

## **Inclusion for People of Varying Abilities: How Inclusion Moves us all Closer to the Human Experience.**

By Michelle Sturz

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A child begins a daunting journey, a journey neither he nor his family could have anticipated or prepared for. This journey begins in the pediatrician's office at age 2 and continues with increased involvement with various medical professionals, state agencies and educators. What this child and his family are experiencing is the entry into the world of differing ability, or as it is commonly referred to...disability. What this family does not know is that "up to 600 million people throughout the world live with a disability" (Joni and Friends), "approximately 20.9 million American families had at least one member with a disability and that they differed in important ways from other families" (Wang) and "6.1 percent of the U.S. population under 18 years of age, have disabilities" (Wenger). This family is far from alone.

As days, months, and years pass, this family becomes more involved with medical and educational agencies. The whole family, which includes a sibling only two years older, drifts further and further from the usual early experiences of other families across the nation. They begin to question the isolation and segregation that permeates their lives; is it necessary and more importantly is it healthy for their family and child? As they ponder this question and search for answers, they begin finding significant value and improvements for their child through one choice. This choice is something other families do naturally; it is to include him in the school setting and within his community more fully. With small steps, and over time, the family embraces a guiding philosophy for their family and child; a philosophy of full inclusion which they will utilize in all decisions pertaining to their child. Unbeknownst to them, at this pivotal moment, this guiding philosophy would play an important role in decisions made for this child for years to come and have a far-reaching impact, not only on their child, but also on their entire family. They were quite unaware in these early moments that for their family and this child, the shift to more fully include him, however challenging, was the perfect fit.

The question becomes whether this approach is the right fit for other children, families and individuals who live with disabilities. It is possible that through the utilization of early inclusive practice, many more individuals with a disability will be able to enjoy more of their inherent civil liberties because they will have better integrative skills, more acceptance and natural supports.

It is important to understand inclusive practices more fully; what constitutes inclusive practice and how this shift might impact the human rights of individuals with varying disabilities. Take for instance Edgewood College and their obvious commitment to serving and including individuals with disabilities. According to Lilian O'Connell, disabilities services coordinator for the Madison based college, inclusion benefits all students, not only those with a disability. Inclusive practices "bring diversity and allow for a different college experience for all students. Students gain insight into diversity and it breaks down stereotypes." (O'Connell) Edgewood's commitment to inclusion is exemplary as they recently added a new Cutting Edge program for students with more significant disabilities who would otherwise not be allowed to participate in the college experience, an experience and option that many of us take for granted.

In order for inclusion to work properly, however, an individual cannot merely be placed within the same environment as other individuals. There must be meaningful interaction and mutual engagement; this can prove quite challenging given the gap created when students of varying abilities are combined together in classrooms. Modifications and adaptations are often required, and these modifications and adaptations need to be designed with the student in mind. Successful modifications are well thought out and involve peers as helpers, like those developed in the Clarkston Community School District by Maureen Ziegler. Maureen taught a group of students with autism in a segregated classroom and decided to have her students join other students for parts of the day. What Maureen did not realize was that ultimately the program she called LINK would be so successful that she would move the district to a model of full inclusion for students with a wide range of needs. Coincidentally, what she also discovered was that her students were more successful outside the classroom and after graduation. Outside the classroom, many were beginning to engage in meaningful

relationships with peers. After graduation, students in the program were more successful in finding and retaining meaningful employment, which was attributed to an increase in social skills. Plus, many of the peers involved in the LINK program were business leaders in the community who were more willing to hire and retain their former classmates. (Ziegler)

We must, as human beings in pursuit of our own personal success, remember those famous words of our founders: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness..." These words written by our forefathers, the founders of our nation, formed a powerful basis upon which our country's values and legal system are based.

For decades, our country has segregated individuals with disabilities into institutions and segregated schools; this was done under the pretense that they would be better served in alternate environments. As it turns out, research indicates this is not the case. To move to a model of full inclusion may take time, possibly decades, but progress is occurring and attitudes are changing one baby step at a time. We are closing institutions, moving people with disabilities into communities, and creating school systems that embrace all students and for this, I am proud of our nation and of the people who fought hard for these changes to occur.

Today the child, who began his journey at age two surrounded only by family and professionals, is in middle school and attends class with his same age peers. He attends community events with his family, enjoys relationships with members of his church, engages in reciprocal relationships with peers at school and with other members of the community, is involved in making decisions that pertain to his future and is freely pursuing his own happiness. In short, he is in the driver's seat of his own life and is looking toward a brighter future than had been anticipated just over a decade earlier, at diagnosis. According to him, his future includes attending college, having continued relationships with family and friends, and making decisions regarding his own future.

When asked recently if his math class, a class he attends with his same aged peers and is beyond his academic ability, was too hard and if he would prefer an alternate placement, he replied, "I like hard." And don't we all! If we recognize "Human vulnerability as a basic human characteristic" (Horowitz, 420), then shouldn't he be allowed the opportunity to travel along that path of challenge that leads each individual down a road of success or failure – that path we go down and won't know the outcome until we walk it; the path that our forefathers guaranteed for all of us when they wrote the basis for our country which serves as, if you will, a guiding philosophy for our nation. This guiding philosophy for our nation is not so very different from the guiding philosophy of this family, to include their child fully and allow him the same opportunities afforded to others in this nation of opportunity.

When our forefathers wrote the Declaration of Independence, they formed a powerful basis upon which we formed our country's values and legal system, a system that prioritizes the rights of every individual. It is with these rights in mind that we must recognize the inherit basic right to make our own individual choices for how we each wish to be involved in society and to support these choices wholeheartedly. Only in this way, can people be allowed to pursue a life with the freedom to choose the path that brings them happiness.

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