



In and Out of Mental Retardation

by Burton Blatt

One of the lessons implied by the suddenness with which the rights of handicapped people emerged as a social issue is that we haven't understood the nature of society as it is presently constituted. If we had understood the social implications of labeling, institutional segregation, and devaluing stereotypes, most of us would have acted quite differently 15 or 20 or 30 years ago. Thus, the political and social process in which PL 94-142 is but one step is a powerful thrust from a world we don't understand very well toward a world we can't predict and, quite probably, won't ever understand well.

This is certainly not to say that we shouldn't continue that thrust. In the real world, the "facts" are never all in and analyses and understandings are always imperfect. This is why action has to be based on judgment rather than deduction. This is also why there is often so much disagreement among people who share similar goals; their judgments of what should be the next step toward the goal can vary widely. But though we all know these things—that our understanding is imperfect, that the consequences of what we passionately advocate today may be unanticipated or even undesirable—nevertheless, we must act as though there could be no doubt about what we do. The success of any program of social reform depends too much on decisiveness and confidence to permit the awareness of our human condition to dampen it. Thus, PL 94-142 has its enthusiastic advocates not because the law is "the" answer, but because it is perceived to be an important step in the right direction; and those who feel that the next urgent order of business is to create jobs for handicapped adults have their eyes on the immediate benefits to the economic and social status of handicapped people rather than on global economic factors. Obviously, these and other programs have merit. Each nudges us closer to the Good Society. But also obviously, each of them is in a sense irrelevant to

what we want as a goal. PL 94-142 is quite clearly a transitional device; no one could suppose that its reimbursement incentives and formulas should constitute a lasting form of justice for all citizens. Like affirmative action, it can be justified, if at all, only as a part of the remedy, not as a state of health. And providing jobs for handicapped people is also important as a step, but hardly begins to address the factors which have heretofore oppressed mentally retarded people. At this time, when the mentally retarded are excluded almost entirely from job opportunities, we are justified in demanding the creation of those opportunities. Yet, in the long run we will have to reconcile this demand with the fact of widespread unemployment in society as a whole, and even with our nation's uncertain fortune in the economy of the world. . . .

The temptation is to take the easy way and write about PL 94-142, to discuss the various ingredients of that law: individual educational plan, mainstreaming, zero reject, and of course the topic of the day, least restrictive alternative. The problem with these terms and others like them is that, at present, they are little more than shibboleths and slogans. We simply don't have an adequate understanding of what they mean. That may be a harsh conclusion but there aren't many people around who would deny that there are lots of different definitions for each of the aforementioned concepts, some of them in conflict with one another. So I will take the hard road, which is for me the easy way out, which is to get to the ideas that go beyond the current law or, indeed, beyond the issue of the handicapped themselves. If we are going to offer mentally retarded people the freedoms and benefits of our society, we should look at what it is we have to offer. To protect a person in spite of himself is to sometimes protect him from living. To avoid potential dangers is sometimes to avoid life. Even for the retarded, possibly especially for the retarded, the rule should not be to reduce risk taking. Rather, it should encourage certain reasonable risk taking. Risk taking is unavoidable for those who would develop well. To legislate prohibition of virtually any potential hazard is to also inhibit one's opportunity to mature. Anybody who ever mattered took risks. Consequently, anybody who matters, that is, any human being, is entitled to as few restrictions as society can restrain itself to impose. Equally, as educators, we must be committed to the belief that people can learn and mature in their judgment and that, when all is said and done, this is the only protection from the dangers of life. ■

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