

The following comments reflect what studies both overseas and in New Zealand have found: students with disabilities don't always experience a sense of belonging in their relationships with others in their classes and schools. In a New Zealand secondary school, parents and non disabled students were positive about the benefits of inclusion, but non disabled students did point out that it was *not really o.k.* that students with disabilities were often sitting separately from the rest of the class, engaged in *totally different work from us*, and isolated at break time *sticking together in their own little group*. The students in this study also disclosed verbal bullying which was distressing for them, and which teachers were either not aware of, or not dealing with.

(Kavermann, 1998, p.53; Lovitt, Plavins & Cushing, 1999; Lyle, 2002)

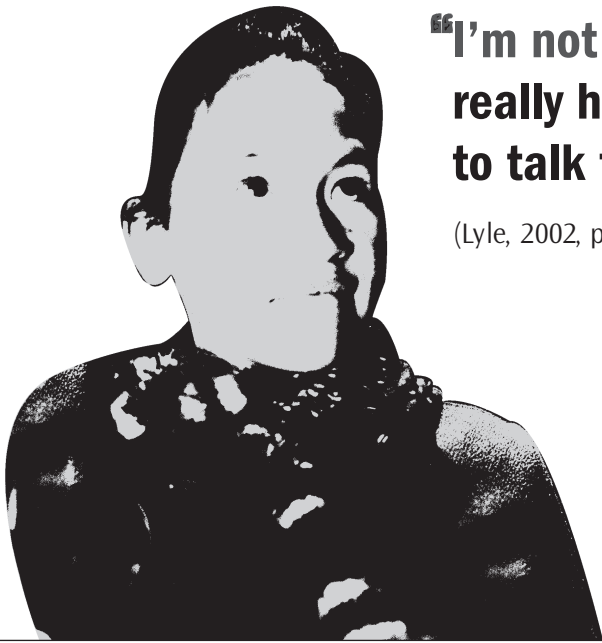
HOW CAN WE CELEBRATE AND SUPPORT THE DIVERSE NEEDS OF OUR STUDENTS?



“I liked it there in primary school. We were 14 in class. That was better to be in class. While the others were doing English, I had lessons alone – that was not fair, I was not allowed to come ... so I am a little angry”.

(Nes, 1999, p. 120)

Belonging



“I’m not really friends with them. You don’t really hang around with them. It’s someone to talk to”.

(Lyle, 2002, p. 54)



“... it’s like, what’s the point of having her in class if she’s not doing anything. We have our work to do and it’s like she’s not even there, she is just an extra chair. So I think Sally and Miriam are not really part of our class”.

(Williams & Downing, 2000, p.107)



What diversity or diverse experiences do your students bring to your classroom?

What do you think about these assumptions as a basis for curriculum development?

- All students can think and learn
- All students have unique gifts they can offer their school
- Diversity within a school community is to be embraced and celebrated
- All students differ in the ways in which they most effectively learn and express their understandings
- All students learn best when they are actively and collaboratively building knowledge with their classmates and teacher
- All children learn best when studying interesting and challenging topics that they find personally meaningful
- Effective teaching methods for students with disabilities are good teaching for all students.

(Jorgensen, 1997)

