

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Autism and education: Advancing inclusion through the arts

By Patricia Douglas, Ph.D.



Why this research is important

The World Report on Disability

http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/en/

documents a stark picture of marginalization, under- or unemployment, poverty, barriers to education and health, violence and discrimination for the 15.6% of the global population who lives with a disability or chronic health condition. Access to and meaningful inclusion in education—a basic human right—is identified as key in change efforts. This research addresses educational barriers and furthers our understanding of what is necessary to advance inclusion. Using

What you need to know

In the midst of calls by the United Nations, disability rights organizations and local governments for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of life, education systems struggle with barriers to meaningful inclusion for persons with autism. Students commonly face bullying, isolation or segregation, while parents and teachers grapple with limited resources and strained relationships within school communities and between schools, school boards and families. Special education categories define disabilities such as autism as a deficit—a problem that needs fixing—inadvertently reproducing marginalization and educational disparity. Little is known about experiences of exclusion and belonging from the perspective of students with autism and those that work with and care for and about them. This project uses a critical disability studies approach, understanding inclusion as a social justice issue and autism as an integral and valuable part of human diversity, to address this gap in knowledge. This is particularly important in light of the current educational landscape and sharply rising rates of autism diagnosis.

a disability studies approach, the project focuses on the knowledge and experience of persons with autism through key informant interviews and digital storytelling workshops. This addresses a gap in knowledge about autism and inclusion and fosters collaborations between persons with autism, families and school communities to find out what's working and what's not, and to intervene into exclusionary policy and practice. Given sharply rising rates of autism diagnosis and reports of

bullying and isolation in schools for students with autism, this research is pressing.

How the research is done

Currently, I am in phase one of my research, doing key informant interviews with people with autism, educators and families in Toronto, Ontario, to learn more about experiences of schooling. In October and December, I am holding digital storytelling workshops with these same groups, where participants will be supported to make their own short first-person films about their experiences of autism and schooling. Workshops provide participants an immersive experience where they have the opportunity to explore their experiences, speak back to systems, discover commonly shared assumptions and work across differences. Part of this phase of research is also a short documentary that follows the research process, documents how inclusion unfolds in the space of the workshop and explores the power of the arts to enact change. In phase two of the study, which will take place next fall in Brandon, Manitoba, and Toronto, Ontario, professional development forums for educators and policy makers will be held. These forums will incorporate interview findings and digital stories, and will measure the impact of first-person stories on educators' understandings of autism and inclusion.

How this research can be used

This research can be used to fill gaps in knowledge about autism and inclusion, shift negative perceptions and advance inclusion. Findings will be made available to academics and teachers through presentations at academic and professional conferences, and through articles in academic journals with links to digital stories. A related book project on disability studies in education in Canada is also planned. New knowledge will also be shared with educators and policy makers through professional development forums in Manitoba and Ontario. The documentary will be entered into film festivals in order to

bring new knowledge to a general audience interested in disability and family stories, human rights and inclusion.

About the researcher

Patricia Douglas is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at Brandon University. She specializes in critical disability studies, which views disability as a social justice issue rather than an individual problem in need of fixing. She focuses on critical disability histories as well as the lived experience of persons with disabilities through critical and interpretive approaches and the power of the arts to transform stereotypes, speak back to exclusionary systems, and enhance access to life.

douglasp@brandonu.ca

Keywords

inclusion; social justice education; critical disability studies; arts-based methods; collaborative research

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Research Connection is a periodical publication intended to provide information about the impact of Brandon University's academic research, creative activities and expertise. This summary is supported by the Office of Research Services and by the Centre for Aboriginal and Rural Education Studies, Faculty of Education.

<http://www.brandonu.ca/research-connection>

This research project has been approved by the Brandon University Research Ethics Committee.