

CLASSIC TASH ARTICLE I

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Toward the realization of the least restrictive educational environments for severely handicapped students

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It is now the responsibility of educators to provide for the education of severely handicapped students in what has been referred to as "the least restrictive educational environment." This paper discusses least restrictive educational environments in relation to segregation versus integration, interactions with nonhandicapped age peers, the ratio between handicapped and nonhandicapped students, chronologically age-appropriate educational environments, architectural barriers and prosthetized environments, "normal" organization of the school day, equal access to school facilities and resources, transportation, and ancillary services. The fundamental premise offered here is that educational service delivery models for severely handicapped students must closely approximate the best educational service delivery models used for nonhandicapped students.

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There are now thousands of severely handicapped students in this nation who live with their nonhandicapped parents, play with nonhandicapped siblings and nonhandicapped friends in their neighborhoods, wait in the waiting rooms of physicians along with nonhandicapped citizens, attend church with nonhandicapped worshippers, and lie in the sand next to nonhandicapped bathers. However, these same handicapped individuals are segregated from nonhandicapped citizens in what is presumably the major educational force in the life of any child—THE SCHOOL. Stated another way, there are thousands of severely handicapped stu-

dents in this country who are systematically segregated from nonhandicapped citizens *only during school hours*.

With the passage of Public Law 94-142, as well as many state laws, and as a result of many judicial and educational actions, it is now the responsibility of educators in the United States to provide for the educational development of severely handicapped students in the "least restrictive educational environment." The position offered here is that not only do severely handicapped citizens have the right to be participating members of heterogeneous communities, but that such participation is inherently good, and that it is now feasible to arrange educational service delivery systems in ways that maximize the probability of such participation. The only way that severely handicapped and nonhandicapped citizens will learn to live with, and learn from, each other as fully participating members of complex, adult, heterogeneous communities is through long-term interaction during the educational years.¹ Therefore, it is proposed that severely handicapped students be educated with nonhandicapped students, in settings that encourage and support extensive long-term interaction and that only such settings be considered "least restrictive." Settings that might support constructive interaction between severely handicapped students and nonhandicapped students and other citizens include at least self-contained classes for severely handicapped students in regular school buildings, regular classes, nonclassroom but school-related activities both on and off school grounds, and nonschool settings and activities involving nonhandicapped people of all ages and levels of function.

SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS

Currently, most severely handicapped students in the United States are receiving services in one of the following educational settings:

1. Self-contained schools on the grounds of residential facilities (institutions);
2. Self-contained private schools;
3. Self-contained public schools;
4. Self-contained units or pods within public elementary schools;
5. Self-contained classes within regular schools;
6. Regular classes within regular schools.

While there may appear to be a continuum of service delivery options available, the predominant models currently in use are self-contained schools on the grounds of residential facilities and self-contained private and public schools (Kenowitz, Zweibel, & Edgar, in press).

Serving severely handicapped students educationally on the grounds of institutions and in self-contained schools is considered unacceptable when held up against the interpretations of the least restrictive educational environment offered here. Providing educational services in residential facilities is unacceptable if only

¹The phrase "educational years," is used to refer to the period from birth through age 25. The authors realize, of course, that most people continue to learn throughout their lives.

because the overwhelming majority of nonhandicapped students do not go to school at home. Since the place of residence and the place of schooling are separated for most nonhandicapped students, it is unduly restrictive not to separate them for severely handicapped students. Providing educational services in self-contained private or public schools, or in other segregated settings also results in more restrictive educational environments than are otherwise available. Placements that do comply with the mandate for least restrictive environments include specifically self-contained classrooms within regular schools and regular classes within regular schools.

The concept of "least restrictive educational environment" will be discussed in schools, in homes, in seminar rooms, and in the courts of this country for some time to come. Undoubtedly, many persons, functioning from many different perspectives, all sincerely concerned with the maximal development of all children, will advocate diametrically opposed positions on both current and evolving dimensions of the concept "least restrictive educational environment." The fundamental assertion here is that the *educational service delivery models used for severely handicapped students must closely approximate the best available educational service delivery models used for nonhandicapped students*. Certainly each student, regardless of functioning level, needs individualized educational attention and planning. However, any adjustment made in the educational plan for a child because of a handicap must be scrutinized carefully to minimize the possibility that such a plan might encourage, rather than reduce, developmental discrepancies between that child and nonhandicapped students. Thus, models for providing education to the severely handicapped should not differ from models for providing similar services to nonhandicapped students. As educators, we should choose to err on the side of desegregation. We should assume that it is better for severely handicapped students to be exposed to, to be involved with, and to be treated as nonhandicapped students as much as possible, than to deliver specialized educational services which could increase the discrepancies between handicapped and the nonhandicapped.

