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The Next Frontier of Inclusion: Re-Defining International Education One School at a Time

By William Powell
& Ochan Kusuma-Powell

The moral lens of history is clear. Unfortunately, our window into the present is often murky. For example, today it's easy to look back on racial segregation that existed in the South of the United States prior to 1963 with moral condemnation. And yet, during that time, there were many intelligent and otherwise compassionate people who accepted racial apartheid as the normal state of affairs. How could they have missed the inequity?

And so we ask ourselves, what inequities are we currently missing? What moral blind spots will future generations identify and hold us accountable for? What am *I* currently doing or passively accepting that my grandchildren will be ashamed of?

Stated more positively, what opportunities do we have to make the world a more humane and decent place?

An historical note...

International education, as we know it today, did not exist before World War II. In the early part of the Twentieth Century, there were overseas national schools, mostly British, French and American. However, the aftermath of the WWII saw an increasingly mobile business and diplomatic community and with it the growth of international schools. These were schools designed with a philosophy born out of the carnage and intolerance of the world war. These were schools in which racial, cultural and ethnic diversity was welcomed and appreciated. We believe it is time for these same schools to exhibit similar tolerance and appreciation for learning diversity. We see this as a logical and long overdue redefinition of international education.

This was the focus of a very intense conversation that took place in the Headmaster's Office of the International School of Brussels during a dark, autumnal afternoon in 2009. Kevin Bartlett, Kristen Pelletier, and Bill and Ochan Powell sat around the conference table talking about the reluctance that many international schools have in accepting students with learning issues and catering for their specific needs. The questions flew fast and furious.

"There would be a huge outcry if an international school refused to take students on the basis of race, religion or ethnicity. What makes learning diversity different?"

"Shouldn't international schools reflect the entire community—with the full range of learning diversity?"

"What makes international schools think that they have the right to cherry pick only the students who are the easiest to educate?"

"Do great schools reflect or transform society?"

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"What are parents supposed to do, leave the child with learning issues behind when they travel overseas—'There's sandwiches in the fridge, be back in five years'?"

"How do we go about re-defining international education to be inclusive of children who learn differently?"

The conversation was long, generative and left the participants with more energy at the end than they had had to start with. It was one of those conversations that truly mattered. Meg Wheatley writes that: "authentic conversations are where intelligent behavior begins…"

The conversation that autumn afternoon in Brussels gave birth to The Next Frontier Inclusion (NFI), a non-profit organization devoted to supporting international schools in becoming more inclusive of students with special learning needs. We wrote a beseeching email to Bob Gross, then the REO for Europe for the Office of Overseas Schools and within forty eight hours had a US State Department pledge of seed money for NFI.

Also, out of that conversation emerged the NFI belief statements:

- High quality education is a basic human right of all children;
- We need to redefine international education to be inclusive of students who learn differently or at different rates;
- Parents who travel overseas should not have to leave some of their children behind or divide their families between schools;
- We are committed to a planned and carefully managed approach to including students who have special needs or may be exceptionally capable;
- The inclusion of children requiring learning support enhances the education of all children; and,
- The thoughtful inclusion of diverse learners raises the school's organizational intelligence.

Perhaps the most audacious aspect of that conversation was the framing of NFI's over-arching goal: *To have at least one inclusive international school in every major city of the world.* Arguably, a bit of a stretch—but a compelling vision nevertheless.

The NFI Design Team perceive the inclusion of children with learning issues as a matter of human rights that is part of a continuing historical trend towards greater social justice. This trend includes racial, ethnic, religious and gender inclusion. In order to put learning diversity in this context we developed a taxonomy of inclusion.

Level 1
Discrimination: Explicit & Overt

What we might see (behaviors)	What we might hear	What we might feel (emotions & attitudes)	What we might read (policies)
Racial segregation, pre-1963 in the South of the US Racial apartheid in South Africa Discriminatory hiring practices based on race, gender or religion Women barred from voting Exclusion from school based on a learning issue or handicap	"Whites-only toilet." "No Irish need apply." "Apartment for rent. No Jews." "We can't cater for backward children." "We are a college prep school. We don't accept children with learning disabilities."	The status quo is all that can be imagined. Discrimination is an acceptable norm. The disenfranchised group may pose an unspecified threat to the dominant culture. Fear and anger may be present. Arrogance may be worn as a public badge: "This school has a hundred year history of educational excellence. We are not about to risk that now."	Laws that enforce discrimination Anti-miscegenation laws School admissions policies that prohibit the enrollment of students with learning issues.