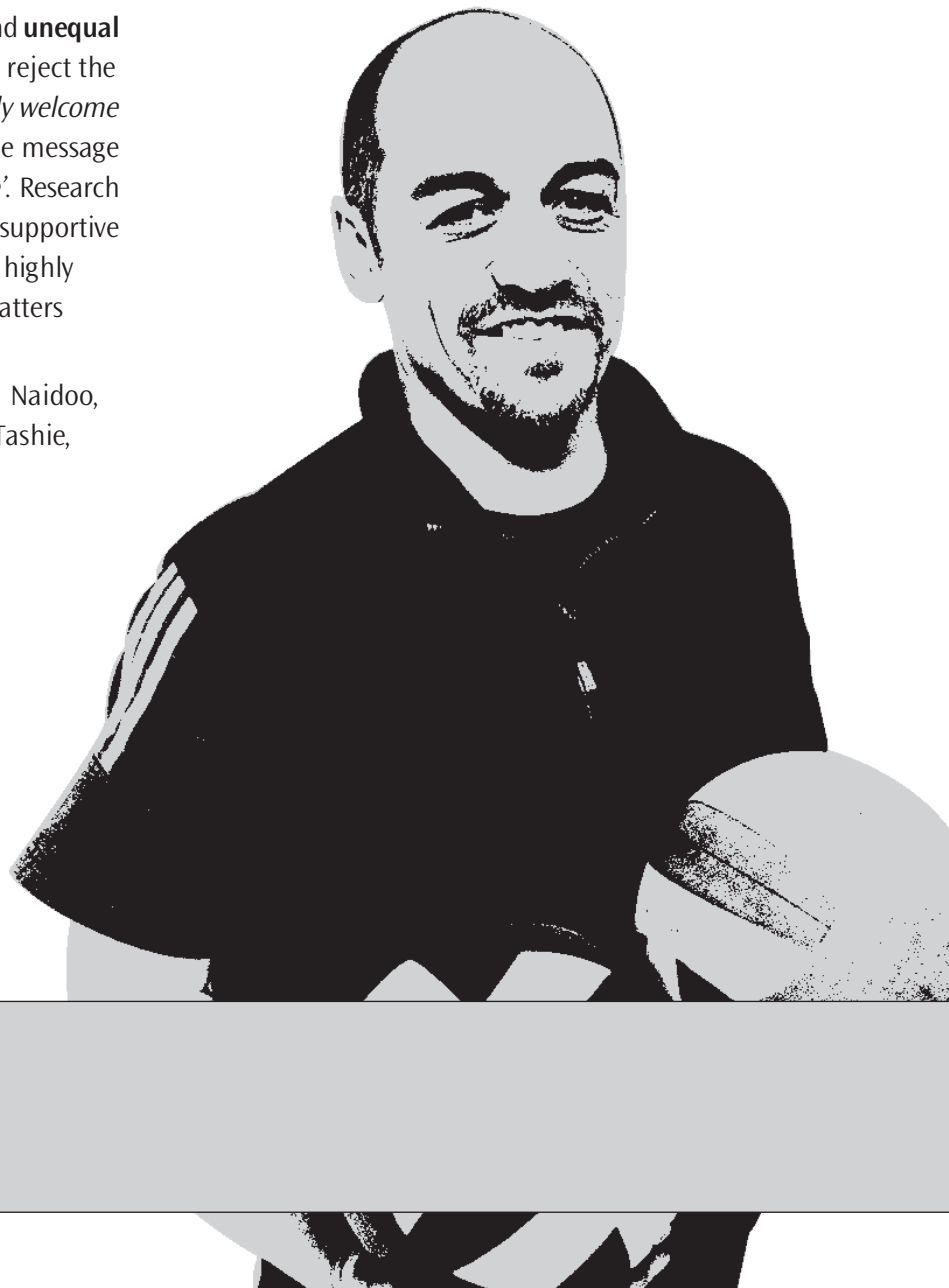


“The teacher gets in there and plays with them. And that’s the interesting part . When they’re playing and there’s no teacher there Hamish can get himself into some fairly heavy scraps because he likes to, well he has his own interpretation of the rules. But when there’s a teacher there, a moderator, they’re wonderful. The kids need the teacher for Hamish”.

(MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001, p.68)

Teaching methods that support a sense of belonging are those that support social relationships in the classroom. These include shared activities, peer tutoring, cooperative learning and acknowledging the accomplishments of all learners. Central to the idea of belonging is the school as a caring community where **diversity is valued** and **unequal power in relationships** is rejected. Schools must reject the not-so-subtle message to students that *‘you are only welcome if you act, sound, think, talk like us,’* and send the message to all students *‘you are welcome exactly as you are.’* Research interviews with students have shown that schools supportive of these values, often have students who show a highly sophisticated understanding of disability, and matters of social justice.

(Allan, 1997; Baker & Donnelly, 2001; Lai, Sinclair, Naidoo, Naidoo & Robinson, 2003; Lyle, 2002; Rosetti & Tashie, 2001 p. 22)



Hamish's mother describes her son's school as having *the most amazing community spirit ...it's just the most wonderfully, warm, welcoming place*. She puts this down to a school principal who was very concerned with supportive social relationships amongst the pupils. The school principal has been identified in research as playing a key role in establishing, maintaining and shaping a supportive social environment. Students who experience a positive sense of membership and belonging to their school are likely to have friends and are unlikely to experience bullying. They are also likely to find the caring ethos of the school supportive of their emerging identity as a learner.

(Baker & Donnelly, 2001; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001, p. 68)



“Small incidents which would not upset a normal person just blow up in Hamish’s face. If something goes wrong, he wouldn’t respond to the child he would come and see us. So we’ve always told him please go and get an adult, a big person, and he often tells me stories about how he’s gone and got somebody because so and so did something, which makes him sound like a little tell tale but these days that sort of stuff is brought out in the open and he never gets told off for it”.

(MacArthur, 2002, p. 14)



Characteristics of caring classrooms:

- Students have opportunities to learn about their classmates
- The contribution of each class member is valued
- Diversity amongst students is used as a starting point toward valuing group difference
- Students are supported to work on activities together
- Students have equal access to materials
- Students are encouraged to explore a range of friendships.

(Rietveld, 1999; Staub, 1998)