Service delivery models for all students should be evaluated against the objective of facilitating heterogeneous interactions between students of all levels of functioning. Departures from this standard should be justified *prior* to implementation. Unfortunately, present practice is often to justify departures from this standard *after* they are in effect and *after* harm has been done. Most professionals assume that severely handicapped students receive better educational services if they are segregated, and attempts to develop integrated educational services are resisted vehemently.

Certainly exceptional children need modified instructional technologies, specialized services, prosthesized environments, and other accommodations to approximate or realize maximal development (Barrett, in press). However, these services should be delivered in as normal a fashion as possible. When analyzing service delivery models for severely handicapped students provided in this manner?" The burden of proof should rest with those who support segregated or a typical service delivery models, not with those who advocate integrated or typical service delivery models.

The service delivery models currently in use for severely handicapped students

vary along many dimensions. We will discuss ten of these dimensions and the way they relate to the concept "least restrictive educational environment." Although the longitudinal empirical effects of service delivery decisions are regrettably not currently available, it should not obstruct progress toward establishing the most desirable educational environments for severely handicapped students.

1. Segregation versus Integration

Long-term, heterogeneous interactions between severely handicapped and nonhandicapped students facilitate the development of the skills, attitudes, and values that will prepare both groups to be sharing, participating, contributing members of complex, postschool communities. Stated another way, separate education is *not* equal education.

Segregated service delivery models have at least the following disadvantages:

1. Exposure to nonhandicapped student models is absent or minimal;
2. Severely handicapped students tend to learn "handicapped" skills, attitudes, and values;
3. Teachers tend to strive for the resolution of handicapping problems at the expense of developing functional community-referenced skills;
4. Most comparisons between students are made in relation to degrees of handicap rather than to the criteria of nonhandicapped performance;
5. Lack of exposure to severely handicapped students limits the probability that the skills, attitudes, and values of *nonhandicapped* students will become more constructive, tolerant, and appropriate.

Certainly, it is possible that interaction may not take place even if severely handicapped students are in the physical presence of nonhandicapped students. However, unless severely handicapped and nonhandicapped students occupy the same physical space, interaction is impossible. Furthermore, the presumption that placement in a self-contained public school is acceptable because it is less restrictive than placement in an institution school is also untenable. Less restrictive alternatives are immediately available.

2. Interactions with Nonhandicapped Age Peers

In the future, severely handicapped students, upon the completion of formal schooling, will live in public, minimally segregated, heterogeneous communities, where they will constantly interact with nonhandicapped citizens. Thus, the educational experience should be representative and help prepare both severely handicapped students and nonhandicapped students to function adaptively in integrated communities.

Severely handicapped students, regardless of their level of functioning, should interact in educational settings as much as possible with nonhandicapped age peers and with other nonhandicapped citizens. Certainly there are educational activities in which severely handicapped students and nonhandicapped students might not be expected to interact (e.g., calculus, Latin). However, there are *many* educational activities in which severely handicapped and nonhandicapped students can interact with resulting educational benefit to all.

3. The Ratio Between Handicapped and Nonhandicapped Students

Generally, students who are referred to as severely handicapped represent less than 2% of the population of any given chronological age. Therefore, in most educational settings severely handicapped students should represent only 2% of the student population. That is, the distribution of developmental functioning levels within school activities and settings should be comparable to the distribution that might be found in desegregated, heterogeneous, postschool communities.

4. Chronological Age-Appropriate Educational Environments

Severely handicapped students should interact with nonhandicapped students of the same, or approximately the same, chronological ages throughout their education. Placing secondary aged/young adult severely handicapped students in educational settings where there are no nonhandicapped students of the same age is not acceptable. For example, a wing serving severely handicapped students from ages 5 to 25 attached to an elementary school serving nonhandicapped students from ages 5 to 12 does not provide age-appropriate peers for the severely handicapped students over age 12. It is therefore unduly restrictive.

5. Architectural Barriers and Prosthetized Environments

It is only a matter of time before *all* public facilities will be adapted to meet the architectural and other physical needs of *all* handicapped citizens. Thus, the rationale for placing students in self-contained schools because they presumably have barrier-free environments is unacceptable. The acceptable alternative is to make all environments, and consequently all schools, barrier-free.

