

Inclusive Education - A Parent's Perspective

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There is a saying about walking in another person's shoes to truly understand what they're about. In the case of understanding why parents of children with disabilities are choosing an Inclusive Education for their children, it may be a matter of really thinking about what it means to walk in your own shoes and allowing someone else to walk in them too.

Leave disability aside for a moment and reflect on the far-reaching impact of school years on children in general. These are the years when we form our own personal identities and our sense of our own worth, in response to the feedback we receive from others. They are years when we form many friendships. Some friendships prove ephemeral, but provide us with valuable 'practice' in relationships; practice in communication, in compromise and in sharing interests, ideas and feelings. Some friendships endure, helping to sustain and support us through life's trials. Throughout our typical thirteen years of classroom activities, we make countless acquaintances and have to learn to work with and relate to people we don't know well. We learn to deal with the come-and-go of relationships, the elation of popularity and the pain of losing friends and other crises. We learn about the appropriate behaviour for a wide range of circumstances. We acquire skills both intentionally and incidentally. And while we are doing all this our families are also making acquaintances or friends at the school gate, the sporting fields or the school canteen.

Then we speak about "education". What we usually mean is more obvious to all as the work of schools: the learning of a broad curriculum of knowledge and skills deemed appropriate by our community. But the outcomes parents seek for their children through their school years have as much to do with the 'hidden curriculum' as they do with the obvious and intentional educational goals.

They want happy, well adjusted, confident children who have friends, can communicate effectively with a diverse range of people they encounter in life, are accepted and valued in their community and who have acquired the skills and knowledge they need to be able to participate in the workforce and lead fulfilled lives.

None of this changes if your child happens to have a disability.

In fact, if a child experiences difficulties in communication, or mobility, or vision or any other aspect of their ability to do the things the rest of us take for granted, the vast and varied range of relationships and opportunities offered by the typical school become even more vital to the achievement of these goals. Children who have difficulty communicating need more, not fewer opportunities to communicate with other children and to learn the unwritten 'rules' of interaction with others. Children who learn more slowly need more, not less time being immersed in the unwritten 'rules' of the way things are done, the routines of an ordinary day.

Children who have traditionally been regarded by the community as having little value, need more, not fewer opportunities to meet others on an individual basis, in ordinary environments, where they can become known by their names, and as who they are, rather than by their label, and as who people think they are.

The valued and typical outcomes I want for my son can only be achieved in valued and typical surroundings. He is Alex. He will not spend his life being perpetually regarded as a 'client', a 'patient', a 'resident', let alone an 'I.M.', an 'I.O.' or an 'I.S.' He will grow up with children who know him as Alex, and see the value, the gifts, the person in him. For us, the choice of an Inclusive Education is only one part of our vision of an included, valued life for Alex.

It is a very important part, but still only one part of a whole of life direction to which our family has committed itself.

For that reason, I strongly object to the notion that the "professional judgement" of education personnel is the only valid way to decide a child's school placement. These judgements are often based on the more narrow definition of 'education', and they are most definitely based on our common community assumptions (mostly unconscious ones) about what people with disabilities are and what they need.

The first thing parents discover when they learn their child has a disability, is the amount of unconscious 'baggage' they carry about disability. The next thing they learn is how wrong most of those unconscious assumptions are.

Where the community makes the assumption that the needs of people with disability can only be met by specially trained personnel, parents soon discover, having been left with no specialist training and often little support, that the crucial factors are knowing their child well, valuing their individual gifts and strengths and finding out what particular things 'work' for them.

Where the community sets up segregated and congregating settings for people with disabilities, families discover that their child thrives when embraced fully and included naturally by their extended family, friends and neighbourhood. They are starting to recognise those separate settings for what they are: a rejection of their children from a life in the community which others will take for granted.

That is why it is so important to think about the shoes you walk in. Most aspects of an ordinary valued life are so taken for granted that people are totally unaware what they deny to people with disabilities when they segregate and congregate them. Our insistence on seeing disability first means we never see people. The issue is so crystal clear for me that I often wonder why others don't see it: what is not good enough for everyone else is not good enough for Alex.

In practical terms, an Inclusive Education requires that educators follow through on what has been preached for years; that all children learn at different rates and in different ways; that all Children are valuable, and have strengths, gifts and needs. Appropriate educational theories and strategies have been around for years, like using multiple intelligences, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, whole class projects, etc. Used effectively, these can build a classroom where children can enjoy learning in different ways, at different rates, and be supported in that process by others. They may require some teachers to move outside their comfort zones, as may the inclusion of children with disabilities. Nevertheless the evidence of the value of each has been steadily accumulating for years.

Obviously the adequate support of children with disabilities is an issue. Parents do not want "mainstream dumping", as it has been called, any more than teachers do.

They do want teachers to acknowledge the right of their children to the rich rewards of a typical experience of school. They do want teachers to take on the challenge of teaching all their students effectively. But they will, if allowed, prove a valuable ally to teachers in any fight to ensure that adequate resources are allocated to children not settings.

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