Major Project Report:

Peer Perspectives: Inclusion in Schools

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Abstract

Peer Perspectives: Inclusion in School is a research project designed to gain understanding in regards to the social experience of students with disabilities. The policy at school district, provincial and national levels clearly points to an intention to systemically encourage inclusion in the academic and social realms of these students, yet statistics describe a failing attempt. My intention was to investigate how the current culture and programming within schools reflected this mandate, while creating an opportunity for the participants of my research project to contribute their personal views and examine their role in the creation of an inclusive community. The participants I chose were high school aged women who are members in a mentorship program delivered through Salt Spring Women Opposed to Violence and Abuse. These young women attended a workshop delivered by myself around Person First Language, the Community Living movement and the concept of Inclusion in the context of persons with disabilities. Within the format of my chosen method: “Photovoice,” participants took photos and created captions in response to my research question: “How do you describe the experience of inclusion of your peers with disabilities in school and extra-curricular activities?” They shared the photos in a small focus group, responding to questions about their photos and related captions. I feel that my findings support my initial suspicion that there is progress to be made in creating an inclusive social experience for student with disabilities, yet I was surprised and inspired by the perspectives of the participants. I believe that this research supports justification to develop school programming that creates dialogue around disability, while empowering students to co-create positive culture for vulnerable members.
Major Project Report: Peer Perspectives: Inclusion in School

The Policy and Vision

The Absent Policy. All students should receive education about the importance of inclusion and person first language.

The Vision. The experience of bullying in school is not only traumatizing and painful but can negatively impact the social, economic, psychological and physical development of victims into adulthood (Wolke et al, 2013). Children and young people challenged by a disability are more likely than their peers to become targets of bullying (UVF, 2008) and less likely to experience the support and protection of their peers (Campbell, Missiuna, 2011). In the 2011 Report Card on Inclusion, the CACL identifies that Canadians with disabilities continue to face unreasonable barriers, exclusion, isolation and poverty. In order to become a more inclusive society, we need to give children an opportunity to learn and practice the values that promote a good life for those with disabilities in the classroom and on the playground. Therefore, all school-aged children should receive education about the value of inclusion and person first language. Increasing awareness in children about diversity and de-mystifying disabilities will not only create a safer and more positive experience in school, but will create the building blocks for inclusive communities.

Rationale. Children with disabilities are especially vulnerable to bullying as they may already struggle with self-esteem issues and may also be less likely and or able to stand up for themselves. The same research shows that children with disabilities are up to 3 times more likely to be bullied and that the bullying tends to be chronic in nature and related to the child’s disability (AbilityPath.org, 2014). We know that the need to be accepted and loved can often be just as strong as the basic instinct to survive (Glasser, 2010). Children with disabilities need to feel that they are invited and valued members during playtime at school and having this experience directly affects their wellbeing and development (Hurley, 2010). In keeping with the Ministry of Education’s policy to promote an “inclusive education system in which students with special needs are fully
participating members of a community of learners” (2013, p.2), educators are challenged to find ways to address the social reality for students with disabilities. Creating specific curriculum for students with disabilities does not ensure their experience of inclusion. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere asserts that it is the experience of friendship that is the determining factor in children’s feelings of competence and inclusion (2008). I believe that giving students educational opportunities to learn about the lived experience of their peers who have disabilities could change school cultures and create opportunities for friendship and inclusion.

In the preamble of the 2006 Convention on the Rights Persons with Disabilities it is stated “discrimination against any person on the basis of disability is a violation of the inherent dignity and worth of the human person”. In article 7 of the Convention it urges countries to “take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children”. The social experience of children directly affects their quality of life (King, 1996) and therefore it is our responsibility to teach the values of inclusion and asset-based thinking in the context of those with disabilities.

A policy that directly addresses the social development of children with disabilities outside of the classroom is overdue. Very few studies have been done that inquire directly into the experience of students with disabilities (Broer et. al, 2005) and many families of children with special needs report the need for more advocacy around the issue of bullying (AbilityPath, 2011). “We should focus on eliminating barriers in the physical, social, and institutional environments. This involves activities such as educating others and working to change attitudes so that individuals with disabilities are believed in and are accepted by others” (King, 1996). I believe that by providing children with opportunities to explore the values that encourage inclusion, we can positively influence school culture and create better outcomes for children and adults with disabilities.

