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## Preparing the Ground for What Is to Come

A Rationale for Inclusive High Schools

*Susan Shapiro-Barnard*

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"Those of us committed to education are committed not only to effecting continuities but to preparing the ground for what is to come." (Greene, 1988, p. 3)

### **Molly**

Molly is an eighth-grade student who takes all general education classes at the middle school in her town. Because she happens to have a disability, she is provided with a variety of supports. Both Molly and her parents expect that she will attend the local high school next year and continue to be supported in general education classes. However, they are worried that sharing these expectations at a school meeting will yield only a long silence. In the past, educators have supported Molly's participation in general education, but more recently they have shared concerns about the increased emphasis on content in high school classes. They do not believe that Molly will "get anything out of them." Plans are already under way for Molly to spend a portion of her day in the high school's special education room, where the curriculum is "more practical."

In almost all instances, conversations about whether high school students with disabilities should be educated in general education classes begin with the premise that they should not. Often that premise holds until people can gather together enough evidence to the contrary. So, Molly and her parents must come to the next meeting prepared to prove that she can learn in general education classes. It is hard to imagine that a student without disabilities would need to do the same.

Imagine for a moment that our judicial system presumed people guilty until proved innocent. What would happen if people were treated as criminals until ample proof of innocence was provided? There would be outrage, accusations of rights denied, lawsuits, and pleas for a more just system. Fortunately, our judicial system does not operate in this manner. It presumes people innocent until proved guilty because that is the least dangerous assumption.

Leaving the courtroom and stepping back into the classroom, imagine that our educational system presumed students unable to learn in general education classes until it was proved otherwise. What would happen if students were excluded from general education until there was ample evidence to support their inclusion? Unfortunately,

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there is no need for imagination here. This is not a hypothetical situation.

Every day, students with disabilities are excluded from the mainstream of high schools. Only 30% of students ages 12–17 attend general education classes as compared with 50% of students ages 6–11 years of age (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). The unwritten rule seems to suggest exclusion unless it is proved that inclusion is appropriate. Ironically, there is also a written rule that is more like the premise of innocent until proved guilty: the law. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 (PL 101-476) states that students with disabilities must be educated in general education classrooms with appropriate supports and services unless it can be proved that they are unable to learn in that environment with those supports and services.

What will happen when Molly and her parents attend the next meeting and present the ways in which she benefits from being educated in general education classes, provide examples of how creative supports are successfully being utilized at the middle school, and cite court decisions that strongly support inclusive education? Probably, Molly will go to high school and be supported to take general education classes, but something else will happen, too. The field of vision will be narrowed as the question of inclusive education—a question that embraces both the efficacy and the humanity of our schools—gets answered with a list of benefits for an individual student with disabilities. The issue of inclusive education is larger than that. It does make sense for students with disabilities; but then so too does it make sense for students without disabilities, entire school communities, and the future of public education.

**OVERVIEW**

This chapter provides a rationale for inclusive high schools. But inherent in this exercise—defending the reasons high schools should be inclusive—are two dangerous assumptions. The first is that it is necessary to prove that students with disabilities can and should be educated in general education classes. The second is that the merits of inclusive education can be judged solely by the benefits that accrue to students with disabilities. We have been here before and we have been here for too long—debating who can learn and who has the right to be in school and defending inclusion for only students with disabilities.

Certainly, there is work to be done to adequately ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to educational opportunities. However, the nature of that work has changed dramatically. It is no

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longer necessary to ask whether high school students with disabilities can learn in general education classes. Countless high school graduates throughout the United States have already answered this question. Instead, the task at hand is to better understand what students learn so that we can then determine how best to support them.

Although this chapter documents what students with disabilities learn in general education classes, it also advances a bolder, more encompassing thesis: that the only place where students with disabilities can learn what they need to learn to lead a productive adult life is the general education classroom and that inclusion benefits the entire school community. From this new point of view, we can begin to understand that school reform is incomplete unless it includes inclusive practices and values.<sup>1</sup>

#### **WHAT ALL STUDENTS LEARN IN HIGH SCHOOL**

Think about your own high school experience for a moment. What are the most important skills you learned? What lessons helped you become a successful adult? Perhaps you learned to manage time, organize materials, or work with other people. Perhaps you learned to read, to communicate ideas, or to locate resources for information. Or perhaps you learned to keep on going when the going got tough, to read people "between the lines," or to defend your own beliefs. Most likely, your ability to convert moles to grams and your skills with a food processor are not the basis for your success.

