

The Role of True Inclusion in Acceptance of Diversity. A Reflection.

The scientific and medical understanding of the 'disabled' mind and body in the early 1900's is shocking by today's standards. A baby born with obvious, or even suspected abnormalities, was figuratively and literally discarded.

The evidence and experiences of that time constructed the believe that people with physical and intellectual disabilities were not comparable to their 'normal' counterparts. Considered unable to learn, unsafe to themselves and others, susceptible to contracting and spreading illness, void of emotional or physical feelings...anyone diagnosed as 'retarded' was left to die or sent away.

Confronted with resigned medical professionals, limited scientific data, and no social support, desperate parents surrendered their clinically diagnosed 'retarded' child to a psychiatric institution.

Although medical science and life experience has progressed over the past century, this history is not a distant past. Deinstitutionalization of patients began in the 1960s and continued into the early 2000s.

During this period of transition, society steadily advanced through a series of maturation phases. Direct experience and meaningful connections between the 'normal' and the 'retarded' gradually humanized these former patients.

The deinstitutionalization movement was the catalyst for change so significant that we are just now at a place to realize the impact on humanity. It was not a spike in research-based learning that prompted the integration of the 'retarded' into a community setting. The general view remained that they could not learn, feel, or make any valued contribution. It was simply considered inhumane to have them institutionalized.

Insight into the capabilities of a 'handicap' person were revealed over time with the accumulation of direct and diverse experiences with community members. With their potential peaking through the dark blanket of ignorance, advocates took notice and went to work.

Action was taken to learn more, invest more, and improve quality of life. They were granted the right to receive formal education, participate in segregated community programming, and experience adapted employment opportunities. Although the increase in integration exposed their unique abilities, it simultaneously highlighted differences.

Parents and guardians had been made responsible for their 'disabled' child without being provided the skills or resources to parent and advocate with confidence. As a

result, to shield their child from hurt and preserve dignity, a strategy of concealment was adopted. Effort was taken to minimize or hide natural character and behaviour. And the 'disabled' spent their time safe from judgement at home with their family.

In time the atmosphere evolved from, 'don't look at us' to, 'we are all the same'. There grew a strong defence for those with 'special needs' to not only participate unapologetically, but to be seen as 'equal' to their peers. Demand for accessibility, equality, and inclusion was ironically fortified by an intolerance for ignorance.

In search of acceptance, champions of the 'special needs' population created a reputation of being unapproachable. Fear of reprimand, for inadvertently causing offense, the well-meaning curious avoided asking their questions.

It would be reasonable to assume that progress towards universal acceptance would cease, even regress without the pursuit of answers. But the opposite has happened.

More than any time in history people who manage intellectual disabilities are encouraged to embrace their differences and contribute meaningfully to their community. They are not universally welcomed or understood, but the decades they invested engaging with their communities has had a measurable impact.

Whether in the classroom, at the grocery store, on the bus, or at the gym each interaction provided an opportunity for the neurodiverse and the neurotypical to learn about each other, from each other. Once meaningfully connected, differences fade, and we become invested in the wellbeing of one another.

It can now be argued that the most difficult challenges in achieving universal appreciation of diversity have been satisfied by our predecessors. The leaders of deinstitutionalization, courageous parents, radical researchers and medial professionals, the founders of the Special Olympic Movement and others like it created the possibility for interconnections.

They could not have grasped the scope of their influence at the time, but their facilitation of social interaction can be credited for the advancements currently experienced.

To honour their sacrifice, resilience, and determination there is a responsibility to continue facilitating opportunities for humans to do what humans do; connect.