The Opportunity
Political Climate and Will - Mobilizing Community. The Ministry of Education’s policies assert that “British Columbia promotes an inclusive education system in which students with special needs are fully participating members of a community of learners” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013), yet children with disabilities continue to live with the threat of being bullied and socially excluded at school. Current studies show that not only are they bullied more often than other students (University of Fraser Valley, 2008), but are also at risk of being overlooked as victims due to disability related barriers in reporting their abuse (Campbell et. al, 2011). Studies show that outcomes of advocacy for these children would include long-term improvements in their quality of life (The Children’s Society, 2011). The purpose of the B.C. Human Rights code is “to promote a climate of understanding and mutual respect where all are equal in dignity and rights” (2014). In order to protect these rights, programming that teaches children the history of the community living movement and the concepts of inclusion and person first language in the context of people with disabilities is necessary for all students.

The social and political climate for the creation of this type of policy is fertile given all the recent attention to the issue of bullying and the growing awareness about inclusion. Pink Shirt Day is a major awareness campaign supported by premier Christy Clark and many other celebrities, politicians and notable social advocates (PinkShirtDay.ca, 2014). This campaign has become widespread, observed heavily in the media and adopted officially by the majority of schools and even organizations such as the RCMP. The Ministry of Education recognizes the devastating effects of bullying and is working to make British Columbia a leader in this important movement (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2014). ERASE stands for “Expect Respect and Safe Education”; it is a campaign that “builds on the province’s Safe, Caring and Orderly Schools Strategy which focused on creating schools where every child feels safe, accepted and respected, regardless of their gender, race, culture, religion or sexual orientation” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2014).
The attention to this issue in the media tells us that it is time to advocate for a policy in the school system that specifically addresses the exclusion and bullying of children with disabilities. Modeling and teaching respectful behavior is an effective way to change the culture of the classroom (Fusaro, 2010); this concept could be used to advocate for a different approach. While current campaigns focus on anti-bullying, advocacy in this movement could focus on creation of policy that reflects the need to educate children about the values of inclusion and respect. Engaging with values improves the learning environment for everybody at school, creating better outcomes and good citizens (Values Based Education, 2014).

Leadership. Children with disabilities need leaders and advocates to rise to the task of creating change within the system. Passionate and effective leadership will be necessary to facilitate the steps in the creation of new policy that aims to protect the most vulnerable students from the damaging experience of bullying. “Leadership is about developing a vision for the future, facilitating change and inspiring people” (Kotter).

Wheatly said, “Relationships are all there is.” The success of this project will be based directly on the relationships created. Skilled communication and empathy are needed to find and include the stories that need to be told in order for meaningful cultural changes to happen. A commitment to co-creation and the process itself will be the focus: rather than attack the system, we need to capitalize on our existing strengths and vision.

The Project

Community Based Action. My large scale vision was based on creating programming for school aged children that introduced them to the concepts of asset based thinking, person first language and the importance of “Inclusion” in the context of the lives of person’s with disabilities. I envisioned creating a learning opportunity that would de-mystify disabilities for students and introduce to them the value of social justice and community mindedness. After learning about asset based community development and participatory action
research, I changed my thinking around design of this project to include more enquiry into the culture of my
target group and more trust that providing an opportunity for awareness around these issues for them could
produce possible self-generated solutions that were yet undiscovered.

After learning about the research method Photovoice I became excited about the possible impact this
method alone could have on the success of my project while also providing me with the research data I need to
fuel further action around this issue. This unique and exciting method employs photography and group
dialogue as a means for individuals to deepen their understanding of community issues (Havelock, Krieg, et
al., 2009). Photovoice research asks participants to create a photo that expresses their perspective on a topic
and to be shared with a focus group alongside captions they assign to their photo. The acronym VOICE
describes the process: “voicing our individual and collective experience” (Havelock, Krieg, et al., 2012).

