find too frequent a “giver-receiver” quality in relationships developed in many schools. A giver-receiver model by its nature cannot be an experience in equity. As you will see during this presentation, PlayFair Teams is designed to welcome volunteer participants from among all students in a school in equitable co-operation, regardless of any differences that may exist. Each Team member contributes collaboratively from her/his own individual strengths in creating understanding of **DISABILITY – SOCIAL JUSTICE – INCLUSION**. Their audiences are themselves, other students, their teachers and administrators, other schools, their families, and their communities. PlayFair Teams is an all-student, all school activity. It is not a special education program.

In our presentation we shall describe what a PlayFair Team is, what a Team may look like, what school administrators and teachers think of PlayFair Teams, and what the Team effect is on its members. Lastly, we shall place PlayFair Teams as one component of an equitable school infrastructure recognizing learners experiencing disabilities as full members of their school community.

The following is an overview of concepts behind PlayFair Teams, how it is structured, and how elementary and secondary students respond having been part of a Team or having attended a Team presentation.

PLAYFAIR TEAMS

Disability – Social Justice – Inclusion

- **A school-based infrastructure strategy to support interaction of students with and without disabilities in an equitable environment.**
- **An opportunity for student leadership in an area of social justice and education for all.**
- **An opportunity for schools to demonstrate their intent to promote positive change.**
- **An opportunity for enlightened impact on schools and communities surrounding schools.**

What Is a PlayFair Team?

A **PlayFair Team** is a leadership opportunity for schools. In our experience, it is rare for a school to set about development of a long-term program aimed at acting on issues surrounding social justice. Yet, this is exactly what schools talk to their students about through the curriculum. Most often there is talk without action. What is missing is giving students opportunities to be involved in social justice, close to home and close to their community. What better way to accomplish this curricular aim than to become activists in the school and in the community around the school?

PlayFair Teams is positive response to the unfortunate fact that people experiencing disabilities are not yet fully accepted members of our society. Many students with disabilities are segregated from their able-bodied peers in school systems. Even when they are placed in regular classroom settings in the company of their typical peers, they tend to be relegated to the fringes of the classroom society. They often remain unknown in their communities, have restricted friendship circles, experience teasing and bullying, and are treated as second-class citizens. Adults with disabilities face high unemployment rates and low wages when employed. Housing is a continuing concern. Even in Canada, a wealthy, progressive nation, people with disabilities are marginalized in society. The larger society, and our local communities, is not aware of the situation of people with disabilities in our midst. One of the hopes for our education system is that it will strengthen our understanding of each other. We need to work at this. It will not be realized otherwise.

PlayFair Teams is aimed at informing communities about the situation of people with disabilities. It is aimed at disability, social justice, and community.

PlayFair Teams is leadership opportunity for students. It may sound trite to say "The students of today are the leaders of tomorrow.", but it is true. If we wish for equitable treatment of Canadians with disabilities in our communities, we must look to the leaders of tomorrow and support them in social justice for all.

Most people do not personally know a person with disability. They may interact with them occasionally at a superficial or instructional level, but that is not getting to know them. This is certainly true in our schools where typical students rarely have opportunity to mix with their peers with disabilities. They know of them. They see them in the hallways of their schools, on the street, or at the mall at times. But they do not know them at a personal level. They do not know how often their fellow citizens with disabilities are ignored, avoided, and marginalized in their communities. When asked, they will say that their fellow students with disabilities have friends, but that those friends are others in their special classroom. The way to change this is to become involved.

Scattered through this brief discussion are the words of students who have become involved.

¹PlayFair has been an experience like no other. It was definitely nothing like I had expected. When I was first told about the nature of PlayFair, my initial thought was that as the Grade 12's, we would be leading the special ed students in developing a presentation. As soon as I learned, the true experience was for me. I'd discovered the joy of meeting new people. Despite physical and mental disabilities, the special ed students are like any other teenager. During this experience, we talked, played, laughed, and cried.

Michelle, Grade 12

¹ Please note that when the student voice is used, no attempt was made to alter grammar or spelling.

There is an old saying with a great deal of truth in it.

**Show me and I will forget.
Tell me and I may remember.
Involve me and I will understand.**

PlayFair Teams involves both typical students and students experiencing disabilities. Together, our students are a powerful tool, one which can change the lives of many Canadians with disabilities. We teachers can help them to realize the power they have to create change.

- Our students know what is fair and what is not fair.
- Our students, with strong adult example and guidance, have the potential to sensitize their communities with regard to disability and social justice. They know what playing fair means.
- **PlayFair Teams** is a community education strategy to mobilize the youth of Canada in advancing disability, social justice, and inclusion.
- **PlayFair Teams** is social justice, playing fair, in action.
- **PlayFair Teams** is schools looking outward and contributing to their communities.
- **PlayFair Teams** is students, now and in the future, becoming leaders for social justice.
- **PlayFair Teams** is the Canadian character of accepting all with equity, generosity, and personal responsibility in action.

Playfair gave me the opportunity to meet and get to know 12 different, amazing people, all of who taught me something. The things I've learned about the process of a presentation and about myself are lessons that'll stay with me for life.

Florence, Grade 11

What Does a PlayFair Team Look Like?

A **PlayFair Team** looks like any group of elementary or secondary students. It is a group, which varies in size from school to school. Here are a number of points about what a **PlayFair Team** looks like and does.

