Understanding Belongingness in Schools for Disabled Students Who Require a High Level of Support

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Abstract

The principles and practices of belonging are at the heart of inclusion (Slee, 2019, p. 917). The concept of belonging allows for a broadening of the debates around the inclusion/exclusion binary (Mee & Wright, 2009, p. 774). The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how processes of belongingness do and do not occur in schools for disabled students. A critical disability studies orientation guided the project, specifically, Meekosha and Shuttleworth's (2017) four principles of CDS. The research questions were: (1) How do the students I work with (autistic students with IDD) develop a sense of belongingness in classrooms and school spaces? (2) What are the conditions in schools that allow belongingness to flourish? (3) What are the conditions in schools that prevent processes of belongingness from occurring? The study was influenced by Jean Clandinin and Micheal Connolly's conceptual framework for narrative inquiry. G. Thomas Couser's six guidelines for disability life writing and representation were used as a standard for the construction of the participant narratives. I examined the experiences of two interview participants—an autistic young adult, and a school principal with two disabled daughters. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interviews and construct themes. Based on the themes, I composed narratives in which I quoted the participants verbatim. Each interview resulted in its own themes, along with one similarity and two differences between the interviews, in relation to the research questions. I further reflected on these findings and their implications for my teaching practice as a special education teacher. The final discussion section answers the research questions through my findings from the participants, which are contextualized in relevant literature and CDS concepts.

Acknowledgements

To my partner, Mitchell, without your support and consistent encouragement this project could not have happened. Thank you for the many hours you took Wesley and Samuel on adventures so I could work. To my committee members, Dr. Kimberly Maich, thank you for your sharp attention to detail that helped elevate this paper, and Dr. Tim Fletcher, thank you for your thoughtful questions that pushed me to dig deeper. To my supervisor, Dr. Maureen Connolly, there are no words to express my gratitude. Meeting and working with you has been life changing. Each time I spoke with you I learned something. I am forever grateful that you provided me with the opportunity to do this project. Finally, to my participants, the insights from your lived experiences is what made this paper meaningful. Thank you for sharing all that you did.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Although the expression 'I belong here' remains first and foremost a personal, intimate feeling of being 'at home' in a place (place-belongingness), it is also unavoidably conditioned by the working of power relations (politics of belonging)" (Antonsich, 2010, p. 652-653).

Background

While eating lunch, hunched over my computer at work, I overheard laughing coming from the room connected to my office. I peered through the pewter door frame, and under the florescent lighting sat a group of teenagers lounging in a circle of pleather bean bag chairs—a few of them were watching a *Barney the Dinosaur* video. Viewing it on one of their tiny phone screens, they were sincerely laughing and enjoying the video. Those students not engaged in this interaction were not questioning its occurrence. This transpired in a *safe space*—the space at the school where I work for autistic students. It is a space where students can optionally drop-in and hang out, or access academic or social support from a team of educational assistants (EAs) or teachers.

What creates the conditions for connection to the social environments of classrooms and schools for disabled students? Dewey (2015) posits that education is a social process, which "…is realized in the degree in which individuals form a community group" (p. 58). The social interactions in classrooms are the basis for the learning process (Osterman, 2000, p. 350). A classroom as *a community* can serve as a framework to guide and understand these interactions. A community exists when its members experience a sense of belonging (Osterman, 2000. p. 324). Osterman (2000) identifies three aspects of classroom practices from the literature which impact a student’s sense of relatedness in a classroom—instruction, teacher support, and authority relations/autonomy (pp. 348-356). The instructional aspects include cooperative learning (rather than competition), which affects the frequency of student interactions and, when implemented properly, the nature of student interactions (Osterman, pp. 348-349). This means structuring classroom group tasks so that the students need each other (Osterman, 2000, p. 349). As Noddings (2012) tells us, although competition remains necessary, our global interdependence and commitment to cooperation should replace our emphasis on competition in schools (p. 777). Dialogue was another aspect of instruction identified by Osterman, however, as not all students use language to communicate, this would mean embracing and structuring learning tasks to include varying forms of communication in the exchange of ideas. Whether or not a child feels cared for, and a part of the school community, is largely determined by whether a caring and supportive relationship exists between the teacher and student (Osterman, 2000, p.351). Noddings (2013) describes *caring from the inner view*, on the part of the teacher, as an on-going commitment to stay interested in the reality of the cared-for (p. 16). These teacher-student relationships also impact a child’s autonomy. When educators engage in *autonomy supportive* approaches (i.e., reasoning, encouragement, and empathic limit setting), in contrast to obedience and conformity, this will positively impact a student’s classroom experience (Osterman, 2000, pp. 356-358). This current project, researching belongingness in schools, comes from a curiosity of what it takes for classrooms and schools to be places where the above processes can occur, and where disabled students can feel they belong.

Research Questions

The notion of belonging is about emotional attachment and a feeling of being *at home* (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 197). It is a way of re-imagining socio-spatial inclusion that centralizes the autonomy of the student. It involves connection, acceptance, and a feeling of ease for students. In this research I explored three research questions:

1) How do the students I work with, autistic students with intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD), develop a sense of belongingness in classrooms and school spaces?
2) What are the conditions in schools that allow belongingness to flourish?
3) What are the conditions in schools that prevent processes of belongingness from occurring?

I investigated these questions through analyzing interview data from two informants, comparing them, and then reflecting on their experiences in relation to my own experiences as a special education teacher, to better understand how a sense of belongingness does and does not flourish for disabled students in classrooms and school spaces. The study developed through a constructivist epistemology, and a Critical Disability Studies (CDS) orientation guided the project.

Critical Disability Studies (CDS)

Critical Disability Studies considers how people are *dis-abled*, both systematically and socially, by institutions, cities, or societies—and it emphasizes how the body and impairment can be involved in discussions of disability and disablement, critically (Critical Disability Studies Working Group [CDSWG], 2021, para. 2). CDS moves beyond a social model analysis, and it considers other ways structures of power disable unconventional bodies. A CDS orientation analyzes disability as a cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon (Hall, 2019, para. 1).

Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2017) offer four principles that guide CDS. The principles come from critical social theory, and Meekosha and Shuttleworth apply them to disability studies as part of its transformation into a critical discipline. Firstly, critical social theory (CST) is irreducible to facts—studying any phenomenon involving humans cannot be reduced to facts or measurements, as the context of changing social relations and cultural meanings must always be considered (p. 179). Secondly, CST links theory with praxis in the struggle for an autonomous and participatory society—autonomy here links to emancipation from hegemonic and hierarchical ideologies, and is about individuals having choices, being aware of those choices, and choosing to engage with the world on one's own terms (p. 180). Third, the necessity that a discipline or field of study be aware of its own historicity, which requires an ongoing critical self-reflexivity towards its own theory and praxis (p. 180). Finally, the need to engage in dialogue with other cultures on the issues and concepts of current significance—having a diversity of cultures as part of an explicit dialogue with regards to human rights and emancipatory thinking (p. 181). A critical orientation helps deconstruct how hegemonic and hierarchical ideologies structure knowledge and practice (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017, p. 180). Basing values in unchecked hegemonic discourses inevitably marginalizes people. CDS moves beyond a materialist analysis and examines other ways we are complicit in allowing the continuation of disablement.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Inclusive practices in schools are meant to engender a sense of belongingness for disabled students. Belongingness is difficult to measure, but also hard to falsify. A student's daily experiences in classrooms reflects whether they belong. It is a student's feelings of belongingness (or lack thereof) that can help understand the impact of inclusive policies, and what needs to change. This chapter provides an overview of some of the relevant literature on inclusion, belongingness, and assumptions about disability and normalcy. I layout legislation that supports inclusion in schools along with various scholars' critical reflections on the topic. I use Dewey's (2015) theory of experience to explore what constitutes experience, and the educator's role in student experiences. I distinguish between *inclusion* and *integration* to help understand how true inclusion is emancipatory. Inclusion requires a societal change, rather than disabled people having to assimilate to existing conditions (Cameron, 2014, p. 79). In the belongingness section, I provide ways to understand it as a concept, including its construction. Nel Nodding's work on caring in education is used to consider why belongingness matters. I also emphasize Hall's (2010) perspective, who advocates for *safe havens* or *oases* for individuals with IDD, which are disability exclusive spaces where individuals with IDD can feel safe (p. 51). In the final section, I discuss the construction of normality, how it operationalizes in schools, and its consequences, such as stigma. I use the Ministry of Education's definition of autism, to show the medical model thinking that is so prevalent in schools, and how this dis/orients our understanding of disabled people. I conclude with the way deficit-based thinking around disability can be disrupted and re-framed through new understandings, such as through the work of scholars like Joseph Straus. Straus explains how autism is socially constructed, and he positions autistic individuals as a culture of people.

Inclusion

“We are still citing inclusion as our goal; still waiting to include, yet speaking as if we are already inclusive” (Slee & Allan, 2011, p. 181).

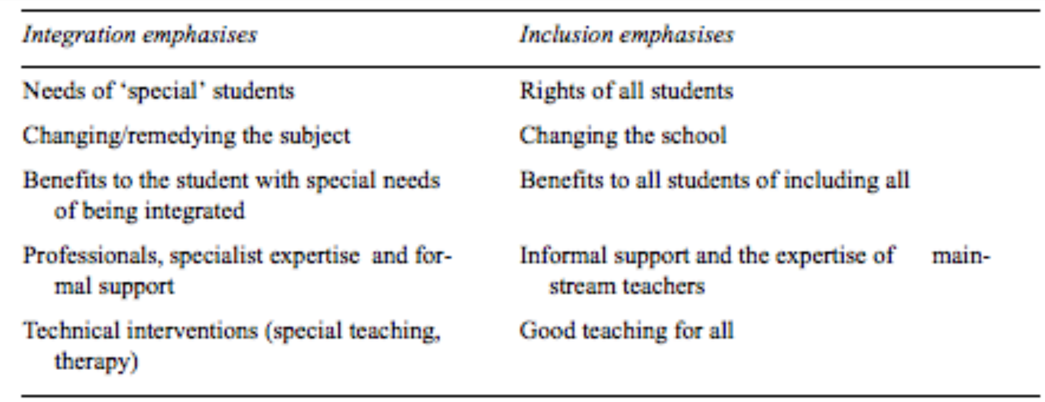
In 2010 Canada ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Article 24 addresses education, and it expresses that state parties must assure persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability (United Nations, n.d.). The impact of educational policy and its interpretation have major implications for all students' lives. Many debates occur within schools, and beyond, around the inclusion and exclusion of particular groups of students. In the Ontario report, *If Inclusion Means Everyone, WHY NOT ME?* (2018) of the 280 parents of children who have an intellectual disability surveyed, 67% of them reported that their child had been excluded from the appropriate curriculum based on their learning level, and 62.7% reported that their child has been excluded from extracurricular activities. Implicated in the exclusion and *othering* of disabled students is a medical model framing of their impairment, which orients professionals and educators to approach them as though they need fixing.

