

Curtains for Special Education: An Open Letter to Educators

by James M. Kauffman

I think we're approaching the end of special education. By analogy, we're nearing the final scene of a stage play. Special education is, I think, very near its "curtains." And we're perilously close to being unable to rewrite the play while it's in progress.

Two events of January 15, 2010, made me think about "curtains." First, a personal letter I received from noted special educator and attorney, Barbara Bateman, made me wonder about basing individualized education programs (IEPs) on state standards of learning (i.e., standards-based IEPs). I started thinking about how IEPs are by law based on individual educational needs, not state standards. Second, I watched *Bill Moyers Journal*, which featured an interview with the writer, Thomas Frank. Frank talked about how government came under attack in the 1980s and is still being demeaned. Together, the Bateman letter and the Frank interview made me think more about the assumptions underlying special education and where special education is headed.

Special education comes from the recognition that some students need things that most don't. It starts with the assumption that it's not for all kids. It recognizes that students at both extremes of the distribution of abilities have *special* needs. For them, the general education most kids get, even if it's good, isn't reasonable, isn't appropriate, is a very poor fit for exceptional children. Special education is only for those we recognize as having disabilities and for those we know as gifted. It's a way of insuring that kids with special educational needs get the education they should have. It can't be cookie-cutter education. It has to be individualized in many ways, including placement, curriculum, and

instruction. I and my frequent co-author, Dan Hallahan, published a little booklet called *Special Education: What It Is and Why We Need It* in 2005. We tried to explain why special education will always be needed, but perhaps our efforts were too little too late.

Three basic assumptions underlie special education. First, it's not general education. That is, if a student can be successful in general education, then special education isn't intended for that child. Second, not all students can be successful in general education. For some students, general education isn't good, much less education's best effort for them. These students need special education. Third, special education can help students who need it. It can improve the lives of the exceptional children for whom it's appropriate. It can lead to better outcomes than those they'd achieve in general education. The second and third assumptions are now being denied. And all three of the old assumptions are being replaced by a single new one: All students can be successful in general education. This assumption makes special education superfluous. The replacement assumption implies that a lot of people just haven't figured out yet that when general education is done right it's successful with all students regardless of their exceptionality, an assumption that's only fantasy. The replacement assumption is directly related to Bateman's thinking that standards-based IEPs aren't even legal, much less a good idea and to Frank's observation that since 1980 government in general and most of its programs have been demeaned.

I can't go into all the details of how we got to the denial of two-thirds of the basic assumptions underlying special education and to rewriting all three of them into a single new one. But the denial and rewriting undercuts special education as an idea and as a

project for achieving something closer to social justice. Following are the broad outlines of thinking and dispositions that I think nudge special education toward its “curtains.”

The federal special education law of 1975, now known as IDEA, was far from perfect, but it was based on the three assumptions I mentioned. And I think the law was a good start. Nevertheless, within less than a decade of the law’s enactment President Ronald Reagan’s suggestion that government *is* the problem became very popular. The seeds of the destruction of special education were planted, willingly but perhaps not knowingly, by special educators who began arguing against the very assumptions on which special education was based. They argued that special education should be a responsibility of general education. Like government in general, special education came to be seen as the problem, not the solution.

Special education was and is demeaned, not criticized constructively but often portrayed as horrible. Helpful criticism points to imperfections needing correction, but it doesn’t include broadsides rejecting the idea of the enterprise itself or rejecting what the enterprise must do by definition. Special education has been criticized for noticing “deficits,” a basic idea underlying its existence, and for “sorting,” which it must do.

The set-up for the demise of special education is very much like the set-up for demeaning government in general. Frank and Bateman might describe the “set-up” somewhat like I do in the following paragraphs.

The set-up might begin with descriptions of how bad government and its programs are. It might include descriptions of wonderful alternatives. Partial truths for which people can find some basis in fact are put forward, but the larger truth is lost or

deliberately hidden. It points to government failures, leading to the argument that government *always* fails or compares unfavorably to the private sector and that privatization is the key to success and efficiency. It hides the fact that businesses often fail and that private enterprises considered successful because they produce profits for shareholders often fleece the public and create disasters if they're not carefully regulated by government. In special education, the set-up points to failure as an inevitable outcome of "separate" special education and touts the wonders of a "unitary" or "single" system. The larger truth that's hidden or ignored is that if something isn't a separate, distinctive entity, then it's going to be lost completely or be relatively ineffective. That's why we have a Department of the Interior and a Department of Education, not a department of something in which education is included with the hope that education will be part of its work.

The set-up follows the line of argument that special education *creates* problems. Never mind the fact that problems in meeting the educational needs of exceptional children existed before special education was invented. These problems are now blamed on special education.

