

What is Inclusion? What's Not?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

What is inclusion? Why are more people concerned about it? And why now?

Let's start with the last question. Some of us have been agitating for the inclusion of children and adults with disabilities in all areas of society for many years. (In my case, for 24 years, after my son, Benjamin, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy shortly after birth.) At that time, some people saw inclusion as a fad—the “wild” idea of “radical” parents—that would pass. But it wasn't and it didn't.

Why are some people concerned about inclusion? For many reasons, in no particular order. Because some parents want the same life for their children with disabilities that their children without disabilities have. Because some people embrace the spirit and intent of federal laws (Developmental Disabilities Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Americans with Disabilities Act, and others) that affirm the full participation of people with disabilities in all areas of society and/or prohibit discrimination based on disability. Because some people recognize that the invisibility of people with disabilities (in schools, community activities, employment, etc.) is *not* the result of one's *choice* to be invisible, but the outcome of systemic efforts by others to “help” people that resulted in segregation in special, separate programs. Because some people with disabilities and/or their families are refusing to accept segregation. Many people recognize the abject immorality of segregating, devaluing, and marginalizing people based on a characteristic—inclusion represents the polar opposite of institutionalizing people with disabilities, a practice that represented conventional wisdom for decades. (The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* is unequivocal: “Segregated facilities are inherently unequal.”)

So inclusion—in schools, communities, employment, and other places—is a hot topic for some. But many activities that are *described* as inclusive are not! (See my article on “Mainstreaming,

Integration, Inclusion: Is There a Difference?” on my website.)

It's estimated that 20 percent of adults and 10 percent of children have medical diagnoses that are categorized as disabilities. Those numbers represent the “natural proportion” of people with disabilities in our society. An inclusive environment is one that replicates the natural proportion. So in a classroom of 20 students, for example, there should be no more than two students with disabilities (10 percent). If the percentage of people with disabilities is greater than the natural proportion in any environment or activity, it is not inclusive; it represents an artificial environment. Inclusion means

all people, in all environments, all the time; or as others have simply and eloquently said, “All means all.”

When we label something as inclusive but it's *not* (because it does not reflect the natural proportion), this doesn't simply represent a misuse of language; there can be harmful consequences, not only for people with disabilities, but for our society, as well. Let's look at some examples before going further.

A school principal says his school is inclusive because students with disabilities are *in the building* (but are isolated in “that room” at the end of the hallway). They don't participate in any way with students who do not have disabilities. Physical proximity *is* inclusion, in the mind of the principal (but it's not).

Someone shared info about an “inclusive cheerleading program for disabled girls” (their words, not mine). If it's “for disabled girls” then it's not inclusive. In this “program,” girls with disabilities were *not* part of the school's “regular” cheerleading squad; they were members of a parallel (separate) squad just for girls with disabilities. This is not inclusion. Could high school girls *without* disabilities join this group? No.

Human service agencies provide disability services that are mandated by state and federal laws. Their programs (funded by tax dollars) are, by their nature, special and segregated since people *without* disabilities

If others say one thing, but do another, you are lying to yourself if you don't listen to their actions.

Don Miguel Ruiz

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are not eligible for these programs. Some agencies are now promoting “community inclusion” activities: separate recreational programs (including Special Olympics), dances only for adults with disabilities who receive services, etc. These may be located “in the community” (as opposed to an institution), but they do not represent “community inclusion”—people *without* disabilities are not participants.

Organized religion is not immune. (Christians might ask, “What *would* Jesus do?” I don’t recall segregation of people with disabilities in the Bible—just the opposite.) “Special needs” programs for children and/or adults with disabilities are often the norm, but the religious entity considers itself inclusive. Examples abound in other areas of society—child care/preschools, recreational activities, clubs, separate proms at high schools, and more—that claim to be inclusive, but are not.

Finally, special, separate college programs have been created for students with disabilities that essentially replicate the segregated life-skills classes of public schools. These are called inclusive, but are not. Students *without* disabilities are not in these classes.

What are the outcomes when well-intentioned people *believe* their actions are progressive, but they’re actually regressive? Any separate, parallel, segregated activity inadvertently sends harmful messages and/or reinforces prejudicial stereotypes: “they” (people with disabilities) don’t belong, aren’t good enough, should be with their own kind, and more. In addition, the apparent “success” of any separate program breeds more of the same, as others think this must be the “right thing to do.” The marginalization, devaluation, and isolation of people with disabilities continues. Those who promote separate, segregated activities as inclusive pat themselves on the back for their good deeds. People with disabilities are supposed to feel grateful that they’re “allowed” to participate. The dangerous “us/them” mentality continues; social justice, equality, and true inclusion remain an elusive dream.

We would never allow this for other populations. Would a predominantly “white” school create a

separate, parallel cheerleading squad for African-American girls? Or vice-versa: would a predominantly “black” school sanction a separate program for “white” students? Would a college authorize a separate, parallel classroom only for students from the LGBT community? Think of other examples.

The issue *is not* whether people choose to self-segregate. We routinely join with others like ourselves based on shared interests: hobby clubs, park and rec activities, etc. The issue *is* when we create separate, parallel, segregated activities and call these inclusive; and in the process, exclude people with disabilities from ordinary and truly inclusive activities.

Instead of creating a special cheerleading squad, sports activity, or anything else, why not modify the “rules” to allow participation by all? That’s what happened when the U.S. military and professional sports were racially-integrated in the 1940s, when women’s military opportunities were expanded in the 1970s, and so forth. Again, think of other examples. If a group doesn’t want to alter the competitive nature of its activity, for example, we can create a non-competitive, inclusive activity for all. Many families would like their children (*with and without* disabilities) to be in inclusive activities where one’s participation is *not* dependent solely on skill level.

People with disabilities and/or families bear some responsibility for this situation. If, for example, parents didn’t *allow* their children with disabilities to participate in segregated activities, they’d “go out of business.” Hegemony is at work: “Dominance of one social group over another, such that the ruling group acquires some degree of consent from the subordinate...” [from <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hegemony>].

Knowing what’s inclusive is simple: is the activity open to all and does it reflect the natural proportion (no more than 20 percent adults with disabilities and/or 10 percent children with disabilities)? Let’s not use words like “inclusive” to mask segregation and/or to make ourselves feel or look good. Our fellow citizens who happen to have disabilities deserve better.