

# Belonging and Connection

## of School Students with Disability

### Issues paper

Dr Sally Robinson & Julia Truscott  
Centre for Children and Young People  
Southern Cross University

Policy recommendations written with  
**Children with Disability Australia**



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This paper has been prepared by Children with Disability Australia for the Australian Government, represented by the Department of Social Services. The views expressed in this publication are those of Children with Disability Australia and do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government.

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# Summary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# Definitions

## Children and young people with disability

People 0 – 25 years of age.

## Belonging and connection

Belonging and connection are related, but different concepts. A sense of *belonging* relates to the symbolic spaces which feel familiar, comfortable and secure, and to which a person feels emotionally attached. We develop a sense of belonging over time, remembering experiences, people and places. *Connectedness* refers to the quality and number of connections with people and place (Antonsich, 2010).

We use belonging and connection in this paper to refer to the places, people and relationships that are emotionally and psychologically important to students with disability.

## Bullying

This definition is provided from the National Safe Schools Framework Resource Manual.

*Bullying is a pattern of repeated physical, verbal, psychological or social aggression that is directed towards a specific student by someone with more power and is intended to cause harm, distress and/or create fear. Bullying may be carried out overtly (e.g. face-to-face) or covertly (e.g. through repeated social exclusion or via technology). It is a sub-category of aggression and is different to, but also related to, harassment and violence. It is not the same as conflict or social dislike even though, in some cases, the outcome of both can be bullying.*

*Face-to-face bullying (sometimes referred to as direct bullying) involves physical actions such as punching or kicking or overt verbal actions such as name-calling and insulting.*

*Covert bullying (sometimes referred to as indirect bullying) is a subtle type of non-physical bullying which isn't easily seen by others and is conducted out of sight, and often unacknowledged by adults.*

*Cyberbullying occurs through the use of information or communication technologies such as Instant Messaging, text messages, email and social networking sites. It has many similarities with offline bullying but it differs in that the student(s) who is/are bullying can be anonymous, it can reach a wide audience and the sent or uploaded material can be difficult to remove.*

*Most students who cyberbully also bully off-line. It is now recognised that many forms of covert bullying appear to have significant potential for serious harm.*

(MCEECDYA, 2011, p. 8)

## Inclusive education

Inclusive education 'requires recognising impairment as one of many forms of human diversity, and welcoming and viewing diversity as a resource rather than a problem. Inclusive education, therefore, creates a situation where all children can be valued and experience a sense of belonging and where all children are encouraged to reach their full potential in all areas of development.' (Cologon, 2013b, p. 20)

## People with disability

Disability is 'a human characteristic that includes medical, functional, and social perspectives' (McDermott & Turk, 2011).

Most researchers, policy makers and practitioners tend to choose one of these perspectives and use it predominantly or even exclusively in programs, policy and research. The perspective dominating research and policy has shifted over time. The medical model prevailed through the 1980s; more recently, the functional perspective has gained prominence (ibid).

Australian terminology generally adopts 'person first' language, but the term 'disability' rather than 'disabilities' is used to acknowledge the disabling impact of social and cultural forces on people with impairments. It is a hybrid approach from the UK terminology of 'disabled people'.



## Acknowledgements

Our thanks to the people who have generously shared their stories about school life which are included in this paper. These experiences both enliven the paper, and also provide key insights into the importance of better understanding belonging and connection in young peoples' lives.

Appreciation is also extended to Professor Anne Graham, Professor Bettina Cass & Dr Kathy Cologon for their thoughtful review of the draft paper.

# Introduction

Feeling like you belong, and that you are connected to other people are fundamental relational issues that are particularly important for young people. For children and young people, school is a centrally important space where a sense of belonging and connection is formed, sustained and supported through both formal and informal activities and interactions. All students seek a sense of belonging and connection. This positive experience doesn't routinely happen for many students with disability.

The inclusion of students with disability in their local schools has been long promoted, but has been implemented with varying degrees of success. Some students with disability find school a fulfilling and happy experience. However, for others, loneliness, social difficulties and bullying are a hallmark of their school lives. Might a focus on belonging and connection expand our understanding of inclusion?

This paper explores how understanding and encouraging a sense of belonging and connection can make a positive difference to school life for all students, but particularly for students with disability.

Research on belonging explores the need of children and young people with disability for meaningful connection with others which helps build a sense of belonging. Alongside this, a significant amount of research addresses the bullying and abuse of students with disability. There is some evidence to suggest that bringing both areas of research together may improve understanding of what children and young people with disability need for school to be a happy and positive experience.

A number of the elements key to belonging and connection are building blocks of inclusion, and provide a broader way to think about inclusive education. These focus on the relationships and interactions between students with disability and others in the school community, including friends, peers, and other key adults. A sense of capability and being valued underpins the development of both relationships and engagement with curriculum.

Examples of finding school a fulfilling and happy experience are countered by many experiences of exclusion, poor education provision, and low expectations. Sadly, stigma and discrimination remain common in the lives of young people with disability and their families. The impact of this in the lives of young people with disability can be profound, threatening their sense of belonging and connection to school communities, but also self-confidence and self-esteem.

When belonging and connection are threatened there are several areas in which the impact is seen, and these directly affect inclusion. Relationships are impaired, resulting in students lacking friends, feeling lonely, and both feeling and being excluded. Their strengths aren't seen, school spaces are controlled, and there are tensions in negotiating support relationships. The experience of bullying is a particularly strong threat to a felt sense of belonging and connection, and apart from its abusive impact, the paper highlights how bullying interrupts or constrains the belonging of young people with disability in their school communities.

A series of initiatives, strategies, and practices are described in this paper which encourage a sense of belonging and connection in the lives of students with disability. In order to bring about genuine inclusion in all domains of school life, schools need to make this as much of

a focus as academic education. The social and relational elements of education are equally important, and in many ways a precondition of academic or curriculum based outcomes. This focus opens an important conversation about progressing inclusive educational experiences in schools.

## Approach of the paper

This paper explores the factors which underpin the sense of belonging and connection felt by students with disability in their schools, and considers how these might be helpful in promoting and building inclusion in schools.

To do this, we ‘unpack’ the concepts of belonging and connection to consider the key areas which either sustain or threaten the social inclusion of young people with disability in school communities.



Two different kinds of evidence have been used to develop an understanding of belonging and connection, and how and why these ideas might be helpful for students with disability in thinking about a fulfilling school life:

- Two areas of research literature have been explored to provide a basis for discussion of issues key to belonging and connection in school life. These centre on belonging and connection, and bullying of students with disability.
- The voices of students with disability and their families who provided examples from their school experiences to Children With Disability Australia (CDA) enliven the research approach and provide local, recent and topical examples of the impact of policy, practice and relationships on school belonging and connection.

While this paper does not attempt to provide policy commentary, it aims to deepen the understanding about what inclusion looks like, or could look like.

The first section of the paper explains the concepts of belonging and connection, and discusses why and how they are important in understanding inclusion. The next section explores the factors that give students with disability a sense of belonging and connection at school. These positive relationships, interactions and qualities are easily identifiable building blocks towards social inclusion.

The third section identifies threats to belonging and connection, and the way that these constrain feelings of belonging and connection. If these tensions and constraints can also be identified and broken down, they may be easier to respond to and resolve. The fourth section considers the particular impact and role of bullying in damaging the sense of belonging and connection of many school students with disability. While bullying is a threat to belonging and connection in the same way as those elements in the previous section, the risk to personal safety and the trauma caused to students has caused us to elevate attention to it.

The fifth section of the paper discusses features which help in building belonging and connection for students with disability. Strategies and suggestions for change are offered at three levels — personal, systemic, and school community — to encourage and sustain belonging and connection in schools. This includes recommendations developed by CDA to initiate change in response to the core concepts raised in the paper. Four recommendations are made for specific action to build belonging and connection in key policy and practice areas — school funding, anti-bullying strategies, leadership development, and data collection.

The final section discusses the utility of belonging and connection as a concept for better embedding inclusion as fundamental to school at multiple levels.



# Section 1 Understanding belonging and connection

## What do we mean by belonging and connection at school?

To feel like you belong is a fundamental human relational need. Research on belonging has found that people have a deep drive to form and maintain ‘at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships’ (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). In order to meet this need, two things must happen — first, frequent emotionally pleasant interactions with a few other people; and second, these interactions must happen in a relatively stable framework of concern for each other’s welfare (ibid).

For some people these relationships form easily. For others, including many students with disability, encouragement and support is needed to overcome individual, systemic and structural barriers which are not in place for other children. These barriers include social and cultural attitudes and values, myths about disability, low expectations, physical exclusion, and a lack of personal safety (Davis & Watson, 2001; Díez, 2010; Hoskin, 2010; MacArthur, 2012; Prince & Hadwin, 2013).

