

The integration - segregation issue:

Some questions, assumptions, and facts

by PROFESSOR BURTON BLATT

Professor Blatt is the Director of the Division of Special Education and Rehabilitation of Syracuse University in the United States. In this article Professor Blatt looks at the question of whether children with special needs are best served in specialized facilities or regular community facilities.

Question 1

What is the debate?

Assumptions

Many in the fields of special education and general education believe that children with special needs, all children, should live in ordinary communities and attend ordinary schools in ordinary classes. They may allow exceptions for that very small number of children with extraordinary needs, agreeing that such youngsters may require specialized programs that could not be adequately provided in regular community settings. However, they would contend that, even for those children, every effort should be made to enhance their participation with typical children in regular school and other community programs.

Others, also in both fields, contend that children with special needs are best served in specialized programs, supervised by specially trained teachers who employ special methods and use unique facilities and equipment. They believe that it is the responsibility of both society, in general, and the schools to allocate the resources and support to permit special — oftentimes segregated — educational opportunities for handicapped children. They believe that regular classes have oftentimes been thoughtless places, dumping grounds, for unwanted children who are forced to sit unattended and deprived of opportunities to learn.

Some adherents to the preservation of specialized schools and programs are distressed by what appears to them to be an erosion of quality as the consequence of movements to decategorize, mainstream, integrate and interrelate all children in heterogeneous settings. Their plea is to consider the handicapped child first and, secondarily, the philosophies of educational reformers with

prejudices for integration. They believe strongly that integration for many children with special needs is very difficult to achieve and, for most of those children, unwarranted. They contend that the significant discrepancy in achievement level and rate of learning between handicapped children and typical children would cause unusual hardships and embarrassments for the handicapped, not to mention the severe pedagogical difficulties teachers would encounter in trying to provide for the individualized learning needs of widely heterogeneous pupils in integrated settings. They believe that many handicapped children have specific learning needs and disabilities that require specialized pedagogical and curricula approaches. Consequently, they believe that teachers of handicapped children require unique pre-service training experiences which regular teacher education programs do not offer and, so they claim, neither do the newer non-categorical interrelated special education programs.

In essence, critics of the integration movement in special education have concluded that such practices inevitably lead to a general ignorance about individual differences, resulting in the neglect of children who require individualized or unusual consideration. Capability for focusing on a child's deficit, dealing expertly with not only the deficits but his strengths in a clinical setting, accounting for disparities in his development as contrasted with typical development, attending to the special problems faced by families with such children, modifying classroom environments and procedures to promote successful experiences have been suggested as requiring specialized facilities, programs and teachers. And, consequently, many renowned special educators believe those are the elements that make special education special and, further, require much of special education to be separated from more conventional programs.

