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Perceptions of Inclusion in the Eyes of Students: A Canadian Perspective

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Abstract

This paper centers on students' perceptions of an inclusionary approach to education within Canada, specifically as it applies to students with learning disabilities. Perceptions of inclusion may have wide-ranging implications, including the extent of carrying out prosocial behavior and impacts on academic achievement. Thus, we review Canadian literature on inclusive education policy, followed by students' perceptions of inclusion, the outcomes of positive perceptions, and methods to achieve successful inclusion. Next, we provide recommendations for researchers and educators that will lead to positive perceptions of inclusion among students. Positive perceptions, in turn, support the development of global citizens, a necessity in today's diverse and internationally interconnected society.

Learning disabilities¹¹ may include impairments in oral language, written expression, mathematics and/or reading, frequently impeding academic work and leading to special education support (Backenson et al., 2015; Kozey & Siegel, 2008). Inclusion is an educational method wherein students who are identified as having special education needs learn alongside their peers without disabilities (Bennett, 2009; Sokal & Katz, 2015). Boyle and Sharma (2015) regard inclusive education as a global concept and access to it a human right. Inclusion may facilitate individuals' appreciation for the diversity of learning styles and help to minimize stigmatization, which may lead not only to improved academic performance within the classroom, but also to preparing all students to meet the challenges of living in a complex and diverse society. Nonetheless, research by McDougall, Dewit, King, Miller, and Killip (2004) indicated that a significant minority of students negatively perceived their peers with learning disabilities. Thus, this article first provides readers with a picture of current education policy on inclusion within Canada. Next, we describe perceptions of inclusion as well as the outcomes of positive perceptions among students. Finally, we review literature describing how successful inclusion may be achieved. This review of the literature is drawn from Canadian research but our goal is to inform researchers and educators not only in Canada but also at an international level.

Current Literature on Inclusive Education Policy in Canada

Inclusion is described as “a value system that welcomes and celebrates diversity arising from gender, nationality, race, language of origin, social background, and level of educational achievement or disability” (Mittler, 2000, p. 10). Across the world, however, a common educational approach is to assign students to categories as a result of learning differences – a segregation approach to education. Nevertheless, the importance of inclusion is recognized by many countries and within some it has seen success (Boyle & Sharma, 2015). This article focuses on Canada, a country considered to be a leader in the practice of inclusion (Bunch, 2015). Even within Canada, however, Kohen, Uppal, Khan, and Visentin (2010) report that 26% of students with learning disabilities attend schools using a special education approach. The gravitation towards special education is a reflection of how segregation has become ingrained within educational systems over recent decades. As such, funding provisions and teacher training are contingent on a system that endorses special education, such as pull-out programs (Sokal & Katz, 2015). Nonetheless, among each territory and province, either a formal implementation of an inclusive approach or an approach that is congruent with an inclusive approach is embedded within the schooling systems (McCrimmon, 2015).

Overall, while inclusion is seen as valuable because it is “in keeping with social justice and human rights” (Bunch & Valeo, 2004, p. 61) in many ways, segregation endures, possibly compromising the extent of successful inclusion. Across Canada, supports leading to segregation are continually broken down and replaced with supports leading to successful inclusion, including amendments to assessment and curriculum, allocation of funding, and teacher training (Sokal & Katz, 2015).

¹ Within Canada, most of the policies among the provinces and territories regard learning disabilities to mean a discrepancy between achievement and scores on intelligence measure (Kozey & Siegel, 2008). In this article, however, we extend the term learning disabilities to include students with identified learning impairments who may be candidates to receive special education within a school using a segregated approach.

