

FOLLOWING THE NATURAL PATHS OF CHILDHOOD

by Bob Jackson

(This paper is a development of a paper "Should schools include children with a disability?" Robert Jackson, Ron Chalmers and Darrell Wills, Interaction 2004.)

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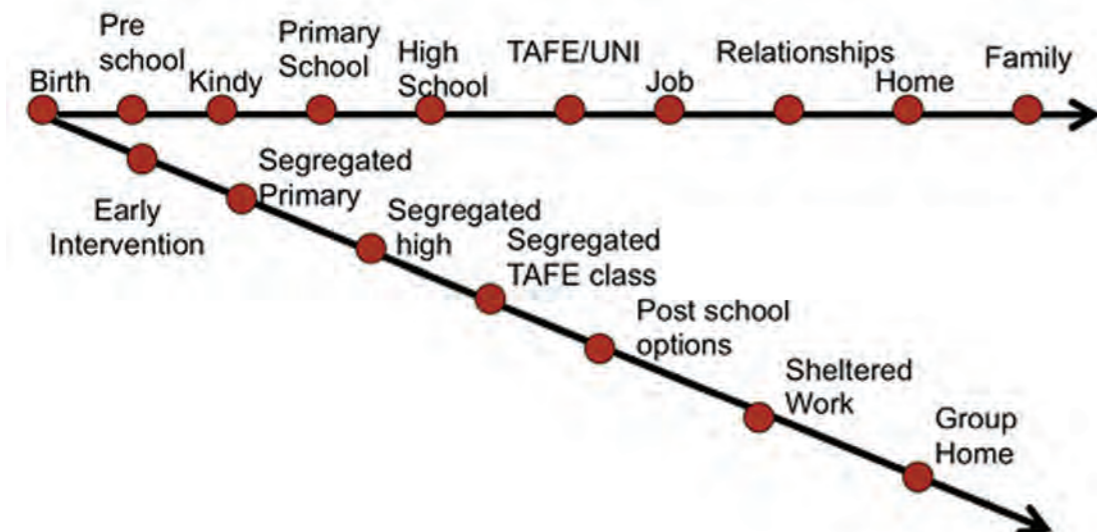


When we have a child there is a set of expectations that are rarely spoken about but look something like the line below



Whenever I talk to parents of children with or without a disability, all seem to be satisfied with some variant of this for their child. Not all their children may go on to further education, not all might have a family but all parents would be happy with some variant of this line – an ordinary life.

However, if one has a child with a disability, different forces come into play. Almost from the first instant that the disability is recognised, the advice starts coming in. "There is this wonderful early intervention program that you might be able to get her in if you apply now". "You should go and have a look at this wonderful special school where they have lots of therapy and small classes where he will do so much better". "The unit at the high school will cater really well for her needs and she will be able to be included in the art class if she is capable." All of a sudden the world starts to look like this:



Now I have never met a parent who would choose the bottom path unless they are at the point of desperation due to feeling abandoned in terms of real support.

The point of this is that if you do not have a vision of the top line, the alternative vision has been laid out for you. It is also clear that every step taken down the segregated path is a step away from the ordinary life, and so makes it just a bit harder to get that inclusion

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in the ordinary world. Of course parents may look at early intervention and make the decision that this will give a real boost to skills and so make the top line easier to attain. Similarly, other decisions may be made during the developmental period. The implication though is that we must have a vision so that we can assess each decision on the basis of "will it make that vision more likely to be a reality?" If you do not have this clear vision, then history tells us that the bottom line or 'parallel life with your own kind' is likely to be the life outcome.

WHY CHOOSE INCLUSION?

Long term outcomes

Many parents struggle with the decision of whether to include their child in a mainstream school. They will almost certainly be receiving lots of advice that segregated education will be best for their child and our shared experience growing up was that these children were educated 'elsewhere'. Parents may also have seen how difficult it can be to teach their own child at home and wonder how she could be taught in a mainstream class with 20 or 30 others. Very easy to be guided to the parallel path, particularly when embellished

with promises of good staff ratios, lots of therapy and specialised staff. When added to the reaction of the mainstream school, which often hovers between outright hostility to reluctant acceptance, the segregated path is very tempting.

However a moment's reflection raises

some important questions: What have been the life outcomes for those who have gone through the segregated system? Has it been an ordinary life? If we segregate children with disabilities for the whole of the developmental period, give them a low powered curriculum of 'life skills', surround them with models of others with low skills and often difficult behaviour from a life of rejection is that going to lead to inclusion, good social skills etc.? Such questions may lead us to think of looking to stay on the top line as an alternative more likely to lead to the ordinary life. Clear evidence is emerging that this leads to higher social skills, higher likelihood of employment and independence, and more community inclusion in later life.

It's the right thing to do.

