Ability & Opportunity in the Rearview Mirror

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One writer of this chapter - Norm - has cerebral palsy and initially attended a school for disabled children. At age 13, he argued his way into his regular neighbourhood school. From there, he went on to successfully complete both an undergraduate and a master's degree. The other author - Emma - attended regular school as an undiagnosed Autistic child. Leaving school at age 15, demoralized and angry, she later managed an idiosyncratic trajectory through higher education, and also graduated with a master's degree. Both have spent their adult lives advocating for the rights of disabled people to live good lives - lives that include educational, work and leisure opportunities.

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The last three decades have seen a huge proliferation of information and research on strategies that can be used to successfully support disabled children* in regular classrooms. Many of these are useful, and have facilitated better inclusive environments. However, from our experience as two adults with different disabilities who have experienced the school system in different ways and with different degrees of success, we believe that there is a central issue - an ongoing confusion about the relationship between ability and opportunity - that we must grapple with in order to ensure that inclusive education truly lives up to its promise.

Ability and Opportunity

It is widely seen as self-evident in our Western culture that ability leads to opportunity. If you're good at something, the reasoning goes, then those skills, talents and abilities will certainly foster opportunity. We rarely question this belief. When it comes to disability, fostering ability in both schools and human services has traditionally focused on teaching lifeskills as a prerequisite for entering the "regular" community. This approach fits with an equally unquestioned belief that improving a disabled person's ability is the best way to improve their quality of life and increase the likelihood of later opportunities. But is this necessarily so?

Indulge us in a quick exercise. First, think of five classical musical composers. Now, think of five famous artists.

It's likely that you thought first of composers like Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Handel, and Tchaikovsky. Artists? Perhaps Picasso, Renoir, Van Gogh, Matisse, or Michelangelo. It's likely that many, if not all, of the names you thought of were men.

If we believe that ability truly determines opportunity, it would then logically follow that women must have been devoid of artistic and musical *ability* for the last few centuries. Obviously, this is not the case. The reason why women have been so under-represented is obvious. Until recently, women have not been afforded equal *opportunity* to develop and foster musical and artistic ability.

This simple exercise reveals an unfortunate truth: Opportunity is determined by social convention, not ability. That is, opportunity is not afforded to those who are most able, but to those our society deems worthy of that opportunity. This has significant parallel consequences for disabled people and raises different questions as we continue the enterprise of constructing truly inclusive classrooms.

In the context of the preceding discussion, we offer our personal experiences.

Norm - When Ability is seen to precede Opportunity

Like many educators and other professionals working with disabled people, I had always just assumed that my abilities would largely determine my opportunities. I believed that the more things I could do, the more doors would open for me. So I focused early on becoming as non-disabled as possible. Improving my ability, whether that was learning to walk, improving my speech or doing well in school, seemed to promise a better chance for getting a decent job, finding a meaningful relationship and having a rich, enjoyable life. It wasn't until I left the segregated school that I began to question these assumptions.

At the segregated school, I had speech therapy twice a week for eight years. I'd sit in a small room with a speech therapist and read an endless stream of boring books out loud in what I called "my speech therapy voice.". Prompted by the therapist, I'd dutifully pause at regular intervals to breathe, swallow, and articulate.

There was no doubt about it. For the duration of the 30-minute therapy session, my speech was dramatically more intelligible. However, it didn't make much difference in my life because, at the end of the session, I'd leave the speech therapy room and talk the way I usually talked. Everyone I knew at the segregated school and at home understood me. The "breathe, swallow, and articulate" mantra was only required in the speech therapy room; it seemed unnecessary in the rest of my life.

When I decided that I wanted to leave the segregated school and attend my neighbourhood junior high school, one of the most vocal opponents to this idea was my speech therapist. It wasn't that she was against integration; she was just worried that I would no longer receive speech therapy in the regular school. Although I was secretly delighted by the prospect of therapy-free days at school, she insisted that I was making a terrible mistake. She stressed that I had made substantial progress in speaking and that stopping speech therapy would prevent me from reaching "my potential" – that nebulous Shangri-la of functioning that always seemed to loom two years of therapy ahead of me. . Having no desire to remain a segregated Sisyphus, I told her that speaking clearly was pointless… if I didn't have any friends to speak to.

The combined weight of my determination to go to a regular school, my parents' support of this goal, and the wary consent of school administrators outweighed the speech therapist's objections and I entered my neighbourhood school. However, within days of being in my new school, I realised that the other kids and even some of the teachers were having trouble understanding me.

