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Integration: Being Realistic Isn't Realistic

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An increasing amount of pressure is being put on school boards to integrate students with physical, mental, and learning disabilities into regular classrooms, and thus teachers, principals, and those within the educational hierarchy are facing a dilemma to which there seem to be no easy answers. The primary concern confronting these educators is which students should be placed within the regular classroom and which students should be placed in segregated settings - whether in segregated schools or in segregated classes within a regular school. Even within the field of Special Education, there is a wide range of ideologies as to whether integration or segregation serves the best interests of the student.

On one end of the ideological spectrum, there is the view that segregation always benefits the student regardless of the particular disability. Yet such a view is usually seen as outdated and some-what defeatist in that it does not allow the student even the chance to become integrated into the regular classroom. On the other hand, there is the view that integration always serves the best interest of the student and that all the segregated schools and classes should be disbanded. However, this view is usually seen as being idealistic and not facing the unique needs of this special student.

As a result, many principals and teachers often find them-selves in the position where they must decide whether to integrate or segregate a student with a disability given his or her particular needs and capabilities. The central issue confronting these educators is, when is integration realistic and when is integration not realistic? With respect to this question, I have a definite view: Integration is not realistic, and that is precisely why we should integrate. But before we can explore this somewhat confusing statement, it is important to examine the context in which this phrase is usually used.

The term, "not realistic" has been used so often in discussions of the educational placement of a student with a disability that the meaning of the actual term has become obscure and somewhat of a cliché. Moreover, the validity of using this term has gone largely unchallenged. It is vital, therefore, that we take time to examine the implications of our own language and define precisely what we mean when we decide that something is "not realistic."

In trying to decide whether to integrate a student with a disability, the discussion inevitably focuses on evaluating the student's limitations. In some cases, the student's limitations are so severe that it seems impossible for that student to participate in many of the school's activities. The tendency, therefore, is not to integrate the student, for what seem to be valid reasons. Yet, although the decision may appear 'realistic' often these very sensible conclusions deny students the opportunity to discover a way in which they could successfully integrate themselves into the regular class. Thus, the question of what is realistic isn't as clear-cut as it may seem.

Realism and Defeatism

Differentiating between the situations when one is being realistic and when one is being a defeatist is often very difficult, and the difference is crucial. If a student does not try out for the school football team because he feels he is too light, is he being realistic or being a defeatist? When a student with a disability is being integrated into a school, the whereabouts of this thin line between realism and defeatism is constantly in question. Unfortunately, it is often easier to say, "It's just not realistic."

A vivid example of a time when I fell into the mire of defeatism under the guise of "being realistic" happened when a friend of mine, who also has cerebral palsy, tried to get his driver's license. At that time, I had already passed the necessary tests and had received my license. My friend, no doubt inspired by the fact that I could now drive around instead of taking the bus, told me that he intended to try for his license. I said - and here it comes - that it wasn't realistic because his right foot was too slow to make an emergency stop. I am sure that anyone would have made the same comment. (It should be noted that hand controls were of no use to my friend as he only had the use of his right arm.) Undaunted, he took driving lessons but unfortunately failed the examination because his right foot reflexes were too slow. Although I outwardly sympathized with him, I admit that underneath I thought it was all for the better - not to mention that I was a bit proud that my prediction had come true. My pride was shattered when he drove up in a car which had an additional accelerator on the left side of the brake. His right side was handicapped, not his left side. With this one adaptation, it was possible for him to operate the accelerator and the brake with his left foot, and as a result he could drive as well and as safely as anyone else.

This episode raised an important question for me: how many times have we prevented individuals with disabilities from figuring out ways of overcoming problems simply by saying, "It is not realistic. We have no intention of being defeatist, just as I had no such thought when I advised my friend not to drive. Indeed most people think, as I did, that they are acting in the best interests of the person.

The incident with my friend incited my curiosity about the hidden reasons which prompt us to eagerly announce that a given task is "not realistic" for certain students. Many of my initial predictions about the underlying motivations were validated in numerous discussions with teachers and principals across Canada and the United States. Here are a few of the more common latent reasons.

