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REACTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Accountability: Whose Job Is It, Anyway?

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Kudos to Guralnick for his leadership in editing this book and for his keen sense of the future. Because he so clearly seeks accountability for the past and most especially for the future, we too focus on accountability.

Mike comments that, ‘‘ . . . since the mid-1970s, there have been remarkable advances with respect to early childhood inclusion.’’ He goes on to say that ‘‘ . . . much remains to be accomplished’’ then he identifies ‘‘significant concerns’’ with regard to ‘‘four central goals of early childhood inclusion,’’ and acknowledges that ‘‘the field has got to resolve many longstanding issues stemming from differences in values, philosophies, and practices.’’

Let’s consider one of those longstanding issues: the feeling that many parents had 20 years ago, and that many still have today, that inclusion primarily depends upon their own advocacy (Erwin, Soodak, Winton, & Turnbull, in press). That is a major issue—the responsibility to initiate inclusion falls on parents, or so many believe. Are the parents right?

U.S. Department of Education (1985, 1999) data indicate that 60% of children ages 3–5 were served in regular classes in 1981–82, whereas 51% were served in that same environment in 1997–98. Are these data accurate?

Our interpretation of these cold reality data is that inclusion progress has not been as remarkable as we would like to believe. They also cause us to ponder long and hard about our own individual and collective accountability. In spite of the millions and millions of dollars invested in the inclusion agenda, why has the progress not been more substantial?

Let’s approach the accountability question from two perspectives, the ethical and then the dictionary perspectives. And then let’s think more broadly about accountability. Rabbi Hillel asked, in a now-familiar question, ‘‘If not you, who? If not now, when?’’ That’s an ethical perspective: If you are not accountable now, who will be now or later? A different perspective is a dictionary one: ‘‘Accountability’’ refers to taking responsibility and holding oneself and others to account for the who, what, when, where, why, how, and ‘‘so what’’ (what outcomes, what differences?) of their actions.

Accountability for Systems Change Agenda

Guralnick’s on-the-mark answer is to constitute (a) a National Leadership Forum and (b) a task force in each state; together, these will stimulate, carry out, and monitor systems change. To an extent, they duplicate the role of the Federal Interagency Coordinating Council; to an extent, however, they also expand the Council’s role, best described as ensuring ‘‘an integrated, seamless system of service and supports that is family-centered, community-based, and culturally competent’’ and that meets the ‘‘physical, mental, health, developmental, and learning needs’’ of children, ages birth to 8, who have or are at risk for having disabilities so that they may reach ‘‘their full potential.’’

Inherent in Guralnick’s proposals and in this vision statement are faith in a top-down approach to systems change and identification

of various actors who will be responsible (accountable?) for achieving system change. Is the faith well placed? Are all the individuals identified? And (most of all), is there a clear outcome that all the actors will achieve?

Although there can be no doubt that a top-down approach to changing human service systems contributes to accountability, conventional wisdom (the ''new federalism'') and empirical data related to school reform (changing a human service system at its elementary and secondary levels) suggest that a bottom-up approach is also necessary for accountability. Both top-down and bottom-up are necessary; neither alone is sufficient.

Whichever strategy is used or if both are used together (our preference), the questions of accountability are always these: If not you, who? If not now, when? For what? Where? Why? How? So what? To ask those questions is often to provoke a classic ''finger-pointing'' response, best exemplified by the following lesson, entitled ''Whose Job Is It?''

> This is a story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. There was an important job to be done and Everybody was asked to do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that, because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.

Admittedly, that is a result that neither Guralnick nor anyone else wants. So, who should be accountable for avoiding that result in early childhood inclusion, and how should that ''who'' act? Winton, an early childhood leader, has a persuasive answer (Winton, 2000). Looking 30 years ahead, she envisions early childhood programs that include students with and without disabilities, that are multicultural, that use state-of-the-art technology, and that rely on family-professional partnerships, action research, personnel development, and community linkages. (We urge you to read Winton's article—it's a must.) In each early childhood program, staff and parents create an ''Accountability Council'' that engages in self-study of how to improve the program; this is a peer-accountability approach. Complementing these councils are community-based teams consisting of ''preschool staff . . . , public school kindergarten teachers from the neighborhood elementary school, an early intervention team, parents, and faculty and traditional students from both 2-year and 4-year colleges . . . '' (p. 88). (We ourselves think Winton would agree to a modest addition: researchers.) These councils and teams jointly develop a community-wide professional development plan and participate in quarterly workshops to implement that plan.

> The centerpiece of the vision is a well-paid, well-educated, early childhood workforce situated in ''learning communities'' whereby parents, practitioners, administrators, consultants, and university and community college faculty are mutually accountable for creating quality early environments for *all* children. Personnel preparation is an ongoing part of the fabric of daily work. The driving force behind the content and specific educational activities is the basic question, ''What do we need to know and do to improve the outcomes for *all* young children?'' (p. 87)

Winton has begun the ''accountability'' task of putting roles to the names of *Everybody*, *Somebody*, *Anybody*, and *Nobody*.

More than that, she puts the accountability role at the grassroots level, advocating for a bottom-up approach that nicely complements Guralnick's top-down approach. Let us combine Guralnick's National Leadership Forum approach (top-down) and Winton's bottom-up use of locally referenced, ecologically valid strategies that local learning communities and Accountability Councils discover, implement, and refine. And then let us ensure that the local wisdom be synthesized and disseminated so the national, state, and local stakeholders can benefit from it. In other words, combine the two sources of wisdom.

