Building empathy for students with Special Educational Needs through disability awareness

by

Jinder Dhami

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Faculty of Education

© Jinder Dhami, 2019
Vancouver Island University

All rights reserved. This project may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or other means, without permission of the author.
We accept this Thesis as conforming to the required standard.

__________________________________________
Dr. Wendy Simms, Thesis Faculty Supervisor                      Date:
Faculty of Education,
Vancouver Island University

__________________________________________
Dr. David Paterson, Dean, Faculty of Education,
Vancouver Island University                      Date:
Abstract

Students with disabilities have come a long way from being considered "handicapped" and being institutionalized, as policies now support full inclusion within neighborhood schools. Inclusion is said to provide greater access to the general curriculum, increase social interactions and create higher expectations for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). However, inclusion is not without its challenges. As students with SEN transition from one school to another, particularly elementary to high school, the transition can produce new challenges such as bullying and loneliness. This study captured the voice of grade 7 students pre-transition and grade 8 students post-transition to answer the research question: How can the concerns and challenges surrounding student transition contribute to the design of empathy training material for Grade 8 students? A mixed methods Design-Based Research approach was used to design an intervention to promote inclusion and build empathy among neuro-typical grade 8 students towards their peers with Special Educational Needs. The intervention, a Periodic Table of Disabilities, visually presents the disability categories in British Columbia and their prevalence both Provincially and locally. It will be used to promote open communication about special needs, as this may be an important element supporting the successful transition of SEN students from elementary to high school.

Keywords: empathy, disability awareness, transition, Special Educational Needs, inclusion
Table of Contents

Abstract.........................................................................................................................iii

Table of Contents.............................................................................................................iv

List of Tables..................................................................................................................viii

List of Figures..................................................................................................................ix

Chapter 1: Introduction.................................................................................................1

Researcher Context........................................................................................................3

The Empathy Project......................................................................................................5

Problem in Practice.......................................................................................................6

Purpose Statement.........................................................................................................6

Research Question.........................................................................................................7

Definition of Terms.......................................................................................................7

Special Educational Needs..........................................................................................7

Transition......................................................................................................................7

Empathy........................................................................................................................7

Inclusion.........................................................................................................................7

Integration....................................................................................................................8

Overview of Study........................................................................................................8

Chapter 2- Literature Review.......................................................................................9

A History of Special Education in BC Schools...............................................................9

Bullying..........................................................................................................................12

Transitions....................................................................................................................12

The Importance of Friendships during Transition.......................................................13
Loneliness............................................................................................................14
Empathy Training as a Possible Solutions..........................................................15
  Overcoming Barriers to Inclusion......................................................................17
Conclusion...........................................................................................................19

Chapter 3 - Research Design...............................................................................21
Methodological Approach- Design-Based Research..........................................21
  Phases of Design-Based Research....................................................................22
Research Design..................................................................................................24
  Research Sites...................................................................................................24
  Ocean View High School..................................................................................24
  Elementary Feeder Schools..............................................................................24
  Feeder School A...............................................................................................25
  Feeder School B...............................................................................................25
  Feeder School C...............................................................................................25
Participants..........................................................................................................25
  Grade 8 Student Participants (Post-Transition)..............................................26
  Grade 7 Student Participants (Pre-Transition)...............................................26
Participant Recruitment......................................................................................26

Using Design-Based Research to design an Intervention to
Foster Empathy among Grade 8 Students..........................................................27
  Phase 1: Analysis and Exploration of Bullying
  Behaviour towards students with SEN............................................................28
  Phase 2: Design and Construction of the Intervention....................................29
Informing the Design of The Empathy Project.................................................................47

Periodic Table of Disabilities.........................................................................................48

Limitations.....................................................................................................................49

Implications for Future Considerations........................................................................50

Conclusions....................................................................................................................51

References......................................................................................................................52

Appendix A: Periodic Table of Disabilities.................................................................64

Appendix B: Grade 8 Student Questionnaire.............................................................65

Appendix C: Grade 7 Student Questionnaire.............................................................67
List of Tables

Table 1. Sample Instruments used to design Questionnaire ........................................33
Table 2. Grade 8 Descriptive Statistics .....................................................................37
Table 3. Grade 8 Coded Responses ........................................................................38
Table 4. Grade 7 Descriptive Statistics .....................................................................40
Table 5. Grade 7 Perceptions of High School ............................................................41
List of Figures

Figure 1. Model for Conducting DBR for The Empathy Project...........................................28
Chapter 1: Introduction

Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are increasingly educated alongside their neuro-typical peers across the globe in a practice called inclusion (World Health Organization, 2011). Equal access to inclusive education for all students is considered a fundamental human right. The following discussion outlines the international movement towards inclusive education, as well as British Columbia's policy towards inclusive education and inclusion.

The Salamanca Statement was issued by The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1994 and signed by 92 countries and 25 organizations, including Canada. It states that "those with Special Educational Needs must have access to regular schools.....which is the most effective means of combating discriminating attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (UNESCO, 2009, p. viii-ix). In 2006, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 24) required member states to provide inclusive education at all levels for people with SEN, and that students with SEN must not be excluded from general education (UNESCO, 2009). All 161 signatory states, including Canada, are bound by this agreement. As a result of these international agreements, many countries, including Canada, have developed national policies to support inclusion. In British Columbia, the BC Ministry of Education mandates that a student with SEN must be provided an educational program, in their neighborhood school, where the student is integrated with other students of their age and grade who do not have SEN (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). Special Educational Need, as defined by the BC Ministry of Education, is a student with a disability of an intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional or behavioural nature (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). Students with a Ministry recognized disability in British Columbia receive extra support and funding to promote
Inclusive practices. Inclusion surpasses placement to comprise meaningful participation and the promotion of interaction with others.

In British Columbia, many children with SEN are educated in inclusive, regular classrooms with age and grade appropriate peers. Starting in Kindergarten, students with SEN are placed in a regular classroom unless the educational needs of the student indicate otherwise (Ministry of Education, 2016). Students with SEN transition from grade to grade with their age and grade appropriate peers throughout their Elementary years (generally Kindergarten to grade 6 or 7). In British Columbia, students typically transition from elementary school to either middle school or secondary school after grade 6 or 7. Wentzel, Tomback, William and McNeish (2019) refer to transition as moving from school to school, with normative transitions taking place as students move from elementary to middle or secondary school. Any transition, particularly those from elementary to secondary school, can be challenging and filled with stress for students with SEN if not managed carefully. In elementary school, students with SEN spend the majority of their day with a single teacher, in one room, surrounded by a familiar group of peers. In contrast, at secondary school, students with SEN follow a timetable, moving from class to class and teacher to teacher either independently or with the support of an Educational Assistant. This move from elementary to secondary school systems places greater demands on students with SEN and is considered one of the biggest challenges in a students' education, regardless of a disability or not (Mandy et al., 2016). In elementary systems, there is a greater social acceptance by peers towards students with SEN compared to a secondary setting (Sparling, 2002). A recent review of SEN and secondary school transition shows that individuals with SEN are more likely to express concerns around bullying, victimization, and poorer social adjustments after transition (Hughes, Banks & Terras, 2013).
The benefits of inclusion are well documented and include increased interactions with neuro-typical peers, greater tolerance and acceptance of differences. However, individuals with SEN are generally less accepted than their typically developing peers, increasing the risk of victimization and bullying (Frederickson, 2010). Acceptance is influenced by the nature of the disability, lack of knowledge about the disability, peer pressure, school and community culture, and teacher attitude (Sparling, 2002). Bourke and Burgman (2010) found that individuals with SEN experience bullying more frequently than their neuro-typical peers. Connors and Stalker (2007) discovered that almost half the children in their research experienced bullying at school. However, Frederickson (2010) highlighted that "including the peer group in open communication about special needs is an important foundation for building positive classroom relationships" (p. 4). Together, this suggests that educating students about special educational needs, and providing disability awareness may be an important component of successful transition to high school. Disability awareness may support the development of empathy and the ability to understand and feel other students' perspectives and emotions (Eisenberg, Eggum & Di Giunta, 2010).

The impact of transitions on students with SEN therefore needs to be more fully understood from the perspective of students, both with SEN and without. Through this research, the challenges encountered by students with SEN were explored at two different time points, both pre and post transition from elementary to secondary school using separate questionnaires developed from established instruments.

**Researcher Context**

I have worked with students with SEN for the majority of my 15 year career within the education system. As a Special Education British Columbia (SET-BC) consultant, I have
matched students with technology so they can access the curriculum. As a District Resource Teacher I have supported teachers and students in creating Individual Education Plans and adapting the curriculum so individuals with SEN can receive an individualized education program. As an elementary Learning Assistance teacher I have developed and implemented programs to support struggling learners improve their reading, writing and math levels. More recently, as a Resource teacher at a high school, one of my roles has been to ensure the smooth transition of students with SEN into the high school environment. I support these individuals both academically and socially and sometimes emotionally. If an incidence occurs involving a student or students on my caseload, I am involved with the administration of the school in the investigation, liaison with parents and at times discipline.

