

The power of personal connection in achieving inclusion: Youth perception of students with disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Objectives This study aims to investigate a fundamental factor underlying school inclusion of students with disabilities (SWD)—personal connection. Specifically, the study explores the effects of youth participants' personal connections with people with disabilities (PWD) on their perceptions of SWD.

Methods This pilot-study design gathered preliminary data on youth perceptions. 54 participants between the ages of 14 and 24 completed an internet-based survey. Student t-tests were used to determine whether significant differences were present between participants who have a personal connection with PWD and participants who do not.

Results Significant differences in participants' perceptions of matters related to students with disabilities were found between the group of participants who have a personal connection with PWD and those who do not, indicating that personal connections have a direct and significant impact on participants' perceptions.

Conclusion Achieving inclusion of SWD requires a school environment that fosters personal connections. To gain youth's support in advancing inclusion, schools, parents, and all stakeholders need to shift their focus to efforts that enable personal connections in school communities.

Keywords students with disabilities, inclusion, personal connection, youth perception, DEI, Sustainable Development

Highlights

- This is a youth-led original research. Youth researchers took all initiatives and made all decisions throughout the entire research process.
- With a sharp focus on connection, the youth researchers were able to steer the study away from the vicious cycle of competition among those who strive to advance inclusion. As the study pointed out, inclusion is *not* a zero-sum game.
- The methodological value of this study lies in its investigation of youth perceptions, which is imperative understanding the attitudes and behaviors of future generations.

address and support the institutions in creating change. However, even with DEI professionals leading important conversations, many individuals remain concerned about the true implementation of DEI practices into the preexisting systems of practice (Weiner, 2022). In school environments, youth experience longing for change and hope for a more inclusive future. Students' lived experiences on campus contribute to a school's inclusive culture and environment, and their perspectives and voices should be valued and heard on the inclusion of students with disabilities. The opinions held by the student body are equally as important as the work done by the DEI directors on campus. Thus, our paper focuses on the youth perspective of inclusion on campus and seeks to understand how one's personal



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, both youth and adults have been participating in conversations concerning the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) of systems implemented across the United States. In response to such conversations, many institutions, such as schools and government agencies, have hired DEI directors to

connections with PWD impacts their perception of school inclusion for SWD. Specifically, we ask the following question: To what extent do youth's personal connections with PWD affect their perceptions of:

- (1) school inclusion of SWD,
- (2) social and academic struggles of SWD,
- (3) fair treatment of SWD?

LITERATURE REVIEW

School inclusion of SWD

While considerable research has been done on the inclusion of educational settings, a precisely designed definition of the term does not exist (Kruse et al., 2018). Inclusion became an emerging topic of conversation within educational settings beginning in the 1990s, following the enactment of civil rights legislation that ensured equal access to the full range of opportunities for children on the autism spectrum. Although the term is not defined clearly, literature points to inclusion as a journey—a more dynamic process—rather than a static condition, or destination (Boyle et al., 2012).

In the past, inclusion was not valued. Out of concern for SWD and their inability to keep up with students without disabilities led to the creation of separation practices, in which students characterized as “special” would be sent to receive a “special education” at a separate school. Once students were enrolled in a special school, few returned to the mainstream school system, thus fostering the removal of inclusion for educational environments (Boyle et al., 2012). The physical separation between SWD and students without disabilities exemplified the manifestation of deep discrimination within schools. While calls for “separate but equal,” initially were Jim Crow laws meant to racially separate children, it also had the effect of removing the inclusion of school environments for SWD (Borson, 2017). The lack of opportunities for SWD to interact and connect with students without disabilities furthered the discriminatory mindset and gap between SWD and others. Many youths indicated that they seldom had naturally occurring, reciprocal interactions between youth with and without disabilities in the school or community (Wilhite et al., 1999). The lack of contact with each other served to fuel the misunderstandings between SWD and others.

However, in the present-day, educators value inclusion and seek ways to make their teaching accessible to all, regardless of students' differences.