I noticed that they would listen to the first three or four words I'd say. If they understood those first words, they kept listening. But if they didn't understand me, their eyes would glaze over. It was clear that they had decided my speech was unintelligible. I knew the exact second this happened. They always did the same three things: they'd smile, nod their heads vigorously, and then benignly say "yeah..."

Translation? "I don't have a clue what you're saying."

I quickly understood that if I wanted people to listen to me, I needed to make my first words as intelligible as possible. That's when I developed my standard operating procedure for talking to a new person. I'd invoke the old speech therapy mantra: "Breathe, Swallow, Articulate." It invariably worked! Once the person came to understand me, I would gradually drop the speech therapy regimen and seduce them into my usual way of talking. I soon realized, however, that I needed to continue to do this with every new person I met, day after day, week after week.

By the end of my first year at the regular school, I would meet family friends and relatives who hadn't seen me since I left the segregated school. Astonished by the improved clarity of my speech, they would invariably say, "Norman, you're talking so much more clearly. What did you do?"

I'd say - "I quit speech therapy!"

I usually get prolonged laughter when I tell this story in conference keynotes. But when I told this story to an audience of speech therapists in Sioux City Iowa, they somehow missed the humour . In fact, some felt I'd discounted the importance of speech therapy. This isn't true. What I learned in speech therapy was useful. My *ability* to talk clearly was important. But it was my *opportunity* to attend a regular school that allowed me to put what I'd learned into practice.

This insight was reinforced when, later in university, I became affiliated with the Toronto Disability Rights Network. I met many powerful and articulate disabled activists. I was amazed to discover that most of them, despite their obvious capabilities, were either unemployed or drastically underemployed. I quickly realized that it was the *lack of* opportunity and not the lack of *ability* that posed the greatest threat to my quality of life. Clearly, my success in later education and employment would depend on my ability to navigate through a world of prejudice and social bias. I realized I would have to cajole, convince, or coerce people into giving me the opportunities that would afford me a chance to demonstrate my ability. When it came to improving my speech or physical ability, my success largely depended on what I did; I was ultimately in charge. But when it came to dealing with discrimination and prejudice, my success would ultimately depend on what others did. This seemed far more daunting and, to be honest, it scared me.

Emma - Opportunity is not Enough

Let me add a little more complexity to this issue and talk about my life at school. I was born and grew up in the days before the words "autism spectrum" or sensory processing disorder became public property. Had I been born a decade or so later, that label or one like it might have been applied to me.

Because I was undiagnosed, and largely "flew under the radar", my experience was quite different from Norm's. I was never denied access to the classroom. It was never suggested that segregation was appropriate for me, or that I should take part in remedial programs. In fact, there were no such programs in my schools. Arguably, I experienced all the opportunity I could wish for. However, the problem was that I lacked support. Because nobody understood that I was experiencing the classroom differently, and coping with a laundry list of sensory and learning issues, I was largely ignored or treated with disdain and frustration. It is undeniably true that opportunity must precede ability, but unfortunately, opportunity without support is a set up for failure. So, my experience was best encapsulated by the immortal words of Pogo. I was "surrounded by insurmountable opportunity".

I do not entirely blame educators for my experiences. I was certainly a child who presented baffling dichotomies. After all, how is an educator to understand a hyperlexic child who is reading existentialist literature at age 12 but is inexplicably dyscalculiac, and cannot master the times tables or the simplest mathematical equation? I was a frustrating child to my teachers: single-tracked, focusing on something and then sticking in that track, often at the expense of getting other things done. Paradoxically, I was easily distracted, and experienced great difficulty in getting my brain’s motivational apparatus in gear if the topic didn't engage me. Norm often jokes today that I am the proverbial light switch - either on or off, no in betweens. My idiosyncratic and divergent learning style made conventional classroom approaches inaccessible to me, and my love-hate relationship with the spatial world made physical education an impossible enterprise. I was (and continue to be) a hybrid of sensory avoiding and sensory seeking. My sensory issues made concentration a challenge during times of overstimulation, and boredom a huge issue during times of understimulation.

So, school was a nightmare. The characteristics that simply bemused (and yes, sometimes irritated) my family were transformed by educators into personal failings. I became the sad recipient of much adult frustration.

My teachers knew I was smart and that I likely had the necessary ability to succeed, but they had no idea how to help. Instead, the problems they saw were viewed as something I did on purpose. The labels I collected were not medicalized. Instead, they were descriptions of volitional behaviour: lazy, non-compliant, obsessive. "Must try harder" and "doesn't pay attention" were part of a constant litany that followed me from my earliest academic experiences until the day I quit school in demoralized desperation at age 15.

