

SEPARATE

and

UNEQUAL

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

In the middle of the 20th Century, parents filed right-to-education lawsuits to end educational discrimination based on skin color. Their efforts led to the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision when the Supreme Court ruled that “*separate educational facilities are inherently unequal*.” Seventeen years later, other parents filed lawsuits to end educational discrimination based on *disability*. In one of these cases (*PARC v. Pennsylvania*), the parents’ attorney (Thomas Gilhool) cited the *Brown* decision, noting that the Supreme Court had outlawed “separate education.” The *PARC* case and others, along with lots of advocacy, got the attention of the Federal government, and special ed law (P.L. 94-142, now Individuals with Disabilities Education Act-IDEA), was the result.

Sadly, too many students with disabilities are still being educated in separate classrooms or buildings, despite the *Brown* decision and despite the provisions in IDEA that call for education in the least restrictive environment. And this topic has been covered in articles already written, and some yet to come.

This article focuses, instead, on segregated sports and other activities that are separate and unequal, and that can have profoundly negative effects not only on participants, but on our society as a whole.

Special Olympics, Challenger Baseball, and the newest entry, the Miracle League, along with “special” Scout troops and other segregated activities, may have been created with good intentions: to ensure children with disabilities can participate in traditional activities. *But these good intentions are also riddled with prejudice.* For they have *prejudged* children and adults with disabilities as being unable or incompetent to participate in ordinary community activities, included with their peers who do not have disabilities.

Granted, during the past forty years or so, many activities did not welcome people with disabilities, despite Federal laws that prohibit discrimination based on disability. And many parents, along with leaders of such activities, believed children with disabilities were

unable to participate in ordinary community activities. But some parents *knew* this wasn’t true.

In 1992, when my son, Benjamin, was five, he played T-ball on a “regular” park and rec team in our community. His use of a wheelchair and diagnosis of cerebral palsy were not barriers to inclusion and full participation. He was also in Cub Scouts, karate classes, drama lessons, 4-H, and more—all “regular,” never “special.” Other parents, in other communities, ensured their children with disabilities were included in typical community activities years before! (See the “Inclusive Recreation” article.) These parents, along with my husband and myself, saw no reason to embrace segregation. Personally, I had learned—from the real life experiences of adults with developmental disabilities—that segregation is *morally and ethically wrong*. With accommodations and supports, my son and others with disabilities could be included as equally valuable, participating members in the activities of their choosing.

On the continuum of change—beginning with the deinstitutionalization movement of the 1960s—we *should be* moving toward the inclusion of more and more children and adults with disabilities in more and more ordinary activities in our communities. But in the area of sports and recreation, it seems we’re going backward!

I know the rationale: special activities are thought to be the only option for children with disabilities. But, this is an erroneous belief, as children with disabilities *can* successfully participate and be included in typical community activities! Some parents say that they, personally, don’t believe in segregated activities, then add, “But my child loves it and has so much fun!” Maybe a child “loves it” just like you’d love vanilla ice cream if that was the only flavor you thought existed. But when you learned there were 31 more flavors, you might choose something other than vanilla!

Segregated programs reinforce negative stereotypes across our society, and it’s these old, prejudicial

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attitudes which are the greatest barriers facing people with disabilities. The simple *existence* of segregated activities sends the message, “People with disabilities don’t/can’t belong in regular activities. They belong in special (segregated) activities.” Thus, some park and rec departments or other entities feel there is *no need* to ensure their activities are open and accessible to all, as special programs will handle “*those*” kids and adults. As a result, when parents *do* attempt to enroll their children with disabilities in ordinary, community activities, it’s not uncommon for them to be told, “No, we can’t handle ‘special needs kids’—go to Special Olympics [or some other segregated program].”

We should not be surprised when inclusion in other areas seems out of reach. Every time a segregated activity makes the news—“feel good” stories that generate thoughts like, “Thank God *my* child is not *like that...*” or “Those poor people...” or “Aren’t they cute...” or worse—John and Jane Public are once again exposed to the notion that children and adults with disabilities are *not* equal, can’t cut it in the Real World, and must have segregated, special programs. Some people may even be moved to volunteer and/or start their own “special” activities! Such publicity perpetuates more pity or “inspiration”—the flip side of the same coin. (*Gag!*)

Similarly, the promotion and fundraising efforts of segregated activities reinforce negative, pitiful, and stereotypical attitudes. The Miracle League website states, “The thrill of playing, the cheers...and the friendships they develop make the Miracle League Field an oasis away from their everyday battles.” Well, the greatest daily battle my son and others with disabilities face is *not* their disabilities, but societal prejudice that is reinforced by pity-laden messages! The Miracle League website’s home page states, “If I were to tell you about an organized youth baseball league, you might call it *ordinary*. If I were to tell you the athletes are physically and mentally challenged, you might call it *touching*. If you were to see them play, you would call it a *Miracle*.” So now it’s “miraculous” that kids with disabilities can play baseball? (I’ll have to tell my son about this—he doesn’t know he’s performed miracles!) If a segregated team populated by “special children” (the Miracle League’s descriptor) who are helped by “buddies” is “miraculous,” what descriptor should be

used about children with disabilities who are included in ordinary sports teams—kids who are considered just “players” and “teammates” and there’s nothing, *thank goodness*, “special” about them? Hmm—what’s higher praise than miraculous? How about *equal*? For that’s the outcome of inclusion: equality!

