

Education, Ethical Communities, and Personal Dignity

Rud Turnbull

In 1971, John Lennon (Lennon, 1971) encouraged us to *imagine all the people, sharing all the world*.

So, imagine.

The year is 1974. Imagine being the parents of a first-grade boy with an intellectual disability. Imagine watching as the school bus comes to pick up all the neighborhood children. But it does not stop to pick up your son. The boy was our son, Jay. Just as there had been no early education for him, so too the school doors were closed to him and many with disabilities.

That changed in 1975, when Congress enacted Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142, 20 U.S.C. Secs. 1400 et seq., renamed in 1990 as Individuals With Disabilities Act, P.L. 101-476). Jay and all students with disabilities now had a right to an education, because research had shown that all can learn.

Now imagine teenagers in a segregated high school, bound for a sheltered workshop, there to be paid less than a dollar an hour. Imagine parents having no federally supported parent information and training centers and no community parent resource centers to help secure their children's rights to an education. The years: 1983-1987. The remedies under Individuals With Disabilities Education Act: in 1983, an opportunity for preschool and early intervention (P.L. 98-101); in 1986, an opportunity for education of infants and toddlers (P.L. 99-457). Both amendments emphasize parent/family and professional partnerships. The consequence: real rights; real opportunities to live the American promise; and parent-professional partnerships in pursuit of the American dream.

The year is 1988. Jay earns a regular high-school diploma, from Walt Whitman High School, in Bethesda, Maryland. He has been a manager of the football team. He receives his varsity letter-jacket at a seasons'-end football banquet, and players and their families stand to applaud him vigorously. He belongs: all know it, he especially. He has learned skills sufficient to do a job as a clerical aid at a major research university. For just over 20 years he is solidly in America's workforce, paid a competitive wage, and lives with support in a home of his own.

He has a life of dignity until he dies completely unexpectedly in 2009 (Turnbull, 2011).

Next, imagine students being disciplined by restraint and seclusion or by noxious sprays and electric shock; being expelled because of their disabilities; and having few rights to resist discipline of any kind, much less these punishing and demeaning ones. The year is 1997. The IDEA remedy (P.L. 105-17): a right to have educators consider positive behavior support to respond to students' needs. One consequence: the infusion of federally funded research into how schools can use positive behavior support, creating thereby a humane environment for education, a place that incorporates both rights and decent treatment of those with disabilities. Another, a proclamation that positive interventions are means for a quality of life and indicators of the ethic of dignity (Turnbull, A. & Turnbull, R., 2011).

Finally, imagine students in schools that have low expectations of them. The years: the first half-decade of this century. An IDEA remedy (P.L. 108-446) is to explicitly re-state a policy goal of independent living. This remedy is achieved by a powerful, evidence-based curriculum on self-determination and supports, guiding students to be autonomous people. The consequence: independent citizens who know how to make their own decisions.

This Lennon-based approach is more than a matter of imagining; it is also a matter of remembering IDEA's history. Our memories capture IDEA's fundamental messages—first: disability is a natural consequence of the human experience and is no reason for discrimination (20 U.S.C. Sec. 1400(c)); and, second, discrimination in schools will fade as appropriate education in inclusive schools occur (20 U.S.C. Secs. 1414(a) – (d)). The job now is to preserve and improve the law, to constantly be on guard that Congress does not dilute it.

To be expected to benefit in school because of rights and education—that is what IDEA has meant before. To be welcomed and dignified—that is what IDEA only implicitly meant (Turnbull & Stowe, 2001). It is what it must explicitly mean from now on (Turnbull, 2013).

To achieve that result, we must overcome two challenges. The first is to provide an education that makes it likely that all students, across their lifetimes, will attain IDEA's four goals: equal opportunity, independent living, full participation, and economic self-sufficiency (20 U.S.C. Sec. 1400(c)). We are a long way from attaining those goals. The consequence is unacceptable. Failing to attain these four national goals, people with disabilities will not find themselves heartily welcomed or dignified. We must do better in schools so that our communities will be better places for us all.

Our second challenge is to ensure that our schools are the foundations for more than rights and education. They must be the places where a new culture is birthed, raised, and matured. This new culture occurs in what is best called *ethical communities* (Turnbull, 2013).

This culture acknowledges the abilities of people with disabilities. It honors their liberty to lead self-determined lives. This culture creates ethical communities.

So, the new IDEA will say not just that disability is a natural consequence of our human condition and therefore an expected presence in our communities. No, the new IDEA will proclaim that those with disabilities are welcome and will be treated with dignity in every one of our communities.

IDEA now and forever also should memorialize a foundational American creed: Our differences—whether based on race, ethnicity, cultural heritage, sexuality, age, and disability—yes, especially disability—should not separate—should not segregate—us from each other.

Each of us is less able than someone else, in one way or another; all of us have different lineages, different abilities, and different limitations. But none of us is therefore less worthy: Each of us who has a disability must be welcomed and dignified.

That was IDEA's implicit message when Congress enacted it in 1975. That must be its explicit message the next time Congress acts on it.

John Lennon challenged us to imagine all the people sharing all the world. Before him, John Kennedy (1960), himself the brother of a woman with intellectual disability, said:

I believe in human dignity as the source of national purpose, in human liberty as the source of national action, in the human heart as the source of national compassion, and in the human mind as the source of our invention and our ideas.

Lennon imagined an integrated world; before him, Kennedy asserted a basis for the integration. The question now is whether we have ears to hear and heed, and imagination, will, and power to act.

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