In my classroom, I must constantly judge and question what conditions or quality of experiences I am creating for students. John Dewey used the notion of *experience* to think through the education of students. For Dewey (2015), experiences had two aspects, the immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness of an experience, and its influence upon later experiences (p. 27). A student’s experience has significance in the immediate moment or context, and on their future opportunities or experiences. He proposed two interdependent principles, *continuity* and *interaction*, which when applied to classrooms and schools help discriminate both the educative significance and the value of experiences (Dewey, 2015, pp. 44-45). The principle of continuity of experience, or the experiential continuum, suggests "… that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey, 2015, p. 35). When an educator decides upon and sets conditions for a disabled student, they are also influencing that student's future experiences. It is the educator's responsibility to understand what direction an experience is headed, and judge which attitudes are conducive to continued growth, and what are detrimental (Dewey, 2015, pp. 38-39). The second principle, *interaction* (or situation), describes the interplay between external or objective conditions and internal conditions (Dewey, 2015, p. 42). A classroom experience, then, is a series of interactions between the student and their external environment, an environment which is directly influenced by structural elements and educators' decisions. The educator's concern should lie in the situations in which interactions take place—it is the objective conditions which the educator has the possibility of regulating (Dewey, 2015, p. 45). As Price (2015) warns, when engaging with the topic of education "...sometimes "schools" are abusive prisons, and sometimes pathways to greater social justice, and it is not always easy to tell the difference" (p. 64).

Cameron (2015) differentiates between *inclusion* and *integration.* Doing so helps uncover some of the nuances involved in authentic inclusion. *Integration* puts the onus on disabled people to change in order to fit into existing societal norms, and to become *more like* non-disabled people (Cameron, 2015, p. 79). Integration implies a tolerance for disabled people—but who will never be regarded as equals (Cameron, 2015, p. 79). Contrarily, *inclusion* places the responsibility onto society to change (Cameron, 2014, p. 79). Cameron (2014) notes inclusion in schools requires a complete re-think of how everything is done (p. 79). This process can involve significant dissonance on the part of educators. Walker (1998) offers what emphasises occur in the contrasting notions of inclusion and integration:

Figure 1

Walker's contrast of inclusion versus integration



Integration emphasises	*Inclusion emphasises*
Needs of 'special' students	Rights of all students
Changing/remedying the subject	Changing the school
Benefits to the student with special needs of being integrated	Benefits to all students of including all
Professionals, specialist expertise and formal support	Informal support and the expertise of mainstream teachers
Technical interventions (special teaching, therapy)	Good teaching for all

Note. From Thomas, G., Walker, D. Webb, J. (1998). *Inclusive education: The ideals and the practice.* Routledge.

The inclusive education movement is troubled by its multiplicity of meanings (Graham & Slee, 2008, p. 279). Multiple meanings promote re-interpretations by well-intentioned professionals. Exploring our intent versus our impact, then, is crucial for educators when thinking and making decisions about marginalized populations. Inclusive education began as a protest and a call for radical change in schools, although it is now increasingly used as a means for protecting the status quo (Graham & Slee, p. 277). Reducing the concept of inclusion to standards created within our culture of normalcy excludes bodies. Roger & Slee (2008) ask what assumptions might inform our philosophies in relation to inclusive education? What does *including* mean? What happens? Whose interests are served? What do we seek to include? (p. 290).

Slee & Allan (2001) explain that mechanisms that drive exclusion are both deeply structural and broadly cultural (p. 178). They identify a "shifting spectrum of diversity" that is affected, such as identities of disability, race, gender, class, and sexuality (Slee & Allan, 2001, p. 178). By defining disablism in the way that C. Thomas (2007) does, as a form of social oppression involving socially imposed restrictions of activities, and an undermining of the psycho-emotional well-being of people with impairments (p. 73), it places disablism alongside other forms of oppression, such as hetero/sexism, racism, and ageism (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2010, p.281). Inclusion is not only a disability issue. Confronting the oppression disabled people endure reveals the cultural values that other forms of oppression (e.g., racism) are created and sustained within (Cameron, 2014, p. 79).

There is an increasing focus on intersectionality in CDS, which bridges it with other emancipatory discourses, such as a feminism and critical race theory (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017, p. 187). DeLuca (2013) delineates an interdisciplinary framework for educational inclusivity to coordinate a cohesive understanding of inclusion that moves beyond thinking about inclusion from the perspective of a single marginalized group. Multiple conceptions of inclusivity exist within teacher discourse, in part, because inclusive research and policy initiatives have stemmed from a range of sub-disciplines (in addition to special education)—multicultural education, anti-racist education, queer education, and the education of women (p. 307). He characterizes four conceptions of inclusivity along a continuum of inclusivity. Firstly, a *normative conception of inclusivity* occurs when non-dominant groups are recognized but not legitimized, it involves active assimilation and normalization to a dominant cultural standard and maintains a dualistic discourse (DeLuca, 2013, p. 26). Secondly, *integrative inclusivity*, accepts and legitimizes difference through institutional modifications, but the dominant cultural standard still exists (DeLuca, 2013, p. 330). Thirdly, *dialogical inclusivity* accepts individuals as culturally complex, and while the dominant group is still evident it recognizes and accepts difference (DeLuca, 2013, p. 332). This requires a response to difference that enables access and participation (DeLuca, 2013, p. 333). Lastly, a *transgressive conception of inclusivity*, "…student diversity is used as a vehicle for the generation of new knowledge and learning experiences" (DeLuca, 2013, p. 334). Although aspirational, this last conception creates the conditions for the acceptance of *all* students as complex individuals with an equal right to access educational settings, and it integrates different ways of knowing and being. This pushes the boundaries of what might be otherwise accepted as inclusion. A fundamental part of understanding the effectiveness of inclusion of disabled students is a sense of school belongingness (Prince and Hadwin, 2012, p. 240).

Belongingness

The principles and practices of belonging are at the heart of inclusion (Slee, 2019, p. 917). The concept of belonging allows for a broadening of the debates around the inclusion/exclusion binary (Mee & Wright, 2009, p. 774). Belonging is an ongoing interconnectivity that cannot be reduced to objective facts. It is a dynamic process (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199), and as Probyn (1996) describes it—a combination of both being and of a desiring or longing for attachment "to other people, places, or modes of being" (p. 19). Baumeister and Leary (1995) posit that belonging is a fundamental need (p. 497) and that the need to belong has two main features—frequent personal interactions, with the majority of them being positive, and the perception of a relationship that is marked by stability, affective concern, and continuing into the foreseeable future (p. 500). Belongingness understood in this way substantiates the role that caring plays in school belonging, and that schools have the potentiality to foster feelings of belongingness in students. Teachers are tasked with connecting the moral worlds of school and public life (Noddings, 2012, p. 779). The relationship that exists between a teacher as the carer and a student as the cared-for, has implications beyond that direct relationship. When we explore Adam's narrative below, we will see that he emphasized the impact and importance of relationship building between teacher and student, and the influence that had on his school experiences—interactions that affected his educational trajectory. "Caring involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's" (Noddings, 2013, p. 24). Caring requires considering the other's point of view, objective needs, and their expectations of us (Noddings, 2013, p. 24) It is not how the educator would feel in the student's position, but rather how the student feels—this can prove difficult when a student uses minimal or no language to express themselves, but as we shall learn in the *findings* section of this paper, from Ron, it requires paying close attention to the cues given by a child. Educators must not quickly declare an understanding of how a student feels, which I have done myself, and see others do often. Instead, asking questions and reflecting on the answers can help with empathic accuracy, something which more likely occurs in well-established relationships (Noddings, 2012, p. 775). In the *discussion* section below, I explain how special education programs can potentially foster deep relationships between educators and students.

Hall (2010) proposes using *belonging* in place of *inclusion* to think about what people with IDD want from their spaces of support and care, and more broadly how they relate to and find their place in society (p. 52). To belong is to feel attachment, to feel valued, and to have a sense of *insiderness* (Hall, 2010, p. 56). Looking at interactions and practices that influence student well-being, through a lens of belongingness, provides a framing for understanding student experience. "Spaces and relations of belonging and well-being" remains a way to examine and conceptualize paths to improve the lives and the acceptance for people with IDD (Hall, 2010, p. 49). Indeed, focusing on belonging, rather than on solely inclusion versus exclusion, creates the possibility of changing and broadening the discourses we use in schools around disabled students, and our approaches in special education.

Among the ways to explore belonging is through Yuval-Davis' three analytical levels on which belongingness is constructed. Two of which are most salient to this discussion on belongingness in schools. Firstly, *social locations*—one's positionality along an axis of power (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199). These are social and economic locations, which have particular implications depending on the historical moment (p. 199). Prior to the industrial revolution of the late eighteenth century, for example, impairment was typical, and impaired people were included in everyday life (Cameron, 2015, p. 66). The exclusion and disablement of a previously considered commonplace group of people began with the advent of the factory system, and the requirement for standardized bodies to fit within it (Cameron, 2015, p. 66). The *creation* of disability occurred through a system that did not consider bodies that were outside of the constructed standard; their exclusion was inextricably linked to their social locations. Schools are socializing agencies and transmit dominant values and beliefs (Barton, 1986, p. 274). By examining disabled students' social locations, within school institutions and beyond, we can better understand how schools perpetuate marginalized locations or push back against them. Moreover, Yuval-Davis (2006) emphasizes the importance of an intersectional approach to social locations (p. 200). Students with multiple marginalized aspects of their identities have a complexity in their oppression that is entwined with how processes of belonging occur.

A second level on which belongingness is constructed is on *identification and emotional attachment*—these are narratives people construct around who they are and are not, and rather than simple stories are reflections of emotional investments and desire for attachments (p. 202). Belonging involves specific repetitive practices, related to particular social and cultural spaces, which link together individual and collective behaviour—these are crucial for the creation and reproduction of identity narratives, and for the constructions of attachment (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 203). As classrooms involve repetitive rituals, orienting these rituals to bring students together, or rely on each other, can contribute to the potential for belongingness in classrooms. This idea illuminates the potentiality for belongingness in classrooms and schools. In Adam's narrative below, he speaks about a twice monthly lunch outing for students from the ASD program. He looks back on these lunches fondly and remembers them as times he felt a sense of belongingness.

Individuals with IDD, in response to oppressive understandings of social inclusion in larger society (such as expectations of employment, independent living, and community participation) have sought alternative spaces of inclusion (Hall, 2010, p. 51). Narrow understandings of social inclusion reflect the language used in Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and transition planning. On the Ontario Ministry of Education's website, stating that those with an IEP, who are not identified as solely gifted must have "...a plan for the transition to postsecondary education, or the workplace, or to help *the student live as independently as possible in the community* [emphasis added]" (Ministry of Education, 2018, para. 2). None of us live independently. Without the reliance on others, we would not be able to function in our daily lives. Yet, there is a socially constructed line which humans apparently should not cross in terms of how much or what kind of help we rely upon.

