

[Interview with Bruce Uditsky, CEO Emeritus of Inclusion Alberta](#)

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Transcribed by Julie Ann Lee

(Theme song - soft piano music)

Anne: Today, we're talking with **Bruce Uditsky**. Bruce is the CEO Emeritus of Inclusion Alberta and its former CEO for over 25 years. Inclusion Alberta is a family based non-profit federation that advocates for intellectually and developmentally disabled children and adults. Bruce is internationally recognized for his leadership and advocacy in social justice and inclusion and is the founder of Inclusive Post-Secondary Education and co-founder of the Rotary Employment Partnerships, both of which have been formally recognized as world-leading innovations.

Bruce, it's great to talk to you today.

Bruce: I am happy to talk to you as well Anne.

Anne: That's great. I'm going to get a little background into the issue that we're talking about which is restraint and seclusion in schools. When I hear about the use of restraint and seclusion in schools, where children are held down against their will or locked in sealed rooms by teachers, it really takes me back to the era of residential institutions. And I think a lot of people think 'oh, that's something that happened in the past,' but we can see it is still happening today. For example, the horrific case in Sherwood Park School in Alberta this past September. For background, the parents are suing the school because their 12-year-old autistic son was allegedly stripped naked by teachers and locked in a school isolation room. There was paper taped over the windows, and it was locked from the outside, and the school sent a photo of the naked boy in the isolation room to his parents. To me, this is what really stuck. The fact that they sent the photo just telegraphed that the school thought this was okay.

So, I'd like to ask you Bruce, how did this happen? How is this happening?

Bruce: Well, it's basically happening in the schools across the country at least in many parts of the country to our knowledge, not that children are necessarily isolated by having to undress first or left in the rooms necessarily for long periods of time and in this particular instance you mentioned actually covered in feces. But, children with disabilities or with autism are being restrained and secluded in schools without any sort of monitoring being kept, with no data, no assurance that proper, positive strategies have been utilized for example....it's a serious problem that's been raised by sister organizations of ours in provinces across the country.

Anne: Right. Alberta Education has guidelines on the use of seclusion and physical restraints, but these guidelines are not being enforced, nor do they even regulate, monitor or keep record of whether schools honour the policy and what's happening in the schools around seclusion and restraint. Is that correct?

Bruce: Yes. That's correct, and I think it's reflective of, in fact a distinction between how Alberta Education and perhaps others look at students with disabilities relative to other marginalized or historically discriminated against populations. So, we are trying to as a province, Alberta Education is

trying to monitor and ensure students on the basis of their gender identity, are accepted and well included and have access to the resources they need--which is very necessary. But at the same time it hasn't monitored children with disabilities who have less capacity to speak for themselves and are in fact put in pretty serious contexts and situations that as you said are reflective of previous institutional practices.

Anne: Right. In your words, the school districts are not being held accountable. And it seems to me that there's a double standard in the two types of classrooms – the special education classroom and the typical or mainstream classroom. Why is this?

Bruce: Oh well, as you would know and most people know there's been a long history not just in Canada but elsewhere with respect to not valuing children with significant disabilities as being equally human [nor] with giving them appropriate and necessary supports to have every potential to be successful learners. So, in effect we're seeing, if you want the remnants of an **outdated historical view** that these children are of somehow less worth, less of value than children without disabilities and that I think is a blatant form of **discrimination**.

[5:03]

Anne: Right. With regard to no record keeping, it's been hard to identify the problem, when there's no record keeping by the government. In the UK for example, the government is keeping track of the use of restraints certainly. And this is helping them to recognize patterns and take action. What I like about Inclusion Alberta, what you've done is said, *if the government is not going to do it, we're going to do it*. And Inclusion Alberta developed a new survey to help gather reports of these incidents.

Can you tell me a little bit about your survey?

Bruce: Yes. The survey was an attempt to do precisely that. Not necessarily in the most scientific way, but to get a sense of what families were experiencing, and schools with respect to children and the use of these seclusions and restraints. And we were in fact surprised by the degree of response we received which experts have told us is way outside of what one would normatively expect. We received over 600 responses to that survey which are now being analyzed by one of the universities we partner with. So, obviously there is a lot of concern out there.

This is an issue that has been festering for quite some time. We haven't been able previously to get the government to react even though they were aware of the situation until this most awful situation that you described earlier became public.

Anne: Right. You have now created basically a platform where they can tell and talk and provide this data. I'm wondering once the data has been gathered and analyzed by the university... that I'm assuming you'll present the data and make recommendations, and do you think you'll be working with the government then to build a better system of accountability?