Inclusion means many things to different people. We recognized that one of our first steps was to define what we meant by inclusion. Accordingly NFI adopted the definition developed at the International School of Brussels. *"Inclusive schools are those that successfully serve a managed number of students representing the full range of learning differences: mild, moderate and intensive needs and the exceptionally able."* By this, we mean that the overall student population should reflect the population at large, with 12-15% having mild learning needs; 2–3% with moderate needs; and 1% having intensive needs.

The Design Team also decided to launch a series "NFI Conversations." These would be "conversations" rather than conferences for two reasons. First, the entire focus was on inclusion rather than an array of different unrelated topics; and second, we expected participants to learn from each other about the challenges and opportunities of inclusion. We increasingly perceived NFI as a collaborative network of international schools engaged in supporting each other.

Our first NFI Conversation was a near disaster. Kevin, Kristen, Bill and Ochan were invited by Dick Krajczar to present on the formation of NFI and inclusion to the EARCOS Spring Heads Meeting, April 2010 in Siem Reap, Cambodia. However the *Eyjaallajokull* volcano in Iceland had other plans. The ash plume rose six miles into the atmosphere and disrupted air traffic over Europe for the best part of a month. Kevin and Kristen were grounded in Brussels. Bill and Ochan led the first NFI Conversation on their own.

In the ensuing years, NFI has organized conversations in Manila, Johannesburg, Brussels, The Hague, Hong Kong, Bangalore, Nairobi and Bangkok; this, in addition to NFI workshops on inclusion at conferences organized by AAIE, ECIS, EARCOS, AISA, Tri-Association and TAISI.

Following the NFI Conversation at the American International School in Johannesburg, the Design Team opened a membership drive in order to make NFI financially sustainable. This was March, 2013, and Bill thought success would be having 25 member schools by August. What a gross underestimate! By the end of September 2013, NFI membership stood at just under a hundred international schools worldwide—reflecting where international schools were in their thinking about special education and inclusion.

At the same time the NFI began prepar-

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ing publications and products to support international school on the journey towards inclusion. 2013 saw the publication of *NFI: Inclusion—A Practical Guide for School Leaders,* followed by *NFI: An Inclusive Toolkit,* a year later. During a three day retreat in the French Pyrenees in May 2014, the NFI Design Team wrote *Towards Inclusion: Planning our Pathway—A self-audit protocol.* The latter is a formative continuum of the journey towards inclusion that asks schools to describe where they might be in four domains:

1. Building Common Meaning and Community Commitment;
2. Designing and Delivering the Service;
3. Developing Professional Capacity; and,
4. Evaluating and Improving the Program.

All NFI publications can be downloaded from wwwnextfrontierinclusion.org without charge for member schools. Hard copies are also available at nominal cost from Amazon.com.

Towards Inclusion has been so well received by schools that it is regularly used at NFI Conversations and has formed the structure of the special needs reviews that NFI has conducted for specific international schools. To date, NFI has undertaken external learning support reviews in over a dozen international schools worldwide.

Recognizing the need for long term sustainability and planning, the Design Team has begun to recruit highly knowledgeable and skillful school leaders committed to inclusion. At this time, the following individuals serve on the NFI Design Support Team: Simon Gillespie, Head of School, The American School of Kinshasa; Danette Sack, Director of Learning Support, The International School of Basel, and Kristel Solomon-Saleem, Director of Learning Support at Hong Kong Academy. We also hired a part time administrator/web manager: Sean Powell.

In 2014, Cindy Warner-Dobrowski, Director of Learning Support at International School of Bangkok approached NFI with a fascinating idea. Concerned about the use of data in making truly important decisions about students with special learning needs, Cindy believed that with research, schools could develop structures and protocols that would make the use of data more systematic and meaningful. With our encouragement, Cindy and Kristen put together a team of nine international school special education leaders. The team read extensively before coming together in Bangkok for an intensive two days of dialogue and writing. Out of these two days came the published monograph:

International schools are poised on the edge of possibility. We have the opportunity to redefine our values about the inclusion of children with special learning needs

Processes and Tools to Support Data-Driven Decision Making in Learning Support (also available to NFI member schools free of charge from the website).

The Bangkok event was so intellectually stimulating and the product so well-received that almost immediately other projects in inclusion began to emerge. Thus was born NFI's research arm: The "Leading the Way" (LTW) initiative.