Belonging and connection are closely related, but slightly different terms. *Belonging* is about ‘a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort and security, and emotional attachment’ acquired through continuity of history and memory, while *connectedness* refers to the quality and number of connections with people and place (Antonsich, 2010, p. 645).

Goodenow defines school belonging as the sense of feeling ‘personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment’ (1993, p. 80). She developed a scale for measuring a sense of school belonging from the viewpoint of school students. This belonging scale has been adapted for use with school students with disability to understand how belonging is viewed in school life (Frederickson, Simmonds, Evans, & Soulsby, 2007). This work has been important in developing some core concepts of school belonging from students’ point of view. These are:

- Feeling happy at school
- Feeling happy being at *this* school
- Thinking that other children who are like you would be happy in their school too
- Other people notice if you are good at something
- Most teachers at this school like you
- Teachers here like people who are like you
- Feeling like you should be at this school
- Feeling like there is an adult here you can talk to about problems
- People at your school are friendly to you
- Not feeling very different from most other children at your school
- Feeling that other kids like you the way you are

## Why is belonging and connection important?

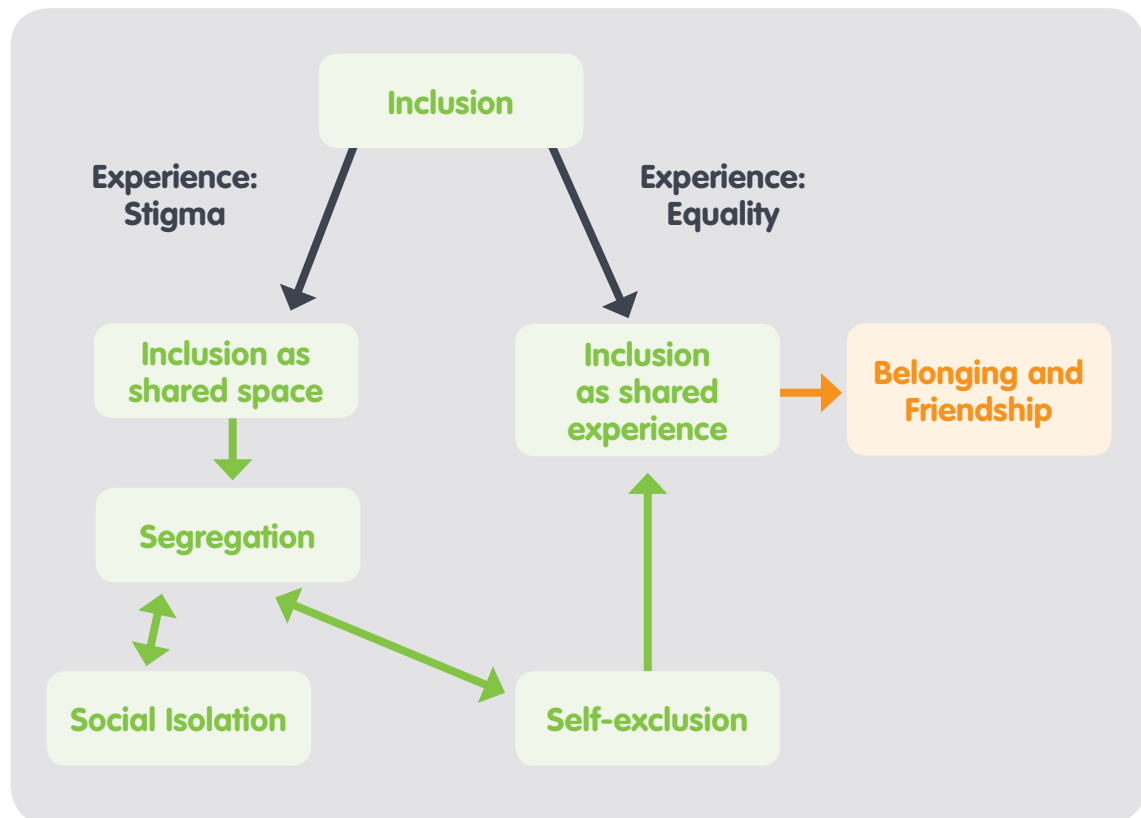
A sense of belonging and connection at school is an important component of broader school inclusion for all students. Research has shown that students who feel more accepted, included and involved in their school are more likely to be engaged in classroom learning, in extracurricular activities, in interpersonal relationships, and in the wider school community (McMahon, Parnes, Keys, & Viola, 2008).

Recent years have seen a significant focus on inclusion, resulting in a wide range of policies and programs to support this agenda. Research indicates that inclusion policy is predominantly based on the assumption of an egalitarian community in which everyone is equally valued (Biklen, 2000; Cologon, 2013; Salmon, 2012). The action in response to this assumption is a policy focus on the removal of access barriers (a focus on supporting presence). However, without adapting the environment and teaching approaches to encourage and support participation of all children, simply removing barriers to entry is insufficient to ensure all students have comparable experiences, and does not account for the widespread stigmatisation of disability. As Salmon writes, 'Unless policy explicitly begins to address stigma, inclusion will continue to be interpreted narrowly as shared space only, thus leading to segregation and social isolation for disabled youth' (2012, p. 8).





Belonging and connection arises out of shared experiences and relationships with others as well as sharing spaces, and as such it is much more than just removing barriers to space and place. The following diagram demonstrates how important the expectations are which underpin inclusive education experiences, and the association between inclusion and belonging.



**Figure 1: (Salmon 2012, p. 5)**

When students with disability in Salmon’s study experienced inclusion as shared experiences, rather than jointly occupied spaces, the resulting relationships and feelings of belonging described were deeper and richer. A fundamental driver of this experience was an expectation of equality and action to address (and redress) stigma at the whole school level.

Students with disability have the same expectations of belonging as any other student. Exploring belonging and connection in school offers a fresh perspective on the lived experience of inclusion in school. This focus offers opportunities to look afresh at relationships and strategies to better support students, in order to ensure that schools also sustain the same expectations of belonging for kids with disability as for any child.



## Section 2 What gives students with disability a sense of belonging and connection at school?

Although belonging is quite a new concept in research, there is already a significant and growing body of literature which explores the experiences and conditions of belonging, connection, relationships and feelings about school for students with disability. However, it is difficult to directly compare studies on school belonging, as they use different methodologies and seek to measure different things — some looking to explore engagement, others to measure bullying, and friendship. For this paper, we found 83 studies and reviews which fall into a number of key areas:

- Belonging
- Connection
- Engagement in school (academic and social)
- Friendship (and difficulties with it) at school
- Bullying
- Exclusion
- Wellbeing at school (emotional and physical)

Together, this research tells a consistent story about what underpins belonging for students with disability. We can confidently say that sense of belonging and connection at school is multidimensional, reliant on the interaction of several key elements. Analysis of the existing research shows the most critical of these elements to be friendships, peer acceptance, being valued, capability and relationships with key adults at school.

### Friends

Making and maintaining friendships was the primary theme to emerge as critical to a sense of belonging in school for students with disability. It appears in many separate studies, and is featured strongly in the research which includes students' perspectives. For students, there are a range of friendship experiences, appearing as a strengthening bond, a protective feature, and also a tension and a strain.

Large scale studies from the UK and Norway offer differing views on the degree to which students with disability struggle with friendship. In two studies, Avramadis (2012) examined the friendships of primary school children with and without disability in England. Although it was found that these students were less popular than students without disability, they were

'equally likely to be members of the friendship clusters of the class and occupied similar levels of network centrality' as their non-disabled peers (2010, p. 413). In contrast, a large scale study from Norway found that students with learning disability and those with behaviour problems had a considerably more difficult time finding and keeping friends (Frostad & Pijl, 2007). These researchers found that students with special needs were less popular, had fewer friends, and participated less often as members of a sub-group. By 7<sup>th</sup> grade, 24% of the group were reported to have no friends.

Three studies from the US found that teenagers with cognitive disability and autism may have simpler notions of friendship than other teenagers, and that they may prioritise proximity and stability of friends and at times have less reciprocity in their friendships (Kuo, Orsmond, Cohn, & Coster, 2011; Matheson, Olsen, Weisner, & Dykens, 2007; Tipton, Christensen, & Blacher, 2013). A number of studies also note that skills for developing and keeping friendships are often learned at school (Foley et al., 2012; Prince, 2010).