Bruce: . I certainly hope so. We are meeting this week as are other stakeholders with Alberta Education to revise a draft of the guidelines. But, we do not know yet to what degree Alberta Education will accept what we believe is its responsibility to actually monitor and ensure the utilization of improved guidelines. In addition to the data set that will be out shortly, we're also going to look at capturing

qualitatively the stories and experiences of families and their sons or daughters, because you know the data itself in terms of how many children, what ages and how long have they been [or] were they in seclusion presents one story. But the story of what it *felt like* as a child to feel unsafe at school, to feel unwanted, to find out as a parent this had happened to your child without your consent or knowledge that trauma that subsequently that was expressed afterwards. This is in the form of other data I think that's just as important and needs to be told.

Anne: I think there are- I mean I think there are some people who seem to think that isolation [is] 'the only way' and the only reason they're doing it is because they 'have to' but, first of all you know the research just doesn't back that up. Ron Garrison, I don't know if you're familiar with him. He's been an expert witness in more than 80 cases and he points to this wealth of research really, which all shows that it doesn't achieve the goal they claim or set out to achieve. That isolation (like you were just saying) increases and escalates the situations, destroys important relationships and trust. It causes post-traumatic stress disorder, and it worsens the environment for everyone... but of course in the worst way for the child with very long term- lifelong effects.

It's also been found that most kids are put in isolation [by adults] not out of some reasoned, calm strategy or approach but out of emotion and anger. So it seems the adults are not dealing appropriately with these situations. And, given what we know about the research, why do the schools and other institutions continue to use it despite all this research and knowledge about why it shouldn't be done?

[9:44]

Bruce: Well, I wish I had a better answer for you because with respect to the education of students with intellectual and other related disabilities, there are far too few schools that still operate on the basis of what the research and knowledge have said for decades actually. And so, the research as you have pointed out is very clear--has been for a long time with respect to the use of these forms of detrimental forms of punishment, if you want.

But the research is also clear as well that inclusive education is a far better approach to educating the students with intellectual and cognitive disabilities than segregating them. And in fact, in many ways segregating them and pushing them out of the lens of the rest of us in society puts them in positions when they're devalued of actually having these kind of punishments applied in their lives. So, we need to both **advance the totality of inclusion** for individuals with disabilities so that they are not in places that are away from the public view if you want, but they're with other kids in school without disabilities who can in fact share and speak for what's happened to their friends with disabilities, and where in fact it's far less likely that they're going to be as devalued, and to be subject to being punished.

In many ways, the history of discrimination and devaluation of people with disabilities is still quite prevalent in our society. School is a reflection of our society, as much as we might like them to rise above that, not enough are demonstrating that ability or capacity or even interest actually.

Anne: Or even interest. One of the big things that I'm concerned about often is that people don't tune in. Providers don't always tune in to the reality that **behaviour is communication** and that children who are "uncontrollable" are struggling to express something. Are people being trained to understand and

tune into that message – you know to respond to those needs? Is that something that’s happening in the education programs and if not, why not?

Bruce: There are schools and districts that actually do a really excellent quality inclusive education, understand behaviour as a function of communication and perhaps other needs--and respond by providing security and safety to students. So that clearly does exist, but it’s not scaled up across schools and school districts. So, if the leadership of one school or school district chooses to operate very positively, that can happen there. But there’s nothing that prevents another school district or school from not showing the necessary leadership. And just as we have attempted to address other forms of societal discrimination on the basis of other historically marginalized conditions, we need to do the same here. It ought to be universal.

No child should be subject to this by chance, that they happen to go to a school where in fact the leadership does not exist, the understanding does not exist, that this is a child that’s attempting to communicate, there’s a purpose to this behaviour and that needs to be addressed in order to ensure that this child has the best possibility of success and feels safe and secure in school.

Anne: Right. Exactly. So, some sort of standardized – there has to be some kind of standard and specifically what you like to see in terms of the reform and reduction in this kind of violence against students or group home residents? What would be the goal?

Bruce: Well, I think the goal would be to ensure that when there is a student, for example in school having certain challenges, we look at every possible means of ameliorating that. That could be everything from the fact that the curriculum is not properly adapted or modified... it’s either not challenging enough or it’s overly challenging. We look as we would with any other student as to whether there are other things going on in that student’s life for example. We would ensure that we’re doing everything that we can to facilitate relationships and friendships, because that’s one of the best means by which to minimize the possibility of behavioural difficulties.

There’s a host of the research literature has of positive strategies to be brought to bear, so it’s a long way before we ever get to the situation where in fact we might need to remove a child; and if we do then the child might be removed to the library or the resource centre or shoot some hoops in the gym or to move around and have a movement break or have some different sensory stimulation etc. to allow that child to self-regulate to the degree possible.