For thousands of years, people with a disability have been rejected and kept at the margins of society. At many periods through that time they were forcibly segregated for life, often sterilised and even killed in large numbers. However, in particular after the horrors of the eugenics of Nazi Germany and the growth of the parent movement following the war, western society has changed from a policy

of segregation to a policy of inclusion of people with disabilities into community life. This was a moral decision. It is important to recognise that inclusion in school is a moral issue, not an educational one. It is a question of whom we welcome into our schools and under what conditions, and this is a decision our society has made with legislation such as the Disability Services Act 1986 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. In our schools we accept children who do not speak English,

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Aboriginal students, students who have been abused, students who do not keep up in class. We do this without question and distribute the school resources to best include and provide an education for all students. Why then is there pressure to only accept a child with a disability if there is support provided, it is part time, it is only if they can keep up – etc. etc.? These are moral questions. Inclusion is fundamentally an issue of the heart – who is welcome in this school to share in the resources with all others?

The teaching of values

If we include a child with a disability well,

“We are teaching compassion, tolerance, acceptance, friendship across difference, giving etc.”

think of the lessons that we are teaching the other children. We are teaching compassion, tolerance, acceptance, friendship across difference, giving etc

.These are values that we continually worry about losing in our society, where here we have a wonderful way as adults to teach by example. What are we teaching if the children with a disability are excluded, treated differently, portrayed as a burden, forced into congregation ‘with their own kind’? I don’t think we want to teach those values by example.

It’s good for the child with a disability

We now have over 40 years of comparative research of the impact of segregated versus inclusive education. In a comprehensive recent review of the literature NOT ONE research

article could be found that compared inclusion with segregation and favoured segregation. Professors or Heads of Education at Australian Universities were written to stating this finding and asking if they knew of any contrary finding. No one came up with a contrary finding. Similarly, Directors General of Education in all Australian States were asked for the research base on which they recommended segregated schooling. While many referred to government reports, they also could not provide empirical evidence in support of segregated schooling for children with an intellectual disability. That is, the belief commonly stated to parents that children with a disability are better off in segregated education is

unsupported by research. In fact the opposite is true, based on studies involving thousands of children in several countries. Some findings are (a detailed literature

review can be downloaded from www.include.com.au/resources):

- Children with an intellectual disability do better academically and socially when included.
- The more they are included, the better they do, academically and socially. That is, pull out programs or part-time inclusion models are detrimental in comparison to full inclusion. The longer the child is in segregated education, the larger the gap with the child who is included.
- In some major studies, inclusion was found to be significantly better than segregation, and children who were segregated lost percentile ranks.
- These findings also apply to children with severe and profound levels of disability. They also do better academically and socially in inclusive settings, and do better the more that they are included.
- Students with an intellectual disability in special schools tended to have fewer friends than students with an intellectual disability in mainstreamed schools, most of them meeting friends at school only.
- Students in special education schools felt lonelier than students in mainstream. They also responded more passively.

It is very important to note that the above research DOES NOT say that children fail to learn in segregated settings. Numerous studies show that children do develop skills in such settings. The point from the research is that they learn significantly

better if they are included, regardless of the extent of their disability.

It is good for the other children

We have seen how the inclusion of children with a disability allows us to demonstrate and directly teach values critical for the future generations. This is also demonstrated in research findings that have been remarkably consistent over decades and many countries. It has been found that for children who share inclusive schools with children with disabilities:

- Students who participated in social integration programs have more positive attitudes towards children with disabilities.
- They learned how to match their language to the ability of the children with a disability.
- They engaged in less disruptive behaviour and spent an equal amount of time working, playing and talking with their peers.
- There was no reduction in academic progress for non-disabled children.
- Non-disabled children do not pick up undesirable behaviour from the children with a disability.
- Students showed:
 - A reduced fear of difference.
 - Growth in social awareness.
 - Improvement in their own self-concept.
 - Development of personal ethics.

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- Development of warm and caring friendships.
- The more contact with disabled children, the better the outcomes, for example:
 - Tolerance of others.
 - Positive changes in their social status with peers.
 - Valuing relationships with children with disabilities.
 - Development of personal values.

It's good for teachers and schools

The child with a disability has a major developmental impact on teachers in learning how to teach to diversity more effectively and how to break down or 'scaffold' curriculum to make it accessible to all. This has significant benefits for all

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children, many of whom can be overlooked in the day-to-day business of the class. As the teacher learns to individualise curriculum, the gifted child is also given extension. Other noted benefits are the increased use of careful grouping and classroom environments, greater accent on positive and developmental teaching and major boosts to teacher self-esteem. Many see it as the best thing that happened to them in their teaching career if they have been properly supported through the process. Research also has cast considerable doubt on some common concerns. For example it has been found in large review studies that:

- The presence of students with severe disabilities had no effect on levels of (teachers') allocated or engaged time.

- Time lost to interruptions of instruction not significantly different to non-inclusive classrooms.

It's the law

Under the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) it is an offence to discriminate against a person on the grounds of their disability. It is also an offence to require a person with a disability to meet conditions that, while appropriate for other people, are not able to be reasonably met by people with a disability (or their families).

This means that it is illegal to force a child to go to a segregated School, Centre, Unit or Class against the wishes of the person (or parents in the case of a child). It is also illegal to allow a child to attend a regular school but refuse to provide the necessary

resources to overcome the limitations due to the disability.