Accountability for Research

Let us extend their proposals by addressing a specific audience, the research community, and by raising a few concerns about researchers (among whom we count ourselves) and their accountability. Our first concern is related to the site and participants. If research were

carried out, as Winton (2000) suggests, in learning communities, and if the participants were not just the researchers themselves but all of the constituents, again as Winton suggests, then the yield of that fertilized and harvested effort would be abundant indeed. Thus, how the work is done and the process for doing it—participatory action research—is critically important to advancing Guralnick's and Winton's visions. By promoting participatory research teams who carry out ecologically valid research in their respective locales, it is more likely that research will focus on and improve such different service provider and cultural environments as rural, inner city, suburban, migrant communities, Native American reservations, and university-based programs.

Our second concern is related to the topics under investigation. Guralnick primarily emphasizes a research agenda of social inclusion (agenda items #17, 18, and 19), but we also want to emphasize the importance of investigating developmental outcomes. One of the most exciting developments in the field of disability is universal design of curriculum and its delivery. (We encourage you to visit www.cast.org/.) Surely, research on the best practices of universal design to enhance developmental outcomes is warranted. We also endorse Guralnick's emphasis on inquiring into organizational and fiscal structures and on the benefits and barriers to inclusion in educational and other community activities. Without explicitly doing so, Guralnick and Winton (2000) make a point about research that we make explicitly: A multi-modal approach is necessary, one that reflects the sciences of human development, public administration, cultural studies (anthropology and sociology), and legal and policy studies.

Our third concern is related to accountability, especially the accountability of the research community and individual researchers and their teams. It is right but also not sufficient to vest responsibility in a National Leadership Forum to synthesize and disseminate research. It is also right and necessary to assert that the research community and its individual and team members have an ethical duty to *individual and collective accountability* for ensuring that research is used in such a way that children with disabilities, their families, the professional community, and the tax-paying community all benefit.

Far too often we have heard our colleagues in the research communities complain that funding agencies and peer-reviewers (of grant applications and of prospective publications) place little value on dissemination and utilization. No doubt, the reward system most often values elegance in research, less often relevance, and least often dissemination and utilization.

Can it really be the case that there is a professional stigma associated with the ''so what'' question: Once the research community or individual researchers and their teams know something and have published that knowledge in peer-reviewed journals, *so, what* difference does that knowledge make and how can that difference be achieved through dissemination and utilization?

We can make the case that there is such a stigma, and, in making that case, we confront the question of accountability. It seems that accountability for research dissemination and utilization lies somewhere between *Everybody*, *Somebody*, *Anybody*, and *Nobody*. That never-never land—or that stigmatized land—is a terrain that both Guralnick and Winton (2000) know well and that they are most rightly concerned to change.

That is why we are confident that they and other like-minded leaders will join us in asking this simple question: What will it take for researchers who are part of national and local learning communities to be accountable for ensuring that their publicly funded research actually benefits the intended beneficiaries—children with disabilities and their families, professionals, and tax-payers?

Will funding agencies, promotion and tenure committees, and journal editors adopt a criterion for their respective reward systems that researchers must demonstrate how they will ensure the use of their data? Will the agencies, committees, and editors also examine researchers' track records for dissemination and utilization when they evaluate prospective grants, appointments, and publica-

tions? In a word, will they provide incentives to researchers to use research results as the means to the end of being accountable to—that is, ensuring positive outcomes for—children with disabilities, their families, professionals, and tax-payers? And will the research leaders themselves prod the agencies, committees, and editors to do so? Will each of us be part of the solution?

Specifically and in order to advance Guralnick's and Winton's (2000) visions and our petition for accountability, we call on researchers and various research centers and their funding agencies (e.g., research institutes funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, research and training centers funded by the National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research, University Affiliated Programs, program projects funded by the National Institute for Child Health and Development, and Mental Retardation Research Centers) to synthesize their own findings, make them accessible through the Internet, and publish them in both peer-reviewed and consumer-friendly products. That would greatly simplify the role of the National Leadership Forum, given that their task would be to complete a ''macro'' synthesis without having to start at the ''micro'' level of individual studies. And it would set an example for—and begin to change the culture of—the research community and the expectations of the consumer constituents.

We are reminded of a recent experience in trying to obtain resources for our elderly parent who is experiencing pain from pressure sores. An occupational therapist recommended that he buy a specially designed cushion. The cost? $450. After a couple of weeks, we realized that the cushion made our family member more uncomfortable rather than comfortable. When we talked with the occupational therapist about this, he quickly replied, ''I certainly cannot be held to the standard that the cushion would be *helpful.*'' We hope you will ponder this reply. Is it reasonable for professionals to hold themselves and have others hold them to the standard of being *helpful*?

For us, the bottom line in an agenda for change for inclusion is that *every single person* in the early childhood field—regardless of particular role—holds himself or herself to the standard of being *helpful* in advancing positive inclusion outcomes for young children and their families. By so doing, we replace the names of *Everybody, Somebody, Anybody,* and *Nobody* with our own names as members of a national field and as members of learning communities at the ground level in our locales.

When we engage in those interlineations, we will find the clear answer to the accountability question: Whose job is it? It is mine. It is ours—each and everyone of us. And when does that job begin? It begins now. If not myself, if not all of us, then who? If not now, then when?

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