Inclusive School Communities Project

Report – Community Consultation

## Introduction

Five individuals attended a focus group on 29 November 2018, coordinated by Purple Orange as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*. Attendees included four people with lived experience of disability:

* two young people living with disability who had recent experience at mainstream schools
* a sibling of a young person living with disability who attended special education (referred to by the participant as a ‘learning centre’)
* a parent of an adult living with disability

The focus group was facilitated by the Project Leader and an Inclusive School Mentor, a young leader from the disability community. At the beginning of the session, the Project Leader provided an overview of the Inclusive School Communities Project and the intentions of the consultations. Informed consent to participate was obtained from all attendees. The consultation was audio recorded and transcribed.

The conversation was structured around the following questions posed by the facilitators:

1. What does inclusion mean to you in a school context?
2. And how about belonging? What is belonging?
3. How would you describe your school community and culture?
4. What things help you to feel welcomed, included and valued at your school?
5. What things get in the way of you feeling welcomed, included and valued at your school?

All attendees actively participated in the discussion, sharing personal insights and ideas.

When the responses were reviewed, we found the discussion was clustered around the following topics:

* Inclusion and Belonging at School
* Understanding the Concepts: Inclusion and Belonging
* Recognition and Acceptance of Difference
* Working Together as a Team
* School Community and Culture
* Feeling Welcomed, Included and Valued at School
* Barriers to Inclusion – Segregation, Bullying, Insufficient Facilities and Resources
* School Values, Awards and Assemblies
* Staff and Resources
* Other Practices of Welcome and Inclusion

This report is based on data from the focus group.

## Inclusion and Belonging at School

## *Understanding the Concepts: Inclusion and Belonging*

The starting point of the consultation was to explore understandings of the concepts ‘inclusion’ and ‘belonging’ as they relate to school communities. These concepts are often misunderstood and there are a range of perspectives on how to achieve inclusion and belonging in schools. One young person, who is a sibling of a young person living with disability, commented:

“Inclusion to me means everyone being given the same opportunities and choices. I think also coming to equity as well; some people might need extra help to come to the same… to be involved in the same way but that’s all apart of inclusion even if people need more support to be up at the same level.”

Participants described inclusion as, not only what happens inside of school, but also the ordinary experiences of students outside of school.

“My peers used to not invite me to places. They never once did. All I ever need is just people to enjoy life with me and to include me to places. All they have to do is talk to me, invite me... Going to concerts, people inviting me to parties - it needs to happen more often, but they never do it.”

Participants suggested belonging relates to feeling comfortable, safe, and accepted, and having choices and freedom. They explored reasons why people want to belong:

“… people search for that belonging because they want to feel somewhere where; you feel included, you feel free, you feel like you belong, you feel comfortable in that environment, and safe.”

A key message raised by the group was that the emphasis schools place on, for example sports or specific industries like arts or sciences, influences how students experience belonging in that setting. One participant suggested “different schools have different feels to them… [and] that can determine what the sense of belonging is too.” This is an important consideration for schools striving to set up inclusive communities where everyone feels like they belong.

## *Recognition and Acceptance of Difference*

The significance of being accepted by others for being different and unique was explored. It was agreed people should be able allowed to be themselves.

“It’s that sense of people being accepted for who they are and being accepted that they are different but accepting that we are all different. It’s not that one person is more different than anyone else; we are all different and then accepting that. That goes both ways for students with disability and students without disability.”

 “We all have abilities and we all have some disabilities.”

One young person living with disability reported being “a shadow in years 7 to 12”. He stated, “I was like lights off to everybody.” He expressed desire to be seen and accepted by his peers at school. In contrast, another young person living with disability shared a more inclusive experience at his school: “I feel like when I was in high school as well, I could be me and everyone accepted it.” Both stories highlight the importance of being recognised and accepted by peers and its relation to inclusion and belonging in schools.

These responses emphasise a need for schools to identify the ways they can recognise difference and embrace diversity among their communities.

