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Who Belongs in School?

Joey is ten years old. He is deaf and autistic. He has recently become extremely aggressive, both at home and at school. He has begun pushing his mother when she does not allow him to have his way. Although he is still relatively small, his mother has already landed on the floor several times as a result of one of these unexpected shoves. Fortunately, no bones have been broken yet, but she is looking for help. Because he started demonstrating similar behavior at school, his educational placement has been changed first from a general education classroom with a support assistant, to a special education class within the same school, to one-on-one services provided at a special day school within the school district. In the third week of the most recent arrangement, he crashed his head into the teacher's face, breaking her nose. The teacher did not believe that the act was intentional on Joey's part. Nevertheless, her nose was broken and she was uncertain what the future should hold for this arrangement.

In spite of his behavioral challenges, Joey has learned a great deal in his years in school. He has a functional use of sign language, which his parents have also learned and use consistently in the home and community. He also uses a picture system as a practical means of alternative communication. Joey is able to manage his toileting, dressing, and other basic grooming needs with only limited supervision. He enjoys riding his bicycle, watching sports shows on TV, and has an extensive collection of comic books that can keep him entertained for hours. He has no difficulty using the computer to play games. His teachers have tapped into his attraction to the computer as a successful mechanism to engage him in academic work. It is only when he reaches a level of frustration that behavioral problems materialize for Joey.

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He can go for weeks without losing control when the environment offers high levels of structure and consistency. However, neither his parents nor the educators who have been working with him have been able to develop a foolproof means of preventing his severe outbursts.

Joey's father, together with other family members and several school personnel, thinks Joey needs services available at a quality out-of-state residential facility. However, the cost of providing this placement for the remainder of the year is equal to the cost of providing daily transportation for every child in his school district for the remainder of the school year. Some school personnel argue that Joey needs peers with appropriate behavioral patterns to serve as models—something that might be missing in the residential setting. They are also concerned about how difficult it would be for Joey to separate from his mother, who has devoted so much of her time and energy to his development. However, parents of other children who have seen the dangers of Joey's physical aggression want him removed from the neighborhood school and have made sure the principal and school board know that they will take legal action if any child is harmed by Joey.

Joey's mother is torn. Over the last ten years, she has dedicated herself to giving Joey the attention and guidance he needs. Yet she is feeling a sense of exhaustion and anxiety as Joey is soon to advance into puberty. She understands why her husband is ready to try a residential placement. Yet, when she thinks of sending Joey away, she cannot stop her mind from questioning her own commitment to her son. How can she turn her back on Joey now?

- What factors should be considered in making a placement decision for Joey?
- How can we balance Joey's needs with those of the other children in the school?
- What would likely have become of Joey before special education laws were enacted?
- Should Joey spend some portion of his school day in a regular class?

WHY ARE STRUGGLING STUDENTS IN GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSES?

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

1. What did schools do with/for struggling students prior to 1975?
2. What constitutional principles are at play when making educational placement decisions?
3. Why do courts tend to rule in favor of the least restrictive educational placements for students with disabilities?

Most of us have experienced some form of exclusion in our lives. A group of friends would not let us join them in play. We tried out for a competitive team and did not make it. Our family had religious beliefs that were ignored or unwelcome by the educational community. Obesity made us the target of cruel jokes. In some instances, we experience rejection simply because of a group identity that we hold. In other parts of the world, severe cases of exclusion are seen in the genocide of people based on shared genetics or cultural heritage. For some in the United States as well as abroad, racial bias has been a constant in their lives, making exclusion an all-too-familiar experience. Exclusion based on gender, sexual orientation, or religion is an everyday experience for some. On a much smaller scale, many children and adults feel the sting of exclusion throughout their lives when they are not invited to the neighbor's birthday party or do not get an invitation to join the social club of their choice while in college. When the exclusion extends beyond social boundaries to educational opportunity, the meaning and power of that exclusion accelerates. Think of the emotions that surround acceptance or rejection to an exclusive university. Now imagine not even having the opportunity to go to kindergarten. The child is too young and innocent to understand the tragedy of such a loss. Yet many children with disabilities were completely excluded from the free public educational system within the United States until the mid-1970s. Their parents and other advocates did understand what was at stake, however, and began fighting this exclusion through the courts.