An alternative to the above understanding of social inclusion are new spaces of inclusion where individuals who cannot achieve standard norms of inclusion can "gather, share experiences, gain support, be *safe* and crucially be able to be *normal* within an accepting environment" (Hall, 2010, p. 51). Hall (2010) is referring to, *safe havens* or *oases*—terminology originally used for new spaces of inclusion for mentally ill individuals (p. 51). These are spaces, found within a mainstream community location, that also have separateness, privacy, and exclusivity (Hall, 2010. p. 52). These are spaces which thrive on interdependence not independence.

Assumptions about Disability and Normalcy

An office at my school holds all the student records. Each of the students I work with acquire a green hanging folder thick with reports and recommendations from professionals. Commonly found phrases on the pages are *quite limited*, *extremely low*, or *much below average*. These folders are full of measurements based on *norms*. Schools are systems built on the measuring, ranking, and sorting of students. Disabled students are further classified, receiving such designations as *mild*, *moderate,* or *severe* (McPhail & Freeman, 2005, p. 257). Medical discourse drives educational practices for these students. Normalcy, an invisible force driving much of what we do and how we make comparisons in education, creates the conditions in which unconventional bodies are cast to the margins.

Lennard Davis (2017) notes that the word *normal*, as meaning conforming to and not deviating from a standard, entered the English language around 1840 (p. 2). Applying this concept of *the norm* to bodies created the mythical *average man* (Davis, 2017, p. 3). This chimerical human is still in existence today, as it contributes to perpetuating hegemonic norms that dictate *the normal* versus *the abnormal*. In schools, students with IDD do not meet constructed academic and social norms, and they are therefore considered *deviants*. This creates the conditions for their stigmatization. Stigma, Coleman Brown (2013) proposes, is a “response to the dilemma of difference” (p. 147). It is those who are *normal* who decide what traits are undesirable versus desirable. Stigma is socially and historically dependent, meaning, it is by chance whether or not a person is born into a stigmatized group (Coleman Brown, 2013, p. 148). Two ways non-stigmatized people convey a sense of inferiority to stigmatized people is through *social rejection* or *social isolation and lowered expectations* (Coleman Brown, 2014, p. 154). As expressed above, through the work of Dewey, educators can potentially play a role in creating these circumstances. Educators must question what attitudes and habitual tendencies are being created (Dewey, 2015, p. 39). Student exclusion in schools, based on disability, stigmatizes. Moreover, the stigma associated with disability potentially becomes disabled students' *master status.* A master status renders the rest of one's identity, outside of the stigmatized aspect, invisible (Coleman Brown, 2013, p. 152).

Linton (1998) explains that using the terms *normal* and *abnormal* moves discourses to the highly abstract and removes the possibility of concrete discussion of specific characteristics (p. 23). She provides the example of the comparison between *the normal children* and *the handicapped children*—this dichotomy labels *the handicapped children* as abnormal by default, avoids discussions of actual differences, devalues the disabled children, and forces an *us and them* division between the two (Linton, 1998, p. 23). Binary thinking supresses the possibility of understanding the complexities which exist in individuals.

Discourses in special education operate through the binary abnormality versus normality, and as such, establish hierarchies of who is and is not included in regular social life (Slee & Allan, 2001, p. 179). In the Ontario Government document *Effective Educational Practices for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (2007) we see this line of thinking represented in its definition of *autistic disorder*:

> Students with autistic disorder have noticeable abnormal or impaired development in social interaction and communication and a restricted repertoire of activity and

> interests...abnormalities in the development of cognitive skills and in posture and body movements may be present. These impairments are accompanied by a delay or abnormal functioning in social interaction, language used in social communication, or symbolic or imaginative play… (p. 12)

In opposition to the above definition of autism is one which instead considers autism as a culture of people. Joseph Straus (2010), who identifies as autistic, writes that autism can be understood as a social group or culture of people, constructed by autistic people themselves, through the culture they produce, such as art, music, or writing (pp. 536-541). Autism is also historically contingent (Straus, 2010, p. 535). Asperger's Disorder, for example, once "existed", and since its removal from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5; APA 2013) no one is now acquiring this label. Straus (2010) notes that "...autism is intrinsically a relational phenomenon…" (p. 541). Autism, then, is not located within individuals, but rather is a function of the interactions between people (Straus, 2010, p. 541). This understanding of autism illuminates its social construction and rejects its medical pathology. It is in opposition to a positivist orientation that seeks to uncover an objective truth—an orientation underpinning the medical model of disability.

The medical model of disability dis/orients us to believe that disability is an individual problem (Cameron, 2014, p. 99). It is a deficit-based model that is reproduced in the Ministry of Education's definition of autism. This framing of disability puts the onus on the individual to change, and it requires one to become as *normal* as possible. The classroom is a place where this oppressive process can occur. Classrooms become places where interventions, based on a medical model ideology, take place (Price, 2015, p. 64). This dominant understanding is found in mainstream representations, such as in the media, leading to it being an accepted *truth*. In the

1970s a group of physically impaired disabled activists rejected this understanding of disability and countered it with the social model of disability. The social model disrupts medical model thinking. This model identifies disability as a social structural issue (Cameron, 2014, p. 137). Furthermore, "…it is a tool to help make sense of the experience of impairment in a disabling society" (Cameron, 2014, p. 139). It is a lens that educators can use to reassess the student experiences and future experiences they are contributing to.

Chapter 3: The Research Design

“It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told...” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 212)

The following chapter maps out my methodology and research approach. Narrative inquiry does not claim objectivity, but rather relationality (Clandinin, 2013, p. 220). The work of Jean Clandinin and Micheal Connelly form the conceptual framework for much of narrative inquiry. While the work of Clandinin and Connelly influenced this study, it was G. Thomas Couser (2010) who guided the construction of the narratives of the participants. Couser specifically discusses disability life writing and representation. His premises about disability life writing provide a tool to critically examine representation and narrative writing about disability. My professional experience as a special education teacher was a starting point for this research, and that experience was central to how I understood the data and re-told the participants’ stories. I articulate here how I handled the data collected from an interview with each participant. Through the interviews, the two participants, Adam and Ron each offer stories of their experiences in relation to disability and belongingness in schools. They share unique, but also overlapping, perspectives on my research questions. As I knew both participants prior to the interviews, I was able to fill in additional details about their stories. Using thematic analysis, I generated themes from their interview responses to produce a narrative of their experiences. This chapter shows transparency in my research process to contribute to the trustworthiness of this paper.

Narrative Inquiry

Where was I first exposed to disability? This was the question posed to the class in one of my recent university courses. For me and most of the class, it was in schools. Institutional stories of schools shape all of us (Clandinin, 2013, p. 219). Narrative inquiries use inquiry into the researchers' own stories of experience as a starting point, making it an ongoing reflexive and reflective methodology (Given, 2008, p. 542). Narrative inquiry is a relational methodology, not an objective one (Clandinin, 2013, p. 220). This project is a co-construction of meaning between myself and the two informants. This relational methodology allowed me to engage with my research puzzle and zoom in on the experiences of my informants in relation to my own experiences. As a secondary school teacher who works with disabled students, how I understood and retold the stories of the informants about belongingness in schools is inextricably linked to my own experiences in classrooms. Similarly, the retelling of Ron's stories of his daughters were also shaped by my identity as a mother of two children of my own.

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) posit that narrative inquiry is the study of experience *as* story, which makes it a way of thinking about experience (p. 375). Moreover, experience is understood as a changing stream characterized by our personal, social, and material environments continually interacting with human thought (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39). The purpose of this study is to investigate belongingness in school spaces. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) use the metaphor of a three-dimensional inquiry space, with the dimensions being—*interaction, continuity, and situation,* which define an inquiry (p. 50). To understand the experiences of my informants I thought through their stories using these premises. This is a focus on a balance of personal and social interactions (*interaction*); a look at the past, present, and future (*continuity* or temporality); and the occurrences in specific places or sequences of places (*situation*) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50).

Furthermore, three sets of criteria for legitimation of qualitative studies are presented by Mulholland and Wallace (2003): research conducted in ways that provide evidence of thoroughness and fairness, allowing the reader to experience vicariously the world of the participants, and a concern with the ways in which education is enhanced for the researcher, participant, and reader (p. 5). My hope is that in the retelling of the participants' stories I am increasing rather than diminishing the value and quality of their stories (Mulholland & Wallace, 2003, p. 6).

G. Thomas Couser

I deployed Couser in this study by using his six standards for disability life writing and representation in the construction of the narratives of each participant. First, Couser (2010) specifies disability autobiography should address misrepresentations—as a response to the traditional misrepresentations of disability in Western culture (p. 532). Although my work is not autobiographical, the narratives of my participants, and the discussion surrounding them, counter common disability tropes. Second, they are also not written for the readers comfort, but rather to challenge cultural scripts about disability (Couser, 2010, p. 533). Third, Couser (2010) calls for self-representation (p. 533). The narratives offer an inside perspective—participants are quoted verbatim. The analysis was guided by CDS, which is a discipline rooted in the emancipation of disabled people. His fourth criteria is that the writing should critique oppressive systems and structures (Couser, 2010, p. 533). In line with his fifth criteria is that these stories provide a "controlled access" (Couser, 2010, p. 533) into the lives of the informants. These life narratives explore the experience of disability in everyday school life, which is traditionally not shared.

Finally, Couser (2010) declares that disability life writing can be approached as a *quality-of-life* writing because it addresses ethical questions (pp. 533-534). He writes, "Because disability life narratives can counter the too often moralizing, objectifying, pathologizing, and marginalizing representations of disability in contemporary culture, they offer an important, if not unique, entree for inquiry into one of the fundamental aspects of human diversity" (Couser, 2010, p. 534).

Research Participants

I used a comparative narrative approach to weave together the experiences of two informants. One informant, Adam, is an autistic young adult who is currently enrolled in a disability studies program at an Ontario University. Through his school career he has been in contained classes, inclusive classes, and a college program before his current situation at university. The other informant, Ron, is a school principal. He is the parent of two children who are considered medically fragile and globally developmentally delayed. His oldest daughter no longer attends the schools where he is the principal, while his younger daughter still does. He was also a disability studies student. By layering their stories together, I provide insight into my three research questions.

Data Collection

My primary sources of data were interviews. Interviews are a common method used in narrative inquiry, and are understood as conversations (Given, 2008, p. 542). I conducted semi-structured interviews. For Adam, I did one interview which lasted 57 minutes. For Ron, I also did one interview, which lasted 33 minutes. Using a different interview guide with each participant allowed each of them to share their own life stories. To facilitate these conversations, and to aid in constructing a narrative from each of the participants, I used Quinn Patton's six kinds of interview questions (Quinn Patton, 2015, p. 444). These include experience and behaviour, opinion and values, feeling, knowledge, sensory, and background/demographic questions (Quinn Patton, 2105, p. 444). By using these differing types of questions, I created a rich multi-dimensional narrative. I also structured some of the interview questions to be broad enough to allow for participants to tell their stories within the interviews.