Acceptance towards SWD has grown considerably, and more resources have become at their disposal. One fundamental factor underlying today's school inclusion of SWD in U.S. schools is a connection with students without disabilities. Our study is important because it explores the significance of the relationship between one's personal connections with PWD and their perception of school inclusion of SWD.

Social and academic struggles of SWD

Due to the interactive and co-dependent nature of perceptions of others and self-perception, the academic, social, and behavioral struggles of SWD are often interrelated. SWD who are excluded and separated face both academic and social struggles. The school curriculum often caters to students without disabilities. As a result, the struggle of SWD in schools is more profound than acknowledged (Macaulay et al., 2016). Additionally, misperceptions about SWD's struggles may lead to SWD being viewed as “unmotivated.” Those who form such misperceptions are unaware of how the SWD's disability may impact their learning. When SWD fall behind their peers and feel unable to catch up, they experience learned helplessness (Comerford, 1995), a negative mindset that reinforces their belief that they must struggle academically. Poor academic self-concept and learned helplessness cause SWD to adopt negative views of themselves and impact their academic performance and motivation.

SWD are also less likely to have friends. SWD spend less time with friends outside of school and are less likely to have a cohesive friend group (Rising, 2017). Internalizing such behaviors prevents further social interaction and causes their peers to perceive SWD as less socially competent. This perception further lowers the amount of time SWD spend with their friends (Maxey & Beckert, 2017).

Fair treatment of SWD

While equal treatment (the “one-glove-fits-all” approach) is not always the best solution in resolving certain inequalities, encouraging personal connections between SWD and students without disabilities and equitable treatment within educational environments promotes fairness and advances inclusion. Studies show that disability labels are stigmatizing. These labels perpetuate false stereotypes where SWD are always less capable than their peers (Tomar & Garg, 2020). By shifting language to focus on the student, rather than the disability, students and teachers use

inclusive language to treat SWD the same way as others. Additionally, including SWD with students without disabilities helps children cooperate, work together, understand and value different perspectives, think critically, and even test well (Ruef, 2003), showing that fair practices reap beneficial results for the entire classroom. Rather than exclude children based on their disability, fair practices aim to include and encourage the building of connections between SWD and students without disabilities.

Youth perception

Youth perceptions on the topic of inclusion have not been the center of the discussion. This is, at least partially, due to developmental concerns. As neuroscience has revealed, the adolescent brain, especially executive function, is not fully developed until one is well into adulthood (Johnson et al., 2009; Sekartini, R., 2021). Our study chose to investigate youth perceptions not due to bias, but on the grounds of the recognition of another important development in neuroscience: it is the individual's experiences, rather than age, that is more closely associated with the development of adolescent brain executive function (Coffey & Han, 2022). By investigating the perceptions of individuals who have a personal connection with PWD and those who do not, our study focuses on the integral factor, personal connections, and individual experiences.

METHODS

In this pilot study, we gathered preliminary data on youth perceptions of topics related to students with disabilities. 54 participants completed an internet-based survey. Student t-tests were used to determine whether significant differences were present between participants who have a personal connection with PWD and participants who do not.

Participants

We used a snowball sampling technique (Handcock & Gile, 2011) and focused on youth from Turkey and the United States between 14-24 years of age. Because a diversified population was crucial to our research, we hoped that our ten-year age range would expand demographics, thus promoting data collection from a wider range of opinions and ideas. Participants were recruited through internet-based platforms. More than 120 participants were reached, and a total of 54 participants completed the survey.

Data collection

We gathered preliminary data on youth perceptions of inclusion and students with disabilities. We administered an electronic survey generated using SurveyMonkey™. Survey Monkey™ was the most convenient, accessible, and secure to use. Our survey was distributed through social media platforms (Instagram, WhatsApp, and Apple Messages). The survey was anonymous, and the responses could not be traced back to the participants. We designed the survey questions to collect:

- (1) Participants' personal connections with PWD, i.e., if the participant is, has a family member who is, or has a friend who is PWD.
- (2) Perceptions on the inclusion of SWD at their schools, with sub-variables -- social, academic, and behavioral struggles, and equitable treatment of SWD. We used Likert scales 1–9 for all perception related questions.
- (3) Participant's demographic information (age, type of residence, public/private school, gender, race).

