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Abstract

These notes were taken by a participant at a seminar by Bruce Uditsky, an educator who has worked extensively with families, individuals with disability and organisations. She looks particularly at the attitudes of society and that inclusive schooling should merely be a natural consequence of society's attitude.

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INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING - EDUCATIONAL OR SOCIETAL ISSUE

By Patricia Mckenzie

I recently attended a seminar given by Bruce Uditsky, a Canadian educator advocating inclusive schooling - that is, the total integration of children with all disabilities into mainstream classes. I believe that the ideas he expounded should be considered by the parents of each child with a disability, and I have therefore attempted to summarize them.

The question of whether children with disabilities should be educated in mainstream classes, in special classes within mainstream schools or in special schools has been addressed in Australia as an educational issue. Bruce Uditsky contends that it is, in fact, a societal issue.

Essentially, Bruce Uditsky makes two vital points, which I will attempt to adapt for the Australian position.

1. It is, we would like to think, axiomatic that all Australians are of equal value. The notion of the classless society is the very basis on which Australia is founded and Australians are proud of their philosophy of giving everyone a "fair go". History, however, has shown that not all classes of society have been equally valued. It is not so long ago that assumptions were made about the abilities and role of women which led to them being offered limited education and career choices. Today, it would be laughable to suggest that young women should be segregated into separate classes to take, for example, home economics courses in schools while their male counterparts studied science and other more academic subjects, on the basis that they were not capable of understanding such subjects and would not need them to fulfill the role of wife and mother society assigned to them. Similarly, assumptions are made about the abilities and role of children with disabilities. As a result, the education offered to them limits their potential and career choices. If it is true that all people are inherently and equally valued, then it must follow that all are entitled to the same educational and career opportunities. Therefore, all children would automatically be included in the education offered in the local school environment.

2. Society is a whole entity, and each part benefits from the existence of the others.

Do we want a society where we segregate out certain sections, or do we want a society where we accept ourselves with all of our faults and various parts and benefit from that whole. People seem able to accept that the environment must be viewed as a whole, and that we cannot effectively segregate and damage some parts of it without affecting the whole. So too with society, we need to accept that there are imperfections in all of us, and that by segregating people with a disability we are in fact damaging the fabric of society as a whole. If we accept that principle, then it would again follow that all children, irrespective of their disabilities would be accepted into the neighbourhood schools and educated along with their peers. Australian society has segregated people with disabilities, in education, career and lifestyle, and this can only be to the detriment of society as a whole.

Bruce Uditsky argues that inclusive schooling, that is the full inclusion of children with any disability into the mainstream classroom, is in fact a right of each individual - or, as he calls it, a moral imperative. If we accept that premise, then we must consider the arguments presented in favour of segregated schooling to determine whether they are, in fact, valid.

1. Segregated education provides a better education for children with a disability.

Bruce Uditsky argues that there is no educational basis for segregated education. Segregated education was initiated historically because children with a disability were denied access to mainstream schools, and therefore in order to obtain an education for their children, the parents established special schools. There is no reason why children with disabilities cannot be educated within the normal classroom, with a modified syllabus and any necessary aides. In the Canadian experience, it has been the special educators who have most resisted inclusive schooling, because an industry now exists to support segregated schooling. However, even the most disabled of children have been successfully integrated into the school system.

2. Segregated schooling is necessary to teach life skills.

Certainly, inclusive schooling will not teach students with a disability the life skills taught in special schools. However, since the ultimate goal of life skills teaching is to enable the student to integrate as an adult into society, it is ludicrous to remove students from society in order to teach them to integrate at a later stage. Children will learn behaviour and language from other children, two of the most important lifestyle skills. If we segregate a child with behaviour and communication problems into a class with other children with various other behavioural and communication problems, naturally that child will copy the other children.

Rather than learn appropriate behaviour, the child will learn new and exciting methods of inappropriate behaviour.

Bruce makes the point that appropriate behaviour can be a difficult thing to teach. All adults must go through the stage of being a teenager in order to reach adulthood. Teenagers behaviour is usually considered by their parents to be totally inappropriate. However, we do not allow our children with disabilities the opportunity to be teenagers. In fact, the only place where you can learn to be a teenager is by "hanging out" with other teenagers. Bruce argues that there is a whole generation of adults with disabilities who have grown up without being teenagers.

3. Inclusive schooling will have a detrimental effect on the other children in the class.

If we accept the moral imperative of inclusive schooling, then this should not be an issue. It effectively says that the other children in the class are more important, more valued people, than the child with the disability. However, since the parents of other children will inevitably be concerned, the Canadian experience has been that there is no detrimental effect, and that in most cases there has been a very positive effect, since those students learn the value of every human being.

4. Segregated schooling and lifestyle provides the person with a disability with security.

In fact, segregation provides the environment in which abuse can most easily take place. We only have to look at the Chelmsford and Ward 12 situations in order to see what lack of security can arise from segregation. Segregation leads to devaluation, and then into a more conducive environment for abuse.

5. A child with a disability will have no friends in an inclusive schooling situation.

The Canadian experience has shown that students with a disability have formed friendships with other children in the mainstream classes. Bruce Uditsky suggests that perhaps we as parents are guilty of believing that no one other than ourselves could love our children. In Canada, the school peers have been the least of the problems.

6. Inclusive schooling is too expensive.

We would like to think that, if the argument that society must accept inclusive schooling as the morally correct approach to the education of all is accepted, then the question of funds should not arise. The student with a disability should not be disadvantaged simply because it is expensive to provide inclusive schooling.

However, since this is unlikely to convince the school bureaucracies, Bruce Uditsky suggests that the funds pay for inclusive schooling would come from the dismantling of the segregated schooling infrastructure - the huge expenses involved in testing students to determine who gets education, the money invested in buildings for special schools etc. Remember, intellectually gifted children can be highly disruptive and require special education, but no school turns away such a child for lack of money.

Comment:

As I listened to Bruce speak, I thought - yes, children with Down Syndrome should be offered inclusive schooling. When he extended the concept to children with autism and cerebral palsy and multiple severe handicaps, I found the idea confronting. Why? Because, due to my exposure to people with Down Syndrome, I have no trouble in envisioning them in any situation. Since I do not have the same exposure to people with other disabilities, I find the idea of including them in the classroom with my children without any disability confronting.

When I thought about my reaction, it proved to me the validity of Bruce's premise. We will all benefit from the inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of our lives. There will be no need for us to avert our eyes and minds from people with disabilities, as I vividly remember doing during my first pregnancy. Instead, inclusion will lead to familiarity, and with familiarity, we will cease to fear the unknown and learn to equally value people with disabilities, rather than merely paying lip service to equality. This is an issue of the attitude of society. If society takes the attitude that all of its members are inherently and equally valued, and therefore should be included in all aspects of societal life, then inclusive schooling will no longer be an issue, but merely the natural consequence of the society's attitude.