WHICH SHOULD BE DEFENDED: INCLUSION OR Segregation?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

For years, activists have worked diligently to ensure children and adults with disabilities are included in all areas of society: home, school, work, community, etc., instead of being physically and socially isolated in "special" segregated settings. In these efforts, we have attempted to influence, cajole, or persuade others; used legal remedies; and/or participated in campaigns, demonstrations, or other activities. In short, we have spent enormous amounts of time and energy *defending* the inclusion of children and adults with disabilities. But as I described in another article ("Inclusion: The Natural State"), inclusion *is* the natural state—every person is born included! The segregation/exclusion of children and adults with disabilities is not the result of their medical diagnoses, but is caused by *our* actions.

Before going further, perhaps a definition of "inclusion" is in order. My computer dictionary defines "include" as: "incorporate, comprise, encompass, embrace, involve, be composed of." But perhaps the easiest way to define it is to examine its opposite: to exclude. If a person with a disability is excluded from an ordinary environment, he is, by definition, not included.

> ***Segregation is the adultery of an illicit intercourse between injustice and immorality.***
>
> Martin Luther King, Jr.

Special, separate programs—which segregate and isolate people with disabilities from the mainstream—continue to be the dominant, normal state of affairs in the minds of many parents, educators, service providers, and others who exert control over people with disabilities. On the flip side, those who favor inclusion are in the minority, and their position is considered radical, and is, therefore, questioned and devalued.

Our American Civil War comes to mind . . . Those who supported the slavery, segregation, and exclusion of people of color were in the majority for decades. Those who opposed slavery (the abolitionists) recognized slavery as morally and ethically abhorrent. They were in the minority, and like today's inclusionists, they were seen as radicals, troublemakers, and worse. But the tide began to turn, and ultimately, the slave owners (the segregationists of their day) were forced to defend their position—*and they lost.*

In today's disability arena, skirmishes between segregationists and inclusionists are daily occurrences from coast-to-coast. And *unlike* the situation prior to the Civil War, today's federal and state laws—as well as public opinion—are on the side of inclusion! For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehab Act prohibit discrimination (and therefore, exclusion) on the basis of disability. Special ed law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), mandates "least restrictive environment" in education, and the Supreme Court decision in the Olmstead case does the same regarding living arrangements.

Finally, a variety of surveys (2007 MN Survey of Attitudes prepared for MN Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, National Organization on Disability surveys, and others) demonstrate that the general public believes people with disabilities should be included in ordinary activities. Nevertheless, segregation drags on, maintained by segregationists' antiquated attitudes and prejudicial actions.

So in this 21st Century struggle, activists feel compelled to defend the birthright—inclusion—of children and adult with disabilities. On the surface, this seems the appropriate action to take. But why do we need to defend what's morally, ethically, and legally right? *Why shouldn't others have to defend the immoral, unethical, and illegal position of segregation?*

Let's think about the ramifications of this situation. First, when we defend inclusion, we're also arguing against segregation. But doesn't an argument against segregation unintentionally substantiate it as a valid position? Consider this: would we entertain an argument from a child about his desire to play in the street? No! Playing in the street is wrong because it's dangerous—end of discussion. To allow a child to argue the merits of his case would be to validate his position! Isn't the same true about segregation?

Second, the segregation of people with disabilities is justified by negatives: stereotypical perceptions, erroneous beliefs, and prejudice (all of which were used to justify slavery). And as logic teaches us, one cannot prove a negative. Thus, segregationists cannot *prove* why people with disabilities should be segregated—they can only spew justifications and rationalizations. But these are not truth with a capital T, so why do we bother arguing against an indefensible position?

Third, any hint of the validity of segregation was exploded in the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision (see box). While that decision was specific to the public school segregation of children on the basis of ethnicity, its valuable tenets apply to those who have been segregated in other environments based on a different characteristic (disability).

1954 Supreme Court Decision
Brown v. Board of Education

(Some language has been modified to avoid using old ethnic descriptors.)

