

# A VERY SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE: OPEN SCHOOLS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

by Fredric G. Posner, Ph.D.

Years ago, when I was a special education teacher at a conventional school, I remember remarking to a colleague that I felt more like a defense attorney than a teacher. My job, as I perceived it, was to get "my kids" through, around or over the system any way I could. I became the consummate plea bargainer. I even joked that I might as well have gone to law school like my father had wanted me to do in the first place.

In any case it was obvious that I was the one and sometimes only advocate for these specifically identified outcasts. I was good at my job. I arranged for my unfortunates to take tests in the lab. Sometimes I even helped them cheat when I knew the odds were insurmountable or the exams just foolish exercises to begin with.

Grades were everything. Self-esteem hung precariously on every report card. No attention was paid to the unique strengths of the kids. The gist was fitting them into the system at any cost. The problem was that the system was phony and arbitrary to begin with so the students' successes were often shallow and usually quite temporary.

So after years of knocking my head against the proverbial wall, I transferred to a public open school, a place without grades and seemingly without boundaries, the kind of place that was considered anathema to all special education kids. You know, the ones who supposedly craved structure and routine in a somewhat sterile, laboratory kind of setting. Coming myself from such a background, I too was properly skeptical and dubious, worried as it were about the chances for kids' success in such chaotic surroundings.

Well, as it turned out, it took me more time to adjust than the kids. I did however have some things on my side. I found myself part of an advisory system that was the real crux of the school. Every teacher was an advisor and thereby directly responsible for and accountable to a certain number of kids. Certainly I was accustomed to having my own advisory group. The problem in the past was that I was the *only* advisor and my advisees were perceived as "my kids" or even worse, "those kids", always isolated from the others.

All of a sudden it dawned on me that at the Open School the entire staff was like a group of special education teachers with their own groups of students and their own advocacy programs for each. What a relief to know that these teachers were not just chained to their content areas and ultimately not accountable to their students.

Another realization dawned on me--without the heavy yoke of grades, what was there to plea bargain for? Could students, all students, really be allowed to focus on learning at their own pace, in their own way without the onus of failure constantly hanging over their heads? I was still doubtful. It was becoming apparent that it was me who was quite conditioned and perhaps too well trained. Like a student new to the open school, I kept waiting for someone to tell me what to do or for the bell to ring to structure my now wildly free time.

I learned; I changed and I finally caught on. Now I can never go back to that stultifying world of conventional education. I finally see the wonderful synergy of my own educational experience and how it relates to the true ideals of special education. I realize how the evolution of special education itself has come around to the open school philosophy. Or perhaps it's the other way around. I now know there are many things to learn *from* special education. Moreover, the combination of the best of both of these educational approaches should serve as an excellent foundation for overall school reform.

Allow me to elaborate on the key concepts of this confluence in both practical and philosophical terms.

## A personalized education:

Both special and open education are focussed on the idea that education should be a deeply personal and meaningful experience. In this context it is interesting to note that the special education I.E.P. (individualized educational plan) has evolved into a more holistic well-rounded plan of action that fits the student more than the mold. At many open schools all students design I.E.P.s with their advisors. Usually these are plans that reflect goals and strategies in specific growth domains such as the social, personal and intellectual areas.

In schools where all students have such comprehensive personal plans there is a genuine feeling that all kids are special. One rarely hears the common complaint from "typical" student parents of special treatment for those special kids.

In this sense a school becomes a special place for everyone, one in which collaboration, cooperation and good solid modeling can take place naturally. The curriculum is needs-based and the testing gives way to demonstrated competence and self evaluation. Special education has promoted these concepts for years. Why shouldn't these things be good for all kids, not just those who have been formally staffed, stuffed and labelled?

## The advisory system:

Once again, why not for everyone? Shouldn't every student have a personal advisor and support group to help them connect with the school community and proceed on that sometimes scary road of personal growth?

In conventional schools only the special education kids have this wonderful privilege. They get to know their lab teachers as counselors and friends, not just as math or history teachers. Also,

more often than not, these lab teachers act as generalists teaching in a number of different content areas and usually concentrating on personal growth as the significant measure of success.

Advising, the central focus of open schools, provides real accountability. The kids become "ours" not "theirs". The parents know who to call if they have problems or questions about their children.

The focus on empowerment and ownership:

Certainly all kids need this but special education kids have been traditionally excluded. This open school tenet teaches us that all kids have something unique to contribute; and that as a school community, it behooves us to take advantage of each student's particular strengths and abilities. This takes us a long way from the deficit model that saps spirit and strength from all educational communities.

Also, it is interesting to note that surprising leadership skills emerge in this kind of supportive, "safe" atmosphere. Kids who would normally be completely out of the mainstream and extremely alienated in other kinds of school settings suddenly come alive as organizers, planners and speakers in the school governance setting. Open schools have been practicing shared decision making for years. So far this liberating and sometimes frustrating process is just a catch phrase being tossed around by educational reformers.

Special educators have also been guilty of giving lip service to some of their values. The current term "inclusion" is being discussed in some circles as a radical new concept for genuine kinds of integration for special education students. One look no further than the open school model to see real life inclusion in action as part and parcel of a community of learners. Everyone feels included in this type of setting.

The experiential life skills focus:

Once again a basic thrust of open education is tied into the philosophy of special education. Students in the open school get to practice real life skills like planning for trips, using the telephone and being integral parts of groups in natural settings.

Community service, apprenticeships and career exploration are important parts of the open school curriculum. Special educators have

been stressing the importance of such experiences for years. Unfortunately, conventional settings have not been very amenable, often treating such experiential components as either extra-curricular or as special privileges for honor roll students or student council members.

School reformers should pay heed here. The focus once again is on personal growth and internalizing learning. These things are obviously difficult to measure but if the focus is on demonstrated competence outcomes become quite clear. Both special and open education have much to offer in this area. Too often in the debates about test scores and grades we lose track of what we really want our kids to be like when they leave school. As Art Combs once asked: Why should we have to choose between these two skewed outcomes: the smart but maladjusted kid or the well-rounded dope?

The joy of learning:

Finally what greater benefit from two dynamic educational philosophies than a true feeling of the pleasure learning! Both open and special education values include the sense that learning takes place all the time, that everyone can do it and that the process itself is inherently joyful. The evidence indicates that open school students like school, want to be there and feel that learning is fun. Special educators have long waged the battle of school phobia with their students by providing them

with a sense of support and comfort in the school setting. Isn't it time that we realized that this feeling for the joy of learning is the ultimate outcome of any educational process?

And so it appears that my own educational and personal paths have mysteriously merged, that my discovery of the open school and my background in special education have followed naturally down one road. What I have learned from each has helped mold me as a person and as a teacher.

What I would love to see now is for the awareness and understanding to grow—for educational reformers to realize how much they can learn from these two educational philosophies that were once viewed as outcast or impractical. Perhaps, in this way, we can open new doors and explore different directions for educational change. After all, every one of our kids is special and each deserves an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment available. Isn't it time to realize that inclusion is a good idea for everyone? Open schools show us the way: a very special education for everyone.