During the interview with Adam, he spoke about his experiences in elementary school, high school, college, and at his current university where he is completing a disability studies undergraduate degree. As Adam previously attended the high school where I teach, he spoke a lot about his experiences there. I was able to fill in some of the details of his time there, such as the structure of his program and classes. I asked him questions about how he defined belongingness for himself. I also inquired about experiences that he had in school environments where he felt as though he belonged. And other experiences where he felt he did not belong. Adam provided ardent, detailed, answers about his background in educational settings in relation to belongingness and inclusion. His post-secondary studies instilled an activist tone to many of his answers.

Ron spoke about his daughters' experiences in school settings, as well. His older daughter, Rachelle, now attends a local high school, while his younger daughter, Joelle, attends the school where he is the principal. We told me about their experiences of belongingness and inclusion in his own school. I asked him about scenarios at school where he felt his daughters belonged, and conversely, did not belong. He additionally provided a parent's perception of a child's belongingness, and the emotions associated with that. I also asked him what role friendships had in his daughters' sense of belongingness at school. We discussed a poem I found on one of his family blogs written by his daughter and her friend, which led to a story of powerful connection between the girls. Ron’s answers, dense with insight, were shaped by his role as a school administrator, a student of disability studies, and as the father of two disabled children.

I also asked both participants to share an artifact to be included in this study. The use of artifacts can trigger the telling of stories (Given, 2008, p. 542). Each shared an artifact and explained its significance—this can be found in chapter four. The data collected from the participants was kept confidential. Participants’ names and Ron’s children’s names were replaced with pseudonyms before release of findings.

One additional form of data collection was a researcher journal. I kept a digital journal to record my thoughts, assumptions, and ideas, throughout this process. In the journal I also wrote reflections from my past experiences with students and their families. I used this journal to assist in writing my reflection.

Consent & Procedure

Verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of the interviews. The letter of invitation and consent form are found in appendix D and E, respectively. I also asked Ron for permission to cite from his family blogs, which are predominantly written by his wife and document the journey of his family from 2009 to 2020. Due to the global pandemic of COVID-19, the format of the interviews was through video call, and therefore both audio and video of the interview were recorded. The recordings were immediately uploaded to a password protected computer. The transcriptions of the interview were also on the password protected computer. At the completion of this research, digital records and recordings will be deleted, and paper records will be shredded. The right to withdraw was outlined to interview participants in the informed consent letter. To withdraw from the study, informants could inform PSI in writing through an email. There were no consequences to withdrawal, and any data collected would have been deleted or shredded.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2012) identified that the purpose of analysis is to find patterns across a data set that are relevant to the research question (p. 57). Using thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2019) as my approach, I analyzed each transcript to try to understand what the experiences of my informants could speculate about belongingness in school spaces. I transcribed both interviews verbatim. During the first phase of TA, I familiarized myself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012, pp. 60-61). I read and re-read the interviews numerous times to gather a sense of their whole, and to familiarize myself with each interview. I noted any significant parts of the data that related to my research questions in my journal. Following this, I moved onto phase two where I generated initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2012, pp. 61-63). Using the conceptual framework laid out by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), I identified different types of codes. During this first cycle coding, for each interview, I coded the transcripts with descriptive, process, emotion, verbatim/quotes, and value codes. By coding line by line and assigning these *topics* to the data set, it allowed for an intensive examination and accounting for everything each participant said. I tagged many of the responses by the informants with multiple types of codes. For example, when Ron said, *I have heard belonging is do they know ... when you're no longer there, right? Are you missed when you're not there? ... you know you belong when you're missed when you're not there, and I think that's the part where I would say that's probably the biggest thing, and I don't know if Joelle and Rachelle feel that but we as parents definitely feel that.* I tagged this response as a process code, an emotion code, and a value code. Ron is describing belongingness as a process that is happening and what it means (process), that it is something him and his spouse feel about their daughters' experiences (emotion), and that it represents his beliefs about what belongingness is and how it affects him (value). This exemplifies how applying multiple codes to a response helped deepen my understanding of what was said by the participants.

Next, I began the process of searching for potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012, pp. 63-65). During this second cycle coding, I took all the codes from each interview and wrote each of them on a sticky note. I arranged the notes to display patterns that I was seeing in each interview. I wrote down the patterns from each interview in anticipation of creating themes for each of them. With Dr. Connolly's assistance, I constructed themes, phase five (Braun & Clarke, 2012, pp. 66-69), for each participant out of the patterns from the interview data. Following this process, I did a third cycle of coding in which I identified similarities and differences across the two interviews. In the final phase of producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2012, pg. 69) I settled on two themes around Adam's interview and three themes from Ron's. I also identified one similarity and distinguished two differences in the informants' notions of belongingness in schools.

TA allows for the making sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences, and it is a way to identify commonalities in how a topic is talked or written about and make sense of these similarities (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Braun and Clarke (2019) refer to their approach as *reflexive TA*, which distinguishes this approach as one that emphasizes the researcher's role in knowledge production (p. 594). By engaging in this project, I was constructing knowledge. All three cycles were influenced by my theoretical framework of CDS. Critical theory itself intimates an enactment of self-reflexivity to contribute to facilitating emancipation of disabled people (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017, p. 180). I tried to understand what the participants were saying in relation to the larger influences at play in schools, such as hegemonic assumptions and structures of power. I viewed the data through an emancipatory lens. My own experiences in schools shaped how I understood the participants' stories and how I coded, identified patterns, and constructed themes. I aimed to make obvious important notions that were not always explicitly stated, while still honouring the participants’ own meaning.

Chapter 4: Findings

Adam attended the high school where I work. I was never his classroom teacher, but I remember him walking through the hallways with his group of friends from the ASD program. I also saw him many times in the ASD program's converted classroom (the central hub or safe haven of the program), and on program wide field trips. He has a gentle and kind nature, and he had deep connections with some of my teacher colleagues. One of those teacherswas the one who suggested I contact Adam to be a part of this study. Adam, now a disability studies student, brings insight to the topic of belongingness in schools through his lived experience as an autistic person and his education in disability studies.

Two themes were created from Adam's interview. In the first theme, *The Tension Between Inclusion and Exclusion,* he explains how in high school it was with his autistic peers, who were enrolled in the autism program with him, where he felt he belonged. While he still longed for disabled and non-disabled students to come together and interact with mutual respect, this was often not his experience. In the second theme, C*onnecting*, Adam discusses the power of relationships in schools and some of the ways disabled students can feel supported and understood, such as creating a club that mirrors a gay-straight alliance to educate non-disabled students about disability.

I first met Ron when we had a university class together. Ron was also completing a disability studies degree. During a lunch break in one of our all-day seminars, Ron was sitting at a desk across from me and sharing with a group of us that him and his wife ran support groups for parents of disabled children. He spoke about the experience of having a disabled child, and that it does not live up to societal expectations of the experience of parenthood. He mentioned a family blog where they document their journey as the parents of two children who have required significant medical support from their birth date. In one blog post, Ron writes a letter to his youngest daughter, Joelle, on her sixth birthday:

> *This may sound funny, but sometimes I am saddened about my sadness regarding your birth. Your arrival, even though it brought me to tears, has profoundly impacted so many people. You bring a smile to the face of people you meet. The world would be a better place if more people could do that. Your presence has shaped your older three sisters and your mother and I in so many good and positive ways. And you give the best hugs.*

Ron's interview generated three themes. The first theme, *A Circle of Support,* describes how his daughters' days are heavily mediated by adults that care for them, and if his daughters feel belongingness (which he is not sure they do) their caregivers play a large role in it. Classroom peers also contribute to how his daughters experience connection at school, for example, he describes how although his daughters are non-verbal, Joelle, engages in reciprocal expressive exchange with her classmates through her iPad and switchboard. His second theme of *Not Knowing* provides the perspective of him and his spouse as not knowing how or if his daughters feel belongingness at all. He emphasized the need to pay close attention to his daughters' cues. As a school administrator he must constantly evaluate what kinds of daily experiences are being created for all disabled students, and he has a unique perspective to do so. One similarity between the informant's responses about belongingness was *Deliberate Action.* Processes of belongingness for marginalized groups do not happen without purposeful steps to create the potential for it.

Two differences between the informant's responses about belongingness were *How Connection is Felt* and their *Sense of Inclusion.* Connection was felt differently for Adam from Ron's daughters, and Ron indicated that whether or not his daughters belonged was something him and his spouse felt. While Adam claims a disabled identity and sees value in both inclusion and self-exclusion, Ron approaches inclusion from his daughters' right to access education as any other elementary student would. In the retelling of these participants' stories, through the themes I constructed, I have used the participants' words in the narratives to contribute to the trustworthiness of this research, and to centralize their voices. The narratives in this chapter represent the complexity of belongingness and the way it is felt, from two perspectives.

Adam's Interview Theme One: The Tension Between Inclusion and Exclusion

I couldn't really work with standard education, it just ... didn't really work out well. Adam's autism diagnosis came in grade three. He explained this was a turning point in his life, allowing him to switch schools and enter an ASD Program that same year. He credits the special education programs, and the EAs and teachers in them, as getting him through school. Prior to switching schools, he felt alienated from the rest of the class and was often picked on. *I felt like I was different, like I felt like I wasn't really part of it, I wasn't ... kind of... say normal in the class. I had a really good teacher in grade one and two, but grade three is where I really struggled ... there was no ERFs [in my class]*. Adam's grade three teacher told his parents that she did not have time to support him. He described his first school as *mainstream* with *minimal support*.

Two to three EAs and a special education teacher taught his new classroom of six to seven students. He reflected on this time and mentioned a classmate from the special education class who he still maintains a relationship with over sixteen years later. Adam continued in special education throughout elementary school. He arrived in high school enrolled in a large regional autism program (the program I teach in). Most of Adam's classes mixed autistic and non-autistic students together, but he also took classes made up of only autistic students. Having the disability exclusive classes was one of the supports provided by his program. A special education teacher and EAs taught the classes. The curriculum focused on building life skills, such as social skills and self-advocacy. These classes were his *all-time favourite*, he explained. He also had access to a converted classroom down the hall with comfortable seating and work areas. The room was staffed by an EA and teacher all day, and available for academic or social emotional support. In my role as a teacher, I have monitored this same room. I have watched autistic teens come to gather and socialized or access academic support. Students also come to laugh, talk, cry, scream, and occasionally throw objects when a school day is too overwhelming.