The set-up might move on to creating impossible expectations for an entity, then to damning that very institution for not meeting them, whether it's government in general or specific programs like special education. It involves "reframing" issues by choosing words with very negative connotations for what a government program does (e.g., "hand-out," "death tax," "death panel," "sorting," "second rate," "deficit model"). If possible, the original intent of a government program is said to be something it wasn't, or the

program is criticized for not meeting objectives it never had or for being something it never was. Special education is now frequently criticized for not making students with disabilities perform like those without disabilities. Never mind that it never had that objective. Never mind the absurdity of the expectation that it could. Special education is said to have been conceptualized as a “place,” although it was never so conceptualized. Ironically, the inclusion movement makes “place” the central issue or preoccupation of policy makers. Radical inclusionists make place the biggest deal, the most important thing, the criterion of success.

The set-up might include the use of false statements, inappropriate analogies, illogic, and other sleights of mind to mislead people. For example, it might include the argument that government programs restrict people’s freedom when they actually do the opposite, as in the misrepresentation of health insurance reform as a government take-over and the misinterpretation of IDEA as requiring full inclusion. In special education, we’ve seen the inappropriate special-education-is-like-racial-segregation analogy used to create outrage and opposition on the basis of a presumed but nonexistent parallel. We’ve seen the illogic of “ready means never” to explain why students with disabilities should be “challenged” by the general education curriculum before they’ve learned more basic skills. In other endeavors (e.g., sports, music), we see the logic of needing basic skills before training in advanced skills. We recognize that a student may not be ready for an advanced course or advanced training by virtue of the fact that he or she hasn’t learned the more basic, prerequisite skills. But logic is often waived for instruction. This demeans both general and special education.

The set-up often embraces a revisionist history that uses one political extreme to justify achieving an objective of the opposite political extreme. Concern of extreme liberals for the self-respect of disadvantaged people is used by extreme conservatives to justify cutting welfare rolls to save money and “free people from dependence.” Even radical liberals go for “freedom and independence.” In the case of special education, the extremes of liberal thinking about equality are used to justify the extreme conservative position of requiring children with disabilities to take whatever can be offered in general education, saving money and ostensibly helping students with disabilities reach their capacity. Ultra-liberals love the idea of all kids being “included” and being “challenged” and “reaching their capacity.” If special education ceases to exist, it will satisfy the longing of both ultra-liberal and ultra-conservative advocacy groups, the liberals for achieving a kind of equality, the conservatives for saving money and requiring students to achieve more. Together, the ideological extremists working at both ends of the liberal-conservative spectrum seem likely to make common cause—curtains for special education. True, liberals and conservatives will have very different reasons for reaching a common objective. But the end is assumed by both to justify the means.

“Curtains” for special education seems inevitable, given enthusiasm for the pretense that general education can be made flexible enough to handle any exceptionality and that all students can be successful in meeting uniform goals in a common curriculum. Special education may well be “rediscovered” by some future generation. Mark Twain is said to have observed that history doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes—that is, the replication isn’t direct or exact, but we see parallels to or approximations of earlier eras.

The early twenty-first century has seen an approximation of the robber-barons, as they were called, of the late nineteenth century—extremely wealthy and powerful individuals in the context of widespread poverty. I will be pleasantly surprised if we *don't* see an approximation before long of the special education of the early twentieth century—virtually nonexistent, mainly residential, mostly available only to the very wealthy. We might do well to remember that it's always the poor who suffer most when government withdraws its protection, and that the wealthy always can buy almost anything they want.

The zeitgeist of special education in the early twenty-first century is, to my mind, disgraceful. And as the University of Pittsburgh special education scholar Naomi Zigmond has pointed out, the disgrace isn't that general education teachers aren't able to provide special education. It's that so many university faculty in special education have come to believe that special education isn't really so very special. The disgrace is that so many special educators don't see that special education *has* to be different from general education. Among the most disgraceful notions are the ideas that general educators can and should do it (general educators should provide special education), that where it's done is more important than what's done (full inclusion should be mandated), that what's done should really be the same for everyone (all education should be special education), and that IEPs should be aligned in all cases with the general education curriculum and universal standards of learning (standards-based IEPs should be required).

Some readers of this letter may see at least some of the things happening that I think I do. And they may ask me or themselves or someone else, "So, what can we do?" Personally, I think all we can do is speak up, speak out, call attention to the direction

we're going, and work to make special and general education better. If you're a special educator, don't lose sight of how special education *must* be different from general education. Base your work on what's best for the students you teach, and strive to make special education better. If you're a general educator, don't pretend that you can do what you can't. Refuse teaching tasks for which you're not prepared. If you're a teacher educator or administrator, stay in the real world when you speak of expectations. Don't assume that teachers can and will do whatever they're told.

I wish I had better answers. These things are just a beginning. But they may be enough to rewrite the play (i.e., alter special education's future) if enough people do them.

We know that special education is often not as good as it could be, not what it should be, not what we want it to be. We could say the same of general education. I've worked in both general and special education. But I'm most concerned right now about special education. We need to make it better. It's not a bad idea, and it's not beyond hope. However, if special education isn't grounded in scientific and mathematical realities and clear thinking about human capacities and human differences, only in ideology, then it will surely come to naught.

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