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**SEMINAR SERIES:**

**DISABILITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE LaW
2012-13**

***“Mainstreaming” Disability: Inclusive Education***

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**Moderator:** Béatrice Vizkelety, Director, Secretariat and Legal Department, Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse

**Resource Persons:**

Tara Flanagan, Assistant Professor, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, McGill University

Frédéric Fovet, Director, Office for Students with Disabilities, McGill University

Cristobal Vignal, Chairperson of the Governing Board, Mackay Centre School

**Organized by:** Centre for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism, McGill Human Rights Working Group – Disability and the Law Portfolio

The fourth and final seminar in the series provided a forum for exploring the role of inclusive education in integrating people with disabilities in academic settings as well as strategies for implementing inclusive education. Despite provisions for inclusive education in human rights instruments, full integration remains elusive and people with disabilities continue to be along the least educated groups. The inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream academic programs varies by province, leaving many children with disabilities attending segregated schools.

The resource persons presented brief remarks at the start of the discussion, beginning with Professor Flanagan, who provided an overview of the work that she is involved in to promote inclusive education at McGill. Her research focuses on self determination and quality of life. Professor Flanagan stated that the notion of self-determination, while linked to autonomy, choice, and personal empowerment, is capable of existing in a supportive community structure. She argued against the commonly-held assumption that a person who requires assistance cannot be empowered in education settings. Little research has been carried out on issues related to quality of life for people with autism, which inspired her to engage in this area of research. Professor Flanagan highlighted the attitudinal factors that often act as barriers to full inclusion. She noted that the Faculty of Education offers a specialized Masters of Education in Inclusive Education, and that Montreal’s first ever disability film festival will take place this year from March 21-28.

Mr. Vignal brought a practical perspective to the discussion as Chairperson of the Governing Board at the Mackay Centre School as well as the parent of a child with a disability attending the school. He described the difficulties that his daughter has faced in transitioning from the Mackay Centre School, where she benefited from the latest in technology, to Westmount High School. While his daughter, who uses a wheelchair, is “integrated” in many ways, she sometimes feels isolated due to accessibility issues. Her classroom on the ground floor, for example, does not provide access to the cafeteria and auditorium. Mr. Vignal pointed out that his daughter would benefit from being part of an inclusive environment where she can get the support she needs to reach her full potential. Although he is encouraged by the fact that Canada is a party to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there is much to be done before Canada achieves the level of accessibility available in countries such as New Zealand.

Mr. Fovet highlighted the importance of the shift that has occurred in recent years from the medical model of disability to the social model, and the impact on mainstreaming inclusive education. The social model’s recognition that the concept of disability is not intrinsic to the individual is more conducive to the initiation of environmental interventions meant to reduce systematic barriers and societal exclusion. The medical model, by contrast, views disability as a diagnostic label attached to a physical condition, or as an “illness” to be cured or managed. Mr. Fovet suggested, however, that a gap exists between the conceptual framework and reality. He pointed out that inclusion is not an overnight process, and that management of change is required to implement inclusion in practice. He also discussed McGill’s efforts in employing the Universal Design model.

When the floor was opened for questions, a number of participants raised concerns about the costs involved in implementing inclusive practices. Mr. Fovet agreed that there is indeed a cost element, particularly with respect to training, but noted that not improving access to education is also costly, and that it would be a better use of funds to ensure inclusion—a sustainable change. One participant pointed out that there are ways of improving access to education that are less costly and which are already taking place, such as the recording of lectures and using different evaluation methods. Some participants also raised questions relating to inclusion of people with mental disabilities. Mr. Fovet stating that universal design places an emphasis on access to education rather than diagnostic issues and, together with a common sense approach, access to education can still be achieved through methods such as not making participation and attendance compulsory. A significant part of the discussion focused on the role of legislation. There was consensus that although legislation has a significant part to play in creating a duty to make education accessible, it is not the only response. Professor Flanagan pointed out that people can also contribute to change by modeling good practices in their everyday lives.