Twice monthly students from the program would go out to lunch. *That was one of the best moments [at school] where I actually feel like I really belong[ed].* He felt that the program is where his real friends were. *[The ASD program] is where I actually belonged.* Still, Adam expressed a yearning for all students in school environments to come together. He described inclusive schools as places where ... *everyone works together equally ... working together with mutual respect.* He noted a feeling of safety as crucial for autistic students in school environments. School Environments should also be about ... *allowing people who are not disabled and those who are disabled coming together and to work together.*

His discomfort in mixed classes and within the larger school was evident in his description of the way other students would sometimes treat him and his autistic peers. *Some students outside our program ... would just look at us or treat us differently or some of them would laugh at us and ... it's just not a really nice feeling ...we are human beings ...we deserve to be treated equally.* His ambition was not to fit in but to develop genuine relationships and friendships. *I really didn't see myself as a popular student and I never wanted to be popular, I* *just wanted to … have a conversation and build … friendships.* He went on to say… *they think that just because we are in an [ASD] program they assume that we are different from them and that's not true [...] but we are unique, we are human, it's just that we learn differently, we communicate or interact differently.*

He recounted many occasions in which his peers were not who they seemed to be, leading to a mistrust in people. *Looking back now … the people that I used to think that they are my friends, like outside the [ASD] program … turns out they weren't the people that I thought they would be.* He explained that he was *quite used to* having these sorts of social encounters. In his current situation at university, though, he feels like he is finally surrounded by *mature, good people*.

Adam's Interview Theme Two: Connecting

Disability is not a problem, it's our identity … [it is] who we are. Adam considers himself a part of the disability community. He feels he belongs there. He connected to this community through the disability studies university degree he is currently working his way through. It was during his studies he learned about person first language, and now identifies as an autistic male (not a person with autism). *I can actually feel safe, and actually be who I am … my identity intersects with this community, and with my personal experience.*

Rapport building, Adam says, is a key piece of constructing belongingness for disabled students. *There's a saying that family doesn't have to be blood related, it depends on how the person is loyal to you, believes in you ... looks out for you ... and respect[s you][...] that's what I believe in.* It's the relationships in schools that matter. He spoke about an interdependence that needs to develop between a teacher and a student, one in which there is trust built between the two. The teacher as caring and supportive is a requirement for these relationships to flourish.

Thinking back to his high school experiences, he remembers ... *being in a classroom where you're ... the only one or like have two or three other students from the [ASD] program ... and most of the portion of the students are not from the [ASD] program ... you're at a slight disadvantage and sometimes when you're encountering bullying or feeling harassed and you don't know what to do, then where are you going to get support?* Adam feels that support within the alternative space offered by the ASD program helped, but also that developing a peer group to support disabled students is another approach. *Free to Be Me* clubs in schools, designed to support and build belongingness for LGBTQIA students and their allies, is something Adam references in relation to supporting diversity in schools. He would want the group to be a mix of non-autistic and autistic students in order to educate the non-autistic students on ideas such as ... *why normative representations can really mislead understandings of disability.*

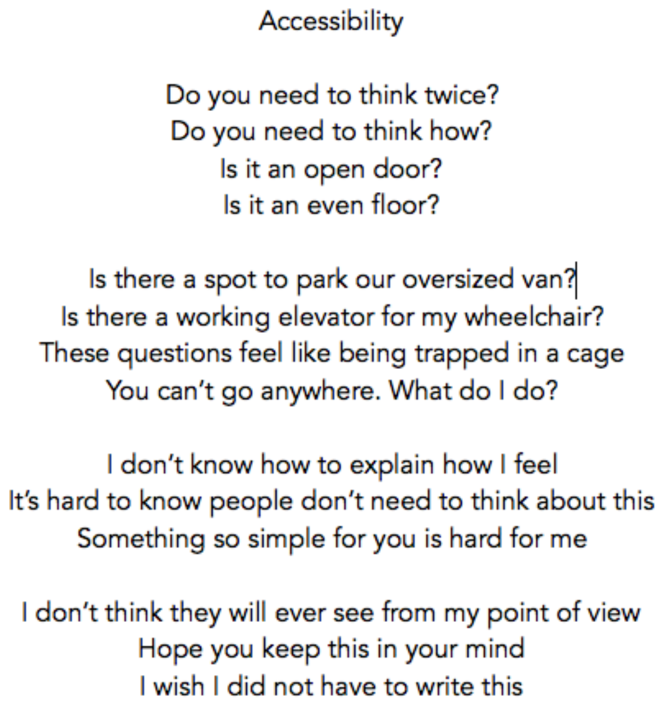
Adam goes on to explain that we cannot change people's minds about how they view disabled people but getting to know a disabled person can. Stereotypical representations of disability, commonly found in mainstream media, need to be disrupted, and ... *we want people outside our community to know ... there [are] misconceptions, stereotypical representations of autism, but it's not just autism ... its intellectual disabilities, Down syndrome ... [and] the way normative culture represents disability.* He also notes the cycle of misrepresentation of disabled people where ... *people look upon autistic or disabled people as inspiring or objects of pity, of entertainment ...we shouldn't be looking at those, [they] are very stereotypical role perceptions.* He also stresses that friendship is a key ingredient of being part of a community or group, and when someone comes out as autistic, they must contend with how others will react to them. A crucial aspect of belongingness is one's identity ... *if you don't belong it's because you are not being yourself.*

Ron’s Interview Theme One: A Circle of Support

I think the biggest thing for us as parents is that she’s cared for, she’s safe, [and] she’s interacting with people her age. When two of Ron’s daughters entered grade four, they began attending the school where he is the principal. When Rachelle, the eldest, arrived, modifications to the school had to be made. The girls are medically fragile and globally developmentally delayed. They are tube-fed and non-verbal and require a PSW to work alongside them throughout their school day. *Now the school is fully set-up in terms of personal care space ... [and] room in support services that ... allows them to be there with the PSW during parts of the day where she can’t cope through a full day.* Joelle, his younger daughter, is now part of the grade six homeroom class, while Rachelle has gone onto a special education program in a local high school.

Joelle’s day is heavily mediated by adults. She always has a PSW alongside her—during recess, in class, on field trips. She also accesses other supports through the school, such as physiotherapy and occupational therapy. If Joelle feels belongingness, it is heavily dependent on the interdependent relationships she has with her caregivers. The many relational pieces of her daily school life reflect the potential for processes of belongingness. Her peers play an important role too. When Ron reflects on the friendships his daughters have, he says, *there’s definitely certain kids in their experience that have ... kind of walked alongside them.* One girl Anna, who gravitated towards Rachelle, who was born in the same week, enjoys spending time with her, and Rachelle likewise is very comfortable with her. They wrote a poem together:

Figure 2
Rachelle and Anna's Poem



Accessibility

Do you need to think twice?
Do you need to think how?
Is it an open door?
Is it an even floor?

Is there a spot to park our oversized van?
Is there a working elevator for my wheelchair?
These questions feel like being trapped in a cage
You can't go anywhere. What do I do?

I don't know how to explain how I feel
It's hard to know people don't need to think about this
Something so simple for you is hard for me

I don't think they will ever see from my point of view
Hope you keep this in your mind
I wish I did not have to write this

Ron sees a pattern in children when they start entering grade seven or eight and says there is a shift ... *it gets a little more difficult because then all of a sudden the kids are thinking about eeeeverything else, right? A little more self-aware, and a little more self-conscious*. But with this friend it was different. They maintained a strong connection. The girls have since gone onto different high schools, which makes the longevity of their friendship an unknown.

Ron explains that Joelle enjoys interacting with the other students and it helps the other students understand that not everyone is the same, *and this whole idea of how do we care for another?* Joelle engages in reciprocal expressive exchange with her peers through her iPad and switchboard. Through her eye movements she makes choices. *...the other students have been really good with trying to work with her on choice boards.* She participates in daily classroom activities, and the school staff *seek creative ways* to include her in them. Ron notes that ... *as she* *moves into higher and higher grades that becomes more and more complicated.* It's an ongoing question of *how do you widen the scope of who you serve within a classroom?* While she has her own version of a typical day with an IEP that guides what she is working on, she is a member of the classroom community.

Ron's Interview Theme Two: Not Knowing

It's a little bit tough to define for them..how do we know that they belong? or that they felt belonging? It's almost something that we feel as parents more than perhaps they do…
Ron is not sure what his daughters feel in relation to belongingness. *It's not like a typically developing child who will say "ya no one wants to play with me at recess" type of thing.* He is sure, though, that they enjoy going to school. Like all parents, he wants his children to go places they enjoy going to. When schools moved to virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools accommodated some students with unique needs to continue in-person learning. Both girls were able to attend school during this time. For Joelle, there were only about ten other students in the entire school who attended in-person. She still enjoyed it, but Ron knows she was happy to have the rest of her class back when the schools reopened.

He explained that, as parents, *it's just sensing their anxiety levels and their comfort levels, we can see when they're excited or happy about doing something and when they're kind of frustrated and wanting to get out of there.* Even though they do not tell him with verbal language, by paying attention he becomes aware of what they need or might be feeling. Dropping off Rachelle at high school in the morning creates a moment where he feels Rachelle belongs. *When she comes out of our van and goes to school right away there is another student who will say "hi Rachelle"... someone's in Rachelle's class, like a 16-year-old boy who has Down syndrome and is just excited to have her at school.* He shares one way to understand belongingness as, *do they know ... when you're no longer there, right? Are you missed when you're not there? ... you know you belong when you're missed when you're not there, and I think that's the part where I would say that's probably the biggest thing, and I don't know if Joelle and Rachelle feel that but we as parents definitely feel that.*

As an administrator Ron is constantly evaluating the happenings in his school, and then communicating and making decisions around them. Sometimes, Ron sees occurrences at his school that involve his daughter (and other students) and says ... *"ya we have got to do that better".* Ron works from a value system of equity, and it is not always easy to implement. Shifting people's mindsets to think more inclusively has been a challenge and has become defining for him, whether he wanted it to be or not.