**Participants.** The research participants I chose are up to 17 high-school aged girls (Grade 11
and 12) who are part of a program through Salt Spring Women Against Violence and Abuse
(SWOVA) called “Pass It On”. The membership of this group is based on applications that focus on
their desire to be part of a program that includes social responsibility and action.

I chose this group as a convenient non-random sample as they assemble weekly, have a culture of open
dialogue and are committed to mentoring vulnerable students and supporting each other in their development
as young adults (S.W.O.V.A, 2014). I felt that with this group, given their existing culture, would have the
communication climate, personal safety and confidence in the group setting to share a rich and reflective
perspective on the inclusion of peers with disabilities.
Community Partner

**Organizational Context.** The organization that I have chosen to partner with for my project is Salt Spring Women Opposed to Violence (S.W.O.V.A.). S.W.O.V.A was created almost two decades ago in response to a horrific act of violence towards a local woman and her daughter. According to S.W.O.V.A.’s website, their unique mission as an organization is to “empower youth and foster respectful relationships through education, skill building, and mentoring; creating leaders of tomorrow” (S.W.O.V.A, 2014).

“Empowering Youth for a Better Tomorrow” (S.W.O.V.A., 2014) is the slogan of this community development and research society whose mandate is to prevent violence and abuse by: promoting respectful and healthy relationships, supporting and enhancing evidence-based prevention education in schools, building and fostering youth leadership, developing solutions in partnership with community and by contributing to research in violence prevention education and skill development (S.W.O.V.A, 2014).

This organization works closely with the school district, schools and teachers to provide programming that has a positive effect on school culture and ultimately the community. The local RCMP acknowledges that these programs have an effect on the incidence of youth violence in the community and counselors, educators and other community leaders recognize the personal and cultural impact of their effective programming (SWOVA, 2014).

**Asset-Based and Sustainable.** The mission of this S.W.O.V.A reflects the intent of my project. S.W.O.V.A. researches the need for and effect of values based education and the life-long and far reaching results of violence and abuse on victims and society as a whole. They create programming that is empowering and positive, using a values-driven approach that is congruent with my intention to facilitate from a place of recognizing and developing strengths. The intended outcomes of their workshops are to reduce violence and encourage respectful relationships, build mentoring bonds and empower students in leadership roles. My
project is based around the desire for similar outcomes. Hopefully, this project will educate participants about importance of asset-based, person first thinking and the process of successful community action.

**Research and Methodology**

**Project Title.** Peer Perspectives: Inclusion Values In School

**Research Question.** How do the youth participants of the “Pass it On” program offered through S.W.O.V.A describe the culture of inclusion around their peers with disabilities? How does participating in an activity designed to promote awareness about the lived experience of peers with disabilities affect their attitudes and behaviors?

**Participatory Action Research and Photovoice.** Action research has been described as conducting research alongside participants rather than for or about them (Bell, Bryman and Teevan, 2012). I believe by enquiring into our role as players in the act of inclusion, we can uncover unaddressed perspectives that may lead to a personal awareness invaluable in the evolution of the culture around us.

The research method I chose for my project is Photovoice. Photovoice is an engaging and effective form of Participatory Action Research. According to the creator of Photovoice, Carolyn Wang:

Photovoice is a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. As a practice based in the production of knowledge, photovoice has three main goals: (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers (1997).

Some of the other possible relevant benefits:

- The facilitator becomes co-researcher with the participants being empowered to create and direct the research content
- Process can empower participants to gain authority to advocate for themselves and community members
- Power in the research process is shared, with the participants leading the dialogue through description and discussion of their perspective
- Creative and engaging process, challenging to participants to experience their culture in new ways
- Skill building: using technology in a new way
- Having a chance to be “heard” and share ideas without judgment
- Learn how images and personal perspective can be used to affect policy and decision makers

(Havelock, Krieg, et al., 2009)

**Data Analysis.** The type of data being produced by this process is that of a qualitative nature, its true source the perspective of the participants on their own culture specifically the experience of their peers with disabilities. The data consists of the photos and the descriptions of the photos including personal interpretation associated with the images they choose to collect. It also includes the sharing and reflection on participant learning and insights recorded during a two hour focus group. This data has a narrative quality to it, as the process itself was based on a search for the participant’s sense of their role in their culture. I believe my final developed findings and theory reflects the contribution of the participants authentically and consistently. My intention was to provide a description of the culture of inclusion from the point of view of the participants, and report their contribution in terms of possible personal, group or systemic action that could be taken to effect change.

