Impacts of an Inclusive Education Program for Adults with Intellectual/Developmental

Disabilities Within a Postsecondary Environment

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, postsecondary institutions in Canada and globally have created programs to include persons with intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD) in higher education. These programs vary in their scope but generally aim to provide an inclusive opportunity for persons with IDD to attend postsecondary education alongside their same-aged peers. This research study focused on one program at a university in Southern Ontario that has been providing an inclusive campus experience for over 25 years. The study was guided by the research question, "What are the impacts realized by former program participants, their parents/caregivers, former student volunteers, and university partners from involvement with an inclusive education program within a postsecondary environment"? Interview data were derived from 17 semi-structured interviews across four stakeholder groups and were examined using thematic analyses. Findings indicated three major areas of impact: friendship, growth, and belonging. Implications describe steps for broader implementation and a call-to-action for postsecondary institutions to push for greater inclusivity of persons with IDD within higher education.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary education (PSE) is gradually emerging as an option for adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD). Where PSE was accessible only to those who could afford it and who met the strict academic criteria for entry, there is a push for postsecondary institutions to act more like a "welcome mat than a gatekeeper" (Kozicka, 2018)[1]. This push for accessible education, coupled with the deinstitutionalization of individuals with IDD over the last few decades (Brown & Radford, 2015) has created space and opportunity for adults with IDD to start realizing their postsecondary aspirations.

The inclusive education movement made great strides with the support of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which was ratified by Canada in 2010. Article 24 of the CRPD recognizes the rights of individuals with IDD to have equal opportunity to access PSE and be provided with reasonable accommodations and an environment free from discrimination (United Nations, 2006). Actualization of these rights has been slow, but persons with IDD are being recognized as citizens worthy of education and societal recognition of the systemic barriers they face has begun to come to light.

The early developmental delays experienced by persons with IDD has traditionally meant their intellectual and cognitive function and abilities were pre-determined at a certain level for the duration of their lifespan. According to Lifshitz (2020), "the concept [of] 'self-actualization' can be expanded to include people with IDD who, under appropriate environmental conditions and with continuous systematic

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[1] Citation attributed to Fiona Deller, Senior Executive Director of Research and Policy at the Higher Education Council of Ontario, speaking on TVO's *The Agenda with Steve Paikin*.

intervention, can be brought to a level of functioning previously absent from their behavioral repertoire" (p. 3). Lifshitz's (2020) compensation age theory (CAT) postulates that people with IDD are capable of change and cognitive growth when provided the right environment and opportunity for it. With an understanding of the principles of CAT, this study's research question asks, "What are the impacts realized by former program participants, their parents/caregivers, former student volunteers, and university partners from involvement with an inclusive education program within a postsecondary environment"? This study delved into what has been done, what was observed, and finally, what is potentially possible for persons with IDD at postsecondary levels of education.

<center>**Context of the Research**</center>

Over the last decade and a half, the Province of Ontario has seen the closure of three remaining segregated institutions (Rideau Regional Centre, Southwestern Regional Centre, and Huronia Regional Centre) that provided services for a population of persons with IDD and there were reforms to its care model to support people with IDD in their communities. Having been segregated from their families and communities, on March 31, 2009, the last remaining 36 residents left their institutionalized way of life and entered a new phase of living (Crawford, 2008). "Whereas institutionalization was once the only option for families with intellectually disabled children, now it is no option at all" (Crawford, 2008, para. 8).

The deinstitutionalization of more than 1,000 residents since 2004 meant housing accommodations had to be created and communities needed to be ready to accommodate an influx of people who required a variety of support services (Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services [OM-CCSS], 2009). With an investment of

$276 million, the Ontario Government made a commitment to supports and services for persons with IDD. "Ontario's goal is a modern, fair and financially sustainable system of supports that will help people participate more fully in their new communities'" (OM-CCSS, 2009, Modernizing Developmental Services section, para. 2).

This new chapter on intellectual and developmental services has ushered in a movement that values, includes, and provides choices to people with IDD including honouring their PSE aspirations. At the same time, the last decade has seen an increase in PSE institutions opening their doors to provide more equitable access for those who may have traditionally been left out. As Sue Gillespie, Chief Executive Officer of Pathways to Education noted on TVO's *The Agenda*,

> If we want Canada to be a prosperous nation, we need to enable all of our young
> people to be successful, and it doesn't matter who you are or where you live, you
> should have access to the opportunity of education, the opportunity of learning.
> (Kozicka, 2018).

These two system shifts have created space and opportunities for those with IDD to continue their education after high school in a postsecondary setting. Adults with IDD are finding themselves with ever-increasing choice over their own lives, what they choose to do, and with whom they choose to do it. PSE institutions are finding value in diversity and leaning into community partnerships that are mutually beneficial. For example, a statement from the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM, n.d.) articulates that, "We hold each other accountable, both in realizing our personal responsibilities and in making UTM a community; one that welcomes equity-deserving groups, lowers barriers to belonging and fosters everyone's well-being" (p. 12).

Significance of the Study

The benefits of PSE are plentiful, and when adults with IDD are included and accepted, they reap the same rewards and contribute in a positive way to the diversity of the postsecondary community that they are a part of. PSE is known to benefit both the individual with IDD and the economy. PSE offers better employment opportunities and higher wages (Reid et al., 2020) and contributes to the economy by supplying it with educated citizens wanting to work (Brennan et al., 2021). People with IDD, like their counterparts without IDD, have a desire to learn, to develop their self-esteem, independence, and self-determination, to push their boundaries, to increase their social networks, and to take advantage of the opportunities PSE can afford them (Corby et al., 2020). "Combating exclusion is essential to ensuring that economies can develop, while those at most risk can become part of the knowledge society and make their contribution" (Corby et al., 2020, p. 340).

When PSE programs increase their diversity, they create opportunities for social interactions that can increase a sense of belonging for persons with IDD (Tucker et al., 2020). In Tucker et al.'s (2020) study titled "Let's Take a Walk," peers without IDD "described experiencing a shift in the way they perceive individuals with intellectual disability, which allowed them to focus less on the differences and more on what they had in common with [students with IDD]" (p. 167).

According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC, 2003), an accessible educational environment is one where individuals with IDD can "access their environment and face the same duties and responsibilities as everyone else, with dignity and without impediment" (p. 46). The OHRC outlines the ways in which PSE institutions have a duty to accommodate the various needs, develop curricula, create inclusive and

welcoming environments that are free of discrimination, and create physical spaces that are designed thoughtfully. The OHRC also clearly makes reference to "students with disabilities" but in reality, are people with IDD afforded the same rights and protections at a PSE level? There are questions related to whether they are left out of the conversation and if so, how can their rights to further education be protected?

There are countless, notable benefits for all individuals to attend higher education. One of the most sought-after benefits is greater employability and the potential for higher wages (Reid et al., 2020). A PSE experience that weaves academics and critical thinking together with social and emotional development can provide students with a foundation for the challenges that life might bring them (Robertson, 2021).

Historically, the entry point into higher education has been guarded and solely reliant on academic merit, which can leave adults with IDD continuously behind. How can space be made for adults with IDD at a PSE level, and what would these programs look like? This study examined the impacts of one program that has been in operation at a university in Southern Ontario, Canada, since 1996. The findings related to the impacts of this program could open the doors to countless other PSE institutions to host similar programs and alter the course for adults with IDD as they transition out of secondary school and enter the next stage of their lives.

Operational Definitions

The following terms are used throughout this research project and have the meanings set forth below:

- *Persons With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)*: "Intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) is a disorder with onset during the developmental

period that includes both intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits in conceptual, social, and practical domains" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 33).

- *Postsecondary Education (PSE)*: Defining PSE can be difficult as the term varies among researchers, provinces, and across the world (Alqazlan et al., 2019; Usher, 2021). For the purpose of this paper, PSE refers to participation at a publicly funded university or college after the age of 18 (Usher, 2021) and corresponds also "to those whose highest level of educational attainment is an apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma" (Statistics Canada, 2010, para. 1).

- *Inclusive Education:* "Inclusive education is about ensuring access to quality education for all students by effectively meeting their diverse needs in a way that is responsive, accepting, respectful and supportive. Students participate in the education program in a common learning environment with support to diminish and remove barriers and obstacles that may lead to exclusion" (Inclusive Education Canada, n.d., para. 3). Inclusive education in the program that was investigated in this study refers to the inclusion of students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities within a postsecondary learning environment.

- *Belonging*: Refers to "the human need to be accepted into relationships with others and be a part of social groups" (Thompson, 2023, p. 19).

- *Student Volunteers:* At Southern Ontario University[2] (SO-U), a degree-seeking student who commits their time for at least 1-hour per week for the duration of the semester. In its search for student volunteers, a community organization associated with SO-U seeks "friendly, empathetic persons" who wish to improve

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[2] To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used both for the sample university and any affiliated program or organization cited in this study.

the quality of life for young adults with IDD. In the context of this project, the term "student volunteers" refers to those who do not have an IDD.

Research Question

Based on the researcher's personal history working within PSE, with a program for young adults with IDD, she has seen and heard many personal stories and impacts from each stakeholder group involved. This program was immersed within the university both physically and culturally. To uncover the true impact(s) of this program, the following research question guided this study: "What are the impacts realized by former program participants, their parents/caregivers, former student volunteers, and university partners from involvement with an inclusive education program within a postsecondary environment?"

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that anchors this study is compensation age theory (CAT). CAT suggests adults with mild to severe/profound IDD have the ability to enhance their cognitive development and succeed in new skill development into middle/late adulthood given the proper environment to allow these cognitive abilities to thrive (Lifshitz, 2020). With supportive ecological factors in place, adults with IDD can acquire new skills through targeted cognitive stimulation and leisure activities (Lifshitz, 2020).

The growth trajectory for typically developing adults sees developmental and cognitive milestones being hit from birth to age 20; then adult development remains consistent until age 60 at which point cognitive decline begins (Lifshitz-Vahav, 2015). For persons with IDD, the compensation trajectory (CT) model posits that individuals are compensated later in life for the developmental delays experienced in early childhood

(Lifshitz-Vahav, 2015). Individuals with IDD can have a growth trajectory that far exceeds the general population (into their 40s and early 50s), but with intelligence levels roughly two standard deviations below the general population. CAT argues then that individuals with IDD are capable of cognitive development and "years of schooling, greater maturity and cumulative life experience help [adults with IDD] acquire skills that were previously absent from their behavioral repertoire" (Lifshitz-Vahav, 2015, p. 142). An important element of the CAT framework includes provision of cognitive educational opportunities for persons with IDD. CAT suggests that educational opportunities can support the cognitive growth for individuals with mild/moderate IDD.

