

**The Need to Belong:
Rediscovering Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.**

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Newtonian principles of physics were regarded as true until Einstein demonstrated that they provided an inadequate explanation of the laws of nature. Similarly, Freudian analysts viewed a woman's admission of being sexually abused by her father as a neurotic fantasy stemming from an "Electra complex." Only recently have other forms of therapy shown that women are accurate in their accounts of being abused. In every field of knowledge, anomalies such as these arise that call current practices and "paradigms" (i.e. world views) into question and necessitate the creation of new paradigms and related practices. It is precisely through this process that a body of knowledge develops. Such a process is now taking place in the field of special education. Anomalies have arisen that seriously call into question the validity of segregating students with specific physical, intellectual, or emotional needs. Moreover, these anomalies demand that new paradigms be created and embraced.

THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PARADIGM: SKILLS AS A PREREQUISITE TO INCLUSION

In the United States, P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, and the concept of the least restrictive environment (LRE) initially were seen as meaningful steps toward including children with physical, intellectual, and emotional needs within regular classrooms. In actuality, however, this legislation and its embedded concept of LRE still gave credence to segregated, self-contained classrooms. Although lip service was given to the idea that students would be integrated as much as possible, the underlying paradigm supporting the maintenance of the continuum of services was that students with severe, or even moderate, impairments needed to learn and demonstrate basic skills (e.g., staying quiet in class, going to the washroom independently,) in self-contained classrooms before they could, if ever, be allowed to enter regular classrooms. This educational paradigm can be represented as follows:

STUDENT --> skills --> regular classroom

This paradigm has been the basis for the practice of placing students with moderate or severe disabilities in segregated, self-contained classrooms or programs in which the curriculum focus is basic skills instruction. As a result, segregated classrooms generally have been seen as a necessary educational option that must be maintained to meet the needs of "some" students.

ANOMALIES IN THE SEGREGATION PARADIGM: LACK OF PROGRESS

The belief in the need for segregation has created a situation in which students with intensive physical, intellectual, or emotional needs enter the school system at the age of 5 or 6 and are placed in self-contained classrooms or programs in which life skills, age-appropriate behaviour, and possibly social

interaction with other students are primary goals. These students typically stay in the school system for 15-18 years and, despite the commitment of hundreds of thousands of dollars, the majority fail to master life skills or appropriate behaviour and remain socially isolated throughout their school years. These students have not progressed at a rate that allows for a successful transition into community life (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989., Stainback, Stainback, & Forest, 1989., Wagner, 1989). Although teachers and teaching assistants may be fully committed to helping students acquire basic skills, many students seem disinterested, unwilling, or incapable of learning the skills. Moreover, students who do master certain skills often fail to retain the newly acquired skills or cannot replicate them in situations outside of the classroom. As a consequence, many "graduates" of self-contained classrooms enter directly into sheltered workshops or segregated prevocational training programs where they must continue to practice the same basic life skills. The result is that people with disabilities, unable to make the transition into community life, spend their years continuously preparing for life, a modern version of Sisyphus.

Often the lack of student progress is blamed on the student. Students are seen as having such severe disabilities that they are incapable of learning appropriate behaviour and skills. However, this answer is losing credibility. Research and experience are showing that students in segregated programs do imitate and learn, but often what they imitate and learn is the inappropriate behaviour of their classmates. Furthermore, there is growing documentation of students who seemed incapable of learning appropriate behaviour and skills in segregated settings achieving these previously unattainable goals once integrated into regular classrooms. It seems, then, that the adherence to current paradigms within special education has resulted in the creation and maintenance of what I term "retarded immersion" classes. Students are immersed in an environment of "retarded behaviour" and learn how to be retarded.

A far more reasonable explanation for the lack of student progress has to do with the absence of motivation. There are very few, if any, rewards or payoffs to the student for learning new activities in this environment. Students don't pass retarded immersion and exit to general education: they can't even fail retarded immersion. In fact, they are sometimes even punished for being successful. For example I have seen situations where students have been required to stack blocks in an effort to improve fine motor control. The students successfully complete this task only to be given smaller blocks. Consequently, the task becomes more difficult until it is beyond the students' capability. We ask children to spend their entire day doing tasks that are meaningless and difficult and then wonder why very little is learned in retarded immersion.