Canada has no national approach to educational inclusion; rather, certain provinces provide novel approaches to inclusion, in turn acting as examples to other provinces (Sokal & Katz, 2015). The province of Alberta has recently begun to develop funding formulas; one example is Inclusive Education funding (Alberta Education, 2012), replacing individual student and categorical funding with block funding allocation (i.e., general as opposed to specific funding). Funding is based on variables including diagnosis, socioeconomic status, enrolment, and geography. Giangreco (2010) states that this enables school divisions to be flexible and develop innovative approaches to support students with learning disabilities. The use of assistive technology, smaller classroom sizes, and co-teaching may help to attain successful inclusion, in contrast to readily assigning educational assistants. British Columbia also supports inclusion; the province has amended its curriculum and assessment methods to those associated with learning tailored to the student. This plan encourages greater adjustability and choice of how supports are delivered (Sokal & Katz, 2015). While each province and territory is responsible for its own development of curriculum, policy, and standards to be met for achievement, there exists the common goal for inclusion to succeed. One component of successful inclusion that has received little attention within Canada is the perceptions that students with and without learning disabilities have regarding inclusion. What follows is a review of findings from Canadian literature on the perceptions of students.

Perceptions of Inclusion Among Students With and Without Learning Disabilities

Attitudes towards learning disabilities vary among students. For instance, McDougall et al. (2004) found that 61% of Grade 9 students from Ontario perceived their peers with disabilities (physical and mental) in a positive light (e.g., were happy to have a student with a disability as a friend). In contrast, a significant minority of students (21%) perceived their peers with disabilities in a negative light (e.g., would not go to the house of a student with a disability). In a subsequent study, Litvack, Ritchie and Shore (2011) gathered data from a Canadian school district (Grades 4-6) and found that students as a whole perceived learning differences positively. The age of the participants may be a determining factor in differences between findings on students' perceptions. For instance, Dyson (2005) evaluated the extent of acceptance of disabilities among a group of 77 kindergarten students in Western Canada. While students demonstrated acceptance of visible disabilities, they did not indicate recognition of hidden disabilities, such as learning disabilities. As students become older, as were the participants of research by McDougall and colleagues (2004), learning differences may become more apparent and negative attitudes toward them (e.g., stigmatization, perceptions of unjustified support from teachers) may be more likely to develop, possibly leading to victimization.

Nowicki's (2007) work within inclusive primary schools in a sizeable rural and urban school district in Ontario suggested that older opposed to younger students tend to hold the belief that in contrast to physical impairments, learning impairments are more likely to be able to be overcome by exerting greater effort. Bunch and Valeo's (2004) research found that there were students who reported that those with disabilities in general could "catch up" and meet the demands of a traditional setting. This belief was supported through the examples of educators, who separated students on the basis of achievement. Negative perceptions of students towards their peers with learning differences may be exacerbated through the belief that their academic evaluations may be compromised as a result (Katz, Porath, Bendu, & Epp, 2012). For instance, students with learning disabilities may work at a slower pace, frustrating their peers without learning disabilities.

Bunch and Valeo (2004) point out that it is unsurprising that students are accepting of what they are accustomed to. To accept what is familiar within one's environment and what is endorsed by authority figures is a part of being human. To support this notion, Bunch and Valeo (2004) draw on social learning theory and social referencing theory. Social learning theory is described by Bunch and Valeo (2004) as the process through which attitudes and values develop as a result of one's social context. In line with social learning theory, the researchers found that students accepted their given school approach to education. Specifically, students in an inclusive setting believed inclusion to be the most appropriate method; on the other hand, students in schools using a segregation approach believed special education to be the most appropriate method. Bunch and Valeo (2004) found that students within special education settings, for the most part, perceived that their peers with disabilities are unable to meet the demands of a traditional classroom. Students with disabilities are made to believe that a specialized setting is required to meet their unique needs. Overall, as proposed by social learning theory, students believed that the educational approach taken within their school was the most legitimate and desirable (Bunch & Valeo, 2004).

