

Looking back at Special Education 1982 style

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This paper is not an academic retrospective on the past three decades of education of children with intellectual disabilities. Rather it is perhaps a reminder that laws alone do not level the road to equality in education or in life itself. In January 1982, when the brief reproduced below was first presented, my son was in his 18th year yet had spent only a couple of those years in the public education system. Quite simply, he did not qualify for regular education nor did he qualify for the special kind! My son (now 51) was one of many school aged children for whom access to education was denied solely because of disability. In those times, there appeared to be no Ministerial shame and very little public concern attached to that fact. As the Education Minister himself had said to me some years earlier when another parent and I had challenged him on the failure of the system to include our sons, "Surely, you don't expect the Ministry of Education to build hospitals for the "vegetables!" Well no, we told him as politely as possible in the circumstances, we had no such expectation. Our sons were not vegetables, they were real life school aged children who, rightfully, should be in school!

By the time the brief below was written, my son was in school. He was not exactly in what one would call regular school but he was in an establishment for which the School Board finally believed him to be qualified. He wasn't exactly in the segregated School for the Trainable Mentally Retarded either but he was in a part of that school. He was in a new special developmental class of five children. In a corridor away from most classrooms they were segregated from the other students in the segregated school. They had almost no contact in school hours with any but each other and a wonderful, caring, kind, considerate, innovative, fun loving former High School teacher, Bill Brown, co-author of the brief. Bill was not only Ian's salvation but also ours, as a family!

The brief, written and presented in January 1982, has been edited to remove identifying references. The opinion of the authors is that although when written the brief related to a particular School Board in a particular province, it could have been addressed to many Special Education Committees across the country at one time or another.

Most of the terminology common at the time the brief was written has not been replaced even though such language is now understood to be offensive. Just as the prevailing attitudes were accepting of the exclusionary enrolment practices then in place in the field of education so were they accepting of demeaning and insulting

language to describe the people receiving or perhaps not receiving it. More respectful language was beginning to creep into the lexicon here and there but it was not typically used by practitioners at the time. The purpose of this document was not to write a modern version of an old piece but rather to offer the piece 'as is' and to suggest that some of the barriers faced today by parents of school aged children who have intellectual disabilities are simply newer and perhaps more subtle versions of the barriers of old.

BRIEF ON SPECIAL EDUCATION TO THE SPECIAL EDUCATION COMMITTEE OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

January 21st 1982

Presented by William Brown, teacher and Audrey Cole, parent.

The *Declaration of Rights of the Child* was adopted unanimously by the United Nations in 1959.

We would like to extract and address issues raised by one of the principles of the *U.N. Declaration* from the perspectives of a teacher who has had ten years experience in the regular secondary school system and five years in Special Education and of a parent whose child has spent all of his school aged life within the Board's jurisdictional area but not all of his "school years" within its education system.

As our experience has been with children who are commonly labelled "trainable retarded" it is on these children that we focus but our comments apply to all students who have been educated in segregated settings because of an exceptionality.

Principle II of the *U.N. Declaration* states that the child "... shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity."

In this province, in 1982, this might appear to be a non-issue. It could be presumed that this principle is the very foundation on which the entire educational structure is built. Is it not? Yes and No! Yes, for the vast numbers of children who have not been labelled by an "exceptionality" that does not permit them "to profit from the educational programme offered in the regular school "within the system". No, for many of those who have been tagged with a disability label.

The key issue in Principle II is the meaning of "a healthy and normal manner".

How does this issue pertain to the current educational system under this Board of Education?

Although what is considered to be normal will vary to some degree with the age level to which it applies, it is generally accepted that a normal school would be one that:

- a) serves either a given neighbourhood or, to some extent and particularly at senior levels, students with special areas of interest;

- b) houses students whose chronological ages are within fairly standard groupings;
- c) has a population which reflects the range of social, economic, intellectual and cultural values of its neighbourhood or community;
- d) has an appropriate range of extra-curricular activities;
- e) offers, especially at senior levels, contact with students from other parts of the city or rural area through inter-scholastic programmes;
- f) has the support or interest of neighbours and becomes at the very least an integral part of the community and in some cases a focus for it;
- g) provides students with opportunities to expand their relationships with classmates into friendships that have a chance to flourish both during and after school.