*See the appendix for the list of questions.

Data analysis

We used student t-tests to determine whether significant differences were present between participants who have a personal connection with PWD and participants who do not. Participants' answers to questions determining their personal connections with PWD were in yes/no format. We gave the value of "1" to a "yes" answer to any of the three questions determining the existence of a personal connection. On the other hand, we gave the value of "0" to participants who answered "no" to all three questions, indicating the absence of a personal connection with PWD. Participants' answers to perception-related questions were in numbers between one and nine (Likert scales). We then performed t-tests to determine whether significant differences were present.

RESULTS

Of the 54 participants who completed the survey, 25 have family members and/or friends who are PWD, including two participants who have disabilities themselves. These 25 participants made up Group A—participants who have a personal connection with PWD. The other 29 made up Group B—participants who do not have a personal connection with PWD.

Statistical significance was found between the

existence or absence of participants' personal connections with PWD and participants' perceptions on (1) school inclusion of SWD, (2) social, academic, and behavioral struggles of SWD, and (3) fair treatment of SWD.

On school inclusion of SWD

Group B showed a stronger tendency to give higher scores on the inclusion at their schools. There was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of Group A and B ($p < 0.05$), which confirmed the effects of participants' personal connections with PWD on their perceptions of school inclusion of SWD.

Data Summary			
	A	B	Total
n	25	29	54
ΣX	118	168	286
ΣX^2	670	1130	1800
SS	113.04	156.7586	285.2593
mean	4.72	5.7931	5.2963

Results

Mean _a —Mean _b	t	df	P	one-tailed	0.044781
-1.0731	-1.73	52		two-tailed	0.089562

On social, academic, and behavioral struggles of SWD

Group B showed a stronger tendency to give higher scores on the struggles of SWD. There was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of Group A and B ($p < 0.05$), which confirmed the effects of participants' personal connections with PWD on their perceptions of the social, academic, and behavioral struggles of SWD.

Data Summary			
	A	B	Total
n	25	29	54
ΣX	111	157.25	268.25
ΣX^2	541	922.6875	1463.6875
SS	48.16	70.0129	131.1308
mean	4.44	5.4224	4.9676

Results

Mean _a —Mean _b	t	df	P	one-tailed	0.0102535
-0.9824	-2.39	52		two-tailed	0.020507

On fair treatment of SWD

Group A showed a stronger tendency to treat SWD the same way they treat others. There was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of Group A and B ($p < 0.05$), which confirmed the effects of participants' personal connections with PWD on their perceived likelihood of treating SWD the same way they treat others.

Data Summary			
	A	B	Total
n	25	29	54
ΣX	187	182	369
ΣX^2	1487	1358	2845
SS	88.24	215.7931	323.5
mean	7.48	6.2759	6.8333

Results

Mean _a —Mean _b	t	df	P	one-tailed	0.0372585
1.2041	+1.82	52		two-tailed	0.074517

DISCUSSION

Perceptions are shaped by experiences (Massey et al., 2013). Youth experiences are limited to their interactions with family members, the school community, and a small number of people outside of family and school. These interactions allow or limit youth's access to PWD and influence their perceptions of SWD as part of the school community. The results section above showed that youth's personal connections with PWD have a significant impact on their perceptions of SWD on three crucial dimensions.

On school inclusion of SWD

When it comes to inclusion of SWD, schools strive to achieve optimal outcomes but often face the challenge of insufficient resources: the lack of special education teachers, facilities, technological equipment, etc. Our findings suggest that the amount of resources, or funding, available to schools or its students are not the only factors that may significantly affect youth perceptions of school inclusion. Instead, even beyond the resources available, it is the youth's personal connections with PWD that have a significant impact on their perceptions of school inclusion. While we recognize that many schools face the challenge of lacking resources, inclusion is unlikely an outcome that can simply be achieved through resources. As our data

presented, the determining factor of inclusion likely lies in social acceptance highlighted by personal connections between SWD and people around them.