The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision that outlawed racial segregation in schools set the stage for these disability activists to gain access to schools for children with disabilities. Passage of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975 (originally known as the Education of the Handicapped Act) has proven to be a critical turning point in the way our nation views and educates children with disabilities. Just as *Brown v. the Board of Education* changed the course of education for students of color, the passage of IDEA forever changed educational opportunity for thousands upon thousands of children.

Prior to the passage of IDEA, special education was limited to small, specialized programs created through the will and determination of small groups of parents, teachers, and other concerned professionals. Today, it is a major part of every school system. There would be no more waiting lists, lack of teaching staff, or insufficient funds. Today it is hard to imagine that, prior to 1975, many children in this country were routinely denied a public education simply because they were dependent on wheelchairs for mobility, unable to speak, had cognitive limitations, or were facing the challenges of mental illness.

At the same time that the educational rights of children with disabilities were being established, others were pushing for normalization of housing for persons with mental illness and mental retardation (Hobbs, 1975). The normalization movement was intended to bring persons who had been relegated to remote institutions back into the mainstream of

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society for their housing, education, and employment. Huge residential institutions had proven to have little, if any, rehabilitative benefits, as the residents in them spent years and years in inhumane conditions. The citizens of this country who struggled with mental illness and cognitive impairments were often cast off into the vilest of living conditions. They were removed from the community and thereby removed from the conscious of the community.

IDEA has been amended several times since 1975, but continues to require that all children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Both FAPE and LRE have proven to be subjective concepts that can lead to debate and conflict between parents and schools. What does it mean to say that the general education classroom is not an appropriate setting for the child? Does it mean that the nature of the setting should change or that the child should be excluded from it? It is a team of individuals who must actually struggle with these questions as they develop a child's Individual Education Program (IEP) in a fashion that gives the child the greatest possible access to the general education curriculum in the least restrictive environment possible.

The enactment of IDEA not only opened educational doors for some, but also changed educational opportunities for many children already in school. Those who had been struggling and failing in general education settings without the benefit of diagnosis and treatment of a learning disability, speech and language problems, or mild cognitive impairments were identified and began receiving special education services. Teachers and parents were relieved to have new hope for these students who faced so many struggles in school. Following the required testing and diagnosis, children with these disabilities began receiving special education services. Others with severe emotional disorders also found a new resource within the public school setting that could help them avoid expulsion from school when they displayed unacceptable behaviors.

For children with disabilities who had been struggling in school without attention to their needs, the passage of IDEA increased awareness and understanding of their educational struggles. However, it also resulted in their movement out of general education classrooms into special classes and resource classes. An unintended consequence was the reduction of their access to the general curriculum. Their academic experiences were based on individual assessments, and in many cases resulted in lowered academic expectations. For example, a fifth grade student with a learning disability in reading might receive instruction that was predominately at first or second grade levels simply because that was his reading level. This approach negated the fact that such a child might be perfectly capable of working with content at grade level in spite of the difficulty he might have reading. The pull-out model and use of resource teachers focusing on isolated skill development was not working for these children. Study after study resulted in findings that indicated young adults who had been in

special education were not experiencing educational or economic success after high school. The information we had about negative outcomes for students in special education (e.g., dropout rates, involvement in the criminal justice system, poor employment records) all pointed to the need to create a more integrated and coordinated system of education. These children needed to be back in the general classroom with some means of helping them be successful.

In 1986, as director of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation, Madeline Will spoke out in sharp criticism of the state of special education. She made a call for reform in *Educating Children with Learning Problems: A Shared Responsibility* (1986). Will's monograph introduced a movement that came to be known as the Regular Education Initiative (REI). Will saw that placement options for children and teacher licensure based on disability categories prevented educators from organizing children according to their educational needs. Children with the same diagnostic label might not necessarily have the same educational needs. For example, the category of learning disability is so broad that it includes students with a wide array of problems. Many of these students also have overlapping behaviors similar to those shown by children diagnosed as being emotionally disturbed. On the other hand, children with differing categorical diagnoses can benefit from similar instructional strategies. The isolation of children and teachers in rigid disability-specific diagnoses and classrooms was not efficient or effective. Educators needed a system that offered flexibility while granting students maximum access to the general curriculum.