## *Working Together as a Team*

A participant, a parent of an adult living with disability, discussed the importance of individuals viewing themselves as a “valued contributor”, and realising they have something to offer. Inclusion is about being a team member and working together as a team; ensuring everyone has a voice and contributes. Inclusive schools ensure each community member is viewed as a valued contributor and part of the team. As one young person adeptly put it: “What I think… inclusion means to me in a school, is your whole class is a team and you’ve all got to contribute even if you don’t want to contribute.” Participants commented on what seems to be a two-way street between giving (what individuals contribute to the team) and taking (what individuals receive from the team). A characteristic of a well-functioning, supportive team discussed by the focus group is encouraging everyone: “Caring for people and caring for people’s needs. And also love.”

## School Community and Culture

The focus group discussed schools as communities where there are certain practices and ways of operating that everyone, including teachers, need to work within. There is an acknowledgement that “this is a community and we’ve got to make it work.” Participants discussed obligations that must be considered:

“I wish to belong and therefore there are some things I have to work at… if I value this community then… there might be some things for me to modify – my emotions or my behaviour.”

This illustrates an element of changing and conforming to fit within a community for belonging to be attained: “Being a part of this community means there are certain norms and things that I seek to comply with.”

It is not only about an individual being accepted by their community, but also about the individual meeting the social responsibilities associated with being a member of that community such as “Serving one another [and] being there for one another.”

One of the young people living with disability described experiencing an inclusive school community at primary and high school that was respectful and accepting, with a large population of students from multicultural backgrounds. He stated, “I felt that we all mingled and got together pretty well.” He stated some students spoke different languages at home and the school employed tutors to communicate with students in their first languages. He mentioned communication as a factor in students feeling there was a bond with each other. In contrast, another young person described his experience where other students at his school were rarely friendly and caring to him; he felt left out and ignored. The focus group agreed that inclusive school communities have policies and practices in place that show they accept people from different cultures and backgrounds, ensuring respect for everyone.

A participant discussed expectations on students in schools exploring how they treat each other including peers who have different abilities. He suggested:

“In secondary schools, you can expect more of students because they have had time to reflect and they understand better. I think little kids are a bit different – I don’t think they mean to be mean but that’s just how it is.”

However other participants suggested that younger children naturally embrace difference and easily adapt to peers who have different abilities or who need help; it is the older ones who are less accepting and are more likely to actively exclude or persecute those who are perceived as different.

A few participants shared personal stories about either themselves or loved ones being mimicked and mocked for having visible differences, such as speech differences or mobility aides. One participant described when his daughter, who has a physical impairment, was in primary school having observed many kids “waddling” behind her mimicking her gait and walk. Another participant spoke about his peers mocking the way he speaks.

Whilst the group was able to explore this topic generally and share stories and insights, they were unable to describe community and culture for the school they most recently attended or were associated with. This implies that the markers of an inclusive school community are not always obvious but are interwoven in habits of welcome and inclusion that school’s practice on a daily basis.

## Feeling Welcomed, Included and Valued at School

## *Barriers to Inclusion – Segregation, Bullying, Insufficient Facilities and Resources*

One of the young people, her twin brother lives with disability, discussed segregation at the high school she attended. She commented that while the school promoted itself as an inclusive setting, there wasn’t much crossover between the ‘learning centre’ and mainstream classes:

“I think at my high school, we had major segregation - one part of the school with the learning centre and the other part was just mainstream schooling. It created a lot of stigma and there was huge distance. Learning centre kids played over here and everyone else played over here.”

Similarly, another young person described the school he attended as having a “special ed [sic] courtyard” suggesting “they would just stay in there” whereas “everyone else got to play around the school”. Both young people shared similar perspectives about the stigma that prohibited students in the mainstream classes from interacting with students in the other settings, such as the learning centre or special education classes. Their comments also reveal that these schools were not also set up for inclusion outside of the classroom and missed the opportunity for students from mainstream and special settings to interact and socialise.

Participants explored how bullying impacts on school culture and can get in the way of students feeling welcomed, included and valued at school. Attitudes, stereotyping and lack of awareness about disability were identified as factors contributing to bullying in schools. One young person living with disability, reported:

“Once I got bullied at primary school and it was the worst thing. When I was just walking by, me as a person with disability, someone said you’re not playing when I was just walking by and also thought it was really funny to throw a pen or pencil at me.”

