Can Inclusion Work? A Conversation with Jim Kauffman and Mara Sapon-Shevin

John O'Neil

To what extent should schools provide services to students with disabilities in regular classrooms? Jim Kauffman and Mara Sapon-Shevin debate the potential and pitfalls of trying to make schools more inclusive.

Mara, you're a supporter of more inclusive schools. How do you define inclusion, and what's your rationale for wanting schools to be more inclusive?

Sapon-Shevin: The vision of inclusion is that all children would be served in their neighborhood schools, in the "regular classroom" with children their own age. The idea is that these schools would be restructured so that they are supportive, nurturing communities that really meet the needs of all the children within them: rich in resources and support for both students and teachers.

As far as a rationale, we should not have to defend inclusion—we should make others defend exclusion. There's very little evidence that some children need segregated settings in which to be educated. At another level, we know that the world is an inclusive community. There are lots of people in it who vary, not only in terms of disabilities, but in race, class, gender, and religious background. It's very important for children to have the opportunity to learn and grow within communities that represent the kind of world they'll live in when they finish school. So we should begin with the assumptions that all children are included and that we must meet their needs within an inclusive setting.


Mara Sapon-Shevin

Jim, some critics say that special education has emerged as the place to put kids who "don't fit" in traditional classrooms. Would you agree that many schools are too quick to remove children from regular classrooms? And if so, then why not seek ways to meet their special needs in regular classrooms?

Kauffman: A lot of schools do move too quickly to remove kids from a regular classroom. But many others are too reluctant to consider alternatives to the regular class. I'm convinced that we *must* maintain the alternative of moving kids to other places when that appears necessary in the judgment of teachers and parents.

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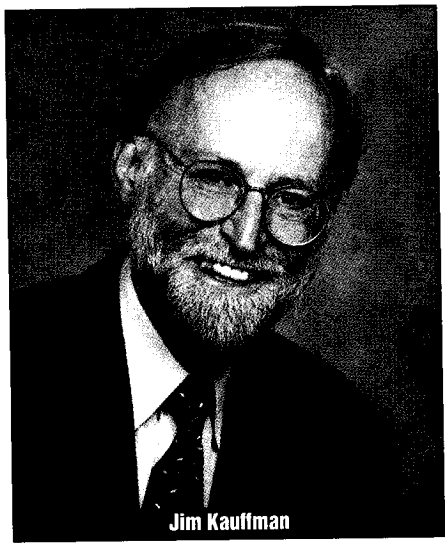
> —Sapon-Shevin

Educators have to defend every placement decision, inclusive or otherwise. Sure, we ought to meet special needs in a regular class when that's possible. But there isn't anything wrong with meeting special needs outside the regular class if that is required. In fact, the law and best practice say we must consider both possibilities.


Jim Kauffman

"We need different instruction for different kids, and you can't have all types of instruction happening in the same place at the same time."
—Kauffman

Mara, Jim supports the idea of maintaining a continuum of possible placements, ranging from a regular classroom to a special separate school. Do you agree?

Sapon-Shevin: Clearly, what we need is a continuum of *services*, but that's not the same as a continuum of placements. To deny children with special needs some type of service, whether it's speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, or something else, is not what inclusion's about. Inclusion is saying: How can we meet children's individual educational needs within the regular classroom context—the community of students—without segregating them?

The problem with maintaining this "continuum of placements" is that it keeps districts from making the far-reaching changes they need to make. They continue to try to fix special education or make this dual system of regular and special education work better.

In many places, special education has become a kind of safety valve that allows schools to keep doing business as usual—labeling, sorting, and segregating students. You can see that when you look at different schools. While one school is able to teach large numbers of students with disabilities in regular classrooms, others refer every other child to special education.

How do you respond to that, Jim? It does appear that some schools manage to serve all kids in regular classrooms, while others almost reflexively place students elsewhere.

Kauffman: I agree that there are differences in the capacity of schools and teachers to deal with differences. But we don't have research showing that *all* students can be taught well in regular classrooms and regular schools. Reflexive placement decisions are bad practice and illegal, whether the reflex is to place children in regular classrooms or elsewhere.