There was also concern about the social isolation of students with disabilities and the resulting stigmatization and negative consequences, such as lowered self-esteem and the development of poor attitudes toward school and learning. Although many believed that segregated special education programs could save children from the damaging social aspects of school failure, evidence did not support this belief. Rather, the research indicated that more harm was done to social development for these students than good. Students felt humiliation when identified as special education students, and tried to keep it a secret from their classmates. Rigid eligibility requirements and placement options inevitably caused conflicts between parents and school personnel about placements and labels used to describe children. For children with disabilities, the REI became a way of reestablishing their place in general education. It did not make their academic struggles disappear.

Today, the matter of where and how a child with disabilities should be educated remains a point of discussion. For some, the argument in favor of inclusion for most, if not all, is as basic as the original fight for access to public education. For them, segregated special education is "the moral equivalent of apartheid and even slavery" (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995, p. 523). They argue that special education serves as a means of removing unwanted children from general education classes, maintaining patterns

of racial segregation, and keeping poorly performing students' test scores out of class performance records. It was this same thinking that resulted in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which requires that children with disabilities be included in state assessments and that results must be disaggregated. Advocates for full inclusion call into question the goodness of the intentions of those with the power to decide where to educate children with disabilities. From this perspective, the placement of Joey in a residential facility is the equivalent of giving up on him.

Inclusion is an abstract concept, a philosophical perspective, an unachievable ideal, and a principle found in the mandate to provide special education services in the least restrictive environment. However, it is also a decision made in an individual's life that directly influences his or her daily life, as well as that of the child's family, the teachers in the school, and the child's peers who are classmates, neighbors, and friends. Decisions often center around how far to go on a continuum of possibilities. It is not just an issue for children with disabilities, as many other children experience life conditions that leave educators and politicians debating the merits of inclusion. Should children who are homeless be gathered into one school as a means of diminishing the social stigma they might face in a mainstream school? What about the children who do not speak English? Where should we educate Native Americans and who should set the curriculum for them? The complexity of inclusion and what it means to be excluded gets played out every day in general education classrooms as teachers and parents make life-changing decisions for the children in their care.

WHO ARE THE STUDENTS THAT STRUGGLE IN SCHOOL?

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

1. Who belongs in a general education classroom?
2. Who should decide who belongs?
3. Do race and poverty influence success in school achievement?
4. Where should children living in the United States who do not speak English be educated?
5. What role does public education have in the United States?

Imagine the power to compile your own class roster. Who stays on the list and who gets relegated to exile? While teachers might complain about some of their students, not all would really send the difficult ones

away if given the power to do so. For all the complaining that goes on regarding students, many teachers take great pride in achieving success with the most challenging of cases, even the children to whom they are not naturally drawn.

Teachers working in a public school today know that they are expected to work with the children assigned to their classes. Nevertheless, there sometimes seems to be a student (or two) who is just too difficult to manage, too far behind in skills development to catch up, or whose parents have been unable to provide a consistent, stable home life. The teacher knows it is her job to work with children who face these challenges. She also knows that sometimes the student needs more than she can provide—whether it is instructional time, money to sustain a family or secure needed medical treatments, or strategic discipline. In the recent past, the classroom teacher has held significant power to initiate removal of children from general education settings by making referrals to special education. Today, that is no longer the case. Many children with diagnosed disabilities remain in the general education setting where special education teachers join them.

For many decades, educators have felt the tension between the intended benefits of special education services and the costs associated with removing a child from the general education classroom. Calls for the reconsideration of segregating students with mild disabilities began almost as soon as special education became an integral part of the U.S. educational system. However, the quality of the instruction available in general education classes has also been questioned, particularly for children from vulnerable populations. Numerous reports (e.g., National Research Council, 2002) and policy standards set in No Child Left Behind and IDEA have pointed to the need for instruction in the general education classroom to be more effective with all students, including those who are from non-white ethnic groups, those who qualify for special education services, those who are learning to communicate in English, or those who come from such extreme poverty that their families struggle to meet their most basic needs.