In the autumn of 2015 a second LTW group of international educators gathered at the American School of the Hague to explore the knotty question of "Learning Difference OR Learning English?"—the difficult question of identifying and planning interventions for students who are learning English and have learning issues. The group did extensive research before meeting at ASH for two intensive days of writing in December, 2015. The monograph is now published as *Why 'LS' or 'EAL?' is the Wrong Question: Serving ELLs with Learning Issues in Inclusive Schools.*

For 2016-2017 NFI has four Leading the Way initiatives that focus on:

1. Developing Programs for Intensive Needs Students
2. The Highly Capable
3. Admissions in Inclusive Schools
4. Early Childhood

The last LTW initiative on Early Childhood will be the product of an NFI Study Tour to Reggio Emilia in November 2016. We want to explore how Reggio schools cater for what they refer to as "children with special rights." We also want to launch an inquiry into how play based early childhood programs can be complementary with early identification and interventions.

Two NFI Conversations are planned

Level 2 Discrimination: Implicit & Covert			
What we might see (behaviors)	**What we might hear**	**What we might feel (emotions & attitudes)**	**What we might read (policies)**
Discrimination is still practiced, but may be hidden or accompanied with excuses or apologies Students with learning issues are regularly exited from the school (sometimes with regret) particularly when transitioning from primary to middle or from middle to high school.	"I wouldn't object to hiring Black people, but the community would boycott our store." "Our school community demands the highest standards. They aren't ready for the inclusion of kids with learning disabilities." "There are more appropriate educational placements. We would be doing the child a disservice to admit." "Differentiation isn't relevant in the IB Diploma Program." "Allowing this student to transition into our high school would be a recipe for failure. It would be unethical."	There is a suppressed anxiety surrounding exclusion. There may be a growing awareness that such exclusion is wrong and inhumane. However, public opinion is still perceived as strong and few are willing to go against it. There is an unexamined feeling that we don't have sufficient resources in place to serve these children. In addition, there may be an unwillingness to explore how to overcome this barrier.	School admissions policies set arbitrary criteria for admission. "This school does not admit students with IQ's lower than 90." School policies state that admission to one division of the school does NOT guarantee admission to the next division of the school.

for 2016-2017: An NFI Roundtable Conversation at the International School in Genoa, Italy on November 18-19th and an NFI Conversation at The Graded School in Sao Paulo, Brazil from March 5-7, 2017. We are also actively exploring partnerships with the Common Ground Collaborative (CGC), WIDA, International School Consultancy Group (ISC) and the Teacher Training Center (TTC/PTC).

Level 3 Tolerance: Benign Neglect			
What we might see (behaviors)	**What we might hear**	**What we might feel (emotions & attitudes)**	**What we might read (policies)**
Learning support is incorporated into the school, but learning specialists have low status. Service delivery is primarily through pull-out. Classroom teachers don't feel a shared responsibility for students with learning needs. Schools may hire less than fully qualified learning support teachers. There is an absence of leadership interest in or support for the learning support program. There may be "ghetto" pull out programs that are not aligned with the mainstream curriculum. Fearful parents may fail to disclose a learning disability when applying for admission. Professional development in personalized learning/ differentiation is mandatory for teachers, but school leaders do not attend and don't understand what it means.	"These kids are part of the community and I suppose we have to take them. However, I don't want us to be known as a special needs school." "Learning support is OK so long as it doesn't detract from the learning of normal kids." "We mustn't allow the inclusion of these kids to lower our exam scores." "It's OK as long as it doesn't cost too much." "The teachers will be on overload."	Begrudging recognition that the school needs to serve diverse learners. Prejudice is driven underground because we sense that exclusion is not politically correct. However, students receiving learning support feel stigmatized and disenfranchised. Learning support teachers feel low status in comparison to their regular education counterparts. There is perhaps an unspoken sense that learning support students lower standards for everyone else. Resentment may be present that accrediting agencies are requiring greater differentiation of instruction.	Former US Military policy "Don't ask/Don't tell". Vague statements in the school's mission statement about valuing diversity and helping each child reach his or her potential that may not be borne out in practice. Ambiguous and vague admissions polcies that are interpreted by a single individual who makes admissions decisions. School policy stresses collaboration. However, genuine collaboration between learning support teachers and classroom teachers is rare.

The positive response with which NFI has been received by the international school community suggests to us that international schools are poised on the edge of possibility. We have an opportunity to redefine our values about the inclusion of children with special learning needs.