To separate [children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone...Segregation...has a detrimental effect upon the [segregated] children...[as it's] usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the [segregated] group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation...has a tendency to retard the educational and mental development of [the segregated] children and to deprive them of...benefits they would receive in an...integrated school system... We conclude that...the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.

In addition to this Supreme Court decision, we only have to look at the outcomes of generations of segregation. During the institutional era, hopelessness, loneliness, isolation, abuse, and even death at the hands of "helpers" were the norm for thousands of people with disabilities. In today's world, children with disabilities are undereducated in segregated special ed classrooms where low expectations are the norm. They *do,* however, learn dependence, isolation, hopelessness, and "inappropriate behaviors" from the aberrant segregated environment.

It should come as no surprise then that, as adults, many are prepared only for continued segregation in Disability World's congregate living settings, sheltered work, on-going dependence, and continued hopelessness. The estimated 75 percent unemployment rate (which is higher for those with significant developmental disabilities) says it all. The ever-present impact of segregation is nothing but shameful.

Those who support the belief that every person is born included and should remain included—at home, in school, at work, and in the community—should not feel obligated to defend this inherent birthright. Instead, the tables need to be turned, and segregationists need to defend their (indefensible) position.

Adults with disabilities should not have to defend their desire to live, work, and play in ordinary and inclusive settings in their communities. The promoters of sheltered, segregated environments—including service providers, parents, and/or others—should have to defend *their* positions. And while, as mentioned previously, laws are "on the side" of inclusion, we know that, in practice, many rules, regulations, and/or policies impede inclusion and practically mandate segregation.

Thus, in the larger arena of systems change, activists need to trade places, by stepping down from the Inclusion Soapbox and insisting others prove their position from the Segregation Soapbox. We need to better educate policymakers (at local, state, and federal levels) who are often clueless about the realities of their policies and procedures which, however well-intentioned, often result in the physical segregation and social isolation of children and adults with disabilities.

In the public school arena, parents of children with disabilities can take a page from IDEA (special ed law) and put it to use. Section 300.320 states that a student's IEP shall include: "A statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services...and...program modifications or supports for school personnel that will...enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum...and participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities; and be educated and participate with other children with disabilities and nondisabled children...[and] *an explanation of the extent, if any, to which the child will not participate with nondisabled children in the regular class and [other] activities...*(italics added). Thus, according to the law, parents should not have to defend the inclusion of their children in general education classrooms; educators must explain/defend special ed classrooms, pull-out, and other practices that result in segregation.

> ***Individual rights are not subject to a public vote; a majority has no right to vote away the rights of a minority.***
>
> Ayn Rand

Parents of young children with disabilities should not feel compelled to defend their decision to keep their preschoolers at home with mom or dad or to enroll them in an inclusive, neighborhood child care setting, instead of sending them to a segregated special ed preschool. Let educators try to prove why a young child should be segregated! For too many children with disabilities, this is where the physical and social isolation of segregation begins.

Parents often believe a special ed preschool is the "ticket" to inclusion in kindergarten. No one actually tells a parent this; we're just led to believe that a special ed preschool is effective preparation for our children's success in the public school system. But the reality is usually the opposite. In too many cases, educators presume that a child who has "needed" a special ed preschool will also "need" to be in a segregated, special ed elementary classroom when it's time for kindergarten or first grade. Oh, the heartbreak, disappointment, anger, and mistrust of educators this can engender in parents. And as many parents have learned, once a child is segregated in public school, that's it, game over—the student will most likely be segregated until the end of his school career, unless his activist parents are successful in their efforts to ensure his inclusion.

Some parents *do* recognize the dangers of segregation in special ed preschool settings, but are unwilling to do anything about it. They may complain that if they send their child to an inclusive neighborhood preschool, they'd have to "pay for it," while the special ed preschool is "free." Well, the price might be "free," but the *costs* of segregation to the child and her future are greater than we can imagine. And if we paid for preschool/child care for our children without disabilities, are we saying the lives of our children with disabilities aren't worth that same expense?