Throughout my extensive experience, I have recognized that students with SEN are no different than their neuro-typical peers, wanting to be accepted by their peers and be a part of the classroom and school environment. They experience similar struggles and have similar hopes and dreams but have to overcome greater challenges than their neuro-typical peers. Unfortunately, most individuals have no idea what students with SEN struggle with on a daily basis. Truly inclusive education requires a school culture that emphasizes diversity while exploring differences and similarities and as a result, the goal in creating inclusive schools should not only focus on students with SEN but on equity and inclusion of all students (Carrington, 1999). I believe that the lack of education about disabilities is a barrier that prevents people from accepting and showing empathy with individuals who have SEN. As a result, it has become my personal and professional goal to design and deliver effective interventions that can support positive change, both in the classroom and the school culture.
The Empathy Project. During my time as a Resource teacher, several incidences of bullying (both physical and verbal) occurred involving grade 8 students and students with SEN. One of these incidences was serious enough to involve restorative justice on the part of the typically developing peers involved. The bullying was severe enough to warrant separating students into different classrooms.

In addition to my professional observations, other teachers at the school had also noticed an increase in bullying behavior and a lack of empathy among typically developing students. Due to this concern, during a department meeting, it was decided that an intervention was needed for all grade 8 students. Out of these discussions came the idea of The Empathy Project, a workshop provided to all grade 8 students during class time aimed at building an understanding of their learning styles, similarities and challenges. Several grade 8 teachers were approached by the grade 8 department head and solicited for suggestions and ideas of how to organize this project and what should be included. I was approached and asked to provide information to students about the similarities and differences surrounding students with SEN in an effort to build greater understanding and empathy.

My observations and involvement in The Empathy Project revealed the need to better understand the challenges encountered by both Grade 7 and Grade 8 students making the transition from elementary to high school. This information can greatly support initiatives and interventions aimed at easing the transition to secondary school for children with SEN, while improving school practice and building a school culture that is more inclusive. This was the reason I chose to focus my Master of Education research on building empathy for students with SEN through disability awareness.
Problem in Practice

All students experience transitions, whether to a middle school or high school. Changes in the building size, teaching styles, more emphasis on academic achievement and the complexity of daily schedules are all concerns of both typically developing students and students with SEN (Maras & Aveling, 2006). Some students are able to handle that transition better than others. When you include a special educational need, that transition can be much more difficult for some students. Children with SEN may be more vulnerable and may be at an increased risk of experiencing a wide range of concerns, including bullying, lack of meaningful friendships, and loneliness (Hughes et al., 2013). Understanding the impact of transition for children with SEN is important not only to provide proper supports for the students with SEN, but also in promoting inclusion and building empathy among their neuro-typical peers. Designing empathy training materials based on students’ perspectives of the perceived challenges and actual challenges fosters acceptance and understanding of students with special educational needs. However, the problem guiding this Design-Based Research, is that many of these interventions are not grounded in research and student voice.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this Master of Education research was to understand the challenges facing students with SEN as they transitioned into high school in an effort to support the design of empathy training material for grade 8 students. Specifically, the empathy training material is a disability awareness chart called The Periodic Table of Disabilities that explains the different disability categories in British Columbia while showing the prevalence of those disabilities, both provincially and locally. It will give educators, administrators and more specifically, students a clearer picture of the types of disabilities and challenges faced by these individuals, as well as
the understanding that they will encounter someone with SEN in not just school, but in society and the workplace.

**Research Question**

The overarching question guiding this research was: How can the concerns and challenges surrounding student transition contribute to the design of empathy training material for Grade 8 students? The following sub-questions were developed to help answer the overarching research question:

1. What were the specific concerns of Grade 7 students with SEN about to transition into high school?
2. After transition, what, if any, challenges were encountered by Grade 8 students with SEN?

**Definition of Terms**

**Special Educational Needs (SEN).** A student with a disability of an intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional or behavioural nature (BC Ministry of Education, 2016).

**Transition.** Wentzel, Tombac, William and McNeish (2019) refer to transition as moving from school to school, with normative transitions taking place as students move from elementary to middle or secondary school.

**Empathy.** Empathy has been defined as the ability to understand and feel others' perspectives and emotions (Eisenberg et al., 2010).

**Inclusion.** The principle that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement, and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their education. Inclusion goes beyond placement to include meaningful participation and the promotion of interaction with others (BC Ministry of Education, 2016).
Integration. According to the *Special Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines*, integration is a strategy used to achieve inclusion, whereby students with special needs are included in an educational setting with peers who do not have special needs (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). The principle of "placement in the most enabling learning environment" helps to decide whether a student is placed in a regular classroom or alternative placement (p. v).

**Overview of Study**

This study explored the challenges encountered by students with SEN in making the transition from elementary to secondary school and designed an intervention to increase disability awareness while promoting inclusion and building empathy. Design-Based Research was chosen as the methodological approach because it aligns well with educational research that allows for the creation of "useable knowledge" that develops out of the research (McKenney & Reeves, 2012, p. 7). The voice of students in both grade 7 (pre-transition) and grade 8 (post-transition) were collected using a questionnaire that included both quantitative and qualitative components. The findings contributed to the development of The Periodic Table of Disabilities, an intervention specifically designed to build empathy and promote inclusion through disability awareness. The Period Table of Disabilities and the Empathy Project are both interventionist in nature, as lack of empathy among typically developing peers in grade 8 was identified as a “significant educational problem in need of innovative solutions” (McKenney and Reeves, 2012, p.14). The Periodic Table of Disabilities will continue to be developed long after this research is complete.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this research was to understand the major challenges encountered by students with SEN when making the transition from elementary to secondary school in an effort to support the design of empathy training materials for grade 8 students.

In this chapter, a brief history of special education in British Columbia is explored, from institutionalization to inclusion. Then the drawbacks of inclusion, such as bullying and loneliness will be presented, followed by a discussion of how disability awareness might foster empathy and promote inclusion.

A History of Special Education in BC Schools

The principle of inclusion and integration in BC schools supports equal access to learning by all students in all aspects of their education and is achieved through integration, where individuals with SEN interact and participate fully with peers of the same age and grade in their neighborhood schools (BC Ministry of Education, 2016).

Charlie Naylor's (2005) paper on inclusion in British Columbia public schools provides a review of the history of special education in British Columbia. Inclusion, in BC, was the result of parents’ and educators’ belief that the best place to educate all students, regardless of their ability or need, was in their neighborhood schools (Naylor, 2005). However, inclusion was not always the accepted policy. In the 1900s, segregated schooling was the norm. Students with SEN were placed into 'specialized' schools within their school districts, funded by the provincial government (Naylor, 2005). It was believed that the needs of student with disabilities could not be met within public schools. At these 'specialized' schools, students with SEN had access to greater supports, such as occupational therapists and speech language pathologists; however they were separated from their peers meaning they could not learn appropriate behaviours from their
neuro-typical peers and their neuro-typical peers could not learn about acceptance of disabilities. By the late 1950s, the Public Schools Act was amended, permitting individuals with SEN to be educated in regular schools, but within separate classes (Naylor, 2005). By the 1970s, public pressure was building to put supports in place for students with SEN to attend public schools. However, it was not until the 1980s that the Ministry of Education developed policies and procedures for including students with SEN in regular classrooms (Naylor, 2005). 1987 was the turning point for students with SEN. It was the year the BC government established the Royal Commission on Education that recommended rights for students with SEN be clarified in the School Act (Naylor, 2005). As a result, the School Act was revised in 1989-90 in a way that entitled all school-aged children to an education in their neighborhood schools, not separated from other students, effectively guaranteeing inclusion (Siegel, 2000). The development of special education policy in British Columbia evolved under the growing international recognition of individuals with special educational needs in The Salamanca Statement issued by UNESCO in 1994.

In British Columbia, the Provincial Policy framework for students with SEN is contained in the document Special Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). In BC, students who have a disability of an intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional or behavioural nature have a learning disability or have special gifts or talents (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). Special needs categories were established to assist school districts in identifying student needs, providing programming and to report students for supplemental funding (BC Ministry of Education: K-12 Funding-Special Needs, 2019). In order to support inclusion, the BC Ministry of Education recognized that additional funding is needed. Supplemental funding is broken down into level 1, 2 and 3 funding, depending on the SEN
category. Level 1 funding includes students with multiple needs who are physically dependent (Category A) or deafblind (B). Level 2 funding includes students with moderate/profound intellectual disabilities (C), physical disabilities or chronic health impairments (D), visual impairments (E), students who are deaf or hard of hearing (F) and autism spectrum disorder (G). Level 3 funding includes students requiring intensive behaviour interventions or serious mental illness (H) (BC Ministry of Education, 2016).

While inclusion is the policy, British Columbia does not mandate full integration in all situations. It allows individual school boards to integrate students "unless the educational needs of the student with special needs indicates that the educational program for the student with special needs should be provided otherwise" (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 2). However, many schools in British Columbia believe in and practice inclusion through integration. According to the BC Ministry of Education Special Needs Headcount data (2017/18) on students with special needs in public schools, there were 34,121 students with SEN enrolled across Level 1, 2 and 3 funding. What those numbers don't indicate however, is how accepted the students within inclusive classrooms felt. Sparling (2002), found a greater social acceptance of students with SEN by peers was within the elementary rather than secondary setting. Acceptance was influenced by the nature of the disability, lack of knowledge about the disability, peer pressure, school and community culture, and teacher attitude. Low social acceptance for students with SEN increases the risk of being victimized and increases the risk of being bullied by their classmates (Fredrickson, 2010).