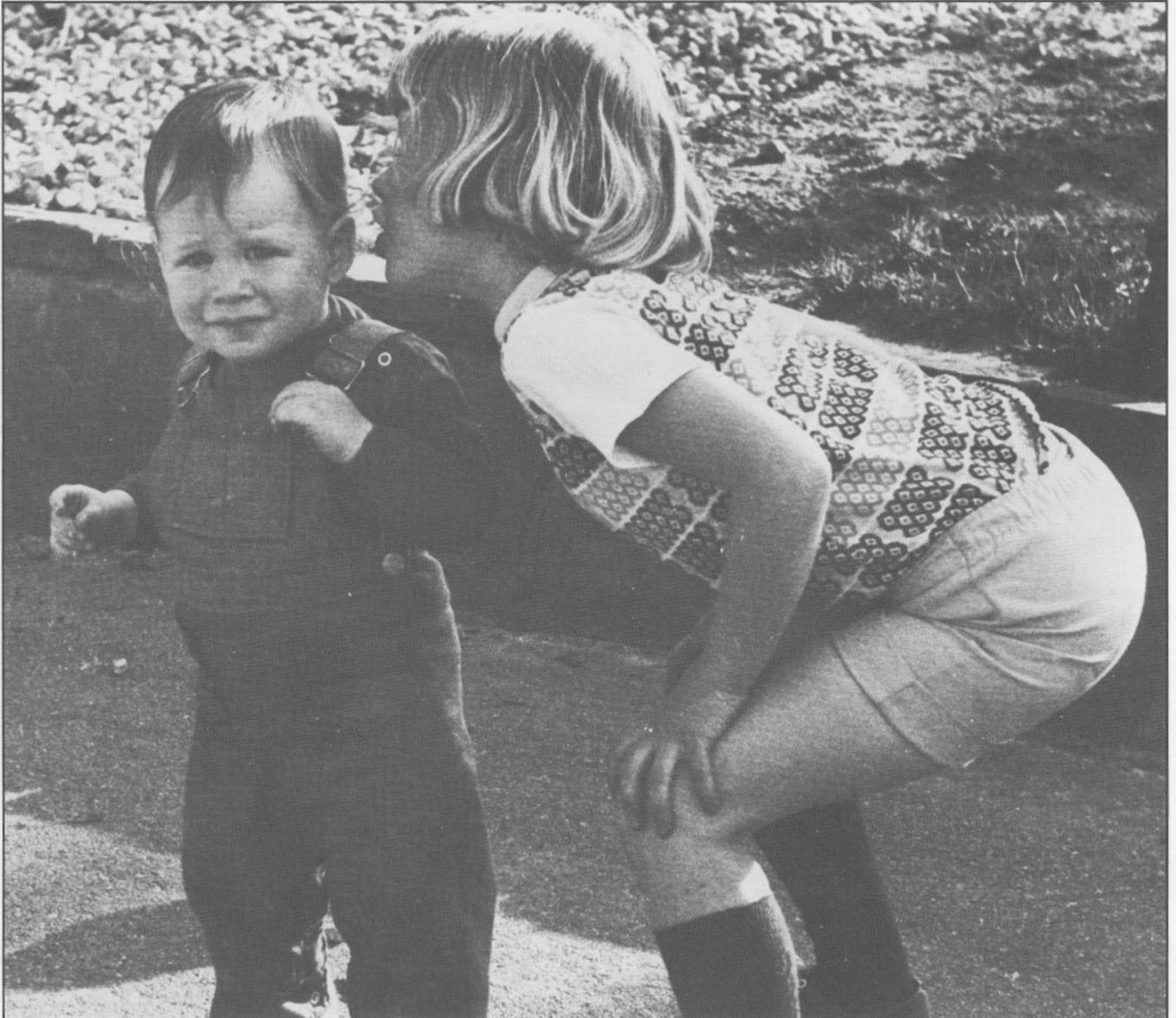
Unfortunately, the one persistent fact in the integration-segregation issue is that there is no compelling research in support of either approach. The best, the most, that can be claimed is that some children fare better in separate class programs and others do better in ordinary programs. This research, sometimes called "efficacy studies", leads to the general conclusion that special education programs — essentially special classes — as they are now constituted, are no more beneficial for handicapped children than are ordinary classes. However, because of the equivocal data obtained from these studies, and serious defects with most of the research methodologies employed, the question remains essentially open and, further, possibly unanswerable. And, for those who claim

that special education has not been given a proper chance to demonstrate its effectiveness, there are others who can equally claim that neither have efforts to integrate children in regular programs.

The one situation where I believe there is general agreement concerns segregated institutions. They are not good for people. To discuss this further in the context of "assumptions" and "facts" is to possibly create the illusion that there are compelling pros and cons to the question. There aren't, and I choose not to debate that assertion.

Question 2

Then, what is the problem?



Assumptions

There is no single problem or single debate surrounding the integration-segregation issue. There are problems; there are debates; there are assertions, facts, polemics and solutions. Especially with an issue that is grounded more in prejudices than in facts, more in values than data, more in fear (or love) than demographics, debate of the issue must deal with the many dimensions of human affairs: ideologies, missions, rights, development, resources, and politics. And, there is no central debate. There is no prepotent problem. And, there is neither a single nor a simple answer. There are problems and there are solutions. There are levels of integration that some would call segregation; there are levels of segregation that others would call integration. There is no black or white; there are not any clearcut dichotomies or other subdivisions and boundaries to the issue. And, consequently, assumptions and beliefs are very important in understanding the issue, while "facts" are not always used on behalf of people.

Facts

There are facts and there are facts. And, although it is true that some facts, and some knowledge, can be dangerous, insofar as this issue is concerned, not to use the little we know may be even more dangerous. Also, I believe that the truth lies not only in facts, or in accuracy, but in how the whole of a body of work permits one to see the truth; the words of a presentation, themselves, are almost nothing.

Question 3

What are the competing values?

Assumptions

There are several levels of conflicting values attendant to this issue. There are ideological differences between those who believe that the state was created to serve human beings, to free them, and those who believe that, although we once created the state to serve us, we must now serve the state. Consequently, there are some who claim that the state must be responsible for — must control — social, intellectual and other kinds of deviance; while there are others who assert the right of any human being to do exactly as he pleases, to live exactly as he wishes, just so long as he does not break the law. There are those who believe in human freedom, who even appreciate the concept of anarchy; and, there are others who believe in human control, who even appreciate the concept of the totalitarian state.