In Israel, Bar-Ilan University's School of Education puts the CAT theory into practice by hosting students with various levels of IDD in their Otzmot Post-Secondary Empowerment Project, which

offers an innovative, theoretically grounded, multi-stage academic project for adults with [IDD], which has attempted to systematically implement the diverse PSE models of inclusion while explicitly targeting the goal of cognitive growth during adulthood in [IDD]. (Lifshitz, 2020, p. 93)

Guided by CAT, there is no upper age limit to attend the Otzmot Project and programming is designed for various levels of cognitive functioning. For those students with mild/moderate IDD, they are enrolled in the "enrichment program" where they attend psychology and sociology classes as well as research seminars alongside their non-disabled peers. The objectives are to acquire knowledge on topics relevant to this population, learn self-advocacy skills, enhance self-image and quality of life as well as develop socially with their peers (Lifshitz-Vahav, 2015).

The Otzmot Project has also a vocational college model for those with moderate IDD. The focus of this model is on academic and practical skills needed to succeed in the workforce. The goal is to "familiarize learners with the theoretical and practical aspects of the world of employment, focusing on theoretical models and self-advocacy tools for effectively presenting oneself at work" (Lifshitz, 2020, p. 96).

Autonomy and a holistic environment lie at the base of the application of CAT. Teaching social and life skills in a natural setting have shown to improve choice-making skills for adults with severe/profound IDD (Lifshitz-Vahav, 2015). What does this look like when applied? It means teaching within a natural setting and using the environment as part of the learning, instead of teaching one skill in a segregated setting over and over. Repeated contact with paraprofessionals within the setting can allow for growth and greater autonomy, as witnessed by Lifshitz-Vahav (2015). Premised in CAT, the impacts of such exemplars as the Otzmot Post-Secondary Empowerment Project were the inspiration for the current study to examine what is going on in similar programs in Southern Ontario.

Chapter Summary

PSE is the common destination for students after finishing secondary school. The benefits are well known for the economy and students' future employment options, earning potential, relationship/network building, leadership development, intellectual growth, and personal development (Berger & Parkin, 2009; Maple League, n.d.)—everything a young adult needs to succeed in the adult world. Adults with IDD have historically been left out of PSE opportunities and consequently, their aspirations for further education have not been fully recognized.

In a post-pandemic society and with equitable and inclusive access at the forefront of many PSE institutions' mandates, there is space to also include adults with IDD in the higher education conversation. Greater access to education means some colleges and universities are reimagining how to deliver programs and courses that have proven to be successful in other jurisdictions, which can include adults with IDD in their classrooms.

CAT postulates that everyone is capable of cognitive learning when provided with the holistic and supportive environment to do so. PSE campuses can provide a welcoming and inclusive space for adults with various levels of IDD to thrive and achieve the same PSE outcomes as their non-disabled peers, but adults with IDD, family members, and allies need to demand it. The history of adults with IDD within PSE is not long, but there have been successful, mutually beneficial programs created and learning more about these opportunities will help us move forward in the right direction.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Adults with IDD are making choices about their own lives and services at greater rates than before. At one point, in the not-so-distant past, a high school education was the highest level achievable and imaginable. Now adults with IDD can attend PSE courses alongside their non-disabled peers, participate in research opportunities, complete course work, and access on-campus clubs and recreational activities (Alqazlan et al., 2019)—all in pursuit of *their* higher education.

One outcome that spans any demographic attending PSE, regardless of disability, is friendship (Spruit & Carter, 2021). Adults with IDD have new opportunities to meet and find common bonds with anyone on campus. If these friendships are nurtured, they can lead to an increased quality of life (for all individuals) and transcend the boundaries of the institution and into everyday life. Access is not universal, nor perfect, but some institutions are breaking barriers and showing the world the benefits that can come when adults with IDD have access to attend PSE. By understanding the history, we can plan the road ahead, support further education aspirations, and advise institutions on the benefits of creating space for adults with IDD.

This chapter presents a review of the literature related to the population of people with IDD and a look into the inclusive education landscape in Canada. It provides a brief history of PSE options for young adults with IDD that summarizes the traditional PSE path and what inclusive PSE looks like. Finally, it reviews the literature on the importance of friendships among young adults with IDD as well as relationships within PSE.

Young Adults With IDD

It is important to understand the population of people who are the focus of this research project. Who are they? What has inclusive education or programming meant to

them and what awaits them as they transition out of high school and into adulthood? What are the needs or barriers they face in pursuit of educational opportunities? According to the Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD), the latest Canadian census report at the time of writing this manuscript, approximately 315,470 persons (or 1.1% of the general population) over the age of 15 are classified as having a developmental disability; approximately 2.4% of those with a developmental disability are between the ages of 15–24 (Morris et al., 2018). In the Province of Ontario, these are young adults who have grown up in the "inclusive education" era.

Gaining momentum in the 1980s, integration of students with special needs in Western classrooms meant the physical presence of these students among their peers in a regular classroom setting (Jahnukainen, 2015). This mainstreaming often meant those with mild to moderate disabilities learned alongside their peers, however those with more severe or profound disabilities were taught in segregated classrooms and spent a majority of their day with other students with IDD (Jahnukainen, 2015). Inclusive education was a shift in mindset, values, and finally policy starting in the 1980s and making strides until officially adopted into the United Nations' Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), signed and adopted by Canada in December 2006 (ratified in 2010). Under Article 24, people with disabilities have the right to equal and inclusive education that is supportive of their unique personalities, talents, and needs and promotes their autonomy as equal citizens (United Nations, 2006). To this day, adoption, interpretation, and implementation of the concept of inclusive education continues to differ across Canada, and in the Province of Ontario, even across school districts (Bennett & Gallagher, 2013).

In Canada, the landscape of inclusive education is still in flux. Unlike in the United States, there is no federal oversight of inclusive education and no common definition. Canadian provinces and territories are still interpreting and adopting the rights of the CRPD differently as they work independent of one another (Bunch, 2015; Sweet, 2012). Inclusive education is now a term used broadly to mean the inclusion and acceptance of all equity-seeking groups, which can mean those with IDD are easily overlooked and, in some cases, special education once again becomes the default learning option (Bunch, 2015). Yet,

> Inclusive schooling is more than a method or strategy. It is a way of life that is tied directly to the value system that values diversity. Inclusive education is also a philosophical and practical education approach which strives to respond to individual needs and is intended to assure equal access for all students to educational programs offered in regular classroom settings (Bunch, 2015, p. 4).

In the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2014) latest edition of *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario's Schools*, special education (segregated) classes are permitted with written proof of need; students are monitored using the Individual Education Plan (IEP) which can provide accommodations, and work to create an environment conducive to an individual student's learning style. For now, young people with IDD in Canada will continue to transition out of school with varied levels of education, socialization, emotional maturity, and preparedness for society that awaits them.

As more students with IDD experience inclusive education alongside their same-aged peers in primary and secondary school, the possibilities for further education should continue to parallel their peers'. Like their peers without disabilities, young adults with

IDD who do choose PSE cite employment outcomes as one of their main goals

(Alqazlana et al., 2019). According to Inclusion Canada (n.d.), there are approximately

500,000 working age people with IDD in Canada and only 25% of them are employed.

"Too often, we fail to recognize the strengths and talents of this unique and specialized

group, leading to misconceptions about capabilities. In reality, experience-based evidence

from employers around the world is proving that these assumed barriers are incorrect"

(Inclusion Canada, n.d., para. 2).

   Transition programs that foster a student's self-determination (Bell et al., 2017)

and positive attitudes through demonstration and mentoring help to ready these students

for the rigours of PSE (Sweet, 2012). Areas of secondary school planning that cannot be

overlooked according to Sweet (2012) are academic readiness, goal setting, and self-

regulation to prepare students for PSE. There is no "one size fits all" approach to

successful transition planning for persons with IDD. Studies illustrate that combined

academic and social engagement effort from a strengths-based approach leads to the best

outcomes, but there are still often challenges enacting this (Sweet, 2012).

   A shift from viewing disability from a deficit perspective to a strengths-based one

has contributed to increased inclusive education research and policy review (Sweet,

2012). The transition from secondary school to PSE is an important element to consider

when planning for further education for students with IDD. "Change at the classroom

level can be affected by providing social-emotional supports such as caring relationships

with adults and effective peer relationships that promote students' academic performance

and developmental autonomy" (Doll et al., 2011, as cited in Sweet, 2012, p. 6).

   In the United States, there are over 270 participating institutions (approximately

6%) offering inclusive postsecondary programs (Scheef et al., 2020). This growth was significantly supported by the U.S.'s 2008 Higher Education Opportunities Act as it provided the foundation, funding, and legitimacy for institutions to create inclusive programming (Scheef et al., 2020; Sheen et al., 2022). A second factor for sustained development of inclusive postsecondary programs was the establishment of the Think College, which provides national oversight and delivery of information on available programs, collects data, produces research, and informs and supports individuals, families, and postsecondary institutions as they navigate inclusive education (Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network, 2022).

In Canada, inclusive PSE is not a new concept, but its implementation across Canada is still in its infancy stage. In Alberta, Canada, there are 20 initiatives, some existing since the 1980s (Beschen, 2018), however inclusion at a PSE level has garnered attention and traction in more recent years (Alqazlan, et al., 2019). According to Uditsky and Hughson (2012), the success that Alberta has seen can be attributed to three factors:

> Clarity on the meaning of full inclusion, reasonably sustained funding that is not tied to special education or segregated adult programs but to supporting the inclusion of adults with ID (intellectual disabilities), and a provincial advocacy organization, the Alberta Association for Community Living (AACL), which is deeply committed to inclusion across the life span. (As cited in Beschen, 2018, p. 17)

As Canada continues to decentralize its education system to the provinces and territories, there will continue to be murky definitions of inclusive education that are likely to be implemented differently across this country. For now, PSE for adults with

IDD will continue to progress, albeit at a slower pace compared to other countries such as the U.S. and with varied levels of inclusion.