Bullying

Bullying is defined as "victimizing peers by repeatedly using negative actions such as physical, verbal, or indirect aggression" (Pellegrine & Long, 2002, p.2) or aggression that is used
to obtain resources and is characterized by a power imbalance whereby the aggressor has more power than the victim (Zablotsky, Bradshaw, Anderson & Law, 2014). Bullying can take many forms, occur across socio-economic backgrounds, is not gender specific and does not discriminate between an individual with or without SEN. Llewellyn (2000), through personal interviews, found students with physical disabilities reported some form of bullying, mainly verbal intimidation but also physical bullying. Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) also reported greater victimization in inclusive settings (Zablotsky et al., 2014). Students with high functioning autism were the most likely to spend the most amount of time in an inclusive classroom. These are also the students who struggled the most to make friends. As Pellegrini and Long (2002) found, the number and quality of friends serves as a protective factor in being victimized because “higher levels of support are associated with lower levels of bullying involvement” (Kendrick, Jutengren & Stattin, 2012, p. 1070). However, many students with SEN often do not have friends to turn to. Friendships also change over time, especially during educational transitions, as students are struggling to find their place and identity.

**Transitions**

In British Columbia, students transition from elementary to secondary school, either directly or through a middle school. This period in their adolescence is both a time of excitement and worry, both socially and academically. These adolescents are faced with new teachers, new academic subjects, new expectations and new peer relationships. These common concerns during the pre-transition period were highlighted by Maras and Aveling (2006); students who were interviewed before transition often expressed that the size of the school and the prospect of bullying and losing friends as their other top concerns. This new setting requires students to adapt, which can have effects on their psychological development. Vaughn (1985) argued that
during the transition period, students with SEN are at a greater risk of being socially rejected and feeling isolated. Relationships with peers produce frustrations, a lower self-concept, and loneliness (Lovitt, 1987). Students with SEN also express poorer social skills (Tur-Kaspa, 2002) and often don’t have the same level of social support as their typically developing peers (Hughes et al., 2013). For typically developing students, strong social skills and peer support are often recognized as protective factors during the transition (Hughes et al., 2013). Even the presence of one close friendship provides a student with emotional support and may protect him/her from bullying and loneliness (Tur-Kaspa, Margalit, & Most, 1999). Bullying is a concern, especially during the transition years, because of the changes in social dynamics and relationships.

The importance of friendships during the transition period. In elementary school, students spend all day with one teacher and the same group of peers; most of the unstructured time is supervised and oftentimes friendships facilitated by an adult. Friendships in elementary school often take the form of caretaker to reciprocal friendships (Staub, Schwartz, Galluci & Peck, 1994). The caretaker role is one in which typically developing students help or support students with SEN academically in the classroom setting. However, as students transition from elementary school to high school, age appropriate interpersonal relationships become increasingly important (Tipton, Christensen & Blacher, 2013). For this reason, students tend to gravitate towards like-minded peers and are influenced by their peer group (Framer & Farmer, 1996). Having a disability complicates experiences of friendship, as teens tend to spend more time connecting with friends. Adolescents with ASD and intellectual disabilities often experience lower quality friendships because many of these individuals have deficits in communication and social interaction (Tipton et al., 2013). To further complicate matters, there is often stigma attached to individuals with SEN.
Salmon (2013) argued that disabled youth often feel there is a stigma attached to their disability. At first, they feel included, both socially and academically in the early elementary years (de Boer, Pijl, Post & Minnaert, 2013). However, in late elementary, their disability leads to stigmatization with negative meaning, resulting in rejection by neuro-typical peers and not being recognized as potential friends which often leads to isolation and bullying (de Boer et al., 2013). Research has shown that boys in their first year in middle school, like boys in their first year at high school, are searching for identity and a place within the social dynamics of their group and are therefore less likely to associate with a student with an obvious disability for fear of being labeled or teased (Kalymon et al., 2010).

The nature of the disability also played a role in social acceptance by peers at high school. Invisible disabilities didn’t affect student attitudes while visible disabilities did. Interestingly, physical disabilities were less stigmatizing than cognitive disabilities, the implication being that the type of disability has a significant impact on a student with SEN’s ability to form friendships (Sparling, 2002). Peer pressure certainly plays a part in student attitudes for fear of being associated with a student with SEN thereby being ostracized by the group. If typically developing peers are not developing friendships with students who have SEN, out of fear of being stigmatized, loneliness in students with SEN can become a problem.

**Loneliness**

Loneliness can be defined as sadness from having no friends or company. While loneliness is not exclusive to students with SEN, it is repeatedly reported more often with students who have limited acceptance from peers (Tur-Kaspa et al, 1999). Having one good friend is just as good as having several friends, but many students with SEN lack even one good friend (Kendrick et al., 2012; Tur-Kaspa, 2002; Tur-Kaspa et al., 1999). The important role of
reciprocal friendships in combating loneliness and social development is essential for students with SEN, especially during the high school transition as this is a time when peer relations are increasingly important, especially for boys (Tur-Kaspa, 2002).

Sparling (2012) indicated that the nature of the disability affected attitudes and thus the inability to form friendships, leading to loneliness. A study of 7th through 10th graders in the kibbutz found higher levels of loneliness and lower empathetic skills among students with learning disabilities (LD) and lower levels of acceptance by peers (Tur-Kaspa, 2002). Students with ASD often reported feelings of loneliness more often than typically developing peers and those with motor and/or sensory disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Bossaert, Golpin, Pijl & Petry, 2012). Difficulties with social skills, flexibility, emotional regulation, anxiety and bullying are common among students with ASD and can make the transition to high school much more challenging (Mandy et al., 2016). What can be done to change peer perspectives about students with SEN so that they feel included, have friends and do not experience bullying and loneliness?

Empathy Training as a Possible Solution

In an inclusive classroom, neuro-typical students are exposed to students with SEN who may be receiving support or extra help. However, simple exposure to students with SEN is not enough to create an inclusive classroom that demonstrates acceptance, empathy and positive attitudes (McDougall, DeWit, King, Miller & Killip, 2004). Empathy can be defined as taking the perspective of others; understanding how they view the world and feeling what others feel (Davis, 2018). Empathy can foster cooperation and citizenship (Howe, 2012), strengthen prosocial behaviour (Brophy, Alleman & Halvorsen, 2016) and reduce aggression and social prejudice (van Hazenbroek, Olthof & Goossens, 2017). Empathy plays an important role in
friendships with peers, developing social skills and overcoming crises (Davis, 2018). Seaman (2012) concluded that empathy based learning could create an inclusive culture and prevent bullying behaviour.

Two separate studies found that greater education about SEN can lead to positive attitudes and greater acceptance (Fisher, Pumian & Sax, 1998; Staub et al., 1994). Acknowledgement of differences as well as stressing similarities can promote inclusion. Likewise, Frederickson (2010) found that education about special needs and open discussion and communication amongst the students can lead to more positive classrooms. However, many typical developing students are not educated about disabilities so they are not as understanding, accepting and empathetic toward their peers with disabilities.

In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education considers social responsibility one of the core competencies, equal in importance to reading, writing and numeracy (Katz & Porath, 2011). Social responsibility involves the ability to, among other descriptors, empathize with others. Unfortunately, incidences of bullying towards students with SEN indicated that this was not always happening. Students who are respectful of others demonstrate empathy for others, and are more accepting of others’ strengths and challenges (Katz & Porath, 2011). Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg and Walberg (2004) argued that teaching specific skills, including empathy, are effective components of any social and emotional learning program. Teacher attitudes and beliefs also greatly affect the way students perceive and react to others. Educators would benefit from greater social and emotional training, which they could then integrate into their courses. Jennifer Katz (2012) has developed a Respecting Diversity Program with the goal of developing self and social awareness and respect, as well as the creation of a positive, inclusive classroom climate. Her program consists of 9 lessons, with the final lesson exploring disabilities, within the
context of ability. Student and teacher reflections on this lesson indicated an increase in empathy for individuals with disabilities, as well as greater understanding towards students with SEN (Katz & Porath, 2011). The cornerstone of inclusive education is the belief that students with SEN learn alongside their neuro-typical peers. Until neuro-typical students learn about their peers with SEN, they will not have an understanding of their potential and continue to concentrate on their disability and what they cannot do, unless neuro-typical students are educated in disability awareness. Sahin's (2012) investigation showed a clear decrease in bullying behaviour and an increase in empathetic skills when empathy training as an intervention program is applied to sixth graders. However, barriers to inclusion still exist and in order to overcome these barriers and create a truly inclusive classroom and school climate we must first understand what those barriers are and how to move beyond them.

**Overcoming barriers to inclusion.** Student attitudes towards disabilities impact the social and academic inclusion of students with SEN. To understand what barriers prevent neuro-typical students from socially and academically including students with SEN, Katz and Porath (2012) explored student perspectives regarding inclusion, the barriers to inclusion and facilitators of inclusion. They concluded that disability awareness and co-operative skills as facilitators of greater empathy and willingness to include, particularly for students with hidden disabilities (Katz & Porath, 2012). The top three barriers of their willingness to work with a student with SEN, according to Katz and Porath (2012), were: getting a lower grade (working together will affect their mark), pacing (working together will slow them down), and the educational assistant (presence of the EA was stigmatizing). Clearly, disability awareness and the role of the teacher in facilitating and clarifying goals for all students are necessary for inclusion to be truly valued. When classroom teachers take ownership of all students in a class, regardless of differences, then
a more positive and inclusive classroom environment is created. Negative attitudes towards students with SEN are the result of ignorance. Awareness programs promote acceptance, understanding, empathy and knowledge about different disabilities (Ison et al., 2010). If a school takes the initiative to raise awareness and implement disability education in its classrooms, especially in the first year of high school, then it will have a better chance of fostering peer acceptance and valuing diversity (McPherson & Lindsay, 2011). Merely enrolling students with SEN in regular classrooms does not guarantee that they will be accepted, valued and included (De Boer, Pijil, Minnaert & Post, 2014). Inclusion is more than a method or strategy; it is a value system that values diversity, responds to individual needs and is intended to assure equal access for all students in regular classrooms with age appropriate peers to the benefit of all students, both socially and academically (Bunch, 2015).