Many adults say that the most frequently used and highly prized skills gained during their high school years are habits of learning and working such as inquisitiveness, diligence, collaboration, and critical thinking; content area knowledge, because learning about the world helps many people to find their place in it; and basic academic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics (Sizer, 1992). Each of the aforementioned skill areas is addressed in the following discussion about what high school students with and without disabilities learn in general education classes.

#### **STUDENTS ACQUIRE HABITS OF LEARNING AND WORKING**

The ability to recite poetry from memory, recognize famous artwork, and recall the date of the French and Indian War used to be trade-

<sup>1</sup>*Inclusion* is defined as all students being educated where they would be educated if they did not have a disability (i.e., in age-appropriate general education classes in their neighborhood school), with necessary supports provided to students, educators, and families so that all can be successful.

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marks of a well-educated person. But the world has changed, and new competencies have become important. The SCANS report, *What Work Requires of Schools* (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991), identified eight categories of attributes and skills related to success:

1. Identify, organize, plan, and allocate resources
2. Work with others
3. Acquire and use information
4. Understand complex interrelationships
5. Work with a variety of technologies
6. Perform basic skills (e.g., read, write, perform arithmetic and mathematical operations, listen, and speak)
7. Perform thinking skills (e.g., think creatively, make decisions, solve problems, visualize, know how to learn, and reason)
8. Display personal qualities (e.g., responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity, and honesty) (pp. xvii–xviii)

In response to these newly identified competencies, many schools are realigning their graduation outcomes with the skills necessary for success in the world. For example, one of the guiding principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, a collection of high schools committed to meaningful school reform, is depth over breadth (Sizer, 1992). A school committed to this principle would not require its students to learn the facts about all past wars. Instead, a teacher might pose a series of questions for consideration: How do wars start? How do they end? When is war just? What is worth dying for? Students would then be required to synthesize information about past armed conflicts to develop a deeper understanding of war. This approach, reflecting new educational priorities, emphasizes thinking skills, not memorization (C. Fisher, personal communication, January 1997).

Talk like this makes lots of people nervous, especially people who contend that a well-educated person is one who has obtained a common body of knowledge that has been compiled and agreed on by other well-educated people. There is no need to worry, however. No student would want to come to school if the agenda for 12 years consisted of only the skills identified in the SCANS report (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). It would be dreadfully boring to work with others to think, organize, and understand the relationships between nothing. Skills will always be best taught through content.

Depending on whether the context is special education or general education, the word *skills* can refer to two very different sets of abilities. Students with disabilities have been learning how to water plants, use the bathroom, memorize definitions, and write a check for what feels like forever in special education classrooms. The perception accompanying this learning is that the most important skills for stu-

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dents with disabilities to gain are the skills that students without disabilities already possess. These intentions are good, but the outcomes are not. Take, for example, the students who, in the name of gaining functional skills, are never taught to read (Koppenhaver, Coleman, Kalman, & Yoder, 1991). (Is there a more functional skill than literacy?) This instructional emphasis fuels the creation of separate curricula and classrooms and ultimately a readiness checklist for a student's inclusion into general education. It should come as no surprise that some students are never included.

Of course, learning to balance a checkbook and use a fork and knife are important. But these skills are not more important than learning how to work with people, what to do to stay motivated, or when to ask a question. That is where our professional thinking gets muddled as educators feel compelled to choose between one set of skills and the other when planning a student's education. This should not be the case. Having a disability should not mean needing to choose between thinking about manners and learning to think, working on saying hello and working with classmates, or learning to use a knife and learning to use a word processor. When mastering a traditional list of functional skills is deemed more important than developing effective habits for learning and working, students with disabilities are set up to fail. Research and testimony say that *a*, *b*, and *c* are key ingredients for success; but students with disabilities are being taught *x*, *y*, and *z*.

**STUDENTS LEARN CONTENT AREA KNOWLEDGE**

Certainly there is nothing wrong—and lots right—with gaining knowledge for its own sake. Information about science, literature, history, business, health, and the fine arts is important. It is exciting, invigorating, and expansive—the very stuff of learning. Knowledge helps students identify areas of interest that may lead to future hobbies or provide career direction. It is what people think about, talk about, and write about. Therefore, it is important that schools do not abandon teaching knowledge for its own sake as they redefine learning for the 21st century.

