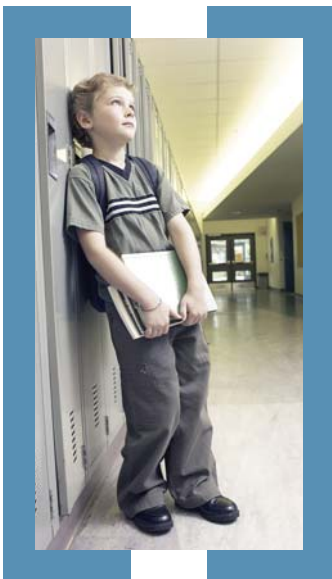JUDITH WIENER

FOSTERING SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE
IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

EN BREF Le concept d'inclusion, ou d'intégration, dépasse la simple présence d'élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage dans des classes régulières. Il implique une participation véritable, des réalisations correspondant aux habiletés et l'acceptation sociale par les enseignants et les pairs. Selon beaucoup d'indications, toutefois, il arrive souvent que ces élèves ne soient pas acceptés par leurs pairs – ils sont fréquemment tourmentés, leur statut social est inférieur et ils ont moins d'amis intimes que leurs camarades de classe sans problèmes d'apprentissage. Les enseignants qui voient ces élèves comme un défi plutôt que comme un fardeau, qui croient qu'ils peuvent influer sur les relations avec les pairs, et qui instaurent des stratégies éprouvées pour prévenir leur persécution par les pairs, rehausser leur statut social et favoriser l'établissement d'amitiés estimées – ces enseignants-là aident les élèves avec des difficultés d'apprentissage à bien s'intégrer à la classe.

"I think that school, for Jeff, is an absolute nightmare, in every possible way that you can imagine. He absolutely despises school and everything that goes with it. And the kids at school…he just identifies those children with school. It's the thing that he has to do. He has to be in the presence of these kids six hours a day." (Parent of 13-year-old boy with LD and ADHD)

Inclusion of students experiencing learning disabilities is a challenge educators have been facing since the 1990s, when Canadian provinces enacted regulations requiring placement of these students in the least restrictive environment possible. In many jurisdictions, this inclusive placement involves their presence in general classrooms, as opposed to truly providing them with the full experience afforded to typically developing children. In 2006, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) indicated that true inclusion is about the presence, participation, and achievement of all students.[1] Presence refers to the location (normally general education classroom) where they are educated; participation refers to the quality of their experiences in that classroom; and achievement refers to their acquisition of academic and non-academic skills in accordance with the curriculum and their individual needs. Although possibly implied in the notion of participation, UNESCO does not explicitly discuss a fourth component of inclusion – acceptance by teachers and peers.[2]

WHAT DOES ACCEPTANCE MEAN IN THE CONTEXT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

The opportunity to have positive peer relationships is a key aspect of inclusion of students with learning disabilities. In spite of this, there is considerable evidence that these students are often not accepted by peers – they are more frequently victimized by peers, have lower social status, and have fewer close friends than their typically developing classmates.

"How does it make you feel when kids bully you?"
"Lonely. Makes me feel embarrassed and sad…angry."
"What do you do?"
"I just walk away."
"What do you do with all that anger and sadness?"
"I let it out when I get home…or I just deny. I go upstairs to my room, close the door, and start screaming and shouting at the top of my lungs."
"Does that help?"
"No."
(11-year-old boy with LD and ADHD talking with interviewer)

Peer victimization, or bullying, involves one or more children performing negative actions towards another child repeatedly and over time. These negative actions may involve both physical and verbal aggression (including verbal taunts, malicious gossip, spreading rumours, cyber-bullying, racial and sexual harassment, and homophobia) and typically involve an imbalance of power where the victim is not able to defend himself or herself.[3] Children with learning disabilities are more frequently victims of bullying at school than typically developing children.[4] Although safe school policies generally target physical bullying quite effectively, verbal victimization occurs frequently and is especially devastating for children with learning disabilities.[5] Peer victimization is associated with school absenteeism, stress-related health problems, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts and suicide.[6]

"He would come up to talk to me and ask me a question, and it wouldn't even have anything to do with anybody else; it could be a math question, it could be a science question, and there were tears in his eyes.…he was very, very depressed. He wasn't happy. He was never smiling. He was always very close to tears, and at that point I called his mom and let her know that I was very concerned that he could be depressed to the point where he's going to be contemplating other thoughts…He had no self-esteem." (Teacher of 13-year-old boy with LD)

Social status refers to the extent to which students are liked by their classmates. Those who are especially well-liked are referred to as popular, those who are actively disliked are referred to as rejected, and those who are not actively disliked but generally ignored are referred to as neglected. Most, of course, fall somewhere in the middle. Peer rejection is a major risk factor for social adjustment problems in childhood and adulthood, and children with learning disabilities are more apt to be rejected and neglected by peers than typically developing children.[7]