Australian research with young people with disability highlights this range. A study with children with a physical disability or chronic illness found that one third reported happy and positive friendship networks during the transition from primary to high school. However, a further third of participants did not have a single friend at school. Importantly, for the children with friends, they felt these relationships helped them to be more mentally resilient to bullying and teasing, even if their friend wasn't physically present at the time (McMaugh, 2011). Another Australian study with young people with physical disability (De Vet et al., 2012) found that having both friends and an accessible territory in which to hang out together at school was important in building both social and spatial connections.

Salmon (2012) completed a study with teenagers with disability and their close friends about how they negotiated their friendship and their feelings about belonging. While all of these young people were engaged in rich and fulfilling relationships, they had all been through a period where segregation was imposed on them by their nondisabled peers or by the organisation of the education system (such as segregated lunch-rooms). Each of the teens described ways that they challenged the often stigmatising expectations that the wider school community had of their friendships. This included the expectation that their non or less-disabled friend had caring responsibilities; resisting stereotypes (such as being sacrificing of their own needs by being friends with person with disability); and developing friendships with other young people with disability and choosing to self-exclude from more public spaces, which felt self-affirming.

Some researchers interviewed students without disability about friendship with students with disability. Anderson, Balandin & Clendon interviewed the non-disabled friends of children who communicate via augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) and have cerebral palsy, to find out about their experience of friendship. The children described mutually beneficial friendships, through language such as 'he cares about me and I care about him' (2011, p. 82). Although the friendships had arisen spontaneously between the children through common interests, altruism, recognition and positive feedback were motivators for the children without disability to maintain the relationship.

The literature also captures young people's voices on why friendships are so important to them:

*The ones I have and the ones I find it quite strenuous to keep are really quite important, because I have so little anyway, I only have like one here that if I don't keep that one, I'll be alone again I suppose. (Jackie, 16, in Hoskin, 2010, p. 39).*

*Having someone become your friend [helps me belong] because you know every single day you come to school, you have someone to hang out with. (Leah, child participant, in Beyer, 2008, p. 76)*

*Important because if you're like bullied they can help you out of it. Yeah, my friends like helped me out of it... this boy kept on annoying me... my friends actually said something to him and then he like stopped. And me and the boy actually made friends and we're still friends. (Billy, 13, in Hoskin, 2010, p. 39).*

CDA member stories add weight to this research.

*[in primary school] I made good friends and participated in school productions, school idol, camps and interschool sport which unfortunately was compulsory. What was best for me was that I had a school which believes in every kid's right to an education.*

*My first year of high school has been okay. It hasn't been incredibly bad but it hasn't been like primary school. I have a couple of good mates.*

## Peer acceptance

There is limited evidence in research about progression from simple acceptance of a student with disability by other students into meaningful relationships between students in their school communities. The experience of CDA members is overwhelmingly that students and their peers struggle to bridge a gulf between accepting the presence of students with disability at school and valuing their membership as part of the school community.

Goodenow's pioneering research on belonging found that for early and mid-adolescents in particular (regardless of impairment), 'the need to belong and to have a legitimate and valued membership in a setting may take precedence over virtually all other concerns' (1993, p. 88). Being generally accepted by peers was found in several studies to be important to students with disability (Beyer, 2008; Hoskin, 2010; Prince & Hadwin, 2013). The results of these studies show a movement from exclusion towards more positive attitudes on the part of students without disability.

A recent Italian study of the social position and inherent sense of belonging of school students aged 8–11 (Nepi et al., 2013) found that while students without disability indicated positive attitudes, students with disability did not feel a respondent sense of belonging. They attributed this to a 'compassionate bias' on the part of higher achieving students.

Bunch and Valeo (2004) collected the views of peers of students with disability in Canada, finding that non-disabled high school students held a consistent view that students with

disability had friends, but that their friends were other students with disability, and their friendships were maintained in their own separate classroom or social space within the school. This study found that grouping and special treatment of students with disability acted as a barrier to relationships, that social and academic separation existed between students with and without disability, and that instances of friendship between students with and without disability were limited to early elementary school level. However, younger students who participated in the research who were in inclusive settings with their disabled peers claimed friendships, evidenced familiarity with their friends with disability outside the school setting as well, made distinctions between superficial or disadvantageous relationships and true friendships. Some students connected the inclusive model with greater opportunities for development of friendships.

The experiences of the families who contributed stories about the educational experiences of their children to CDA support this view. Relationships between students with and without disability in primary school were described many times in positive terms, often supported by effective leadership, teaching and support which set an expectation of inclusion for young children to follow. Relationships in high school were much less easy for young people to navigate. This connects to the more complex administrative, curriculum and organisational arrangements of high schools, but also to significantly different cultures. There is a smaller group of students in the research literature who report finding high school easier as they got older, and there was less reliance on active and imaginary play (Hoskin, 2010).

*It was a hard decision weighing up the positives and negatives that each school had to offer. The question was would our child with a disability feel supported, treated like his peers and cared for, and did we feel we could work with the staff to deal with issues when they arose? ... His experience has been so positive. He is part of the school community and is accepted and participates in all the activities alongside his peers. He has not experienced any bullying and the children have been wonderful at embracing him as part of the school community.*

## Feeling capable

The importance and status that comes with being good at things is, of course, well known to students with disability. Being seen as successful in their own eyes and those of others may be, however, more elusive. Several studies suggest that an element of belonging is feeling capable, either in a subject, academically or socially (Beyer, 2008; Foley et al., 2012).

Prince & Hadwin (2013) suggest that students with learning difficulties may find particular satisfaction in their performance in non-academic domains of school (such as sport and social interactions), and use this to develop their sense of identity and self-concept. Peer relations for all students are extremely important, but in the case of students with learning difficulties, they may assume even greater importance, and some young people may either inflate or place more emphasis on their peer relations in school to compensate against the threat to their self-esteem posed by their (lack of) academic status. This perspective supports the importance of a strong sense of belonging for students with disability in maintaining their self-perception as valued school members. It also highlights the significance of responding quickly and with vigour to threats to belonging and connection.

*Our daughter [has changed school]. She is actually bringing her homework home as it is achievable. She has a sense of pride about her school uniform as she has a senior's badge. She has blossomed in just a few months. She is so proud as the netball team are including her. She has never been included in sport before. She won a spelling competition and this trophy is shown to every person who enters our home. I have seen a young girl with limited confidence transform over just two school terms.*

## Feeling valued

Feeling valued includes being appreciated for the qualities that you bring to both individual friendships and the wider school community; having your strengths and positive qualities recognised at multiple levels; and having a constructive rather than a deficit view of your disability applied to both individual and whole school inclusion. These aspects were raised in several studies as key to a feeling of belonging (Avramidis, 2010; Davis & Watson, 2001; Foley et al., 2012; Morrison & Burgman, 2009).

Feeling valued connects and intersects with all of the other elements underpinning belonging and connection, but is worth including here separately because it sits underneath all of them. There are specific tensions which arise for students with disability around feeling valued which are particularly relevant in this paper.

Having overtures to friendship positively responded to, having capability recognised, and having a physical place in inclusive schools are areas in which students with disability can struggle to feel, and be, equally valued.

## Supportive relationships with key adults at school

Relations with teachers and other school staff have also been identified as key to belonging. Hoskin (2010) identifies not only the impact of positive relationships between young people, teachers and teacher's aides on belonging, but also the importance of adults trusting students to have the capability and agency to manage their social times and spaces with choice and autonomy wherever possible. Two other studies also raise this point, noting the experiences of students who had to spend lunchtimes with teaching assistants rather than friends, frequently in segregated environments or with children other than their own peer group (Connors & Stalker, 2006; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). Other research has found that a sense of belonging is enhanced through supportive interactions with key adults, which in turn may lead to students' increased satisfaction with school, confidence in performance at school, and engagement in school (McMahon et al., 2008).

*So much of a child's wellbeing at school depends on the quality of the leadership team. Where the principal leads by example, others follow. It was our daughter's primary school principal who made this comment, "We don't just have students with special needs at our school, every one of our students has special needs." She fostered a school community that accepts all disabilities. Our daughter grew in confidence in such an environment. It was heartening to hear one of the Grade sixers referring our daughter as just like one of them. We felt that her positive experiences at her primary school would enable her to meet her next educational challenge.*





## Section 3 What happens when students don't feel a sense of belonging and connection?

When belonging and connection are under threat in some way for students the impact can be very significant. As well as damage to relationships, also at risk is damage to the young person's sense of self, their self-esteem, self-confidence and resilience. As discussed above, for some young people with disability, these qualities are not strongly established and are easily damaged.

