

Things that might be helpful to consider when choosing an education for your child

Dr Bob Jackson

Decisions made about education have long-term implications. All parents are aware of this and some make decisions costing thousands of dollars in order to achieve a life objective for their son or daughter. Unfortunately, parents of children with a disability are often steered towards not having a vision for their child, or having a very limited one. Life can be 'one day at a time' where decisions are made on what seems to be the best immediate option available.

So, take some time to reflect:

- What is my vision for my son or daughter? After school? As an adult? As a mature adult? As an old person?
- Where do I see him/her living?
- What will s/he do during the day?
- Who will s/he spend her time with - who will be friends and relationships?
- What will his/her life look like after I am gone?

Clearly this is not something that you can do immediately - it will take time and a lot of discussion with your family - including your son or daughter! When you are clear (or at least clearer!) on your vision, ask yourself - who knows about my vision? Friends? Extended family? Professionals? LAC? Etc. Should I share this vision with them so that there are not different expectations and 'agendas' surrounding my child?

If you have teased out the main elements of that life vision, ask yourself: 'What will need to happen for that vision to unfold as I want?'

What are the most important elements of this vision? For example, we may want competence and life skills and therapy outcomes, but these may be secondary to your child having an ordinary life, or belonging with his/her peers. What is the order of priority?

Looking at the educational alternatives, what is most likely to be helpful in achieving my vision?

- If the current education is not the 'best fit', what would be the best fit?
- How could I achieve this?
- Who could help me?
- Can I share the vision with my child's teacher and principal? Should I?

In choosing an educational alternative, some things to consider

Note that the relative importance of items is something that only you can decide - and you may have additional considerations.

Segregated education

Positives

- Often the staff are very caring and concerned about the child.
- They are used to working with children with disabilities and so are not put off by difference.
- Your child is usually treated as an individual.
- Teachers often have good skills on breaking tasks down to make them manageable.
- Staff ratios are often very good.
- Personal and medical care is usually automatically attended to without particular fuss. Therapy is only available on site.
- It is easy as a parent to talk to the teachers and principal.
- Child often gets a lot of community experience.
- Child can be left at school and picked up at the end of the day similar to other children. Easy option for parents, with very minimal hassle unless behaviour is a problem.

Negatives

- Research indicates that the child will learn significantly less, academically and socially, than in inclusion.
- The child is less likely to gain community and neighbourhood friends, particularly if 'bussing' is involved to get to the segregated facility. Often a different school to brothers and sisters.
- Disability label and stereotypes are reinforced through grouping 'with own kind'.
- Models are all of similar low skill.
- Often, the only thing that the students have in common is a disability - and not even the same disability. They can have huge variations in skill level so that it is almost impossible to teach them as a 'class' - they have to be individually managed.
- Curriculum is uncertain. What is taught varies from school to school and teacher to teacher.
- The children are often resentful and have low motivation, with behaviour problems common - which can be copied by others.
- Expectations are lower than in normal classroom. 'Life skills' are likely to dominate curriculum rather than academic skills.

- Child gets no or little experience of interacting under normal social expectations and consequences. Hence social skills are normally less than with included children. This reduces the possibility of easy access to 'normal' out of school activities (sports, clubs etc). More likely to be directed to 'special' groups.
- The system doesn't make logical sense - the rationale is to segregate and congregate children during the whole of their developmental period, surround them with low skilled models to copy, give them a less demanding curriculum with low expectations on outcome - in order to prepare them for lifetime inclusion as an adult.
- 50 years of experience indicates that the majority of graduates of special school education will go on to unemployment or sheltered work, minimal community involvement and often accommodation in some form of segregated group housing. That is, after 12 years of segregated schooling, the outcome is normally quite limited.

Inclusive Education

Positives

- 40 years of research indicates, without contrary evidence, that children learn more academically and socially in an inclusive environment.
- Your child is more likely to learn academic skills essential to modern life (e.g. reading, maths).
- The child has a good chance of 'belonging' in the class, even under poor quality inclusion.
- Once teachers 'get it' they can change dramatically and become your greatest supporters. Their teaching of all children improves to the benefit of all.
- Other children benefit from having values such as sharing, waiting, consideration of others etc. being brought out. This is often acknowledged by other parents.
- As a parent, you become a parent of a child, not segregated with the other 'disabled mums'. Relationships that extend beyond school to shared 'babysitting' etc. can develop.
- Friendships outside of school with non-disabled children are much more likely. Children may come to stay over, your child is more likely to be invited to other children's places, parties etc.
- Membership of mainstream clubs and groups are more likely and easier to achieve.
- Children are generally happier and prefer to be included (although this needs work from the school).
- Your child is more likely to learn normal ways of responding and pick up subtle social skills essential for peer interactions.
- Your child is more likely to become more independent of adult supervision and

able to be trusted increasingly as with other children.

