The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 7, Episode 1

Lou Brown | Progress

Audio Transcript

Tim Villegas (00:00):
Typically I hang up as soon as I know it's going to be a sales call, but this one was different. It was from my alma mater Azusa Pacific University. They were persuading alumni to update their contact information for a networking book. It sounded harmless enough. So I gave the voice on the other end of the line, my details. And as she was inputting the data, she told me about how wonderful it was that I was a special education teacher. And in the very same breath, she exclaimed. Isn't it awful how people are trying to put students with disabilities in the same classrooms as everyone else. I immediately responded, sorry to burst your bubble ma'am but I am one of those people. So why would someone have a problem with students with disabilities being educated side by side with their non-disabled peers? For those of us who are familiar with the decades of research, that support inclusive education and who have experienced success with authentic inclusion, it's easy for us to see that it works for almost everyone else, though.

Tim Villegas (01:11):
It appears to be a near impossible concept to grasp. So despite all the research and resources that are available for schools and districts, why are we continuing to fight an outdated mindset over inclusive education? Here is my short answer. The creation of special education services have become synonymous with separate education services. For most of the 20th century, severely disabled family members were institutionalized, though. This has become less acceptable over time. The damage has been done just as we had a woken to the realization that people with disabilities deserve an education and a living space. We didn't know how to provide the supports within the context of a broader non-disabled world. So we created separate systems. This wouldn't be so bad if these separate systems had changed to evolve with our culture's attitudes towards civil and disability rights, but that is not the case. Today, we have fragments of pockets of schools and communities that do inclusion well.

Tim Villegas (02:24):
The vast majority of places, however, are either unwilling to implement inclusive practices or lack the knowledge and resources to know where to start. The long answer to this question of why is what we are devoting the podcast to for our seventh season. But hold on, hold on. Isn't special education working you might ask. Well, it depends on both your expectations and how you define working. The promise of self-contained, or segregated special education classrooms

and schools do not provide the most benefit for the most children. And this is by no means the fault of the teachers who work in these classrooms. I was one of those teachers and I'm in the unique position of having taught in a separate classroom for 13 years. And at the same time promoting inclusive practices, it can be done. Also, there are schools and districts right now that are rejecting the mindset that separate or special is better and educating a wide variety of learners in the same spaces at the same time.

Tim Villegas (03:39):
Let me quickly share with you my vision for educating students with a wide range of abilities. And you will hear me talk about this throughout the whole season. Imagine there's no special education, nothing special or separate one educational system that supports all students. Every teacher gets the same training on intervention strategies as every other teacher, some states and teacher training centers have already started this dual certification process. And then there's the funding instead of special ed funding and general ed funding. There's only education funding. Segregation is over if we want it. Today on the podcast, our first guest of the new season is Lou Brown. Co-Founder of Tash, an organization that advocates for human rights and inclusion for people with significant disabilities and support needs. He's also the professor Emiratis at the university of Wisconsin. We discuss what supports for students with significant disabilities look like before 1975 and the progress that we have made since then, my name is Tim Villegas. We are so glad you are here with us after a short break, our interview with Lou Brown.

Tim Villegas (05:04):
How do you know you're an inclusionist in 1997, Ellen Bratlinger from Indiana university first used the term inclusionist, which for many means someone who wants to get rid of special education decades of research show better outcomes for people with disabilities when they are included and authentic inclusion is happening in schools and districts around the country, in the world, some nearing 90% inclusion rates or above for many years, this progress did not just happen. But as the result of careful planning led by educational visionaries and the implementation of strategies that promote effective inclusive education, it's time to bring back the moniker of inclusionist to me, a collaborator for inclusive practices, not simply who wants to throw the whole system away without replacing it with something better. If this resonates with you, you are an inclusionist. And do we have the newsletter for you? The weekly ish is for inclusionists subscribe@weeklyishdotsubstack.com.

Lou Brown (06:23):
Hi, my name is Lou Brown and you're listening to the think inclusive podcast.