[15:07]

Bruce: Whether it’s a student with disabilities or not, there are students who at times present you know a crisis situation, you know an imminent possibility of harm to themselves and others and you may need to intervene at that moment in time. And you do that just for that moment of time in the most constructive way possible, but that’s a signal to everyone who’s engaged with that student to then *rethink all the strategies* that have been put into place and what else needs to be adjusted and accommodated so that doesn’t happen again. So, seclusion for example should never be a form of punishment. It has nothing to do with teaching or education. It’s almost more a demonstration of power over a student if you want and a devaluation of that student.

Anne: That's right and that's what the research shows. It really shows that there's no kind of thought behind doing this. It's really emotion on the part of the adults. In Ontario, it's been really challenging because there was just a report by the Ontario Human Rights Commissioner about what Special Education is like in Ontario, it concluded that it really hasn't changed in 30 years. It's been very static and that's not because people haven't been trying to raise their voice but there's just been a missing link where there's just not a clue in from the government for making the kind of changes that need to be made. I don't think that they're necessarily *expensive* changes. If you look at **universal design** and **inclusive design**, this isn't something that would really require that much, but it requires a shift in consciousness about disability and *particularly about intellectual disability*. And so, maybe that's what's holding it back.

Bruce: From my perspective and many others, that would be the case. It's the necessity to raise consciousness, but you need willing partners actually to *want* to understand the history and to in fact demonstrate the leadership to alter things.

This is in fact not a matter of cost as some might contest at all, but it's even more challenging because it's a **matter of values**, and that's more difficult for us to address and discuss as a society and in fact to alter and change. But that's what's fundamentally needed. If one perceives a child with disabilities as no differently human than any other child, then one would be called upon to act very differently than we have. But if one sees that child as somehow less than or detracting from the education or well being of others, or in fact making it 'difficult for me to fulfill my career destination as a teacher', then those children end up actually subject to isolation, marginalization and segregation. And so really the **problem is not with the students with disabilities** (even when they have some significant behavioural difficulties), it's with those of us who are responsible for ensuring that they have every opportunity for a positive and life enhancing education.

Anne: I'm going to switch gears for a bit and just to talk about independent living and independence. You have an amazing initiative called the **Inclusion Alberta Rotary Partnership** which created more than 500 meaningful jobs for developmentally disabled adults. And the average wage is more than \$15 an hour, is that right?

Bruce: Yeah, it's above that now because the minimum wage has gone up in the province. So our average was always above the existing minimum wage, some even higher today.

Anne: Wow, that's great. And it's been a model for programs in other provinces. It was recognized as a world leader by the Zero Conference in Vienna, and the World Future Congress – it looks like it's being used as a model for best practices as well. Can you tell me more about the initiative?

Bruce: Well, the initiative essentially is a partnership between ourselves and Rotarians and Rotary Clubs and Rotary Districts. So, Rotary is a hundred year old plus organization made up of community leaders, professionals, business owners and others who come together to make a difference both locally and internationally. And they are in fact a phenomenally well connected, and understand the value if you want of being in relationship to each other and collaborating to make a difference. People that we're engaged with, people with intellectual disabilities don't have ready access to a network that can create job possibilities for them. They can't necessarily compete often for existing jobs or get in for an interview, so in fact we need to be able to create jobs within existing enterprises that they can-meaningful work they can fulfil. Rotarians come together basically on the basis of their vocation to make

a difference. So we approached the past-president of Inclusion Alberta who now works for us, Wendy McDonald was a Rotarian at the time and she got together with me and discussed how we could possibly capitalize on Rotarians and their connections and their leadership in business to be interested in creating jobs --and they have stepped forward quite wonderfully. I think Rotarians do take pride in the difference they've made in now creating over 500 jobs ...and you know every month, we're adding to that total.

Anne: That's great. Thank you so much for coming in to speak with me Bruce, I really appreciate it.

Bruce: Well, thank you so much for taking an interest and keeping this podcast going forward to raise people's consciousness.

Anne: Thanks a lot.

Bruce: Take care.

(Theme song – soft piano music)

Anne: That was Bruce Uditsky, the CEO Emeritus of Inclusion Alberta, talking with us about their initiative to stop seclusions and isolations in schools.

You've been listening to Noncompliant. I'm your host, Anne Borden King. Noncompliant was recorded at DB Audio and MCS Recording Studios. Various episodes were engineered by Dave Boir, Nathan Greavette, and TJ Liebgott. Thanks to our engineers and thanks for listening.