

The MORAL Imperative of Inclusion

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

Decades ago, parents who were fed up with the discrimination and prejudice directed toward their children because of skin color initiated and won right-to-education cases, which resulted in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision issued on May 27, 1954: "...separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." Two decades later, another group of parents followed, initiating and winning right-to-education cases. This time, however, the characteristic was disability, instead of skin color—but the issues were similar. And in one of the disability-related cases (*PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*) the parents' attorney presented this similarity to the Court, and the parents prevailed.

Today, many recognize the similarities between the Civil Rights and the Disability Rights Movements. The issues are the same: prejudice and discrimination; invisibility, isolation, and segregation; and second-class citizenship based on a characteristic (skin color for one group, disability for the other). The disability-related right-to-education cases ultimately led to the passage of federal special education law (P.L. 94-142) in 1975 that mandates a free and appropriate public education, in the least restrictive environment, for all students with disabilities.

Decades later, the promise of the *Brown* decision has not been fully realized.

Similarly, 30-plus years after P.L. 94-142 was enacted, the promise of special ed law has not permeated the majority of our nation's public schools. The intent of both legal mandates is the elimination of segregation and the promotion of inclusion in the public school system, but segregation still exists.

So it seems the impetus for inclusion, in all areas of our society, must go beyond laws and Supreme Court decisions: *inclusion is a moral issue*. In writing the Court's decision in the *Brown* case, Chief Justice Earl Warren indicated as much in the following excerpt. (The words in parentheses are additions

to clarify or are substitutions for descriptors that are archaic and possibly insulting, and italics have been added for emphasis.)

To separate (children) from others of similar age and qualifications...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.

Warren's message reflected a profound understanding of the lifelong harm of segregation based on skin color in 1954. Aren't his words applicable to children and adults with disabilities today?

Decades ago, there was no evidence or proof to indicate that children with different colors of skin could *not* be successfully educated together. Racially-segregated schools were the result of prejudicial

perceptions and attitudes. Today, the same is true in the disability arena. There is no *proof* that people with disabilities

cannot be successful in the typical environments most Americans take for granted. The segregation of children and adults with disabilities in "special" settings—at schools, in workplaces, and living arrangements—is an outcome of prejudicial perceptions and attitudes. And circular logic allows this prejudice to continue, in both theory and practice. In theory, when a person is in a segregated setting, it's assumed that's the "correct" place for him to be, so there he remains. Conversely, if people with disabilities are not visible in everyday environments, it's assumed they're unable to succeed in those environments. In practice, placing people in segregated, dependent settings often prevents

Pain of mind is worse than pain of body.

Publius Syrus

2 - The Moral Imperative of Inclusion

them from learning *how* to be successful in typical environments. And again, conversely, their absence from typical environments (in school classrooms and elsewhere) prevents others from learning how to welcome them, how to “be” around them, how to provide the supports they may need, and so forth. People with disabilities can’t win! (And, yes, many people with disabilities may need supports, accommodations, and/or assistive technology, but so do people who don’t have disabilities.)

Contrary to the notion that inclusion isn’t a “realistic” possibility are countless examples of success: (1) children with disabilities who are successfully included and educated in age-appropriate, general ed classrooms. Educators in these schools believe all kids can learn and all kids belong, and then do whatever it takes to make it work;

(2) adults with disabilities who are successfully employed in real jobs. In some cases, innovative strategies within the service system (like PASS plans) are used, while in others, fair and open-minded employers value the work product of employees with disabilities, and “special services” are not used;

(3) adults with disabilities who are living in the homes of their choices, with the supports they need, included in their communities. Again, the innovative use of services helps accomplish this in some cases, while in others, individuals are simply using the natural supports in their communities (just like people without disabilities), and “special services” are not used.

Despite these successes—and despite the fact that educators and professionals have *access to strategies* on how to include children and adults with labels—social isolation and physical segregation continue. Why? Excuses, rationalizations, and justifications abound: “they” are not ready, “we” are not ready, we’ve never done that before, we don’t have the resources, we don’t have the money, it won’t work, and more. But

the successes described above prove that whatever reasons are given for the lack of inclusion are, in fact, erroneous assumptions, at best, or mean-spirited excuses, at worst.

It seems that social isolation and physical segregation continue because inclusion within the mainstream of American society *is not a moral imperative for those who exert control* (professionals, parents, educators, employers, and a host of others). Instead, many operate from a *legal* perspective, going no further than following the “guidelines” of special ed law, the ADA, and other laws or policies. Even with legal imperatives, however, segregation and isolation continue. So it seems that until we go *beyond the law and make inclusion a moral imperative*, the status quo will continue.

Going back to Earl Warren’s eloquent and insightful words, is there not a moral imperative to stop the harm of segregation which may affect people’s “hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone”?

With what authority do we inflict second-class citizenship on our fellow citizens who happen to have disability diagnoses? Who empowered us to push others

Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws.

Plato

to the margins of society simply because their bodies or minds might be different from our own? What crimes have they committed that result in their incarceration in the segregated settings of special ed preschools, “resource rooms” of public schools, adult day programs, or congregate living settings? Within the framework of the “helpful special services” provided in these settings, men and women and boys and girls are isolated from the fabric of their communities. Are we so ignorant or arrogant to believe that people with disabilities are immune from feeling *the devastating pain of exclusion*? And shouldn’t we care how they feel? Under God, or whatever moral code we embrace, do we not have a responsibility to treat others the way we want to be treated?

Laws offer important legal protections. But until moral outrage infects *our* hearts and minds, we’re likely to continue inflicting harm on the hearts and minds of others. Can’t we do better?