Too frequently, stories of school disconnection for students with disability involve exclusion from school due to either a mismatch of the student's support needs and the school resources, or problems in supporting the student with challenging behaviour. In this paper, we refer to disconnection in a much broader sense — to mean a range of ways that students with disability are not fully connected or engaged as members of their school community or their wider community.

A number of key areas were identified in the research which are particular sources of disconnection for students with disability. When school life is not going well for students in these domains, their sense of school belonging is likely to be less strong, and they may feel less emotionally and socially connected to their school life. These key areas are:

- Friendships are limited
- Students are lonely
- Spaces are controlled
- There are tensions in negotiating support relationships
- Students feel, and are, excluded
- Students' strengths aren't seen

### Friendships are limited

As detailed in the previous section of the paper, friendship is a key domain of belonging and connection for young people. The individual, systemic and structural barriers discussed earlier impact on friendships for children with disability, often affecting how easily they can make and keep friends. For young people with disability, making and maintaining school friendships and other relationships with peers can be a source of pleasure and pride, and also a source of stress and tension. For families, making decisions about the model of schooling which is believed will best enable the growth of friendships and supportive relationships is a difficult and complex process.

For school staff and leaders, providing the conditions under which students can flourish emotionally as well as academically is a critical consideration. As educators work on developing policy, curriculum and educational strategy, the research on belonging and connection tells us that the same level of attention is also needed for friendship, particularly for students who require emotional and social support.

The roles schools play can have a major influence in this area. High schools students in the UK talked about the limitations imposed on their friendships by an expectation on the part of teaching assistants and teachers that students with disability would prefer to socialise only with other students with disability (Hoskin, 2010). This perspective extended to other students, with research showing that high school students also formed views that students with disability had friends within their own segregated group, but that there was no 'cross over' into the wider student body, nor expectation of it (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). In this study, students from inclusive schools had more well developed friendships, although in some cases students with disability were 'known' rather than friends. Students without disability knew students with disability in other classes by name and are aware of their friendship status. They had valuable insights into the quality of friendships and knew when they are real or contrived. There was evidence of awareness of friendships in the larger community. These patterns were repeated at the secondary level in inclusive schools.

The precarious nature of friendship is mentioned in a number of studies by students — making and keeping friends is not a straightforward process for many students with disability. Having a small friendship network is also mentioned by students as a vulnerability (Hoskin, 2010). Many students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in this study had a maximum of one friend and were satisfied (Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2012). Indeed, for some students with disability (particularly ASD), perceived quality of friendship has been found to be more important than quantity, with one study finding that a lower number of friends did not seem to impact on feelings of loneliness.

*The gap between our daughter and the other children her age has become greater in terms of academic ability. She has struggled with making friends and this has been heart breaking. In class sizes of 32 children she became more and more lost. She has struggled with everything from homework to being included by peers. She was bullied continuously in her last year of school and this was reported to the Principal as a serious matter.*

## Students are lonely

When friendships are limited, and support for those students who need it is not forthcoming for them to make or keep friends, the risk of loneliness increases. As described above, research into school belonging shows that, from students' perspective, relationships with other students are of great importance to children and young people. When this component of belonging is not fulfilled for students, there are significant implications for their sense of school belonging and connection, and even school performance.

There are a number of studies about students with disability and loneliness. In their meta review, Pijl, Skaalvik and Skaalvik found that 'compared to their peers without disabilities in regular education, students with mild learning disabilities were less accepted, had fewer friends and felt more lonely' (2010, p. 61).

Reversi et al. (2007) explored loneliness in a large study with Italian students with and without disability. Students with disability were found to have higher self-rated loneliness levels than their non-disabled peers. Interestingly, students felt less alone when they were attending classes in inclusive high school settings with two or three other students with disability than when they were the only person with disability in the class.

A Belgian study with grade 7 students compared students with ASD, physical disability and those who were typically developing (Bossaert et al., 2012). The researchers investigated loneliness prevalence and friendship quantity and quality. Students with physical disability and non-disabled students reported experiencing similarly low levels of loneliness. Students with ASD reported overall levels of loneliness that were twice as high as the other groups. However the majority reported that they did not feel lonely at school.

Estell et al. explored loneliness over time, looking at the experiences of students in the US over a 3 year period. They found that although students with disability seem to find friends and be included in their groups, 'they both begin with and maintain significant deficits in how they are viewed by their peers beyond their group' (2008, p. 13). The connection between felt loneliness and treatment by peers is clear.

Heiman & Margalit completed a large study with students with learning disability in Israel, exploring loneliness, depression and social skills. They found that students with learning difficulties in self-contained classes of general schools exhibited a greater sense of loneliness, depression and poorer peer perception of social status during preadolescence than similar students in special schools. However, by the adolescent stage, these students scored no differently on these measures than fellow students without learning difficulties. In contrast, special education students 'experienced an intensified sense of loneliness during adolescence' (1998, p. 159).

## Spaces are controlled

Students in a number of studies refer to the impact on them of having their movement and relationships with others in school constrained by the preferences and administrative needs of staff (Hoskin, 2010; MacArthur, 2012; Salmon, 2012). This was particularly keenly felt at break times, when students gave several examples of the way spaces were used to isolate students with disability from other students. They talked about having to accompany their teaching aide to the class where her friend taught for the lunch break; all students with disability having to spend lunch times collectively in one room in order to receive support, but in doing so missing opportunities for engagement with their friends; and their friends not being allowed in to the 'disability' room at lunch breaks. Lara, who changed schools, said 'They wanted me to stay in room 10 cos they were over-protective but I wanted to be with my friends. It was very difficult. Here, room 57 is way better, my friends can hang out with me' (Hoskin, 2010, p. 33).

There is a clear association here with restrictive practices in schools. While many practices were not intended to be restrictive, the effect of them was to restrict the physical movement, social interaction and relationships of students (see also the section below on excluding). Students with disability who do not have the same range of choices or movement as other students are being treated differently, regardless of intent, and this was frequently received by them as stigmatising.

## There are tensions in negotiating support relationships

While acknowledging the helpful nature of support in academic and personal care domains, young people talk in a number of studies about tensions in negotiating social relationships when they have teacher's aides. The perception by other students that a student has already got someone with them, so they don't need or want further company; teacher's aides who do all the talking, or take over conversations between students; or who simply don't move back and let the young person be part of their peer group without an adult present are all mentioned by students with disability as actions which constrain their relationships with other students (Connors & Stalker, 2006; Lindsay & McPherson, 2012; MacArthur, Sharp, Kelly, & Gaffney, 2007).

Several CDA member stories identified the difficulty of negotiating support on behalf of students with high support needs, acknowledging that providing complex support was both difficult and appreciated, but that it needed to be done with sensitivity, particularly for teenagers who were expanding their social horizons.

*While some of the teacher-aides were helpful and provided appropriate educational support, interactions with others often resulted in unresolved personal conflict. 'Why do you have to choose to do I.T.?' complained one teacher-aide as she struggled to help her with information technology... The aides were unaware of her many specific needs related to her disability such as choking reflex because of her lack of oral coordination. They made little effort to help her to socialize and to make new friends. At lunchtime, her friends were asked to go away from the integration room as the aides wanted time to themselves. Her desire to make new friends at that school became an issue.*

## Students feel, and are, excluded

Actions, or failures to act, which result in students being excluded from activities or relationships in schools (or even from school altogether) exist at the peer, teacher and institutional levels. Each of these levels intersect and influence each other.

Children with physical disability, particularly motor difficulties, often felt excluded at primary school due to the active nature of young children's play. However, by adolescence, which places a greater emphasis on conversational and intellectual interaction, social exclusion decreases for many students with physical disability (Ytterhus, 2012), if appropriate social spaces could be accessed (Hoskin, 2010).

Lindsay and McPherson aimed to understand different forms of exclusion in the lives of students with disability in Canada (2012). They describe consequences for young people which are unanticipated by the school administration — for example, special accommodations such as sitting in a room alone in order to have extra time for an exam which have a positive aim, but can also result in a student feeling isolated and treated differently. Some examples concern indirect exclusion, such as a student with a communication impairment who was refused a button on his wheelchair to indicate he needed the bathroom, as the teacher felt concerned other children would misuse it and be distracted. Others are direct failures to accommodate the disability related needs of students, such as turning off communication aids. Both of these examples constitute abuse. One of the key findings of this study was that 'Although many of these instances of exclusion were unintentional, lacking opportunities for inclusion in activities



with peers can increase the likelihood of being bullied, because having friends can provide a buffer mechanism to bullying. Our findings indicated that unintentional forms of social exclusion often preceded more explicit forms of exclusion and bullying' (2012, p. 105).