Honest Ignorance

For many teachers, the thought of having a student with a disability in their class seems like a completely unrealistic proposition if not a terrifying nightmare. Yet these same teachers are often unaware of the possible minor adaptations which could be made in the classroom to accommodate such students. Thus, the statement, "not realistic," is often a reflection of honest ignorance. However, in deciding that a certain task is "not realistic," the speaker immediately minimizes the opportunity to brainstorm about the possible ways of overcoming a specific problem. Moreover, in committing oneself to the view that integrating a certain student is "not realistic," one immediately makes a judgment about that situation and now has a vested interest in maintaining the validity of that judgment.

These problems, however, can be easily sidestepped by making statements which are more congruent with the speaker's actual concern. Rather than concluding that integrating a certain student is "not realistic" for now and evermore, if we identify the specific concerns we have, such as taking notes, two

different curricula in the class, etc., and indicate that overcoming these problems would make integrating this student a plausible idea, then the previously mentioned issues disappear. By focusing on the specific problems and encouraging possible solutions, the staff, the student, and the classmates become immediately engaged in the process of trying to create ways of overcoming certain obstacles. The shop class, for example, may become involved in designing a desk which may allow the paper to be clamped to the desk, making note-taking easier for the student. Moreover, in focusing on the specific problems and not making grand conclusions, no one is proven wrong when new ideas are presented. Thus, simply the way we express our concerns can dramatically affect the educational opportunities for students with disabilities.

Fear of Failure

Another latent motivation for declaring that integration is "not realistic" is fear of failure. The principal or teacher may be concerned that an unsuccessful attempt to integrate a certain student may be more detrimental than if the student were not integrated at all. Yet there is a more subtle fear of failure involved in this statement. There is the fear that if I, the teacher, fail at integrating this student, what will my principal think of me? What will the other teachers think of me? What will I think of my own ability as a teacher, especially if I'm in Special Education.

In this situation, however, it is vital that we examine the implications of our language. To retreat from the possibility of failure is to retreat from the experience of learning itself. It must be remembered that education is a process, not a product. Failure is the essential factor within the process of education that makes learning possible. For students, education becomes a product, a tangible result, usually consisting of a letter, number, or red checkmark. Ultimately, the issue is how we help students to appreciate the process of learning rather than becoming consumed by the product of learning.

Although many teachers recognize this issue in their own classes, relatively few teachers appreciate this same discrepancy between process and product when it rears its obstinate head in the area of integration. Integrating a student with a disability into a regular classroom is itself a learning experience, and as such it must be defined as a process, not a product. Too often "successful integration" is defined as a product, an end result in which successful means that all of the problems of integration have been triumphantly conquered such that students with disabilities are a blissful addendum to the school culture.. Those with first-hand experience with integration know that such a conception is a fantasy. In terms of integration, "successful" refers to the process by which a student is integrated into the class. Successfully integrating a student means that there is a shared commitment among the staff, the student, and the classmates to finding new ways of overcoming obstacles which inevitably and continuously arise. Moreover, when the student does initially fail at a certain task, rather than re-examining the feasibility of integration, there is a common interest among all who are involved in what can be learned by this failure. A student's failure to accomplish a task will always provide new information which was not present before the student failed. The question is, are the staff and the student looking for that new information and, if so, are they able to incorporate that new information in modifying the subsequent ideas on how the student might accomplish that same task? In this way, then, the term "successful" refers to the attitude of the staff and the process by which attempts are made to integrate the exceptional student rather than tangible products or outcomes.

Limited Time and Energy

In many cases, teachers agree with the philosophy of integration but claim that they would not accept a student with a disability into their class simply because they feel that they don't have the time and energy to give the student the special attention he or she needs. The question is, though, where does the majority of a teacher's time and energy go?