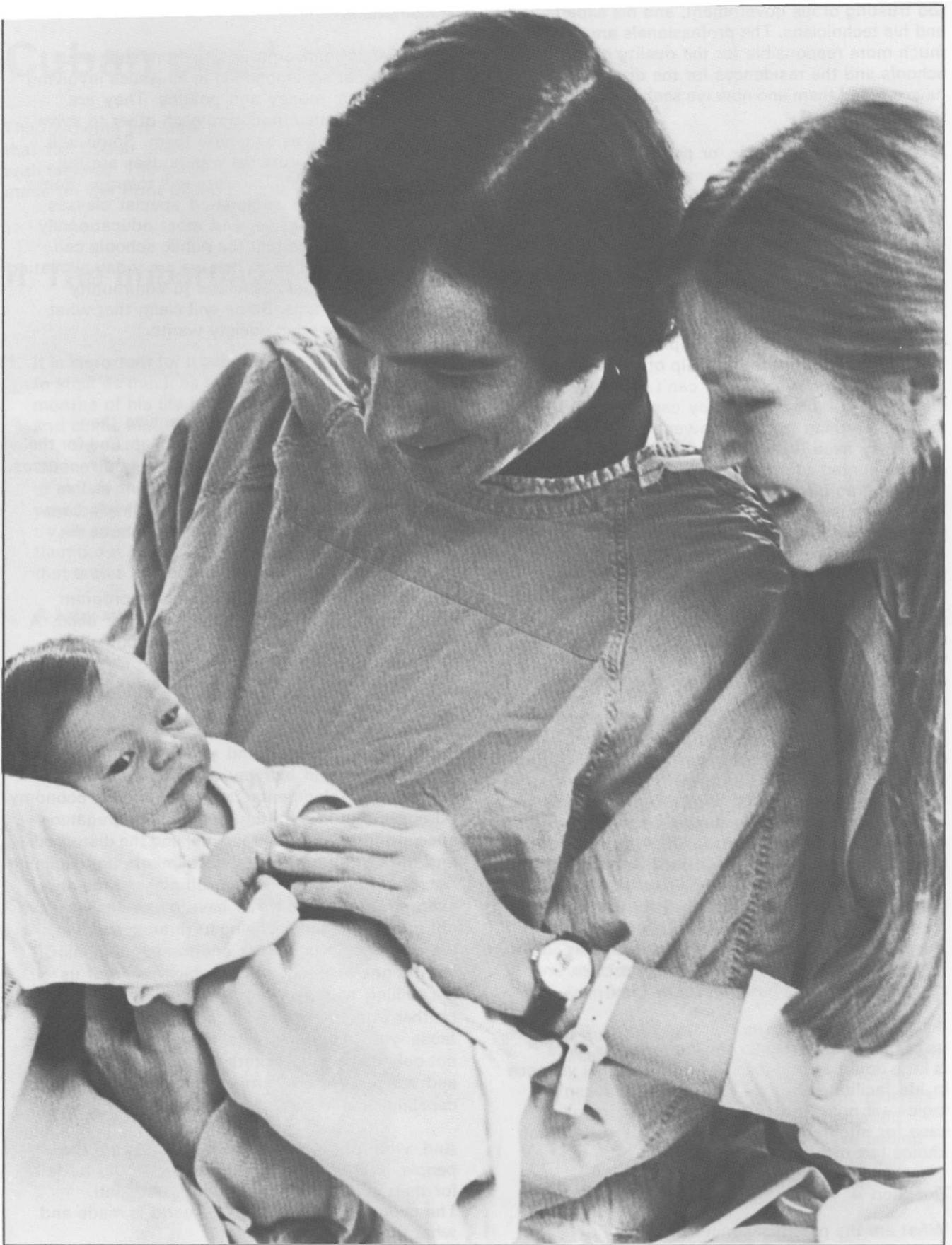
And, most of the others, most of us, have values that fall somewhere between those polarities.

There are some people who believe that folks are better off "with their own kind". There are others who believe that the world is enriched as we engage in relationships with those who are different. These are the people who are disturbed because we have systematically excluded so many human beings from ordinary life. And, while there are some who decry our deliberate efforts to segregate and separate the deviant, or the merely different, from typical society, there are others who say we must exert greater efforts to separate out the deviant. They would claim that this is the only hope for the continuation of society as we know it; and, to return to the others, those people would ask why anyone wishes to continue society as it now exists.

