

Mainstreaming, *Integration*, Inclusion IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?

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

Lots of words are bandied about to describe people with disabilities being “in,” or “part of” ordinary environments, such as school, community activities, work, etc. These words—mainstreaming, integration, and inclusion—are often used interchangeably. *But do they mean the same thing?* Let’s examine the issue and explore what difference it all makes . . .

In the adult arena, human service agencies across the country attempt to ensure community integration of adults with disabilities. Weekly “community outings” to the mall, bowling centers, grocery store, and other locations are the norm. Similar routines are followed in many public schools, when teachers take “special ed students” on “community outings” to grocery stores and other locations.

This practice is an unfortunate and useless relic of the institutional era of the 19th and 20th centuries when many children with disabilities were abandoned by their parents and grew up in institutions. At that time, it was believed that before an institutionalized person could successfully re-enter the community, she would need these “life-skills” experiences. But how is an outing to the grocery store relevant or meaningful to today’s students who are *not* growing up in institutions and who have probably been going to the grocery store with their moms since they were born? Where have today’s special ed teachers learned this nonsense and why do parents allow it? And, sadly, *because* the public school offers this “training,” it seems that many parents have willingly surrendered their responsibilities of helping their children learn how to live in the real world.

When it comes to adults, yes, there are some older adults who may have grown up in (and are still living in) congregate facilities, and have little personal experience living in the real world. And there are also younger adults in group homes who, like today’s children, did *not* grow up in institutional

settings. For either of these groups of adults, however, a community outing in no way represents mainstreaming, integration, *or* inclusion. Instead, it represents “visitation”—they’re *visitors* to these environments. In most cases, they’re not free to go when and where they want; they travel in groups, supervised by someone in authority; and they have little or no personal interaction with others in stores, the mall, the bowling center, or other community locations they “visit.”

In the public school arena, a review of history demonstrates that mainstreaming—placing students with disabilities into general ed classrooms—was attempted by some in the late ‘70s, shortly after the passage of Federal special ed law. In far too many cases, this was all that was done: students with disabilities were “placed” in general ed classrooms with no supports or accommodations. Personal histories reveal that many students were, in essence, “dumped” into classrooms, where they were expected to sink or swim. This “experiment” (as that’s how many saw it at the time, despite the specific mandates in special ed law) was seen as a failure and many parents and teachers retreated to the status quo: special, segregated classrooms for students with disabilities.

Then, in the 1980s, some enterprising teachers and parents—recognizing the “failure of mainstreaming”—moved toward “integration.” These practices went beyond the dumping of students, as more supports and accommodations (as mandated by special ed law) were provided. Some students were provided with one-on-one aides (and in many cases, then and now, parents were told their children with disabilities could not be in a general ed classroom *without* a full-time aide). Some progress was seen, but many realized that a big chunk was still missing: physical integration did not necessarily ensure social integration. For example, the student and the aide

2 - Mainstreaming, Integration, Inclusion: Is There a Difference?

might have sat in the back of the room, away from the rest of the classroom. The student had little or no interaction with the classroom teacher or other students; he did not participate in classroom activities; he made no friends; he was not seen as a true member of the classroom; *he didn't belong*.

So, in the '90s and today, some parents and educators, learning from the failed strategies of mainstreaming and integration, recognize the value of inclusion. The definition of inclusion from my book, *Disability is Natural: Revolutionary Common Sense for Raising Successful Children with Disabilities*, reflects what has actually occurred for my son and others with disabilities (in other words, it's not a theoretical definition, but the reality). In addition, these practices reflect the provisions of Federal special ed law in both spirit and intent (and these principles can also apply to children and/or adults with disabilities in any environment):

Inclusion is children with disabilities being educated in the schools they would attend if they didn't have disabilities, in age-appropriate regular education classrooms, where services and supports are provided in those classrooms for both the students and their teachers, and where students with disabilities are fully participating members of their school communities in academic and extracurricular activities.

Some parents and educators routinely poo-poo inclusion today, saying they've tried it and it doesn't work. But when questioned about details, it becomes apparent that the old style mainstreaming or integration, not inclusion, was attempted. In other cases, a parent or teacher says a student with disability is included because he/she attends art, PE, and/or music general ed classrooms, while being in segregated classrooms the rest of the time. But this is not inclusion; like the adults mentioned previously, these students are "visitors." Inclusion is like pregnancy: you either are or are not. There's no such thing as "partial inclusion."

Inclusive practices *do* work. My children's school and many others, as well as the college my son attends

today, and all the community activities he participated in when he was younger, provide ample testimony.

In pockets here and there, real progress is being made. But in other places, we're going backwards, as segregated classrooms and/or schools just for students with autism, for example, are on the rise. In addition, "special college programs" are being implemented across the country. In most of these programs, college-aged students with disabilities attend life-skills or other special classes created "just for them." Proponents vehemently deny that these programs represent segregation, saying students are integrated on college campuses. They've failed to learn from the past. Yes, these students might be physically integrated on a college campus, but they're not socially included—there is no sense of belonging to the whole. Like others previously described, they're essentially visitors on a college campus. Feeling like you don't belong, that you're not quite good enough, that you're not like the others, and more—are there any worse feelings in the world?

We can ensure inclusion for all if we can answer "yes" to these questions:

- Is the person in an age-appropriate, ordinary (not special) environment?
- Does the person have the needed accommodations, assistive technology, and/or other supports to ensure active participation and opportunities for meaningful relationships and experiences?
- Does the person feel that he belongs?
- Is the person viewed by others as a member of the group?

As described in other articles, every person in our society is *born included*—inclusion is the natural state of being. There *is* a difference between mainstreaming, integration, and inclusion. Our society is enriched by the diversity of its people. Individuals with disabilities can and should contribute to this richness, and inclusion is the way to make it happen.