"This girl right beside him moved her chair as far away from him as she could and she kept moving it over…so she was totally, with her body language and everything, removing herself away from him. I see the looks that they shoot him – like, 'you're weird'…" (Teacher of junior age child with LD and ADHD)

Friendship is a reciprocal dyadic relationship – two children are friends only when both believe that they have a close and positive relationship. During elementary school, friendship typically involves frequent companionship, such as playing together at recess and sitting together at lunch. In addition to companionship, children who are friends help each other, validate each other's accomplishments, and as they get older, become intimate (i.e., disclose feelings and secrets). Although friends typically experience some conflict, in stable friendships both children have strategies for resolving those conflicts. Having a close friend is a very important part of development.[8] Children who are friendless are more likely to be victimized by peers and to have many social adjustment difficulties. Children with learning disabilities have fewer reciprocated friendships and less stable, lower quality relationships than typically developing children.[9]

They all use me…for my games and stuff. So, I just stay here and wait for someone to come over, "Can I play your Playstation?"…Fine, use it! All I want is someone to just play with at least…I don't care. (10-year-old boy with LD)

WHAT TEACHER ATTITUDES FOSTER ACCEPTANCE?

Greg was a 10 year-old-boy whose experience influenced my ideas about the impact of teacher attitudes on the acceptance of children with learning disabilities. He was in Grade 5 when I met him in my role as a school psychologist. Although he was eventually diagnosed with learning disabilities and ADHD – inattentive type, this was the least of his problems. Greg was a tall, physically attractive student who was disliked and had no friends in his classroom. Peers had actively physically and verbally victimized him since he was retained in Grade 1, to the point that, by the time I met him, he was withdrawn and depressed. He was especially upset about other students calling him CN-Tower – he saw the reference to his height as an insidious way of referring to the fact that he had 'failed' a grade – and was very concerned about school inaction when other boys beat him up on his way home from school.

Unfortunately, his Grade 5 teacher was extremely bothered by his inattention, disorganization, and passivity and communicated her concerns, verbally and non-verbally, in the classroom and staff room. The victimization, and Greg's depression, got worse throughout Grade 5.

By contrast, Greg's Grade 6 teacher viewed Greg's difficulties as a challenge and decided to take active steps to improve the situation. He liked and respected Greg, developed a trusting relationship with him, invited him to join the basketball team, praised him for his effort as well as his achievement, focused on his strengths, and ignored his inattention and disorganization. He made it clear that bullying of any student would not be tolerated. He used any resource he could think of to find helpful strategies, including consulting the school psychologist and developing a collaborative relationship with Greg's parents. By the end of the school year, Greg was no longer depressed, the other students did not victimize him, and he had made one close friend.

STUDENTS WITH LEARNING AND BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES IN CLASSROOMS WITH TEACHERS WHO HOLD INTERVENTIONIST ATTITUDES HAVE A HIGHER ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT AND ARE BETTER ACCEPTED BY PEERS.

Paula Stanovich and Anne Jordan would describe Greg's teacher as interventionist. Consistent with the findings from their research, Greg's Grade 6 teacher believed that Greg's peer acceptance difficulties were at least in part due to an interaction between his learning and behavioural difficulties and the way he was treated in the classroom. He was convinced that he could help Greg change his pattern of achievement and social interaction, and he used every means he could think of to do so. Stanovich and Jordan have shown that students with learning and behavioural difficulties in classrooms with teachers who hold interventionist attitudes have a higher academic self-concept and are better accepted by peers. They also found that teachers' interventionist attitudes are influenced by school norms; teachers are more likely to have interventionist attitudes toward children with learning and behavioural difficulties if school administrators hold similar attitudes.[10]

"Each one of Simon's friends, for whatever his or her own reasons, is a kind of kid who is willing to overlook Simon's eccentricities and accept him for what he is. Each kid he plays with… is a kid who seems to be able to see through to Simon's sense of humour, and his willingness to sort of do fun things, and also is willing to overlook the fact that Simon really needs to have situations be his way in order to be comfortable." (Parent of 10-year-old boy with LD)

WHAT STRATEGIES SHOULD EDUCATORS USE TO FOSTER ACCEPTANCE?

As discussed above, children with learning and behavioural difficulties are more apt to be victimized by peers, have rejected or neglected social status, and have fewer reciprocated and lower quality friendships than typically developing children. Although students placed in general education classrooms for most of the day are slightly less likely to experience these peer difficulties than students placed in self-contained special education classes for at least half the school day,[11] there is considerable variation in acceptance among integrated classrooms.

In one of my studies, I identified a split Grade 4/5 where students with learning disabilities were as accepted as typically developing children. We did intensive observations in this classroom in order to find out what the teachers were doing to contribute to this acceptance.