History of PSE and Inclusive PSE for Young Adults with IDD

The path after high school for students with and without disabilities varies greatly and some opportunities are more prevalent to different groups. The path for non-disabled students, defined here as those without an identified IDD, is often linear. At roughly 18 years of age, many of these students head from secondary to PSE and then into the workforce. Of course, this is a generalization, but for the sake of this paper, comparisons will be made to this traditional path to PSE. The decision to pursue higher education is typically made by adolescents in middle to late high school years and is considered the next step after graduation. Upon graduation, there is generally a gap of 2 to 4 months and then direct entry into PSE in the Fall semester (Hango, 2011), the primary goal of PSE being to obtain a degree and increase the likelihood of gaining employment (Usher, 2021). Obtaining PSE not only leads to increased chances of meaningful employment (Zafft et al., 2004) but also the chance to learn new skills, form new ideas and opinions, and also form "values and attitudes that have an important impact on their quality of life" (Roeher Institute, 1996, as cited in Zafft et al., 2004, p. 51).

The question of *who* attends PSE has been a topic of conversation for decades. Recent literature routinely shows the same determining factors for PSE participation: academic achievement in high school, financial status of the family, parental education, region, and being a member of a visible minority (Robson et al., 2018). On an individual level, the attainment of PSE can lead to better wages, and therefore increased quality of life (Morris et al., 2018; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2018). Similar to their peers without

disabilities, young adults with IDD who do choose PSE cite employment outcomes as one of their main goals (Alqazlan, et al., 2019).

On a societal level, a skilled workforce can lead to "achieving socially desirable goals related to equality of opportunity, to social inclusion, and to promoting citizenship" (Drolet, 2005, p. 5). For the economy, an educated and skilled workforce "fosters innovation and improves Canada's competitiveness in an ever-increasing global market" (Drolet, 2005, p. 5). As of 2021, Canada had the highest level of PSE attainment in the world, with over 70% of 25- to 34-year-olds with some form of PSE credentials (Usher, 2021). For young adults with IDD, the path to PSE looks vastly different, and the options significantly reduced.

Three models of education delivery are typically cited for persons with IDD within the current literature: inclusive, separate, and mixed/hybrid (Ryan et al., 2019). Within the inclusive model, students with IDD are immersed within the campus culture, with formal or informal support to attend classes and complete assignments. An example of this model is the University of Alberta's *On Campus* program, operating since 1987 and considered the first postsecondary program for students with IDD in the world. *On Campus* is a 4-year, non-degree program in which persons with IDD are supported by a facilitator to attend classes of interest. Student volunteers provide in-class support as well as companionship outside the classroom. The program's end goal and its focus during the final 2 years is to obtain meaningful employment for students with IDD (University of Alberta, n.d.).

Another example of inclusive PSE programming in Ontario, Canada is King's University College's (KUC's) Disability Studies program, which includes an experiential

learning course that brings together students and adults from the community who have IDD (KUC, 2018). Together, they learn from each other about what it means to have a "good life." KUC Program Coordinator Dr. Patricia Cushing states that courses like this one are breaking down long standing barriers:

> Decades of research confirm that if you want to make real change on discriminatory attitudes towards marginalized groups, three essentials for success are extended time, frequent interactions, and a shared project. (As cited in KUC, 2018, para. 2)

KUC offers a space for traditional students to learn alongside adults with IDD and demonstrates that adults with IDD are the experts in their own lives and have value to provide in a classroom setting.

The separate model involves students with IDD taking classes with other students with IDD, such as life skills or vocational training. There is a separate curriculum and participation is restricted to those with an identified IDD. An example of this is the Community Integration through Cooperative Education (CICE) certificate program offered at several colleges in Ontario, Canada (Humber, Niagara, Georgian, Mohawk). CICE provides adults with IDD the opportunity to experience college while building independence and learning to advocate for oneself in a supportive and inclusive environment (Humber College, n.d.). Registration is not limited by residence, but applicants must have a Certificate of Achievement, Ontario Secondary School Certificate or equivalent, complete an interview process, and provide two references (Humber College, n.d.).

A mixed/hybrid model offers an inclusive setting and opportunities to learn and develop socially among students without disabilities while also learning alongside other

students with IDD, such as in life skills or work preparation courses (Ryan et al., 2019).

The sample university's (SO-U's) *Community-Based Program* (*CB Program*), the focus

of this MRP, as well as the University of Guelph's *Campus Friends* program, are

considered to be mixed/hybid models. For *Campus Friends*, admission is restricted to

local residents receiving support from Community Living Guelph Wellington (CLGW)

and support relies heavily on student volunteers (Avitzur et al., 2020). The SO-U's *CB

Program* participants follow an individualized routine that lasts for the duration of the

semester. With support from student volunteers, they work towards achieving their goals,

often with future employment as their target. Participants still have the structured support

from a staff member of an affiliated community organization, who is trained in CPR, de-

escalation techniques, and personal care and who can safely administer medication as

required.

The opportunity for mutually beneficial, educational opportunities exists within

every program mentioned above. What is evident from these programs is a common

vision or evidence, such that "the goal of any community involvement initiative should

be to address some of the common issues that impact interpersonal connections and

relationships including proximity, reciprocity, mutually reinforcing events, and choice"

(Thorn et al., 2009, p. 895). Each program offers a unique take on PSE, with varied goals

and potential outcomes.

The Importance of Friendship Among Young Adults With IDD

Defining or quantifying friendship is a subjective task as the word holds specific

meaning to each person who experiences it. While trying to determine its meaning to

persons with IDD, researchers have found commonalities/themes among study

participants, leading to a general understanding of what friendship means to this

population. The social and emotional well-being of persons with IDD is undoubtedly a

topic of concern and focus of research, considering the revolutionizing shift from

institutional to community living. "Social support is a protective factor which enhances

mental (Hefner & Eisenberg 2009; Wilkinson & Marmot 2003) and physical health

(Wilkinson & Marmot 2003)" (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018, p.18). Loneliness, isolation, and

lack of access to friends have been addressed as concerns facing this population leading

to a decrease in social capital/inclusion and restricting their rights as citizens in their

communities (Callus, 2017). Friendships for persons with IDD are essential to their well-

being but there are several roadblocks to facilitating true friendships, including lack of

access/opportunity, safety concerns, and lack of time, transportation, and money (Callus,

2017). As a result, people with IDD are often restricted to socialization with family and

paid support (Callus, 2017). These restrictions can mean people with IDD are only

forming friendships within the same settings they consistently inhabit (e.g., home, school,

day support location, work, and recreational activities) and they often remain tied to those

settings (Callus, 2017).

Persons with IDD experience and define friendship in a number of ways, which is

important for policy makers and organizations to understand in order to create support for

maintaining relationships (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018). Researchers Fulford and Cobigo

(2018) from the University of Ottawa conducted a thematic analysis of 18 articles that

involved studying the relationships people with IDD have in their lives; their analysis

found major themes such as "How do I know someone is my friend" (p. 20) and "What

helps and hinders friendships and intimate relationships?" (p. 24). Participants spoke

about being with friends who liked to do the same activities as they did such as

swimming, going to the movies, or eating together (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018). They also found that participants valued communication as well as trust or a feeling of safety within their friendships. Participants found it easier to be friends with others who have IDD (vs. people without IDD), citing comfort, a sense of safety, and similar communication styles as factors that allow for easier relationship building (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018).

Limiting factors to friendship found in Fulford and Cobigo's (2018) analysis included financial restrictions, such as a lack of funds to pay support staff to accompany them to go out with friends or meet new ones. Staff and family were also seen as barriers to creating social relationships due to the control they had regarding when and where participants spent their time, and/or because they did not recognize the importance of friendships (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018). "Although caregivers were seen as a source of support, participants indicated that they also restricted choice making within the participants' relationships. Participants did not always have control over their social lives" (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018, p. 28). Diaz Garolera et al.'s (2021) study reinforced the notion of communication as a barrier to building friendship; participants liked building friendships with those whom they were able to communicate with and having poor communication skills "can negatively affect friendships" (p. 829).

When understanding with *whom* persons with IDD choose to be friends, it is important to also understand their relationships with persons *without* IDD. Community members, classmates, and co-workers are people who can form friendships and supportive networks for persons with IDD but like the friendships with other persons with IDD, they are subject to the same limitations as mentioned above. According to Friedman and Rizzolo (2018), reciprocity is an essential part of the relationship recipe,

"Although friendships between people with IDD and non-disabled people do occur, and can be meaningful, reciprocity may be lacking; while nondisabled peers may find people with IDD likable and sociable, friendship requires mutual affection" (p. 40). Physical inclusion within communities and school systems has promoted the social inclusion of persons with IDD as well. Continuous and supported engagement can reduce loneliness (Diaz Garolera et al., 2021) and provide opportunities for relationships to grow naturally into lifelong friendships.

Relationships Within PSE

When exploring the motivating factors for adults with IDD to attend PSE, Alqazlan et al. (2019) heard participants speak about the desire to learn skills, find a job, and earn money; however, while delving deeper into these reasons, they also uncovered a resounding desire to make friends and gain independence. Just as their counterparts without IDD, these young adults saw PSE as their means to move closer to self-determination and develop themselves socially. The transition from high school into adulthood is one that involves a change in roles, responsibilities, contexts, and often relationships (Glidden et al., 2012).

The social circles for young adults with IDD are often limited to the physical spaces in which they spend their time. As young adults with IDD make the transition out of high school, they have a difficult time maintaining those existing friendships and creating new ones. Given that meeting friends in informal settings is rare, most meet and socialize with friends within structured settings (Callus, 2017). Attending PSE can provide adults with IDD the space and continuity required to make new friends, especially with students without disabilities (Alqazlan et al., 2019).

According to Shany et al. (2013), "Friendships are associated with acceptance and companionship" (as cited in Corby et al., 2020, p. 353); however, those with an intellectual disability require support to develop and maintain friendships formed (Corby et al., 2020). It is here where the importance of natural support is evident. The term "natural support" was coined in the 1980s to signify support provided to persons with IDD in communities and work environments by persons naturally in those environments (Westling & Kelley, 2020). Maintaining friendships can be difficult and therefore PSE can offer a new avenue to friendship (McVilly et al., 2006). When two diverse groups of people spend time together, they will naturally learn from one another so long as the environment allows for it (Tucker et al., 2020). Students without disabilities can form the basis of natural and on-going support for persons with IDD and together there is opportunity for mutually beneficial relationships to form.

