

Inclusive Education (or What's So Special About Special Education?)

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

Segregating children and adults with disabilities has been the historical norm, and segregation does not work. We recognize that it's morally and ethically wrong to intentionally segregate others on the basis of a characteristic (ethnic origin, religion, etc.). So why is it acceptable to segregate children and adults based on the characteristic of disability?

My children attended an inclusive elementary school in the early 1990s. There was no segregated special ed room at this school; all students successfully learned in general education classrooms. In addition, students with disabilities (like my son, Benjamin, who has cerebral palsy, as well as children with Down syndrome, autism, and other conditions) were valuable members of the student body: they sang in the choir, competed in science fairs, and participated fully in all other areas of student life. Most of these students have gone on to college and/or have entered the workforce. The same, sadly, is not true for students with disabilities who are educated in segregated, special ed classrooms. More in a moment, but first, let's go back in history...

In the mid-1800s, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe was a pioneer in the "new" training school movement for children and youth with disabilities. At the time, parents clamored for these "improved" treatments and services. (Things haven't changed much—many of today's parents still chase after the latest "treatment.") To meet the growing demand, more residential training schools were built. But overcrowding soon turned the training schools into custodial facilities. They became human warehouses.

Dr. Howe was dismayed at the turn of events, but it was too late to stop the burgeoning new industry. In 1866, he was asked to give the keynote address at the opening of a new institution. He shocked those in attendance by warning about the dangers of

segregation; he believed people with disabilities should be included in their communities and surrounded by people who didn't have disabilities. Few heeded Howe's wisdom at the time, and his extraordinary wisdom is seldom heeded today:

...We should be cautious about establishing such artificial communities...for any children and youth; but more especially should we avoid them for those who have natural infirmity...Such persons spring up sporadically in the community, and they should be kept diffused among sound and normal persons...As much as may be, surround insane and excitable persons with sane people and ordinary influences; vicious children with virtuous people and virtuous influences; blind children with those who see; mute children with those who speak; and the like...

[Howe, S.G. (1866) In "Ceremonies on laying the cornerstone of the New York State Institution for the Blind at Batavia," Genes Co., NY: Henry Todd. Cited in D. Bardic, "Forces That Shape the Funding of Mental Retardation Services-Proceedings of the 1988 John Quincy Memorial Fund Lecture." Boston: Wrentham State School, pp. 115.]

Children who are treated as if they are uneducable almost invariably become uneducable.

Kenneth B. Clark

Time passed, attitudes changed, and deinstitutionalization began. By the 1970s, parents of children with disabilities were filing lawsuits across the country for their children to be educated in public schools. The parents ultimately prevailed when the Federal government passed special ed law in the mid-1970s. In one of those lawsuits (*PARC v. Pennsylvania*), the attorney for the parents cited the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, noting the parallels between discrimination of students

2—Inclusive Education (or What's So Special About Special Education?)

of African-American heritage and students with disabilities. Here's a brief excerpt of that Supreme Court decision (modified slightly to remove archaic racial terms that are no longer used):

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 the 21st century, why haven't we learned from the experiences and wisdom of the past? What is the purpose of education? To prepare students for successful employment and/or post-secondary education, right? The long-term 75-90 percent unemployment rate of people with developmental disabilities is evidence that "education" in segregated, special classrooms is failing miserably. As taxpayers, shouldn't we be enraged that our tax dollars are being used in ways that result in a sub-standard education for millions of students with disabilities? As human beings, shouldn't we be ashamed that millions of children are separated in segregated classrooms (where low expectations are the norm), and where children are denied opportunities to make friends, take their rightful places as valued members of the student body,

**The hearts of small children
are delicate organs.**

**A cruel beginning in this
world can twist them into
curious shapes.**

Carson McCullers

and acquire the education they need for a successful adult life?

How can we tolerate students with disabilities having to sit at a separate table in the cafeteria or, worse, not being allowed to leave their classrooms for lunch? How can we condone a "life-skills" education, instead of an academic education (reading, writing, arithmetic, and more)? How is it appropriate for six-year-olds to be in the same classroom with 12-year-olds, for example? How is it right for students with disabilities to spend years in the same special, multi-age classroom, never knowing what it's like to be a "fourth-grader" or a "tenth-grader"? The list of "standard practices" in many special ed classrooms that defy both common sense and ethical treatment of others could go on and on. My book, *Disability is Natural: Revolutionary Common Sense for Raising Successful Children with Disabilities*,

features strategies to make inclusive education and reality, and the following articles can help lead us in a better direction...

- Inclusion: The Natural State
- Inclusive Education: A Primer
- Inclusive Education: A Principal's Perspective
- Testimonial on Inclusive Education (From a Special Ed Teacher)
- Dear Teachers and IEP Members...
- New and Improved IEP* Meetings (and any other kind of "I" meetings!)
- Which Should Be Defended: Inclusion or Segregation?
- Lessons of Segregation

We can and must do better! Children with disabilities—like all children—are our society's future; they're counting on us and we must not let them down. Every child is born included; every child needs to stay that way.