- Your child may be safer. Normal school environments are much more open and it is much less likely for things to occur unseen. Other children are credible witnesses if problems do occur.
- On completion of school there is a much higher probability of achieving normal employment due to the increased social skills as well as networks developed through school.
- An ordinary life, a good life, becomes a possibility.

Negatives

- Most teachers have little or no experience of working with children with a disability.
- Teachers may be unwilling and uncertain about having the child.
- Because of this lack of knowledge, they may not be as aware of things overlooked for your child. In the worst cases, less likely now, the child can be segregated with an aide.
- Therapists may visit less and there may be little classroom support for the teacher
- As a parent, you will need to be a continual safeguard and highly aware of your child's education. You may need to do home tutoring to ease areas where the teacher is struggling.
- As a parent, you may have to take on the role of an advocate. A great teacher one year can be followed by not so good the next. This can be very disheartening.
- Your child is likely to experience some teasing and hard times from other children. You may need to be super aware of this and bring it to the attention of the school. You may feel that you have become a whingeing mum! It is a difficult balance between overprotection and protecting real vulnerabilities.
- It will be hard at times. Things may be said that put your child down and really hurt. You may (almost certainly will) be faced by lots of professionals advocating segregation. It is hard to trust your instincts under such pressure.

Note that all of these negatives are about SYSTEM problems - not problems with the idea of inclusive education.

Educational Support Unit or Centre - best of both worlds?

The stated policy of the Department of Education is to provide these partial integration options, where the child is segregated with other disabled children part of the day and joins mainstream children for some of the less academic subjects such as art, sport and music. The Education Support Centre is on the same campus as the regular school but has a separate Principal.

The Education Support Unit is normally one or two separate classrooms in the school but

the Teachers and Unit are under the control of the regular school principal.

Positives

- Children may get to travel on the same school bus as other children.
- They will be recognised by the other children in the school as going to the same school.
- Some children may be positive towards them and involve them in activities, particularly if encouraged by the teachers.
- They are likely to get some exposure to good peer models when they are included.
- They will often get higher ratios and more therapy than in full mainstream.
- Parents get an easier time - they can still leave it up to the school to 'do what's best'.

Negatives

- A child deficient in learning ability and social skills is required to learn two sets of rules, two environments, two teachers, two sets of peers. This increases the likelihood of failure in one or both environments - particularly the included one.
- The model is built on the assumption that if you can't keep up academically, you can't belong. It is profoundly reinforcing a segregation mind-set in education and continuing the myth that if you can't keep up you shouldn't be there, except as a favour. It hurts numerous children - the 20% who can't read or do maths; the very capable children who are not being individually challenged as 'one size fits all'. Only full inclusion challenges this basic mis-assumption of education.
- It is unclear to the child where he or she 'belongs'. They are in a position of permanent uncertainty and continual change. It can be a continuing source of rejection and low motivation.
- Other children do not see the child as one of the class. "John? - Oh he comes and goes".
- Real relationships with other children have been found to be unlikely and the probability of teasing and bullying may be more likely with the limited identification with the visiting child.
- Research studies indicate that academic and social outcomes are directly related to the amount of inclusion. A child included 100% does better than one included 50%, who does better than one included 20%... This also applies to children with severe or multiple disabilities.
- The regular school teacher does not take full responsibility even during the inclusion 'sessions' as the child is 'enrolled' in the Unit or Centre and so is their responsibility.
- One ex-student of fully segregated schooling described partial inclusion as cruel. "They hold your nose to the window of a normal life and tell you that you can't have it." "It is better to be totally segregated than continually reminded that you don't belong".

- Some writers in the area of special education are coming to the conclusion that even though partial segregation has a superficial attraction, it may be the worst of all options for the child, family and society.

AUTHOR: Bob Jackson

SOURCE: www.include.com.au

This information is made available by Family Advocacy and cannot be used except for the sole purpose of research and study. www.family-advocacy.com