

Full inclusion and the value of students with severe disabilities

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"What are the six core values that should be taught to every American child? Respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, caring, justice and fairness, civic virtue and citizenship - all according to the Aspen Declaration on Character Education signed by the 28 leaders of US youth and Education groups..."
World Monitor, October 1992

How are these core values to be taught? Simply adding them to a curriculum will not work. These are values that are learned by being practiced. While occasional excursions to segregated settings may acquaint you with elders, or others who benefit from your gifts, the real lessons are learned from everyday experience. One of the best ways for children in regular education classes to learn these values is to include children with severe disabilities in their classrooms. The capacity for students with severe disabilities to teach these core values should be a major part of our argument for full inclusion of children with severe disabilities in our community schools. While the benefits that children with severe disabilities derive from being in regular classrooms are clear, we have not emphasized the benefits that the regular education students receive.

When school budgets are being reduced, when a good year is defined as one with no cuts, the cost of special education is often seen as a costly, legally required burden. Any additional costs required to implement full inclusion may be seen as too much money going to too few students. Acrimonious debate erupts where those concerned about the education of the regular education students often use code phrases (or simply assert) that special education students are less worthy. While this is partially a reflection of the mean spiritedness of our times it also reflects how badly we have educated the parents of regular education students about the contributions that students with severe disabilities can make.

We should ask the parents of regular education students, who are from all economic and ethnic groups, how we can teach these students the core values that these youth groups have articulated? Every parent who has had a successful full inclusion experience will be able to answer. Every parent that I have had the privilege of listening to has told me how the students in their child's class have found a friend, have discovered the rewards of giving care, and received more than they have given.

One of the powerful stories that I heard was from Andrea's mother. Andrea is an enormously charming girl who was in the fourth grade and her first year of full inclusion when I met her. Andrea lives next to her neighborhood school. When she was being bussed to a segregated school, her contact with the regular education students was

across the back fence. Andrea was teased with painful words and phrases. Andrea's mother feared that full inclusion would mean that the occasional cruelty that Andrea endured at a distance would now be constant and immediate. Since Andrea had a tendency to scream and bite her arm when she is upset, the concern went beyond a mother's worry about teasing.

The reality was the opposite of the fears. Andrea's classmates are not only accepting they are protective. To be Andrea's friend is desired and valued. When her classmates wrote about their first year with Andrea they remarked on how much she had benefitted from the experience. She yells less frequently and rarely bites her arm. She models her behavior after theirs and they have noticed. They feel more responsible. When asked to write about their experiences with Andrea, one student titled her paper "My Happiness with Andrea". Jose wrote that "Andrea makes me feel happy that we can help her out." Stephanie noted that "She only hugs you when you want one" and that "She can say words in a different way but we understand her". Stephanie closed by saying that "She makes me more caring to people and she makes me get better with other people."

This story is from Nebraska. There are similar stories wherever full inclusion occurs. The stories are told with different words, but the results are the same all over this country. Children learn the core values. These are the values that we want our children to learn and people like Andrea are the best teachers. When we look at Andrea's contribution to the education of her classmates, Andrea is seen as valued. If the parents of regular education students were informed about these contributions they would fight to get an "Andrea" to be in their child's classroom. They would see the cost as being minimal when compared with the benefit.

We need to reshape the debate over full inclusion. Parents of students with severe disabilities should be provided with information and stories on the benefits that the regular education students receive. Students with severe disabilities are some of the best teachers of these core values. They are not part of a problem, they are vital to a solution.

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