Roadman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty* is a children's novel that tells the story of two characters with disabilities who collaborate with one another to overcome their challenges. Mohammadzadeh, Kayhan and Dimililer (2017) examined if six University age students' (3 from Nigeria and 3 from Turkey) response to this novel enhanced disability awareness and empathy. They found that connections with a character in a novel fostered empathy and emotional ties. Reader responses from the study indicated that their understanding of disabilities and ability to empathize with the characters was greatly enhanced. Stories like *Freak the Mighty* and others with a main character with SEN promote disability awareness, acceptance and empathy towards individuals with SEN and show neuro-typical children the challenges they face on a daily basis. Inclusion does not just happen because children with SEN are placed in a regular classroom. It is a process that relies on the commitment of leadership at all levels. If the values and importance of inclusion are not accepted, equitable education for students with SEN will not occur. When
neuro-typical students are educated about disabilities, academic and social inclusion and empathy towards their peers with SEN is more likely.

**Conclusion**

British Columbia has come a long way from having students with SEN educated in 'special' schools to present day inclusion in neighborhood schools and being integrated into regular classrooms with age and grade appropriate peers. Inclusion provides students with equitable access to learning but inclusion also has drawbacks, such as bullying and loneliness for students with SEN. Negative perceptions held about disabilities, whether accurate or not, shape the way students with SEN are treated. Many of these negative perceptions come from lack of understanding about disabilities. Lindsay and McPherson (2012) concluded that children with disabilities often feel excluded from activities at school and attribute much of this to a lack of understanding of their disability, indicating the need for effective disability awareness programs. As students transition from elementary to secondary school, individuals struggle for a sense of place and identity in their new school and social groups. The transition for students with SEN can be much more difficult as they struggle with negative perceptions about their disability, peer acceptance, friendships, loneliness and bullying. One way to dispel negative perceptions and promote inclusion is through disability awareness to build empathy. BC's new curriculum puts an emphasis on social responsibility as one of the core competencies, with empathy playing a key part of social responsibility. Lack of empathy, teacher attitudes, and the severity of a student's disability seem to create loneliness, lack of meaningful friendships and leads to bullying, regardless of well-meaning policies. It is for this reason I have chosen to focus my Master of Education research on building empathy for students with Special Educational Needs through disability awareness. Using a Design-Based Research approach, the voices of grade 7 and 8
students were collected in order to design an intervention that will become part of the Empathy Project initiative. This research design will be described in detail in Chapter 3
Chapter 3: Research Design

The overarching question guiding this research was: How can the concerns and challenges surrounding student transition contribute to the design of empathy training material for Grade 8 students? Specifically, the empathy training material was being designed for an existing initiative called the Empathy Project, a workshop provided to all grade 8 students aimed at building an understanding of their learning styles, similarities and challenges. To ensure this design-based research included student voice, two sub-questions were asked:

1. What were the specific concerns of Grade 7 students with SEN, about to transition to high school?
2. After transition, what, if any, challenges were encountered by Grade 8 students with SEN?

This chapter introduces the methodological approach chosen to answer these questions, and then details the research design.

Methodological approach: Design-Based Research

Educational Design-Based Research (DBR) is not a single approach, rather it is a series of approaches with the intent of producing new theories, artifacts, and practices to impact learning and teaching (Barab & Squire, 2003). In DBR, activity is studied in a naturalistic setting and as the study unfolds, theoretically inspired innovations are developed that pass through multiple iterations to then develop new theories (Barab, 2014). Through iterative cycles of testing and improving prototypes, it evolves over time through exploration and analysis, design and construction, and evaluation and reflection (McKenney and Reeves, 2012). DBR theories or practices may be adopted or adapted to other schools or classrooms and improves learning for those participants in the study (Barab, 2014).
Design-Based Research was chosen as the methodological approach for this study because it allowed for the development of “usable knowledge” to understand the impact of transition for children with SEN and more importantly, how to foster empathy among typically developing peers (McKenney & Reeves, 2012, p.7). Many research methodologies identify and explore problems in practice, but “what sets educational design research apart from other forms of scientific inquiry is its commitment to developing theoretical insights and practical solutions simultaneously” (McKenney & Reeves, 2012, p.7). Designing solutions to problems situated in real world context is at the core of Design-Based Research.

As with many DBR designs, a mixed methods approach was used to address the challenges surrounding transition for students with SEN. A convergent parallel design was applied, in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected in parallel, analyzed separately, and then merged (Creswell, 2014). The reason for collecting both qualitative and quantitative data was so that the data could be more easily compared and assist in creating the design-based intervention.

**Phases of Design-Based Research.** McKenney and Reeves (2012) identified three phases in DBR: (1) Analysis and Exploration, (2) Design and Construction, and (3) Evaluation and Reflection. The three phases allow for flexibility and a deeper understanding of learning (Barab, 2014). Phase one (Analysis and Exploration) is characterized by the identification and diagnosis of the problem, literature review, collaboration with practitioners, and exploration of similar problems and solutions. In Phase two (Design and Construction), a process is followed to arrive at a solution, a conceptual model is created, potential solutions are generated, explored and considered and a possible prototype is developed. In Phase three (Evaluation and Reflection) testing is conducted through design or intervention and reflections on the findings are
examined to refine the design or intervention. This phase can lead to either redesign or conclusions. This can then lead “to the production of theoretical understanding and the development of an intervention, which matures over time” (McKenney & Reeves, 2012, p. 77). The three phases are flexible as "many pathways can be taken", and iterative in nature because "some elements feed into others, over and over again" (McKenney & Reeves, 2012, p. 77). The results and findings "provide important building blocks for theory, and can also contribute indirectly to practice as these ideas may be shared among professionals and used to build new interventions" (McKenney & Reeves, 2012, p.80).

The intervention developed from this DBR will be used to design empathy training material that will be used in the Empathy Project to build disability awareness, understanding, empathy and a school culture that is more inclusive. The Empathy Project aligns with British Columbia's redesigned curriculum that identifies three core competencies (Communication, Thinking and Personal and Social) that all students need to develop (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). One goal of the Personal and Social competency is to develop the students' abilities to understand and care about themselves and others, which aligns with the goal of The Empathy Project. The Empathy Project is aimed at Grade 8 students who have just entered high school, as they were identified as lacking empathy towards their peers with SEN. If students build empathy in their first year of high school, then the culture of the school may eventually be changed if empathy training is provided to every grade 8 class, year after year. Over time, this continued disability awareness could influence the school environment, educate students so they become better citizens (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012), become more understanding of diversity and help in eliminating prejudice and support tolerance for differences (Gasser, Malti & Buholzer, 2013).
Research Design

Research sites. In an effort to inform the design of an empathy training intervention for grade 8 students surrounding the struggles of students with SEN transitioning from elementary school to high school, two types of research sites were deemed necessary; the high school where the intervention will be implemented, and the elementary feeder schools for that high school.

Ocean View high school. A public high school in British Columbia was chosen as the primary research site for this study. In 2018, when this research was conducted, Ocean View high school (pseudonym) had over 900 students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The grade 8 students are on a linear system with their core subjects (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies), delivered as year-long courses. This differs from the students in grades 9 through 12 who are on a semestered, self-paced system (each course runs for a single semester). Ocean View applies an inclusive model of education (as stated in the School Act), therefore all students with SEN are integrated with other students without special needs whenever possible. The grade 8 students are paired with two grade 8 teachers that are responsible for the majority of their academic subjects (English, Science, Math and Social Studies). This essentially creates a ‘school within a school’ for the grade 8 students. This approach eases the transition for grade 8 students coming from an elementary school before being introduced to the semestered model. It allows their two core teachers to build relationships, give the students two adults they can turn to for support and reduces stress when transitioning into a much bigger environment than they are accustomed to.

Elementary feeder schools. Three of the "feeder" elementary schools for Ocean View High School were identified as additional research sites for this study because they house the majority of the grade 7 students that transition into Ocean View high school.
Feeder school A. Lake View (pseudonym) had an enrollment of approximately 370 students in Kindergarten through Grade 7 in 2018/19. Lake View has a rural setting, and serves students from families with diverse demographic backgrounds. Approximately 8% of Lake View students have an Aboriginal heritage. Special Educational Needs students are integrated into regular classes whenever possible and appropriate.

Feeder school B. Farm View (pseudonym) is bordered by farmland and was originally a High School. It transitioned into a middle school before district restructuring transitioned it into a K-7 elementary school. Farm View had an enrollment of approximately 350 students in Kindergarten through Grade 7 in 2018/19. Special Educational Needs students are integrated into regular classes whenever possible and appropriate.