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS: A PARADIGM FOR MOTIVATING LEARNING

In sum, segregated programs and classrooms have failed to teach students appropriate behaviour and skills. Environments where students model, learn, and practice inappropriate or meaningless behaviours have not been successful in preparing individuals for community life. These anomalies challenge the validity of segregation as an educational practice and require new paradigms to be developed -- paradigms that incorporate a motivation to learn.

Educators have a choice. We can either continue to blame the lack of progress in segregated classrooms on the severity of the disability, or we can have the courage and integrity to seriously question whether there is, in fact, a more effective way to prepare students with disabilities to enter the community after graduation.

In the 1980s, it became increasingly apparent that a different paradigm was needed to accomplish the goals set forth for special education. The special education practices of the past were founded on an old paradigm where skills were seen as a prerequisite to inclusion or integration. An alternate paradigm reverses this order, and requires educators to temporarily abandon their emphasis on skills and place the child in the regular classroom with appropriate support. The rationale is that a student's desire to belong, to be "one of the kids," provides the motivation to learn new skills, a motivation noticeably absent in segregated classrooms. This new paradigm could be visually represented as follows:

**STUDENT ==> regular classroom ==> skills
(with support)**

This paradigm, with its recognition of the importance of belonging, is not a new concept introduced with the inclusive education movement. Abraham Maslow (1970), in his discussion of a hierarchy of human needs, pointed out that belonging was an essential and prerequisite human need that had to be met before one could ever achieve a sense of self-worth.

Maslow posited that the needs of human beings could be divided and prioritized into five "levels." Individuals do not seek the satisfaction of a need at one level until the previous "level of need" is met. The five levels of need identified by Maslow were Physiological, Safety/Security, Belonging/Social Affiliation, Self-Esteem, and Self-Actualization. They are represented as a pyramid in Figure 1.

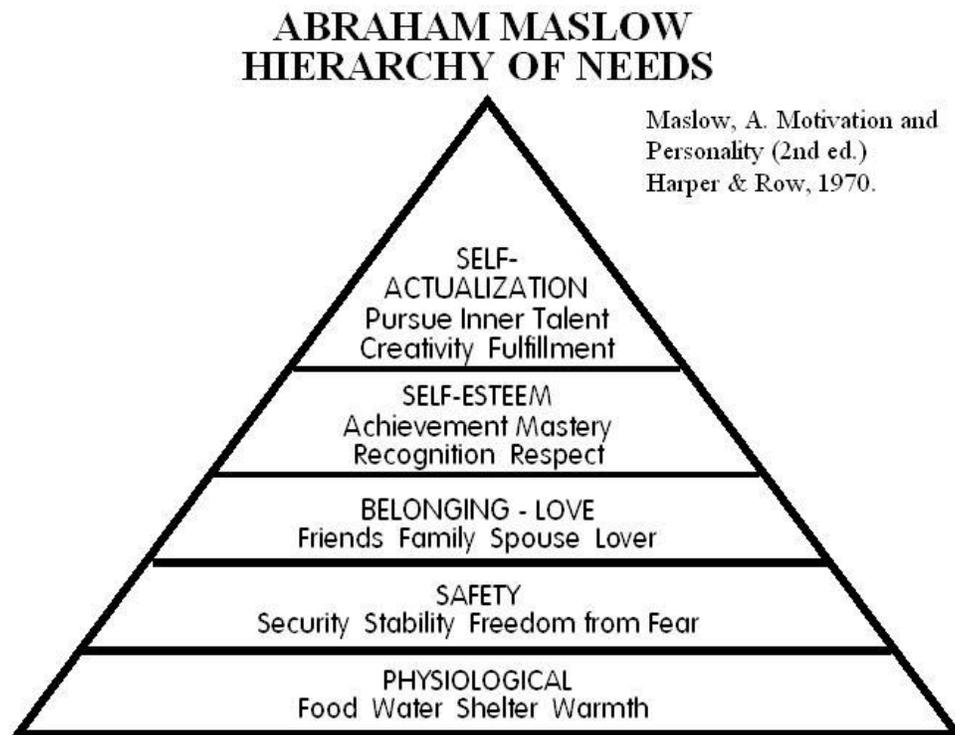


Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. (From Maslow, A. (1970). Motivation and personality (2nd ed.). New York: Harper & Row; reprinted by permission of Harper Collins Publishers.)

