

Time to reject ‘special needs’
***R.L. Jackson 2016.**

When we see discussions about people with disabilities, we almost always hear the words ‘special needs’. However, when I ask what is the special need, I get answers like ‘He needs a wheelchair and that is special as others don’t need one’. “She needs speech therapy as she cannot talk, and this is special as others of her age can talk”.

However a moment’s reflection shows that this is nonsense. For the person who can’t walk, the need is to *be mobile*, and the wheelchair is one way of meeting that need. However the need could also be met by an electric tricycle, wheelbarrow or by being carried (as occurs in third world countries). For the girl who doesn’t talk, the need is to *communicate*, and this need could be met by technology such as an ipad, communication by hands and fingers, or being placed in a stimulating environment where there are numerous competent models such as the regular classroom.

This could be seen to be spitting hairs, but the distinction becomes life defining for many people with a disability, particularly children. When we define a child as having ‘special needs’, it becomes immediately obvious that they will need ‘special approaches’ to properly address these ‘special needs’. In fact to do this best we really need special places called ‘special schools’ and clearly the staff will need to have ‘training in special needs’. Because of the huge difficulty working with such ‘special needs’ those poor teachers will clearly need to have ‘special needs assistants’ in the classroom as well as ‘special needs therapists’, and of course the children will need to have a special needs curriculum in order to properly address their ‘special needs’. They are on a trajectory for a life apart.

The idea of children with such ‘special needs’ being in the mainstream classroom would of course not be supported as the regular teachers have not been given the ‘essential skills’ to cope with these ‘special needs’. If some parents were so unwise as to insist on their children receiving a mainstream education, the teacher will need to import lots of ‘special needs techniques’ to cope with these children. They will need a separate special curriculum that would have to be taught by a specially trained aide sitting next to them. They clearly couldn’t cope with the regular classroom all day so they will need to be withdrawn for some specialised teaching. In the playground they will need to wear a fluorescent vest so everyone will know where they are...

Reflect for a moment if we did the same thing for some other human difference – say skin colour or racial identity. “All Jewish children have special needs so we will require special Jewish schools with a special needs curriculum, taught by specially trained teachers”. “If any Jewish child does attend a mainstream school, they will have to sit on a special mat in the classroom and wear a special vest when they go out into the playground”.

The reality is that we have known for over 5 decades that children with a disability do better academically and socially if they are included in the mainstream classroom. The more they are included, the better they do. If they are segregated, they lose percentile ranks in comparison to those included. It is clear that the whole notion of ‘special needs’ is doing great damage to large numbers of children, and depriving other children of the opportunity to grow up with others less fortunate than them.

A little trick learned from a parent: “Every time you hear the word ‘special’, substitute ‘Martian’. Martian needs children require a Martian school with Martian needs trained staff and a Martian curriculum in order to teach them how to be a Martian.” Then it will start to make sense.

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