Access to education—particularly the general education classroom and curriculum—has changed over the years. Popular social attitudes have combined with the realities of economics, political control, established religious and ethical standards, and scientific advances in medicine and technology to move us to change our educational practices. In the 1970s, parents of children with disabilities and committed professionals followed the wave of progress of the Civil Rights Movement for blacks to establish the legal right to free appropriate public education for children with disabilities. Gone are the clauses in school attendance laws that specifically excluded many children with disabilities or severe behavior problems. We no longer exclude children from school based on the language spoken in their homes, the color of their skin, their dependence on mechanical devices to walk or talk, or their lack of a permanent address. Nevertheless, the reality is that, although access to school is established for all, many vulnerable children continue to struggle in school.

Students experience failure in school for many different reasons (Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, 1998; Leone et al., n.d.; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Scott, Nelson, & Liaupsin, 2001). Some may not easily succeed academically because their early life experiences did not include a variety and depth of experiences. These children may lack the foundational skills that would have developed easily and naturally through experiences such as listening and observing as books were read to them, counting and stacking blocks, or playing simple turn-taking games.

Some children, regardless of the family resources available to them, find it more difficult than others to focus on schoolwork and teacher instructions. For them, the classroom setting is simply too distracting to concentrate. They cannot easily sort out the important from the unimportant in the classroom environment, getting distracted by outside noises, the appearance of a classmate, the pictures hanging on the wall, or any other visual or auditory element in the room.

Some children are slow to understand the relationship between sounds and written words. Their slowness seems to catch up with them when others advance. They sense the failure that is closing in on them and replace effort with avoidance.

Some experience limited educational opportunity caused by conscious or unconscious racial prejudice on the part of teachers or school administrators. A black male child has a higher probability of being sent out of class or suspended even in the elementary grades than do white children. Each and every time such a removal takes place, the child involved has less opportunity to learn.

Teachers may reduce the level of work presented to children whom they consider unable to learn at higher levels. Through this perceived act of kindness, the teacher lowers her expectations, thereby actually reducing the educational opportunities available to the child.

Some children are in families who have faced generations of poverty and failure in school. While their parents want their children to be the first generation to break the cycle, the odds are against them without some specialized intervention. The parents may have a sense of helplessness, feeling unable to support their children at school, assist them with homework assignments, or challenge the authority of school personnel who place their children in less demanding classes.

Some children just do not get it the way the material is presented. The teacher's pace may be too fast or too slow to match a child's needs. The teacher might rely only on oral presentations of material when a child would be more successful with instruction that included a combination of oral and visual presentation.

A child might need greater structure than another who is in the same class. If the teacher expects this child to work independently with only limited directions, the child is likely to flounder, uncertain how to begin.

Many children whose families do not speak English as the primary language in the home attend U.S. public schools. Educators face challenges to determine the best services for these students. Should they cluster them in a few schools to make efficient use of teachers qualified to work with them? Should they simply place them in regular classes, hoping to accelerate their English language acquisition by making it the only language available to them in school? Should teachers accommodate these students by lowering expectations and reducing assignments due to the challenges they are facing associated with the language differences? Even educators focused on educating English Language Learners (ELLs) do not agree on the answers to these questions. Classroom teachers stand to be isolated and uncertain as to how to teach ELLs who are in their classes.

Regardless of the theoretical orientation educators hold about the best approach to educate ELLs, they must work with the resources available to them. Non-native English speakers do spend a good portion of the day in general education classes in many areas of the country. These students will understandably struggle with content as well as basic literacy skills until they develop sufficient English to function in the classroom. While the lack of English can make integration of the student into the routines and instruction within the classroom more challenging, such students can provide the opportunity for others in the class to learn about another language and culture. The presence of international classmates gives teachers opportunities to bring many social studies lessons to life in a new way, not just additional responsibilities associated with teaching an ELL student.