However, the notion of getting through the curriculum has become anachronistic as the amount of information in the world has begun to grow faster than people can learn and absorb it. Perhaps there was a time when students could be taught all that was known about science, but that era is long past (Wiggins, 1989). Thus, educators recognize that teaching students how to gain knowledge by supporting their efforts to develop effective personal habits for lifelong

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learning is essential. Knowledge is important for its own sake, absolutely. It would be a sad day if people stopped studying insects, other cultures, and economic principles. But knowledge also holds the attention of students so that habits of learning and working can be acquired. It serves as both a vehicle for learning and a destination.

Recognizing the dual purpose of learning content area knowledge—for its own sake and for the sake of learning how to learn—is important especially as it pertains to students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are often denied access to general education classes on the basis that they will be unable to learn the content being taught. Think back to Molly's team for a moment. Many of the educators were concerned that the general education curriculum would not be meaningful for her, so a special education class was recommended.

Ironically, the reasons for suggesting a special education class—Molly's alleged need for more practical learning—strongly justify Molly's taking general education classes. Like all students, Molly needs to learn to work independently and with her peers, to manage time and materials, to contribute thoughts and hear the thoughts of others, and to solve problems and rethink solutions—in short, to function in the real world. So, if it is true that the process of learning provides all students with lifelong skills for working and learning, then the argument for excluding Molly on the basis that she needs a more practical curricular emphasis proves obsolete. The content area knowledge taught in heterogeneously grouped general education classrooms supports all students to acquire important habits of working and learning. The very stuff that Molly needs.

Is this the only reason Molly should be included in general education classes? Is it only the acquisition of skills that warrants the learning of knowledge for students with disabilities? Goodlad and Oakes (1988) challenged educators: "We must rid ourselves of the dangerous notion that individual differences, such as in interests and rate of learning, call for substantially differentiated curriculums" (p. 19). Like others in the field who criticize the practices of ability grouping and tracking (e.g., Wheelock, 1992), Goodlad and Oakes argued that our schools and the students within them are too often organized based on the misconceptions that educators hold about learning and who can do it. On making knowledge accessible for all students, Goodlad and Oakes stated,

It is helpful for both the public and the professionals to understand that the general laws of the land imply equal access not only to schools but to the education schools are supposed to provide. Further, state documents on schooling almost always include the concept of equity in some form and

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admonish school boards and educators . . . to eschew practices that discriminate against students because of their race, ethnicity, or religion. (1988, p. 20)

Disability must be added this list. The inextricable linking of a student's disability with the student's access to knowledge is unsound educational practice. All students have the right to attain knowledge. Even those who do not yet have a reliable mode of communication. Even those whose behavior greatly challenges us on a daily basis. Even those who have been labeled as having mental retardation. Not because research has proved that all students can learn all things, but because research has not proved that all students cannot. To assume that someone cannot learn something is to assume that there is no other way to teach it. It suggests a false precision for evaluating the knowledge and skills that a student has gained. It assumes that there is an accurate tool for measuring human growth, which of course there is not. An English teacher once commented,

When I first learned that Lars would be in my sports literature class, I was nervous. I didn't know what to expect from him, nor did I know how to get this information. He had a little board that he used to communicate. At first I felt he would be better off in a resource room learning how to use that board than he would be in my class reading and writing about football. He never seemed to be listening or interested in our class discussions. But one day Lars starting pointing to letters on the board. Apparently, he is a big fan of the Patriots.

This story exemplifies a decision-making model called "the criterion of the least dangerous assumption" (Donnellan, 1984, p. 141). The theory underlying this model is that, in the absence of reliable and valid data about students' capabilities, the least dangerous assumption should be made. In other words, the assumption that should be made is the one that will do the least amount of harm, should it later be realized that the assumption was wrong.

A case in point related to the gaining of knowledge: It is sometimes difficult to determine whether a student with disabilities is actually learning content area knowledge. Therefore, in the absence of reliable and valid data, an assumption must be made. There are two options. First, it can be assumed that a student cannot learn knowledge, and subsequent decisions about course selection and learning priorities can be based on this assumption. But what if the assumption proves to be incorrect? What if the student does not enroll in academic classes, because it is assumed that he or she is unable to learn that kind of knowledge, and then it is discovered at some time in the future that the student could have learned this information? What has been



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lost? Most people answer, "The student's education," "The opportunity to go to college," or "12 years." Fortunately, there is another option. Educators can assume that a student can learn content area knowledge and therefore support the student to do so. What is lost if this assumption proves to be incorrect? The answer most people give is, "Nothing."

