

# Inclusion is Not Assimilation: The Importance of Identity in Education

By Dr. Shelley Moore, Jan. 2025

Inclusion in education has changed a lot over time. It's no longer just about having everyone in the same classroom; it's about making sure everyone feels like they belong and that their identities are recognized. Dr. Shelley Moore, in her "Five Moore Minutes" video, points out that inclusion shouldn't mean forcing people to fit into a dominant group. Instead, it should create spaces where different identities can live together and succeed. Research supports this idea, showing that recognizing and valuing the diverse identities of students helps them do better socially and academically.

One example shared by Dr. Moore is about a young refugee student who felt lost when he first arrived in Canada. He started to feel like he belonged when he met another student who spoke his language and shared his culture. This shows how important it is for students to connect with others who have similar backgrounds. Studies show that when students form these connections, they gain social support and resilience, which help them adjust and succeed in school. Being able to speak one's home language is not just a preference; it's a crucial part of identity that affects how students feel about belonging and their emotional health.

Dr. Moore also emphasizes that inclusion shouldn't require people to hide who they are or fit into mainstream norms. Research indicates that when students feel pressured to assimilate, they can feel alienated and exhausted, which harms their academic performance and mental health. For example, LGBTQ2+ students often face challenges in environments that don't recognize their identities, leading to anxiety and lower grades. Therefore, creating an inclusive environment means allowing all students to express their identities openly without fear of judgment or exclusion, including students with Disabilities.



Disability is an important part of this discussion. The understanding of Disability has shifted from a medical viewpoint to a social one, which values identity and community among people with Disabilities. Researchers argue for redefining Disability in ways that promote appreciation and belonging among both Disabled and non-disabled individuals. This perspective helps to reduce isolation and emphasizes the importance of social relationships.

Developing a positive Disability identity is also crucial for students with Disabilities. Many students lack positive representation and resources during their early years, which can hinder their understanding of their identity until adulthood. This highlights the need for schools to offer resources and support to help students with Disabilities explore and affirm their identities from a young age. Additionally, Disability should be seen as part of social justice efforts, alongside other identity and diversity driven initiatives, to create inclusive environments that respect and celebrate all identities.

As we work towards inclusive education, it's vital to understand that true inclusion means celebrating diversity and building communities where everyone feels safe and valued. This means supporting students in embracing their identities and ensuring that all members of the school community, including students with Disabilities, feel respected. By focusing on inclusion rather than assimilation, we can create educational spaces where everyone can thrive, enriching the learning experience for all. Inclusion is about creating environments where students can be their true selves, which is especially important for those with Disabilities, who often face challenges in feeling like they belong. By promoting positive Disability identities and fostering communities of identity, educators can help all students feel valued, respected, and empowered to learn from one another.



## References (created with support from Scite AI)

Cicero, E. and Wesp, L. (2017). Supporting the health and well-being of transgender students. *The Journal of School Nursing*, 33(2), 95–108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059840516689705>

Civitillo et al. "Disentangling the effects of perceived personal and group ethnic discrimination among secondary school students: The protective role of teacher–student relationship quality and school climate" *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* (2021) doi:10.1002/cad.20415

Dirth and Branscombe "The social identity approach to disability: Bridging disability studies and psychological science." *Psychological Bulletin* (2018) doi:10.1037/bul0000156

Khalili "Prediction of academic well-being based on school atmosphere and identity, family communication patterns and social-emotional competence of secondary school students in Sari city" (2023) doi:10.61838/kman.jayps.4.10.20

Laiti et al. "LGBTQ+ Students' Experiences of Junior High School Nursing in Finland: A Qualitative Study" *The Journal of School Nursing* (2020) doi:10.1177/1059840520910796

Mueller "'I Didn't Know People With Disabilities Could Grow Up to Be Adults': Disability History, Curriculum, and Identity in Special Education" *Teacher Education and Special Education* (2021) doi:10.1177/0888406421996069

Najjar et al. "Experiences of Arab heritage youth in US schools and impact on identity development" *School Psychology International* (2019) doi:10.1177/0143034319831057

Nario-Redmond et al. "Redefining Disability, Re-imagining the Self: Disability Identification Predicts Self-esteem and Strategic Responses to Stigma" *Self and Identity* (2013) doi:10.1080/15298868.2012.681118

Preusche and Göbel "Does a Strong Bicultural Identity Matter for Emotional, Cognitive, and Behavioral Engagement?" *Education Sciences* (2021) doi:10.3390/educsci1201000

Pugach et al. "Disability and the Meaning of Social Justice in Teacher Education Research: A Precarious Guest at the Table?" *Journal of Teacher Education* (2020)  
doi:10.1177/0022487120929623

Russell et al. "Safe Schools Policy for LGBTQ Students and commentaries" *Social Policy Report* (2010) doi:10.1002/j.2379-3988.2010.tb00065.x

Turner et al. "Understanding aggression and victimization: Negative binomial modelling with supportive school climate, mental health, and social identity mediation." *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* (2018) doi:10.1037/tps0000174

Vemde et al. "Classroom Predictors of National Belonging: The Role of Interethnic Contact and Teachers' and Classmates' Diversity Norms" *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (2021)  
doi:10.1007/s10964-021-01430-2