Ron's Interview Theme Three: How People Think About People

So, a big thing at my school is a grade eight overnight three-day trip and it was ... basically a non-starter for my daughter Rachelle to go on that trip ... the question became how do we make it so Rachelle can go on this trip? Rather than, what kind of trip can we take that all of our students can go on? And so, it's a different way to ask the question. These are the kind of school situations in which he feels his daughters do not belong. When at the outset they are not considered, but rather there is an attempt to fit them into already established inaccessible activities or events. Ron explained that within the school there has been effort made to consider all students, but it is not ingrained. *It's the exception not the rule. We struggle with how do you create that as just the way things operate?*

The language used about students in schools is fused with belongingness and inclusion, as well. *How staff members speak about students ... "all the students can walk over here".* A simple statement that does not include his daughters. Ron conceives the potential of belongingness as transpiring through widening its lens to apply to everybody. *This idea of inclusion and belonging really starts to take off when we are not just talking about a segment of a classroom, or a segment of society, we are talking about people.*

When asked about how to create an accessible classroom he responded ... *you can have all the physical space in the world sorted out ... but if the people in that physical space are not accommodating, if they are not ... thinking of the needs of others then you can have the most successful space in the universe but it's not gonna ... help.* Shifting people's mindsets is a far more daunting task than changing the layout of a room, but making spaces physically accessible is also tied up in people's thinking. For anyone using a wheelchair or walker, for example, ensuring chairs are tucked in, something which Ron jokes *no grade eight child has ever done on their own*. It is the adults and the students in a classroom who create accessibility. This is questioning seemingly harmless habits and how they contribute or take away from the potential of a person feeling they belong. Having his daughters in the classrooms of his school has had a profound impact. He says that it has ... *helped people to not have just ... a singular mindset or tunnel vision of what school is.* Many of the issues around belongingness stem from people's narrow conceptions. *So, I think it's ... widened the school community in terms of how people think about people.*

Similarity Across Adam's and Ron's Interviews: Deliberate Action

Both interview participants emphasized the need for a profound ongoing commitment to deliberate action to create the conditions in schools that allow for processes of belongingness to happen. These conditions do not happen spontaneously. For Ron, it was an ongoing evaluation of what happens in the school, and continual adjustments to make inclusiveness as *just the way things operate*. For Adam, it was supporting diversity in schools through interventions such as clubs similar to gay-straight alliances in schools. These actions are rooted in a value system that came across from both informants in the interviews—one of equity, caring, support, and safety. The deliberate action is in the service of creating changes in staff and student behaviours, shifting to more inclusive language used about disabled students, and a re-imagining of school spaces.

Trusting interdependent relationships are at the foundation of this work. Having good intentions is not adequate. It is looking at the impact of actions and what kind of day-to-day experiences are created for disabled students. To what degree students feel belongingness, if at all, does not change some of the ways school staff can approach creating these conditions. When school staff critically reflect on their own practices in schools and widen their thinking, this is a path towards inclusiveness and creating classrooms where marginalized students feel welcome and safe. There needs to be an ongoing questioning of norms, and disruption of the colonial lens which dictates how schooling should be. All the above processes can also only be fully realized with the voices of disabled students and their families being included in the conversation.

Difference Across Adam's and Ron's Interviews: How Connection is Felt

Ron is a parent watching the world of disability. Adam is living in the world of disability. Adam spoke for himself. He communicated his awareness of how he felt perceived by others. His self-awareness brought about a range of emotions for him. On outings with other students in the ASD program he felt authentic friendship and connection. During interactions with students from outside the program he was sometimes picked on and mistreated. As Ron's daughters do not verbally communicate, Ron is not sure how they internalize the connections they have at school. There is no doubt though that there are connections through their many daily interactions and relationships with their peers and their caregivers. Ron's stories illuminate the empathy that all parents feel for their own children. Parents of disabled students, especially those that require a high level of support, have a perspective and insight that schools must learn from in order to properly support this population of students.

Difference Across Adam’s and Ron’s Interviews: A Sense of Inclusion

Both Ron and Adam also each had a different sense of inclusion. This highlights that inclusion means different things to different people and that it is not a one-size-fits-all conception. Adam identified his disability community as a place he felt he belonged. He spoke of his disability exclusive classes and program outings as places where his true friends and experiences of belonging were. In Adam’s experience of high school, he was in some ways advocating for self-exclusion, although he also wanted a mutually respectful alliance between disabled and non-disabled students. There is a tension here between inclusion and exclusion and both can co-exist for him.

Ron spoke on behalf of his daughters’ experiences in elementary school. He comes at the subject from a different lens, which is their rights to equity in the education system. Ron’s daughters, as part of the regular elementary classroom, are where he felt they belonged. Their days are more engaging and have more value because they are participating in a regular classroom. As the leader of the school, and father of two disabled children, he must manage the tensions that arise around inclusion, but he does not accept them. His values do not allow for it. Everybody counts or nobody counts—he does not distinguish between his children who have unique needs versus a typically developing peer in terms of who should be included in his school’s classrooms.

Artifacts

I asked each of the participants to share an artefact that related to belongingness in schools. The purpose of the artefact was to add a visual element to the project, as another way to represent their lived experiences, and to prompt storytelling. I asked Adam to share something that was important to his identity and belonging, while for Ron, I asked for something that represented belongingness for each of his daughters.

Figure 3
Adam's Artifact

Retrieved from https://themighty.com/2019/08/true-inclusion-disability/

Note. For Adam, this picture is disabled and non-disabled students at an accessible table. The image represents what a sense of belongingness looks like, and the important role diversity plays in it. For him, the picture shows acceptance, friendship, and allowing for more people into one's social circle.

Figure 4

Ron's Artifact

Note. Ron's daughter, Joelle, engaged in an activity in a grade six science class. One of the significant parts about this photo, which is not visible, is that there is a group of students working cooperatively with Joelle to light up this light bulb. The students are all engaged in this experiment together, which is taking place on Joelle's tray.

My Reflection

“ ...the focus of narrative inquiry is not only valorizing individuals’ experience but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted.”

(Clandinin, 2013, p. 217)

This past school year, I spent some of the year teaching my classes over video calls. I would occasionally do a show and tell activity. When asked to share a personal belonging, many of the students held up a stuffed animal, or a toy such as a roaring walking dinosaur, to their computer camera. Although these items would not be considered *age appropriate* for high school students, other students’ reactions to their chosen items ranged from indifference to excitement. No student was teased or antagonized. On the other hand, when these students are in regular classrooms, they are having other kinds of social interactions with their typical peers, that cannot be re-created in a disability exclusive space. Their inclusion also has wider impacts beyond themselves. As Ron explained, it helps with understanding that not everyone is the same. The relegation of disabled people to private spaces is one factor that constructs disability (Wendell, 1996, p. 40).

The program I run at a secondary school is for students coming from self-contained classrooms to develop skills to enter a vocational secondary school environment. I also monitor how they do when they are in the regular classrooms, which involves communication with their parent(s)/guardians, and with the school staff working with them in the classes. As they are sometimes included in regular classes and sometime not, I came to these research questions out of a curiosity of what it takes for students to feel an attachment to their school spaces, and to enrich my teaching practices.

CDS is a way to think through a restructuring of cultural meanings, social processes, and politics (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017, p. 175). Central to this process is the voices of disabled people. Since I do not identify as disabled, I knew I wanted to include disabled people in this study. One of the principles of CDS, which guided the justification of this project, was bringing theory into action in the service of increased autonomy and a freeing from hegemonic structures and ideologies for disabled students (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017, p. 180). I am trying to move ideas of belongingness into the service of action. As a teacher, I hold tremendous power over the daily experiences of disabled students and influence what their future lives hold. Dei et al. (2000) explain that "… the process of teaching, learning, and sharing of knowledge is fundamentally a power relation" (p. 243). Much of my education, prior to this degree, has been oriented through a medical model lens. Being that this is also the dominant model in our culture, I still catch myself thinking and using language that is oriented in this way—even with one of my own children who, as a speech and language pathologist tells me, has *mild-moderate delays in his development of expressive language*. As I count his words and orient my verbal interactions with him around changing the way he communicates, rather than a natural interpersonal interaction, I am intervening in a way that parents of disabled children are told they must ascribe to. This project is an exercise in critical reflection of my own thinking about disability and humanity.

The process of thinking through and writing this thesis has impacted my teaching practice. It has made me choose language more carefully when I talk about students. It has caused me to rephrase colleagues' words when they speak about students. Identity-first language is something I am still working on, as it is not the common practice of educators to use it. Instead, person-first language is the norm. I began my interview with Adam by asking him how he identified. He responded that he identified as an *autistic mal*e. I now understand that identity-first language is a statement about the rights of those that experience disability, and as Cameron (2014) writes, is a source of collective pride in one's disabled identity (p.74). Identifying as disabled orientates disabled people from a position of strength; it makes an assertion about the right to be different and the ordinariness of it (Cameron, 2014, pp.72-73). "To say 'I don't see myself as disabled' does not mean that one does not experience physical and social barriers" (Cameron, 2014, p.74). Not identifying as disabled myself, I find this concept difficult to regularly implement into my practice. Furthermore, I work with some parents who have never told their child they have an autism diagnosis, so this complicates the matter further. Still, I continue to work towards bringing identity-first language into the mainstream through conversations with colleagues.

Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2017) warn, "the creation of knowledge and meaning is also implicated in maintaining structures of control and exclusion" (p. 176). I began this project thinking by the end of it I might be able to compose a list of the things necessary in schools to create a feeling of belongingness for disabled students. As the project progressed, I thought to myself that I might be able to create a flawed list. I am now at a place where I feel there cannot be a list. As culture is habitual and invisible, we are too deeply rooted in deficit thinking around disability in education to be ready for that list. Medical model thinking is not just seen as one perspective on disability, but rather as established fact (Cameron, 2014, p. 99).

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this final chapter, I explore my three research questions through the findings from the participants, and I contextualize those finding in relevant literature and CDS concepts. For my first question: how do the students I work with (autistic students with IDD) develop a sense of belongingness in classrooms and school spaces? I speculate based on aspects of what my participants shared and the literature, since I did not interview any of my own students or their families for this project. The final two questions I combined, which are, what are the conditions in schools that allow belongingness to flourish? What are the conditions in schools that prevent processes of belongingness from occurring? These two questions are coupled because many of the human actions that potentially create conditions for belongingness can also prevent those conditions when enacted in a different way—for example, the way we speak about disabled students can both open up or shut down possibilities for them. There is a difference between saying *a student requires a high level of support* versus *a student is low functioning*. The first statement acknowledges that every student requires support in the school environment, but some need more. The second statement positions the student as inadequate. The first statement may encourage a response of proactive support, while the second statement may discourage it. The language we use creates a feedback loop—it informs the practices we have and perpetuates them. Schools have highly permeable boundaries, and the ways disabled students are talked about, thought about, and treated in school buildings reverberates well beyond their walls. Each of these research questions was created to understand how to create better conditions in schools for disabled students.

How do the students I work with (autistic students with IDD) develop a sense of belongingness in classrooms and school spaces?

Ron was unsure whether or not his daughters felt belongingness. Likewise, I will never know how, or if, my students feel belongingness. Belongingness is experienced on a spectrum. The more self-aware a child is, the more they can participate in the tensions that are associated with belongingness and inclusion. The more support they require, the less likely these processes are going to be authentic as we do not know how it is felt for them. Ron said, about his daughters, that he *wants them to go to places that they are happy to go*.

In the literature, one of the ways that the feeling of belonging is described is of a feeling of *being at home* in a place (Antonish, 2010, p. 652). This aligns with the way Adam described belongingness—*the idea of coming … to a place where you feel like its home.* Of the ways to understand belonging, the feeling of home is familiar. Any person with a *good* home, would have a version of what it feels like to be in that home. Van Manen (1990) describes home as "where we can *be* what we *are*" (p. 102). In this sense, home is a place of familiarity and comfort, and its relational aspects contribute to its essence. In order to satisfy the need to belong, a person must feel cared for and liked (or loved) (Baumeester & Leary, 1995, p. 500). By approaching school spaces through an orientation of a welcoming home, and paying attention to what students are communicating, we can create spaces where students want to be. This might be in a regular classroom, it might be a self-contained one, or it might be in both. For the students I work with, it is a high school classroom that feels safe and comforting in a way that they want to be there, can grow, and be who they are.