A study conducted in the United States titled "Let's Take a Walk" included students without disabilities who were paired with a person from the community who had an intellectual disability and together they would walk around campus for 45 minutes twice a week for 12 weeks (Tucker et al., 2020). The study aimed to find the benefits that exist for both parties when they have an opportunity to interact with each other for prolonged periods of time. "Let's Take a Walk" provided students the opportunity to shift away from a deficit lens and to see the community walkers as capable and worthy of spending time with. "Student Walkers also described experiencing a shift in the way they perceive individuals with intellectual disability, which allowed them to focus less on the differences and more on what they had in common with Community Walkers" (Tucker et

al., 2020, p. 167). Opportunities for prolonged exposure such as this have proven to be catalysts for true social inclusion and friendship building.

The typical primary and secondary school experiences of persons with IDD have seen great change over the last four decades. The special education deficit lens is slowly being replaced by one of strength, opportunity, autonomy, and personal growth for individuals with IDD. As the pendulum begins to swing, we are beginning to see a population of people with PSE aspirations, and university and colleges around the world are starting to get on board. The programs described above offer different PSE experiences: some focus more on academics while others are more socially focused. Regardless of the foci, friendship tends to be a common outcome from all PSE programs. Whether between persons with IDD or with other students without IDD, the social connections made are vital for the growth and development of friendships, leading to a reduction in loneliness.

<div align="center">**Chapter Summary**</div>

This chapter's literature review has summarized a selection of journal articles that examined the population of young adults with IDD in Canada and the landscape of inclusive education (e.g., Bennett & Gallagher, 2013; Bunch, 2015; Jahnukainen, 2015; Morris et al., 2018; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014; Sweet, 2012; United Nations, 2006). Another section of Chapter 2 was dedicated to uncovering the types of postsecondary options that currently exist for persons with IDD in Ontario (inclusive, mixed-hybrid, and segregated) as well as the current programs that exist (e.g., Alqazlan et al., 2019; Avitzur et al., 2020; Drolet, 2005; Hango, 2011; Morris et al., 2018; Robson et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2019; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2018; Thorn et al., 2009; Usher, 2021;

Zafft et al., 2004). The last section focused on relationships, specifically friendships within postsecondary environments between peers both with and without disabilities (e.g., Alqazlan et al., 2019; Callus 2017; Diaz Garolera et al., 2021; Fulford & Cobigo, 2018; Glidden et al., 2012; McVilly et al., 2006; Tucker et al., 2020; Westling & Kelley, 2020).

The population of adults with IDD who have been addressed in this MRP have been educated in a provincial K–12 system that ascribes to inclusive education. Although administered differently across provinces, inclusive education at the primary and secondary level is a right under the CRPD. All students are to be taught in a positive learning environment that is reflective of who they are and how they learn (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Students with IDD are graduating secondary school with similar aspirations as their peers—further education being one of them. Where this once was not an option, more postsecondary institutions are working together with community agencies to support adults with IDD to attend PSE. Now, programs exist at several colleges and universities for adults with mild to severe/profound IDD and with varied levels of inclusion alongside students without disabilities. The outcomes vary for each program but one positive finding seems to permeate through each one: friendship. Among peers with and without disabilities, friendship and the relationships formed with casual members within the environment promote a welcoming, inclusive atmosphere, are mutually beneficial, and lend to greater quality of life.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This project was designed to understand the impacts of a program for adults with IDD operating within a postsecondary setting. With few postsecondary options for adults with IDD in Ontario, the researcher sought to examine one of the few inclusive options that have been successfully operating at the sample Southern Ontario University's (SO-U's) *Community-Based Program* (*CB Program*) for almost three decades. This study aimed to answer the question, "What are the impacts realized by former program participants, their parents/caregivers, former student volunteers, and university partners from involvement with an inclusive education program within a postsecondary environment"? The following sections of Chapter 3 will provide a context for the project, method and methodology, description of the participants, data collection and analyses, and ethical considerations.

Project Context

This project was conceived from the researcher's personal connection to the *CB Program* and a desire to capture the voices and stories heard throughout her tenure there. She worked at *CB Program*, a partnership program between an associated community agency (hereafter, the Agency) and SO-U between 2008–2020. *CB Program* ran approximately 36 weeks per year, closing for exam breaks, reading weeks, and holidays. The fee for service was $80/day, payable to the Agency. The program worked in partnership with the student services department at SO-U and was given an accessible office space, internet, and phone. Program participants were also granted access to the amenities at SO-U, such as guest computer accounts and access to the gym facilities.

In her role as Support Worker, the researcher was responsible for daily oversight and planning for the program. This involved pairing program participants (21–30 years of

age) who have IDD with the SO-U students who volunteer their time. Four program

participants per day were supported to experience life on campus. Program participants

could spend 1 or 2 days on campus per week depending on their schedule, and interest in

the activities offered and could stay for a period of 3 years. Each program participant's

schedule was individualized based on their interests, goals, and their idea of what

postsecondary meant. These activities included, but were not limited to:

- Sports (playing basketball, ping pong, tennis, badminton, golf, frisbee)

- Individual or group fitness

- Swimming or hot tub

- Nature/campus walks

- Bike rides

- Board games

- Auditing classes of interest

- Literacy work

- Computer work

- Volunteering with various departments (e.g., Library)

- Attending campus events

- Joining campus groups

Student volunteers—who were degree-seeking SO-U students without

disabilities—provided one-on-one support during activities. They were diverse in their

program of study, year of study, cultural heritage, gender, age, and previous experience

working with people with IDD. Student volunteers were required to complete an intake

form, interview with the *CB Program* Support Worker, provide two references, complete

a vulnerable record check, and attend an orientation. Once complete, they were required to sign up for a minimum of 1-hour per week for the duration of the semester (12 weeks).

Student volunteers provided one-on-one support to program participants during their activities and were responsible for ensuring participants' safety as well as assisting with any daily living requirements such as support during lunch to use the microwave. Sometimes these identified areas of support became goals and student volunteers were encouraged to teach the program participants the skills they needed to be independent on campus; for example, teaching participants how to use the microwave (which buttons to push), how to problem solve, and then repeating the process daily until the program participants had mastered the skill. Student volunteers were encouraged to interact with program participants in the same manner as any other friend and to only offer support if it was needed; the goal of independence was paramount.

My role of novice researcher started long ago, when I realized the power that existed within the *CB Program*. I took interest in seeing the growth potential of each person who came in contact with the program and I wanted to capture it. I began to witness trends that I had not witnessed in my previous work within the disability sector. I heard from parents about how thankful they were to have a postsecondary option for their child—program participants who, when surrounded by a holistic, natural, supportive environment, could learn skills that were previously thought to be unattainable. Student volunteers who were shy and reserved flourished into leaders and advocates for inclusion. Staff, unsure of how to include someone with a disability in their department, now encouraged others to get involved. I saw a campus accepting of people who were different than them but saw the value they have and that they were deserving of respect.

This program created positive ripples with anyone who came into contact with it. As a novice researcher, I wanted to capture these stories and to hear directly from those who experienced the program from the user point of view. I wondered what trends and impacts could be seen among these groups of people and sought to identify what could be learned about inclusive programming at a postsecondary level for adults with IDD.

Method and Methodology

Through the use of qualitative methods of study, the researcher aimed to give an emancipatory voice to a population who is often spoken *for*, instead of heard (Berger & Lorenz, 2016). According to Berger and Lorenz (2016), in contrast to their quantitative research counterparts, qualitative researchers aim to take a smaller number of cases, and "reveal elements of empirical reality that are not amenable to statistical representation" (p. 14). The interest for this study was born from personal and professional observations of the program participant subset within a postsecondary environment. Multiple stakeholder groups were interviewed to provide a comprehensive overview of the *CB Program*.

According to Berger and Lorenz (2016), disability studies involves two actions for the researcher: "reflexive and empathetic" (p. 14). The two-step process requires the researcher to self-reflect and remove bias, then look outward to empathize with the others' experiences as they have lived them (Berger & Lorenz, 2016). In this study the researcher was known to the program participants not as a researcher but as someone with whom they have built a rapport over several years—someone who listened to their stories, supported them with care and empathy, and promoted their independence.

During the interviews the researcher was cognizant of this relationship, power imbalance, and personal bias. This relationship dynamic meant the researcher was privy to hearing their inner feelings and concerns, and capturing their true voice. For qualitative

researchers, striving for "empathetic and intersubjective understanding" (Berger & Lorenz, 2016, p. 15) is how marginalized groups are truly seen and heard in research. Therefore, this previous relationship with study participants should be regarded as one that will provide greater insight and bring to light the lived experiences of the study participants as they interacted with the *CB Program*.

Participants

There were four identified groups of stakeholders within the *CB Program*: program participants, parents/caregivers, student volunteers, and university partners. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms. The program participants (n=4) were over the age of 21 (as this was the demographic for the *CB Program* servicing ages 21–30). All other demographics are withheld to ensure confidentiality. The parents/caregivers (n=4) each had a child who has graduated from the *CB Program*. Together, the program participants and parents/caregivers were: Shawn, his mother Paula, and sister Erin; Fred and his mother, Nancy; Rachel and her mother, Connie; and Jenny and her mother, Tina. Student volunteers (n=7) were SO-U alumni who were over the age of 18 and inclusive of all other demographic characteristics. Student volunteers were: Diana, Tori, Sara, Leah, Monica, Catherine, and Harrison. The university partners (n=2)—Donna and Laura—were former SO-U staff who worked with *CB Program* participants in their various departments.

The inclusion criteria for study participants stipulated that they could no longer be involved with the *CB Program*. Program participants had to have completed a full 3 years with the *CB Program*. All study participants who were contacted agreed to participate in the study with the exception of two who did not fully meet the temporal inclusion criteria.

As a former staff member of the *CB Program*, the researcher knew all study participants in the sample on a personal level. They kept in contact via social media and

were in semi-regular face-to-face contact. Consequently, all study participants were contacted via social media and provided a letter of invitation inviting them to participate. Those who replied indicating their interest in participating were sent a consent form. They returned the consent form via email to the researcher. It should be noted that the program participants' consent form was also read to them (by the researcher) and they could respond verbally with consent. This was done at the beginning of the Microsoft Teams or Zoom interview with the parent/caregiver present.

Data Collection

Interviews were set up at a mutually convenient time both for the study participants and the researcher. The interviews were conducted by the researcher between September 2021 to January 2022 and were recorded over Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Interviews were approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length. The interviews with program participants and parents/caregivers were conducted on the same date, starting with the program participant's questions followed by the parent/caregiver. Interviews with the student volunteers and university partners were conducted individually. All study participants were asked if they had a preferred pseudonym, and if not, one was assigned to them by the researcher.