Feeder school C. River View (pseudonym) is located in a small community and within a sub-division. The Kindergarten to grade 7 school had approximately 300 students in 2018/19. Special Educational Needs students are integrated into regular classes whenever possible and appropriate.

Participants

To understand the unique concerns and challenges of SEN students during the transition from elementary school to high school, the voice of both grade 7 and grade 8 students were sought to inform the design of the empathy training materials that became the Periodic Table of Disabilities. DBR stresses that various voices be heard, as this helps to "(a) ensure a balanced portrayal of the situation; (b) achieve respondent triangulation; and (c) create broader ownership of the project" (McKenney & Reeves, 2012, p. 97). As a result, this study surrounding the transition period included participants from both grade 7 and grade 8.
Grade 8 student participants (post-transition). Adolescents experiencing an educational transition into high school are struggling to find their identity during this developmental stage of their lives (Lohaus, Elben, Ball, & Klein-Hessling, 2004). Changes in building size, teaching styles, daily schedules and concerns surrounding peer relationships have been identified as the challenges grade 8 students face during transition (Maras & Aveling, 2006). Students with SEN face even greater challenges than their typically developing peers. Frederickson (2010) suggested that students with SEN are often less accepted by their peers, and that low social acceptance can often lead to victimization and bullying. It is the concerns and challenges of these students, who have recently transitioned to secondary school, that will contribute to the design of an effective intervention to build empathy. As a result, grade 8 students from Ocean View high school were invited to participate in this research.

Grade 7 student participants (pre-transition). To capture the students’ views prior to transition, it was important to include grade 7 student voices in order to understand what hopes and concerns these students were feeling. During pre-transition interviews by Maras and Aveling (2006), students with Autism Spectrum Disorder expressed feelings of anxiousness around new social situations and the possibility of not knowing anyone at the new school. Social concerns around bullying, making friends and getting lost are common among both students with SEN and typically developing students (Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007). It was important to include these voices when designing the empathy training intervention to show the commonalities among all students. As a result, grade 7 students from Ocean View high school feeder schools were invited to participate in this research

Participant Recruitment. For a grade 8 high school student to have been included in this study, they must have met the following criteria: (1) transitioned to Ocean View high school
in 2018; (2) currently attending Ocean View high school; (3) receiving their education in mainstream classrooms rather than a pullout program (Resource Room) as students in inclusive classrooms will have the greatest interaction with neuro-typical peers their age and grade.

For a grade 7 elementary student to have been included in this study, they must have met the following criteria: (1) transitioning to Ocean View high school in September 2019; (2) transitioning from one of the 3 feeder schools previously identified.

With ethics approval from the Vancouver Island University Research Ethics Board, school district administration permission and school principal and teacher permission were obtained for each research site. With permission, a recruitment package was sent to all grade 7 and grade 8 parents of the three elementary ‘feeder’ schools (Lake View, Farm View, River View) and Ocean View High School. The recruitment package contained a letter outlining the intent and use of the questionnaire, a consent/assent letter for the student and parent, instructions on how to complete the package and the questionnaire, information that described the study, its length, as well as any potential risks and benefits. Due to the potential stress of reliving past traumatic experiences, information about referral sources for counseling or therapy was also provided. Students were given two weeks to complete and return the questionnaire and consent/assent letter to a sealed drop box at each school.

**Using DBR to design an intervention to foster empathy among grade 8 students**

Interventions designed to break down stereotypes and increase knowledge are more likely to improve acceptance and attitudes towards individuals with SEN (Lloyd, Smith, Dempsey, Fischetti & Amos, 2017). Student perceptions about disabilities shape the way students with SEN are treated. While DBR was chosen to create an intervention to address this problem, it is important to note that this Master of Education research was part of a larger initiative to build
empathy for students with SEN as they transition from elementary to secondary school (the Empathy Project). The research focused specifically on the question: How can the concerns and challenges surrounding student transition contribute to the design of empathy training material for Grade 8 students? By applying the three phases of DBR to the overarching research question (McKenney & Reeves, 2012), the research design can be clearly visualized within this model (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**: Model for conducting DBR for The Empathy Project

**Phase 1: Analysis and exploration of bullying behaviour towards students with SEN** *(Figure 1; red)*. Phase 1 included ongoing observations and collaboration with colleagues throughout the school year and was conducted prior to starting this Master of Education research. As described within the Research Context section in Chapter 1, the researcher had witnessed
students with SEN who had transitioned from elementary to high school struggle with bullying, loneliness and victimization. Bullying among grade 8 students had also been a particular concern, witnessed by the researcher, administration, and grade 8 teachers. The issue of bullying had resulted in the creation of the Empathy Project, a workshop for all grade 8 students with the goal of fostering empathy, creating a caring learning environment, problem solving in peaceful ways, and valuing diversity and building relationships. Essentially the long-term goal of the Empathy Project has been to build a culture of inclusion and caring at Ocean View high school.

After starting the Master of Education program, Phase 1 continued with contextual analysis, literature review, and perceptions of the problem were refined as well as causes being explained (McKenney & Reeves, 2012). Through collaboration, a better understanding of the problem was sought, and a clear definition was the goal. When applied to the current study, through collaboration with colleagues, an understanding that neuro-typical students in their first year of high school lacked empathy towards their peers with SEN was defined as the problem. A literature review supported the finding that students with SEN are often susceptible to bullying (Bourke & Burgman, 2010), lack of meaningful friendships (Farmer & Farmer, 1996) and loneliness (Bossaert et al., 2012), especially during transitions (Hughes et al. 2013).

**Phase 2: Design and construction of the intervention (Figure 1; blue).** Phase 2 of the DBR represents the element that was the focus of this Master of Education research. During phase 2, a process was followed to arrive at a solution, a conceptual model was made, potential solutions were generated, explored and considered, and a prototype was developed. In DBR, there is no one size fits all model, rather each situation is treated uniquely and a potential solution is arrived at by careful examination of the most fitting approach for the specific educational purpose. For this research, a Periodic Table of Disabilities (Appendix A) was
created as the intervention, to contribute to the larger Empathy Project initiative. This prototype version of the intervention represents an early iteration and may go through several versions before a final solution is agreed upon. The design of the intervention may "lead to new insights, prompting new cycles" (McKenney and Reeves, 2012, p. 110).

**Phase 3: Evaluation and reflection of the intervention (Figure 1; green).** In phase 3, testing is conducted through design and intervention, and reflections on findings are examined to refine the design or intervention. This phase can lead to either redesign or conclusions. A better understanding of the intervention is a result of this phase. "Reflections on the findings help generate explanations for the results, and new or refined ideas concerning design and/or prototype solutions" (McKenney & Reeves, 2012, p. 134). The Periodic Table of Disabilities intervention will be introduced into the Empathy Project in fall 2020 as it evolves through evaluation and feedback. As the Periodic Table of Disabilities is introduced into the Empathy Project, student feedback will be collected and evaluated, leading to either redesign or conclusions about its educational use.

Design-Based Research as a methodological approach was chosen because bullying of students with SEN in grade 8 was identified as a major concern. Personal observations and the observations of my colleagues confirmed that an intervention was needed. The Empathy Project was conceived from these observations and collaborations. To build an effective intervention, it was clear that the perspective of students was needed both pre and post transition to inform the design of empathy training material. Student voices were collected at two time periods through separate questionnaires. Time 1 was 3 months into the school year for grade 8 students (post-transition); Time 2 was 3 months prior to transition for grade 7 students (pre-transition).
Data Collection

Within the DBR research design, data collection occurred during Phase 2 to inform the design and construction of the Periodic Table of Disabilities. As with many DBR studies, a mixed methods approach was used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell, 2013). A questionnaire was developed with both open-ended and closed-ended questions in an effort to answer the two research sub-questions;

1. What are the specific concerns of children with SEN who are about to transition to high school?
2. After transition, what, if any, challenges were encountered by students?

To design an effective intervention, the perspective of the students was required. Collecting the students’ voices allows a Design-Based researcher to understand what the students are feeling and experiencing, thereby allowing the researcher to implement interventions to address the problems students have identified.

Grade 8 data collection. Grade 8 students at Ocean View high school that agreed to participate in this research completed a 9 item questionnaire 3 months into the school year; 6 questions were quantitative using a Likert scale, while the other 3 questions were open-ended and qualitative (Appendix B). Students were given 2 weeks to complete and return the questionnaire to a sealed drop-box in their advisor room.

Grade 7 data collection. Grade 7 students at the 3 feeder elementary schools (Lake View, River View and Farm View) that agreed to participate in this research completed a 6 item questionnaire 3 months prior to transition; 5 questions were quantitative, using a Likert scale, while the other question was open-ended and qualitative (Appendix C). Students were given 2 weeks to complete and return the questionnaire to a sealed drop-box in or near their classrooms.
The Questionnaires

Questionnaires were chosen as the means for collecting data both pre and post transition. Anonymous questionnaires are a convenient and inexpensive way of gathering information from large groups of people (Mathers, Fox & Hunn, 2009). They can provide either quantitative or qualitative data, or both, as in this study. For the purposes of this research, paper-based questionnaires were sent to all grade 7 and grade 8 parents of the participating elementary schools and high school with an invitation to participate in this research anonymously.