Social referencing theory is described by Bunch and Valeo (2004) as looking for examples of others' behaviors to guide one's own behaviour. The researchers refer to Bandura (1986), who noted that through observation, others' behaviors are rapidly learned and imitated. For instance, if teachers are accepting of students within an inclusive classroom, students will be responsive to this and they too will be accepting. If teachers perceive inclusion in a positive light, so will students (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). Thus, to achieve successful inclusion, teachers first need to have a positive attitude towards inclusion. If a school segregates students with learning disabilities and teachers do not support inclusion, students may also be less accepting of inclusion and perceive their peers with disabilities as different from themselves. Nowicki, Brown, and Stepien (2014) found the central cause of exclusion of students with learning disabilities focused on the differences between these students and students who are "average learners." This indicates the importance of the support of a strong foundation for inclusion to lead to a positive perception of inclusion among students with and without learning disabilities. What follows is a review of literature on outcomes of successful inclusion.

Outcomes of Positive Perceptions of Inclusion

Bunch and Valeo (2004) describe that "one system has structures that bring students together. The other separates students on the basis of disability" (p. 73). Research from within Canada supports the use of inclusion within schools, bringing students together (e.g., Loreman, McGhie-Richmond, Barber, & Lupart, 2009). For instance, research suggests that within an inclusive setting, students perceive less inappropriate behaviour among their peers with disabilities compared to students with a special education approach. This may in part provide an explanation as to why students without disabilities whose school takes an inclusive approach are more likely to have friendships with students who have disabilities and bullying is reduced (Bunch & Valeo, 2004; Demeris, Childs, & Jordan, 2008; Loreman et al., 2009). "The analysis which comes most readily to mind is that we do not tease and insult those whom we know, but we might with those we do not know and whom the system centres out as different" (Bunch & Valeo, 2004, pp. 73-74). This helps explain why inclusiveness improves self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-esteem among students with disabilities (Bunch & Valeo, 2004; Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002; Wiener & Tardif, 2004).

Inclusion may foster the importance of learning rather than competition and comparison among students (McDougall et al., 2004). Similarly, students within an inclusive setting report a sense of accountability to assist their peers with a disability to succeed academically and socially. In contrast, within a special education structure, that accountability is not evidenced (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). Accountability may develop through contact between students with and without disabilities. It is likely that increased contact promotes understanding and empathy among students due to greater appreciation of differences (McDougall et al., 2004). The appreciation of differences may not only facilitate friendships but also reduce the likelihood of abusive behaviour and bullying (Bunch & Valeo, 2004; Cummings, Pepler, Mishna, & Craig, 2006). Overall, positive attitudes towards learning disabilities due to inclusionary education may also benefit learning among all students. Given the positive outcomes related to inclusion, what follows is research and educational recommendations towards its successful implementation.

Creating Positive Perceptions of Inclusion

Successful inclusion is in part dependent on the attitudes administrators and teachers have towards inclusion. In order for teachers to do their best work with students who have disabilities across differing ages and varied disabilities (Loreman, 2001), it is necessary to have a dedicated administration (Salisbury, 2006). Loreman (2001) reports that administration favoring inclusion offers staff the much-needed supports to succeed within an environment where inclusion is the only accepted method. In fact, Stanovich and Jordan (1998a) report that administrators' beliefs and attitudes toward diverse classrooms are the most significant predictors of effective teaching within classrooms that are inclusive.

Administrative support is likely rooted, in part, in policy and funding. Nevertheless, beyond the attitudes that administrators hold it is necessary to train teachers how to carry out effective inclusive education (Sokal & Katz, 2015). Training also needs to be continual through personal development among in-service teachers (Sokal & Katz, 2015). Failure to receive appropriate training may lead to limitations of teachers' abilities to strategize (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000) and remain confident in their ability to teach (Mamlin, 1999; Smith & Smith, 2000). If the school structure and teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are positive, success is a likely outcome (Hobbs & Westling, 1998). This is because inclusion needs to be ubiquitous within the school culture and not solely within the scope of the classroom (Dei & James, 2002). In research by Litvack et al. (2011) however, while learning about disabilities was seen as positive, students found feeling comfortable with their peers with disabilities could be difficult. As such, it is necessary for school systems to support programs targeted at promoting student understanding and acceptance of disabilities, such as the Respecting Disability (RD) program.