Disruption and constantly changing settings also caused students to feel, and be, excluded. They experienced disruption daily between school and community, special education classrooms in mainstream schools, and between inclusive classes. This is reported in several studies as at times disconcerting, damaging to relationships and self-confidence and stigmatising to young people (Davis & Watson, 2001; de Vet et al., 2012; Díez, 2010). Some students and families also talk about the dislocation caused by going to school outside of their local community. Travel to and from school takes a long time, leaving students tired and sometimes stressed. Outside of school hours, students know few other kids in their local neighbourhoods, and going to the local park or shop, they are less likely to be an included community member and more likely to be seen as different.

*My 8 year old son used to spend up to four hours a day travelling to and from his school which was less than 10km away from our home. He is now attending his local primary school.*

*He is a valued member of his school community and now has much more time to play and hang out. No child should be stuck on a bus to get to school for four hours a day.*

Low expectations of students with disability held by teachers, primarily as a result of lack of training and expertise, feature in a number of studies. Students completing ‘make-work’, playing a computer game, spending time away from classroom bullies in ‘conflict avoidance training’, and sitting through lessons with no accommodation for learning disability are all represented as experiences of ostracism and exclusion (de Vet et al., 2012; Díez, 2010; MacArthur et al., 2007).

Exclusion which is institutional or teacher driven also has a further impact, in influencing the attitudes and behaviour of fellow students. Students’ attitudes and behaviour is a complex mix of what they see at home, what teachers and school leaders set as the expectation at school, and action and judgement based on their own lived experience. Where the student community see students with disability treated differently to the rest of the student body by teachers or principals, expectations of students are also lowered.

*Our son’s improving language skills, and increasing desire to socialise/ interact with children, saw us investigate a transition from special to mainstream after several years. What an extremely disheartening and disappointing path we endured. We sat through multiple interviews with school principals — undergoing interrogation about our son. This included discussions about what his problems were, how much extra was required to accommodate him, what influence he might have over other children, what limits there were on support in the classroom. There was also a reluctance or refusal to support him in the playground and depending on the school, external consultants (who would provide therapy) might or might not be welcome to see him at school. In addition his funding would be ‘pooled’ with other students with disability so support would “ebb & flow” as the pool allowed.*

*The school principal’s we spoke to never directly said “no” and were more than happy to ‘leave the decision to enrol entirely to us’. When you visit a school expecting to hear how it will help your child, we were hardly encouraged to enrol after such interrogation and negativity. We were looking (naively perhaps) for an environment of opportunity and encouragement.*

## Students’ strengths aren’t seen

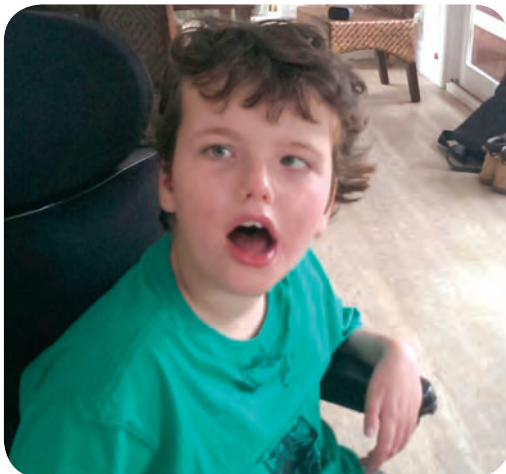
When students’ sense of belonging in school is not strong, they feel that few people see them as capable or worthwhile members of the school community (MacArthur et al., 2007; Prince, 2010). They are more likely to be viewed through the lens of disability which is seen purely as an impairment — as the ‘Down’s girl’ or the ‘CP boy’ rather than for the qualities and skills they bring to the school. A student in a study by Díez puts it very well in saying ‘People knew me for my learning disability, just that about me, nothing else’ (2010, p. 168).

The impact of a deficit view of students with disability is pervasive and significant. It features strongly in families’ stories of seeking funding, and appealing the outcomes of funding allocations. In order to prove need for funded support at school, families must paint a picture of their child which is based on what they can’t do, rather than on their preferences, skills and

qualities. Many families also write about interviews with school principals in the mainstream school sector who actively discouraged them from enrolling their child, and who spoke in very negative tones about them.

*The assistant principal tells us there is no funding for students like our son and that we have to muddle through until there is significant deterioration in his performance and well-being. Then he might qualify. I think this is needlessly cruel. He knows he is different and every day is very stressful for him. We try our best to plug gaps with extra tuition. We also pay privately for an aide for 3 lunchtimes per week to avoid the previous episodes of bullying, teasing and isolation. This is a great stress financially but we believe it is the minimum requirement for his current needs.*

A deficit approach is very stressful for students, and for families, and this connects directly to belonging. McMahon et al. (2008) found that if students reported more stressors in their lives, they were likely to have a weaker sense of belonging, and more negative outcomes. If they had more social resources, they were more likely to feel a stronger sense of belonging and to have more positive social and academic outcomes.







## Section 4 How does bullying impact on a felt sense of belonging and connection?

The first section of this paper has shown that a number of key elements are particularly important to school students with disability in helping them to feel a sense of belonging and connection in their school communities. These are friendships, acceptance by peers, feeling valued, capability, and having a supportive relationship with a key adult(s) in the school. Bullying is a particularly intractable problem for many students with disability, and directly affects the relationships which are key to how students feel about the way that they belong in their school communities. In this next part of paper, we explore the impact of bullying on students' felt sense of belonging and connection.

### What do we know about bullying and students with disability?

It is well established in the research literature that children with disability (regardless of age, educational setting, gender or type of disability) experience more school bullying than peers without disability. In the last decade, there has been enormous research growth in this area and in the last six years alone over 40 studies on bullying of students with disability have been published. Research which directly connects bullying and belonging is much more limited.

In their study drawing together literature on school belongingness and inclusion, Prince & Hadwin (2013) highlight that children with disability (regardless of age or gender) generally experience more bullying than other children. Additionally, children (especially boys) attending special schools report a consistently higher rate of in-school bullying (see Prince & Hadwin, 2013), and far more bullying outside of school by children from mainstream schools and neighbourhood peers (Norwich & Kelly, 2004). Further, though students in both systems advocated for peers with disability, advocacy was more frequent and vigorous in inclusive settings (Bunch & Valeo, 2004).

Although all children with disability experience more bullying than peers without disability, the type of disability students have appears to affect the prevalence or 'risk.' In general, those with more pronounced intellectual or social difficulties were less socially accepted by peers and less able to make friends (Bossaert et al., 2012; Frostad & Pijl, 2007; Kloosterman, Kelley, Craig, Parker, & Javier, 2013; Nowicki, 2006; Pijl et al., 2010; Rowley et al., 2012; Ytterhus, 2012). For instance, a number of studies (see Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Kloosterman et al., 2013; Rowley et al., 2012) note that pupils with ASD reported higher frequency of bullying than those with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, or those with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

*[After a protracted battle over our son's distress at school] They suggested that removing him from school would result in academic failure and our concern about his happiness was misplaced as "he is destined to be unhappy, he is autistic".*

Frederickson et al. (2007) used the belonging scale to assess peer group inclusion, including social behaviour, bullying and feelings of belonging at school. Their research showed that students who had transferred from a special school to mainstream schools felt an equal sense of belonging to their non-disabled peers, but that students with special educational needs who were already in the mainstream schools had a less strong sense of belonging. This difference may be due to students reporting feeling less supported, less included by their peers, and less likely to be accepted for work and play activities by peers. Both existing and transferring students with disability reported higher levels of peer bullying than students without disability.

A small number of studies (e.g. Christensen, Fraynt, Neece, & Baker, 2012; VandeKemp, 2013) have found that although children with disability are bullied more often, this bullying was no more severe or chronic than the bullying experiences of typically developing peers. Nevertheless, this should not distract from the substantial body of research documenting the frequency or severity of bullying for individual children.

Research with family members draws out more extreme examples of bullying and abuse, more chronic harm, and more significant impact on the mental and emotional health of young people. Cappadocia et al. (2012) investigated bullying among students with ASD by surveying parents. 77% of parents reported their child had been bullied within the last month — 30% two or more times per week. In over half of the reports, the victimisation had continued for over one year. Parents felt this harm related directly to mental health problems in their child, including anxiety, hyperactivity, self-injurious and stereotypic behaviour and over sensitivity. This study found that ‘bullying experiences are very common among children with ASD, with victimisation rates that are twice as high as those found in the general population’ (2012, p. 274). A similar study by Carter (2009) found that nearly 65% of parents of children with Asperger’s reported their children had been victimised by their peers in some way within the past year. Nearly half were afraid of their peers, and had been hit by them.