Looking at the youngest children, early intervention services are supposed to be (and usually are) provided in natural and inclusive environments. But it's during the early intervention phase that parents are informed of their child's rights and entitlements, and many begin the path of dependence on the system at this point—a path that frequently leads to the later segregation of their children (like in special ed preschools). Parents can avoid this trap if they choose to value life-long inclusion over services that result in segregation. Early intervention personnel can assist in this effort by being brutally honest with parents about today's segregated status quo that will swallow up children if parents aren't ever-vigilant.

In the community, we should also recognize inclusion as the natural state. This means never asking permission to be included! Community inclusion will become a reality when we adopt more successful strategies. For example, we often call a community activity and ask, "Do you take people with disabilities," and/or we sign a person up for an activity and then say, "She has [medical diagnosis]." At that point, the door is often slammed shut! Instead, we can sign the person up for the activity without mentioning anything about the person's disability.

Then, at some point before the first day, we can, in an upbeat, positive tone, simply share the person's needs with the appropriate person, as in: "My child will need [large print, wheelchair access, assistance from peers, etc.]."

In these situations, we do not need to share the diagnosis! My son, Benjamin, has participated in a variety of ordinary community activities in his 21 years, and we've never told others, "Benjamin has cerebral palsy." We've only shared what his needs are; the diagnosis is no one's business, and revealing it can result in fear, misunderstanding, and exclusion. Once the activity was underway, Benjamin sometimes *did* share his diagnosis with others when and if it was appropriate. And this was an amazing and pleasurable discovery: in the system, his diagnosis is the first thing people want to know, while in the community, it's irrelevant! Furthermore, we found that leaders of community activities think they "don't take people with disabilities," simply because *they've never done it before.* Benjamin was often the first person with a disability who was included in various activities, and once people learned how easy it was (and how right it was) this opened the door to others.

The advent of the deinstitutionalization movement in the mid-1960s, coupled with passage of disability-related legislation throughout the past thirty years, would seem to *guarantee* the decline of segregation. But in many places, we seem to be in a "holding pattern," with little progress being made. And, shockingly, segregation is now being imported into a previously untouched arena: colleges and universities. Springing up like bad weeds, "special programs" for young adults with disabilities offer more of the same from the dismal practices in many high schools: special, segregated life-skills classes on college campuses! Proponents of these programs loudly proclaim that they're "not segregated, they're integrated" since they're on a college campus. Sadly, and unfortunately for the students, these proponents don't understand (or they *do* understand and choose to ignore) that one can be physically integrated and still be socially isolated and segregated. Just being "on campus" does not guarantee inclusion. No doubt those who support segregated college programs have good intentions, but their endorsement of segregation cannot be condoned. Young adults with disabilities can attend college via many avenues; a special program is neither needed nor desirable.

Good intentions will always be pleaded for every assumption of authority.

Daniel Webster

Ultimately, segregation will die a natural death when parents refuse to allow their children to be segregated in any setting. And when these children grow up, they will speak for themselves and not allow anyone to segregate them. Until that time comes, let's take a firm stand: the next time you feel the need to defend inclusion, turn the tables and ask the other person to defend segregation. Say something like, "What you're describing represents the segregation of [my child, people with disabilities, etc.]. Please explain how such segregation can be defended." Try it, you'll like it! You can watch as the other person's mouth soundlessly gapes open and closed like a fish, or you might be treated to a slew of hackneyed platitudes that you can easily dismantle.

In other articles, I've detailed the importance of presuming competence when thinking of people with disabilities. Similarly, we can *presume inclusion!* Too often, we've presumed *exclusion*—it's as if *we* don't think we or our children belong—which then causes us to whine, beg, fight for, and/or defend inclusion. In the immortal words of author Dorothea Brande, "Act as though it were impossible to fail."

I will no longer defend inclusion; I will insist that others defend segregation. My son, as well as millions of others with disabilities, was *born* included, and the presence of a characteristic we call a disability is no justification for exclusion.

Segregation is an aberration of the human condition that cannot be righteously defended. Inclusion is a person's birthright and needs no defense.