**Ethics.** The population that I selected are female minors and therefore vulnerable, and received the most careful treatment in terms of ethics. Participants were invited to contribute to this project voluntarily, invited to ask questions, and given the opportunity to withdraw consent at any time. Informed personal and parental consent were required to participate and the facilitator of the group was involved and present
for all proposed activities. The participants are not identified by name in the project report and are not specifically referenced in my analysis or findings. The purpose of the Photovoice method is to empower the contributors to have their voices heard and their ideas respected without judgment or evaluation. The participants were treated as co-researchers, leading the focus and direction of not only our discussion but the development of theory.

**Peer Perspectives: Inclusion in School**

**Research Project Overview.** Peer Perspectives: Inclusion in School was a one hour focus group where participants shared photos and captions created in response to the research question: “How would you describe the social experience of your peers with disabilities?” All participants are members of the “Pass It On” program through Salt Spring Women Against Violence and abuse and were attendees in a two-hour workshop delivered by myself around the history of the Community Living movement, Person First Language and the concepts of Inclusion in the context of disabilities. During this workshop, we examined different types of discrimination, the effects of labels and ableism, the history of rights movements specifically community living, and the intended and latent effects of marginalization. We also spent time reframing disabilities and exploring the concept of Inclusion as it relates to the community living movement. Four members of the group stepped forward to participate in this research project.

During the one-hour focus group, each participant shared a photo that represented their perspective on the social experience of peers with disabilities. All of the contributions seemed very thoughtful and candid, and I was very impressed with the amount of consideration these young women put into their photos. Many of the views shared during this event supported what I had expected to find, while many statements surprised me; inspiring unexpected realizations about the social reality of students with disabilities. Based on my experience with this group, I feel that we have a lot to learn about the
experience of youth with disabilities and gained confidence in the idea that creating opportunities for dialogue among their community is potentially the most powerful and efficient way to facilitate change.

**Box 1.1** “How would you describe the inclusion of your peers with disabilities at school and in extra-curricular activities?”

**Project Findings.** In response to the research question, (Box 1.1) the participants shared that students with disabilities tend to socialize with one another more readily than with non-disabled peers and that any social exclusion is compounded by a lack of awareness and education around disabilities. Participants also shared the observation that most of the disabilities in the population of their school are unidentified or invisible.

They suggested more education for students at a younger age around disabilities recommending empathy reinforcement and de-mystification for their school community around the topic of Inclusion. They emphasized the importance of their teachers in the creation of the social culture and the need for more support in the classroom. Participants suggested that teachers could have an impact on the experience of peers with disabilities by receiving more training and education around disabilities themselves. These findings are elaborated and supported below.

**Experience of Inclusion.** The Participants shared a surprising observation with me; peers with disabilities gravitate to one another, perhaps out of a sense of acceptance and community.
"Their friends are other people with disabilities. Then during class they will be in groups..." (P1)

I asked why that would happen, why would people with disabilities gravitate towards one another...The answer was: “maybe just acceptance on both sides.” (P1)

“It’s easier to flock with your own.” (P1)

“It’s almost like ‘don’t look, don’t treat them like they are weird, so don’t look.” (P2)

They described behavioral disabilities as isolating for students, as they (as non-disabled witnesses) didn’t know how to treat their peers, describing some of the behaviors observed as aggressive or angry.

“It is anger they are having at school...” (P3)

“A lot of kids in our school act out.” (P3)

They also reported that students with disabilities were not around at recess and lunch, perhaps missing valuable spontaneous social experiences because of their disabilities.

“Kids with disabilities disappeared at recess and lunch time....at a time when you could interact with them in a social dynamic, the were gone.” (P4)
**The Barriers.** The participants strongly suggest that exclusion is rooted in a lack of information for their peer community in regards to disabilities.