We also have our differences because of our selfish interests. Segregated schools and classes and, especially, segregated institutions require that architects design buildings, and contractors build them, and people administer them, and teachers and social workers and psychologists work in them. Specialization incurs certain sacrifices that the specialist must make; but even they would not argue that there are not also benefits. There is, at least, a degree of self-interest imposed into the substance of these debates.

Facts

It is a fact that those closest to the issue — families who have children with special needs, teachers and administrators of special programs, and others who are intimately associated with programs for the handicapped — are the most outspoken about their values relating to the issue. It isn't the general educator who is interfering with efforts to integrate disabled children in ordinary classes. Essentially, special educators — sometimes the parents — have been most responsible for the rather slow progress made in integrating children in the public schools. And who are the ones most loudly and eloquently defending the continuance of public institutions for the mentally retarded? The commissioners of mental health, the superintendents of such institutions, and the directors, and teachers, and matrons. Persistently, we seem to blame Mr. Joe Citizen for all of the abuse in our institutions, for our wastelands we call schools, for the so many abuses in our culture. Possibly Mr. Joe Citizen is too passive, too unconcerned, too busy to notice what is happening to abused children, to the neglected elderly, to the suffering poor. But, also, he is untutored, possibly intimidated (by us), and much



and his technicians. The professionals are ever so much more responsible for the quality of our schools and the residences for the disabled. We have created them and now we seek to preserve them.

It isn't that professionals, or parents, or other interested parties, are dishonest, or mendacious, or unfeeling. They are just as good as Mr. Joe Citizen. However, they can also be just as bad. And, further, they are not without self-interest and they each have their own perspectives and values. Let's not mistake those qualities for facts or morality.

What is the historic mission of people in the helping professions? It's so simple, yet so misunderstood or neglected: to help other people, not to judge whether they can or can't be helped but, explicitly, to believe that they can be helped and to do everything in one's power to provide what they need. What is the historic belief concerning human educability? The evidence is so abundant, so clear: people can change, can learn, intelligence is educable, intelligence is a function of practice and experience and encouragement. Almost from the beginning, human beings noted that, with appropriate instruction and motivation, people can learn, can improve their performance. Yet, who will argue that, at least in our time, the most characteristic quality expressed by human beings is a pessimism — not only concerning others but, strangely, about ourselves, about our capabilities for changing.

The history is clear; the record is before us. Our mission as educators, psychologists, physicians, others in helping fields, is to help other human beings grow, learn, fulfill themselves. The goal is clear. Evidence aside, we must work as if people can change, as if our efforts will help them be better educated, healthier, better human beings. The need is clear: you have your values and I have mine, but the one point rational people must agree upon is that it's better to be part of human society than be separated from it and, further, in the best of all worlds, variation adds color and zest to one's life, enhances development.

If the mission we have, if not the facts, require us to behave as if people can learn, and as there is little doubt among reasonable people that variance in life facilitates human development, doesn't logic — if not direct facts — make a compelling case for integration as the placement not only of choice but of necessity?

Question 4

What are the practical concerns?

The practical concerns arising from this issue are those that are embedded in all issues involving human affairs: money and politics. They are inextricably related, bound to each other to solve problems as well as to create them. Some will claim that our institutional warehouses are the cheapest facilities that society will tolerate. Some will claim that our segregated special classes are the least expensive, and most educationally enhancing, facilities that the public schools can provide. Some will claim that we are today allocating greater and broader resources to community integrated programs. Some will claim that what we have now is what society wants.

Facts

Segregation is *always* more expensive than integration, both in terms of real dollars and for the preservation and enhancement of human resources. It is also a fact that most people want to live with their families and friends in ordinary communities. Simply, those are the facts about the dollars and the politics of people.

A good integrated special education program can be purchased for \$2,000 a year per child. A poor segregated institution costs \$8,000 to \$12,000 a year, sometimes more. Is it for economy purposes that we continue to construct institutions at a cost of \$30,000 to \$60,000 a bed when, plainly, community residences can be less expensively purchased and remodeled to serve as group homes and halfway homes and other living and developmental facilities? Is it for economy purposes that we continue to build segregated special schools for the trainable, and the disturbed, and the deaf, while school enrollments are declining notoriously, resulting in unused classrooms and, even empty schools? We have overbuilt; we have not considered the declining birthrates; and, yet, we continue to construct enormously expensive institutions and schools for which some of us are willing to pay a high price to separate one brother from another. How far will we permit those with vested interests, unreasonable interests, not only to rob our pockets but erode our values and convictions concerning human beings, their capabilities, and our interrelatedness?

And, what of the politics? The politics are the people, and the will of the people should be felt, for then good may eventually be obtained. The people know of what the world is made and what a human life needs.