It should, however, be noted that millions of dollars are currently being spent in constructing specialized facilities for severely handicapped students. In addition, millions of dollars are being spent to adapt existing schools to meet the presumed needs of severely handicapped students. In the opinion of the authors, new specialized facilities should not be constructed; and before massive amounts of monies are spent on architectural adaptation, sustained efforts should be expended in teaching severely handicapped students to adapt to existing environments. It has been our experience that by teaching severely handicapped students to transcend or adapt to presumed architectural barriers, much money can be saved and more independent performance fostered.

6. A Functional and Naturalized Curriculum

Severely handicapped students have the right to, and the need for, a longitudinal curriculum that prepares them to function as independently as possible in desegregated, postschool, social, vocational, recreational, and domestic environments. Components of curricula that do not contribute to the development of vital independent functioning skills should be left out. At the same time, the mental age-norm view of curriculum articulation must be expanded to encompass criterion-referenced objectives. In the past the judgment that a particular student is 18 years old chronologically but functioning at the developmental level of a 3-year-old has, unfortunately, encouraged teachers to use content and objectives that might be appropriate for a child who is chronologically 3 years old. This logic often systemati-

cally prevents severely handicapped students from developing many functional skills that are vitally needed in postschool and nonschool settings. Thus, rather than, or in addition to, comparing severely handicapped students with younger age peers, it is often more beneficial to compare present repertoires with the skills necessary to function independently in a variety of environments.

7. "Normal" Organization of the School Day

The length and organization of the school day for severely handicapped students should approximate that of their non- or less-handicapped age peers. If nonhandicapped students attend school from 8:30 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. 5 days per week, then so should severely handicapped students. An arrangement in which handicapped students arrive at school late and depart early just because it is convenient for social, financial, administrative, or logistical reasons is untenable. Similarly, the organization of the school day should be patterned after the system in effect for nonhandicapped students. If classrooms attended by nonhandicapped students include team-teaching activities and relevant support staff, then services to a classroom attended by severely handicapped students should also. Since nonhandicapped high school students typically travel through the school building taking classes in different settings, the educational environment of severely handicapped students must be considered restrictive unless they have similar opportunities to move through the school.

8. Equal Access to School Facilities and Resources

Severely handicapped students should have access to the complement of facilities available in the total school settings. For example, if nonhandicapped students hang their coats in hall lockers and use the gym, lunchroom, and auditorium, severely handicapped students should not be required to hang their coats on hooks in classrooms or be denied heterogeneous access to other school facilities.

9. Transportation

To the maximum extent possible, the amount of time devoted to transportation and the kind of transportation used by severely handicapped students should approximate the time devoted to transportation and the kind of transportation used by nonhandicapped age peers. If nonhandicapped students are bussed to school, severely handicapped age peers should ride those same buses. It is both economically and educationally efficient as well as normalizing to desegregate students enroute to and from school as well as when they reach school.

10. Ancillary Services

The educational placement of severely handicapped students is restrictive to the extent that necessary supportive services are not readily available from competent professional personnel. The availability of ancillary services is sufficiently nonrestricting only if those services are provided by qualified staff and delivered in a manner that maximizes developmental benefits to all. Severely handicapped students may not need football, basketball, or debating coaches, but they do need the

comprehensive, coordinated, and long-term services of personnel such as nurses, language therapists, and physical therapists.

CONCLUSION

The position presented here is that severely handicapped students will be better educated in desegregated environments, even though those environments may lack some presumed educational necessities (e.g., a physical therapy room, a special swimming pool) than in segregated educational settings that restrict opportunities for interaction with age-appropriate students of all developmental levels.

It might be argued that *only one* severely handicapped student in the nation might receive a "better" educational service in a segregated rather than in a desegregated educational setting. At first glance, providing a segregated educational experience for that student might seem reasonable. However, if such a facility is built or kept open, society undoubtedly will place other students there. The question then becomes, "Where do we draw the line?"

The position espoused here is that since the advantages of long-term interactions with nonhandicapped peers are essential to ultimately functioning in complex, heterogeneous, postschool environments, it is better to err on the side of desegregation and encourage interactions. Furthermore, educators are now at the point at which we can begin to provide appropriate educational services for all students in integrated educational environments and at which public schools can evolve into full-service, community-referenced educational environments. Depriving many students of an education in a segregated setting would be better than depriving one student of the opportunities afforded by a desegregated setting. Fortunately, this choice is not necessary. It is the responsibility of all educators to develop and implement educational delivery systems that maximize the opportunities of all students—including the severely handicapped—to learn together the necessary skills for full participating membership in heterogeneous adult communities. In summary, separation of handicapped and nonhandicapped students is untenable; the establishment of a least restrictive environment mandates desegregation.

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