It is clear that schools are intended to nurture the whole person. The monies spent on sports, art, music, technical training, horticulture, domestic science, community field trips, and business-related skills indicate that "academics" are not the sole *raison d'être* for the school system. The system has tried to respond to both the needs of the community and of the students – not an easy path to follow, as we have discovered with Reports demanding broad educational reforms in the province and reviews of the educational system. The point is that the educational system is both interested and willing to examine how best it can meet the needs of its students and to make the changes necessary to accommodate those needs within the system – unless the student happens to have been labelled by an "exceptionality" such as mental retardation.

(W.B.): "As a teacher I can remember nothing in my teacher-training exposure to the 'philosophy of education' which would warrant such a drastically different educational environment for such a small percentage of the population as is presently provided for most retarded students within the system."

(A.C.): "As a parent I know of nothing that should warrant an educational environment for my son that, almost by definition, deprives him of normal human relationships with any but those who have been similarly labelled and those who have been trained to deal with the 'differentness' that is inferred from that label."

What is there about some "exceptionalities" that makes segregated schools even possible as a response, let alone that allows them to be seen as a necessity by some parts of society? The two most common responses to this question are: 1) economics; and 2) the necessity of meeting the special needs created by the disability. Economics? Surely it cannot be that the cost of housing .003% of the total school population under the jurisdiction of the School Board in a separate facility, with its own separate maintenance system, clerical and administrative budget and the additional and considerable costs which result from the necessity of transporting students from all over an enormous geographical area is less than the cost of restructuring the regular system to accommodate this small number of students who are presently designated "Trainable Mentally Retarded". And should the cost of restructuring the system be greater, in the initial stages at least, should we not look more closely at what we mean by special needs? We have already seen that the regular school system is already able to adapt to the special needs of the majority of its students. What is so particularly special about the needs of children with mental

handicaps that they cannot be met within the regular system? Presumably, the answer lies in that which is unique within the "special school" and so can not be offered within the regular school. But there is nothing in the physical plant that is not, could not or should not be in most schools. The answer then must lie in the specialized staffing of the "special school": the specially trained teachers, teachers' aides, and other professional support staff such as speech therapists and occupational therapists.

(W.B.): "Yet, as a teacher, I know that teachers are 'trainable' and with in-service work and a slight restructuring of the teacher-training programmes, together with a look at how best to use those teachers who already have the experience and training, it is not impossible to offer programmes designed to meet the needs of such a small number of students. With the money saved by not having to maintain separate facilities we could engage and make effective use of graduates from training in other disciplines such as, for example, relevant diploma courses at the Community Colleges. Other professional support staff could go to wherever the needs exist and by so doing could also serve other students within the regular system who could benefit from their valuable skills. A more consultative role for staff with special experience and discipline could be of additional and widespread benefit to the whole school system."

(A.C.): "As a parent, I know that most of my son's needs are normal human needs. I also know that the limitations on his intellectual abilities necessitate some special approaches by those whose skills lie in teaching. And I also believe that skills such as those are attached to people and are usually portable and can be practised wherever their holder happens to be. But my son also needs an environment where his normal human needs can be addressed in the most normal, human manner and that demands contact with his 'normal, human' peers."

At best, the oft-stated advantages of segregated schools for children with mental retardation are questionable. The disadvantages of any "special school" are clear. Such schools contain few elements of normal school settings such as were described above.

(W.B.): "As a teacher I recognise the value of peer modelling. The very nature of segregated schools (or classes) excludes a wide range of good peer models. Without daily contact with regular students even staff with special training have difficulty maintaining realistic and normal expectations. In such secluded settings it is almost impossible to keep abreast of current advances in educational practices, for example, in the use of computers in the classroom. Once the special school is there it becomes possible, almost probable, that it can be seen as a dumping ground for students who do not 'fit' into existing programmes. It is interesting to note that in most cases of children with multiple handicaps (e.g. speech impairment-mental retardation, autism-mental retardation, sight impairment-mental retardation) it is the retardation which determines the placement of the student. Most important, though, is the attitude of the non-handicapped person to those who have handicaps. With the presence of a segregated school, physically separated from the community, atypically populated by young people with an age spread from five to twenty-one, with an unnatural concentration of young people with disabilities who must either remain isolated from their peers and community or be exposed to them in

unnaturally large numbers, it is inevitable that the non-handicapped population will view their disabilities first and their abilities only second, if indeed, at all."