A number of studies link the victimization of students with disability with them bullying others. This is attributed to social skills deficits, self-control, and frustration by one group of researchers, while another reflects on the connection between being bullied and engaging in bullying behaviour (B. B. Carter & Spencer, 2006; Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012). In contrast, Bourke and Burgman (2010) point to the experience of inclusion as likely to increase empathy through shared understanding, and see a valuable role for students with disability who have been bullied in educating other children about bullying prevention.

Farmer et al. (2012) conducted a large study in the US looking at bullying involvement and school adjustment (including school belonging) for rural students with and without disability. They categorize bullying involvement as either being a bully, a victim or both (bully-victim). Their results indicate that for all students (with and without disability) involvement in bullying as a victim or a bully-victim is linked to a lower sense of school belonging. Both boys and girls who received special education services were more likely than nondisabled students to be victims and bully-victims. Boys were 2.4 times as likely to be bullied, and three times as likely to be bully/victims. Girls were 3.9 times as likely to be bullied, and 4.8 times as likely to be bully/victims. Therefore, given their increased involvement in bullying, students with disability are also likely to have a lower sense of school belonging.

## What does this mean for belonging and connection?

A focus on improving the conditions for belonging and connection for students with disability will necessarily include focusing on the *relationships* between students and their peers within the school and the wider community, and also with other adults in the school.

Returning to the belonging scale from the beginning of the paper, we can see that bullying disturbs these domains:

- Feeling happy (and thinking that people like you would be happy here)
- Feeling capable
- Thinking teachers like you (and people like you)
- Feeling like you should be at this school
- Feeling there is an adult you can talk to about a problem
- Feeling people here are friendly to you
- Not feeling different
- Feeling people here like you the way you are

As it is for all students, bullying is a threat to the quality and dynamics of relationships between students with disability and other people in their school world — friends, potential friends, peers, bystanders, teachers, school leaders, support staff and families of students. It not only damages relations between the student and the person engaged in the bullying interaction, but also disrupts opportunities for belonging and connection by dislodging a sense of security and trust, confidence, and sense of self. Further, if not responded to effectively and with vigour, negative messages about the place and respect entitled to children with disability are sent to non-disabled students which impact significantly on the future inclusion of people with disability.

It is important that responses to bullying and negative interpersonal interactions which involve students with disability go beyond punishment for the incident(s), and look to how the motivation of the bully affects a felt sense of belonging and connection for students who may find it difficult to initiate and sustain relationships without some support.



STOP

Bullying.

# Section 5 What helps to build belonging and connection for students with disability in schools?

Students who are struggling to feel a sense of belonging and connection to their school community may have experienced active mistreatment from others, but this is not necessarily the case. The absence of bullying does not lead directly to positive connections for all students to create, facilitate and sometimes maintain links and relationships with others.

This section of the paper explores some of the factors which build a felt sense of belonging and connection for students with disability and help them to feel a valued member of their school community.

There are multiple examples of strategies and practices in schools which work to boost and sustain a felt sense of belonging and connection for students. Some of these are detailed in this section of the paper. They have been drawn from the research, the stories of CDA members, and CDA's wider body of work. They share a number of core characteristics about the way that they support belonging and connection — these approaches are multidimensional, respectful, capacity building and strengths-based.

The strategies, initiatives and relationships laid out here are in three tiers — at the personal; the systemic; and the school community levels.

## Building belonging and connection at the personal level

### The protective aspect of connection

Existing evidence shows that having a strong network of friends is protective against threats to a felt sense of belonging and connection — as expressed by one boy, having friends gives a 'wall of support' (Bourke & Burgman, 2010). If children are connected, they are less likely to be exposed to harm such as chronic bullying, and more likely to tell someone about harm in their lives (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Foley et al., 2012).

These connections operate at multiple levels — friendships, friendly relations with peers, other students who are prepared to act in support of students with support needs, support staff who are well trained and themselves supported, and teaching staff and school leaders who both set expectations and provide guidance to the school community about how to make and sustain meaningful relationships.

### Helping kids to help themselves

Helping students to help themselves through tough times is shown in the research to be seen by some students as an important way to address loneliness — a significant factor impacting on a felt sense of belonging and connection. Pavri & Monda-Amaya (2000) asked the students in their study to rate intervention strategies to address loneliness. Students rated self-initiated strategies (such as engaging in a solitary activity or actively seeking a playmate) as most useful followed by

peer-initiated, and then closely followed by teacher-initiated. “This belief in their intrinsic ability to help themselves has implications for teachers, who can use these perceptions as the starting point to help their students develop self-advocacy and self-determination skills” (p. 29).

The way students talk about how their teachers respond to complaints about the way they are treated by other students gives an important insight into practices that help them to feel a solid sense of belonging and connection. Students with disability have talked in research about definite positive and negative views about how their school deals with bullying. They rate teachers highly who listen and take action when someone was being bullied, and talk about their disappointment when teachers do not act with vigour when they ask them for help in dealing with negative peer interaction, including bullying and ‘being rude’. They perceive teachers to frequently respond by saying to both parties ‘just be nice’ or ‘say sorry’, failing to resolve the situation in their eyes (Bourke & Burgman, 2010; Pryce & Frederickson, 2013).

Being heard about things that go wrong is important, but it is equally important that students with disability have a voice in daily school life that is equivalent in volume and significance to other students. For some students this is through the usual channels — assemblies, classroom discussions, student representative councils and so on. For others, more creative strategies are needed to ensure that their contributions to school life are valued, for example, making photo stories with students ipads to share their insights and ideas with others

The sphere of influence of children is small, and of children with disability smaller still. While it is critical that the voice, and influence, of students with disability is maximized, it is also important that this happens within a broader environment of capacity building and respect for diversity which increases the likelihood that their contributions will be positively received.

Recommendation one recognizes the importance of all children learning about the impact of stigma, and alternative positive ways to engage:

**Recommendation one**—Anti-bullying programs be mandated to include modules that address stigma and bullying related to students with disability, the impact of bullying and strategies to promote peer inclusion and school practices that create peer and adult connections for students with disability.

### Teaching pro-social behaviour and building capability

Opportunities to demonstrate capability and a valued role within the school community are important, and it is equally important that these are made meaningful, not token.

Given the importance of social skills and friendship highlighted in many earlier studies, providing students with disability ample opportunities to learn, practice, and validate age-appropriate social skills in a safe environment may be an important component of developing the skills to make the relationships that underpin a felt sense of belonging and connection. Providing structured opportunities for group and individual social interactions allows students to develop social skills which will assist them into relationship development in school and other life domains, and also stands them in good stead with bullying and harm prevention. The link here between harm prevention and building a felt sense of belonging and connection is clear, where the emphasis is on the development of the social and relational skills which support the friendship and peer relationships which research consistently finds protective against chronic mistreatment (Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012).



## Building belonging and connection at the systemic level

### Changing the system, not the student

Practical actions and inclusive principles which together build a school culture which supports all students is at the heart of inclusive education practice. Making adjustments in classrooms and to curriculum, nuancing social support in the playground, and altering the way support is provided to students with additional learning needs are examples of changes made around students to better adapt the school environment to their needs, rather than expecting the student to make fundamental changes to their identity. Schools widely recognised for their successes in inclusion take a multi-layered approach to the creation of inclusive environments, focusing concurrently on whole-school, social, and curriculum strategies. The focus for change is not the child with disability, but the whole school community.

In a study by MacArthur et al., two schools described the way in which they responded to the stigma children attached the role of special education aide by revising the role to incorporate support for the classroom. Teacher aides are described as attached to the classroom, not the child (although their duties relate to particular children), and children come to the office independently rather than being called out of class. Students move in and out of the classroom for all sorts of reasons, and for students with disability, it is no different to any other student (MacArthur et al., 2007).