Tim Villegas (06:48):
One of the things that that people may not know about you is your connection to the disability rights movement.

Lou Brown (06:56):

So on January, 1965, my wife and I and our, our infant son, one month old son moved to Western Carolina center. Am I here? My job there was to do diagnostic stuff, which was essentially meaningless. And then I worked on a ward with people who are non-ambulatory and then on another ward with people who are ambulatory, but they couldn't speak, basically couldn't speak. And the job was to do something. Well, one this one particular ward, but 40 ambulatory people that were in one big room, all day and, and and say, well, what are you going to do until we say, well, we've got to get them out of this room. We've got to break them up. So I learned a very important lesson.

Lou Brown (07:54):
We must increase the number of environments in which people with disabilities function. We must the more the fewer environments, the more problems they have and everybody else. The second thing is they can't be with each other. You have to heterogeneously group homogen… The whole field was based on homogeneous grouping schools for this schools for that class is for this class for that. And I said, you know, we, we realized that you can't put three kids with autism in one place. You can't put 10 kids with severe physical disabilities in one place it's just homogeneous grouping has to have had to go. So then in the, I would say, then I went to, for a doctoral program at Florida state with Jim's bolshie and Ben Allen. And I worked at the Sunland training centers around Florida for three years. And it, it, it was the same thing.

Lou Brown (08:48):
What I want to put, I did and tried to do at Sunland is the same thing I tried to do with it. Western Carolina center, you take people, do we have to increase the number of environments in which they are functioning. And then we had to try to teach him something. So 1969, I moved to Matt, my wife and I, you know, and our young son moved to Madison that a university of Wisconsin, I remember driving up and we're talking about now, what are we going to do? We had enough, she couldn't find Wisconsin on the map. I mean, I had never been there or heard much about it except for the interview. And so what are we going to do there? So I remember saying, well, we're just going to have to get out of the institution business. We're just going to have to close them down, make sure nobody has to go there because they're just, they're just no good for people with disabilities.

Lou Brown (09:37):
And the second thing is, of course, the people we work with at the institutions would consider too disabled to attend the institution school. And so we set up teaching programs for them and bathrooms and hallways and closets. We just got to get them in school, so they all have to go to school. So that if you, if you think about that, do you think about that some of the principals involved in a closing institution? Well, they're essentially closed now. Kids are considered too disabled to go to school. Well, nobody's considered too disabled to go to school anymore. And, and, and we, of course didn't know the people in Pennsylvania or Massachusetts, Martha Ziglar and Elena Elkind and Tom, but we didn't know those people. Then we would just go on our way independent of a lot of other, but we wouldn't, but we're still a clear minority, right?

Lou Brown (10:33):

So you think about things like rules we sort of adopted. One is we must increase the number of environments in which people with significant disabilities function. That's critical. Two what is the environments can't be overloaded. We have to go to a natural distribution if 1% of, if you had this definition of a person with a significant intellectual disability, as low as functioning, 1% of the population, but no environment should have more than 1% of the people who are significantly disabled intellectually, and then no homogeneous grouping. That's a killer, they're the killers. So now that's sort of how we came about it and involved in it. And we'd been sort of involved ever since.

Tim Villegas (11:22):
No, it's interesting. I mean, these are the, these are the things that you outlined in the sixties in the late sixties. And there's, it seems to me are still the things that are the barriers to students with disabilities in schools. I mean,

Lou Brown (11:45):
Yeah, people are still functioning from it. They're still violating. They still confining the environments. They still violating natural distribution and overpopulating certain environments. And there's still homogeneously grouping autism is a good example.

Tim Villegas (12:03):
Autism is a great example. So I mean, why do you think that if these are the things that that we've been working for for so long, why has there been so little progress?