Katz and Porath (2011) implemented the RD program with a group of students in Grades 4 through 7 and their teachers. RD conveys that despite learning weaknesses, anyone can use his or her strengths to succeed in a career in which their skill set is sought after. The delivery of this program led to greater levels of self-respect, self-awareness, and respect for those who are different. In a subsequent study, Katz et al. (2012) found that RD improved students' ability to determine the role a student with a disability within a group could play in order for him or her to make a necessary contribution to a task. Thus, as a result of RD, students recognized that their peers each have strengths that may promote their success in varied domains. Overall, RD promoted positive perceptions of inclusionary practices among teachers and students; however, administrators and teachers need to continually work together in order for successful inclusion to take place.

Lindsay, Mcpherson, Aslam, Mckeever, and Wright (2013) assessed the extent to which two group-based programs promoting social inclusion facilitated understanding and acceptance of disability. One program was an interactive board game and the other a puppet show; both targeted students aged 10 to 12 years. Lindsay et al. (2013) cited findings by Clarke and Schoech (1995) that group-based programs construct environments which are respectful. The researchers drew on the work of Bell, Raczynski, and Horne (2010), who found that such programs lead to positive change within schools. Further, the researchers cited Hromek and Roffey (2009), who found that group-based games offer children forums in which to develop attitudes centering on one another and, in turn, develop empathy and prosocial behavior. Both programs narrowed in on disability, social exclusion, and bullying; however, they differed in approach and as a result may be more or less appealing and relevant to children. The board game took approximately 60 minutes to complete and the goal was to develop inclusivity within the classroom and inform children about disabilities. The puppet show, on the other hand, was delivered in 45 minutes by trained volunteer puppeteers. It involved life-sized puppets resembling 10- to 12-year-old children of diverse ability levels, gender, social class, and ethnicity. Lindsay et al. (2013) targeted this age group because it is considered that from this age forward students are cognizant of social inclusion and would profit from a program centering on this domain. Unsurprisingly, then, both programs were successful in teaching children about disability, bullying, and forming friendships. Furthermore, children reported that they enjoyed the interactive elements, the length of the programs, and the relevancy of the topics. Overall, both programs were deemed by the children to be appealing.

Recognizing the outcomes of negative and positive perceptions of inclusion, it is clear that we need to work towards achieving positive perceptions, not only among students but also among teachers and administrators. First, policy and funding to facilitate successful inclusion are needed in order for administrators and teachers to implement this approach. Beyond the benefits of policy and administrative support, teachers also need ongoing professional development on creating an inclusive classroom. Further, both teachers and students can become involved in programs such as RD that support and encourage learner diversity. The following section focuses on research recommendations to continually improve our understanding and promotion of positive student perceptions of inclusion. Next, we provide recommendations for educators related to facilitating successful inclusion and, in turn, leading students with and without learning disabilities to positively perceive this educational approach.

Recommendations

Research Recommendations

We recommend that research centering on perceptions of inclusion among students be comprehensive and include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, as well as longitudinal designs and case study approaches. Within the Canadian context, existing research is largely qualitative (e.g., Bunch & Valeo, 2004; Dyson, 2005; Katz et al. 2012; Nowicki et al. 2014). While qualitative methods advance knowledge through the collection of word data, allowing researchers to go into greater depth to understand phenomena, quantitative methods may help to capture the perceptions of inclusion of a greater number of students. Moreover, future studies employing a mixed method approach may allow for a more comprehensive understanding of inclusion. Further, the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches may help speak to the reliability of findings from one research approach to the other (Christensen & Johnson, 2004;

Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Mertens, 2005; Newby, 2010). Importantly, however, inconsistent results would not necessarily mean that findings from one or both approaches lack credibility, but rather, would offer complementary information creating a more complete picture of student perceptions.