Over the past decade international schools have become more tolerant of children who learn differently. Some international schools still maintain exclusive admissions' policies, but increasingly we are seeing schools admitting children with mild to moderate learning disabilities. This is unquestionably a good thing. However, an attitude of tolerance is not enough. As educators and educational leaders we need to move beyond the myths and mindsets that limit our will to serve.

Our experience...

We know from personal experience in a great many international schools that the education of handicapped and learning disabled children can serve to enrich the learning experiences of *all* members of the school community. As counter-intuitive as it may seem, it is our contention that the integration of special needs students serves to raise the organizational intelligence of the school: in terms of student and teacher achievement, emotional and moral intelligence. It is a false dichotomy to think that college preparatory schools cannot serve learning challenged students. What is required is will and skill.

> Inclusive schools are those that successfully serve a managed number of students representing the full range of learning differences: mild, moderate and intensive needs and the exceptionally able.

Will and Skill...

In order to realize the promise of international education we need school leaders and teachers with the will to serve children who learn differently. We need efficacious, courageous and energetic educators who consciously make the decision to teach *all* children—educators who believe firmly that children do not need to earn the right to belong; educators who are willing to explode the comforting myths of impotency ("There are more appropriate settings for these children." "Where will the money come from?" "We can't be all things to all people.")

Level 4 Acceptance			
What we might see (behaviors)	**What we might hear**	**What we might feel (emotions & attitudes)**	**What we might read (policies)**
Affirmative action. There is an awareness that in the past the needs of students with learning issues may not have been met. School-wide corrective action is needed. School leaders are openly and vocally concerned about students with learning issues. Resources are made available to learning support teachers. The school community is coming to understand that learning diversity is the norm and people are embracing the challenge of inclusion. Teachers are involved in collaborative endeavors to plan for differentiated instruction.	"These are our most vulnerable learners. They deserve our best teachers." "Who gave us the right to cherry pick those students who provide the least learning challenges?" "Success in school isn't monolithic. It can be personalized. One size does not fit all." "I feel great pride when we celebrate both a child who is destined for Harvard and a learning support student who is receiving a modified diploma." It is common to hear teachers advocating for students with learning issues.	There is understanding that students with learning issues do not detract from the achievement of other students. Teachers and school leaders appreciate that there are many ways to measure success in school. Teachers and school leaders celebrate the successes of students with learning issues. The school community accepts and expects teachers to differentiate instruction at all levels.	Schools develop inclusive policies and build inclusion into teacher recruitment. School leaders (including Board members) actively promote the values of inclusion in the school community. The school offers modified diplomas for intensive needs students.

But passion is not enough. We also need educators with skill—teachers and administrators who understand how differentiated instruction can provide multiple access points to the curriculum for children who learn differently. We need teachers who are skillful observers of student learning and who can identify and cater for

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Level 5 Appreciating & Valuing – Reciprocal Learning			
What we might see (behaviors)	**What we might hear**	**What we might feel (emotions & attitudes)**	**What we might read (policies)**
There is a thoughtful and managed admissions process that is student oriented. There is an assumption of inclusion. No child has to earn the right to belong. Parents of children with learning issues trust the school and its teachers. Parents of neuro-typical children seek out the school because of its inclusive philosophy and practices. Teachers take pride in being inclusive. The community appreciates the benefits for neuro-typical children of being in an inclusive school.	"Neuro-diversity is a fact of life and should be celebrated." "Neuro-typical children learn empathy, compassion, and humility from students with learning issues." "I chose this school for my children because of its inclusion." "Schools have the capacity to reflect and reform society."	Students receiving support do not feel stigmatized. To the contrary, they feel empowered to advocate for themselves. The school and teachers take pride in the inclusive nature of the school and find it to be a compelling and energizing vision. The school actively markets its inclusive vision.	There is an inclusion policy in place that stresses the benefits of neuro-diversity and this policy is actively supported by the stakeholders. The school actively recruits a neuro-diverse population.

different intelligences and learning preferences. We need educators who understand the curriculum at a conceptual level and have a broad repertoire of instructional strategies. This is the mission of a non-profit consortium of international schools: The Next Frontier Inclusion (www.nextfrontierinclusion.org). We invite you to visit the website, become a member and join in our regional conversations.