As the students I work with are in secondary school, how they connect to school spaces would differ from when they were in elementary school. A fundamental goal of special education is full inclusion, however, “on the ground things are generally more fluid” (Bennett et al., 2008, p. 16). One informant gave an elementary school perspective, while the other provided a high school point of view. It is plausible to think that inclusion differs between these two environments. Both socially, pedagogically, and from a curriculum standpoint, there are differences. Ron said about the school staff working with Joelle that *they seek creative ways to include her in the activities of a given day, having said that, as she moves into higher and higher grades, that becomes more and more complicated.* As students enter high school, and start to work towards their post-secondary pathways, the skills different students require and their directions of growth, varies greatly. For individuals with IDD there are limited post-secondary options (Bennett et al., 2008, p. 52). The students in my program stay until they are 21 years old, and they are therefore on a different timeline and pathway than students that stay until age 18.

Inclusion cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach, and it is far from as straightforward as putting all students in the same classroom. Research in this area is of little help as for every study which demonstrates *no exception inclusion* as the answer, there is another which indicates that some students are better served, at least partially, in a specialized environment (Bennett et al., 2008, pp. 22-23). To enhance autonomy for disabled students, it is not about 100% inclusion in regular classes, necessarily, but rather disrupting what is underlying the oppressive conditions for them in the first place. Each individual child requires something different to support their well-being and potential to feel belongingness. How we plan for and treat disabled students in institutions is tied to broader patterns of oppression in society. Barton (1998, as cited in Clough, 2000) calls for wider changes to our culture:

> Inclusion is a process. Inclusive education is not merely about providing access into mainstream school for pupils who have previously been excluded. It is not about closing down an unacceptable system of segregated provision and dumping those pupils in an unchanged mainstream system. Existing school systems – in terms of physical factors, curriculum aspects, teaching expectations and styles, leadership roles – will have to change. This is because inclusive education is about the participation of all children and young people and the removal of all forms of exclusionary practice (p. 7).

CDS urges for more choices for disabled people, an awareness of what those choices are, and choosing how one wishes to engage with those choices. Reconceptualizing how we see inclusion as driven by individual student choice, and a creative re-think of what schools can offer is one way forward. Belongingness, for Ron, was not necessarily felt by his daughters, but felt by him and his spouse, as parents. Inclusion should be guided by what disabled students and their families communicate they need. This, in part, creates the possibility for processes of belongingness to happen for not only the students, but also for their parents and families.

What are the conditions in schools that allow belongingness to flourish? What are the conditions in schools that prevent processes of belonging from occurring?

A More Inclusive Inclusion

Both informants acknowledged a need to think beyond solely disability in relation to inclusion and belonging. This requires thinking about inclusion beyond the specifics of a particular marginalized group, which can help broaden the scope of emancipation. Ron expressed that *this idea of inclusion and belonging really starts to take off when we are not just talking about a segment of a classroom, or a segment of society, we are talking about people.* By using tools, such DeLuca's (2013) interdisciplinary framework for educational inclusivity, educators and researchers can move inclusive practices in a more desirable direction (p. 324). When used deliberately, tools such as his framework can help educators and school leaders assess systemic issues of exclusion and everyday practices of it. Educational institutions are far away from a transgressive conception of inclusivity, however, shaping policies and practices towards this aspirational touchstone would move towards equity in who is serviced and valued in classrooms. Special education programs each sit somewhere on this continuum of inclusion and require critical examination.

Special Education Programs

For the most part, special education and traditional human service professions "conceive, discuss, and treat disability within a diagnostic perspective that emphasises individual deficiency" (Meekosha and Dowse, 2007, p. 172). If teacher education does not put a critical lens onto special education and centralize the voices of disabled people, we will continue to perpetuate stereotypes and maintain the status quo. When we delineate disabled children and their families as objects of pity (Cameron, 2014, p. 144) we can never foster an environment in which disabled students can truly feel they belong. It is the unquestioned acceptance of such views in education (and wider society) that contribute to the continued oppression of disabled people. As disabled advocate Harriet McBryde Johnson (2018) elucidated:

> Are we "worse off"? I don't think so. Not in any meaningful sense. There are too many variables. For those of us with congenital conditions, disability shapes all we are. Those disabled later in life adapt. We take constraints that no one would

> choose and build rich and satisfying lives within them. We enjoy pleasures other people enjoy, and pleasures peculiarly our own. We have something the world needs (p. 498).

There is no doubt, through my many conversations with families over the years, that there are significant difficulties parenting a high needs child. Still, many of the hardships that parents face are a result of the failures of our society and school system, and the people within them, to adequately support and accommodate their child. Much of the way we label and describe issues as found in the individual are in actuality manifested out of our productivist ableist culture designed for the *paradigm citizen* (Wendell, 1996, p. 41). Individualized programming is what lies in the potentiality of special education. Special education, with its smaller class sizes and team of teachers and EAs, can personalize programming that services the individual child and supports their family. Supporting students who require a high level of support demands a team approach and the time to do it. Many regular classrooms are bursting with too many students who are supported by one teacher who cannot possibly adequately attend to all of them. Noddings (2013) argues for changes to school structure and teaching so that caring can flourish, thereby creating the conditions for both higher cognitive achievement and a more caring and ethical society (p.180). Deep relationships can develop between educators and students in the special education environment if we as educators take an emancipatory and caring approach towards students. Deconstructing disability involves a change of perspective to looking into environment for the source of the problem and the solutions (Wendell, 1996, p. 46).

The Social Construction of Disability

Susan Wendell's premises about the social construction of disability, found in her book *The Rejected Body*, provide further insight into these research questions. Wendell (1996) maintains that disability is created or prevented by the interaction of the biological and the social (p. 35). Society's organization and physical construction both create and prevent disability (Wendell, 1996, p. 39). In schools, the way we *choose* to physically structure them, implement programming, enact relationships, and organize them can potentially create or prevent disability. Disability is socially constructed through "the failure or unwillingness to create ability among people who do not fit the physical and mental profiles of *paradigm* citizens" (Wendell, 1996, p. 41). As disabled students are not *paradigm citizens,* they are most often not considered in school planning. As Ron says, thinking inclusively in schools is the exception not the rule.

In Walker's (1998) chart, he contrasts integration as emphasizing the "needs of *special* students" whereas inclusion emphasizes the "rights of all students". Viewing all students as having the right to belong, and be included, changes how school programs and classrooms are oriented. This re-frames how disability is thought about. Attitudes about disability is one obstacle to its deconstruction (Wendell, 1996, p.52).

Ron's response to how to create an accessible room emphasized not the physical layout of the space, but the mindset of the people in it. In our culture, in which normalcy is an unquestioned starting point, the influence of human action or inaction compounds and promotes values that are exclusionary and oppressive. In schools, seemingly *normal* practices, such as the ranking and sorting of students and the rewarding the highest achieving is exclusionary. Indeed, how we *decide* to foster social environments in schools can prevent or create the conditions for belongingness.

As Osterman (2000) stated, whether or not a child feels cared for, and a part of the school community, is largely determined by whether a caring and supportive relationship exists between the teacher and student (p. 351). In the interview with Adam, he foregrounded how interdependent relationships positively shaped his experiences, *rapport building … its very very important* [to have] *one on one support with a student*. He went on to say *I have built these wonderful relationships with some of my teachers.* It was his friendships within the ASD program, and the teachers he felt supported by, that made his daily life at school enjoyable and place he felt he belonged.

Questioning values and norms is a part of the process of dismantling oppressive structures of power. It is the questions we ask about the oppressive norms of our culture that are habituated in classrooms that will lead to more welcoming spaces. Much like the reckoning that is currently happening in some Ontario school boards around racist practices in schools, there also needs to be a recognition of ableist practices. The way we marginalize disabled students instead of creating opportunities for them denies them the opportunity to belong in school spaces.

Alternative Spaces

Adam's experiences within his secondary school special education program aligned with the concept from the literature of *safe havens*—places where individuals with IDD can "gather, share experiences, gain support, be *safe* and crucially be able to be *normal* within an accepting environment" (Hall, 2010, p. 51). The conflicts he had with students outside his program, in some cases, were an attack on his autistic identity. His friends were primarily from within the ASD program. Having a disability exclusive physical space where they could gather may have contributed to their cohesion, and to Adam's feeling of safety. Ron's school had to be modified *because there was not a student … similar to them that had … rolled through the hallways before.* Part of this modification was a space in student support services where his daughters could receive care, and they could also go when they were not able to participate in a full school day. Ron deemed this alternative space as essential. It is now set-up for any future students who may need it. Alterative spaces in schools are the exception not the norm. However, having such spaces can help build connection for students when they know there is always a welcoming place from them to go.

Limitations and Future Directions

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic I was not able to conduct in-person interviews. Something is lost in these virtual interactions. I was unable to adequately observe body language, and the flow of a conversation, changes over a video call. I also was not able to spend time or observe participants in multiple places either. I wish that I could have spent more time with my participants. Due to the implications of COVID-19 and the time I had to complete this master's degree, I had to set boundaries around it that were narrower than I would have liked. More insight could have been gained from these informants by observing them and speaking to them in multiple places or over a longer period of time. Furthermore, one of the principles of CDS is the need to engage in dialogue with other cultures on the issues and concepts of current significance—having a diversity of cultures as part of an explicit dialogue with regards to human rights and emancipatory thinking (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2017, p. 181). Both my participants were Caucasian. Bringing in more diverse voices to this project would have brought further insight from those with intersecting identities on belongingness in schools.