But promoters of segregated activities really *like* words like “inspiring,” “touching,” “miraculous,” and “special,” because they punch the emotional button that generates pity donations. “Equality” or “inclusion” just doesn’t cut it when it comes to fundraising.

Reinforcing negative perceptions across society is bad enough, but what effect can segregated activities have on participants? Let’s go back to the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown* again. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote that segregation “...generates a feeling of inferiority as to [the segregated children’s] 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.”

There’s no doubt that segregated activities denote the inferiority of the segregated children and adults with disabilities. If they were considered equal in the first place, no one would have ever felt the need to create segregated activities!

The Miracle League and Challenger Baseball assign “buddies” to the “disabled players;” Special Olympics events often include more “helpers” than participants; and according to its website, even Special Olympics Unified Sports “...is an initiative that combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes and athletes without intellectual disabilities (called Partners) on sports teams for training and competition.” The Miracle League website also states, “Disabled children in our community had expressed the desire to . . . round the bases just like their healthy peers.” What are the unspoken assumptions here? Players with disabilities are so incompetent and inferior that they cannot play without the competent help of “mainstream children” (the Miracle League website’s descriptor) or “helpers” without disabilities? And players with disabilities are “unhealthy”—and by extension, inferior? These represent the *epitome* of the “presumed incompetence” mentality. And the Miracle League must be unaware that the presence of a disability does *not* equate to being “unhealthy”!

On a positive note, the Girl Scouts of America website includes an article on its efforts to ensure its troops are inclusive. Unfortunately, however, several parents have shared with me that their daughters *have* been excluded from Girl Scouts, based on disability. On the other hand, I know several Boy Scout leaders who ensure Scouts with disabilities are fully-participating, valued, and equal members of their troops. But there's a mixed message on the Boy Scouts website that states: "While there are, by necessity, troops exclusively composed of Scouts with disabilities, experience has shown that Scouting usually succeeds best when every boy is part of a patrol in a regular troop."

Several adults with developmental disabilities who once participated in "special" activities shared their thoughts with me:

"What segregated sports taught me was that everyone wins. But in real life, everyone doesn't win." The artificial, unnatural, and aberrant environments of segregated activities teach people aberrant lessons about life—lessons that must be unlearned at some point, often in painful ways.

Segregated activities also send the soul-crushing "You don't belong..." message. Yes, you do belong, as long as you stay in a segregated setting, but you *do not belong in the Real World*. As Earl Warren stated in the *Brown* decision, segregation "may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone." Witness the number of adults with developmental disabilities who grew up in segregated classrooms and activities, and who, as adults, don't believe in themselves enough to attempt to live in the community or work at real jobs. Sheltered, segregated environments are the only places they feel they belong. If you've been a "nobody" as a child, how do you become a "somebody" as an adult?

In addition, many adults with developmental disabilities have shared the heart-wrenching memories that they never felt "good enough" for their parents. Some even felt unloved by their parents because of their disabilities. And they reveal that their childhood

**You have no idea, sir,
how difficult it is to be the
victim of benevolence.**

Jane Aiken Hodge

participation in segregated activities was an attempt to please their parents: *they were willing to do almost anything to gain their parents' approval and love.*

If any entity that sponsors or endorses segregated activities *really* wanted to ensure children and adults with disabilities had opportunities to engage in ordinary community activities—and *be perceived as equally valuable participants*—they would invest all their time, money (billions, in some cases), and energy into ensuring the *existing* activities in their communities are *inclusive and accessible*. This effort would take far less time, money, and energy than is currently expended with segregated activities, and would help move us forward, instead of backward.

I just can't get my arms around the mentality that would motivate people to volunteer their time, money, or energy for any activity that promotes segregation and inequality. I'm sure many would argue vehemently with me about this, describing the smiles and joy of the participants when they cross the finish line or smack a ball or whatever, as well as the pride and joy felt by volunteers. But can the short-lived pleasure enjoyed by a few negate the greater harm—to millions of children and adults with disabilities whose lives are inadvertently marginalized and to societal attitudes—that's born out of the antiquated, prejudicial, and stereotypical perceptions generated by segregated activities?

While my criticism has been aimed at operators of segregated activities, the ultimate responsibility lies with family members. For if we did *not* enroll our children or brothers and sisters in segregated activities, they would die a natural death.

When they're young, children might not realize they're in segregated activities. But at some point they will. When they look back on their childhoods, they may ask us, "Why didn't you believe in me enough to let me be in regular activities? Why didn't you think I was good enough to do what other kids do? *Why didn't you at least give me a chance?*" How *will* we look them in the eye and answer their questions?