Definition of an Inclusive Life

If one holds the view that regardless of the nature or complexity of a person's intellectual disability, they are inherently complete in their humanness, then their lives should look no different than the lives of people without intellectual disabilities.

Their lives should unfold while being fully immersed in the midst of and with those of us without disabilities as we live our lives, thus living our lives together; not one segregated from the other. Inclusion is not living a parallel pattern of life or facsimile thereof but living every aspect of life together, inexorably intertwined. Inclusion is thus both the means to a good and promising life and a desired end in how one's life should be lived.

An inclusive life is actually quite common and well understood since this is the life the vast majority of people without disabilities ordinarily live, without much thought or question. It is not simply the life most people expect to live, it's what they desire and aspire to. It is within this inclusive life where hopes and dreams lie with the potential for them to be realized.

As in any culture there are common patterns and pathways in how we live our lives. The wonder and beauty of that common pattern is that within it, each of us develops our unique identity and expression of self. It is within these common patterns and typical pathways that life unfolds over time with unanticipated or unimagined possibilities that give rise to a life of meaning and belonging.

It is true that most people without disabilities do not describe their lives as inclusive given they are not typically excluded, segregated and/or devalued due to having an intellectual disability.

When life over time is described as follows, most people without disabilities can identify this pattern as reflective of their own lives and this ought to be as true for people with intellectual disabilities:

Life starts with family, growing up at home, being loved and wanted, going to playschool, childcare and/or kindergarten and school, having and making friends throughout the journey, having friends and family who support you and your dreams, developing a career identity, participating in community activities, being a teenager, developing a positive sense of self over time, having dreams, playing sports, possibly involved in music, dance or art, going to college or university, traveling, falling in love, getting a job, pursuing a career, perhaps owning a business, finding a soulmate, a home of your own, having friends over for dinner, looking after your parents, growing older and continuing to contribute at every step of the way. It is assumed and expected that

you will grow, relate, adapt, contribute and be included in the fullness of community life amidst your family, friends and colleagues.

This description does not have to be comprehensive for almost everyone to recognize there is a deeply rooted common, familiar pattern and expectation to our lives that we are drawn to, yet our uniqueness and experiences within those common pathways are intensely personal. We have different friends, different families, different ways of surviving being a teenager, different university experiences, different careers, different homes and partners, different ways of expressing our identity, and so on.

It is worth mentioning that these ordinary life milestones and aspirations have been explored, uniquely adopted, found to be tried and true, and repeatedly chosen by generations of people who have the greatest opportunity for autonomy and control over their lives. In effect, these common patterns and normative pathways are very well understood with a proven power. It is therefore likely that such pathways would hold the same power and value for individuals with intellectual disabilities and should be expected, available, accessible and welcoming to people with disabilities.

As the vast majority of lives in Canada are unfolding within these pathways and in these spaces of family, friends and community, inclusion for individuals with intellectual disabilities simply means being embedded in the same pathways and spaces, at the same time and in every sense of the word, with those without disabilities. In this process of shared lives, those without disabilities come to understand and appreciate how inclusion benefits everyone.

To assume, as a function of an intellectual disability, that a different desire and/or a different means exists for a meaningful life is to assume a different humanness. Often one that results in the individual being seen and treated as less valued or less human, thus creating an expectation and acceptance of a less rich life and, at times, worse, an opening to harm.

To begin where we started, the next time someone without a disability asks what inclusion means or what an inclusive life looks like, ask them to take a moment to look at their own life. Inclusion for many with an intellectual disability can be easy to define as too often they are on the outside looking in at the very life they are denied but want no differently for themselves.

With the previous explanation as the foundation to defining inclusion, a more concise version would be as follows:

Think about the lives of most people in Canada. Life starts with family, growing up at home, being loved and wanted, going to playschool, childcare and/or kindergarten and school, having and making friends throughout the journey, having friends and family

who support you and your dreams, developing a career identity, participating in community activities, being a teenager, developing a positive sense of self over time, having dreams, playing sports, possibly involved in music, dance or art, going to college or university, traveling, falling in love, getting a job, pursuing a career, perhaps owning a business, finding a soulmate, a home of your own, having friends over for dinner, looking after your parents, growing older and continuing to contribute at every step of the way. It is assumed and expected that you will grow, relate, adapt, contribute and be included in the fullness of community life amidst your family, friends and colleagues.

Inclusion happens when the lives of children and adults with intellectual disabilities unfold no differently; immersed together with their peers without a disability in the same pathways and experience of life common to us all.