Each stakeholder group was asked a different series of questions aimed at uncovering their perceived impacts of the *CB Program*. Questions included for the student volunteer group were: "Prior to *CB Program*, did you have any previous experience interacting with someone with an intellectual disability? Please explain." "Can you tell me how you felt on your first day at *CB Program*? What emotions did you have?" "How did your role within *CB Program* evolve over your time volunteering?" "Do you still communicate with any program participants now that you are no longer a

volunteer? If so, for how long?" "Which medium do you use? Example: stop and talk in the hall, texting, email, Facebook, other programs, etc.?" "What does friendship mean to you?" "Do you think your time at *CB Program* has helped prepare you for your future? Explain." For the full set of interview questions, please refer to Appendices A-D.

The recordings were individually transcribed by the researcher. They were checked for grammatical errors with conscious effort to maintain individual speech patterns such as pauses and/or repeated words. Upon completion of transcription, they were emailed to the study participants for member checking. Only one parent expressed concern over a phrase her daughter used; the researcher assured her she would not be quoted in this manuscript as it had no relevance to the research question. All study participants provided approval of the transcripts.

Data Analyses

The data set for this study consisted of 17 interviews across four different stakeholder groups: program participants, parents/caregivers, student volunteers, and university partners. Accordingly, triangulation of the data set increases validity and contributes to providing a full picture of the *CB Program*. "Triangulation can enrich research as it offers a variety of datasets to explain differing aspects of a phenomenon of interest" (Noble & Heale, 2019, p. 67). Interviewing all stakeholder groups offers this study varying perspectives of the *CB Program* and generates impacts that will either contradict or support each other.

Interview transcripts were read through and emerging words and sentences of interest or "meaning units" (Belotto, 2018, p. 2624) were coded. According to Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), coding is a favourable method used by qualitative researchers to derive meaning and commonalities from segments of a data set. "[Coding] involves

examining a coherent portion of your empirical material—a word, a paragraph, a page—

and labelling it with a word or short phrase that summarizes its content" (Linneberg &

Korsgaard, 2019, p. 3). Coding also asks the researcher to interact with the participants'

phrases and story several times before assigning meaning to their words. This process can

then lead the researcher to identify patterns and assign them meaning (Linneberg &

Korsgaard, 2019). Based on personal knowledge of the *CB Program* and history of

similar conversations, the researcher created a list of priori codes (see Table 1) to guide

analyses. Coding involved extracting words and/or phrases that were recurrent across the

data set and were describing an *impact* of involvement with *CB Program*. For

consistency, the data from each stakeholder group was coded together. For example, the

program participants were reviewed one after the other. Discussion between the

researcher and faculty supervisor confirmed the coding and categorization procedure.

Table 1 shows the list of codes that were used in analyzing the data set. Some

posteriori codes were developed as the interviews were transcribed and common themes

emerged.

The coded data set was examined using thematic analysis to discover

commonalities and hone emerging themes that answered the research question: "What are

the impacts realized by former program participants, their parents/caregivers, former

student volunteers, and university partners from involvement with an inclusive education

program within a postsecondary environment"? Thematic analysis is useful when

reviewing multiple perspectives to find commonalities and differences but to also

highlight the unexpected insights that are uncovered (Nowell et al., 2017).

Table 1

Examples of Codes, Types of Codes, and Descriptions

Code	Type of code	Description
"Like" or "love"	Priori	Generally used by program participants to describe their feelings towards the volunteers.
Listens	Priori	Used primarily for program participants and their parent/caregiver. Used to describe a relationship formed on campus.
Friend	Priori	Used to describe a relationship formed on campus.
Reciprocity	Posteriori	The give and take between two people indicating equality.
Comfort(able)	Priori	A description of a feeling while being on campus.
Inclusion	Priori	The feeling of being a part of or included in an activity or environment.
Social skills	Priori	A skill gained or improved upon while on campus.
Communication	Priori	A skill developed/enhanced.
Independence	Priori	A skill developed/enhanced.
Community	Priori	A feeling or sense of belonging; a group of people coming together.
Hope	Posteriori	Used primarily for parents/caregivers when describing their son/daughter's future
Naming volunteers	Posteriori	This was a useful code to determine the impact that the volunteers had on the program participants. If they could name their volunteers, it showed that they were valued enough to commit their name to memory. This also allowed program participants who were non-verbal or used few words to communicate to still participate in the study. Gestures indicating names were recorded.
Upset(ting)/sad	Posteriori	Feelings mentioned when talking about having to leave the program; uncertain of future plans; uncertain outlook going forward post program.

All transcripts were re-read and broad themes were first identified and reviewed with the faculty supervisor and assigned colours to differentiate. These themes were examined to ensure that they were inclusive of the codes clustered within them. The final resultant themes were labeled as: friendships, growth, and belonging. Quotations from each stakeholder group were pulled to represent these themes and how the impact of *CB Program* was felt by each group. Some quotes were sent to the faculty supervisor to confirm relevance to the study. Email exchanges and Microsoft Teams meetings allowed for opportunity to review.

Ethical Considerations

This research study was granted clearance from the Brock University Research Ethics Board (File # 21-004 – GALLAGHER) and all data were collected following these standards of practice. Given that the researcher had been in a position of authority, it was important that the study participants understood their participation, their choice to decline participation or withdrawal, and that it would have no effect on the relationship they had with the researcher. Program participants are considered to belong to a vulnerable sector of the population, thus the researcher ensured they understood the project by reading the consent form at the beginning of the interview and was able to answer any questions they had. Program participants were given the option to allow their parent/caregiver to stay while they conducted their interview and all four chose this option.

The researcher's role was made explicit, having personal history with all study participants. Within disability studies, this ethical consideration is a positive attribute as the rapport and relationship that has been established leads to empathetic interviews and inner voices being heard.

Chapter Summary

This chapter established the researcher's background and context for the study. Given that the researcher was known to the study participants, it offered a deeper look into the program and the established rapport aided in the interview process. This study used a qualitative approach to research by gathering information through interviews with various stakeholder groups involved with the *CB Program*. Interviews were conducted and the transcriptions were transcribed, analyzed, and coded using priori/posteriori words and phrases to categorize the data. The coded data began to take shape and themes started to emerge. Thematic analyses followed and the three themes that emerged were: friendships, growth, and belonging.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to assess and understand the impact of the *CB Program* on its various stakeholder groups within a postsecondary environment. Data were collected during 17 semi-structured interviews with program participants and their parents/caregivers, student volunteers, and university partners over a period of 5 months. The data were coded using thematic analysis and three broad themes emerged from the transcriptions: friendship, growth, and belonging. Quotes were taken from the transcriptions that illustrated each of the themes and were representative of each participant's authentic voice.

This chapter will answer the research question, "What are the impacts realized by former program participants, their parents/caregivers, student volunteers, and university partners from involvement with an inclusive education program within a postsecondary environment?" Each of the three subsections will address a theme that emerged related to the overall impact of the program. The first subsection, "Friendships," examines the relationships formed between program participants and student volunteers/university partners. Understanding bilateral feelings between each group is crucial to assessing impact. The second subsection addresses "Growth," which emerged in every stakeholder group in various forms. For some, it is the development of new skills or learning and for others it is a mindset or evolution of acceptance that showed growth. The final subsection comprises "Belonging," and what an inclusive postsecondary experience can look like. The feelings and atmosphere are also addressed when examining the theme of belonging. Through examination of these themes, from the voices of those directly affected, this study uncovers the impacts of the *CB Program.*

Friendships

The *CB Program* was designed as a means for adults from the community who have an IDD to experience life on campus and for SO-U student volunteers to gain skills and experience working with people: The program offers student volunteers some guidance in supporting individuals with IDD while participating in various educational, social, and recreational activities on campus. Friendships were a by-product of this repeated support over a course of time, but never a guaranteed outcome.

Program participants were asked, "Tell me a bit about the volunteers that worked with you in the program." Jenny, who had graduated 2 years prior to the interview, immediately named 12 volunteers who had worked with her over the years: "I like them. I like them so much. They're really nice friends. I just keep in touch with them" (Jenny, Interview, September 18, 2021). During the course of Jenny's interview, she used the terms "like" and/or "love" 17 times when describing the volunteers who had worked with her. Jenny's mom, Tina, confirmed how her friendship circle has grown. When asked if Jenny talked to anyone on Facebook Messenger prior to attending *CB Program*, Tina replied, "Never, never, absolutely never. Never. I wasn't, I wasn't, no … never. [Jenny] didn't have any friends leaving high school. Like after she left, it was done. That's it" (Tina, Interview, September 18, 2021).

One program participant, Rachel, described friendship as "Trust, respect … loyalty … and just having fun, which I did for 3 years when I was at [SO-U] with all of them" (Rachel, Interview, October 12, 2021). This subtheme of "fun" carried through all of the interviews. Volunteer Leah explains the dynamic that was often created at the program:

> There would be times where we would do activities with both the volunteers and the participants. [We] would … be participating in [the activity] and it would just

feel like we were … one big group. It would not feel like we were actually

working there. It actually felt like we were one big group of friends. We were just

sharing that experience together which is what I really liked about it. We were

basically helping them, but they were also helping us. (Leah, Interview, January

26, 2022)

Another program participant, Shawn, who didn't use many words to

communicate, would make hand gestures about his volunteers; each one had a specific

sign. For example, the researcher was symbolized by making the letter "A" with two

index fingers over his nose. Using almost no words, Shawn would communicate through

pointing to pictures or items, or gesturing. During our interview he would smile and

laugh while making the signs for the volunteers he remembered. Some of these

volunteers had graduated and been out of the program for 3 years or longer. Shawn

signed for one volunteer he remembered by making a violin motion because she would

play violin with him. The researcher asked Shawn's mother, Paula, if his communication

was a barrier for building connections with the volunteers: "I think he got his point across

and they listened to what he was having to say … [because] he does say a lot, even

though he doesn't say a word, he still says a lot and I think [the volunteers], they figured

it out very quickly" (Paula, Interview, September 19, 2021).

Parents/caregivers often spoke of the fun their son/daughter would have with the

volunteers. Shawn's mother Paula recounts her end-of-day pick-ups from the program:

[Shawn] would come out of *CB Program* and there'd be 10 [volunteers]. There

would be 10 people. You know, running with him to my car. It was hilarious to

watch. It really was hilarious so you can see his circle of friends growing on *CB

Program*. You could see that they all cared for him and they all were interested in

what he was doing. They were interested in him. Yeah, like they accepted him.

