

The Principal

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The Least Restrictive Environment

The rationale behind educating handicapped children in the least restrictive environment is sound. But a self-contained classroom in a regular public school may not be the least restrictive environment for some handicapped children who are placed there.

Consider, for example, the child involved in this incident:

I am conducting a formal observation in a 2nd grade classroom when I hear blood-curdling screams. I immediately recognize the sound and the problem: one of our emotionally disturbed children is having a violently aggressive outburst. I hope that the screams will subside quickly so I may continue my observation of an outstanding lesson, but I intuitively know this is wishful thinking. I rush to the self-contained classroom, genuinely fearful for the safety of the other children there.

The teacher takes the rest of the children to another location, and I send for the nurse and the psychologist. For nearly 30 minutes we watch until the episode subsides, with the child eventually falling to the floor asleep. But not before the child has destroyed the classroom once again—overturned and broken a computer, knocked over bookcases and desks, ruined kits and important papers, and bitten the psychologist on the arm so deeply that she will need medical attention.

If children such as this one, prone to repeated sudden outbursts of screaming or violent behavior, must be physically removed from the self-contained classroom and isolated on a daily basis, are they truly functioning in a less restrictive environment by remaining in the public school? How will these children learn the skills they need to avoid later institutionalization? We must consider whether keeping such children in a self-contained special class in a public school is *really* less restrictive than placing them in a special school.

Severely disruptive children are already isolated from peer relationships most of the school day. They have only

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the most limited contact with children from other classrooms—perhaps riding on a special bus or sitting in the same lunchroom (although more often than not, disruptive behavior or obstinate refusal to cooperate with lunchroom monitors results in their isolation during this time as well).

Where is our sensitivity to these children's special needs? Wouldn't it be more sensitive to place them in settings where they could relate to other children, even if only with children who share similar handicaps? Wouldn't these children benefit from receiving more focused academic instruction and emotional support, along with behavior modification and

daily-living skills instruction, which they cannot receive in a public school setting? Wouldn't these children benefit from having support staff, such as occupational therapists or psychologists who are specially trained to deal with their handicapping conditions, available full-time? Wouldn't these children benefit from physical facilities and learning environments that are tailored to meet their special needs?

And there is one more very important question that public school administrators must consider: What are the effects upon other students in the self-contained classroom who are having *their* education disrupted on a daily basis by the emotionally disturbed child's outbursts? What are the effects upon classmates when one child continually refuses to perform what he or she is asked to do, forcing the teacher to stop lessons repeatedly? Aren't these other handicapped children also entitled to the best education they can receive in the least restrictive environment? Aren't their rights to a free and appropriate public education being abridged by some of their own classmates? And isn't this terribly unfair?

It is not an easy decision to recommend that a child be removed from public school to attend a special school for the handicapped. But sometimes one must consider such a move, in the best interests of both the particular child and the other children whose instruction is continually disrupted. The "least restrictive environment" must be defined as that which allows for personal and academic growth and development for *all* children in that setting.

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