The **composition** of this exemplary inclusion classroom was 30 students, 10 with identified learning disabilities severe enough to be designated for self-contained class placement, and one whose parents had refused identification and placement. All the children were of the appropriate age to be in Grade 4 or 5. Although this small elementary school only had enough students for one classroom per grade, they created two split Grade 4/5 classrooms so that the children with learning disabilities would be the same age as their classmates. Administrators and teachers chose the typically developing students for this inclusion classroom carefully; they had found through experience that middle achievers with nurturing personalities were the best classmates for students with learning disabilities. Although the students with learning disabilities were identified in accordance with Ontario regulations by the school district Identification, Placement, Review Committee (IPRC), the teachers actively avoided discussion of this identification.

Two **teachers** were assigned to the inclusion classroom, one with a master's degree in special education. Both they and the school administrator were highly committed to inclusion and had interventionist attitudes. The teachers enjoyed co-teaching, supported each other, and problem-solved together to find ways to teach and include every student.

The inclusion **classroom** was in a double-pod that was previously designated for two open-concept classes. The space allowed for various teaching configurations including small group work, and one teacher teaching one or two

students while the other taught a lesson or monitored seatwork for the remaining students. These groupings were flexible and fluid; we never observed one teacher working exclusively with the students identified as having a learning disability while the other worked with the typically developing students.

Several aspects of the **teaching process** facilitated the full inclusion (participation, achievement, and acceptance) of the students with learning disabilities. Both teachers had trusting relationships with all of their students. They liked and respected them, let them know they were available if they wanted to discuss problems, and communicated that they believed all of them could learn.

- The teachers used similar-ability grouping for skill instruction in language arts and mathematics, and mixed-ability cooperative learning groups for content subjects such as science and social science. The similar-ability skill groups were formed on the basis of specific skills (e.g., who is confused about regrouping in subtraction, who is now ready to learn long division) as opposed to overall achievement. The mixed-ability groups were carefully crafted to create groups of students who worked effectively together (e.g., inattentive and disruptive students with calm, focused, and confident students).

- Cooperative learning activities were carefully designed to ensure that students with learning disabilities could contribute meaningfully and would learn from the experience. Good readers might be assigned to read information to the others in the group so that students with reading disabilities might still acquire the content. Students with good research and writing skills might write the initial draft while students who had good handwriting or keyboarding skills would be assigned to complete the final draft. Students who were relatively skilled at drawing, graphics, or oral presentation would assume those roles. In some cases, one of the teachers would pre-teach the concepts and skills to a group of students who needed them so that they could contribute meaningfully to the group as well as acquire the knowledge. Collaboration skills were explicitly taught.

STUDENTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE ENGAGED IN SCHOOL IF THEY HAVE CLOSE FRIENDS THERE AND THEY TYPICALLY MAKE FRIENDS WITH PEERS WHO HAVE SIMILAR PERSONALITIES, INTERESTS, AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT, AND WITH WHOM THEY HAVE LOTS OF OPPORTUNITY TO INTERACT.

- Implicit in the above is a commitment to focusing on strengths. Students were frequently given the opportunity to demonstrate their athletic, musical, dramatic, technological, and artistic talents in addition to their skills and knowledge in more traditional academic subject areas.

- In addition to praising students for excellent performance, both teachers reinforced all students for their effort and for collaborating with and helping others.

- The teachers recognized that students are more likely to be engaged in school if they have close friends there and that children typically make friends with peers who have similar personalities, interests, and academic achievement, and with whom they have lots of opportunity to interact (proximity). They applied the principles of similarity and proximity when allocating seats and organizing groups, and they provided suggestions to parents regarding potential play dates and extra curricular activities.

- They applied the process of social problem solving across the curriculum. Using day-to-day classroom interactions, the teachers taught the students to identify social problems or conflicts; to understand the nature of those problems, including adopting the perspective of others; to come up with a variety of viable alternative solutions; to predict the consequences of implementing each alternative; to decide on social goals; and to figure out the means to reach those goals (including identifying obstacles, ways to circumvent those obstacles, and timelines). They held classroom discussions on the topics of friendship and conflict resolution. Due to their advanced skills in teaching social problem-solving, they did not use a commercial social problem-solving program. Educators who want more explicit guidelines on teaching social problem-solving to students with learning disabilities should consider implementation of an evidence-based program such as Social Life LD.[12]

CONCLUSION

The mere presence of students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms is not inclusion. Inclusion involves meaningful participation by these students, achievement in accordance with their abilities, and social acceptance by teachers and peers. Teachers who view these students as a challenge rather than a burden, who believe that they are able to impact the students' peer relationships, and who implement evidenced-based strategies to prevent peer victimization, enhance social status, and lead to the formation of meaningful friendships, will help students with learning disabilities become fully included in the general education classroom. ▌

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Notes

1 UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), *Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All.* (Paris: UNESCO, 2005).

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