(Paula, Interview, September 19, 2021)

In determining if friendships had been created, the researcher asked program participants, parents/caregivers, and student volunteers if they communicated with each other *outside* of program hours (e.g., stopping and talking in the hallways, via email, text, or Facebook Messenger). Most kept some form of contact with a select few individuals. Shawn's sister recounted a message she had from a volunteer who reached out to her in hopes of staying connected to Shawn:

> Hi Erin, this is "blank" from [SO-U]. I'm [Shawn]'s friend. The one with the
> guitar hand sign. Was wondering if you could please give him a big hug for me
> and tell him that I miss him so much and I'm sorry I haven't been in contact.
> School is so busy but please tell him I love him so much and does [Shawn] have
> Instagram or anything or can I follow you? I would love to see a picture of him. I
> miss his smile and his excitement. (Erin, Interview, September 19, 2021)

Volunteers were asked similar questions to determine if natural friendships had been formed: "Did you communicate with any participant outside of volunteer hours during (and after) the time you were volunteering with the *CB Program*?" "What did you tell other people about the *CB Program* (like classmates and friends)?" "What does friendship mean to you?" "Do you think you made friends at *CB Program*?" One volunteer, Catherine, explains how she saw the relationship(s):

> Even with [other friends], like you see … them outside of school as well. So it's
> nice to learn about somebody so much more. Like we have [a 1–2 hour shift] in
> school, and outside we can chat and you know and [friendship] evolves like that.

So … I really feel like it is a great thing to have [a] relationship outside of just

volunteering hours as well because it helps … our participants and ourselves. We

have a friend. This is not just a 1-hour or 2-hour thing. This is … a lifetime bond.

(Catherine, Interview, September 18, 2021)

Another volunteer, Diana, spoke about the various ways she would connect with

participants outside of the program:

I would always talk to [Jenny] over Facebook and she would call me as well and I

would always stop in the hallway if I ever saw [Michael] or [Melissa] or I

remember seeing [Samantha] at the mall one time and I just stopped and waved at

her and had a small conversation. And also [Dan], he would always be at [the mall]

… or I'd see him on the bus and I'd always stop and say "Hi" to him and I

remember I introduced him to my cousin one time [because] we both bumped into

him on the bus. (Diana, Interview, September 18, 2021)

Diana continued to explain how her friendships with the other volunteers also grew and

evolved over her time volunteering:

I think I started to feel very comfortable and very close to the participants. I really

like [Micaela] and [Dan] and also formed a lot of natural friendships with a lot of

the other volunteers. So it was, like, natural for me to want to help out. (Diana,

Interview, September 18, 2021)

The subthemes of "trust" and "comfort" were brought up when asked to think

about what friendship means, and if they made friends while at *CB Program*. One

program participant, Fred, describes what the volunteers meant to him:

Like if I'm going through a hard time, they understand. And it's, it's kind of like

being in the fire department. Or, first responders, [the volunteers] got your back. I

got their back basically. It's like camaraderie at the Firehouse. You got a lot of friends who care about you and you care about them. (Fred, Interview, October 3, 2021)

Volunteer Monica had been volunteering for 12 years until the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of *CB Program*. She was asked to describe the relationships she had within the program over her time volunteering:

Fostering a relationship that's really strong … and almost like eternal, in a sense. Because the people that you meet and the relationships and bonds that you form, even if you don't physically see people, I think they sort of live internally like within you—which is really special. And so the friendships like that you form with participants and with other people in the program. I think those are things that you'll carry with you for the rest of your life. (Monica, Interview, February 5, 2022)

Monica spoke about how her view of what a friendship is evolved over her time volunteering and how her interactions with different people have helped to shape this perception:

Friendships come in all different forms and … shapes, and sometimes you think that the friend or … the you know people that you meet at school or at work and they have to be around your age and it doesn't matter if you can verbally communicate or not. Friendship is like a feeling and I learned that through *CB Program* for sure. (Monica, Interview, February 5, 2022)

The *CB Program*, by design, is a formal volunteering opportunity whereby two or more people spend at least 1 hour a week together on campus. By hearing from the program

participants and student volunteers about the evolution of their relationships, from formal programming to natural friendships, demonstrates an important impact a program of this kind can have.

Growth

Growth and development of skills was mentioned by all stakeholder groups as a by-product of the program. Each group had different expectations about what they would learn or gain from their experience. A few volunteers were surprised by the skills they developed, not anticipating their own growth and learning. Similarly, university partners welcomed a program participant into their respective departments with the initial goal of helping out and saw growth in their own skills as a result.

During the interviews it was common that parents/caregivers would elaborate on what their son/daughter had said by providing examples of the skill they felt they gained from the activity. Fred mentioned playing Crazy 8's (a card game) each morning and his mother Nancy spoke about the benefit. "That little game of Crazy 8's teaches so many different things. It, it teaches sportsmanship, camaraderie, sequencing, numbers, patience … [concentration]. It just teaches so many different things that will carry them on in life in many different situations" (Nancy, Interview, October 3, 2021).

Jenny spoke about getting healthy by participating in Tai Chi and Yoga as well as using the computers in the library and working on literacy (Jenny, Interview, September 18, 2021). Rachel spoke about learning how to play sports like basketball, tennis, and ping pong. She also mentioned social growth and work ethic from interactions with the volunteers and from volunteering on campus. "Making friends is definitely the hardest thing for a person to do. Definitely putting in the effort, and discipline for work ethic is

hard which I did because I had odd jobs at [SO-U] like at the student centre, which I

loved doing" (Rachel, Interview, October 12, 2021). Rachel's mother Connie spoke of a

noticeable increase in communication she saw in her daughter:

> I think that it gave her confidence and she was very proud that she was in the
>
> program. She was invited to speak at a forum in Niagara Falls about the program
>
> and that was a really excellent experience too; and she won an award. The
>
> lighthouse award through [the Agency] I think and I think [sic] … part of that was
>
> due to the program as well. (Connie, Interview, October 12, 2021)

Shawn indicated many activities in which he participated: swimming (he expressed a

swimming gesture, plus sound), music (he expressed a guitar gesture), using the

computers at the library (he made a honking sign and sound indicating he watched truck

videos). His mother Paula highlighted his active communication after returning home

from *CB Program* each day:

> He communicated more on Friday nights then he did other nights. Yeah, he would
>
> talk more, … about the people that he saw there, what he did versus other days.
>
> Other days, sometimes he would just come home and he would go sit on the
>
> couch. Yeah, when he came home from [the Agency] here, he had a lot to say
>
> [and from] the [SO-U] program, he always had a lot to say … what he had done,
>
> what he's seen, his volunteers, you, April. (Connie, Interview, October 12, 2021).

When interviewing the student volunteer stakeholder group, they were asked,

"How did your role evolve during your time volunteering?" This elicited deep thoughts

and connections made between activities and skills developed over their tenure

volunteering. Subthemes of leadership, initiative, and communication were expressed in

the interview question responses from the student volunteers. One student volunteer,

Catherine, spoke about her leadership growth throughout the program:

> One of the greatest takeaways I'll take from that program is that, because, like, I was working, on my speaking skills when I first started, I was nervous. I was kind of, you know, like in my own shell and by the end of the program I just really blossomed in the sense that I, I had these newfound leadership skills. (Catherine, Interview, September 18, 2021)

Catherine went on to explain other skills she gained from volunteering, "But like what I've gained from that program, is much more than an hour a day. I've learned … leadership skills, so much responsibility, so much respect, compassion, all of these values I've learned and made such good connections" (Catherine, Interview, September 18, 2021).

Leadership was a skill also gained by Leah who spoke about her progression of gaining confidence, finding her voice, and seeing it translate into leadership opportunities:

> I think I became a lot more comfortable. I think in the beginning, I was less comfortable with actually, like, leading certain things or taking initiative. But then … as I continued, that progressively changed and I became a lot more vocal with certain things … like to do certain activities. … I did things that I didn't think I would do. … I would lead certain things with other people or I would like take initiative for once and it would be something I didn't think I would ever do [because] I didn't ever think I would be like in a leadership situation. (Leah, Interview, January 26, 2022)

Leah also spoke of increased extroversion and how her social skills evolved and are now benefiting her in her postgraduate studies.

Student volunteer Monica saw growth in herself but also developed a greater understanding of society and the accessibility barriers that still exist: "I have this new layer of of [sic] knowledge and and [sic] new perspective again on what it means to be able-bodied and what the world looks like" (Monica, Interview, January 18, 2022). Monica talked about perspective and what the world, happiness, and friendships can look like to different people. Monica stressed that the learning gained from *CB Program* goes beyond what formal education teaches:

> It almost teaches you like, that everything that you learn about what it means to be, you know, a "functioning member of society" per se, how they define that right? How it can look so different and how not everything conventional is is [sic] the right way or the only way. So again, I really think it challenges those core beliefs of of [sic] what we value and what we don't and how we structure the world that we live in and and [sic] even like the existing structures that just really makes you think. And it encourages you to be to be [sic] critical of a lot of the things that we're taught. (Monica, Interview, January 18, 2022)

The university partners saw growth as well. As one partner, Donna, remarked, "I learned so much about how he learned" (Donna, Interview, September 26, 2021). Another partner, Laura, spent some time with a participant who used very few words to communicate with: "I think that those are some familiar cues that I can look out for and and [sic] kind of try to practice on my own. So I mean, they might have been barriers for a brief while, but I don't think anything that could have stopped me from communicating with anybody" (Laura, Interview, September 12, 2021).

Every stakeholder group identified growth and development from independence and social skills to leadership and communication. There were opportunities for formal

learning such as developing literacy skills but many opportunities for holistic growth like understanding how ableist our systems can be, and how integral it is to develop activism and empathy for those with IDD who have to navigate them.

Belonging

The theme of belonging was evident in the interview responses mainly from program participants and student volunteers. The concept of belonging (as defined in Chapter 1) describes a feeling or sense of comfort sometimes felt among the *CB Program* members. Belonging is also mentioned as a sense of comfort within a physical space such as the program or university as a whole.

