I am disappointed with the outcomes of special education. I used to say special education did not work, or the system was broken, or we cannot "cure" disabilities. What I really meant was that I was disappointed. Disappointed that youth with disabilities were not finding more joy in their lives. Disappointed that regardless of how hard I or my colleagues tried we never seemed to find the methods to significantly increase the quality of life of youth with disabilities.

The most popular solutions being proposed to improve special education today do not resonate with my heart. The proliferation of more-intensive, relentless individualized instruction does not convince me things will get better. Nor do inclusion in general education classes in neighborhood schools, whole-language reading instruction, direct instruction, cooperative learning, cross-age peer tutoring, wraparound services, transition planning, or more early intervention programs. Not that these ideas are not worthy of advocacy; they certainly are. I just lack faith that any, or all of them in combination, will significantly change the life status of youth with disabilities.

I hold many of these frustrations inside of me. However, I believe the school reform movement may provide a vehicle for action that can lead to a school system, and eventually a social system, that is more caring and tolerant of diversity—diversity of culture and heritage, as well as diversity of talents and skills. Perhaps I am living in a pipe dream, but it is a dream, a vision, that holds out hope for me.

What I need, and what I think the field needs, is a vision, or what Postman (.1996) called a narrative, "a story--not any kind of story, but one that tells of origins and envisions a future, a story that constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority, and above all, gives
a sense of continuity and purpose” (p. 5). As I think about a narrative for public schools and special education, I keep coming back to the questions posed by Goodlad and his colleagues: "What are public schools for in a democratic society? What should they be for and for whom? What is the relationship between the interests of the individual, the family, the community, the state, and society?” (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990, p. xi).

The current school reform movement has been dominated by the notion that schools need higher academic standards. When A Nation at Risk (National Commission' on Excellence in Education, 1983) was published, America's decline in the global economy was seen as an indication that individual Americans are less competent than in the' past. School reform became an attempt to develop a list of standards that all children should achieve and a process for assessing students against these standards. The majority of citizens view the primary goal of public education as the acquisition of marketplace-derived skills and knowledge by students so they can compete for jobs. This is the utilitarian individualism described by Bellah and his colleagues (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985): Get what you can, all you can, however and whenever you can.

The notions proffered in this movement seem too narrow and too driven by market values. If Rifkin (1995) is correct, there will be a serious shortage of jobs in the future and a great proportion of citizens--far more than just those with disabilities--will fail in the quest to secure one. As I think about youth with disabilities fitting into this system of standards and assessments, I have nightmares that mirror the current situation. I am reminded of Voices From the Inside (Poplin & Weeres, 1992) and the authors' finding that unless school reform movements take into account the relationship issues between students and teachers, administrators and parents, and others, there will be no meaningful change within the schools. The major issue facing schools today is how to teach people from diverse backgrounds how to get along together with equity and justice. If educational reform is to have a
serious and positive influence on the lives of our youth, I believe there must be more than a set of academic standards.

A second type of school reform that is being discussed is not a new one. It is one that views schools as centers for the advancement of democracy and the development of citizens who are actively involved in the democratic process (Glickman, 1993; Goodlad et al., 1990). In this narrative public schools are to educate the masses to be effective citizens as opposed to simply trained workers and individual entrepreneurs. This notion proposes that schools, in addition to developing individual skills and knowledge, have a co-priority of teaching citizenship. Best articulated by John Dewey, this proposal includes the teaching of citizenship skills and the development of a school environment that is democratic.

Dewey described democracy as more than a form of government; he saw it also as a process for associated living, 'of conjoint communicated experience" (1944, p. 87). Democracy provides a framework for people to negotiate how they choose to live together. As stated by Wolin (1989, p. 103),

Democracy really does come down to people trying to cooperate, to make common decisions in contexts where there's great diversity and strong conflict. The problem is not to come to the most rationally justifiable decision as an economist might make it. It's a problem of trying to come to a decision in which there are conflicting legitimate claims. Democracy involves a capacity to deal with differences, and to respect them.

Under this notion democracy becomes a Process for shared decision making concerning how we as individuals will live in community.
As Waker (1983) has noted, the public schools fill an intermediate space between family and the larger society. In this space, schools are responsible for preparing students to be good citizens, to be responsible individuals who can have happy and productive lives, and to be contributors to the larger society. Schools are the primary societal institution for preparing people to transition from the smaller communities of family and friends to the community of the whole.

