INCLUSION / EXCLUSION

People often ask us, “What is inclusion?” It is a good question. It gets to the heart of the matter. Because inclusion is at the heart of all our work and these tools, it is important to have a definition and an understanding of inclusion.

• Dictionary Definition: “To include: to hold, to embrace, to involve, to count among.”

• We all want to be “counted among” the human race.

•There was a time (and still is in many countries) when women were not “counted among” those considered fully human. But the world is changing, and moving toward being inclusive.

• What does being “inclusive” mean? Again the dictionary. Being inclusive means: being all embracing, being comprehensive, being expansive, extensive, full, vast and wide.

o The opposite of the word inclusion is exclusion. Inclusive vs. exclusive. Exclusive means being select, restrictive, cliquish and clannish. It means absence, and incompleteness.

o Surely we want to be “all embracing” of people we have historically left out. Inclusive, as a word, does not belong to any one group or issue. It is all embracing of disability, ability, age, gender, and social class. It is inclusive - not exclusive as a word.

The Inclusion-Exclusion Definition Exercise

When someone wants to know what inclusion is all about, this simple exercise helps.

• Ask participants to remember a time in their own life when they were excluded. Ask them to name the feelings surrounding their experience with exclusion. They will probably use these kinds of words: sad, bad, scared, depressed, left out, alone, cold, in jail.

• Then ask them to recall a time when they included. Ask them to name the feelings surrounding that experience. They will probably say: good, great, warm, welcomed, and happy. The answers are similar from people of all ages in all countries.

• Explain that from their own experience, people understand very deeply the meaning of inclusion and exclusion. The best definition of inclusion is already in their heart. Further definitions are often unnecessary. People understand.

• Inclusion and Exclusion. Use THEIR words. It reinforces that they really do understand and demystifies the definition.

Inclusion as a tool for decision-making

• Explain to participants how they can use the notion of inclusion to make decisions.

o When looking at an issue, if one choice ‘feels like’ it is moving towards exclusion, it is likely a poor choice. A better choice would be to search out an alternative that your heart tells you is more inclusive. Even in corporate decision-making, managers are being counseled to listen more carefully to their hearts. Noticing your sensitivity to inclusion is a powerful decision-making tool.

Implementing inclusion

•Present the following overview about implementing inclusion.

o Unfortunately, implementing the elegantly simple concept of inclusion is not easy, especially on a large scale. We are still building jails and nursing homes -- the two largest growth industries in North America. These are not inclusive, but the push is on to find more inclusive ways. The word “inclusion”, like the word “love”, is more easily said than done. But inclusion, like love, is a goal worthy of life-long aspiration.

• “Inclusion” is not a new category of child, a new program plan, a new model, or a kind of classroom. Inclusion is a way of life, a way of being, a way of living. When inclusion becomes a “model” -- beware. When you hear people talk about “the inclusion kids”, “inclusive lunch or coffee break”, “inclusive recess” or “the inclusion class” -- beware! We don’t need to throw out the word, just because it is abused. We do need to use it correctly.

• Inclusion by definition cannot be narrow - it must include families, friends, learning opportunities, workplaces, places of worship, recreation -- the broadest possible context.

• A question to ponder: “If there is an inclusion class, or an inclusion job, what does the exclusion class/job look like? If there is an inclusion student, who are the exclusion students?” If we have “day center” for people with disability labels, what would a center for ‘ability’ labels look like? Inclusive options are a human right. There is one race, the human race. We are all born into it. No one has the right to exclude any of us from our birthright as human beings.

• Inclusion is fundamentally democratic. It is about rights and justice with responsibility - for all. Simply, we all have the right and the need to be included. Thus, there cannot be “special education” and regular education. There needs to be “education” -- quality education for all. There cannot be “housing” and “special housing”. Everyone needs decent shelter. There must not be jobs and incomes, and “special jobs” with “allowances”. This is demeaning and unfair.

• The fact that some people need a bit of extra support must never be used as an excuse for exclusion. The truth is that ALL of us need “special supports” from time to time. All of us are aging. All of us are at best temporarily able bodied. Support systems that allow all people to be included as full citizens are not a luxury, they are a right.

• Inclusion has also been used as an excuse to cut budgets. This is inappropriate and irresponsible. It is ‘dumping’. Quality services for all are an investment in our future. Inclusion needs appropriate budget support - regardless of the delivery mechanism - central, local or familial. Cutting supports on the backs of those who are least able to fight back is both mean spirited and shortsighted. Passing off these responsibilities to families or local government structures without appropriate funding is unacceptable. Rather, high quality education and/or services will use the resources to ensure that every person has an individualized plan that accommodates their learning needs and styles.

• Every person should be challenged to reach their potential and thrive by making their best possible contribution to society. That is inclusive. There is no good or bad inclusion; there is just good or bad education, good or inadequate support. There is no inclusion or exclusion student; there are just students. Beware of the trap of using the word inclusion to make a new category or label. We are all Citizens! That is a good label.

• Inclusion is just another form of the concept of democracy. The United States’ Constitution says it well: “with liberty and justice for all.” That’s inclusion in a nutshell. It may take many lifetimes to make it a reality, but it is worth the effort. It is right and it is necessary. Let’s just do it!