

DO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES BELONG TO THEIR SCHOOL COMMUNITY?

The Oxford English Reference Dictionary defines "belonging" as "a person's membership of, and acceptance by a group or society".

Are people with disabilities accepted by the society in which they live? I live in the Canadian society and can speak only to that society's acceptance in terms of disability and acceptance. The track record of Canadian society over time is that persons with disability routinely have not been accepted by that society. At best, they have been, and continue to be, sidelined by our society and, as far as we know from visiting many other nations, lack of belonging for this group of students is an international challenge.

A particular example is the education society. For many years the education system has been the vehicle developed to embed young people in our communities. School takes in every child in our society at a young age. School is where the other children in our society where children become a part of their particular communities. School is where they meet their often lifetime acquaintances. School is where all children learn the mores binding their communities together.

All children are automatically included - with the exception of one group - those with disabilities. The history of the global education society has been one of rejection of those with disability. Only recently in Canada's history have most children with disabilities been accepted at all by the Canadian education system. However, this acceptance was been structured to segregate those with disabilities from their peers. These children have been assigned to segregated schools and classes in a system referred to as Special Education. The recent change from the

Special Education Model to the more progressive and accepting Inclusive Education Model has had a degree of impact on Canadian education society in a number of places, but not in others. Though parts of the Canadian education system have welcomed and embraced students with disabilities in regular schools and classrooms, too many children still are placed in segregated settings. There is no sense of belonging to the community when one is segregated from her/his peers. The result of this situation has been commented on by two people who do not know each other, but use the same words to sketch the result of this reality. Pitonyak, an American father and Snowdon, a Canadian researcher describe the future for the majority of these left-out children as living lives of loneliness and isolation within their communities.

Those of us at the Marsha Forest Center support change to Inclusive Education for all. Our experiences promoting Inclusive Education have proved that it can work to the benefit of all students. One of our projects is PlayFair Teams, a voluntary school-based program based on activities involving interested students at the Elementary and Secondary levels. Guiding the program are one or two interested teachers. Our experience is, that the teacher guides should not be limited to Special Education Teachers as many fall back on a Special Education approach without realizing it.

The results of PlayFair Teams are interesting when one thinks about belonging in one's community just as are other students. The following are stories from two persons with disabilities who participated in the PlayFair Teams project. The stories are in their own words. Both Andreas and Jenn were young people diagnosed with disability. Andreas was labeled as having Downs Syndrome. Jenn was

diagnosed as having intellectual concerns. The thoughts in their stories are in their own words, though Andreas asked a friend to help him with phrasing. There may be spelling errors and errors in language usage.

Andreas's Story

I want to share with you part of my life,

School.

I went to St. Gregory's just to learn, but I didn't have friends. I felt sad and alone. My Mom took me under her wing and helped me to figure out high school,

My High School was Bishop Allen in Etobicoke [a part of Toronto].

First the staff put me in the Green Room (a segregated classroom). I felt very frustrated that they made me go there. I was in tears. It wasn't fair being there because I wasn't learning in the Green Room. They didn't want me to learn. The Green Room only had lots of flowers. And only students with disabilities were in the Green Room. It made me feel sad and I felt like I was not like the other students. I wanted to get out of there – a cry for help to get out.

What I did – I talked to the Principal. He was a good guy to talk to. He helped me get out of the Green Room and I went to regular class with all the other students.

When that happened, I felt accepted and I made friends there. After school, I went to the Drama Club and we put on a school play. We did the song YMCA in the play.

I got involved with acting. My passion is acting.

After high school, I went to College. I went to Drama School where I studied plays, like Romeo and Juliet.

I made more friends at Drama School. We had a similar interest in acting. We all went to auditions to be in plays. I got parts for two plays and was on the set of a movie called "Jewel" with Farah Fawcett.

In my life, I am included in many things. I am outside the box. Inside the box is negative and stressful. People are not nice or accepting of other people.

When I audition for a play, it is still hard work, a struggle. People sometimes see a label, they see a disability. They see differences. It is the wrong thing to think about.

I have learned to overcome the struggle by being in focus. I focus. I focus on my career in acting. I have friends like Paul who encourage me. My Mom was really strong. She taught me how to speak out.

In my life, we have more similarities than differences. We just want to be treated like a person, and offer our talents to the world.

(We hired Andreas as National Mentor for Disability on the basis of his acting experience. He became a major part of the Marsha Forest's work initiating schools to the concept of PlayFair Teams.)

Jenn's Story

(Jenn's Story has a variety of grammatical errors. As these were part of her voice, these were not corrected.)

Hi My name is Jenn. I am 23 years old.

I went to a Toronto Catholic high school in Grade 9.

In grade 10 I was introduced to PlayFair Team and what it was all about. Before I got involved with PlayFair Team I felt alone like an outsider. I used my music to get me through the days. I felt like an outsider looking at all the kids in school. I felt the kids looked at me like I was different and would not include me in anything or talk to me.

One day a very special teacher to me asked me if I would like to join PlayFair Team she told me it took part in the mornings and after school. I was very nervous but she convinced me to try and that it would be great for me. I would meet other kids, take part in school activities. I decided I would do it. That was the best thing I could have done for myself. It opened my eyes to show how bad kids with worst disabilities has it and were treated it was horrible.

After joining PlayFair Teams I found myself with friends that did not label me with a disability. They oversaw it and to know me as a normal kid.

What a feeling. I still have kept some of these friends till today.

It gave me the confidence to join some sports team and other clubs in School. I even went so far as raising money and took part in a Wake A Thon. I was even invited to Ryerson University speak about PlayFair Team. Hosted by the Marsha Forest Center. People come from all around the world to be introduced to the program. It opened my eyes a lot more. How important PlayFair Team is. Without PlayFair Team kids would not get a chance to have a close to normal life everyone needs Friends, and to have Relationships from teachers. On down to the other kids without disabilities that is very important to all kids.

It is obvious from Adreas's and Jenn's stories that they gained a great deal from their PlayFair Teams experiences. They no longer were lonely in their school communities. They were accepted by their non-disabled peers and no longer social outcasts. They no longer lived lives of loneliness and isolation amongst their peers.

It is important that school has two aspects. One is academic study and the other is the social aspect of building community. Teachers tend to believe that students are in their classrooms to learn Reading and Writing and Arithmetic. The students believe that school provides opportunity for all students to get to know each other and have friends.

The next brief blog/video will describe PlayFair Teams. It also presents a research study of PlayFair Teams and the impact on elementary and secondary students. The study has two parts. The first is how an audience of elementary school peers respond to watching a PlayFair Teams presentation. The second is what voluntary members of secondary PlayFair Teams, both those with disabilities and those without say they learned from their PlayFair Team experience.

Pitonyak, D. (2010). *The Importance of Belonging*. Blacksburg, Virginia, United States.

Snowdon, A. (2010). *The Sandbox Project*. Faculty of Health, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

2 – Series on Inclusive Education

Gary Bunch & Jack Pearpoint