Trying to force everybody into the inclusion mold promises to be just as coercive as trying to force everybody into the mold of special class or institution. There are wide differences in children's needs and the kinds of environments that can address those differences. Inclusion is going to be great for some kids, and some parents will love it. The opposite is also true. I believe in giving options to parents and kids. A continuum of placement options is sensible; it's also the law.

Much of the support for special education in the first place came from parents and advocates for disabled students. Are they sold on inclusion?

Kauffman: Some are, but certainly not all. If you talk to parents of kids with disabilities, there are wide differences in the kind of school or the kind of place that they want their child to attend. Quite a number of parents want their child in a special class or in a special school. Many parents fought for that option, and many parents will fight for it again.

Mara, what would you say to parents who argued strongly for their child to be in a special class or a special school? Should their choice take precedence?

Sapon-Shevin: I would want to sit down with those parents to find out, very carefully, about their hopes for that child. But I have never, ever met a parent of a child with disabilities who did not hope that that child would someday have friends and connections with the broader community—not just with the community of other children with autism, for example, or the community of other people who are blind.

Some parents and advocates for children with disabilities have strenuously objected to the move toward inclusion because they see it as a way for districts to cut costs and to reduce services to their children. Don't they have good reason to worry that inclusion is not being done to help their kids, but is being done in the name of convenience or cutting costs?

Sapon-Shevin: Do they have reason to worry? Absolutely. Inclusion without resources, without support, without teacher preparation time, without commitment, without a vision statement, without restructuring, without staff development, won't

work. This leads some people to say we shouldn't do it. My conclusion is that, knowing all that we know about what it takes to make it happen right, we'd better do it right.

There are children who are dumped into classrooms in the name of inclusion, when in fact, nothing is in place to make that an inclusive classroom except that they've put a child with significant disabilities into it. That's not a problem about inclusion; it's irresponsible planning, irresponsible fiscal management, irresponsible teaching. But to call that inclusion is a real mistake.

Inclusion is much bigger than special education, much bigger than individual classrooms; it's even much bigger than the school. Inclusion really calls for a fundamental restructuring of the school districts and the schools. It means changes in the curriculum, changes of pedagogy, in staff allocation, teacher education, and so on.

But, if I were a parent, telling me that schools need to be restructured for inclusion to work would worry me. All that restructuring will take a long time, but my child's in school this year. Isn't that a valid concern?

Sapon-Shevin: I've been an expert witness in quite a few lawsuits in which parents were suing districts because they wanted their child more fully included, and the districts were reluctant to do so. I think these parents were very realistic about what kinds of major restructuring may need to happen eventually and what kinds of changes need to happen right away.

In any case, the kinds of changes that parents who advocate inclusion want are changes that end up being beneficial for all children. I do not see situations in which an effort to do inclusion has in any way minimized or damaged efforts to make school programs more responsive. I see lots of examples of inclusion efforts improving education for *all* kids. A lot of the "best" practices that are now being advocated—authentic assessment, portfolios, an emphasis on critical thinking, collaborative planning, teamwork—they're all absolutely complementary and part and parcel of an inclusion program.

Jim, much of the support for inclusion seems to be coming from people who are dissatisfied with the outcomes of special education. Some people think that students with disabilities will benefit socially from being in regular classrooms, and they certainly wouldn't do any worse on educational outcomes. How do you respond to that?

Kauffman: Well, there are two points to consider. One is that some studies do show that students have performed better in pull-out programs than in the regular class. The other point is that it's far more important to improve instruction for kids in alternative settings than to try to get all kids into regular classes.

