Introducing Education’s Landscape
Steady increase in students with severe developmental disabilities (DD) in schools

**Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network (CDC, 2014) reports:**
- Early European studies (1960’s-70s) = 1 in 2500 students
- USA multi-state study (2002) = 1 in 150 students
- USA multi-state study (2008) = 1 in 88 students
- USA multi-state study (2010) = 1 in 68 students

These Students are the most difficult to include in general education classrooms and often end up segregated as a result.

**The challenge is no longer to include, but HOW to include these students at school.**

(Mooney & Slee, 2014)

A Story

Oliver (pseudonym) was 16 years old and in grade 11 when I interviewed his high school principal. Oliver is non-verbal and has a severe developmental disability (DD). The following is a piece from that interview that I have never forgotten.

When asked about fondest memories of including Oliver, the administrator [school principal] shared an experience from a few months back when the entire school was assembled in the gym for a special presentation that included a musical performance. When the music began Oliver jumped up and started running around the gym “almost like he was a bird, he had wings” recalled the administrator. The interview continued:

**Researcher:** What was your initial reaction when he got up?

**Administrator:** Oh I was going to go grab him and pull him, pull him aside but because I was, you know it was during a [performance]...so I was more concerned of the guests...but as I could see them smile, we just let it be and let it go and, and I think it, ah, it was a good feeling. (Mooney, 2011, p. 55)

This story runs contrary to the rest of the interview and the study, which showcases a conundrum for this principal, 5 teachers and Oliver’s parents over how to maximize Oliver’s academic learning amid general education’s rigor.

Participants agreed that including Oliver with his same-age peers was ideal, yet Oliver and his peers spent most of their school time apart from each other.

It became obvious to me that we (adult participants and researcher) made assumptions about Oliver, his peers and their ability to comprehend and participate in complex problem-solving about inclusion.

A Theoretical Orientation

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics and the concept of acquiring Bildung:

**BILDUNG:** “the property human way of developing one’s natural talents and capacities” (Gadamer, 2012, p. 11). It relates to experience in a particular field that is continually acquired over time. It is not a goal that can be reached. Yet it is “important for understanding in the human sciences” (p. 10) because as humans we never stop growing, developing, learning.

David Jardine explains: “When we walk into a classroom we ask, “what’s going on here” and the common sense in one classroom is not the same as the common sense in another classroom. What binds public education together in one city or province is not what binds a school together and is not what binds a classroom together. It’s knowing in particular where we are (in the world, in that moment in time); it’s a general thing that has to be applied in particular” (personal communications, January 23, 2014).

“...we may not know in advance exactly what to do, but we are prepared to DO WHAT IS RIGHT because we have a SENSE that it’s all universal. The Universal needs the particular in order to understand what it is and what it should do”

(Jardine, personal communications, February 6, 2014).

Thus, inclusive strategizing cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution. The educational landscape necessitates collaboration (generalizations from multiple forms of Bildung—including from YOUTH) towards particular circumstances.

**Questions**

Relating to the story:
- Were the academic and social pressures of Oliver beyond the comprehension of his peers?
- What might have been different about my study had I involved Oliver and his peers as participants?

Relating to next steps:
- How can students with and without disabilities become more involved in decision-making about inclusion?
- Can general education students learn to comprehend and participate responsibly in the management of education and social inclusion needs of students like Oliver?
- How might participation in decision-making about inclusion enhance the ability of students with and without disabilities to manage their own academic and social pressures?

A Literature Review

One of education’s fellows is to set student’s sights on their future (exams, grade levels, university studies, live as adults without teaching them to recognize, appreciate, and care for other human beings around them) (Dewey, 1997).

Dwayne Haubert (in Hills, 2008, p. 11) talks of “a lack of responsibility for the world” and says we “filter out” the curiosity of students.

Alberta Education (2014, p. 2) wants its students to become “engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit.”

Regarding diversity and inclusion in education, Maxine Greene (1993) makes clear that youth with and without disabilities are “unlikely to feel good enough to pose the questions in which learning begins” (p. 232) unless they are made worthy of doing so.

Elsa Fraturo urges school administrators to re-think responsibilities and capabilities as leaders in education and directs attention to the impact their actions have on society:

It is never easy; it takes time and persistence, but when we instill these beliefs (Inclusion over exclusion), our students can lead this way and systematically create a more just society...They do not choose to be oppressors; they choose to be emancipators.

(Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008, p. 243)

**“Inclusive education is a precondition for an apprenticeship in democracy”**

(Moore & Slee, 2012, p. 236)

A Proposal

Designing a Leadership Education Taskforce: Let It Be

Empowering a direct liaison between school principal and leadership-minded youth with and without DD who collaborate and problem-solve inclusion dilemmas in their local schools and classrooms, I ask:
- What might this taskforce look like?
- How might it operate?
- Who might it serve?
- How might it begin to respond to the questions stated under “relating to next steps”?

School Principal

“Particular” Inclusion Dilemma

Students with DD

Students without DD

**Concluding Words of Wisdom:**

“Let It Be” – Lyrics by Paul McCartney

When I find myself in times of trouble
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom
Let it be
And in my hour of darkness
She is standing right in front of me
Speaking words of wisdom
Let it be
Let it be, let it be, let it be
Whisper words of wisdom
Let it be
And when the broken
hearted people
Living in the world agree
There will be an answer
Let it be
For though they may be parted there is still a chance that they will see
There will be an answer
Let it be
Let it be, let it be, let it be
Yeah, there will be an answer
Let it be
And when the night is cloudy
There is still a light that shines on me
Shine until tomorrow
Let it be
I wake up to the sound of music
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom
Let it be
Let it be, let it be, let it be
There will be an answer
Let it be

A Doctoral Student

What qualifies me to take up this research?

• I will add value to disability studies (DS) research in education, which is a growing trend in response to education reform and inclusion initiatives (Moore & Slee, 2012).

• I am experienced, available, interested and currently removed from initiatives (Moore & Slee, 2012).


Scholars urge exploration of these questions.

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References


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