That is what makes the assumption of competence less dangerous than the assumption of inability. That is why all students must be included and supported to learn. However, there are still those who answer that time, money, and effort are lost in the second scenario and that these precious resources could have been better spent educating another student. There is nothing about this thinking that is not terrifying. And there is no sentiment further from the foundations of public education. Scores of students pass through the doors of public schools every day. Some leave school and go to work in movie theaters. Others cure diseases. A few eventually commit crimes. What are the criteria for resources being well spent? Are time and money wasted when high school graduates end up in jail? When high school graduates do not go on to college? When high school graduates do not vote?

People do not enter the field of education for the school lunches. People become teachers because they care about students and learning and because they are able and willing to believe in young people's potential. To teach is to take a leap of faith—sometimes small, sometimes not so small—and to believe that all students can learn and are therefore worthy of being taught. There is no way to predict the outcomes of education for any student. (If there were a way, would we use it?)

Students with disabilities have spent years trapped in special education classes, remedial classes, and/or lower-level general education classes where functional curricular goals (e.g., hand washing) have been prioritized to the exclusion, in some cases, of other learning. This is inappropriate. Students with disabilities have the right to learn meaningful functional skills as well as gain knowledge, to utilize that knowledge to gain skills for learning and working, and, as discussed in the following section, to learn basic academics. Ability grouping and tracking have harmed students with disabilities greatly because their right to gain this wide variety of skills—skills that are best acquired in general education classes—has been put on hold, at least until the goals listed on the individualized education program are mastered.

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**STUDENTS LEARN BASIC ACADEMIC SKILLS****Frank**

Frank is a 52-year-old man who has a lot of interests and a lot of labels. He lives alone in an apartment but receives numerous supports and services to assist him with the demands of daily living. Last month a worker from an adult services agency taught him how to use the microwave oven in his kitchen. Prior to that, he learned to program his videocassette recorder. Frank was asked what he would like to learn next. His answer, without any hesitation, was, "I want to learn to read."

Literacy is a national goal for all Americans. The U.S. educational agenda set forth in Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 (PL 103-227), states that, by 2000, "every adult American will be literate." Most people learn to read in school. Frank attended a school. Why didn't he learn to read? To begin with, no one expected him to read. In addition, no other students at his school were reading.

In a keynote address at the 1996 National Equity and Excellence Conference, Deborah Meier, former principal of Central Park East Secondary School in New York City and author of *The Power of Their Ideas* (1995), described her experience of learning how to drive a car. She explained that, like many children, she spent endless childhood hours in the family car, where she had the opportunity to watch her parents driving. Although she was not yet old enough to drive, there was always the expectation that she would someday do so. No one doubted that. Meier suggested that these two conditions—the opportunity to watch an expert and high expectations—are two conditions necessary for learning (Meier, 1996).

Meier also talked about baseball. As a child, she attended many professional games, and, although she had countless opportunities to watch the experts, she never learned to play baseball. Why? She argued that, unlike the expectations that were held for her brother, no one expected that she would ever play. The first condition for learning was met, but not the second. Perhaps the reason Meier did not learn to play baseball is the same reason some students with disabilities do not learn in general education classes. The models are in place, but the expectations for learning still tend to remain low. Once again, the first condition for learning is met, but the second is not.

When students with disabilities are educated in special education classes, both conditions for learning are usually absent because there are few experts to watch and learn from, and expectations for learning

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are low or nonexistent. If literacy skills are addressed at all, then there is usually only a sincere hope, not a solid expectation, that students will someday be able to read well. Hence Frank's dilemma.

Reflecting on the way in which people learn to read, Smith wrote,

That we learn from the company that we keep is common everyday wisdom. Every parent knows that children learn to talk exactly like their friends. They also learn to dress and behave and perceive the world in exactly the same way their friends do. It is impossible to prevent them from doing so. No matter how much of their day children hear their parents or their teachers talking, they will not learn to talk as their parents or their teachers talk—at least not as long as they see themselves as being more like their friends than like their parents or teachers. . . . I have characterized this coming to be like the company we keep as "joining the club." Children learn to talk by their membership in the "spoken language clubs" made up of the people they will come to talk like: first family, then friends. And children learn to read and write if they join the "literacy club," literally identifying themselves with people who read and write. (1992, p. 434)

Students learn basic academic skills when they are expected to do so, when there are adequate models around them, and when necessary supports and modifications are in place. These factors are not present in the special education classroom.