Special education can be viewed as a method of distributing education to a specific group of students who have not benefited equally from typical schooling. The first step was to open the schoolhouse door to all students, regardless of disability. However, simply being in the schoolhouse was not sufficient for these students, so additional educational procedures were added: individualized plans, specialized instruction, related services. These forms of specialization have not resulted in a valued place in our society for individuals with disabilities. In many ways the issues we have faced in special education are similar to those of other disenfranchised groups in our society. We are all addressing a group of individuals who have not fared well in school or in the larger society. Disenfranchised, excluded from the public square, silenced, marginalized, they exist on the borders of society.

I believe the best thing special educators can do to improve the lives of youth with disabilities is to become involved in the school reform movement. To date, I think we as a group have been fairly silent on the deliberations of school reform. In our silence I think we have deprived youth with disabilities of a voice at the school reform table. A major part of our role as special educators is to be advocates for youth with disabilities, and as such we need to join the fray, to engage in the struggle of larger school reform.

In my narration a portion of the school day would be devoted to civic education. All members of the learning community (students, teachers, administrators, support staff, parents) would come...
together to work out the processes of how to live together in community with liberty and justice for all. The community (and each individual member of the community) would have the responsibility for maintaining a healthy environment, both the physical and the psychological environment.

Perhaps grouped by age, the students, along with a portion of the adults, would take responsibility for maintaining the physical environment. One group might be responsible for the inside of the school building, another for the grounds, another for preparing food, yet another for public art—the possibilities are limitless. Not replacing the workers who have responsibility for these areas but assisting them, the groups would take responsibility for the common good of the community. All members, male and female, rich and poor, those with disabilities and those without, would share this responsibility.

Each group would also have some responsibility for the psychological well-being of the community: for conflict resolution, for developing and implementing group workshops on creating a caring community, for developing activities that unite the entire community. Each group would have representation in the governance of the community, in developing a code of conduct, and in enforcing the code of conduct. Finally, each group would be involved in an outreach project to the community outside the school building.

Within these activities there undoubtedly would be many instances of conflicting legitimate claims that would need to be resolved through dialogue and deliberation. There would be many instances of differences of opinion and cases in which some form of complex equity was needed to ensure justice. Because all these conflicts are prevalent in the adult community, this proposed school setting would truly be an apprenticeship for democracy.

The other portion of the school day would be devoted to individual student acquisition of
academic skills and knowledge. I passionately believe that schools do need to teach skills and knowledge to all students to the highest standard possible. The methods developed to accomplish this could take many forms. For example, there might be all-female algebra classes, or African American groups, or advanced physics, or remedial reading. These forms would be determined by the needs of the students and the creativity of members of the organization. The need for total inclusion in these classes would be eliminated because of the inclusion of all students in the other portion of the day, the part focusing on conjoint living.

I am not interested in starting another movement that cumulates in a law. Been there, done that, not again! Rather, I think we should join as players in a movement like the one defined by Palmer (1992). Palmer defined two forms of system change: the organizational approach, which focuses on laws and rules and regulations, and the movement approach. The movement process begins when individuals question the current structure or purpose of an organization, then find others who share their concerns and enter into dialogue and deliberation. As their vision grows, they begin to persuade others of their beliefs, and a movement forms that can change the organization. That is the approach I want to follow.

If we are to be successful in coming together in community to formulate a new narrative for public education, we will need to develop our dialogue and deliberation skills. Bohm in his booklet On Dialogue (1990) defined dialogue as developing meaning through people and between people. To accomplish shared meaning involves being committed to trying to understand what others think about a topic rather than trying to convince others that your idea is right. Dialogue, so defined, is a process a group of people who are interested in understanding one another undertake. Shared meaning occurs when each member of the group understands what each other person believes about the topic. Dialogue (as opposed to debate, where the outcome is that one idea wins out over the
Deliberation is the choosing, by a group, of one idea over many ideas, of one course of action over many courses of action. ‘Deliberation is the act of weighing carefully ....

When we deliberate, we evaluate the consequence of various options and, most of all, the views of others’ (Mathews, 1996, p. 279). Deliberation implies that a democratic process is used to arrive at a group decision that includes contributions from all members and the resolution is shared by the majority of the members.

I think general education needs to adopt the democracy-based school reform vision. I think special educators need to be actively engaged in ensuring that this type of reform is adopted. The narrative of democratic schools provides a vision of schools that have as co-priorities individual achievement of market-oriented skills and civic skills and knowledge. Equal time and resources should be expended on each of these priorities. If this were so, I think schools would look and feel much different from schools today. In these schools, youth with disabilities would have a valued place. The graduates of such schools would be committed to reconstructing our society in line with democratic principles. The resulting society would offer a valued place in community for all citizens, those with and without disabilities. This is the type of society I want to live in, I want for my children and grandchildren, I want for all children. This is the narrative I want to guide my work.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

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