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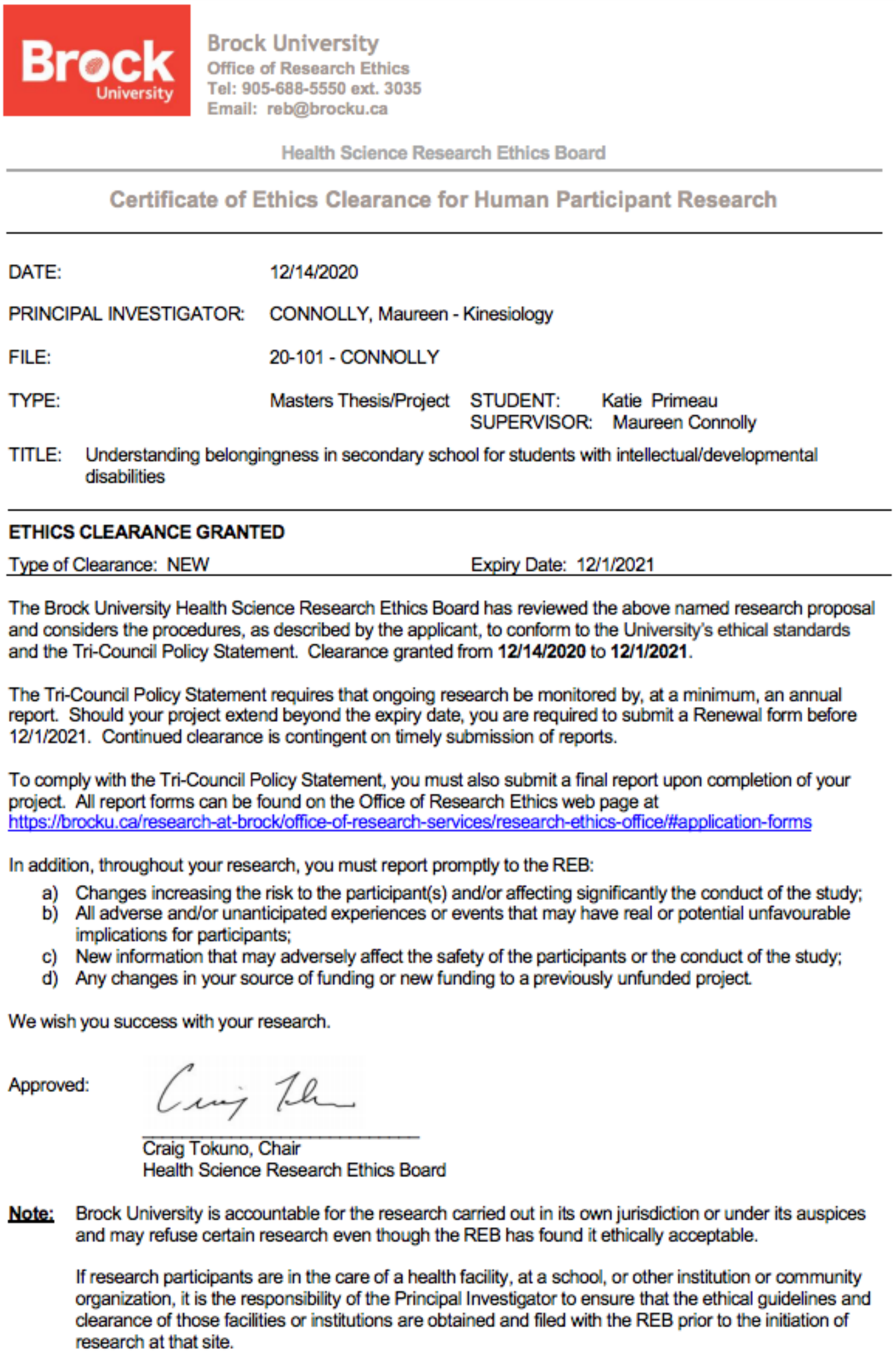
Appendices

Appendix A. Ethics Board Clearance Certificate



Brock University
Office of Research Ethics
Tel: 905-688-5550 ext. 3035
Email: reb@brocku.ca

Health Science Research Ethics Board

Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research

DATE: 12/14/2020

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: CONNOLLY, Maureen - Kinesiology

FILE: 20-101 - CONNOLLY

TYPE: Masters Thesis/Project STUDENT: Katie Primeau
SUPERVISOR: Maureen Connolly

TITLE: Understanding belongingness in secondary school for students with intellectual/developmental disabilities

ETHICS CLEARANCE GRANTED

Type of Clearance: NEW Expiry Date: 12/1/2021

The Brock University Health Science Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research proposal and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement. Clearance granted from **12/14/2020** to **12/1/2021**.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, an annual report. Should your project extend beyond the expiry date, you are required to submit a Renewal form before 12/1/2021. Continued clearance is contingent on timely submission of reports.

To comply with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, you must also submit a final report upon completion of your project. All report forms can be found on the Office of Research Ethics web page at https://brocku.ca/research-at-brock/office-of-research-services/research-ethics-office/#application-forms

In addition, throughout your research, you must report promptly to the REB:

a) Changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
b) All adverse and/or unanticipated experiences or events that may have real or potential unfavourable implications for participants;
c) New information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study;
d) Any changes in your source of funding or new funding to a previously unfunded project.

We wish you success with your research.

Approved:

Craig Tokuno, Chair
Health Science Research Ethics Board

Note: Brock University is accountable for the research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its auspices and may refuse certain research even though the REB has found it ethically acceptable.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of research at that site.

Appendix B. Interview Guide 1

Parent Informant

-Ask for consent to record
-You and your partner have written on your family blog about your experiences, and can I have permission to quote from the two blogs?

Background/demographic
-Can you tell me a little bit about your daughters?

Experience/Behaviour
-If I followed each of your daughters in a typical day at school what would I see?
-What is one or more experiences either of your daughters have had in school in which you think either of them or both of them have felt a though they belonged?
-What is one or more experiences either of your daughters have had in school in which you think they felt as though they did not belong?
-Are there any other significant experiences that you know of that your daughters have had that has contributed to their well-being at school? Or when they attended the Niagara children's centre school?

Opinion
-What do you think the idea of belongingness in a school environment means?
-One of your daughters wrote a poem with her friend. What impact do friendships have on your daughters feeling a sense of belonging at school?
-How do you think inclusive communities are built in schools?
-What do you think are some of the gaps that exist in schools that prevent students from developing a sense of belonging?

Knowledge
-What are some of the policies and procedures around inclusion at your school that you think contribute to your daughters feeling a sense of belonging?

Sensory
-What are some of the physical characteristics of a classroom that you think makes each of your daughters comfortable and can foster their sense of belonging or a feeling of being at home

Artifact
-Do you have an artifact you would like to share?

Anything else you would like to share?

Appendix C Interview Guide 2

Autistic Adult Informant

Ask for consent to record

Background Questions

-How do you identify?

-Have you always identified as Autistic? Or has this changed overtime?

-Can you provide some background about the wide range of educational settings you have been in? From a contained class in elementary to now being in university

Knowledge Questions

-How would you define belongingness for yourself, just generally?

-What comes to mind for you when you think about a sense of belongingness in schools for yourself and for other students that experience disability?

-Shift for a minute to talk about inclusion. What does authentic inclusion in schools mean to you?

Experience

-What are some of the key experiences that you have had in school environments where you look back and feel that you really belonged?

-What are some of the key experiences that you have had in school environments where you look back and think I did not feel I belonged?

-What can you tell me about your experiences, or lack thereof, of belongingness at West credit?

-What can you tell me about your experiences, or lack thereof, of inclusion at West credit?

Feeling

-How do you think your experience of disability relates to your belongingness in schools?

Sensory

-I would like to ask you some sensory question about the physical space of classrooms

-Can you describe your perfect classroom? What do you see, hear, touch, smell?

-What about the physical environment of a classroom might make you uncomfortable?

Opinion

-How do you think a school can foster a sense of belongingness for autistic students?

-What do school staff need to be doing to ensure students feel authentically included?

-In what ways do friendships impact your sense of belongingness?

Artifact

Can you share something that relates to belongingness for you?

Last questions

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix D. Letter of Invitation

Letter of Invitation Interview Informants

August 10, 2020

Title of Study: Belongingness: Connection in the Classroom
Principal Investigator & Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Maureen Connolly, Professor, Kinesiology, Brock University
Student Principal Investigator: Katie Primeau Student, Applied Disability Studies, Brock University

I, Dr. Maureen Connolly, Professor, from the Department of Applied Disability Studies Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled Belongingness: Connection in the Classroom.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into what is necessary in a school environment to allow belongingness to flourish for disabled students that require a high level of support. It will ask what emotional and physical elements foster a welcoming classroom and school, and how these elements interact to contribute to students feeling a part of the school community. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to partake in an interview.

The expected duration is 30 minutes. This research should benefit students that experience disability and allows an opportunity for you to contribute your insights on this topic. This is a single-site project.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Officer (905 688-5550 ext 3035, reb@brocku.ca)

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you,

[Insert Principal Investigator's Signature]

Principal Investigator (PI) & Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Maureen Connolly
Professor
Department of Applied Disability Studies
Brock University
(905-688-5550) x3381
mconnolly@brocku.ca

Student Principal Investigator (SPI): Katie Primeau
Masters student
Department of Applied Disability Studies
Brock University
647-403-2570
Ks09gp@brocku.ca

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board [File: 20-101-Connolly]

Appendix E. Informed Consent

Informed Consent to Interview Participants

Date: August 10, 2020
Project Title: Belongingness: Connection in the Classroom

Principal Investigator (PI) and Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Maureen Connolly
Department of Applied Disability Studies
Brock University
(905-688-5550) x3381

Student Principal Investigator (SPI)
Katie Primeau, Masters student
Department of Applied Disability Studies
Brock University

INVITATION

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to understand how a sense of belongingness is fostered in students that require a high level of support in secondary school.

WHAT'S INVOLVED

As a participant, you will be asked to answer interview questions. We will do the interview in an online video format through Microsoft Teams. The interview will be video recorded through this platform. When recording a meeting, all participants are notified when a recording starts, and online participants can access our privacy notice directly. Recordings are only available to the people on the call or people invited to the meeting. And recordings are stored in a controlled repository that is protected by permissions and encryption. If you do not wish to use Microsoft Teams an audio recorded phone call will be used instead. Participation will take approximately 30 minutes of your time.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

Possible benefits of participation include helping to gain insight on belongingness and potentially improve the daily experience for disabled students that I come in contact with at school. There are no known or anticipated risks associated with participation in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study; however, with your permission, quotations using pseudonyms may be used. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will email you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify and points that you wish. You will have two weeks to review the transcript to ensure that you do not wish to make any changes, updates, or clarifications to our conversation. If I do not hear from you within two weeks, I will assume you are happy with the transcripts as is. Data collected during this study will be stored on my personal locked computer. Data will be stored for approximately 6-months, or until data collection and analysis is complete after which time the data will be deleted. Under mandatory consent laws I am required to disclose any descriptions or threat of abuse of children.

Access to this data will be restricted to Dr. Maureen Connolly (Principal Investigator & Faculty Supervisor), and Katie Primeau (Student investigator)

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. To withdraw from the study, you can inform me in writing by email. There will be no consequences to withdrawal, and any data collected will be deleted or shredded.
There will be no consequences to withdrawal and any data collected will be deleted and/or shredded.

PUBLICATION OF RESULTS

Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available from Katie Primeau, you can contact me at ks09gp@brocku.ca any time after the results are published. When I am done the analysis, I will also email you a summary of results.

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE
If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Dr. Maureen Connolly (Principal Investigator and Faculty Supervisor) or Katie Primeau (Student investigator) using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics at Brock University (File# 20-101). If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

CONSENT FORM
I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: ____

Signature: ____ Date: _________________________

Appendix F. Analysis Example
Second Cycle Coding for Each Interview