Maslow maintained that our most basic need is for physiological survival: shelter warmth, food, drink, and so on. Once these physiological needs are met, individuals then are able to address the need for safety and security, including freedom from danger and absence of threat. Once safety has been assured, belonging or love, which is usually found within families, friendships, membership in associations, and within the community, then becomes a priority. Maslow stressed that only when we are anchored in community do we develop self-esteem, the need to assure ourselves of our own worth as individuals. Maslow claimed that the need for self-esteem can be met through mastery or achievement in a given field or through gaining respect or recognition from others. Once the need for self-esteem has been largely met, Maslow stated, we will develop a new restlessness and the urge to pursue the unique gifts or talents that may be particular to that person. As Maslow stated, "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be at ultimate peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature" (p. 48). Maslow referred to this final level of need as "Self-Actualization."

I believe that the majority of educators would agree that it is tremendously important for a child to develop a sense of self-worth and confidence. However, in our society, especially in the field of education, it has been assumed that a child's sense of self-worth can be developed from a sense of personal achievement that is independent of the child's sense of belonging. If we concur with Maslow, however, we see that self-worth can arise only when an individual is grounded in community. Contained within Maslow's writings is a powerful argument that belonging is one of the central pillars that has been missing from our educational structure for some time. Maslow (1970) explained:

If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, there will emerge the love and affection and belongingness needs.... Now the person will feel keenly, as never before, the absence of friends, or a sweetheart, or a wife, or children. He will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group or family, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal....he will feel sharply the pangs of loneliness, of ostracism, of rejection of friendlessness, of rootlessness.

We have very little scientific information about the belongingness need, although this is a common theme in novels, autobiographies, poems and plays and also in the newer sociological literature. From these we know in a general way the destructive effects on children of moving too often: of disorientation: of the general over-mobility that is forced by industrialization: of being without roots, or of despising one's roots, one's origins, one's group: of being torn from one's home and family, and friends and neighbours: of being a transient or a newcomer rather than a native. We still underplay the deep importance of the neighbourhood, of one's territory, of one's clan, of one's own "kind" one's class, one's gang, one's familiar working colleagues...-

I believe that the tremendous and rapid increase in...personal growth groups and intentional communities may in part be motivated by this unsatisfied hunger for contact, for intimacy, for belongingness and by the need to overcome the widespread feelings of alienation, aloneness, strangeness, and loneliness, which have been worsened by our mobility, by the break-down of traditional groupings, the scattering of families, the generation gap, the steady urbanization and disappearance of village face-to-faceness, and the resulting shallowness of American friendship. My strong impression is also that some proportion of youth rebellion groups -- I don't know how many or

how much -- is motivated by the profound hunger for groupiness, for contact, for real togetherness.... Any good society must satisfy this need, one way or another, if it is to survive and be healthy.(p. 43)

There is an enormous amount of evidence, surprisingly from the field of corporate management, that providing a person with a sense of belonging is pivotal for that person to excel. Management consultants such as Peters and Waterman (1932) outline dozens of strategies for senior managers to use to foster a sense of belonging among staff. Japanese corporations, the wonder kids of capitalism, devote huge amounts of energy and money to practices and policies (e.g., mandatory work uniforms, subsidized apartment buildings) that foster belonging among employees.

Belonging -- having a social context -- is requisite for the development of self-esteem and self-confidence. This is why Maslow posited self-esteem above belonging in his hierarchy. Without a social context in which to validate a person's perceived worth, self-worth is not internalized. The context can vary from small and concrete, as with babies, to universal and highly abstract, as with artists.

