Inclusive Education - Progressive Education
What is the Relationship?

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Preface. *This paper is a response to the recent Progressive Education Summit held in Bloomington Indiana and sponsored by the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education. We left the conference feeling very uncertain whether progressive educators embrace the values of inclusive education when they talk about valuing diversity, committing to educate "all" students, and so forth.*

Inclusive education has a well-defined meaning among people concerned with the education of students with disabilities: *education of students with disabilities in age-appropriate general education classrooms housed in the school that the student would normally attend if not disabled, with all needed supports, services, and accommodations.*[1] Members of the Whole Schooling Consortium have been involved in inclusive education for at least a decade and have reached the conclusion that truly inclusive education can only be achieved in "democratic" schools. In addition, most members of the Consortium share the basic belief system of the Progressive Education movement, quite apart from their specific interest in students with disabilities. The close working relationship between the Whole Schooling Consortium and the Rouge Forum is clear evidence of that belief system. As a result, we believe that the inclusive education movement is a natural and integral part of the broader progressive education

[1] Although most professionals concerned with inclusive education focus on the public schools, many families see the school that their child with a disability "would attend" as a non-public school, quite frequently the non-public school attended by the child's siblings.

movement. It is not in the least clear, however, that progressive educators who do not share our focus on disability as a dimension of normal human diversity share our view.

Is there a disconnect between the Inclusive Education movement and the Progressive Education movement?

From our perspective as inclusive educators, there are three basic connections between inclusive education and progressive education:

1. The belief that all students must be educated to take their places as active participants in a democratic society.
2. The view of disability as just one of many normal dimensions of human diversity, and therefore of "inclusion" as a basic human and civil right.
3. The belief and research finding that inclusive education by its nature requires schools that are democratic at every level.

Reflection on conversations at the Summit suggests that the beliefs articulated in items 1 and 2 may not be shared by all members of the Progressive Education community, and that item 3 is simply not understood by people lacking experience in including students with the full range of disabilities in their schools and communities.

Many of the specific examples of progressive schools and other learning environments mentioned during the meeting have characteristics that make the inclusion of students with physical or cognitive disabilities difficult, if not impossible. On top of that, in spite of a stated belief in the value of authentic, or experiential, learning, it also appeared that the kind of learning with which many participants are most comfortable, and which they value most highly, is

verbally-based, highly abstract, intellectual accomplishment.[2] That is to say, members seem to value experiential learning as a route to abstract, intellectual accomplishment, rather than for itself or for other outcomes it may entail. Although there is frequent reference to a high value placed on "community", the meaning of "community" is also not fully explored and may be more of an intellectual construct than an organic entity.

1. The belief that all students must be educated to take their places as active participants in a democratic society.

Although it is easy to embrace the proposition that all human beings have value and therefore all have (or should have) access to and responsibility for taking an active role in a democratic society, it is often difficult to make the proposition concrete when thinking about people with more severe disabilities. For example, it is relatively easy to see that a person with a reading disability can acquire all necessary knowledge and values through avenues other than reading, and can therefore be a full member of his community and any formal or informal democratic systems. Accommodations or assistance may sometimes be necessary, as in cases where print material must be delivered in aural form, but once the support is provided, the nature of participation is identical to that of a person without a disability. The same is true for people who are deaf or blind, or even both, so long as they have had extraordinarily good educational experiences and on-going supports as they live their lives. (At least it seems to be the assumption of people who do not have the disabilities that this is true. Some people who actually have these disabilities may argue differently.)

[2] This focus on intellectual, verbal educational outcomes may be part of the discomfort voiced by some participants during and after the Summit when concerns about "who is not at the table" were raised. To the extent that is true, attention to disability issues may help illuminate the very broad range of experiences and goals that would be represented if Summit attendance had not been limited to traditional mainstream intellectuals.

However, one cannot pretend that a person with a very severe cognitive disability simply needs "supports" to enable them to assume a role identical to that assumed by others. Likewise, people with significant social/emotional disabilities, including autism and mental illness, cannot simply be given some "help" and then plugged into a standard citizen role. Although purely physical disabilities, even when very severe, on the surface should not interfere with assuming a typical community role, the practicalities are that this rarely happens. Barriers to community inclusion, vastly different experiences and concerns, and lack of needed supports have effectively excluded people with significant physical disabilities from even the edges of the mainstream.

Finding the role of people with significant disabilities in a community is not a trivial matter, and it will not be done without strong beliefs that it can be done and that it must be done. Since most adults have never seen a person with a significant disability assuming full membership in his community, it is not surprising that the mere possibility may be questioned. However, people within the disability rights movement are now in a position to tell true stories and show documentary video that demonstrates that, as activist Judith Snow puts it, there are no "yes, buts".