In addition, the Educational Standards (2005)

set the following standards for schools:

- Reasonable adjustments must be made to include the student with a disability.
- Adjustments must allow similar choices for the student with a disability as other students.
- Students with a disability must be able to participate on the same basis as other students.
- Students must be able to participate in the same curriculum as other students.
- Associates (e.g. parents) must not be discriminated against.
- There must be measures of compliance.

However enforcing the law is complex,

expensive, time consuming and not always successful, even when the law is so clear. Nevertheless it is important to know that inclusion is a right under law with bipartisan support and applies to all schools and day care centres, public or private.

Overall, inclusion is an issue of the heart. All it takes to be successful is the will and the skill. With the will, we can develop the skill through partnerships between parents and the school and outside assistance where required. Without the will, we are dealing with a moral issue that is not solved by resources or added expertise.

THE MECHANICS OF INCLUSION¹

Internationally, inclusion means the student being:

- In the regular classroom or other activities full time (physical inclusion). This means not pulled out for special classes, therapy etc. unless this also happens to all the other students as well.
- Socially participating with the other children (social inclusion). This means going on all the school camps, sports and class activities on the same basis as other students.
- Involved in the normal activities or curriculum (curricular inclusion). If you are not transacting the same tasks as your peers you are not really included. This means that if the class is doing nuclear physics, the student with multiple disabilities and no speech is also participating in the class on nuclear physics.
- Included in the same school and class rules. It is NOT okay to allow a student with a disability special rules because of the disability ("it's okay because he's autistic..."). Different rules make it harder for the child to learn limits, are seen as unfair by others and ultimately tend to lead to exclusion. It may however take

more time and revised methods to teach the rules to a student with a disability.

It can be seen that this definition would apply to any student, with or without a disability. It is inclusive! It is also clearly challenging and will require more than the student just being added to the class with or without an aide.

Physical inclusion may require some physical changes to the school (ramps etc.) or human assistance to navigate. Similarly, inclusion in the rules might require some consideration of strategies to teach the rules in a way that is positive and consistent.

Social inclusion differs depending on age. It is commonly found that in preschool and the early school years friendships tend to be relatively spontaneous and often go outside of the school to invitation to birthday parties and other gatherings. However, in some cases adult intervention may be necessary to build links, and in upper primary and high school adult intervention has been found to be essential. That is, a student voluntarily having a student with a disability as a friend may suffer some peer pressure, so many students tend to stay at a distance even if they would like to engage. However, if adults talk to the other students and ask them to engage and set up means for regular positive interactions (such as structured class groupings), then students have a peer acceptable excuse ("the teacher asked me/made me") which will tend to grow into relationships with many other students as others see it as acceptable. This requires a lot of finesse from the teachers and particularly the aides, who need to judge when to facilitate an engagement but get out quickly to let it develop spontaneously. Relationships are not something that can be left to chance

however, and if the message from the school is that 'relationships are not our business', then the students are likely to pick this up with a higher probability of bullying occurring.

The area that is both most challenging, but most exciting, is curricular inclusion. There are two primary strategies being employed at the cutting edge, both aimed at including ALL students in the same curriculum material with ALL students being challenged at their level. The two methods are Multilevel Teaching and Universal Design for Learning. Universal design is based on the idea coming from architecture where you can design a house that is fully accessible for disabled and non-disabled people by thoughtful design – toilets that have room for a wheelchair next to them, support rails in the shower, doors at standard width, lever door handles etc. etc. In the same way we can design a learning situation so that the material is available in multiple formats to cater for sensory disabilities; at different rates to cater for processing differences; in different presentations to cater for learning style preferences.

Multi-level learning seems to have originated in the University of Oregon where the aim is to challenge everyone, from the most 'gifted' to the most impaired within the same curriculum material. A key concept is the 'big ideas' where each theme, topic and lesson is considered in terms of what are the core concepts that form the basis of the material being taught. Normally lessons consist of a combination

of core concepts, extensions and examples without a clear separation of these. If we take a curriculum section such as writing a sentence, there are core elements that need to be taught. A sentence starts with a capital letter, contains a verb, subject and object, and ends with a full stop. Anyone working with high school students or even university students knows that these core elements are not universally known, but on the other hand we can teach such a small list of core elements to a student with a disability and everyone in the class benefits. Even students with no language can be taught the skills by requiring pointing to the correct answer out of a range, or eye-pointing if they have no muscular control. Gifted students can be challenged to find sentences that break the rules (do not start with a capital, do not have a subject or object etc.) and other students can be required to write a range of sentences. All students however are learning the core elements and all are engaged in the same lesson. We can include all students in the same assessments by having the first few questions being easy and on the core concepts with the student with an disability only expected to do those questions – but all have the same test.

We still have much to learn on the mechanics of inclusion for all students in all situations, but it is now clear from examples around the world in high school and over 20 years of successful inclusion at a university level that if the will is there, the way is there also.

Jackson, B. (2012). Following the natural paths of childhood. In *Thinking about...* Issue 12, July 2012. *Belonging Matters: Melbourne*

¹ See also Wills and Jackson, Inclusion: Much more than being there. *Interaction* 1996.