If one seriously considers where the majority of a teacher's time and energy goes, one realizes that the majority does not go into actually teaching the class. Rather, huge amounts of time and energy are devoted to dealing with discipline problems. From the day educators enter Teachers' College, possibly from the day we enter Grade 1, we learn that dealing with discipline problems is a major part of a teacher's role in life. The assumption that a teacher must devote a great deal of time and energy to dealing with uncooperative students is a habit which we unquestioningly validate and call necessary. Once assumptions are accepted, rules and buildings are erected in the confidence that we are doing what is necessary. If one then tries to challenge the validity of these assumptions, one must not challenge only the assumption itself but must also challenge the environmental physical entities created around the assumption.

This example, then, brings to light the fact that insufficient time and energy is not the real issue: the crucial question is which students have priority on the teacher's time and energy in today's school system? Students who are discipline problems have been accepted into the regular class and, as a result, teachers put forward a great deal of effort trying to educate them. Students with disabilities, if they're fortunate, are granted whatever time is left over. Our own habits and unquestioned assumptions are the greatest barriers to integration.

Fear of Social Rejection

In some cases, the underlying motivation of claiming that integration is "not realistic" is the fear that the students with disabilities will not be socially accepted by the other students. Often teachers and principals become extremely concerned that the other students will tease, imitate, or mock the student. This, they feel, may be more detrimental to the student than if he/she had not been integrated at all. Yet, it is not the actual disability that causes the teasing, it is the other kids' ATTITUDE toward the disability. If a teacher is so willing to segregate at the first sign of social discrimination, one wonders about how different that teacher's attitude is from the kids who do the teasing; the teacher just expresses this fear differently. The point is, if we have students in our schools who have poor attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, are we challenging or perpetuating those attitudes by segregating students with disabilities.

There is, however, a further reason to integrate exceptional students into regular schools. Tomorrow's doctors, nurses, teachers, clerks and, most importantly, tomorrow's parents of students with disabilities are in our schools today. It is a moral crime that, in our society, we allow individuals to grow up not knowing what cerebral palsy or autism are until they are told by a doctor on the floor of a maternity ward. We have a moral obligation, not only to the student with a disability, but to the future parents of students with disabilities to strive towards complete integration in our schools.

There are many reasons why integration is "not realistic":

we have not discovered all the ways of including students with disabilities into regular classes; there is the possibility that the whole attempt may be a failure; teachers certainly do not have the time or energy to deal with a student with a disability in their class; there may be a great deal of social discrimination towards a student with a disability;

Yet it is precisely because integration is not realistic in all of these ways that we should integrate. In fact, when you hear the term not realistic several questions should immediately come to mind:

How am I honestly ignorant of many of the ways in which minor adaptations could be made in my class to accommodate a student with a disability in my class? Am I preventing myself from learning about integration because I am afraid of the possibility of failure? Which students am I allowing to have priority on my time and energy? Am I challenging or perpetuating the existing attitudes in the school by segregating students with disabilities?

Will the Real Disabled Person Please Stand Up

What should be evident at this point in the discussion is that how we act is determined by what we believe. And what we believe is reflected in our language and the way we define words. Let me illustrate this by showing how the way we define two common words can dramatically affect the way we behave. The two words are "situation" and "problem."

With respect to integration, difficulties usually arise as a result of a problem coming into conflict with the situation. Typically the term situation is defined as having 36 students in the class to whom you must teach a given curriculum in a given amount of time. The problem is that two weeks into the school year, your principal walks into your class and says, 'Surprise! We've got a new kid for you: He's blind, has cerebral palsy, auditory learning disability, autistic, and we're not sure, but he might be epileptic. Have fun! Thus, the student becomes defined as the problem. And once the student is seen as the problem, the question is, "How do we fix the problem?"