Despite the essential importance of belonging as a precursor to the development of self-esteem and the motivation to pursue education, it is interesting to note that this is the one level of Maslow's hierarchy for which schools provide little nurturance or assistance. We have practices and programs to support physiological needs (e.g., subsidized breakfast and hot lunch programs), safety needs (e.g., traffic, sex, drug and health education), learning structures to build confidence and esteem (e.g., co-operative group learning, mastery learning models with individualized objectives and performance criteria, esteem building curricular units), and specialized learning needs in a vast array of curriculum domains. Yet,, creating caring communities has not been a mission or practice in the overly tracked, segregated, exclusive schools of the 20th century.

THE INVERSION OF MASLOW'S HIERARCHY: EARNING THE RIGHT TO BELONG

Despite the wealth of research and personal experience that gives validity to Maslow's position, it is not uncommon for educators to work from the premise that achievement and mastery rather than belonging are the primary if not the sole precursors for self-esteem. As Figure 2 illustrates, the current education system, in fact, has dissected and inverted Maslow's hierarchy of needs so that belonging has been transformed from an unconditional need and right of all people into something that must be earned, something that can be achieved only by the "best" of us. Irrespective of the evidence to the contrary (e.g, high incidence of child abuse and neglect), the curricula and the structure of our schools are based on the assumption that children who come to school have had their physiological and safety needs met at home. Students, upon entering school, are immediately expected to learn curriculum. Successful mastery of school work is expected to foster the children's sense of self-worth, which in turn will enable them to join the community as "responsible citizens." Children are required, as it were, to learn their right to belong.



Figure 2: The inversion of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs in 20th century education.

I have often heard the claim in the field of education that an effective way to bolster student self-esteem is to provide students with opportunities to experience a great deal of success. Consequently, efforts are made to ensure that the school work is easy enough so students have little difficulty completing the work correctly, thereby fostering trust in their own abilities. As expected, students do begin to develop self-worth. But in the process, they also learn that their worth as individuals is contingent upon being able to jump through the prescribed academic, physical, or personal hoops.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs not only reminds us how essential it is for people to live within the context of a community, but it also shows us that the need for self-actualization necessary implies that every person has abilities that warrant specific development within themselves. In our education system, however, it is often assumed that only a minority of students are gifted or have an individual calling and are capable of self-actualization. Yet this minority has been artificially created to a large degree by the fact that most schools only see those students with exceptional academic, athletic, and artistic abilities as being deserving of the opportunity to develop their talents. Students with gifts in areas other than these typically are relegated to the world of the normal and mediocre: their wishes to have special considerations so that they may pursue their unique gifts (whether it be auto mechanics, the ability to nurture, or a fascination with nature) are seen as self-indulgent fantasies. Consequently, it is only a few privileged students who are granted the luxury to work and concentrate in areas in which they naturally excel. Ironically, because of the prevailing paradigm of our education system, the pursuits of children

identified as "gifted and talented" often occur in segregated programs that can have a negative impact upon the child's sense of belonging. Thus, even when we grant children the opportunity to meet their need for "self-actualization," it is usually done at the expense of their sense of belonging.

CASUALTIES OF THE INVERSION OF MASLOW'S HIERARCHY

The view that personal achievement fosters self-worth is by no means limited to the field of education. The perception that we must earn our right to belong permeates our society. A central tenet of our culture is that we value uniformity, and we make uniformity the criteria for belonging. Moreover, we exclude people because of their diversity. Weight loss is a blatant example of the ways in which people feel driven to earn the right to belong." Most dieters engage in a form of self-talk (reinforced by weight loss commercials) that is totally consistent with the inverted hierarchy of needs in that they say, "If I lose 50 pounds and go from a size 16 to a size 10 (achievement), then I will feel better about myself (self-esteem), and perhaps then I will be able to regain the lost romance in my marriage (belonging)." Similarly, one can see how the prevalence of workaholicism corresponds with the same inversion of needs. The reasoning goes, "If I work 60 hours a week (achievement) then I'll be assured of my own ability in this role (self-esteem), and I will be respected by my colleagues and will not be fired (belonging)."

As such, we now live in a society that holds forth belonging as something that is earned through academic or physical achievement, appearance, and a host of other socially valued criteria. Belonging no longer is an inherent right of being human. And our schools, being a reflection of society, perpetuate this belief.