Positive attitudes and behaviours of teachers and teacher aides to (and about) students with disability are a critical factor in supporting their felt sense of belonging and connection. In one study about bullying at school, the children often didn't feel able to tell their teachers about being bullied sometimes due to lack of understanding / negative attitudes from the teacher,

which made it feel as though it was their fault. Sometimes they felt embarrassed or ashamed and lacking in self-confidence and peer support. Often they wouldn't tell their parents for a long time, sometimes years (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). The impact of attitudes and behaviour of teaching staff is significant:

*During [my daughter's] education years we experienced mainly pleasant, caring and dedicated teachers. Sadly there were some that we felt thought she did not belong and treated her accordingly. We had bad experiences with two teachers in her education years — one in primary and one in high-school. Whilst it was only two it has left unpleasant memories that are hard to forget... More training must be given so that all teachers accept children with disability as it only takes a single bad experience to leave everlasting scars.*

The role of teachers in influencing peer relations is of course vital. Peer relationships are a key factor in feelings of belonging and connection. Evidence from research studies that peer preparation by teachers who take a strengths based approach to disability (explaining the impact of the student's disability, but presenting them as a whole person) can be effective in supporting a climate in which students with disability receive better empathic support when they arrive at a school, and receive better social support within the classroom and during playground activities (Frederickson, 2010; Frederickson et al., 2007; Paliokosta & Blandford, 2010)

### **Understanding complexity, and how to meet both needs and goals**

The skill level of teachers and aides in supporting students' academic development, alongside their social development, physical, communication and language development is an important fulcrum both in terms of education quality, but also in terms of how students feel about their schooling. When school work is meaningful, achievable but still challenging; attention is paid to the social domains of school; and students are included thoughtfully in physical education and extracurricular activities, there are many more 'touch points' where they are likely to feel capable or a sense of camaraderie with a fellow student — indicators of an increased felt sense of belonging and connection.

A consistent picture emerges from this research of students with socially complex needs who may be particularly isolated (Frederickson et al., 2007; Norwich & Kelly, 2004). They have limited funded support and are in mainstream schooling, and receive little additional assistance for academic or social support at school. This is strongly reinforced by the CDA member stories, of which a significant number mention ways in which the school system does not recognise that their children are not coping.

*Our son has complex needs, being diagnosed with cerebral palsy, autism and ADHD. His invisible disabilities are his greatest challenges: his autism, severe anxiety, and language and learning difficulties. He started school in a wheelchair at a large mainstream regional school, after major leg surgery. During this time he was well supported. Unfortunately when he started walking, he largely lost his break time support, which is when he most needed it because of his social difficulties. He was bullied and repeatedly setup, and developed severe school refusal by the end of Year 1. It would take 2 hours to coax him to school in the mornings.*



A number of studies show that children with strong academic skills but who also need support at school (particularly students with ASD) report higher rates of bullying than other students with disability (Frederickson et al., 2007; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Rowley et al., 2012). There are a number of reasons attributed — these students may be more attuned to subtle bullying and peer exclusion, more able to tell a trusted adult, have more social interaction than children with higher support needs, and the studies include a significant proportion of students with ASD, who may struggle particularly with social interaction.

The impact of school leadership and culture in leading teacher practice is vital. In an environment where resource constraints and lack of funding to support students with disability are common, creativity, collaboration and a visible commitment to inclusion are essential. Limitations such as a paucity of tertiary education about teaching students with additional learning needs, and lack of time for planning and developing effective resources are commonly cited as combining to make meeting the needs of students challenging for many teachers and aides. We do not intend to diminish these factors or to cast doubt on their professionalism or hard work. However, the result of a lack of training and resources can be a deficit approach to students with disability, where a focus is on meeting their disability related needs, without also supporting young people to identify and build on their strengths and talents and to aspire to goals and dreams.

Teachers and other professionals in schools who recognise and respond to the complex needs of some students help to build their felt sense of belonging and connection through the development of supportive relationships, the creation of safe spaces, instilling a sense of capability, and facilitating the growth of peer social networks.

Recommendation two recognises the importance of leadership in building belonging and connection in school communities:

**Recommendation two**—Leadership training modules for principals and other school leaders be expanded to contain elements that cover the importance of belonging and connection for students with disability, and cover practice examples of how they can be embedded in school practice. In addition, the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the National Disability Strategy be added to the training program on the Disability Standards for Education for school leaders to add a social context to this training.

## Building belonging and connection at the school community level

### Funding with broader accountabilities for inclusion

Forthcoming changes to the way that additional support for students with disability is funded will involve the application of a disability loading, with funding for each child to help them access the curriculum. While a critical component to education, there is a need to ensure that a focus on individualised access to curriculum support does not overlook the importance of building belonging and connection and funding the capacity to build this into systemic expectations. It is not students with disability who need to change in order to make their schools more inclusive, but the people and structures around them. Strategies for change need to be targeted at people other than those who are receiving funds.

Individual support is an important aspect of school, and clearly a high priority for families. Many parents talked about the importance of funding as a lever for belonging and connection. In the first instance, getting enough funding is important for supporting students with high support needs effectively. Second, being able to make use of funding in the school of your choice would allow students with disability and their families far more capacity to select their school based on factors which build a sense of belonging and connection to school and community. These include proximity to home, how welcoming the school feels, the quality of leadership, and being able to send all kids in the family to the same school, as well as the programs and support available.

Funding is also needed for systemic action and capacity building across schools. There are a number of ways that funding systems can influence inclusion to support belonging and connection. Many students with disability are ineligible for additional funding, and still require support. The receptiveness to friendship and supportive peer relations by the wider student community is critical for an inclusive school. The skills and attitudes of the whole school staff are vital. Accountability for creating inclusive schools and for meeting leadership benchmarks could be built into principals role requirements.

Recommendation three addresses the importance of the forthcoming funding system incorporating social and emotional learning for all students:

**Recommendation three**—For the purpose of the establishment of the funding model for the loading for students with disability in 2014, the Standing Committee on School Education and Early Childhood (SCEEC) adopt a definition of inclusive education that embraces belonging and connection as well focusing on learning, school culture and leadership. This is important to ensure that the design of the funding system includes expectations for social as well as academic inclusion in schools.

*When our son began his education there was no one in the Department of Education to provide us with guidance or assistance with choosing a school for him or about the services that we could expect would be provided. We went to many schools and spoke to many principals. Eventually we were told his education direction should be determined by his disability and that the only school for him was a special school for children with physical disabilities. Once at that school we were not told anything about how support services would be provided for him, how the school obtained funding based on the extent of his disability or how that funding is used to provide services. Not only was this not transparent but the information we were given was quite misleading.*

### **Building social relationships, social capital, and social responsibility**

Building a stronger school community through whole school activity rather than focusing on a small group has been found to be more likely to encourage friendships and social acceptance among the wider peer group, and so may be the most effective intervention in building a felt sense of belonging and connection (Pryce & Frederickson, 2013; Raskauskas & Modell, 2011; Savage, 2005). The creation and sustenance of school cultures which are appreciative

of diversity, celebrate a wide range of contributions, and actively build connections between students are particularly important to students with disability.

*Our son has a severe disability and moved from a day care centre to his local primary school under a trial program. The region provided a teacher and aide and the community fixed up the school's vacant residence. Over the next 6 months all of the children were fully involved in regular classes. This was an initiative of the teachers. Our son was the last to move into a regular class.*

*He moved on to the secondary college. Provided with the means to communicate and support he was able to fully participate in classes on the same topics as other children. My wife and I were fully involved at every stage through an integration support group. He completed year 12 successfully.*

*The things that made this work were many. It was not just our personal involvement but that the state government had set up a process that enabled all participants to work in partnership [no longer funded].*

The importance of a trust culture in supporting a sense of belonging and connection is foundational. Through developing trusting relationships, teaching pro-social behaviours, building capability, and fostering autonomy in all students, a stronger felt sense of belonging and connection for students with disability may develop (Beyer, 2008). Of further interest is research which identifies the need for this trust culture to be grounded in relationships which grow from regular activity which happens often enough, and meaningfully enough, that it is not token (Avramidis, 2010; Saylor & Leach, 2009).



## Taking a multi-dimensional response to social inclusion

For school leaders, a series of strategies and actions work towards building belonging and connection for students with disability. These include instilling a positive culture and staff selection/management, leading the daily curriculum delivery, and guiding choice of instructional strategies and activities that encourage positive social interaction. These particular actions sit alongside ‘big picture’ approaches to increasing social responsibility in the whole school community.

Numerous studies point out the need for a whole-school approach to school belonging and social inclusion for all students (Prince & Hadwin, 2013; Pryce & Frederickson, 2013; Raskauskas & Modell, 2011; VandeKemp, 2013). In schools which reported success in reducing bullying behaviour, a strong focus on social responsibility was taken by the whole school as a core foundational skill for all students (VandeKemp, 2013). In schools which were engaged with anti-bullying initiatives, a whole school approach was identified as necessary to provide a foundation for individual teachers to be able to work with individual students within a culture of expectation.

Developing an expectation of belonging and connection as a key outcome of education practice is important for schools. Friendship, respect, valuing others, acknowledging the capability of others, and relationships with trusted adults are core to student’s understandings of feeling like they belong in their schools. Expecting this for all students gives added meaning to broad concepts such as social inclusion and social responsibility.

The influential role of schools in shaping experiences and expectations of students, and families, in the wider community is also noteworthy. The developmental learning of students about inclusion can be taken forward both into their family life, other community domains, and their adult careers.