The focus group discussed barriers and challenges to the practical application of inclusion with one participant going so far as to assert:

“It’s one thing to say it, it’s another thing to do it. A lot of what happens is those words are put up in staff rooms but then you see the segregation in the courtyard. It’s all lip service as far as that goes.”

The discussion highlighted that buzzwords in education, ‘safety’ and ‘inclusion’, are sometimes not followed through and put into practice.

Other areas identified by focus group participants that get in the way of inclusion in schools are:

* school buildings/facilities that are old and inaccessible
* challenges with staff allocation including the use of teacher aides in classrooms and arrangements for out of classroom responsibilities like yard duty
* insufficient funding and complexities associated with school budgets

## *School Values, Awards and Assemblies*

The focus group discussed the “in-jargon” used by schools in communicating they are a “safe, supportive, inclusive environment”; this is their way of expressing “who we are” and feeds into the culture. One young person suggested a way that schools can communicate being a safe, supportive, inclusive community is through advocacy. She argued “If they are not talking about it then they aren’t promoting against it – like if they are not promoting against bullying then they probably don’t care about it.”

The way that schools communicate their values and acceptable behaviour within their community was discussed as an ingredient of inclusive schools. Participants agreed on the significance of clear school values that are understood and upheld by all school community members.

Awards for academic and non-academic merit were discussed by participants as a means of recognising specific students and encouraging better behaviour. A young person reported,

“In year 12, I got the Youth Opportunities award for expressing myself and doing all the hard work and all that - that made me feel the best.”

Participants reported receiving an award at a school assembly or another event “make students feel like they are doing a good job” and “makes them feel happy and alive.”

“My daughter, at her school, they have merit awards which they accumulate in the year and can be for anything from doing well on a literacy test to helping a student who is upset. They receive a big certificate at an assembly from the Principal in front of the whole school. It’s not recognizing purely academic and not recognizing purely humanitarian either – it can be a range of things.”

It was discussed how initiatives like awards, which recognise students’ actions and achievements, influence school culture and may contribute to an inclusive school culture:

“If you are only recognising the sporting kids or academic students then that goes to school culture. If you are recognising other aspects of school life, which can be kindness and acceptance that then creates that culture too.”

The discussion emphasised that schools striving to be inclusive ensure all students, including those living with disability, are included and celebrated in assemblies and school events.

## *Staff and Resources*

Participants suggested that the allocation of resources, including assistive technology and teacher aides, is reflective of the school’s commitment to ensuring all students have what they need to engage and learn effectively. One participant commented on the creation of specialist teachers for particular areas in schools, contrasting this to when he was at high school and such responsibilities were added onto a teacher’s workload, limiting what support could be provided to students “because they didn’t necessary have the time or the resources to do it properly”.

It was discussed that schools are investing in building the capacity of their staff and in ensuring students have the resources and supports they need.

## *Other Practices of Welcome and Inclusion*

One young person recounted being taken on a school tour and being introduced to another student, who became one of his best friends. Focus group participants agreed that this is a useful way to welcome students to a new school and if done well, can instigate friendships or buddy arrangements for new students.

Another young person reported: “My care teacher was the Principal of Special Needs. She always told us – Ok class, if you have any issues with anything just come talk to me. So, we felt secure and safe.” Ensuring students feel able to speak up when there are problems or concerns and can access support is essential to fostering inclusive school communities.

## Summary

Five individuals attended a focus group, coordinated by Purple Orange as part of the Inclusive School Communities Project. The focus group was facilitated by the Project Leader and an Inclusive School Mentor, a young leader from the disability community. The discussion was structured around key questions although participants were able to freely share their stories and experiences. Participants shared rich insights on the topics of inclusion and belonging at School; school community and culture; and feeling welcomed, included and valued at school. The responses summarised in the report above can offer schools striving to be inclusive a range of things that are helpful to consider and ideas for how habits of welcome and inclusion can be embedded in their school policies and practices. Whilst the findings indicate that the concepts of inclusion and belonging are hard to define, the stories shared by participants in this focus group provide thrust for schools to invest in creating cultures that recognise and accept diversity and ensure everyone is a valued contributor to the school community.