A PlayFair Team is:

- A group of volunteer students of any age or grade. The number of volunteers determines the group size.
- A blended group with and without disabilities.
- A group with two advisors - a Teacher Advisor from the school and a Community Mentor for Disability from the community to connect the **PlayFair Team** to the community
- An extra-curricular activity like any other extra-curricular activity. It is not a one-time activity, but a continuing part of the school program.
- An opportunity for personal leadership.
- People working together to achieve a positive goal.
- An opportunity for contribution to the community around a school.
- An opportunity to understand and practice social justice and equity.

The numbers do not matter. Even one student is enough to tell stories, sing songs, recite poems, or do a one-person skit about social justice. The need is to form a **Team** and to be active. Participation on a PlayFair Team is not a requirement. No-one should be told to join a Team because someone else thinks it would be good for them. If we tell our students they should join a PlayFair Team, their participation will not be voluntary. Such an action is not one that will lead to equity.

To never ever make fun of people that go to special ed because they are just as important as the rest of us.

Shalini, Grade 3

We evaluated what students think of PlayFair Teams and its message. Below are responses from grade 3 and 4 students who were part of an audience that watched an elementary school PlayFair Team presentation. These are followed by reflections from secondary school students who were members of PlayFair Teams.

Elementary School:

- After watching the skits, what do you think a PlayFair Team means?

S 1, Grade 3, age 9: I think it means you should play fair without cheating.

S 2, Grade 3, age 8: It means people play together and to be friends.

S 3, Grade 4, age 9: I think the play fair team means not to bully others and to treat

everyone fairly.

S 4, Grade 4, age 9: I think it means people have to play fair.

- What do you think one main message of the skits would be?

S 1, Grade 3, age 9: Treat everybody the same way like you treat other people.

S 2, Grade 3, age 8: They should respect the children.

S 3, Grade 4, age 9: To play fair.

S 4, Grade 4, age 9: Help someone if they are hurt.

- What is one thing that you have learned from watching the skits?

S 1, Grade 3, age 9: There are many different people in the world that should be treated good.

S 2, Grade 3, age 8: I have learned from the skits that you have to help people when they are hurt.

S 3, Grade 4, age 9: I have learned to treat everyone fairly.

S 4, Grade 4, age 9: go and play fair and don't make fun of others if they go to special ed

Secondary School:

Crystal (student experiencing disability)

During the eight months of PlayFair I had a lot of fun with my peers writing our own scripts as well as developing new friendships. We learned to work together as a group but more importantly, I think that each of us learned to get to know each other as individuals rather than just judging the first thing we see. As a group, we not only saw each other's strengths and weaknesses but we also learned how to incorporate everybody's talents into one skit. We realized that we needed to accommodate and help each other and everything that we accomplished was not only the work of one person but the work of everybody in the group.

Megan (student experiencing disability)

While during play fair, I learned a lot. I learned how to be more open with people; after all, people are always more than willing to talk as long as you give them the opportunity too. The most important and perhaps the hardest thing I learned was self confidence. I have to believe I can do something and know that I may have physical

challenges but it doesn't mean that I'm incapable of doing things, I can do anything I set my mind to.

All my life, I was judged, put down and left out of things just because I am physically disabled, but for once I'm not. I guess it's true. People really have no clue how powerful they really are. So, I would like to thank the helpers in play fair for everything they have done for us and for becoming the best friends, which is way more than any one of us could every ask for. Their kindness, compassion, understanding, and the fact that they are always there for me and treat us like a normal person means the world to me and all the other kids in play fair. They respect us and care about us and don't put us down in any way. That's a really great thing to have.

Sonia (typical student)

When I first joined PlayFair the ideas the committee put forth to we they were great. It showed a lot about the human condition here at Johnson, because everyone had this ideal that high school students especially in a locale such as Rexdale have a total disregard for others, for matters of importance. But here was this group of people who thought they could make a difference by creating awareness – it was refreshing. Somewhat idealistic I thought to myself, but refreshing none the less. As a child I was exposed to everything in life, every type of person, a vast variety of differences and for this I have always been so grateful. In life, I think, one can only truly be comfortable in their own skin at all times when we realize the only thing that separates us from the others, is ourselves, our fears. And it is illogical to think that by doing so somehow we will ever get anywhere in this society. When I was in grade school the disabled children were never segregated from us. Some of us took to this much better than others unfortunately. I remember two people in particular, Christina and Victor.

Christina was a year older than me, she could not walk, she has been born with a mental disorder, but she could however communicate well. At lunch time everyday the teacher would elect someone to take her around school and I must admit volunteers were scarce. Somehow I was lucky enough to have done some "required" volunteering for most of my grade seven year, even if I didn't appreciate it at the time. The greatest feeling in the world is getting to know someone, and seeing them better their lives. At the beginning of the grade eight year, I got to see Christina take her very first steps. She had had corrective surgery over summer. While it might not have been perfect, far from it even, but I don't think I've ever been happier for anyone in my whole life. Things that I have seen or have happened in my life made me believe in the playfair cause. I thought it would be amazing if we could break down all these barriers, make people approach things with open arms, but is that possible? To me the answer to that question seemed grim but when we arrived at Mary Ward and saw all those students just as we are, working together, it changed my whole point of view. Because now I truly believe that with presentations as powerful and inspiring as the one I was blessed with being able to witness that day, anyone could become enlightened, and would understand the importance. As I do now.

Daniel (typical student)