“People don’t know how to deal with their behavior. Its kind of a little bit of uncharted territory.” (P1)

They emphasized that there is not a lot of dialogue around students that may have higher needs, and little guidance for them to know how to navigate relationships with peers with disabilities.

“It’s not something that is talked about at all.” (P3)

“It’s not a conversation. It is just sort of danced around.” (P3)

“Your don’t have the information to say... ‘Oh this person has a disability and this is why they behave a certain way.’” (P3)

They agreed that most disabilities in their school were unapparent in the sense they were not easily identified, which creates more complexity for them about how to treat their peers.

“They are there, you see them around, but it is not apparent (their disability).” (P3)

“A lot of disabilities in school are not apparent.” (P3)

“You might not know the person is disabled.” (P3)

“I don’t think there’s anybody in our school that you can tell they have a physical disability. A lot of it is mental disabilities. Those are more.” (P3)

“You can’t tell, and so there is this awkward barrier.”(P3)

They pinpointed that personal issues may exacerbate problematic behavior, thus creating more barriers to friendship, and that support is needed so that students can overcome adversity.

“There’s the connection of why they are acting out. A lot of people don’t want to admit their family is not doing well.” (P3)
“Some you can tell right away (that they have a disability). Maybe it’s their family life-they are not being supported enough.” (P2)

Teachers were identified as under supported while having the ability to create a more inclusive and understanding culture.

“I don’t know if they are just acting out or need help from me or a teacher” (P3)

“There is literally uncharted territory, even some of the teachers don’t know. They’re like ‘just go talk to the counselor’ and so I don’t know what to do.” (P3)

The participants shared that there may be fear about behavior that seems angry, and that the cycle of rejection is a major factor in the social experience of their peers with disabilities.

“They can sense you are just going to walk away and that just aggravates them more.” (P3)

“Everybody can feel when they are getting rejected.” (P4)

“People won’t know how to deal with them because they don’t know what they are going through.” (P2)

“It’s challenging and they (non-disabled students) feel like they (the students with disabilities, in)

The focus fell on behavioral and cognitive disabilities, seemingly more problematic in some ways than physical disabilities due to lack of understanding.

“When it’s a mental disability, I think some of the teachers just don’t get it.” (P3)

“If a kid is having behavioral issues it tests the teacher.” (P3)

The participants also observed that teachers need more support staff in order to deal with unique learners and without that it is hard to meet every student’s needs.

“There are a lot of kids that are unsupported.” (P2)

In a classroom setting you have a teacher with 30 kids and no extra teacher to help them even though there are three kids in the class with a learning disability.
Not that the person needs someone standing over them. The room itself needs more support because there are too many diverse needs. (P2)

This caption describes the above photo: “UNNAPARANT” (P2)

“You know you have to be more sensitive or act differently towards them, but I think people just don’t know how.” (P1)

“How do I get to know them anyway?” (P4)

“The ones that aren’t blossoming yet take more time and need extra support that maybe they are not getting.” (P2)

**What Helps.** The participants described the opportunity to learn about disabilities as a missing experience that they feel would be central to their increased understanding of their peers, and an ingredient in being able to connect with them socially.

“The more you understand people, the easier it is to interact and connect with them in general...if you understand where they are coming from and what they have been through.” (P3)

“I think that (education around disabilities) would be really valuable.” (P3)
“If I just knew what was wrong then I could look. Sometimes we just need to be informed so we can support someone..." (P2)

“I think more information would do very well.” (P1)

“To treat them the same, they (non-disabled students) need to know why they are not acting the same.” (P4)

“Having more understanding of what people are going through and what their personal things are within reason, wanting to share, makes things easier.” (P1)

Being familiarized, at a younger age, and being offered opportunities to explore empathy were discussed as ways to demystify the disabilities of their peers.

“I think a lot of the integration has to happen at a young age because once you hit high school, there are so many insecurities and blocks that we all have that it is hard to start facilitating a situation.” (P3)

They specified familiarity, understanding and information as central to creating a more inclusive social culture for peers with disabilities.

“I looked after this kid with cerebral palsy, and I don’t see anything wrong with him because I have grown up with him...to an outsider he probably looks like a handful.” (P3)

Empathy and patience were identified as necessary conditions in improved experiences for these students.

