

Gina has a Master's degree, lives in her own home, and has enjoyed moving up the corporate ladder in a variety of positions. When she was a child, her parents followed conventional wisdom and placed Gina in a residential

"crippled children's" school. She saw her family only once a month, and grew up surrounded by children with orthopedic disabilities, along with therapists, special educators, and doctors. She ultimately became accustomed to this "placement"—to the point that this sheltered, artificial setting seemed the norm, and life in the real world seemed strange. This school had high expectations for students, so Gina received an academic education that enabled her to move on to college.

Outwardly successful, 42-year-old Gina struggles daily with the demons of segregation. Spending her formative years (ages 5-18) in a special, segregated environment caused deep wounds that have never healed, and they're reopened regularly. When faced with any difficulties at work or with family, Gina automatically believes she's at fault, incompetent, and unworthy; and she feels she doesn't belong. Being segregated taught her that she didn't belong—because of her disability, she wasn't "good enough." As an adult, this deeply-rooted emotional pain is almost too much to bear, and has created more difficulties for Gina than her disability. She's currently in counseling, hoping to exorcise the demons that haunt her daily.

Brad has learned other lessons from segregation. He grew up at home with his family, but he never attended the same schools as his brother and sister. At age three, he was put on the special ed bus for the 45-minute ride to the special ed preschool. In later years, he never knew what grade he was in—a common occurrence when children with disabilities of various ages are grouped in the same special ed ungraded classroom. Unlike children *without* disabilities who are exposed to greater learning opportunities and responsibilities as they move up the grade-ladder, Brad's educational and social growth were almost static. Little was expected of him by his parents or teachers. No one ever talked to him about his future and his potential.

At age 22, he aged out of special ed services and left the school system with a "certificate of attendance" instead of a diploma. While his brother and sister moved

# Lessons of SEGREGATION

Revolutionary Common Sense  
by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

on to college and jobs, Brad went from the segregation in public school to segregation in a group home, day programs, and sheltered work.

Brad's service coordinator has tried to "place" Brad in a real job in the community, but all attempts have failed. Like Gina, Brad learned some powerful lessons from segregation. He, too, learned that he didn't belong in the real world. But in his case, this lesson is manifested in Brad's belief that he doesn't *have* to work or be responsible—he's learned to be helpless and dependent.

Delia, a special ed teacher, has recognized the benefits of *inclusive* education and is working to move her sixth grade students out of her segregated classroom and into general ed classrooms. But the general ed teachers complain that these students "don't know how to behave"—they don't know how to take turns, raise their hands and wait to be called on, use their "indoor" voices, and other ordinary student behaviors *most children learn in kindergarten*. The general ed teachers feel this situation is the result of the students' disabilities.

But Delia sees a different picture—she recognizes that her students learned many lessons from being in elementary school special ed rooms. In those multi-age, segregated classrooms, it was okay that 10-year-olds acted like 5-year-olds; in a class of ten students with three adults, "hand-raising" opportunities were limited or non-existent; the way to get attention was to have the loudest voice; and since most of the students were working on different things, they didn't learn how to wait and take turns! These students never learned the ordinary behaviors and skills expected of other students. Now, *they*—not those who allowed this miscarriage of education to occur—are paying the price.

Delia recognizes that the real-life environment of a general ed classroom is the place to learn these skills. But she expresses valid concerns that the general ed teachers (even with Delia's assistance) won't take the time or make the effort to help these students learn how to succeed in the real world. If this occurs, back into a segregated setting they'll go. So when *will* they learn? Who *will* take the time and make the effort? If no one does, these young people will be shipped back to segregated special ed classrooms, where the lessons of segregation—like Brad learned—will be reinforced.

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## 2 - The Lessons of Segregation

How can we continue to segregate children and adults with disabilities, pushing them to the margins of society and setting them up for failure? The landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed “separate, but equal,” and Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote that segregation “generates a feeling of inferiority...that may affect [people’s] hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone... Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” *What’s so hard to understand about this?*

A variety of ideologies are used to justify the segregation of children and adults with disabilities. But none hold up under scrutiny.

Children with disabilities are placed in special ed classrooms because it’s believed they need the specialized expertise and extra attention that can only be provided in the special ed room. But there’s no magic in such a classroom. We make children go to “that room” not because it’s best for them, but because it’s easier on the staff! It’s more convenient, educators believe, to put the human resources (special ed teachers, paras, therapists, etc.) in one place and make the students come to them, rather than take the services and supports to students in general ed classrooms. It’s also more convenient, of course, from the perspective of the general ed teachers: when “those kids” are in the special classrooms, the general ed teachers don’t have to mess with them! Everyone “wins”—except the students, of course.

Some educators—and some parents—have looked into their mythical crystal balls and prophesied that students with disabilities will never be able to work, so why bother with an academic education? Their “educated” minds have missed the more important prophecy—the self-fulfilling prophecy that if students are *not* educated, they *won’t* be in a position to achieve gainful employment. *Duh*—this isn’t rocket science!

But there *are* schools where educators include all students in general ed classrooms, where general and special ed teachers work side-by-side, ensuring all students learn and belong. These educators have recognized the dangers of segregation and the benefits of inclusion, and they do what it takes to make it work.

Regarding adults, current SSI/Medicaid policies are biased toward segregated settings, and many service providers believe people with disabilities are unable to succeed in anything other than segregated environments—like ordinary homes or apartments, real jobs in the community, etc. Yet there *are* people with disabilities—sometimes significant disabilities—who are living in their own places and working at real jobs. In some cases, this has been accomplished via a provider agency that uses waivers and/or pushes the envelope in other ways. And there are men and women who are achieving these milestones with the natural support of family, friends, and co-workers, instead of the system.

Funding is often the rationale for segregation: inclusion, many believe, costs more. But again, real-world practice in schools and other settings explodes this myth. My children’s inclusive elementary school received no additional money; existing funds were reallocated. My 19-year-old son with a disability is included at home and in the community college with natural (and free) support from family, friends, fellow students, and teachers. He doesn’t want special help from voc-rehab or other services that would use taxpayer dollars!

The Supreme Court outlawed segregation in 1954, recognizing the harm it causes. Others have seen or experienced its dangers first-hand. How can we disregard these dangers, and allow convenience, prejudice, and/or some other rationale to justify the incarceration of children and adults with disabilities in artificial and unequal segregated environments? Is there any other group of individuals—except for convicted criminals—for which segregation is justified in 21st century America?

Where *are* our values, ethics, and morals? How *can* we look into the face of a person with a disability and tell him he doesn’t belong, and that a characteristic we call a disability is a valid justification for segregation?

If we support the segregation of people with disabilities, we must also bear the responsibility for the consequences of our actions: children and adults whose hearts and minds are scarred by feelings of inferiority and who are ill-prepared for life as successful citizens in our society. If we do *not* support segregation, when will we turn our righteous indignation into action?