When a school system makes belonging and acceptance conditional upon achievement, it basically leaves students with two options. They can either decide that they are incapable of attaining these expectations and therefore resign themselves to a feeling of personal inadequacy, or, they can decide to try to gain acceptance through achievement in a particular area (i.e. sports, academics, appearance). In either case, there are potential serious negative consequences for the students.

School Dropout as a Casualty

It is fairly easy to see how students who see themselves as incapable of achieving excellence develop a belief of personal unworthiness as well as a hopelessness of ever becoming worthy. Our society; including most of our schools, highly values academic achievement, physical prowess, and attractiveness. Students who do not excel in at least one of these areas are thereby devalued. These are the students who, quite understandably, drop out of school. They remove themselves from the school environment where they are devalued and sometimes enter into other, sometimes dangerous, situations in which they are valued.

Gangs as a Casualty

One environment to which some students turn is that of gangs. Here again, Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a framework for understanding why gangs are becoming increasingly popular among today's youth. Teenage gangs satisfy each level of need in Maslow's hierarchy. When youths join gangs, their physiological needs are met: food, shelter, warmth, and their quasi-physiological needs, such as sex, heroin, and crack, also are met. Youths are provided with a sense of safety in the knowledge that if they are ever harmed by another individual or group, the other gang members will retaliate viciously against

those who caused the harm. Moreover, youths are given a strong sense of belonging within the gang, and in this environment the belonging is not based on achievement but instead on simply "wearing one's colors." After passing a one-time initiation ritual, the sense of belonging provided by gangs is extremely close to unconditional. And given this almost unconditional acceptance and inclusion within a gang, the youths' feelings of self-worth naturally flourish. Anchored in this newly found sense of inclusion and self-worth, many youths begin to focus in those areas in which they excel, such as the criminal code (with all of its technicalities and loopholes), karate, stealing BMWs, extortion, and so on.

The almost comical irony is that some school districts try to tempt youths away from gangs, away from an environment of unconditional inclusion and acceptance, back into school, back into society, back into an environment where belonging and acceptance are conditional and must be earned. Furthermore, the earning must take place in a context where the youths know they have previously failed. The fact that many of these youths quickly discard the possibility of returning to school may be surprising for school officials. Maslow, however, hardly would be surprised at the youths' decision. The tragedy within our education system is that we see the continued membership in a gang as the result of a student's moral deficiency, rather than seeing the school's structure and intrinsic ideology as the impetus.

If we concur with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, then we must face the credible and deeply disturbing proposition that inner city gangs are healthier environments for human beings than schools. Albeit, the values and violence within some gangs may be less than desirable. Nevertheless, schools appear to be far more damaging to the development of adolescents than gangs.

Perfectionism and Suicide as Casualties

The repercussions of conditional belonging are not limited to those students who fail to excel. There are extremely negative consequences for the "achievers" as well. When students strive to become shining scholars or all-star centers on basketball teams, they intrinsically learn that their valued membership in the school is dependent upon maintaining these standards of achievement. As a result, many students wake up each morning and face a day of ongoing pressure to be "good enough to belong," afraid that if they blow a test, miss the critical lay-up shot in the last seconds of the game, or wear the wrong kind of running shoes, their status among their peers, and possibly within the school, will be sacrificed.

Tragically, a growing number of adolescents find that the endless demand to be "good enough to belong" is beyond them and they end the struggle by taking their own lives. As we begin to recognize the process of living in a world of conditional belonging, we can better understand why students who commit suicide frequently are those we least expect. While Maslow's hierarchy of needs may not provide a complete framework for understanding and dealing with this issue, I believe the absence of belonging in our schools is a contributing factor to teenage suicide.