The questionnaires were created from a review of transition literature and assessments, including the Social Support Scale for Children or People in my life (Harter, 1985), Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Scale (Asher & Coie, 1990), Student Perceptions of the transition from elementary to middle school (Akos, 2002), Youth Self report (Achenbach, 1991) and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 2001) (see Table 1). Consultation with school district psychologists guided the selection of items. Further feedback from other valued stakeholders (e.g. special education teachers, students with disabilities, and their parents) was gathered.
Table 1

Sample Instruments used to design Questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument:</th>
<th>Measure:</th>
<th>Example Question(s):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Support Scale for Children or People in my life</strong></td>
<td>Designed to assess and understand the social support or approval from parents, teachers, close friends and classmates.</td>
<td>- Some kids wish they had more friends at school. How often do you feel this way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Scale</strong></td>
<td>Designed to assess children’s feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction.</td>
<td>- It's hard for me to make friends.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Student Perceptions of the transition from elementary to middle school** | Designed to examine what questions/concerns students have about middle school, aspects of middle school students see as positive and what is important for students to know about coming to middle school. | - What do you think high school will be like?  
- How do you feel about coming to high school?  
- What specific concerns do you have about coming to high school? |
| **Youth Self report**                                | Designed to screen for behavioural and emotional problems in children and adolescents.                                                      | - I have been bullied at school.  
- I have witnessed someone being bullied at school.  
- I feel excepted for who I am by other kids at my new high school.                                         |
| **Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire**           | Designed as an emotional and behavioural screening questionnaire for children and adolescents.                                              | I have one or more friends at my new high school that I can turn to for help.                                   |

**Quantitative data.** Quantitative questions allowed for the combination of information across the groups and displayed wider trends allowing for generalization. Quantitative data also allowed comparison between groups (students with and without SEN). Quantitative questions on the questionnaire were measured on a four or five point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, never to all of the time, or very frequently to never. The Likert scale allowed participants to choose the option that best supported their attitudes, beliefs or opinions. Likert scales are also easily understood and do not require students to provide a concrete answer, which makes answering the question easier for the individual. Responses are also easily quantifiable, since a single number represents a student's response (Cohen, 2014).
**Qualitative data.** Qualitative questions allowed for examination of thoughts, feelings and experiences of individuals and helped in developing solutions that can be adapted to emerging problems. Qualitative analysis also helped in building a narrative around the quantitative data. Qualitative questions on the questionnaire allowed for open-ended responses that allowed the researcher to gather rich examples and case narratives that informed theory and interventions (Barab, 2014). The qualitative questions provided the opportunity for real human experiences, observations and student perspectives from both students with and without SEN.

**Data analysis.** This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data to "validate one form of data with the other form and to transform the data for comparison" (Crewell & Plano Clark, 2007, p.118). Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data on the same questionnaire made it easier for the participants to understand and the open-ended questions were linked to the closed-ended questions. The quantitative and qualitative data also increased the accuracy of the data collected and assisted in the analysis (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013). Quantitative data was calculated for frequency distribution to count the number of responses to each question. The two sets of data were then compared during analysis for similarities and differences in responses. In contrast, the qualitative data was analyzed for codes. Coding means translating your data into "symbols, words, numbers, letters or graphic markers to conduct analysis" (Vogt, Gardner, Haeffele & Vogt, 2014, p. 13). These codes were then developed into qualitative response categories, which were then quantified based on the presence of each coded response (Creswell, 2012). Data was then triangulated with the literature to check for similarities or differences and compared to researcher observations. The benefits of triangulation include "increasing confidence in research data, creating innovative ways of understanding a phenomenon, revealing unique findings, challenging or integrating theories, and providing a clearer understanding of the
problem" (Thurmond, 2001, p. 254). Patterns were identified and themes, based on the research questions, were reviewed with themes from literature around transitions.

**Ethical Issues**

Ethical issues of confidentiality and anonymity were addressed within the application to the Vancouver Island University Research Ethics Board. No identifying information was required on the anonymous questionnaires that grade 7 and 8 students were asked to complete. To reduce the risk of students being identified indirectly, confidentiality was addressed through data cleaning. Any identifiers were removed in order to clean the data. Where appropriate, names were replaced with pseudonyms and details in the data were modified to reduce the risk of a respondent being identified.

In Chapter 4, results of the questionnaires, both pre and post-transition are discussed along with how those results informed the design of The Periodic Table of Disabilities. Chapter 5 discusses those results and highlights the specific concerns of both grade 7 and grade 8 students with SEN.
Chapter 4: Results

This chapter discusses the results of the questionnaires both pre and post-transition. Data is examined for both neuro-typical students and students with SEN and compared to the existing research. The researcher then discusses how the students voice (results) informed the design of the Periodic Table of Disabilities intervention.

Participant Characteristics

A total of 347 students received an invitation to participate in this study, 168 grade 8 students from Ocean View high school, and 179 grade 7 students from the three participating feeder schools. Of the 168 grade 8 high school students invited to participate, 23 returned the questionnaire with signed consent/assent forms (12.84%). The sex distribution was 11 males and 12 females, 2 of which self-identified as having a Special Educational Need. The three feeder elementary schools combined returned 58 questionnaires with signed consent/assent forms (34.52%). The combined sex distribution of the elementary schools was 32 males and 25 females with 1 participant choosing not to specify their gender. Five individuals self-identified as having a Special Educational Need. A further 3 individuals did not specify if they had a Special Educational Need or left this section blank.

Post Transition Results

Neuro-typical student results. Examination of the data from grade 8 high school students indicated that most students, both male and female, were having a positive experience in their first three months of high school (see Table 2). They felt strongly supported, strongly accepted and believed that the adults would help them if they were being bullied or if they reported bullying. They also overwhelmingly felt safe everywhere in the school. Table 2 shows that both neuro-typical students and students with SEN have developed or maintained at least
one friendship. Neuro-typical students also overwhelmingly felt accepted and safe at their new high school and reported a lack of bullying or having witnessed bullying.

Table 2

Grade 8 Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Neuro-Typical</th>
<th>SEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some kids wish they had more friends at school.</td>
<td>1 0 3 6 11</td>
<td>1 1 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have 1 or more friends I can turn to for help.</td>
<td>14 7 0 0</td>
<td>2 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals:</td>
<td>1 14 9 6 11</td>
<td>1 3 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel excepted for who I am by other kids.</td>
<td>10 9 1 1</td>
<td>0 1 1 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anywhere that you feel unsafe?</td>
<td>1 22</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals:</td>
<td>10 9 2 23</td>
<td>0 1 1 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been bullied.</td>
<td>0 0 0 2 19</td>
<td>1 0 0 1 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have witnessed someone being bullied.</td>
<td>1 1 1 5 13</td>
<td>0 0 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals:</td>
<td>2 2 1 7 32</td>
<td>1 0 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 5 indicates strongly agree/very frequently; 1 indicates strongly disagree/never

SEN student results. The two students who identified as having a Special Educational Need had very different experiences (see Table 2). One grade 8 student with SEN wished they had more friends at school, suggesting that loneliness might be a concern. A study by Pijl, Frostad and Flem (2008) found that almost 30 percent of students with SEN have significantly fewer friends. As Tur-Kaspa (2002) suggested, the role of reciprocal friendships in combating loneliness is essential for students with SEN, especially during the transition period. These two students also had a slightly less favorable feeling of acceptance/belonging. The nature of their disability may have been a reason for not feeling accepted/belonging as suggested by Sparling (2012). Furthermore, students with difficulties in social skills and flexibility have difficulty fitting into peer groups and therefore lack a sense of belonging (Mandy et al., 2016). Boer, Pijl and Post (2013) argue that students with SEN often struggle with being accepted by peers and
acquiring friendships. Lack of acceptance is often cited as the reason behind bullying by many students with ASD (Mandy et al., 2016).

The student who felt they had been bullied very frequently also felt that if they reported the bullying, it "wasn't taken seriously until it escalated" (Table 3). This student also reported that they had been targeted and bullied by individuals in their class and "nobody stood up for me". This is consistent with research that indicates bystanders are present in bullying situations over 80% of the time, but intervene less than 20% of time (Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008). Of particular concern is that this student felt 'targeted' and 'bullied' and that "nobody stood up for me". While the nature of their disability is unknown, people with intellectual disabilities are at a greater risk of being victimized due to impairments in adaptive behaviour such as gullibility, unawareness of risk or poor judgment as well as other impairments in functioning or appearance; which can lead to anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, all of which are common among victims of bullying (Griffin, Fisher, Lane & Morin, 2019).

Table 3

Grade 8 Coded Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullying: Verbal</td>
<td>Aggressive communications such as teasing, name calling and threats.</td>
<td>&quot;comment were made about my body. I was called ugly&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;one girl was looking to other girl meanly and saying bad things to her&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Guy A and guy B constantly call each other name until they want to fight each other&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Acts of physical aggression such as hitting and kicking</td>
<td>&quot;I was chased around the classroom and no-one stood up for me&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I saw a person push another person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;My hair was pulled repeatedly by more than one girl&quot;.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pre-Transition Results

Neuro-typical student results. Grade 7 student data from River View, Lake View and Farm View was combined to reduce the chance of any student being identified. The majority of students, both male and female were a little worried (n=26, 45%) to a little excited (n=25, 43%) about their upcoming transition to high school. A smaller percent (n=15, 26%) were excited while very few were worried (n=6, 10%). The specific concerns most grade 7 students had about their transition to high school as outlined in Table 4, include being required to do more homework and finding classes. When asked if they had been bullied, the majority of both male and female students indicated they had not been bullied but had witnessed incidences of bullying. Witnessing bullying, like being the target of bullying, can also be associated with anxiety and depression (Midgett & Doumas, 2019). There are many reasons why bystanders choose not to intervene, including fear of repercussions, lack of knowledge, assuming someone else will intervene and lack of empathy; with empathy being a key predictor of defending behaviour (Menolascino & Jenkins, 2018).
Grade 7 students had varying perceptions on what they thought high school would be like (see Table 5). Most students felt it would be fun and exciting with more opportunities, but also felt they would have more homework and the work would be significantly harder, especially with all the different teachers. A few expressed concerns around making new friends and bullying, but overall, the majority of comments were positive with students looking forward to more freedom.