The sad fact is that many vulnerable children do not find the inspiration and instruction they need to succeed in school even when receiving special education services, progressively falling farther and farther behind until they drop out of school. Some children from nondominant cultures might see efforts to succeed in school as useless. If multiple generations of their families have experienced both open and subtle racial discrimination and exclusion in the past, their attitudes about school may be affected. When teachers expect students to hold a middle-class work ethic, the realities of their lives may leave some students questioning its meaning for them even in the elementary grades. The motivation to learn the material that the teacher wants the students to learn may simply not be there for these children. In such situations, poor performance in school may be of limited concern to the students themselves, or even their families as parents struggle to pay the rent. The content that the teacher wants the student to learn, and the types of information students believe they need to get by in the world are disconnected. This sense of disconnection is likely to increase as such children get older and feel a greater distance between their realistic life opportunities and the content of their high school classes. The cumulative effect of students' disinterest or disengagement in school is failure unless an educator finds a way to make a connection to such children. Teachers in the elementary grades have the opportunity to establish the foundation critical

for a child to maintain the effort needed to stay engaged in academic learning to high school graduation and beyond.

Students whose families are from lower socioeconomic groups or who identify with a nondominant subculture face a dilemma. These students may believe that success in school is a sign of submission to the dominant culture, and failing in school is a means of expressing political resistance (Erickson, 1987). Finn (1999) refers to such resistance to schooling by oppressed groups as “oppositional identity.” The submission to authority needed for success in school means that students must accept and honor the legitimacy of that authority and its good intentions. The students must believe that their best interests will be served through compliance with school authority. When students are unable to accept this assumption, they are unlikely to do the work teachers expect. Doing well in school is attributed to “acting white,” or acting like a “school boy” (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

These issues regarding beliefs about the limited value of school-based knowledge apply equally to children from working-class families, regardless of their racial identities. Generations of poverty and exclusion from the mainstream middle-class opportunities can create the same sense of distrust and suspicion of the value of school-based knowledge, as can differences that are ethnic or racial in nature.

Somewhere along the way, any of the children described throughout this chapter might be considered for special education services. In the past, a teacher who felt that she was unable to teach the child effectively could fairly easily refer a child for a diagnostic special education evaluation. Today, there is a far greater expectation that the general education teacher will provide intensified instruction before special education referrals will even be considered.

Response to Intervention (RTI) with multi-tiered levels of instruction now serves as a buffer zone between the general education classroom and special education services in many schools. Since many books (e.g., Allington, 2008; Bender & Shores, 2007; Brown-Chidsey, & Steege, 2005; Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2008; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008) and internet resources (e.g., www.rti4success.org; www.rtinetwork.org; <http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu>) are already available on the subject of RTI, there is no need to repeat that content here. However, the prevailing message found within this book—that teachers can and must find effective approaches to teach the vulnerable children who come their way—is consistent with the underlying concepts behind RTI. The reader will find some classroom-level examples of multitiered instruction in Chapter 9 that are consistent with the principles behind RTI.

When a child is struggling to find personal meaning and motivation for his or her efforts in the classroom, it is unlikely that special education would be of much value. Such children do not need specialized techniques designed for students with learning disabilities or mental retardation. They need a teacher who will help them make the vital connection

between their own lives and the opportunities education can open up for them—something *any* educator can do.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Ethical dilemmas created by tensions between the educational needs of the individual and the educational needs of the group, as seen in Joey's case, haunt us. Fairness, equity, equality, equal opportunity, appropriateness, and education are all subject to personal bias. The reality is that parents and educators approach inclusion and placement decisions with a personal bias. Who do you want in your classroom? Who do you not want in your classroom?

Current special education law and policy are built on the assumption that all children belong in school. Looking at the outcomes of public education, such as dropout rates and persistent illiteracy rates of adults, educators have to acknowledge the critical need for improvement and revision of our efforts. The classroom teacher holds the power to change the educational course for those children for whom schooling does not come easy. She must begin by establishing a sense of community within her classroom that is built on mutual trust and does not demand sameness to fit in. The next chapter provides guidance on how to achieve such a classroom.