By changing our definitions, an entire new set of factors comes into play. We can define the situation as having 36 students in the class - one of whom has a disability - and a given curriculum to cover in a given amount of time. The problem is that the school system has never been set up to accommodate students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Consequently, rather than focusing on the student's disability and trying to muster up all the resource people to work with the student, we become aware of how the environment around the student is handicapped and how it is equally, if not more, important to focus the resources on these less obvious handicaps. Rather than asking, "How do we fix the student?" we begin asking, "How is the school building handicapped? How can we get elevators and ramps built? But more importantly, we begin to ask, "How are the other students handicapped in terms of their attitudes towards individuals with disabilities? Can we get a speaker to come in and talk about different disabilities and society's attitude towards them?" But perhaps the most threatening question is, "How am I, the teacher, handicapped, and how does my handicap interfere with my ability to work with the student?" Perhaps the teacher appears quite comfortable with students with physical or developmental disabilities. But the sight of excessive drooling, self-stimulating behavior, or unwarranted screaming, may initiate a strong internal panic or fear of the student. There may be a sense of being repulsed by the student, or these behaviors may even cause the teacher to withdraw from, or even dislike, the student. All of these initial reactions are normal responses given that individuals with disabilities have been hidden from our view in the past, only shown in exhibitions and horror movies. Nevertheless, the strong internal reactions of panic, fear, and repulsion, are as much a handicap as the unusual behavior of the

student. Consequently, we must not only recognize the student's disability and other students' handicaps, we must also recognize our own handicap and seek out resources to help the teachers rather than concentrating only on the student with the disability.

Mr. Jim Hansen was the former Superintendent of the Hamilton Roman Catholic Separate School Board in Ontario. They have a completely integrated program. If you push him hard enough he will admit that that, occasionally, they will remove a student from the regular classroom. But, he quickly points out, we don't remove the student because of the disability, we remove that student because we as a school system haven't figured out how to support this person in the regular class. But don't worry, we'll get there. The responsibility lies with us and if something doesn't work out, it's our problem, not the student's." Jim Hansen's words raise an important question: Do we segregate because of the severity of the student's disability or do we segregate because of the severity of the school system's handicap?*

In the Best Interests of the Student

Finally, our discussion must address the most controversial aspect of integration: whether integration really does serve the best interests of the student or whether, in some cases, the student's needs are better met in a segregated setting,

If we are to assess a student's "needs," then it is essential to examine all of the needs of that student. I often view a student as a circle; one quarter of that circle has to do with the student's academic learning such as reading, writing, math, etc. The other three quarters of the circle refers to the student's social education, learning how to interact with his/her peers in an age-appropriate fashion. As we know, people learn by imitating the role models which they see.

A segregated setting, even if it has a relevant academic program, can fulfill only one quarter of the students' educational needs. Students' have little hope of learning appropriate social behavior because they are never even given the opportunity to witness age-appropriate behavior. In fact, because most students assigned to segregated classes exhibit inappropriate behavior, it is probable that the students' social behavior will regress rather than progress.

For many years I wrestled with the question of whether segregation could, in some cases, better meet the needs of a student. I read research, weighed all the arguments, but still could not reach a definite conclusion. Then, when I was 23, an incident took place that dramatically affected my beliefs about integration.

In 1981, I was employed to teach a sailing course for individuals with disabilities. In an attempt to recruit new students, we visited several segregated living accommodations for people with physical disabilities. When we entered one "facility," I recognized a young woman whom I shall refer to as Shelly. Shelly and I had come to know each other while we were in a segregated public school and had become close friends. She had cerebral palsy and was an intelligent, perceptive girl who had a dry and biting sense of humor. Together we had talked about what it was like to be handicapped, we laughed about how people reacted to us and shared many of the common ironies and frustrations.

After completing Grade Seven, I was integrated into a regular school and from there continued on into a secondary school, and then entered University. Shelly had continued her education in various segregated settings, eventually moving into a segregated residence. Shelly and I had parted when we

were both thirteen years old. I had not seen Shelly for ten years since that time. Consequently, I was overjoyed to see Shelly again. I sat down and began talking with her. In five minutes, I painfully realized that Shelly was still thirteen years old.