Belonging for the participants often meant an inclusive place where they were a part of the university environment alongside their same-aged peers, without disabilities. Fred described his reaction to getting the phone call that he had got a spot in the *CB Program*: "I got hired to go to [SO-U]. Like I felt I was drafted by the NFL. No, seriously, I'm being serious" (Fred, Interview, October 3, 2021). Fred's mother Nancy echoed his sentiments as she spoke of his time at SO-U:

> I think it also gave him a sense of purpose. Gave him a sense of belonging and participating in different things like the talent competition, Remembrance Day, doing the job fairs. It just made him, in my opinion, feel like such a ... belonging to that whole university community. And I think the impact on him, a sense of pride too. "I go to ... I went to ... [SO-U]." And saying that, with such enthusiasm and pride. [Others would say] let's say, for example, his brother went to Humber [a community college in Ontario]. Well, [Fred] is included in that because. He can say "I went to [SO-U]" and I think it's a big boost of confidence and pride. (Nancy, Interview, September 21, 2021)

Program participant Shawn would indicate to his family that he wanted to talk about *CB Program* by showing them the promotional YouTube video for the program. Shawn's mother was asked if she tells others about the *CB Program* and if so, what does she tell them:

> We just tell them the stories and how great the volunteers [sic] and how well it was run and everything else. And how accepting, how accepting [sic] they were, how accepting the whole university was of these [program participants]. They came to the university and there are the different things they did. Like they they [sic] did things on campus like he would go to Tim Hortons and sit with you in the same place the other university students were sitting. It was like being with his peers. It was wonderful! (Paula, September 19, 2021)

Some volunteers were asked about working with program participants who did not use many words to communicate and how they understood their likes and/or dislikes and if it created any barriers to inclusion. Tori said:

> I mean most of the time we would know if [the participants] were not feeling comfortable doing certain activities [because] they would right away either nod their head or shake their head to say "no" or they would just not participate right away. They would just be very stiff and just walk away. So we knew those were their ways of saying "I don't want to be part of this. Please don't push me into it." So that was our indication of, "OK that's that's [sic] it. We'll do something else." (Tori, Interview, October 3, 2021)

This level of care was felt by program participant Rachel who ended her interview by saying:

> I wish I could go back and do 3 years all over again. I just miss everybody there

to be honest. Because with all these students and volunteers, they really make you

feel loved and it does feel, like, the best time of your life there. I would definitely

say that they care for sure. Three years of friends and fun. [SO-U] is the place to

go. (Rachel, Interview, October 12, 2021)

For the student volunteer group, their sense of belonging came from interactions

with the entire group (support workers, program participants, and other student

volunteers) but also from the activities and interactions they had within SO-U as a whole.

They spoke of participating in activities they would otherwise never have known about or

tried on their own and those experiences led to greater feelings of comfort and belonging

within the university. Diana compared her feelings towards campus life *before* she started

to volunteer versus afterwards:

Campus was just a place where I came to study and like, then got on the bus, then

went home and it was just so depressing. But then when I finally started

volunteering it finally felt like I had the belonging on campus and like comfort

and like people that I could share something with. It finally felt like I was a part of

something bigger than just going to university and it really felt like community.

(Diana, Interview, September 18, 2021)

The subtheme of community involvement was echoed by almost all student volunteers

who were interviewed. Leah spoke honestly about *CB Program* being a "stress reliever"

for herself:

What started off being something that was supposed to be school related ended up

being more of like like [sic] a community for me and something that I I [sic]

would go to school to. … I would actually enjoy going to school for. … It was, it

was great for my stress [because] I would, I would go there even if I wasn't

volunteering and I would just pick up extra hours [because] I honestly, I just, I

would just spend my whole day there. It was a lot of fun. (Leah, Interview,

January 26, 2022)

Student volunteer Tori referred to the program as a "support system" and she would

encourage others to join: "That was the word I use mostly like you have a great support

system. With your whole, like throughout the whole time, you're there" (Tori, Interview,

October 3, 2021). Another student volunteer (Sara) echoed this as she spoke about her

experience making friends: "Yeah, so I know how it feels like when it's your first time

making friends. It's your first time like sitting alone you have no one to talk to. You just

need company. You just need that friend just there by your side" (Sara, Interview,

September 19, 2021).

The sense of belonging that was felt was also "regenerated" by way of social

contract by tenured student volunteers who would work to recreate an inclusive

atmosphere for new program participants and student volunteers coming into the

program. Rachel's mother Connie spoke about her daughter's inclusion within the

university setting:

Like it was, it was more, what I would say, an effort in inclusion. So to bring

somebody into the university setting, to show them how they can fit in, how they

can join in. [In high school], they were in a separate class. They were taking, you

know, like different courses. ... I don't think [Rachel] was ever in a specific

course at the university level, but more being included on the campus. It was

really about the life on campus. (Connie, Interview, October 12, 2021)

The feeling of belonging and community building was felt primarily by the

program participants and student volunteers. They came to a program as individuals,

brought together by various desires and independent goals. They soon found themselves a part of something bigger—a community. A place where they felt safe, calm, supported, respected, and treated equitably. This sense of community came with one rule: to continue the same sense of community for others.

Chapter Summary

Over the course of 17 interviews, data were collected and coded to uncover common themes that answered the question, "What are the social impacts experienced by stakeholders involved with an inclusive education program in a postsecondary setting?" By using thematic analysis, emergent themes identified were: friendship, growth, and belonging. These themes were expressed in the responses from each of the stakeholder groups: program participants, parents/caregivers, student volunteers, and university partners. Each group experienced the social impacts of the *CB Program* as a function of their unique but often similar involvement in this postsecondary setting.

The friendships between program participants and student volunteers was the most evident. Each group spoke fondly of the other, using words like "friend," "friendship," and "like." Often these friendships even extended beyond the hours of the program and contact was kept up using social media or text messaging. Friendship was also generated between student volunteers who had opportunity to engage with students from other programs whom they might not normally have had an opportunity to meet and connect with.

Growth was seen from the program participants in both their hard and soft skills development. Their learning often came through informal ways like playing the "Crazy 8's" card game each morning as identified by one parent. Student volunteers developed their soft skills like communication and leadership.

Belonging was the third theme identified through this study. It was identified by program participants and student volunteers as feelings of "inclusion," "support," and "community" and finding comfort within the physical space of the university. Many spoke of being void of these feelings until their time with *CB Program.*

Chapter 5 will discuss the above findings in greater depth, including their meaning and their implications for policy and practice.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Impacts identified by all stakeholder groups in this study were overwhelmingly positive. All groups spoke fondly of the *CB Program* and were eager to talk about what the program meant to them. Three emergent themes were identified from the data analyses: friendships, growth, and belonging. This chapter provides a discussion of the findings in light of the relevant literature, as well as a summary of the implications for theory, policy, and practice. The chapter concludes with disclosure of the limitations and also ideas for future research.

Discussion of the Findings

This study revealed that a formal program for adults with IDD in a postsecondary environment can in fact contribute to the development of natural friendships with their non-disabled peers. It is not surprising that friendships also developed between program participants, who often knew each other from high school, organized sports, and from the time spent at *CB Program*. Fulford and Cobigo's (2019) analysis of 18 studies on the relationships between adults with IDD also confirmed that participants with IDD cited a sense of safety, understanding, and communication as major factors in the success of building friendships with other adults with IDD.

An unexpected finding from this study was the extent to which student volunteers generated friendships with other student volunteers in the program. They were now connected to students from all across the university. They were introduced in a structured environment first, which lead to the formation of authentic friendships over time. Student volunteers were able to meet and interact with others from various programs of study with whom they might not have normally interacted. The power of friendship and social

connections at a postsecondary level are well researched and documented; "In addition to individual and psychological aspects related to academic self-efficacy and motivation, good social relationships with peers at university is another key variable in academic success" (Morelli et al., 2022). Student volunteers found like-minded peers, and over time, friendships were created.

The friendships and bonds that developed between program participants and student volunteers were the most apparent discussions during the study's interviews. Both stakeholders spoke fondly of the friends they had made while at *CB Program.* Natural friendships were observed as relationships that extended beyond the program. Student volunteers would keep in touch via text messaging or Facebook Messenger as well as creating opportunities to get together outside program time and after graduation. Friendship also seemed to transcend verbal communication as both stakeholder groups were able to find ways to communicate and create bonds that did not always require words. There is little research on friendship outcomes between adults with and without IDD. Most social contact is experienced with paid staff and/or family. The literature that does exist states postsecondary institutions certainly can offer a continuous, safe, and diverse environment for students with and without IDD to build friendships and social connections (Alqazlan et al., 2019; Spruit & Carter, 2021; Tucker et al., 2020).

Another theme uncovered in this research study was growth, which was seen among program participants who developed hard skills of improving literacy concepts, computer- and work-related skills, but also in their soft skills. The postsecondary environment provided an opportunity for continued practice of soft skills such as: communication skills, maturity, independence, confidence building, and self-efficacy. Parents/caregivers were hopeful that their son/daughter would develop these soft skills

that would serve them into adulthood. Many of these skills were previously identified in the literature by parents/caregivers as essential for success in PSE (Sheen et al., 2022). Surprisingly, employment outcomes were not a focus for program participants or parents/caregivers in this study; however, it had been stated in the literature as a desired result of attendance in PSE by both adults with IDD and their families (Martinez et al., 2012).

The last theme uncovered in this study was belonging. Mahar et al. (2013) identified five elements they believe are essential for belonging: subjectivity, groundedness, reciprocity, dynamism, and self-determination. In this study, several stakeholder groups spoke of being grounded to the physical location of the university. It was a "special place" they were excited to attend and wanted to return to. Adults with IDD traditionally have been excluded from environments like postsecondary, therefore being physically present on campus was a first step in belonging for them. From there, the student volunteers played a large role in supporting their belonging on campus. Student volunteers, who already felt included within the physical space, spoke more of the "reciprocity" they felt within the *CB Program*. They finally felt emotionally tied to others through shared experiences (both with program participants and other student volunteers) which for many, they had not yet experienced in their postsecondary career. This experience is similar to that of the student walkers in "Let's Take a Walk" who described the same feeling of community with one another and a feeling of belonging to a group (Tucker et al., 2020).

For the university partners, they spoke about being in a position to create an inclusive and welcoming environment. Hosting a program participant allowed them to expand the diversity of their department to include those with IDD and introduce other

staff who may have not otherwise been involved. Lastly, the *CB Program* fostered choice-making in every activity, and thus program participants developed their self-determination and confidence navigating the physical and social SO-U community.

This study brought to light the impacts of friendship, growth, and belonging among the stakeholder groups. Perhaps evidence that the *CB Program* at the SO-U supports the fulfillment of the third layer of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: love and belonging (Maslow, 1943). Further research could investigate programs for adults with IDD at a postsecondary level that also produce higher levels of self-esteem and self-actualization such as employment and independent living outcomes.

