

*“GET READY!”*

# LIFE IS NOT A DRESS REHEARSAL

Revolutionary Common Sense

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Actors are given a script. They learn their lines and practice the play over and over and over again, under the watchful eyes of the director. The set is constructed; costumes are donned; dress rehearsals begin. And at the appointed hour—ready or not—the curtain rises on opening night.

Life—for many people with disabilities—is not unlike the lives of actors preparing for a play, but with one significant difference. For actors, opening night signals the end of the readiness phase. But for people with disabilities, the dress rehearsals—getting ready for the real thing (LIFE)—continue indefinitely.

Parents and professionals depend on early intervention services (birth to three) to get babies and toddlers “ready” for preschool and/or public school. But by age three, most are not deemed “ready” for typical preschools. They’re said to still need specialized services, and into a special ed preschool they go.

Special ed preschools attempt to get three- to five-year-olds “ready” for regular ed kindergarten. Yet far too many preschoolers with disabilities are never deemed “ready” for a regular ed kindergarten or first grade classroom. Some are even held back in preschool—and how, pray tell, does one fail preschool? Too often, the promise of special ed preschool is never realized as kindergartners are “placed” in a special ed resource room in the elementary school.

They, along with other students in many special ed classrooms (K-12), must then somehow try to earn their way out of segregation. Only when they’re considered “ready,” are they “promoted” into a regular ed classroom. Even if they finally achieve

*“PRACTICE!”,*

this success, however, a tether remains. One infraction in the regular ed environment can land them back in a segregated special ed room.

Sheltered workshops and other vocational services are supposed to get people “ready” for real jobs. Group homes and habilitation services are supposed to get people “ready” for independent living. But most “clients” never reach the level of readiness deemed necessary for working at a real job or living in a real home.

Get ready, get ready, get ready! The dress rehearsals for children and adults with disabilities never end. People with disabilities are on an assembly line, moving from one special program to the next.

Does this mean people with disabilities are failures? Or could it mean today’s programs and services are failing people with disabilities?

Barring a stock market crash and a severe economic depression, if the unemployment rate of the general population rose to 70-75 percent, we would probably attribute this to a failure of the educational system and other public services. We most likely would not blame the vast number of unemployed people.

But now consider the current 70-75 percent unemployment rate for people with disabilities—a figure that has held steady for the past 20+ years, despite more than a quarter of a century of federal special education law and more than a decade of the Americans with Disabilities Act. If we apply the logic in the previous paragraph, can we not see that something is very wrong with special education and

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other disability service systems—that the failure rests there, and not on the shoulders of people with disabilities?

Thinking about the brouhaha over “standards” in today’s public schools can open our minds to the dilemma in Disability World. States have established standardized tests for students, to measure the effectiveness of teachers and schools. Low test scores are (supposedly) seen as a reflection of poor teaching and/or school management, rather than a reflection of individual student ability. In other words, the problem—theoretically—rests squarely on the shoulders of those providing the services, not those receiving the services. Wouldn’t this same logic also apply to disability services?

If so, does the fact that the majority of people with disabilities are unemployed/underemployed mean sheltered workshops and vocational and habilitation services have failed to adequately prepare people for real jobs and independent and/or supported living?

Or does the fact that we still have sheltered workshops and habilitation centers prove that public school special ed services have failed to adequately prepare students with disabilities for life as successful adults? Or does the fact that so many students remain in segregated K-12 classrooms mean that special ed preschools have failed in their efforts to get students “ready” for inclusion in regular classrooms? Or does the high number of young children in special ed preschools indicate a failure of early intervention services?

But wait! Perhaps the failure of disability service systems actually rests in the *philosophy* that keeps these systems running: the “readiness” paradigm. Disability services have devised artificial levels of readiness and competence based on an able-bodied standard that

many people with disabilities are unable to achieve (in some cases, the bar is constantly being raised and remains out of reach). And the resulting “not ready” status assigned to individuals with disabilities keeps the service system in business! If we choose to continue down the current path, the majority of today’s children with disabilities will become adults who will maintain the 70-75 percent unemployment rate, living below the poverty line, and never achieving their dreams.

Do we not realize that placing people in special “get ready” environments *retards* their growth and development? As Tom Powell, a learned man and father of an adult son with autism, once taught me, “If you want to learn to play basketball, you can talk to others about it, read about it, or watch others play. But the only way to really learn to play basketball is to get on the court and play!”

Are we truly willing to let even one precious day of a person’s life be wasted in the demeaning, and often futile, attempt to meet another’s standard of “readiness”? Would you be willing to exchange one day of the life you’ve chosen—a life of successes and struggles, laughter and tears—for one day of trying to reach a level of competence or success *as measured by someone else*? Would you be willing to spend your life in one dress rehearsal after another?

People with disabilities can achieve success in the same ways as people without disabilities: by having the right tools, accommodations, and supports in place (the things people without disabilities could not do without). In the great drama we call life, we each have an important role to play, and our individual performances can contribute to the overall good, or cause the play to close after one performance.

When we change our way of thinking, we’ll know people with disabilities have *always* been ready for opening night; it’s others who have been stuck in rehearsal mode.

**People with disabilities  
have *always* been ready  
for opening night!**