

Forest

THE 3 R'S: REASON, REALITY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Joint Presentation to the Select Committee on Education
by

Down Syndrome Association of Metro Toronto
Down Syndrome Association of York Region
Discant Cum Ceteris: Integration Action Group

on
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REASON

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Parents of children with Down Syndrome want the option of integrated education for their children..This means we want them to walk with their brothers and sisters and friends to their neighbourhood school as a matter of right, attend regular classes with their age appropriate peers and have individualized programming geared to their strengths and needs.

The mainstream is where we want our children to lead their lives. Our children are beggars at a banquet. When they are locked out of integrated education with their typical peers, they embark upon a course of life which runs parallel to the lives of ordinary people, but does not intersect with it..

The educational system is the main "processor" through which all children must pass. It needs to look at it's foundation to see what it is teaching Ontario students about the concept of community, and its responsibility to bring us together on the basis of our common humanity. It must teach us to respect human diversity and give us the open attitude and opportunity to learn from it. Equal membership in the community leads to equality of opportunity.

Forced segregation of persons with specific labels such as Educable Mentally Retarded, Trainable Mentally Retarded, Multiply Handicapped, teaches division and separateness. Integration teaches that all of us are members of one and the same community. The concept of readiness for the community (sold to parents) implies qualifications for the role of human being. People don't qualify for the community- they belong by right.

Integration in education isn't a matter of ability as many in the education system mistakenly believe. It is a matter of choosing to support and transmit respectful human values rather than survival of the fittest values. It is most assuredly a matter of human rights, entitlement to equal benefit of education, and entitlement to equality of opportunity.

The philosophical principles of the Ministry of Education in Ontario in the Special Education Information Handbook refer generally and specifically to:

"All pupils should have the right of educational opportunity and a curriculum of a high quality appropriate to their needs, abilities, and interests.

Both the program and environment of the school should reflect respect for the worth of the individual and respect for the differences among individuals and groups" ¹

The doctrine of Separate as inherently Unequal has long been established.

Forced segregation of children with labels promotes the concept of two communities: one normal, one "abnormal, one well one sick, one valued, one devalued. No amount of money or focus on "special" can disguise to all children-typical or otherwise, the reality that some belong and some do not. This streaming continues on through adult life leading persons with special needs to lives of chronic isolation, poverty and unemployment.

Keeping in mind the Ministry's reference to needs and abilities, parents across the province have been battling in IPRCs (Identification, Placement Review Committee) to have the curriculum of children with special needs based on a strengths and needs assessment. However, children continue to be tested and labelled and slotted in the traditional manner. There exists no specific forum within which a parent may challenge the appropriateness or efficacy of the child's program, though they may challenge, mostly in vain, their child's label or placement.

The Goals of education in this Handbook state the specifics of the Ministry's philosophy. All of the stated goals represent values most of us would have little difficulty accepting. However, we do not believe that these goals are achievable for children with special needs in a system of forced segregation. Nor do they reflect a philosophy of community or belonging-in fact the reality of the manner in which these goals are implemented mitigates against it.

Let us look at some of these goals in detail.
 "The Ministry of Education strives.....equal opportunity for all.
 ...has the overall purpose of helping individual learners to achieve their individual potential in physical, intellectual, emotional, social, cultural and moral development." 2

Forced segregation and equal opportunity are mutually exclusive.

If the Ministry of Education truly believes that the accurate indicators of the achievement potential of children with Down Syndrome are social isolation, maimed self-images, chronic poverty and unemployment, then they are doing their job very well.

The rate of unemployment among persons labelled mentally retarded ranges from 80 to 90 percent. People First, a national self advocacy organization of persons so labelled, estimates that out of 650 Ontario members, 8 to 10 have real jobs in the competitive marketplace. They state that this is not the result of lack of ability or motivation, but is a direct outgrowth of forced segregation and its devastating consequences in adult life. Workshops are attended, despite their terrible working conditions, because they are the only available option to overwhelming social isolation.

Goal 6 "develop a feeling of self worth" ³.

People learning in circumstances of forced segregation do not develop feelings of self worth, despite the best efforts of their families. Regulated contacts with typical students at lunch, music, gym or art classes only serve to reinforce the feeling of differentness and isolation. They do not make the student with special needs "ready" for the community. Nor do they fool the typical students into thinking they are one of the crowd.

Forced segregation is a process of searching out, isolating, labelling and slotting. Mental health professionals from a variety of disciplines all can testify to the centrality of individual self worth in determining school and work performance, social, sexual and family role behavior. Do we think different mental health rules apply to students who require extra supports?

Goal 8 "Acquire skills that contribute to self-reliance in solving practical problems in everyday life" ⁴.

Our children are not allowed to participate in that everyday life. Forced segregation is not real life. It is a fantasy land of many caretakers, permission for dependency, age inappropriate learning activities tolerance of age inappropriate behaviors, based on the assumption of their inability to function independently as adults.

Our children are being well prepared to be the clients of social workers.

Goal 10 "Develop esteem for the customs, cultures and beliefs of a wide variety of societal groups" ⁵.

Forced segregation does not teach typical students to value or respect their peers with special needs. Forced segregation encourages typical students in their attitudes of derision, pity, and low expectations.

These attitudes continue through the life cycle as typical people avoid, deride or pity people with special needs. Through misguided paternalism, they create special places for them such as segregated classes and schools, group homes, workshops, institutions, and therefore as potential employers or fellow employees, lock them out of the competitive marketplace.