A first step in the Progressive Education movement may therefore have to be a concentrated effort at self-education.[3] Progressive educators need to know that inclusion is always possible

[3] It is possible that many disability rights activists themselves may question whether it always "can" be done: they are driven simply by the conviction that it must be done. One often hears activists say that they are willing to entertain the theoretical possibility that a person who cannot be included may exist . . . but in their own experience they have never met such a person and in fact cannot imagine such a person. Again, they adhere to Judith Snow's powerful statement that the only requirement for inclusion is breathing . . .and if technological assistance is required for the breathing, that's okay too. One can, of course, derail the basic premise here by spending time and energy debating the status of people in deep comas and so-called "persistent vegetative states". We argue that this debate is a red herring, and further that extending inclusive practices "even" to these people may well bring about changes in individual people's status. Indeed, there is a growing body of stories of people in such states who were

and to learn the stories of how inclusion actually looks for a variety of people with significant disabilities.

Given that inclusion is possible, why must it be done? There are two reasons: the benefit to the person with the disability (and to those who care about him) and the benefit to the larger community. Although it is often difficult for people with severe disabilities to participate in specific events and activities, all evidence suggests that the desire to do so is present, as long as the external barriers can be overcome. The writings of Temple Grandin, an adult with autism, for example, make a very strong case for assuming that even when a person seems unable to tolerate social settings or incapable of maintaining social relationships, that person wants very much to have the relationships and be in the settings. The challenge, therefore, is making participation possible. At the very least, people with disabilities must have the same choices as people without disabilities.

The most frequent rationales for the benefit of inclusion for the broader community revolve around making other people "better", more empathetic, more compassionate, more creative, more positive. At the same time, exclusion of people with disabilities may result in overlooking the resources such people may actually have to offer. One frequently hears, for example, that people with mild cognitive disabilities "make good workers" and often find tasks challenging and interesting that others may find tedious or even intolerable.[4]

All of these things may be true, and may well constitute rationale enough. We believe, however, that there is another powerful rationale for the inclusion of students with disabilities in

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none the less included as much as possible in community life, and seem to have emerged from those states, even if to a limited degree, as a result.

[4] These kinds of statements set off alarms as they sound (and may be) patronizing and dehumanizing. The same caution must be used when generalizing about people with disabilities as when generalizing about any other group of people.

all aspects of their communities. Experience with people with all manner of disabilities, when those people are recognized as full, valued members of the community, drastically reduces our own fears of becoming disabled and by extension, of merely aging. If we know beyond doubt that people can have excellent lives even when they need a wheelchair to get around, even when they cannot see, even when their IQs are barely measurable[5], then we need be far less fearful of accidents, illnesses, and any other processes that might make "us" like "them". When adults include students with disabilities in activities they lead or support, they have an opportunity to teach all the students how they themselves hope to be treated should they become disabled or infirm later in life. We are educating our future doctors, but we are also educating future practical nurses, home help aides, grocery clerks, neighbors, politicans, voters, and insurance adjusters.

Given that there are compelling reasons to include all people in all aspects of our communities, the genuine challenge that lies before us is building a vision of how inclusive communities will really work. No one can simply hand us that vision, because no such communities exist to use as models. There are, however, bits and pieces here and there. This means that the situation is no different than in the rest of Progressive Education. Although the value system may be clear, full implementation of that system with real people in real places continues to be a work in progress.

2. The view of disability as just one of many normal dimensions of human diversity, and therefore of "inclusion" as a basic human and civil right.

Although people involved in disability rights often simply assert that their struggle is a civil rights struggle identical to that waged by people of various races or ethnic groups and people

[5] IQ is being used as shorthand here, but in fact we do not believe that there is a single unitary construct that can be measured as an "intelligence quotient", nor that any measures of intellectual processing capacity are meaningful when applied to people for whom the measures were not developed or validated.

who are gay or lesbian, that assertion makes many liberal thinkers uncomfortable. We sensed significant discomfort at the Summit. One possible reason for discomfort is simply the universal fear of becoming disabled. If one is straight, one is not going to suddenly find oneself gay. If one is Hispanic, one is not going to wake up one morning as a Pacific Islander. But every one of us is a car accident or a stroke away from severe disability. We teach ourselves not to think about that, and part of that self-training may well involve teaching ourselves not to think about people with disabilities as people like ourselves at all.[6]

Another concern, one that is more central and perhaps more defensible for educators, is the fact that differences relating to disability do alter how people live their lives in a way that other differences do not. One can dismiss differences in race or religion as essentially irrelevant to the vast majority of human activity in a way that one cannot dismiss the inability to see, hear, think symbolically, move independently, use one's hands, and so forth.

For example, one of the schools discussed at the Summit featured activities like taking students hiking mountain trails for months at a time. The race, religion, and sexual identity of the students are irrelevant to such an activity. But how would one include a student who is blind? One who is mobile only when using a wheelchair? One who cannot eat by mouth and has food pumped in via a gastrostomy tube? What would it mean to seek to include such students in one's school? Would activities like hiking in the mountains have to be abandoned? Are there ways to accommodate? What kinds of compromises are compatible with our underlying sense of justice and our commitment to individual rights as well as democracy?

