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Belonging and Connection of School Students with Disability

Issues paper

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Policy recommendations written with
Children with Disability Australia

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Summary

All students want to feel like they belong and that they are valued in their school community. School is a centrally important place to young people — not only where they learn fundamental academic knowledge, but also where skills in making and keeping friends, relating to peers, and social justice principles are learnt and practiced. What happens when young people feel like they don't belong?

This paper focuses particularly on students with disability. There is evidence from research to suggest that while the inclusion of students with disability in their local schools has been long promoted through principles, policy and practices, the experiences of children and young people has been mixed. Some students with disability find their school community a fulfilling and happy place. Yet entrenched problems remain for others with isolation, loneliness, social difficulties and bullying a common feature of their school lives. A lack of inclusion results in significant negative impacts for both learning and broader relationships — not only for students with disability, but for students alongside them, school staff and families in the school community. Everyone is diminished by a narrow focus on inclusion which leaves some members of the school community feeling like they don't belong.

Research on belonging explores the connections to people and places that help us to feel like we belong in our world. Recently, researchers have explored the perspectives and feelings of children and young people with disability about belonging. Alongside this, a significant amount of research addresses the bullying and abuse of school students, with and without disability. There is limited evidence that these two sets of research — on the conditions required for belonging, and on bullying and interpersonal harm — have been connected for students with disability.

Bringing both of these areas of research together may improve understanding of what children and young people with disability need for school to be a happy and positive experience. This is important because existing research about what works to stop bullying shows that if children are connected, they are less likely to be exposed to harms such as chronic bullying, and more likely to tell someone about harm in their lives.

This paper explores a series of key issues about belonging and connection. It cites research that shows:

- Feeling a sense of belonging and connection makes a positive difference to school life.
- There are a number of key elements to belonging and connection — friendship, peer acceptance, capability, being valued, and supportive relationships with key adults.
- When belonging and connection are threatened, there are several areas in which the impact is seen. The friendships of students are limited; they are lonely; the places they can go within the school are controlled; there are tensions in negotiating support relationships; students feel and are excluded; and kid's strengths aren't seen by other students or adults in their school communities.
- Bullying is a particularly strong threat to a felt sense of belonging and connection.

There are a series of approaches and strategies which may help build belonging and connection for students with disability in schools. These are things that work to boost and sustain a sense of belonging and connection for everyone, not singling out students on the basis of impairment.

Many of these strategies, initiatives and relationships are happening now, but in pockets. At the level of individual students particularly useful strategies in building belonging and connection are attending to the protective aspects of connection, helping kids to stand up for themselves and building their capability.

At the systemic level, strategies which are especially valuable work to change the system, not the child, and understand and can respond effectively to complexity. Being able to respond to both needs and goals is important in developing and keeping an aspirational approach.

At the level of the school community, research and practice show that successful inclusion builders include funding for broader inclusion initiatives, paying attention to the building of social relationships, social capital and social responsibility and taking a multi-dimensional response to social inclusion. Valuing the roles of families, friends and people outside of schools is also vital in building from school successes.

There is great potential in broadening our understanding of inclusion by including belonging and connection as building blocks. Feeling a strong sense of belonging and connection in school is not special. It is not extra. It is a fundamental human need, and one to which students with disability are equally entitled. If we do not address belonging and connection meaningfully in schools, relationships between students will be impoverished, diverse strengths and gifts will be unseen, and opportunities to build inclusive communities will be unrealised.