**Table 4**

**Grade 7 Descriptive Statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable:</th>
<th>Neuro-Typical</th>
<th>SEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Loneliness</strong></td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some kids wish they had more friends at school.</td>
<td>2 6 11 16 18</td>
<td>0 1 1 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals:</strong></td>
<td>2 6 11 16 18</td>
<td>0 1 1 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bullying</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been bullied.</td>
<td>0 2 6 18 28</td>
<td>1 2 0 2 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have witnessed someone being bullied.</td>
<td>0 3 21 23 6</td>
<td>1 1 2 1 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals:</strong></td>
<td>0 5 27 41 34</td>
<td>2 3 2 3 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Concerns:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being with older students</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with more school subjects</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting good grades</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing classes</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making new friends</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being required to do more homework</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing friends from previous school</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being able to do the work</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larger class sizes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding classes</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer pressure</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with different teachers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting support for academics</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting support for your disability</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: 5 indicates strongly agree/very frequently; 1 indicates strongly disagree/never*
Table 5

*Grade 7 Perceptions of High School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Difficult | "hard"  
"finding classes"  
"harder work", "more homework"  
"stressful in the beginning then it will get easier" |
| Engaging | "more opportunities"  
"fun"  
"excited for art" |
| Bullying | "more bullies"  
"not excited for the people a year older than me" |
| Independence | "spending time with friends"  
"meet new people"  
"opportunities to pick from"  
"more mature people"  
"more freedom" |
| Challenges | "I think it will be much larger"  
"scared of falling behind"  
"worried about making new friends", "hard time making friends".  
"rude people, mean teachers and overwhelming"  
"drugs"  
"I'm scared it's going to lower my self esteem"  
"people will talk me into bad stuff" |

**SEN student results.** Of the 5 students who identified as having a Special Educational Need, 3 of the 5 students felt that getting support for their disability was a concern (see Table 4). They also reported having been bullied frequently to occasionally as well as witnessing bullying. This may be an indicator that students who have been bullied, tend to report being bullied or witness bullying behavior more often (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). Bullying was also indicated as a common perception of what they felt high school would be like (see Table 5). The one grade 8 student who experienced bullying would agree that high school can be difficult for students with SEN when it comes to bullying. As mentioned previously, bullying of students
with SEN often occurs out of ignorance of their disability. Fredrickson (2010) reports that knowledge about disabilities has a positive influence on acceptance, even at a pre-school level. Interestingly, one student with SEN also reported wishing she had more friends at school. Having one good friend is just as good as having several friends, but many students with SEN lack even one good friend (Kendrick et al., 2012; Tur-Kaspa, 2002; Tur-Kaspa et al., 1999).

**Conclusion**

Neuro-typical students in Grade 8 overall reported having a positive experience during their first few months of high school. They felt safe and accepted in their new school and felt supported by staff and administration if any problems were to arise. Students with SEN had different experiences; but what they both shared was the desire to have more friendships. Such social participation is one of the pillars of inclusion. Conversely, loneliness among students with SEN is an indicator that lack of social participation is putting these students at risk socially, especially during the transition phase when social relationships are breaking up and new friendships are forming (Bossaert et al., 2012). One student with SEN felt accepted and did not experience any bullying while the other felt she was bullied constantly, that the bullying wasn't taken seriously and that her peers were not supportive of her when she was being bullied.

Neuro-typical students in grade 7 expressed sentiments that ranged from "a little worried" to "excited" about transitioning to High School. They expressed similar concerns such as finding classes and keeping up with the increased workload but overall felt that high school would be fun and exciting, presenting new opportunities. Students in grade 7 with SEN reported wishing they had more friends; reported being bullied and witnessing bullying and were concerned with being bullied when they transition to their new high school. Frederickson (2010) implies that research
indicates that acknowledging differences and commonalities with individuals with SEN is more likely to promote inclusion than failing to recognize or address those differences.

**Intervention Design**

A periodic table is organized according to elements, each with its own atomic numbers and symbol. Each element has its own cell in the periodic table with a symbol that is a shorthand notation for the element's name. Also contained in each cell is the atomic number and weight for the element. The Periodic Table is a common tool in science and familiar to most students. In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education also uses shorthand notations for categorization and funding of disabilities. Each school district must report on the number of students they have registered in each category. Since all districts are required to report students in each category, the Ministry of Education has data both provincially and locally for students with special educational needs. Combining the familiarity of a Periodic Table with the elements of SEN categorization and reporting, the idea of a Periodic Table of Disabilities (see Appendix A) was developed as an intervention tool to help promote disability awareness and empathy.
Chapter 5

Discussion

There were several themes that emerged throughout this Design-Based Research. Neurotypical students, both male and female, reported positive experiences in their first 3 months of high school. They indicated that the transition to high school was both smooth and easy for them. They had positive attitudes about the transition and towards their new school. The majority of neurotypical students in their last 3 months of elementary school looked favorably upon the upcoming transition, indicating that high school would give them more freedom and opportunities. However, the experiences of students with Special Educational Needs were different than their neurotypical classmates. Students with a Special Educational Need reported different worries than neurotypical peers; as well they experienced more bullying, witnessed more bullying behavior and expressed the wish for more friendships. The specific concerns of student with SEN, both pre and post transition will be discussed further in the sections below.

Specific concerns of Grade 7 student with SEN (pre-transition)

The goal of the first research question was to understand what the specific concerns Grade 7 students with SEN had about their transition into high school. Previous research suggested that students with SEN experience bullying (Pellegrini & Long, 2002), loneliness (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1999) and lack of meaningful friendships (Tipton et al., 2013). This aligns with data collected from some students with SEN in this study that were a little worried about their transition because their biggest concern was bullying and being with older students. When asked what they thought high school would be like, one individual with SEN responded "more bullies." Connors and Stalked (2007) found that more than half the children in their research experienced bullying at school. This research also found more than half of the students had experienced bullying and may associate being with new students, especially students who do not
know them, as a predictor of being bullied at high school. Pelligrini and Long (2002) suggested that in the initial transition, when peer groups are forming, an increase in bullying behavior, as a form of group acceptance, increases before it should decline, according to dominance theory, for neuro-typical students. Dominance theory suggests that relationship status is achieved through "agonistic and reconciliation interchanges between individuals and is renegotiated during times of transition when new groups are being formed" (Pelligrini & Long, 2002, p. 260). However, students with SEN are not neuro-typical and their disability may lead to low social-acceptance and being rejected by their peer group so the bullying may continue (Frederickson, 2010; Minsha, 2003). The effects of bullying, according to Bourke and Burgman (2010) can include anxiety, depression and lower self-esteem. Social isolation, by being excluded from peer groups or ignored by peers, may also occur (Dixon, 2006). For students with and without SEN, the main method for coping with bullying is through the emotional and physical support of friends (Bourke & Burgman, 2010; Kendrick et al., 2012). For individuals with SEN who may not have close friends, this is not a strategy they can use and a lack of a peer support system may further increase their vulnerability to bullying. Supporting this idea is the fact several grade 7 students in this study reported wishing they had more friends at school, indicating that they may not have a peer support system they can turn to. Raising disability awareness can educate students about disabilities, build empathy and possibly provide a protective barrier against bullying and victimization (Magnusson, Cal & Boissonnault, 2017; Katz & Porath, 2011; Frederickson, 2010; Lloyd, Smith, Dempsey, Fischetti & Amos, 2017). The benefits of including a disability awareness intervention into the curriculum, such as the Periodic Table of Disabilities (as part of the Empathy Project), may lead to positive attitudes towards students with SEN (Morin, Rivard, Crocker, Boursier & Carson, 2008).
Specific concerns of Grade 8 students with SEN (post-transition)

The goal of the second research question was to understand what, if any, challenges were encountered by Grade 8 students with SEN after their transition to high school. Two grade 8 students indicated they had a Special Educational Need and had vastly different experiences. One felt accepted for who she is while the other did not feel accepted. Both indicated they had at least 1 friend they could turn to for help but wished they had more. One felt bullied very frequently while one rarely felt bullied. The biggest difference was that the one student who reported being bullied very frequently felt that "no one stood up for me". There are many reasons why peers may not intervene in a bullying situation, including fear of being bullied themselves, lack of knowledge, assuming someone else will intervene and lack of empathy (Menolascino et al., 2018). Frederickson (2010) reported that more positive attitudes towards individuals with SEN can be fostered if "their 'special' category membership is clearly apparent to other children" (p. 7). Students with invisible disabilities (Autism Spectrum Disorder, Learning Disability, Hard of Hearing, etc) are often the target of bullying or teasing because the disability is not as obvious as someone in a wheelchair for example (Nowicki, 2006; Shalev et al., 2016). Disability awareness programs are a way of supporting acceptance, understanding and increasing knowledge of disabilities (Lloyd et al., 2017). Before a student can focus on their education, they need to feel secure physically, emotionally and socially. Social and emotional learning can be fostered through classroom and school wide interventions (Katz & Porath, 2011). The Periodic Table of Disabilities aims to achieve positive attitudes, reduce stereotypes and increase tolerance for differences so that students with SEN can feel socially included. The Periodic Table of Disabilities and the Empathy Project also align with the BC core competency
of social responsibility. Katz and Porath (2011) suggest there is a link between social and emotional development and academic success for all students.