Lou Brown (12:19):
Well, let me step back a little bit, first of all the definition that we sort of adopted, tried to live by is that we are advocates for the lowest intellectually functioning, 1% of the population, because these are the people who are excluded from schools before 94-142 in 1975. This is what the people were considered to something to autistic, to physically disabled, to behavior disorder, to something, to go to school with everybody else. There were over a hundred, 300,000 in institutions and, most of them stayed at home, right? They functioned in few environments, they had terribly restricted social lives. The only people that interacted with them are family, people, other people with disabilities and people you'll give money to. Right? So, so, so that was the population. And I think that was the original TASH population. And it certainly, there's more inclusion than the lowest intellectually functioning, 1% of the population.

Lou Brown (13:29):
But that's the, that's the group of people that we were primarily concerned with right? Now. What did they have in 1970 activity centers? Some of them shelter, segregated workshop home. They were stayed at home all day. And we said, that's not good enough. That's not good enough. See when you started. And we started to work in the Madison schools with kids with significant disabilities and we follow them. We're still following them to this day, by the way, those who are alive we followed them and still no one when they finished, when they finished, what ha what did they do? Well, they went to a shelter, segregating workshop or segregated activity center where they stayed at home. We said, that's not good enough. So we started and

there was a few years ago, the paper we wrote. So the publication of CEC, Hey, don't forget about me.

Lou Brown (14:29):
I said was the criterion of ultimate functioning. So if you start with young kids and you're staying with them throughout their lives, well, what will ultimately where does it leave? What do you want? What's the outcome that, that, that makes any kind of sense. And so we said that the criteria, the criteria of ultimate functioning to live, work and play in integrated society. So anything you do that prepares people with significant intellectual disabilities to live, work, and play an integrated society, you do. Anything you do that interferes with that you don't do. So that became sort of a guiding rule for us. And of course, that's put us smack in conflict with a large percentage of the population and the institutions, et cetera. Now, you see what progress have we made since 1975? Well, now we have schooling for all, you know, thanks.

Lou Brown (15:30):
But I think that those parents in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania and Ed Martin in his group and, and federal government and senators and Congress, people who, who, who pass the legislation at their primary, good, you've got to thank them. When parents and lawyers in Congress, people and professional professionals get together, you can do wonderful things. Now, very few people in the country, 320 million, and probably fewer than 25,000 people in institutions in both of those are nursing homes. So on institution grounds, we have integrated work every year, more and more people live input, significant disabilities, leave school and do real work in the real world. It no longer said it couldn't be done. It used to be, if you couldn't do the shelter workshop, you said at home, what did nothing. And then people always came up with reasons why these people couldn't function in an integrated society and they're wrong. Right now, we have university….

Lou Brown (16:31):
There were no teacher training programs. As a matter of fact, CEC they did people, whether they have programs for, to train teachers, to work with the mentally retarded, if you will. But they, but these kids were considered sub sub trainable or to this or to that for those programs. And they, those very few university programs that dealt with severe kids with severe intellectual disabilities. All right. So now we've increased the environments. It warms my heart to go around the Madison or anywhere and see people would obvious disabilities on a bus, working at a restaurant and the library, just walking the streets. You couldn't see that when, when the the segregation is the rule, the rule the world right now, now we've got … Even social relationships have improved. What is one of the major problems that you see in education?

Lou Brown (17:28):
Okay. When you talk about the education of kids that there, there, there are several, of course. One of the major problems is the learning and performance characteristics of the population we're talking about. I think there's a, there is pervasive ignorance of, or denial of the learning characteristics of the students we're talking about. For example, they're not that smart. What does that mean? They're going to learn fewer skills in a unit of time, a month, a week, the

school year, the career, then everybody, the 99% of the people. Well, what does that mean? Well, that means you have to things. You pick the, teach them the skills you teach the teaching. You have to teach them. I don't have to be the most important things. They need to know. You can't teach them dumb stuff. You can't waste your time. You can't think to teach them something that spends this valuable time, teaching them something that by the time they learn it, they're obsolete.