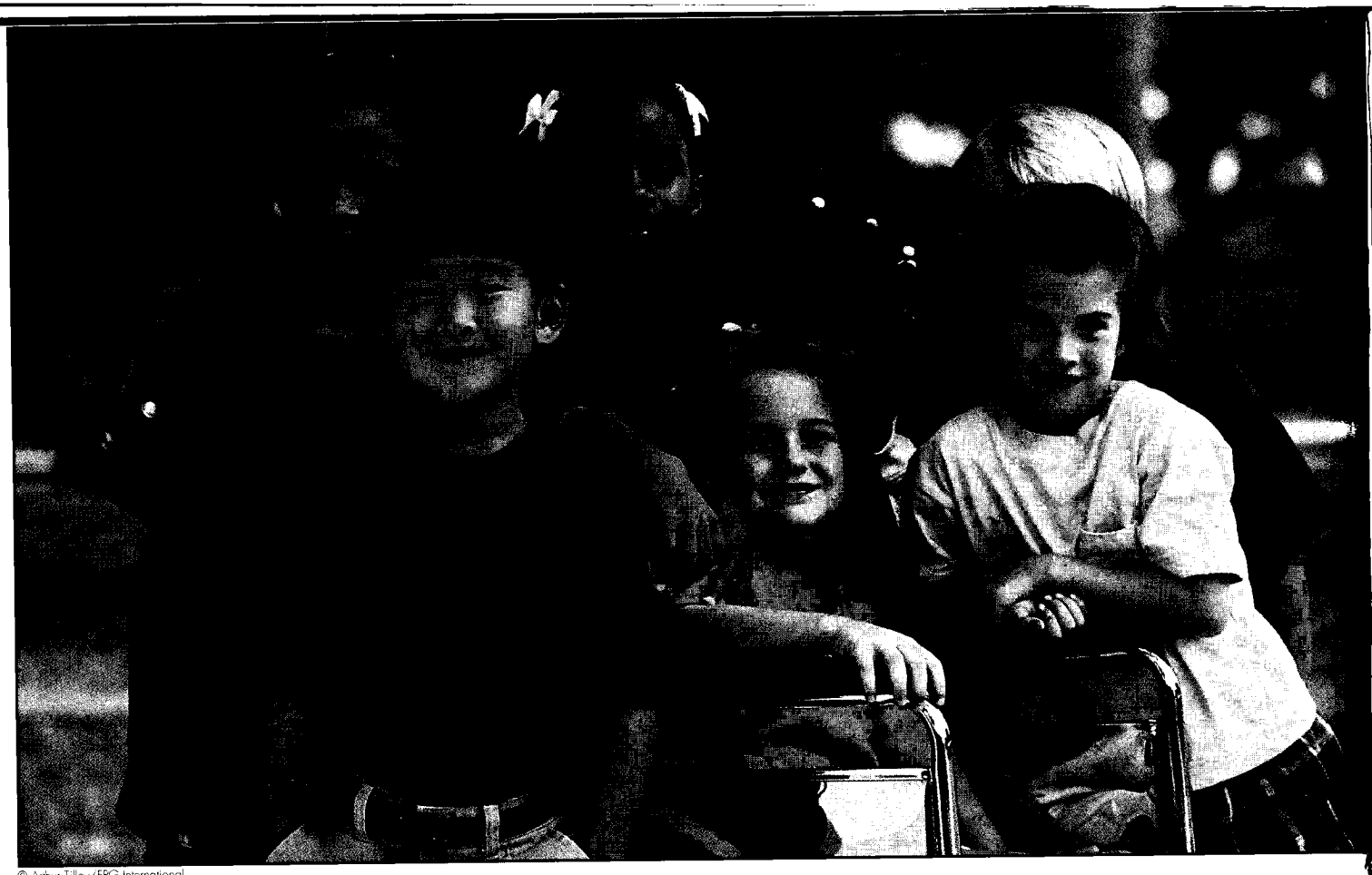
The fact is, we need different instruction for different kids, and you can't have all types of instruction happening in the same place at the same time. Some kids learn very well through an exploratory approach, for example, but others don't learn well this way. Direct instruction is going to produce much better outcomes for them. I think the literature is very clear on that. Some, like deaf kids, need special instruction that can't be provided in a regular class. Many kids with severe emotional or behavioral disorders need a more supportive environment than any regular classroom can possibly provide. Besides, research on inclusion shows that the results for many kids are disappointing. It is possible for kids to do worse, both academically and socially, in inclusive settings than in alternative placements.

Sapon-Shevin: When Jim says that there's research that shows that children in segregated classrooms do better than children in inclusive classrooms, you have to ask: Better at what? Better at spelling? Or better at making friends? Better at being part of the community? Better at being connected with other people? I'm not saying that one sacrifices academic knowledge by moving toward inclusion, but if you look at the differences in terms of children's social connections, children's friends, children's being part of a community, there is absolutely no way that a child in a segregated classroom can learn to be part of the broader community.

