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# BENDING BACK ON HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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“To bend back,”... [to give] careful consideration to important matters and [to be] open to the voices, opinions, and advice of others” (Valli, 1997, pp. 67-68).

I am bending back my mind (and often, it seems, my soul) to reflect on high school programs for students with learning disabilities (LD). This is a painful process. My focus on secondary issues did not start until 1980 when I received a grant from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to study forms of interagency collaboration (Single Portal Intake Project, 1980-1983). In our work related to this grant, we found that (a) interagency collaboration was logical when agencies had reason to collaborate; and (b) transition times (when a student moves from one agency to another) were one of the prime opportunities for collaboration. One of the transitions we studied in the early 1980s was the one from the public schools to adult life.

The first big question was “what happens to special education youth after they graduate from high school?” This question led to the beginning of the follow-up studies on special education graduates I have conducted, almost yearly, since 1983. These studies have produced data that have raised new questions, including what conditions could improve the post-school status of special education graduates, how can we keep more special education students in high school through graduation, and, finally, what is the purpose of public schools in a democracy? For some these questions might not seem sequential; for me they were a straight line to my present position on schooling and special education.

The current condition of schools with regard to youth with LD is worse than it was 20 years ago. This is not because many good, well-intentioned people did not spend oodles of time and energy on the problem. Nor is it because we do not have good, competent people

working on the issue today. Indeed, the quality of the people working on these issues today seems superior to those of 20 years ago. The decline in the quality of schooling stems from other factors, factors that are, in my mind, a clear indication of the failure of the P-20 public school system due to the loss of a moral compass of schooling.

The post-school outcome data on graduates with LD has remained pretty stable over the past 20 years. Males with LD who graduate from high school are employed at more or less 70-80% levels, similar to males without disabilities (Murray, Goldstein, & Edgar, 1997). Although many of these students plan to go to college, few do (about 25%), and even fewer graduate from some form of postsecondary education program (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000). Females do less well; their employment rates are 50-60%, primarily due to child bearing without partners (Murray et al., 1997). Additionally, about 40% of students with LD fail to complete schooling (Kortering & Braziel, 2002).

For both graduates and dropouts, we have virtually no information on the quality of their lives or evidence of their overall citizenship. This is, sadly, also true of young adults without disabilities. Instead, we measure employment status and college attendance as keys to post-school success, rather than the more difficult analysis of quality of life and productive citizenship. This is, I am afraid, a cop-out to the pressure of the American worldview of free market economy and consumerism as a measure of goodness. It is an embarrassment.

There are several major problems facing those of us who care about students labeled as LD. While there are technical problems that we as educators should be able to fix (definition of LD, best instructional practices for students so identified, powerful secondary programs that “hold” students and add value to their lives), these issues, while important, are not nearly as important as

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the shift of the aim of public schooling away from preparing democratic citizens and offering meaningful opportunities for all students. Such problems exceed the reach of special educators. *Today, the most important action for special educators is to become stewards of the public schools.* We must focus on the purpose of schooling and how to arrange the schooling experience for all students. In short, we must be public educators first, and special educators second.

As public educators we must address the larger societal issues of poverty, economic stratification, and racism that permeate our society and affect all children, including those with LD. We must confront those who have taken over the public school agenda, the free-market neoconservatives, who see schooling only as a means to enhancing the free-market, global economy, imperialist worldview, rather than a process of preparing democratic citizens and enhance the life chances of all our children.

### HOW WE GOT HERE

The field of special education made a fatal mistake when we accepted legal remedies for our problems. Federal and state officials develop detailed procedures for schools to follow in providing education to students with disabilities, and punishment is threatened to ensure these policies are followed, even if they result in inappropriate services for children. The people in the trenches – the teachers and principals – are not trusted to make good decisions. Certainly, prior to 1975 the lack of legal access to public schooling was a grave injustice to many children and their families. However, the special education laws have caused far more problems than they have solved.

I also have a grave distrust of the intent of the No Child Left Behind Act. Although I am a big fan of data collection and data analysis, I think a major agenda of the law, or at least in the implementation of the law, is to destroy public schooling. Unrealistic arbitrary standards have been established in an effort to “prove” public schools are failures, and thus provide more “evidence” to support the assumed imperative for school vouchers. Once the schools are branded as failures, the public will demand vouchers so they can send their children to the “best” schools available. This will result in advantaged parents adding their own money to the voucher and buying better schools. Public support for public funding of vouchers will wane, and the poor will receive inadequate funds to use for their children.

The purpose of schooling has been truncated to a sole focus on preparing workers for the global economy. We have bought into (or have been coerced into) a schooling system that only values high levels of verbal and mathematical ability. Students no longer have opportu-

nities to pursue the arts, there are no options for students who are not going on to college or highly technical vocational training schools, and there is no school talk about citizenship, or what John Dewey called civic efficiency, “all that makes one’s own experience more worthwhile to others, and all that enables one to participate more richly in the worthwhile experience of others” (Dewey, 1944, p. 120). Middle-class schools, with high test scores, continue to offer music, performing arts, and courses based on inquiry learning, whereas schools with low test scores restrict their curriculum to the test and cancel recess for more time in math instruction (McNeil, 2000; Sternberg, 2004). These changes directly affect the lives of students with LD, who miss out on experiencing joy and richness in their lives as a penalty for having difficulties in reading.

We are in a mess – a mess, I believe, that cannot be fixed by focusing on instruction or curriculum or alternative teacher certification programs, and certainly not by school vouchers. While I support federal and state laws ensuring access, the micro-management of service delivery and now the penalty for not reaching some absurd standard of achievement by all students is a deterrent to public schooling writ large and to the lives of many individual students.

So what should we do? I believe the basic notion of school reform is the problem. Reform is always a top-down process: Experts (managers) develop an idea and impose it on those who must carry it out. The Deweyan alternative articulated by John Goodlad (2004) is that of school renewal. In renewal, the on-line workers, through inquiry, examine their practices and goals and make adjustments based on such inquiry. The decision making is at the ground level, where teaching and learning takes place. This solution is similar to what Skrtic (1991) recommends as a form of adhocracy, where teachers work together in finding solutions to their own unique problems.

So, is this yet another rant-and-rave by an old, disenchanted white guy whose worldview is no longer valued? Perhaps. But it is also a plea to view schools as moral places, places where we prepare our youth to take on the role of advancing democratic ideals, to give up the notion that top-down management solves our problems, to seriously consider working to repeal ineffective laws, and to refocus our schooling on deeper and more moral premises than consumerism and the free-market economy.

Students with LD are the barometer for our schools. They are not doing well! If they are receiving an education that meets their needs, that allows them to be productive citizens, and become effective citizens, then all children probably are successful. I still hope we can alter the trajectory our society is taking. Our problems

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are not with developing more efficient reading programs or transition services or better means to include students with LD in general education classrooms. Our problem is saving the soul of public education. We cannot be deterred from that goal. If we do not have public schools in this society, what will happen to students with LD?

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