

Mary Ann— A Lesson in Determination

A special student can sometimes teach an entire school something about the human spirit.

MAUREEN DOWLING

The first time an educator told me something was not possible was during my own early school years. The kindergarten teacher seated us around a long wooden table. Ominously, she cleared away all school materials and books. Meticulously, and in silence, she placed before each of us a board with various shaped holes and a packet of pegs. She told us to place the pegs in the correct holes. "And remember," she said staunchly, "it is impossible to put the wrong peg in the wrong hole." There was something about the way she said "impossible" that convinced me to prove her wrong. With dogged determination, I began to pound the round pegs into the square holes and triangular pegs into rectangular holes. When the time was up, the teacher collected each board, and, as mine was carried away, one round peg could be seen standing proudly from a partially accepting square hole.

Although I had been in my new position as Director of Pupil Personnel Services for several months, requests for services for handicapped children were still flooding my office, burying me in paperwork and details. Prioritizing children according to their needs had become my diurnal task. Mary Ann's name, however, had quickly and inevitably risen to the top of my list.

I had been told that Mary Ann, then a sophomore, would be the first student in our high school not to graduate because of her failure to meet the requirements of the New York State Regents Competency Tests. The Regents ensured that every student who received a high school diploma had met minimum standards of competency in mathematics, reading, and writing.

It wasn't that she had already failed; it was simply the general consensus of the teachers and administrators who had worked with Mary Ann that she couldn't possibly pass. As one teacher put it:

She may pass one of the Regents, but never all three. She doesn't have the skills. The question really shouldn't be "Can she do it?" but rather, "What type of certificate can we give her other than a diploma?"

Mary Ann had been adopted in Greece at the age of six and then brought to the U.S. In 4th grade, she was referred to the Committee on the Handicapped. A psychological evaluation indicated that Mary Ann's verbal and performance levels placed her in the lowest 5th percentile nationally. Teacher assessments of Mary Ann's performance supported these results. In those days, the recommendation was usually to send the student to a special class in a state-supported school for the handicapped. Mary Ann's mother made an impassioned plea to keep her child in the mainstream. Both Mary Ann and her mother must have been very special because the committee agreed to declare Mary Ann not handicapped. She was given educational support outside of the classroom. Her teachers generally accepted her limitations and were willing to make modifications and to overlook a great deal.

A Special Dream

I was anxious to meet Mary Ann, never suspecting that she would teach me so much about the human spirit. I intended to speak first with her and then with her mother, about the near-

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certainty that Mary Ann could not meet the graduation requirements. I hoped to discuss the educational alternatives to an academic program in our high school.

Mary Ann was impressive. Wearing a pale pink dress, she appeared pretty and feminine. She sat down in a poised and confident manner. Her speech was halting, but her thoughts were clear and direct. “I can pass the Regents. I want to try. Please let me. I want to graduate more than anything else.” Sensing my concern, she added, “I’ll pass them, don’t worry.”

I met with her mother the next day and enumerated the many obstacles that stood in the way of Mary Ann’s graduation. Her mother nodded knowingly. “I believe she can do it. I want her to have a chance—it means so much. I know you’ll do everything you can to help her.”

After these meetings, I referred Mary Ann to the Committee on the Handicapped. It was in May of her sophomore year. The results of the tests we conducted seemed to put a high school diploma well out of Mary Ann’s reach. Her verbal and performance levels remained in the bottom 5th percentile nationally; math diagnostic tests put her grade level at 1.5.

She couldn’t write more than a few sentences about a single topic, and her reading was mid-3rd grade.

Yet nothing could deter Mary Ann and her mother, and no member of the committee could refuse their request to help Mary Ann graduate with her class. The committee classified Mary Ann as learning disabled. Her placement included two periods of math remediation daily—one with a special education teacher and one with a mainstream math teacher; and one period of reading/writing remediation daily, with a specialist. We had two years to bring Mary Ann’s performance to minimum competency levels.¹

Mary Ann’s educational program began in September and was followed by months of hard work and seemingly little success. The teachers’ refrains reverberated through my office and my conscience. . . .

