

Philosophy for Change

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

Epictetus (55-135 A.D.), a Stoic philosopher from Roman times, is one of my favorite teachers. A former slave, Epictetus rose to prominence by recommending simple ways to a better life. His wisdom is presented in *The Art of Living: The Classic Manual on Virtue, Happiness, and Effectiveness*, interpreted by Sharon Lebell. And every page of this little book is big on strategies that can be used by everyone.

Epictetus said, “Popular perceptions, values, and ways of doing things are rarely the wisest. Many pervasive beliefs would not pass appropriate tests of rationality. Conventional thinking—its means and ends—is essentially uncreative and uninteresting. Its job is to preserve the status quo for overly self-defended individuals and institutions. On the other hand, there is no inherent virtue in *new* ideas. Judge ideas and opportunities on the basis of whether they are life-giving. Give your assent to that which promotes humaneness, justice, beneficial growth, kindness, possibility, and benefit to the human community.” What if we applied the wisdom of Epictetus to disability issues?

Numerous organizations—including Federally-mandated vocational-rehabilitation (VR) services and local/state agencies—are responsible for helping people with disabilities achieve gainful employment. Yet the unemployment rate of people with disabilities is estimated at 70-75 percent (and this rate has changed little over the past 30 years)! If these vocational services were commercial businesses and they had a 70-75 percent “failure rate,” would they still be in business? No! Government programs, however, regardless of their level of effectiveness, live on. But responsibility for the dismal unemployment rate cannot be placed solely on the shoulders of vocational services. Like other disasters, responsibility can be shared among many, as we’ll see.

The purpose of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is “to ensure that all children with disabilities have available...a free appropriate

public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and *prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living...*” (Italics added.)

But special ed is not meeting its goal if 70-75 percent of students who have received 12 or more years of special education services are unable to join the workforce or further their education! And it’s certainly hard to achieve independent living if one is not employed, right? The graduation rate of students with disabilities is much lower than the rate of students without disabilities. In addition, too many students with disabilities are in self-contained classrooms instead of general ed classrooms, despite IDEA requirements regarding “least restrictive environment.” Do you think there’s a connection between the segregation of students with disabilities in self-contained special ed classrooms, the low graduation rate, and the high unemployment rate?

Young children with disabilities are routinely enrolled in special ed preschool classrooms. Most parents believe this will prepare their preschoolers for success in kindergarten and beyond. But few realize that segregated preschool settings usually lead to segregated special ed classrooms as described above.

According to Congress, the intent of early intervention (EI) services is “to reduce the educational costs to our society...by minimizing the need for special education and related services after infants and toddlers with disabilities reach school age...and to maximize the potential for individuals with disabilities to live independently in society.” But the vast majority of children who receive EI services *are* referred for special ed services—and rack up “educational costs”—when they reach school age. And, back to the estimated 70-75 percent unemployment rate again, it’s hard to “live independently” if one has no job. So are EI services meeting the intended goals?

The *promise* of today’s conventional wisdom—from EI to VR—is to help people with disabilities

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achieve employment and independent living. *But the actual practice does not live up to the promise!*

Epictetus said, “Popular perceptions, values, and ways of doing things are rarely the wisest.” The Service System’s *perceptions and values* are, in essence, based on the “deficit/medical model” paradigm: a disability is seen as a “problem” and specialists have the “solution.” Yet even with the thousands of specialists in the field and the billions of dollars in services, the so-called problem of developmental disabilities has not been eradicated. Does this mean all the specialists have failed in their quest? Or should we lay the blame on people with disabilities? It’s neither—the *source of failure rests in our perceptions and values!*

When we recognize that disability is a “natural part of the human experience” (per the Developmental Disabilities Act), we’ll stop trying to change or fix people with disabilities through therapies, special services, and other interventions, and we will, instead, simply provide them with the assistive technology, supports, and accommodations they need. And if we adopt a “social/environmental model” of disability, we’ll recognize the terrible process that occurs: the issues confronting individuals with disabilities are the result of negative perceptions, which create environmental and attitudinal barriers, which lead to physical segregation and social isolation! We don’t need to change people with disabilities; we need to change ourselves—including our attitudes, our ways of doing things, and the rules and regulations of our social policies.

What about passing Epictetus’ “tests of rationality”? Doing things *the same way* and *expecting a different result* is considered “irrational.” If decades of special services provided by thousands of specialists, costing billions of dollars, have not achieved the intended result, is it *rational* to continue to embrace conventional wisdom?

With the shameful unemployment rate, is it rational for young adults to depend on vocational

agencies? Is it rational to educate students with disabilities in specialized, segregated classrooms, when this practice yields dismal results? If, for example, we want a four-year-old with autism to learn to talk, is it rational to put him in a class with other children with autism who are also not talking? Is it rational to start babies and their families on a path of dependence?

What about Epictetus’ words that conventional thinking’s job is “to preserve the status quo for overly self-defended individuals and institutions”? While a few souls bravely say they’re ready and willing to work themselves out of a job, the Service System as a whole works hard to maintain the status quo: keeping children and adults with disabilities needy, helpless, and/or dependent, so workers keep their jobs, and agencies/institutions remain open.

As Epictetus wrote, what “new” ideas can promote “humaneness, justice, beneficial growth, kindness, possibility, and benefit to the human community”? Providing people with disabilities with the tools they need, as mentioned. Helping them learn to help themselves, like how to get their own jobs, instead of trying to get jobs for them. Ensuring they receive an academic education in general ed classrooms to enable them to achieve post-secondary education and/or employment. From the time they’re babies, building on their strengths and abilities, instead of trying to remediate their disabilities. Ensuring that all of our efforts to “help” moves the person away from dependence and closer to successful employment and independent living as an adult. Changing ourselves and our communities, to ensure all are included. What else? There’s more, much more.

Epictetus counsels, “Be suspicious of convention. Take charge of your own thinking. Rouse yourself from the daze of unexamined habit...Be ceaselessly watchful over your beliefs and impulses... Separate yourself from the mob. Decide to be extraordinary and do what you need to do—now.”

For every action there is an equal, and opposite, government program.

David Veal