“Just putting two and two together and thinking about it, I realize: ‘that’s hard, that’s difficult.” (P4)

“Have more patience in situations...just have more opportunities and patience and know that they are going to take more time and that’s just how it is. That’s inclusion.” (P2)

Creating opportunity to connect with Peers was seen as beneficial to all students.

The more peer engagement they have...their behavior starts to become better and they are able to talk a bit more to their peers.” (P2)
“When you are given an opportunity beyond school to connect, everybody can be empowered by that.” (P3)

Support was recommended as a powerful way to encourage students with disabilities and create fertile ground for development both socially and academically.

This caption describes above photo:

I believe that children with disabilities within our community face individual challenges, some being more extensive than others. I feel this photo of cherry blossoms shows the diversity of these children. The flowers that blossom first represent the children who are supported by members of their family and community. The blossoms that have still yet to bloom are the children that struggle to find their way and are lacking the necessary support that they need to succeed. (P3)

“The flowers that blossom first represent the children who are supported....” (P2)

“It’s not about making it easier on them necessarily but giving them more time and finding just as you would with any other student the way that they learn...” (P2)

Offering students who have disabilities an opportunity to share their experience may lead to healing.

“Give them a chance to have more of a voice if they want to...not force any one to speak.... but an opportunity to share.” (P2)
Evolving Attitudes. The participants gained a sense of what inclusion is in the context of persons with disabilities through this dialogue. Person first thinking and the integration of the ideas of acceptance and diversity were evident in the conversation and ideas were consistently framed with these concepts in mind.

This caption describes the above photo:

Inclusion of peers with disabilities is much like a book, it’s meant to be. There are many different words, and the words placed together create a work that matters. People are the same way, when we are together, with Inclusion, we create a work that matters. (P4)

“Peers with disabilities, but everybody else too, have abilities we don’t have.” (P4)

“When everyone is together, great things happen.” (P4)

“Our strength is in being together.” (P4)

“Its hard work.” (P3) (Having a disability)

Recommendations

Through the conversations that took place within this research project, I believe that the experience of social inclusion could be greatly improved for youth with disabilities by an organization with the mandate and programming of Salt Spring Women Against Violence and Abuse.
The research findings confirm a need for demystification of disabilities and education around the concepts of Inclusion and Person-First thinking/language, perhaps beginning at an early age. The findings also reveal that teachers need to be able to reinforce positive culture around disabilities, and therefore would benefit from professional development around these concepts.

**Content Development.** I would recommend the development of content that reflects the unique importance of addressing the marginalization of persons with disabilities in our society and the acknowledgment that the effects of this are unhappiness, poverty, illness and death, in essence a violation of the human rights of this vulnerable population.

Using the existing format of in-school programming such as the “R & R” workshops and “Peace Kids,” S.W.O.V.A is in a unique position to create similar in-school opportunities for education and dialogue around disabilities; specifically the concepts of Inclusion and Person First Language.

I believe that development of a pilot project to be supported by participation of School District 64 would be a worthwhile and meaningful endeavor for this organization.

After hearing the participant’s perspective on the social experience of their peers with disabilities, specifically the improvements that could and should be made, I feel strongly that educating about youth about disabilities and the experience of marginalization is a responsibility of our educational system in upholding their existing policies. I believe that education and dialogue around these topics is a fundamental piece of the protection of the human rights of all people, and should be considered a mandatory component of public education.
Conclusion

The impact of social exclusion of children with disabilities should not be minimized; the personal experiences of poverty, abuse and discrimination are part of a legacy our culture is responsible for. The policies that are in place to protect the rights and nurture the development of vulnerable children should be supported through thoughtful, community minded action. Empowering students, with or without barriers, through education about the experience of disability and the effects of marginalization, will lead to a higher quality of live for individuals with disability and ensure participation in society by all its members. The opportunity to make radical shifts in the lives of persons with disabilities begins with the symbols and messages we encode in the young members of our society. I hope you will agree that we have a responsibility to create dialogue around the authorship of our culture and how it affects the experience of disability.
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