[6] The People First movement was organized specifically to address this issue. People First is an organization of people with cognitive impairments (more or less described by the term "mentally retarded," which the organization explicitly rejects due to its vast negative connotations). The name of the organization is simply a plea to look at us as people first, and see the disability later, merely as a characteristic, not as a definition.

These are difficult questions. It is easy to choose simply not to ask them. A school that touts long hiking trips is unlikely to attract students who cannot walk, although eventually it is going to happen. Likewise, a school photograph that features a flight of stairs up to the front door sends a powerful message to such students – is that the message every school with such a photograph is really seeking to send? Whether it is or not, the students will not show up at the front door, and the progressive educator can continue to pretend that they simply do not exist.

In our view, coming to grips with the human dilemmas posed by disability has to be part of the progressive agenda. Without it, the entire agenda rings hollow.

3. The belief and research finding that inclusive education by its nature requires schools that are democratic at every level.

The Whole Schooling Consortium has been drawn to the progressive education movement because we believe that it is impossible to have inclusive education in schools that do not adhere to stated progressive principles. There are many reasons for this, but the three most central will be discussed here.

1. True inclusion of students with disabilities cannot occur in classrooms unless differences existing between nondisabled students are already acknowledged and embraced. One cannot successfully support a student with disabilities merely by tinkering around the edges of a classroom that otherwise adheres to a one-size-fits-all pedagogy. When one tries to do so, one ends up with a separate curriculum for the student with the disability. One also ends up with the other students having a deep sense of injustice: why should that one student's needs be accommodated when their own are not?

2. True inclusion of students with disabilities cannot occur unless students are empowered to offer and receive assistance from each other. Learning must be viewed as a community activity or the student who needs help will always be a distraction from the individual quest for recognition and achievement. Time spent making inclusion possible will be seen as time stolen from the "real" purposes of the classroom – those purposes focus solely on individuals who are learning in the same place and at the same time, but not together in a community.

3. Inclusion of students with disabilities requires collaboration of many adults. In the United States, this collaboration is required by law, but the collaboration is necessary regardless of legalities. The view of the classroom as the teacher's kingdom, with a door closed to all "outsiders", is antithetical to the teamwork needed to allow students, parents, special and general educators, support staff[7], and administrators to work together. As a result, inclusion can only flourish in a democratic school along the lines described by every progressive educator.

Inclusive Education and Progressive Education: What is the Relationship?

After this long exposition on the reasons that Whole Schooling seems to us to be inextricably tied to Progressive Education, we are left with the question as to whether inclusion

[7] Support staff can include various therapists (e.g., occupational, physical, speech, mobility, recreation), specialized teachers and teacher-consultants, medical personnel, and paraeducators, as well as other community members in paid or volunteer capacities.

is an optional add-on or an integral part of the progressive agenda. It is not enough to mouth liberal platitudes about justice for people with disabilities. The justice argument is used even by those who seek to segregate students with disabilities, using the same arguments that once rationalized education segregated by race.

Because we also share the core values of the Progressive movement, we had assumed that the case for being an integral part would be easily made. However, it is not within our power to simply include ourselves, any more than a student with a disability can simply include himself. Inclusion is a community characteristic. What is the will of the progressive education community?

We said at the summit that we view inclusion as the "canary in the coalmine" of education. That is to say, failure to include students with disabilities in a learning community is an early warning signal that there is an important failure to adhere to the core values of progressive education and that eventually other failures will be recognized. One of us has a child enrolled an independent school, a school that is committed to all of the values discussed at the beginning of the Summit. There is perpetual discussion of the school's progressive/humanistic philosophy and there are t-shirts proclaiming "It's not a philosophy, it's a way of life". But there is a flaw at the the School: it only admits students of exceptionally high intellectual ability, measured in relatively conventional ways.[8] Increasingly, the value system and the "community" are eroding. We would suggest that this is inevitable. One cannot build a community ostensibly committed to social justice on a foundation of exclusion and elitism.

[8] It is interesting to contrast the admissions requirements at a school like Roeper with those of the Summer Institute for Gifted Children. The Institute expressly states that all students are welcome, as long as the activities to be undertaken during the institute are appealing to them. Does this solve the problem? That is a matter for considerable exploration.

Likewise, we put it to the rest of the Summit attendees that Progressive Education needs Inclusive Education even more than the reverse. Disability provides a means for making sure that core values really reach to the core of human experience. Beyond that, the effort to create genuinely inclusive learning communities will bring along all of the other concerns raised during the Summit. In the words of Bill Henderson, principal of a Boston public elementary school committed to inclusion across all human dimension, "inclusion is the catalyst for [progressive] school reform."