Of course, most "student achievers" do not take their own lives. However, we cannot minimize the stress these students feel as well. Teachers are well aware of students who are "perfectionists," obsessively driven to avoid any slight error despite continual reassurances from family and teachers that such concern is unwarranted. Here again, it is important to step back and see the student within the context of a school and a society that repeatedly gives the message that one must earn the right to belong. When community, acceptance, and belonging -- some of the most primal needs of being human -- are held out as the rewards for achievement, we cannot expect students to believe our assurances that they will be "accepted as they are." In all likelihood, we don't believe that for ourselves, as

everything else in our society screams out that belonging is almost totally dependent on perfection. The implicit messages in our schools have caused perfectionism, and ironically, school personnel perceive this perfectionism as a sign of emotional instability on the part of the student.

SEGREGATED CLASSES AS A CASUALTY: FORCING CHILDREN TO EARN THE RIGHT TO BELONG

Perhaps the most glaring example of an educational practice that forces students to earn the right to belong is the maintenance of segregated special classrooms and programs. The practice of making segregated classrooms an intermediary and prerequisite step toward inclusion within regular classrooms explicitly validates the perception that belonging is something that must be earned, rather than an essential human need and a basic human right. Although the intent of segregation is to help students with disabilities learn skills and appropriate behaviour, the very act of removing students with disabilities from the other students necessarily teaches them that "they are not good enough to belong as they are" and that the privilege of belonging will be granted back to them once they have acquired an undefined number of skills. The tragic irony of self-contained classrooms is that as soon as we take away students' sense of belonging, we completely undermine their capacity to learn the skills that will enable them to belong. Herein lies the most painful "Catch-22" situation that confronts students with disabilities -- they can't belong until they learn, but they can't learn because they are prevented from belonging. This injustice is compounded by the fact that the lack of progress in a segregated class is seen as further evidence to justify the need for segregation.

It has been argued that segregated classrooms, although possibly inappropriate for students with minor or moderate disabilities, are absolutely necessary for children with severe or multiple disabilities (e.g., Jenkins, Pious, & Jewell, 1990). It is this line of reasoning that has resulted in one of the cruelest and most insidious forms of emotional abuse that ever could be directed at students, let alone students with severe disabilities. The placement of students with severe disabilities into segregated, self-contained classrooms or programs not only excludes them from their peers and the community, but it ensures that their isolation will be permanent. It is a common practice within segregated classrooms to offer rehabilitative, communication, and life skill programs as necessary requisites for entering the community. This is done in spite of the fact that the specific attributes that have led these students to be segregated, such as physical, mental, sensory, or severe learning disabilities, cannot be eradicated to the point where the student approaches "normalcy." Consequently, the segregated students learn not only that they are not good enough to belong but that they never will be good enough to belong for their disability, and the subsequent reason for their banishment, can never be removed.

PROVIDING BELONGING WITHOUT VALUING DIVERSITY: THE INAPPROPRIATE USE OF MASLOW'S HIERARCHY TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

It is important at this juncture to issue a caution to those who might be inclined to use Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a rationale for including students with intensive educational needs in local school general education programs. If inclusion and belonging are adopted because people see an integrated educational experience as a more effective way to teach skills and appropriate behaviour, then inclusion or belonging opportunities become nothing more than an effective strategy to minimize disabilities. The underlying assumption of this view of inclusion or integration is that children and adults with disabilities should be as "normal" as possible. When we see heterogeneous education in this way, we give legitimacy to a world in which uniformity and perfection are valued if not idolized. In this understanding of integration, belonging and achievements still are regarded as prerequisite steps to self-worth. The

children are placed in settings where they will feel as if they belong so that they might learn the prescribed skills to become "normal" enough to really belong. Again, Maslow's concept of belonging becomes misconstrued and inverted in a different but fundamentally inappropriate way, and its effect upon children is no less damaging.

All children are children. The perception that some children are normal and others are deficient and therefore need to be repaired in some way is still a concomitant of a society that values uniformity rather than diversity. The potential of heterogeneous education lies in the possibility of redefining society's concept of "normalcy." When children are given the right to belong, they are given a right to their diversity. They are wholly welcomed into our neighbourhoods as ones who enrich our lives, without the construction of rehabilitative hoops through which they must jump in order to become "normal enough" to belong.