International schools are an incredible success story. Our schools are growing at a rate of about 7 or 8% per annum. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the recent economic crisis has had no significant effect on our enrollment. International schools have achieved a position of respect and prominence and as such we are in a powerful position to provide examples of inclusive excellence. International schools are truly poised on the edge of possibility. ■

William Powell and Ochan Kusuma-Powell have served as international school educators and leaders for the past 30 years in the United States and abroad. They were the co-authors of Count me in! Developing inclusive international schools *(2000),* Making the difference: Differentiation in international schools *(2007),* Becoming an emotionally intelligent teacher *(2010) and* How to teach now: Five keys to personalized learning in the global classroom *(2011). Bill and Ochan were co-founders of The Next Frontier: Inclusion, an initiative that supports the inclusion of special needs children in international schools. www.nextfrontierinclusion.org.*

The Loss of a Leader: A Tribute to Bill Powell

August 1983, Tanzania. One of the early shapers of international education, Mike Maybury, took his reputation in his hands by letting loose on his school, The International School of Tanganyika (IST), a pair of young leaders characterized by energy, enthusiasm and a notable lack of leadership experience. Bill Powell was to lead the Secondary School, while I was charged with the Elementary.

June 2016, France. In the beautifully converted farmhouse home of Bill and his partner Ochan, in Massat in the French Pyrenees, we held a meeting of the Design Team of The Next Frontier Inclusion (NFI), to plan the future of this growing organization. High on our agenda was the need for succession planning, the recognition that we needed to build the next generation of leaders, to work towards a future less dependent on those of us nearing the end of our careers in international education.

July 2016, Canada. After our meeting, on July 2nd at 4 am, Bill drove the four of us to the airport in Toulouse, to head off to our separate destinations. In the case of Bill and Ochan, that was a family holiday in Canada with their beloved sons Sean and Colin and their families. They were all so looking forward to that precious time together. A few short days later, Bill was no longer with us. His loss has left many of us reeling with disbelief and sadness.

In the years that passed between those early days in Tanzania and those last days in Canada, Bill's life in leadership unfolded in the most remarkable ways. It was never dull. At IST, he stamped his personality on a school that had already had a growing reputation for producing leaders. Bill was fierce in his beliefs, loyal in his friendships, dedicated to the directions he had set and impatient with those who did not buy into his vision.

His success in achieving that vision led to other leadership opportunities, including Principalships in Jakarta and Directorships in Kuala Lumpur and back at IST. All were characterized by the same passion, the same indefatigable drive to follow his personal vision. Despite, or because of, his success in these traditional positions of leadership, Bill decided, with Ochan, to pursue a different direction.

They chose a more risky path, without the job guarantees and safety nets that come with school leadership. They would work together to change the face of international education. They would research, write, publish. They would work as a team, consulting and coaching in schools around the world, promoting the principles and practices in which they believed.

Even in the early days in Tanzania, Bill and Ochan's focus was on providing learning access to those students with different learning and language profiles. Now, they would focus on building the capacity of teachers and schools for differentiating their practice. They would work towards their vision for smarter, kinder schools, prepared to embrace the challenge of truly serving international families, not just cherry-picking the 'easy students'

All Bill's energy, intelligence and talent came together most powerfully in this last decade, and most conspicuously in the formation of The Next Frontier Inclusion, together with Ochan, Kristen Pelletier and me, then both working at the International School of Brussels. NFI's goal was simple, 'One inclusive international school in every city'. The fact that NFI now has over 100 members, and the fact that inclusion is increasingly accepted as the natural, ethical norm, is a result of the unrelenting drive of Bill and Ochan.

Ever the rebel, Bill's commitment to radical change had landed him in hot water in his youth. In his later years, as a champion for students with different learning profiles, Bill truly became a rebel with a cause. He was indefatigable in his vision for improving learning and life for these students and their families. To ask any of those children and parents about the impact of inclusion is to hear stories of transformation, of children who had been near breaking point in non-empathetic school systems, finding a personal, confident voice and a hopeful future. The real testament to the impact of Bill's life is to be found in those children's stories.

Professionally, it has been an immense privilege to work alongside Bill as young educators in Africa and, as older, hopefully wiser men, in NFI around the globe. Personally, and I speak for all of Bill's friends in saying this, I will miss the man more than I care to dwell on here. Uncompromising, argumentative, possessed of a wild energy, passion and humour, Bill Powell was unquestionably larger than life. His life leaves international education immeasurably larger in collective intelligence and immensely richer in compassion. Thanks, Bill, on behalf of all those whose lives you changed. *Safari njema*, old friend. ■

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