At that moment, the connection between segregation and death became apparent. Although Shelly was breathing and talking, and was biologically functioning, it was clear that Shelly had died at thirteen years old. Granted, she was involved with physio-therapy, speech therapy, and recreational therapy. But life doesn't consist of walking better, talking better, or being able to swim. Life consists of facing the challenges which confront you in the world beyond the facility. Moreover, life consists of having the ability to choose how one is to live their life. One only learns to face challenges by facing challenges.

Likewise, one only gains the ability to choose if one is given the opportunity to choose. In any segregated setting, life gets handed to the person on a silver platter. And the paradox is that when life gets handed to you on a silver platter, you die.

As I drove home that night one question burned in my mind: How come I'm here and Shelly's there when, ten years ago, we had equal abilities? What happened? And as I thought back to the time when I was integrated into a regular school, I remembered meeting with a Vice-Principal, Mr. Bremner, about the possibility of my entering his school. Mr. Bremner met with the Board, which was extremely apprehensive about integrating me. Following the Board meeting, Mr. Bremner met with me and said, "If you want to go for it, I'll back you up."

I never realized the implications of Mr. Bremner's words until the night I was driving home after seeing Shelly. Mr. Bremner took a chance that he did not necessarily have to take. He took a risk which, technically speaking, was politically dangerous.

And remembering Mr. Bremner's words humbled me because I began to ask myself, 'How much is my being in university a result of a decision that a Vice-Principal made ten years ago?' But that memory also scared me because I began to wonder where I might be now if I hadn't met Mr. Bremner. Would I have been like Shelly? I had Bremner and I won. Chance, rather than our abilities, had determined our futures.

But what about the new Normans and the new Shellys coming up through the system? Whom will they meet? Will they meet Bremners? More importantly, what will you, the teacher or principal, say when they meet you?

In the education business, professional distance is seen as an asset. Educators are encouraged to be objective so as to make more "realistic" and rational decisions than the parents who become "too emotionally involved" with the student. But if that same teacher or principal was the parent of that student, what would they want for their child? First, they would love their child very deeply: secondly, they would want their child to maximize his or her full potential: and thirdly, they would want their child to be able to live in society after they were gone. The most challenging question that educators have to confront is, "Are the decisions that you are making as an educator the same decisions you would want to be made if you were a parent of a student with a disability?"

If we are honest, we must admit that integration is not an educational issue: integration is a political issue. If we are to succeed at incorporating students with disabilities into the regular class it is essential that we have the moral and political support of teachers and principals.

If, however, you believe that segregation can, in some cases, better meet the best interests of the student, then I would like to offer you a few thoughts:

1. Have you ever visited a segregated school knowing the capabilities of the individual students??

2. Segregation is often justified by the need to lower academic standards so as to meet the students on their level. One must ask, however, Where will the students go after they graduate? What are we educating them FOR?"

3. Often, it is said that segregated settings permit a lower teacher-student ratio thus providing a better chance for students to develop their social skills. Yet, some research in this area (Certo & Haring, 1983) has concluded that segregated settings teach the student to interact with adults, not with peers.

I firmly believe that every teacher or principal is capable of being another Bremner. The only factors which might hinder them will be their own assumptions and their own fears. In this discussion, we have closely examined many of the assumptions which hinder our professional creativity. Let us briefly look at the issue of fear.

The process of integrating an exceptional student is often thwarted by a teacher's or principal's fear of students with disabilities. Yet, the only reason why educators are afraid of students with disabilities is because they have never been exposed to students with disabilities. The only way educators will be able to overcome their fear is if students with disabilities are integrated into the regular schools, which is unlikely, as educators are afraid of students with disabilities.

At some point, this vicious circle has to be broken by educators who admit their fear of students with disabilities yet still decide to maintain a commitment to integration. For some reason, educators have not been given permission to be afraid. Yet the only way one can overcome one's fears is to work through the fear.

The danger does not lie in being afraid. The danger arises when we hide our fear behind academic arguments. For those arguments then become myths and soon other people hide their fear behind the same myth.

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