Implications

The findings from this major research project offer a deeper look into the impacts of a social inclusion program for adults with IDD within a postsecondary environment. Four stakeholder groups (Program Participants, Parent/caregivers, Student Volunteers and University Partners) offered their unique insights and experiences with the program. The findings of this research have implications for theory, policy, and practice.

Implications for Theory and Policy

According to the Education Act (1990) and the Convention of Rights for Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), school boards in Ontario are required to provide a positive and inclusive environment for all students. According to the CRPD Article 24, "Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live." By law, students in Ontario with IDD are guaranteed an "inclusive education" during K–12 schooling. The definition of inclusive education varies between school districts, but

students in Ontario are guaranteed a place within their school. At the postsecondary level people with IDD are not guaranteed the same level of access to education and are often restricted by matriculation requirements.

Compensation age theory (CAT) is informative in understanding IDD from a theoretical perspective. If provided with a conducive environment, individuals regardless of ability level, can continue to learn (Lifshitz, 2020). To truly be diverse and inclusive, postsecondary institutions need to redefine their definition of education. Is education simply a combination of credits taken over a select number of years leading to a degree or diploma in a certain field of study? Or can it also be a furtherment of knowledge, to improve oneself in an area they deem necessary for further growth and understanding? How might this include adults with IDD who want to better themselves and who seek to learn and grow as their peers do? "All this means that formal systems of provision need to become much more open and flexible, so that such opportunities can truly be tailored to the needs of the learner, or indeed the potential learner" (Laal, 2011, p. 471).

Higher education is seen as a valued path for young adults to take that often leads to higher wages, better employment outcomes, and improved quality of life. If provincial legislation focuses only on K−12 education for persons with IDD, then what message is that sending? Do we not also want those high education outcomes for adults with IDD as well? There will continue to be institutions (like the SO-U) that see the value in opening their doors to adults with IDD, but until legislation catches up, there will never be equal access for all.

Implications for Practice

The *CB Program* provides an inclusive educational opportunity for adults with IDD to attend PSE alongside their peers. The positive outcomes documented in this study

suggest that a program like this can be mutually beneficial to all stakeholders involved. The call to action is to postsecondary institutions who do not currently welcome adults with IDD on campus; it's time for them to open their doors.

Postsecondary education (PSE) in Ontario (and across Canada) has a long way to go to be truly inclusive of adults with IDD. First, there needs to be national oversight of the education system with common policies and procedures. There also should be one common understanding of inclusive education at the K–12 level and how it applies to all stakeholder groups. For example, what does inclusive education mean for students who are deaf, blind, have physical and learning disabilities, as well as IDD? These policies will then extend to include PSE ensuring institutions work to create space for adults with IDD within their campus environments.

Much like the United States, a national organization to oversee the implementation of PSE for adults with IDD will need to be created in Canada. This organization could work together with community organizations and postsecondary institutions to secure funding and create programs suitable for the PSE campus that are of benefit to the adults with IDD who will be attending. Informed by the needs identified through the secondary school systems, programs would look different and target specific learning outcomes. Some institutions might have greater in-class involvement and options for degree completion while others may be more of a campus experience. The one common goal will be inclusion.

Further research is needed to define inclusion at a PSE level for adults with IDD. For example, does attendance in a campus classroom determine true inclusion? Most *CB Program* participants never stepped foot inside an SO-U classroom, but according to their

expressed definition, they felt included in their campus community. Like belonging, inclusion is subjective to the individual and thus it is important to emphasize that when determining if inclusive outcomes are being met.

Last, it is important to support the creation of transition planning into PSE from secondary school and out of PSE into the world of work. Secondary school administrators should be exploring the PSE options, identifying strengths and areas to improve, and future career goals. This planning can help to successfully transition adults with IDD out of secondary and into PSE with clear, identified goals. In the same way, part of PSE should include some discussion and training for the next steps after they finish their final year. Career planning like job searches, resume and cover letter writing, and interview support can be provided through the campus career centre as well as hard skills that will correlate with the desired career can be targeted. With proper planning and support, adults with IDD can work to maintain social relationships they have created past graduation.

With the above suggestions for practice in place, higher education for adults with IDD will be available and ready to support the varied learners attending PSE. Inclusion will be held in high regard, but will remain subjective, flexible, and respectful of the diverse learners and open to viewing inclusion from their lens.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study was its relatively small sample size (n=17) and varied amount of time study participants had been away from the program. This study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and thus there were remote connections to friends. Inclusion criteria meant study participants were to have no affiliation with SO-U or the

CB Program that limited the participants who could be involved. Study participants were also only contacted through this researcher's social media account, thus limiting the potential pool of diverse participants.

Based on results and limitations of the present study, more research is needed into PSE options and outcomes for adults with IDD. Longitudinal research on transition into PSE from secondary school, throughout PSE, and then post-school outcomes would offer a full picture of a program supporting adults with IDD at a postsecondary level. Also, more research should be done with student volunteers as they progress into their own careers to assess the impact of their relationship(s) with people with IDD. Research on the types of PSE opportunities (inclusive, mixed/hybrid, segregated) and their various work-related outcomes would be another area of study that could help individuals with IDD and their families in choosing the program that will best fit their individual needs and future goals.

Conclusion

The landscape of PSE for adults with IDD has come a long way since the first programs of its kind emerged in the 1980s. Since then, postsecondary institutions around the world have opened their doors and worked to create learning spaces accessible for adults with IDD. There are programs and initiatives that exist, like the *CB Program*, that are blueprints of a successful program, leading to friendships, growth, and belonging outcomes for all stakeholders involved.

These programs are successful based on a multitude of factors. They are a successful convergence of supportive faculty and administration willing to advocate on their behalf, and open-minded community organizations that truly believe in supporting

individuals to reach for their goals. It is a campus culture that embraces diversity and promotes inclusion at all levels. It is a student body that believes in experiential learning and are the changemakers and advocates for inclusion. It is parents/caregivers who never stop dreaming and advocating for their son's/daughter's future. It is the young adults with IDD who show up every day, ready to learn, engage, have fun, challenge, and ultimately change a campus community for the better.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions – Program Participants

1. Can you tell me about how you felt the first day you started at *Community-based Program*? Follow up: What emotions did you have that first day?

2. Describe what a day at *Community-based Program* like for you? Follow up: what activities did you participate in? What did you enjoy? Was there anything you disliked?

3. How was *Community-based Program* different then high school?

4. Tell me about *Southern Ontario University*- what was it like?

5. Tell me a bit about the volunteers that worked with you in the program?

6. Do you still communicate with any of your volunteers? If yes, can you explain how. Example- stop and talk in the hallways, facebook, email, text etc)? If no, why not? Would you like to?

7. Can you explain what friendship means to you?

8. Do you think you made friends at *Community-based Program*? Follow up: How do you know they are friends?

9. Do you think your time at *Community-based Program* has helped prepare you for your future? Please explain.

10. Would you recommend a friend to join *Community-based Program*? If yes, what would you tell them to get them to join? If no, why not?

11. How did you feel when you were finished? Why do you think you felt this way?

12. Is there anything else about the program you would like to tell me?

Appendix B

Interview Questions – Parents/Caregivers

1. When you pictured your son/daughter/family member's life after high school, what were your plans or expectations? What expectations did they have for themselves upon finishing high school?

2. Can you tell me about how they felt on their first day at *Community-based Program*?

3. What was the programming like at *Community-based Program*? What expectations did you have for them?

4. Did they talk about their volunteers/ or the program at home? What did they say?

5. Did they communicate with their volunteers outside of program hours (facebook, phone, text, email etc) if so, how?

6. How did you know they liked/disliked the program?

7. Compared to their high school experience, how was this program different?

8. Tell me about their friendship circle before starting *Community-based Program*-who did they consider to be their friends?

9. Tell me about their friendship circle now.

10. Did you notice a change in how they communicated? Or what they communicated about?

11. Would you recommend *Community-based Program* to another family? If yes, what would you tell them to get them to join? If no, why not?

12. Do you think their time at *Community-based Program* has helped prepare them for their future? Please explain?

13. Are there any other impacts of the program you would like to tell me about?

Appendix C

Interview Questions – Student Volunteers

1. Can you tell me what program you took while attending the Southern Ontario University?

2. What year did you start volunteering with *Community-based Program*?

3. Do you know approximately how many hours you completed?

4. Prior to *Community-based Program* did you have any previous experience interacting with someone with an intellectual disability? Please explain.

5. What was your main motivation for wanting to volunteer at *Community-based Program*?

6. Can you tell me how you felt on your first day at *Community-based Program*? What emotions did you have?

7. What was the programming like at *Community-based Program*- what expectations did you have when you first started? Was there anything you particularly liked/disliked?

8. How did your role within *Community-based Program* evolve over your time volunteering?

9. Did you communicate with any participants outside of your volunteer hours during the time you were a volunteer? Example- stop and talk in the hall, texting, email, facebook, other programs etc

10. What did you tell other people about *Community-based Program*? For example your classmates.

11. Do you still communicate with any participants now that you are no longer a volunteer? If so, for how long? Which medium do you use Example- stop and talk in the hall, texting, email, facebook, other programs etc?

12. What does friendship mean to you?

13. Do you think you made friends at *Community-based Program*? Please explain

14. Do you think your time at *Community-based Program* has helped prepare you for your future? Explain?

15. Would you recommend a friend to join *Community-based Program*? What would you tell them to get them to join?

16. Are there any other impacts about the program you would like to tell me?

Appendix D

Interview Questions – University Partners

1. Can you please tell me about the position you held at the Southern Ontario University?

2. Can you please tell me a bit about your involvement with the *Community-based Program*? Please explain your role as it relates to the *Community-based Program*, and when you got involved

3. Prior to your role with *Community-based Program*, did you have any experience working/interacting with persons with an intellectual disability?

4. What was your main reason for becoming involved with *Community-based Program*?

5. Can you please explain how you felt on your first day with the program? What emotions did you have?

6. What were your original expectations for the partnership? Who would benefit?

7. How did your experience with the program evolve over time?

8. Did you experience any barriers? If so, please explain.

9. What was the response from other staff/faculty in your department about the partnership?

10. Can you highlight the positives that came from the partnership with *Community-based Program*.

11. Would you recommend other departments to partner with *Community-based Program*- why or why not? What would you tell them?

12. Are there any other impacts you would like to tell me about the partnership?