

A Reflection on Education – Past and Future

A few months ago, I began working with a project called the Inclusive Schools Initiative, a partnership between my employer, the Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre (DDRC), and the Calgary Board of Education. The project was created to work with schools and school boards to strengthen the abilities of those schools to include children with disabilities in ordinary classroom and school life in the best and most meaningful way possible.

I was trained as a teacher, and taught for ten years. My teaching was in Special Education. Over the course of my teaching career, I taught children and adults of all ages with developmental and other disabilities. Most of this was carried out in what we now called ‘segregated settings’, meaning that the children and adults were grouped together with others with similar disabilities in special classes or even special schools. The thinking was that they would receive the extra attention and specialized instruction that would give them a leg up and help them achieve their maximum potential. When these special education services were created, they were a big leap forward from the previous era, when people with developmental disabilities were considered, and even formally labeled, ‘ineducable.’ In those earlier days, children with these disabilities were denied any education at all, and were typically taken from their families and home communities to live in (often far away) institutions.

I was very enthusiastic to begin teaching these children. I worked hard and had what I thought were very high expectations for my students. Sadly, I realized over time that their lives were not turning out very well. They were frequently overlooked, misunderstood and badly treated by the society they graduated into. Where had we gone wrong? What part had we played in this state of affairs?

I’ve come to realize that, whatever our motives, intentions and hard work within the walls of the special classroom or the special school were, what we had done was to create an aura of “differentness” around our students from which they could not break free from. By grouping kids with disabilities together and creating special services for them, we had convinced both the students themselves and the rest of the community that they somehow did not belong, and perhaps never could, or worst of all, never should belong. It was dispiriting for the students, and they did not grow to the extent that they could have. And for the community, it created a gulf of misunderstanding, apprehension and fear which they could not comprehend crossing.

Since that time, I’ve come to believe deeply that ‘inclusion’ is a better answer. By inclusion, I mean children with disabilities included alongside other children who are their age and in ordinary classrooms and in the ordinary life of their neighborhood. To achieve this inclusion in school settings requires more than just the child sitting in a desk, receiving instruction in the 3 R’s. It means teachers and schools need to be enlisted in a common effort with parents, other students and community members to raise and nurture each child as a whole person and as future adult citizens of our world. To reduce education to the 3 R’s is to deny how complex this common effort is and also to deny how profound a responsibility it is.

Early on in my teaching career, someone gave me a copy of this anonymous poem. It's just as relevant today for teachers, parents, and anyone else concerned with children:

Children Learn what they Live.

If a child lives with criticism
She learns to condemn.

If a child lives with hostility
He learns to fight.

If a child lives with ridicule
She learns to be shy

If a child lives with shame
He learns to feel guilty

If a child lives with tolerance
She learns to be patient.

If a child lives with encouragement
He learns to be confident

If a child lives with praise
She learns to appreciate

If a child lives with fairness
He learns justice

If a child lives with security
She learns to have faith

If a child lives with approval
He learns to like himself

If a child lives with acceptance
and friendship

He or she learns to find
love in the world.

These, then are our responsibilities beyond academic instruction: As we walk with children in their personal journey of growth, we must be tolerant, friendly encouraging, and accepting. We must be generous in our praise and fair in our actions. We must create atmospheres of security. Only then will we see children grow to be the patient, confident, just and loving adult citizens that are the only hope for a good future.

To do this is a community challenge more than it is strictly an educational one. There are endless techniques and strategies to foster, promote and nurture inclusion in school, but unless there is a healthy community based on principles like those in the poem above, they will not take root. Disability is not, of course, the only thing that can cause a person to become disenfranchised from their community- age, poverty, ethnicity, any of these can be barriers to inclusion as a

full citizen. A truly inclusive community is one where everyone belongs and contributes. This is the next challenge for those who will be building inclusive schools and communities as a whole.

Bill Forman, Inclusive Education Facilitator
DDRC