She can’t pass the Regents. We’re not doing the right thing for her—we’re setting her up for unattainable expectations.

My committee members and I questioned our judgment—it was a difficult time for us.

Mary Ann had been enrolled in a half-day BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) cosmetology

program early that year to help her realize her dream of becoming a beautician. In December, I received a call from the BOCES counselor. The recommendation was familiar and expected—she should not be in the program. Even if she could manage the practicum, she could never pass the written examination. There was no reasoning with Mary Ann on this question—she was determined to be a beautician. She remained in the program.

The Turning Point

In February of her junior year, one of Mary Ann’s math teachers came into my office, smiling. “I just gave Mary Ann a practice Regents math test, and she scored 20 points higher. You know something? I think you’re right. I think she can do it. She works so hard.” The word spread quickly, and her reading/writing teacher added to the new enthusiasm—Mary Ann was reading better. For the first time, she had a chance of passing the Regents reading exam. Writing, however, seemed the impossible obstacle. We persevered. Mary Ann’s learning rate began to increase. We watched improvements in her scores on practice tests with a controlled exuberance.

In June of her junior year, Mary Ann passed the Regents math exam with a highly respectable grade of 78 percent.

The high school principal, who had been committed to helping Mary Ann, recommended to the board of education and the superintendent that Mary Ann be given additional instruction in reading and writing, after school hours, during her senior year. (Actually, unbeknownst to us, the teacher was already doing this three times a week without compensation.) They readily agreed, and this impressive young woman became a cause for many people.

In January of her senior year, Mary Ann passed the Regents reading exam with several points to spare. Again, it became painfully clear that her programs in writing seemed to be proceeding too slowly, given our deadline.

During all this, Mary Ann attended classes and fulfilled her other school responsibilities. At home, her mother and friends tutored her. Mary Ann never faltered or lost heart. She simply tried harder.

In June, three days before commencement, Mary Ann passed the Regents writing examination—barely.

The graduation ceremony took place on a warm, clear day. It was held on the lawn, and the sound of chamber music periodically filled the air. The opening speeches and other details are difficult to recall, but I will never forget the intense pride I felt as Mary Ann walked across the dais in her cap and gown. The assistant principal smiled warmly as he awarded Mary Ann a diploma. He held her hand for what seemed a long time as the applause of her admirers resounded.

There is a sequel to this. Mary Ann passed the practicum for the beautician's license with a "B" average, but for two years, and after three attempts, she failed the written exam.

I contacted a BOCES counselor and asked about tutoring. The counselor reviewed Mary Ann's records and excitedly—defensively—reported that BOCES was not responsible for her failure. For two years, the BOCES teachers had recommended that Mary

Ann be withdrawn from the program. I quickly reassured her. "I know. I'm asking for over and above—the impossible." Her tone softened with compassion as she spoke and offered one-to-one tutoring without charge. I asked a question I had asked several times before, "Is there any way to provide modified testing conditions?" "No," she replied, "only foreign-born students are eligible." With a surge of hope, I exclaimed, "Mary Ann was born in Greece!" Though reserved, the counselor instilled confidence as she responded, "I'll see what I can do."

When Mary Ann was finally allowed to take the test orally, she passed. For months after, Mary Ann struggled to become a professional haircutter. She worked in several local salons but was given only menial tasks to perform. One employer told her that professional haircutting would be out of her reach. Last fall, Mary Ann was promot-

ed to haircutter in a fine salon and has continued successfully in this position.

As I remember Mary Ann, I think of something Thoreau said:

If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. □

Minimum high school competency levels are nebulous when transferred to grade equivalents. Generally, a student must have the overall ability to perform the skills of reading, writing, and mathematics on a 7th to 9th grade level to pass these exams.

Modified testing conditions are available to handicapped students under many statewide testing programs. In Mary Ann's case, her learning disability prevented her from writing her answers in the allotted time. She did, however, know the material for which she was being tested.

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