*Our decision to send Darryl to [another] school has proved to be very successful. Their approach has been VERY different. They believe in helping all children, regardless of funding, because if the children are settled, the class is settled and everyone benefits. **All** the staff are aware of my son’s support needs. It is a smaller school, and they have been very accommodating. The strategies we fought so hard to get established at his previous school are automatic at the new one. For the first time in two years, my son waves goodbye happily and I no longer have to wait with him in the playground.*

Recommendation four addresses the need for changes in the level and strength of social connection of students with disability to be captured with improved collection of data:

**Recommendation four**—That social connection of students with disability in schools be considered to be an essential part of any public reporting of school performance in future.

## Valuing the roles of families, friends and people outside of school

Taking a team approach to the education of students with disability was strongly supported by families who contributed to this paper. Using the expertise, commitment and support of parents and extended family members allows for students who are supported by engaged families to benefit from a partnership approach between home and school which builds their capability and confidence, develops skills and relationships, and helps ease transitions.

Home and community factors can influence students resilience to loneliness at school, although not necessarily facilitate their connection to school. One study reported that students with high feelings of belonging within the nuclear family were protected from struggling with high levels of loneliness at school (Baskin et al., cited in VandellKemp, 2013).

*We have been at the independent school for 3 full years and been delighted. They have a dedicated education support unit, but more importantly they always welcome us into the classroom as parents, and the teacher and assistants are always keen to draw on our experience of 'what works' with our boy. Of course, what works will vary with time, but they treat us as fellow experts in the education of our child, rather than as obstacles to getting their job done.*





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# Section 6 Broadening understanding of inclusion

Schools have fundamental obligations to address the belonging elements of inclusion. At international, national and state levels, human rights and policy instruments clearly lay out the expectation that children and young people with disability should have an inclusive education.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) both detail the rights of children with disability to education which develops their social and emotional capacity, in addition to a focus on curriculum learning. The UNCRPD states:

## Article 24 — Education

States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

- (a) The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- (b) The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
- (c) Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society (UNCRPD, 2006, p. 16).

The National Disability Strategy, which articulates how all governments will meet their obligations under the UNCRPD, identifies education as one of six key outcome areas for action. By 2020, the aim of the strategy is that 'People with disability achieve their full potential through their participation in an inclusive high quality education system that is responsive to their needs' (COAG, 2010, p. 53). Underpinning this aim are principles which recognise that society's response to people with disability is often more disabling than the disability itself, and concerted action is needed to address and remove barriers to participation in a range of critical areas.

The National Disability Standards for Education, enacted in 2005, benchmark the non-discrimination obligations of schools to ensure that students with disability are able to access and participate in education.

These are framework documents that all reference participation in education for children with disability alongside their peers. Implementing their key principles needs to include all aspects of school participation, including learning, constructive school relationships and safeguarding against bullying and stigma.

## How does belonging and connection fit in to the policy agenda?

Feeling a strong sense of belonging and connection in school is not an optional extra in school provision, an additional component to curriculum inclusion or a particular requirement of disability policy. It meets a fundamental human need for all students. Finding ways to ensure that students with disability feel a robust sense of belonging and connection needs to be embedded into the practice of schools as part of their role in supporting all students to feel like they belong and are important in their school. It is a core expectation of all students, and students with disability are no different.

If we do not address belonging and connection meaningfully in schools, students with disability will experience parallel pathways through education. The relationships of students in schools will not be full and rich, diverse strengths and gifts will go unappreciated, and fundamental building blocks for inclusion will be unrealised to that of their peers.

Exploring the conditions that underpin a felt sense of belonging and connection in school for students with disability uncovers a series of facilitators and barriers. The relationships and interactions that may support young people to feel sustained and supported in their school communities include:

- Having friends
- Acceptance by peers
- Feeling capable
- Feeling valued
- Having a trusted adult at school

When belonging and connection feels absent or under threat in young people's school lives, another series of relational things are happening. These include that:

- Friendships are limited
- Students are lonely
- Spaces are controlled
- There are tensions in negotiating support relationships
- Students feel, and are, excluded
- Students' strengths aren't seen

Approaching the education of students with disability in their schools through the lens of belonging and connection provides another way to think about inclusion. This paper demonstrates that physical presence in classrooms and schools does not in and of itself drive inclusion. Relationships and engagement between students, between students and teachers, and between students and others in the school community are fundamental to inclusion, and need to be better understood by everyone working, or being educated, in schools.



In the best cases, schools have adopted whole-school initiatives which create an inclusive, welcoming and receptive culture as a baseline. In these cases, staffing, learning approaches, and leadership expectations are all geared to including all students as needed, and a firm foundation for a felt sense of belonging and connection is laid. Tolerance of bullying and mistreatment is low, and strategies to promote the growth of positive relationships and peer respect are active. Within this supportive framework, students can be valued and engaged members of the school community.

The positive stories of students and families shared in this paper are unfortunately countered by many experiences of stigma and discrimination in school. Poor quality education provision, exclusion, low expectations and unaddressed bullying combine to make school an unhappy and lonely place for too many students with disability. This impacts profoundly in the lives of young people with disability, threatening their sense of belonging and connection to their school communities, and also their self-confidence and self-esteem. It also affects their families, their friends and their communities. More broadly, the ways in which students with disability experience school life impact on their whole school community. When all students are valued and supported, strong messages are sent to the whole school community about respect for diversity. When some students are treated unequally, a space opens up which allows poor treatment of those students — friendlessness, restrictive practices and ill-checked bullying. This would not be tolerated for other students and it diminishes the whole school community.

Prince and Hadwin write that ‘An important aspect of inclusion is to engender a sense of community and belonging due to its functional importance for successful learning and general well-being’ (2013, p. 240). A body of research and policy from the UK recognises the need to better measure the effectiveness of education for students with disability across three domains — educational attainment, gains in self-esteem and improved social relationships of students with special educational needs (Frederickson et al., 2007). This movement towards including self-concept and relationships in school measurement suggests that belonging and connection may also be a fruitful avenue to explore in progressing the *effectiveness* of inclusion. Its focus on considering the impact and effect of inclusion from the perspective of students with disability themselves is particularly attractive. Additionally, the concept of belonging and connection may address concerns of family members about the depth and strength of the relationships their child has at schools — how accepted and welcomed they are in school.

Building and sustaining a sense of belonging and connection for students with disability in school has benefits for everyone involved in schools. Students with disability, of course, have much to gain — to feel a valued member of their school community, engaged and befriended, connected to others in meaningful ways. Their peers have the opportunity to also be befriended, and to develop an inclusive understanding of diversity which they take forward into their adult lives. Teachers and school leaders, while they have curriculum and policy responsibilities, are also a vital part of the social ‘glue’ in forming and maintaining these important relationships. Finally, whole school communities benefit from celebrating and respecting a wide range of contributions, and from setting high and clear expectations on the whole student body around inclusion of students with disability.



# Summary of CDA policy recommendations

This paper has identified a series of factors which help support and sustain a sense of belonging and connection for students with disability. In the current landscape, attention and resources need to be directed to ensuring that these are firmly in place in all schools, and that all children benefit from capacity building and strengths-based approaches to education — at the level of the individual student, the school structure, and the school community.

To give belonging and connection practical expression in Australian education practice, the following recommendations are made:

## 1. Addressing stigma

Recommendation one recognizes the importance of all children learning about the impact of stigma, and alternative positive ways to engage:

Anti-bullying programs be mandated to include modules that address stigma and bullying related to students with disability, the impact of bullying and strategies to promote peer inclusion and school practices that create peer and adult connections for students with disability.

## 2. Supporting leadership development

Recommendation two recognises the importance of leadership in building belonging and connection in school communities:

Leadership training modules for principals and other school leaders be expanded to contain elements that cover the importance of belonging and connection for students with disability, and cover practice examples of how they can be embedded in school practice. In addition, the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the National Disability Strategy be added to the training program on the Disability Standards for Education for school leaders to add a social context to this training.

## 3. Funding

Recommendation three addresses the importance of the forthcoming funding system incorporating social and emotional learning for all students:

For the purpose of the establishment of the loading for students with disability in 2014, the Standing Committee on School Education and Early Childhood (SCEEC) adopt a definition of inclusive education that embraces belonging and connection as well focusing on learning, school culture and leadership. This is important to ensure that the design of the funding system includes expectations for social as well as academic inclusion in schools.

## 4. Data collection

Recommendation four addresses the need for changes in the level and strength of social connection of students with disability to be captured with improved collection of data.

That social connection of students with disability in schools be considered to be an essential part of any public reporting of school performance in future.



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