On social, academic, and behavioral struggles of SWD

Perceived social, academic, and behavioral struggles of SWD are partially or entirely a result of one's emotional response to unfamiliar factors (Vinnikova et al., 2023). While unfamiliarity can trigger positive emotions like excitement, often however, it triggers emotions such as dislike, criticism, and fear (Cao et al., 2011). In short, challenges may seem greater when unfamiliarity is involved. This notion was manifested in the data we collected through this study. Participants in Group B, students who do not have personal connections with PWD and therefore are unfamiliar with the lives of SWD, believed to a greater extent that SWD face social, academic, and behavioral struggles. Participants in Group A, students who have personal connections with PWD and therefore are more familiar with the lives of SWD, however, saw the social, academic, and behavioral challenges SWD face as less of a struggle.

On fair treatment of SWD

Treatment and attitude are not defined by those who offer them, but by those who receive them. One may choose to stay at a distance from PWD out of respect or in the hope of "giving space," but to PWD, this action could mean "dislike." The subtleties in treatment and attitude can be complicated and discouraging, but individuals who have a personal connection with PWD, whether through a family relationship or friendship, are more likely to understand these subtleties and less likely to shy away from the challenge. Our data showed that youth's personal connections have a significant impact on their perceived likelihood of treating SWD the same way they treat others.

CONCLUSION

Through this pilot study, we found that youth who have a personal connection with PWD, whether through a family relationship or friendship, perceive schools' inclusion more critically, have a better understanding of the social, academic, and behavioral struggles of SWD, and are more likely to treat SWD fairly. Our findings showcase the significance of personal connections in achieving inclusion in school.

Personal connection is crucial to establishing and advancing inclusion. To achieve inclusion, individuals without disabilities should strive to seek PWD's authentic stories. When people listen and empathize with the stories and experiences of PWD, they empower PWD and break the cycle of discrimination that excludes them from many environments (UABIHR, 2019). Our study also addresses another issue that hinders the progress in achieving inclusion: the perception of inclusion as a zero-sum game. The mindset that one group must "lose" for another to "win" creates disagreements around "who" questions. For example, one may ask "who should or should not be included," "who is more disadvantaged," and "who is more in need." However, inclusion is not a zero-sum game; everyone must "win," and feel that they belong, to achieve inclusion. Thus, a focus solely on "who" can distract DEI professionals and all who strive to advance inclusion from understanding and solving the root problem of the real issue. Upon reviewing the findings through this study, we conclude that it is necessary to shift the focus of inclusion discussions from comparing groups to asking questions such as "how to create an environment that allows personal connections to take place" and "how to better meet everyone's fundamental need for personal connections." As our findings presented, the power of personal connections is evident, and may just be the direction that schools need to take to achieve inclusion.

As a pilot study gathering preliminary data, one of the limitations of the study is the small sample size. We also recognize that our convenience sampling may not be fully representative of the population that participated in our study. While there was statistical significance found in all three analyses, we advise future researchers to conduct larger studies using random sampling. We also recommend that future studies explore the usage of existing as well as novel measurement tools for institutional inclusion. Lastly, we recommend collecting qualitative data in addition to quantitative data to gain insights into the significance of personal connections to one's perceptions.

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APPENDIX

Survey questions

- Q1: Do you have a disability?
- Q2: Does someone in your family have a disability?
- Q3: Do you have a friend with a disability?
- Q4: How inclusive do you think your school is/was towards students with disabilities?
- Q5: Does/did your school lack technology barriers when educating all students?
- Q6: Do you believe students with disabilities struggle to make friends?
- Q7: Do you believe students with disabilities struggle academically?
- Q8: Do you believe students with disabilities struggle behaviorally?
- Q9: Do you believe students with disabilities struggle socially?
- Q10: How often do you treat people with disabilities the same way you treat others?
- Q11: How old are you?
- Q12: What is your gender?
- Q13: What is your race?
- Q14: What country do you live in?
- Q15: What best describes where you live?