In addition, future research involving longitudinal designs and case studies would be valuable. Within the domain of longitudinal designs are cohort and retrospective designs. Cohort studies focus on certain groups of individuals. Within a cohort, for instance, each student within the study experiences the same approach to teaching students with learning disabilities. At predetermined time intervals, data are collected from each student within the study. Retrospective studies are also longitudinal but unlike cohort studies they assess the perceptions that participants previously had on inclusion. Finally, in line with Grenot-Scheyer, Fisher, and Staub (2001), we recommend the use of case studies to examine individuals' perceptions and experiences with inclusion to provide detailed descriptions of unique factors related to participants' contexts. Overall, perceptions of those who experience inclusion within the Canadian context is an underdeveloped area of research. Future studies involving all stakeholders, including student participants, is needed to further our understanding of the value of inclusion as well as perceptions of it among students with and without learning disabilities.

Educational Recommendations

It is necessary for educators to take the steps needed to achieve successful inclusion within their classrooms. First and foremost, educators must be receptive to educational policy that facilitates and promotes continual professional development in areas including differentiated instruction and universal design for learning. Such professional development may promote classroom teachers' abilities to implement practices including peer tutoring and cooperative learning, in turn encouraging successful inclusion within the classroom. Further, while it is necessary for students to learn how to collaborate with one another irrespective of differing skills, teachers first need to learn strategies in this domain which they can apply with their students. Next, it is worthwhile for classroom teachers to learn about programs that promote understanding and acceptance of learning disabilities (Katz & Porath, 2011; Lindsay et al., 2013).

Recognizing the benefits of an inclusive approach, Tompson, Lyons, and Timmons (2014) note that teachers do see the value of inclusion and seek and advocate for related professional development. Nonetheless, McCrimmon (2015) suggests that the training teachers receive is insufficient with respect to disabilities. Consequently, there is a need for specialized training in working with students who have disabilities. McCrimmon (2015) identifies one program within Canada that does offer such training; however, it is necessary for all teacher education programs to integrate training that promotes successful inclusion and conduct continual program evaluations. In addition to offering professional development, educational administrators need to continually work alongside classroom teachers. Varied levels of ability and learning profiles cannot be ignored. Curriculum, assessment, and evaluation need to be differentiated and continually assessed and reformed in order to best support teachers working within an inclusive classroom. Teachers lacking adequate supports, including crucial administrative support, may begin to negatively perceive inclusion.

To improve students' perceptions of inclusion, students need to have an understanding of how they will be evaluated. As previously noted, students who believe that they will be penalized due to slower progress or incomplete work as a result of working with a student with a learning disability may be more likely to begin to develop negative perceptions of inclusion.

Finally, students need to come to see educational aids as supports for the classroom as a whole. Katz et al. (2012) found that a stigma is associated with educational aids. Educational aids typically involve special education teachers working one-on-one with a student who may have a learning disability or other needs that warrant extra support within a classroom. If students with and without learning disabilities are going to learn together, the special education teacher cannot be a symbol of division. Rather than directing special educational support to students with disabilities, an inclusive education guideline involves aids providing support to all students (Bunch, 2015). Educational administrators can work with classroom teachers to modify the approach taken by special education teachers when working in mainstream classrooms. Overall, both the school structure and the behaviors and attitudes of the classroom teacher need to appreciate the differences among students with and without learning disabilities and highlight individual strengths among all students.

Final Remarks

One role of researchers and educators in Canada is to promote the success of all students through a predominantly inclusive approach. Inclusion may not only promote the academic success of students but also help to instill a worldview that supports cooperative learning and social justice. We began this article with a discussion of current education policy on inclusion within Canada, followed by perceptions of inclusion among students. This was followed by a review of Canadian literature on methods of facilitating successful inclusion. Successful inclusion depends on the support of governments because funding allocation leads to policy, then to the actions of administrators, then to teachers' perceptions of inclusion, and ultimately, to students' perceptions of inclusion.

Overall, in the presence of a strong foundation for inclusion, students come to value this approach and perceive it to be the optimal method in teaching students with disabilities (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). As Hodkinson (2010) notes, "A prerequisite for successful inclusion is the maintenance of a dialogue between those involved and those who experience this process" (p. 63). Not only is it necessary for classroom teachers to maintain a dialogue with administrators, it is also necessary for students and their classroom teachers to discuss their thoughts and concerns about inclusion.

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