(A.C.): "As a parent, I recognise that my son, having always been in a segregated educational setting, has been deprived of many opportunities of having friends in his own community, of going to school with the "kids next door", of normal social interactions such as other children in our community take for granted. I do not know how he would handle such relationships. I do not know how the other young people in the community would handle such a relationship. I do believe it is morally wrong to withhold the opportunity.

As a family we have been deprived of those normal relationships with neighbours that so often focus on school issues. The communities in which our son has gone to school have been alien communities with which we had no ties. Parents of other children in our son's school have also been from other and many communities. Few of us have known the community in which our children have gone to school and our children have rarely gone to school in the communities we have known.

Our community has been deprived of the opportunity of knowing well one of its lifetime members. To many children in the community my son is a stranger who comes and goes on a special bus and attends some 'other' school. That is not a privilege for my son. It is a violation of his right to grow up in what most of us would believe to be a healthy, normal manner. My son does not have the privilege of knowing the security of 'belonging' in his own community."

Yes, there is security in the special school. There is security and protection for the child, for the parent, for the teacher and for the system and to a degree that might not be assured in the regular school. Yes, there is apprehension about integration, certainly amongst parents, certainly amongst teachers. But most of us do not choose to spend our lives in circumstances of social isolation. We need normal social interactions to preserve our personal well-being. There is no basis for an assumption that people who are labelled "mentally retarded" are different.

"Special", segregated schools (and classes) provide only special segregated schooling. They contribute the perpetuation of the myth that children with mental retardation can learn only in the company of other children with similar disabilities. They perpetuate the myth that those of us who have not been labelled "retarded" have nothing to gain from association with those of us who have been so labelled.

We, in this province, are proud of the fact that we offer educational opportunities for all children – equal opportunity as we would probably prefer to have it described. But, just as in the United States Supreme Court ruling in Brown vs. the Board of Education, in 1954. Here, in this province, in this County, "Separate but equal is inherently unequal."

The Board of Education must commit itself to the spirit of the new legislation and provide leadership such as it has shown in other areas of responsibility by adopting the following recommendations:

- (1) That the Board of Education recognize the right of all children to be educated in a "healthy and normal manner" and that toward this end it adopt as policy the model of "least restrictive and most enhancing environment" for placement of students with exceptionalities.

- (2) That the Board of Education investigate pedagogically sound methods of ensuring that the policy of "least restrictive and most enhancing environment" is the normal expectation of all children within its jurisdiction and that such "environments" are within the regular school system that would be provided for all children in any community; and that such policy include a more flexible use of teachers with special education training, greater use of teachers' aides with skills in supportive disciplines, and the expanded use of "parallel-professionals".
- (3) That the Board of Education establish a system of monitoring to ensure that the right of all children to be educated in a "healthy and normal" manner is preserved.
- (4) That the Board of Education clarify and support the vital role that teachers at the currently segregated school can play in an integrated system.

It was not until the mid eighties that legislative changes in our particular province finally placed on School Boards full responsibility for education of all children within their respective geographical jurisdictions. By that time, Canada had a Charter of Rights and Freedoms and since that time, Canada has also signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 24 of the Convention places yet stronger requirements on governments to ensure equal opportunity to an "inclusive education system at all levels of lifelong learning..."

Had those instruments been effectively in place in January 1982, we would like to think there would have been no need for the original brief. However, from concerns that are currently expressed by many families, we know that all is not yet as well as it could be in the education world, regular or special. This glance back into history might be helpful. Perhaps it is the very notion of "special education" that needs to be addressed. We could have listened more carefully to the late Burton Blatt, renowned US Educator, who, back in those days, was questioning whether special education was really special or even education. The concerns that continue to be raised by parents of children with intellectual disabilities, the frustrations that continue to play such damaging roles in the lives of their families, suggest that issue has yet to be resolved.

- Audrey Cole

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