Moreover, I believe that good educators feel it is their responsibility to help each student discover what his or her individual strengths and capacities are and then facilitate opportunities for him or her to concentrate and excel in those areas. To mold students into carbon copies of normalcy, all having uniform abilities, is a betrayal of the awesome wonder of an individual. To attempt to do the same to students with disabilities is no less of a travesty.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: AN OPPORTUNITY TO ACTUALIZE MASLOW'S HIERARCHY AND REDISCOVER BELONGING AS A HUMAN RIGHT

In the 1950s, my motivation for advocating for the inclusion of students with severe disabilities within regular classrooms came out of a sense of social injustice. I believed that students, by being placed in segregated classrooms or programs, were being denied the opportunity to learn socially appropriate behaviour and develop friendships with their peers. In the intervening time, however, I have become increasingly alarmed at the severity of the social problems in our schools. Academic averages are plummeting, the drop-out rate is increasing, and teen pregnancy is becoming a major social concern. Teenage suicide is increasing at an exponential rate and now has become the second leading cause of adolescent death in the United States and in Canada ((Health & Welfare Canada, 1987., Patterson, Purkey, & Parker, 1986). Extreme violence, drug dependency, gangs, anorexia nervosa, and depression among students have risen to the point that these problems now are perceived almost as an expected part of high school culture. The job description of teacher now vacillates between educator and psychotherapist and at times becomes even that of benevolent sorcerer. University and corporate establishments also are becoming increasingly vocal about the lack of preparedness of high school graduates. It is little wonder that principals are attending high-powered corporate seminars on crisis management rather than the more sedate presentations on curriculum implementation.

What we are witnessing, I believe, are the symptoms of a society in which self-hatred has become an epidemic. Feelings of personal inadequacy have become so common in our schools and our culture that we have begun to assume that it is part of the nature of being human. It is certainly questionable whether our society will be able to survive if this self-hatred is allowed to flourish.

In attempting to counter this crisis, many supposed pundits of educational reform are claiming that we are in desperate need of an immediate return to those values consistent with the words, "standards," "achievement," and "curriculum." But before we run full speed back-ward, grasping at these hard words

and clutching them close to our bosom, it may be wise to pause, if only for a moment, to consider that our social malady may stem not from the lack of achievement, but from the lack of belonging.

The degree of underachievement and unfulfilled potential in our society may not be the result of widespread laziness. It may result from a sense of apathy, apathy that so often accompanies the constant demand to be perfect enough to belong. What is needed in our society and especially our education system is not more rigorous demands to achieve and master so that our youth will move closer to the idealized form of perfection. What is needed is a collective effort among all of us to search for ways to foster a sense of belonging in our schools, not only for students, but for the staff as well. For when we are able to rely on our peers' individual strengths rather than expecting to attain complete mastery in all areas, then belonging begins to precede achievement, and we may be welcomed into community not because of our perfection, but because of our inherent natural and individual capacities.

Inclusive education represents a very concrete and manageable step that can be taken in our school systems to ensure that all students begin to learn that belonging is a right, not a privileged status that is earned. If we are to create schools in which students feel welcomed and part of a community, then we must begin by creating schools that welcome the diversity of all children.

The fundamental principle of inclusive education is the valuing of diversity within the human community. Every person has a contribution to offer to the world. Yet, in our society, we have drawn narrow parameters around what is valued and how one makes a contribution. The ways in which people with disabilities can contribute to the world may be less apparent: they often fall outside of the goods and service-oriented, success-driven society. Consequently, it is concluded that no gift is present. So, many educators set about trying to minimize the disability, believing that by doing so their students will move closer to be-coming contributing members of society.

When inclusive education is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children have to become "normal" in order to contribute to the world. Instead, we search for and nourish the gifts that are inherent in all people. We begin to look beyond typical ways of becoming valued members of the community, and in doing so, begin to realize the achievable goal of providing all children with an authentic sense of belonging.

As a collective commitment to educate all children takes hold and "typical" students realize that "those kids" do belong in their schools and classes, typical students will benefit by learning that their own membership in the class and society is something that has to do with human rights rather than academic or physical ability. In this way, it is conceivable that the students of inclusive schools will be liberated from the tyranny of earning the right to belong. It is ironic that the students who were believed to have the least worth and value may be the only ones who can guide us off the path of social destruction.

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