**Informing the design of the Empathy Project**

The Empathy Project was developed after observations by the researcher and colleagues identified a lack of empathy in grade 8 students towards their peers with SEN. In collaboration with colleagues, a single class workshop was given to all grade 8 students with the goal of building greater understanding and empathy. To fully understand the challenges students with SEN in their first year of high school face, it was apparent that the voice of students was needed, both prior to and shortly after the transition to high school. A questionnaire was developed, sourced from established instruments to capture the voice of students both pre-transition and post-transition to High School to design training material for grade 8 students.

Originally, it was thought that a storyboard would be the intervention that would be added to the Empathy Project workshop. A storyboard is a graphic organizer that allows you to share your vision of the story with others. Taking the voice of the students and storyboarding them to show similarities and challenges to aid in empathy training was the initial goal. However, after reading the one grade 8 students' account of being bullied and "no body helping", the researcher felt that a graphic organizer would not aid in empathy training. Disability awareness programs like the Jennifer Katz (2012) Respecting Diversity Program have been shown to improve student attitudes and empathy. By educating students about different disabilities, they become more accepting and understanding of individual differences. Most typically developing student are not educated on disabilities so they are not understanding, accepting and empathetic to those students with disabilities. Incorporating disability awareness into the curriculum will have benefits on inclusion and the overall school environment. Rather
than a storyboard, what emerged from the data was the need for disability awareness and the idea of developing a Periodic Table of Disabilities to support the Empathy Project began to develop.

**Periodic Table of Disabilities.** The intervention that emerged from the questionnaire data was a Periodic Table of Disabilities for grade 8 students. This training material highlights the various disability categories in British Columbia, funding support, and prevalence both Provincially and locally. Students can be educated about what the disability is, the characteristics and what challenges they may develop a more positive attitude towards peers with SEN as they learn to reduce stereotypes about disabilities (Lloyd et al., 2017). This awareness training material is adaptable to any school district in British Columbia (Provincial data will remain the same, but local data will need to be changed). It will also be a useful teaching tool for Learning Assistance and Resource teachers (most LA and Resource teachers are unaware of the funding model), School Administrators (administration set the climate of the school through their policies) and classroom teachers. Teacher's greatly influence students through their actions and words, whether they realize it or not (Campbell, 2006). Teacher's with a greater understanding of disabilities and a positive attitude towards inclusion are more confident in their ability to educate students with SEN, in turn, creating a more inclusive and accepting classroom (Campbell, Gilmore & Cuckelly, 2003). Teachers who are uncomfortable educating students with SEN can develop negative attitudes, leading to lower expectations and fewer learning opportunities for students with SEN (Campbell et al., 2003). With the new BC curriculum and an emphasis on social responsibility, The Periodic Table of Disabilities can not only help raise awareness, but foster empathy so students can understand and care about themselves and others.
Limitations

This study had several important limitations, and the results should be interpreted with these limitations in mind. This current study only received 2 questionnaires from students that identified as SEN in grade 8, and 5 from students that identified as SEN in grade 7. While the sample size is small, the inclusion of qualitative questions allowed the account of student experiences to tell a story of their lived experiences. More opportunities should be provided to give voice to students with SEN. In future studies, interviews with grade 8 students with SEN, instead of a voluntary questionnaire, might provide richer descriptions of their lived experiences. Furthermore, it would be valuable to follow up with the grade 8 students with SEN prior to the end of the year to see if their experiences had changed over the course of the year.

Additionally, participants were drawn from only one high school. Experiences are influenced by local culture and the culture of individual schools. It is possible that a different grade 8 group of students at a different high school would have responded differently, depending on how that school supports, or does not support a culture of inclusion. Further research with more diverse schools is necessary.

Finally, the current study included participants who self-identified as having a Special Educational Need. It is possible that many students who do not identify or do not know they have a Special Educational Need were excluded from the data. One way to address this would be to directly invite students within the various Special Education categories to participate in research, prioritizing the voice of these individuals.
**Implications for Future Consideration**

The current DBR study sought to create a usable resource, from the perspective of students, as part of a larger initiative (The Empathy Project) aimed at building a culture of inclusion at a high school in BC. The original idea of creating a storyboard to highlight similarities and difference evolved into The Periodic Table of Disabilities to teach disability awareness and to promote empathy. Empathy is a strong predictor of bystander intervention (Menolascino & Jenkins, 2018). Building empathy in students should be central in any intervention program. The overall findings indicate that students with SEN about to transition into high school experience bullying and worry about bullying in their new high school. Before a student can focus on their education, they must feel secure and accepted in other aspects of their life. Without social inclusion, academic success suffers (de Leew, de Boer & Minnaert, 2017). These negative outcomes are contradictory to the aims of inclusive education.

This study shows that post transition, some students with SEN are still experiencing the same negative outcomes that inclusion was supposed to eliminate, such as embracing diversity and differences and promoting equal opportunities for all. Students who have recently transitioned experience bullying and lack support from their peers. If the goal of inclusion is to foster acceptance, understanding and opportunities to achieve their potential, then disability awareness is necessary because as Frederickson (2010) reported in a study of 8-11 year olds "when explanatory information about students with Autism was presented by a professional (teacher or doctor), the willingness to interact with students increased" (p.8). School wide interventions in the first year of high school could change the culture of the school to be more supportive of inclusion and understanding of individuals with SEN. As awareness of disabilities increases, students may become less likely to passively observe if bullying occurs.
Conclusions

The school culture sets the tone for individual classrooms. If the school takes the initiative to implement disability awareness as part of an Empathy Project for students in their first year of high school, then students with SEN will have a better chance of peer acceptance as attitudes begin to change and stereotypes about disabilities are eliminated. Like other studies, this research suggests that students with SEN face greater challenges as they transition to high school and that interventions targeted during that first year of transition may change attitudes and beliefs and make that transition easier. Teachers, students and schools will find disability awareness a valuable resource as part of a larger discussion around inclusion and equitable education. To make individuals with SEN feel truly included, both socially and academically, we must celebrate our differences and highlight our similarities and not be afraid to have discussions around disabilities.
References


Griffin, M.M., Fisher, M.H., Lane, L.A., & Morin, L. (2019). Their own words: Perceptions and experiences of bullying among Individuals with intellectual and developmental...


Seaman, M. (2012). Beyond anti-bullying programs: Learn how to foster empathy within your curriculum to increase the emotional intelligence of middle schoolers. *Journal of the New Jersey Education Association, 85*, 22-24


Appendix B: Grade 8 Questionnaire

Gender _____ I have a Special Education Designation __Yes __No

1. I feel accepted by my peers at my new high school for who I am.
   - Strongly Agree - Agree - Disagree - Strongly Disagree

2. I have 1 or more friends at my new high school I can turn to for help.
   - Strongly Agree - Agree - Disagree - Strongly Disagree

3. Some kids wish they had more friends at school. How often do you feel this way?
   - Never - Almost never - Sometimes - Almost all the time - All of the time

4. I have been bullied at my new high school.
   - Very Frequently - Frequently - Occasionally - Rarely - Never

5. I have witnessed someone being bullied at my new high school.
   - Very Frequently - Frequently - Occasionally - Rarely - Never

6. If you report bullying to an adult, what do you think is most likely to happen.
   - Nothing will be done
   - The adult will speak to the bully and make things better
   - The adult will speak to the bully and make things worse
   - Other

7. Is there anywhere in your new high school you feel unsafe?
   - Yes - No

   If yes, please explain ________________________________________________________

8. What can adults do better to help you feel safer at your new high school?

   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
9. Can you briefly describe an incident in which you observed someone else being bullied or an incident in which you felt you were bullied at your new high school? (do not include names and use the back of this paper if you need more space).
Appendix C: Grade 7 Questionnaire

Gender __________ I have a Special Education Designation: ___Yes ___No

1. How do you feel about coming to High School? (check all that apply)
   - Worried
   - A little worried
   - A little excited
   - excited

2. What specific concerns do you have about coming to High School? (check all that apply)
   - Being with Older students
   - Dealing with more school subjects
   - Getting good grades
   - Changing classes
   - Making new friends
   - Being required to do more homework
   - Missing friends from previous school
   - Other (please explain below)

   - Not being able to do the work
   - Larger Class size
   - Finding classes
   - Bullying
   - Peer pressure
   - Dealing with different teachers
   - Getting support for academics
   - Getting support for your disability

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

3. I have been bullied at school.
   - Very frequently
   - Frequently
   - Occasionally
   - Rarely
   - Never

4. I have witnessed someone being bullied at school.
   - Very frequently
   - Frequently
   - Occasionally
   - Rarely
   - Never

5. Some kids wish they had more friends at school. How often do you feel this way?
   - Never
   - Almost never
   - Sometimes
   - Almost all the time
   - All of the time

5. What do you think High School will be like? (use the back of this page if you require additional space)