Michelle Zhang 20479259

Social Inclusion Support Plan

Social inclusion is conducive to student wellbeing and development of prosocial skills (DEC, 2015), yet many students with disabilities experience loneliness caused exclusion (Woodgate et al., 2020).
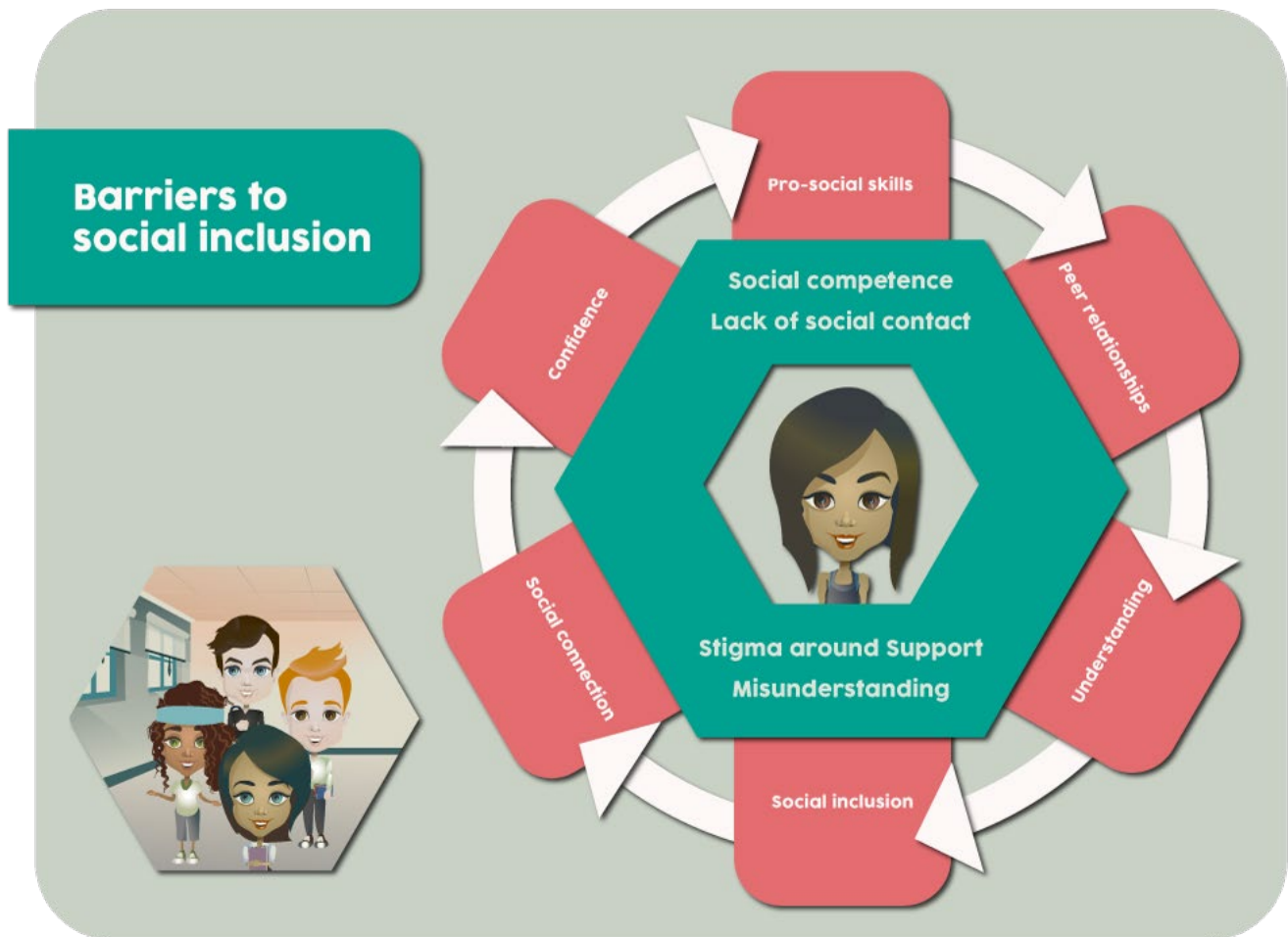

(Zhang, 2021)

Socially inclusive learning environments remove barriers to inclusion to enable students to develop mutually beneficial and meaningful peer relationships which promote prosocial behaviours.

Social inclusion supports formation of mutually beneficial peer relationships for students with/without disabilities (Lyons et al., 2016; Woodgate et al., 2020; Ziegler et al., 2020). Peer-to-peer programs partner students with and without disabilities, to facilitates peer relationships, increases participation, mutual understanding, attendance and academic performance for *all* participants, evidencing feelings of belonging for students with disabilities (Ziegler et al., 2020), fostering *connectedness* for wellbeing (DEC, 2015), which is imperative to adolescent development as they move towards independence (Lyons et al., 2016).

The key inclusion barrier is the cyclical nature of stigma around disability and students' social competence (Figure 2) as an impact of minimised social contact. Whilst students with physical disabilities are more likely to be included by peers, those with invisible/intellectual disabilities experienced more exclusion; directly related to communication, socio-emotional regulation, and peers lacking knowledge about students' disabilities; increasing with the severity of students' disabilities (Lyons et al., 2016; Woodgate et al., 2020). Other barriers include relationships limited to the classroom, and discomfort around the stigma/dependency on support (Woodgate et al., 2020)

Figure 2

(Zhang, 2021)

Peer relationships enable foundations of shared interest, mutual support and understanding, affording students skills, confidence, and knowledge to advocate for social inclusion, challenging stigma around students with disabilities and one-way support hierarchies (Woodgate et al., 2020; Ziegler et al., 2020).

Social inclusion support is consistent across classrooms, outdoors and beyond the school, seeking to build positive relationships, improve participation and encourage community engagement. Peers were more inclined towards inclusion when provided with support (Woodgate et al., 2020). Understanding students' strengths, interests, support needs, and disability is paramount for effective interventions, from class participation to supporting diverse relationship navigation (Lyons et al., 2016).

Teachers and support staff can provide participation opportunities and disability education to promote inclusion in classrooms and beyond (Woodgate et al., 2020), by facilitating group work to integrate content with socio-emotional learning, engaging formal and informal peer-to-peer programs including sports, electives, lunchtime activities, excursions, digital participation and community volunteering (Ziegler et al., 2020), and ensuring they respect student autonomy and agency in all school contexts.

Social inclusion effectiveness is evaluated by observing the presence of barriers to inclusion (**Figure 2**) before and after implementation, ensuring that students are active participants in the cycle of inclusion (**Figure 3**). Any adaptations required should be addressed for reflection and review.

Figure 3

(Zhang, 2021)

References

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