Lou Brown (18:27):
The second characteristic of the population is the level of difficulty. I mean. You see some of these IEPs and they're wonderfully exciting and stimulating, and Oh boy, they refill beautifully. And they've downloaded from all these checklists and, Oh, it's great. It's great. The problem is what they're talking about is their out of the difficulty tange. There too complicated for the students of concern. Then I didn't select from the capable of learning though. So now you have to have the fourth pick an important skill in the difficulty range, the highest part of the difficulty range of an individual student. Another problem, they want a reason to say that. So is significantly disabled, intellectually to take a longer to learn than everybody else. We refer to as the number of trials to acquisition, how many trials is going to take to teach this particular student a very important skill in her difficulty range?

Lou Brown (19:23):
Well, well, let's say you say a hundred. Well, if you only can get in 50 and before you go onto the next skill, she doesn't learn anything. So there's no accumulation. And this is a tremendous problem is over time is building the repertoire. The next problem that I think is dishonored is practice. If you don't know, if they don't practice what they know, then they forget. All right. So now you have what we call vertical practice, which is classic general education for smart kids. You do addition, then you do subtraction. Then you do multiplication. Then you do, and you keep going up and making things more complicated. Well, the problem with that vertical development strategy is that you hit the top of their difficulty range. And then they can count to this, but you start to counting, adding on what they have to count.

Lou Brown (20:15):
They don't do it. They can't do it. So what do you do? Well, what you do is you go horizontally. You teach them to use what they know in different activities, in different environments, in different in different environments. So, so and so by doing that, if I teach her skills in school, I make sure they use it in a game, make a sure it's a functional skill, make sure they use it at home in some way. And then you build in practice and you do reduce, forgetting the other major problem. That's just almost well, it's a significantly ignored by educators. It's the problem of generalization. No one has ever said, you know, the more intellectually disabled you are, the better you generalize. No one ever said that. Everybody knows the more, the more, disabled you are intellectually, the more problems you have generalizing, right?

Lou Brown (21:04):
So, so it's senseless to teach somebody a skill in school and then require them to expect them. What's your hope for them to use that skill someplace else? It just doesn't work. I'm really

sorry. So what you have to do is build in generalization into your instructional programs, get a commitment from parents or friends or anybody so that if I teach them this skill in school, then they're going to use it here. So they won't forget it. And they don't have to worry about deficits and generalization. Another problem that's been ignored is we know, we know the overwhelming majority of our students are imitative. They can imitate the ones that can't where we will teach them to imitate. We're really good at teaching kids to imitate. Okay, so now we've got in school or in our therapy programs, we teach kids to imitate. So now what do we do with them? When we put them with other kids who self stimulate with other kids who can't talk with other kids who can't move, you see? So it's crazy to spend your resources, teaching imitation skills. We know how to do it. It's really, but get imitative. Then you put them with horrible models. So we want, we want to put them with the best possible language, behavior, social, work, whatever models, well in schools, where are the best models they're not in special education settings, they're in the general education setting.

Tim Villegas (22:33):
We will hear more from our guests, Lou Brown later on this season, if you would like to hear the entire unedited interview with Lou Brown, consider becoming a Patreon subscriber at patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast. Follow the think inclusive podcast on the web at thinkinclusive.us and tell us what you thought of the podcast via Twitter at inclusive underscore pod on Facebook or Instagram, you can also subscribe to the think inclusive podcast via Apple podcasts, Google Play, Stitcher, or on the Anchor app. We'd love to know that you were listening. Also a reminder that you can support the think inclusive podcast, either through Patrion, anchor.fm, with a monthly contribution so that we can continue to bring you in-depth interviews with thought leaders in inclusive education and community advocacy on that note, thanks to Patriots. Donna L Kathleen T and Renee J for their continued support of our podcast. Also a special shout out to my producer and love of my life. Brianna, she will always be number one in my book. And one more shout out to my boys. You know who you are for all the encouragement. I greatly appreciate it. Next time on the think inclusive podcast.

Erin Studer (24:00):
It's a major problem. If you tell me that a child with an intellectual disability in California will spend 80% of their K through 12 experience only with other children with disabilities. That's a problem.

Tim Villegas (24:15):
Thanks for your time and attention. See you next time.

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