#### **HOW INCLUSION BENEFITS ENTIRE SCHOOL COMMUNITIES**

To say that inclusive education benefits school communities—by improving the lives of students with disabilities, more efficiently allocating resources to support a greater number of learners, and merging the systems of special education and general education—would seem to state the obvious. Heaps of evidence and endless examples of these outcomes can be found in schools throughout the United States. To say, however, that inclusive education benefits school communities by creating a culture where belonging is a necessary condition for quality education does not seem to state the obvious, though increasingly it is recognized as stating the truth (C.M. Jorgensen, personal communication, June 1994; Kunc, 1992).

#### **Inclusion Is Not Merely an Instructional Practice**

Once upon a time, there was a high school where all students were included and school reform and restructuring efforts were well under way. But students were mean to one another. They came to school afraid of being picked on for their differences. It was a high school that carefully crafted structures, schedules,

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and assignments but forgot about climate. All students were educated together, more because they were organized that way and less as a result of diversity being valued.

This story is a reminder that inclusive learning communities are not created simply by employing state-of-the-art instructional practices. Attention to the culture of the learning community is equally important because innovative structures and strategies are greatly discounted in an atmosphere that continues to reward sameness and conformity. In an atmosphere that continues to see difference as a liability. In an atmosphere that continues to believe only some people are different. For many years, students with and without disabilities have been sorted based on personal characteristics—some that are valued in school (e.g., having strong linguistic intelligence) (Gardner, 1983) and others that are not (e.g., having Down syndrome). Inclusive schools undo these artificial divisions by embedding into the school culture a value that “no one is perfect, but everyone is okay” (Dillon et al., 1993, p. 29).

Schools looking toward the future do not need educators who simply agree that diversity is a good thing, because these educators will organize disability awareness weeks and contain diversity in curricular units. Schools need educators who value diversity as a result of their own life experience, who understand that “diversity is in everyone’s best interest” (N. Kunc, personal communication, November 1996).

Perhaps inclusion will continue to be seen as just another educational philosophy until those who do not yet embrace it are themselves discriminated against. Perhaps it is only at this point that inclusion moves out of the educational realm and into the realm of social justice. Perhaps I do not care if you are devalued for communicating with a computer until I am devalued because I am female. Or gay. Or old. Or of Asian descent. Or overweight. Or simply not like you.

Inclusive education benefits school communities by bringing attention to the issue of belonging and by reminding us that the capacity of schools to host meaningful learning opportunities parallels our attention to this matter. Even if there were no students with disabilities, the culturing of inclusive schools would still be important because the entrance of students with disabilities into general education classes does not signify the presence of diversity in the school; it recognizes and affirms the diversity that has always existed. As a result, people are less bound by false ideals of normalcy, are less fearful of expressing their own uniqueness, and thus are more able to learn.

## CONCLUSIONS

Have you ever walked into a McDonald's restaurant and asked for a grilled cheese sandwich? They will tell you it's not on the menu. If you tell them that what you really want is just a piece of cheese melted on a bun, they will say they are sorry, but they cannot do that. You offer to buy a cheeseburger but ask them to hold the burger, and they will say okay but look very nervous.

Change is hard. Changing schools is harder. When change hovers nearby, the structures and systems in schools that are most protected are usually those most in need of alteration—the issues we gloss over with rhetoric. We fly banners from the flagpole that invite celebrations of diversity. We announce to parents that we believe all students have unique gifts and talents. Then we walk back into the classroom and prepare students to take standardized achievement tests so that we can see which kids have been filled up with the most information.

Struggles in education are not limited to disability-related initiatives. We need to do more than repair special education; we need to transform general education. History reminds us that we have changed schools before and that we will change them again, but this time there is a notable difference. We are restructuring education for all students, not just most of them, and our efforts are proving successful.

This chapter has described both the learning that occurs in general education classes and the importance of that learning for all students, even those with long labels and thick student files. It has proposed that inclusive education benefits entire school communities, not only students with disabilities, most significantly through the creation of a school culture that values diversity. And though the work of building inclusive high schools is well under way, it is far from completed. Molly is still a high school student with a disability who is included. Can she someday be just a high school student?

In the chapters that follow, strategies for making an inclusive vision a reality are shared, including changing the role of special educators, developing inclusive curriculum, creating an environment in which social relationships can flourish, embedding self-determination into the general education curriculum, abolishing separate community-based instruction for students with disabilities in favor of community learning experiences for all students, and establishing an inclusive graduation planning system.

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