Ability and Opportunity in the Rearview Mirror

It is through viewing our educational experiences retrospectively that we have come to believe that inclusion needs to be viewed more broadly. It's our hope that we might consider how strategies tied to fundamentally flawed theoretical constructs can be turned on their heads and reconceptualized. If we believe that education is about outcomes - and life after school ends is certainly the outcome we most need to be concerned with - then we are challenged to find ways to maximize success for disabled students. Currently, we create remedial programs to bolster ability, firmly believing that this will lead to opportunity. And yet we continue to see adults who have 'graduated' these programs fall into segregated lives of unemployment, underemployment, isolation and poverty.

Although improving ability may make a person’s life easier in some respects, it probably won’t make their life better. The significant obstacles confronting us are the lack of opportunities, not the limitations of ability. And in that context, we also need to think about the kind of support we offer in order to ensure that people leave school with a sense of confidence, competence and optimism.

We are sometimes asked by both teachers and parents whether pull out programs are ever justified. Norm spent most of his time at school in regular classes, but when it didn't make sense (ie: some sections of physical education), he would find a quiet place and work on homework. But because these alternatives to the regular curriculum made logical sense and were not associated with a Special Education program, Norm was always seen as belonging to the regular class. Unfortunately. many of the traditional "pull out" programs designed to help students with learning or behavioural difficulties are part of a Special Education program founded upon an ideology of deficiency. Unfortunately, in this view disabled students are seen as globally deficient and different, and therefore in need of remediation in segregated settings before they can be effectively re-introduced to the larger non-disabled community. Sadly, this ultimately leads disabled students to view themselves as broken, and implants an identity of deficiency that is difficult to overcome in later years.

Emma was never offered the opportunity to leave the classroom. At times this might have been helpful in managing sensory overload. Again, being able to leave the classroom is quite different from more traditional "time out" and seclusion responses to children who are experiencing overwhelm. Helping a student learn to self-regulate by offering opportunities to experiment and learn about how their bodies and brains work is invaluable. These are the experiences that increase confidence and promote the ability to experience inclusive classrooms in positive ways.

The issue of pull out is not about placement. It is about power and agency. In other words, does the student have some say in the process? Forcible exclusion is fundamentally disempowering. Working with students to craft innovative accommodations - even when they may include working in separate spaces for finite periods of time - empowers them to develop self-understanding and learn advocate for themselves and initiate the support they need. It is the ability to speak up for themselves and to initiate needed supports, and not the minimization of a particular disability, that will be essential skills they'll need in later life.

Swimming Lessons

When it comes to thinking about the difference between ability and opportunity, we've encapsulated our thinking into one simple metaphorical rule. It goes like this: **No matter how good a swimming instructor you may be, you can never teach a person to swim in the parking lot of a swimming pool.** And yet, this is what we've been trying to do in segregated programs. In my (Norm's) early years, I was stuck in the parking lot. Teachers with the best of intentions could not possibly replicate the nuances of typical experiences that I needed to know about through fabricated life-skills education. It was only after leaving the segregated school that I was able to learn the more complex rules of human interaction and the skills I'd need to be successful..

I (Emma) was in the pool, but spent most of my time drowning. Our friend and colleague Bill Page also uses a swimming analogy: he says "never give swimming lessons when someone is drowning." So just being in the pool isn't enough, either. Opportunity must be accompanied by support. Sometimes this support is about fostering learning, but sometimes it is simply about providing safety. Bill reminds us that educators and parents have two roles; that of the swimming instructor, and that of the life guard. He suggests that we get into trouble when we don't understand which role we need to assume at which time. When I was drowning, it was not helpful for the teacher to be a swimming instructor, yelling directions from the metaphorical pool deck. What I needed was a teacher who was a lifeguard - someone to get into the pool with me and help me get to shallow water. Then later, after the overwhelm had dissipated and I was emotionally ready to engage, to help me learn the skills I needed.

Conclusion

To summarize then, as disabled people , we believe that it is both essential and ethical that disabled children are afforded the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers. Focusing on ability to the exclusion of opportunity is not only fundamentally unjust, it ironically undermines the very conditions needed to acquire those abilities.

Yet, it is equally important that those opportunities be accompanied by support, and that educators take the time to work with the student to determine what kind of support will be most helpful.

* Note on the use of language. We have chosen to use identity language rather than person first language in this chapter. We recognize and respect that many individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families prefer person first language. However, within the community of people with physical disabilities, and in the Neurodiversity movement with Autistic people, identity language is preferred. It's a point of reclamation and pride.