Typical students are denied the enrichment of learning and playing with their friends who may need extra help, but who are also capable of helping, learning and having fun. Those Boards who integrate consistently testify to the immense benefits of integration for the typical students. Everyone profits from learning and working in an atmosphere where all people are truly valued for their contributions.

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Goal II "Acquire skills and attitudes that will lead to satisfaction and productivity in the world of work" 6.

Persons with special needs are locked out of competitive employment. Forced segregation and all it implies about goals, expectations, and curriculum, is the beginning of this process.

Chronic unemployment and spending time in a sheltered workshop for a disability pension of approximately 6,000 dollars per year and ten dollars a week can in no way be imagined as satisfying or productive.

Goal I3 "Develop values related to personal, ethical, or religious beliefs and to the common welfare of society." 7.

The operative word here is common. Typical people and people with special needs are carefully taught that they belong to separate communities—one functioning, one custodial.

Typical people have been denied the opportunity to grow up alongside their peers with special needs, to learn with them, to work with them and be their friends. Our community is denied the creativity and contributions of thousands of its members.

People with special needs refuse to be streamed away from the community. They belong simply because they are here. They want to learn, play, work and contribute to the community. They do not want the protectionism and paternalism they are offered and which they know to be soul destroying. They want integration, human and civil rights, personal choice and reasonable accommodation.

The Ministry of Education must decide and then teach in a proactive manner that all belong.

We support a philosophical foundation for education in Ontario promoting one community with a common interest in its own communal preservation, welfare and progress respecting and appreciating human diversity.

With respect of persons who will require some extra supports, we advocate a philosophy which believes that all persons have the right and capacity to live what we call "normal" lives. Normal life is defined as going to school, having friends, hobbies, getting a job, moving away from home, establishing your own family setting and contributing to the community.

Persons with special needs have been protected from the dignity of risk and so have been blocked from reaching their potential and leading typical lives, albeit with varying levels of support. Their lot has been chronic poverty on social assistance, social isolation, and the devaluation of their abilities, talents, desire to contribute and belong.

Our educational system and community cannot continue to waste precious human lives.

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REALITY

As long as geography and religion continue to be the major determinants of quality of education, this province has a long way to go to provide equal opportunity for all children to meet basic educational goals.

The discriminatory manner in which most students with special needs are currently treated by school boards has a double negative effect:

1. The labelled students are deprived of quality education and introduced to lives of poverty, isolation, unemployment, and a succession of "services".
2. The typical students learn to perpetuate these discriminatory practices.

The present education system stresses segregation versus integration, labels versus individuals, placement versus people, and efficiency versus quality. It even allocates money to categories, not kids! Some school boards make a pretense of complying with Ministry regulations by offering what is euphemistically called a "range of options", which implies choice, but the reality is that there is no choice: either all the options are bad, or the unwritten but strictly enforced corollary is that each option applies to only a specified type of student. The phrase "appropriate education" is being narrowly interpreted by Appeal Boards to refer only to a board's existing services; thus, if a student requires a programme, placement or service that a particular board does not offer, she/he is denied the right to a truly appropriate education. The Act pays mere lip service to the role of parents in the educational process. While it sometimes "invites" parents to attend meetings about their children, it ensures that such meetings, especially in the Appeal process, are controlled by professionals. These fundamental injustices are not tolerable as a value base for a system that proclaims equality of opportunity.

In attempting to redress the inequities inherent in the current legislation, each of the three groups represented here

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION #1: THAT the Proposed Amendments to the Special Education Legislation be introduced to the legislature as a priority item in the fall session, in order that they may go to committee and public hearings as soon as possible.

RECOMMENDATION #2: THAT the Education Act be amended to ensure that all students, regardless of exceptionality, have the right to be educated in regular classes in their home schools (i.e., the schools they would be attending if they were not labelled "exceptional") with their chronological age peers, and that supplementary supports and services be provided to exceptional students in integrated classes as required to meet individual programme goals.

RECOMMENDATION #3: THAT a significant preamble to the Education Act be written which will clearly define its value base and provide a detailed statement of principles. It should include:

- the role of education in enhancing community membership
- the right of families to meaningful participation in their children's educational careers, and to a fair appeal process
- the basic assumption that all children can learn and develop
- the principles of normalization and integration as the operating frame of reference for students with special needs
- the consideration of individual strengths and needs, not labels, as the criteria for planning individual programmes
- the right of all children to an education that will prepare them to live and work in the real world, rather than in artificial, sheltered environments
- the responsibility of educators to respect and value their students
- a recognition that an "appropriate education" means one that is geared towards meeting a student's individual needs and is not limited by a board's existing service delivery model. In the pursuit of independence, academic goals may not necessarily take precedence over social and personal goals; the school has a responsibility to help students progress in all three areas of development.

RECOMMENDATION #4: THAT all references to "special" education be deleted from the Education Act, regulations, Ministry and school board documents and policies, teacher training courses and qualifications, etc.

We need to debunk the notion apparent in our present approach that two systems of education are necessary: regular and special. As Louise has pointed out, separate is INHERENTLY unequal.

The critical philosophical question is deceptively simple: "Do we, as a society, value persons who have special needs or do we not?"

ALL children require educational programmes and services and deserve to receive them in their home schools. Until a commitment is made to this basic principle, the rights of children currently labelled "exceptional" will continue to be denied as they suffer the status of second class citizens in this province.