Kauffman: Well, let's talk some about the word *segregation.* Certainly racial segregation is a great evil, and segregation that is forced and universal and unrelated to legitimate educational purposes certainly is wrong. But when separate programs are freely chosen and placement decisions are made on a case-by-case basis—not forced, not universal—I think it's inappropriate to call that segregation.

If you ask kids, you'll find many who say that they want to be in a special school, or that they like their special class. I think we should listen to them. And, yes, some have better social experiences in special schools or classes.

Mara said earlier that the world is an inclusive place. That's not really



true in many ways. We're not all included in the same place doing the same or parallel activities; we go to many different places for different purposes. We may go to different places of worship and different places of work, for example, but that doesn't exclude us from being part of other communities outside those places, and it doesn't demean us. We ought to celebrate a diversity of places where we learn and work and play and have friends.

Sapon-Shevin: I think it's a complete rewriting of history to say that special education placements have been freely chosen. If you look at the over-representation of children of color in special education classrooms, if you look at the vast numbers of children who are never given a choice of the inclusive placement, it's a real mistake to say that these parents or children are freely choosing to be segregated.

When children report that they would rather be in a segregated classroom, very often what they're telling you is that there is something about that regular classroom that isn't hospitable and accepting. Of course they want to exit that setting. But removing kids doesn't do anything to change the nature of that regular classroom setting to make it a more warm and welcoming community.

Mara, if a school or district were to move toward inclusion, what specifically would it need to do to make it work?

Sapon-Shevin: Again, we shouldn't think of choosing between special education services and regular classrooms as they currently look, but to rethink, restructure, and recreate a different kind of regular education classroom. These would be classrooms in which, for example, curriculum is flexible and appropriate for different levels and modalities. There would probably be things like thematic instruction, cooperative learning, authentic assessment—practices that are really encouraging, and foster individualized and cooperative learning activities.

But surely there are students with very profound disabilities who have different needs than just thematic learning, for example.

Sapon-Shevin: That's true, but there are ways of addressing those needs. For example, aides are often assigned to help children who need additional kinds of supports. Some people are finding that it's much more helpful to think of that aide as someone who also supports the entire classroom. We need to move away from the kind of isolation where we have one teacher who is in charge of 30 kids. Instead, we need to say: How do we arrange classrooms where there may be two or three adults who share responsibility and expertise and collaborate to meet the needs of a wide range of learners? I think there are some fundamental ways of restructuring that really make it much more possible to meet a diverse range of needs.

Jim, do you think Mara has identified the kinds of supports that would be needed, or do you think she's underestimating it?

Kauffman: I think she's underestimating, especially for kids with learning disabilities and emotional or behavioral disorders. Although it sounds very engaging and intriguing, I

doubt that it's possible to provide all needed services in one place at the same time for all the types of children one might have. People are eager to say that they don't exclude anybody from a particular classroom, but there is no credible research showing that the regular classroom can actually provide superior services for all kids with disabilities.

But do you think that techniques like thematic instruction, using adults in the classroom more flexibly, and so on, will help make inclusion work?

Kauffman: They're insufficient. I think all of them have some merit and can be of some help to some kids. But there just isn't sound research to support the idea that the practices Mara is mentioning are effective for instructing all kids with learning and behavior problems or other disabilities.

I agree with Mara that inclusion should be the "default" setting for schools, and it is so by law. But there are children for whom the default setting is inappropriate, and there are many parents and teachers who feel that these practices that Mara refers to are not going to be adequate to meet the needs of their kids. And many of those parents and teachers are correct.

Obviously, there are strong arguments on both sides of the inclusion debate. What do you foresee happening with inclusion in schools?

Kauffman: The movement has been going strong for a decade, and I think it's already had a major impact. It's seen as the thing to do, and it's taken on a bandwagon effect that is gaining momentum. I have really mixed feelings about that because I'm a supporter of inclusion for kids for whom it's appropriate. I think we have an obligation to try to make accommodations for kids in a regular classroom.

On the other hand, I see a lot of dumping of kids and a lot of pretense about what's happening with inclusion. My fear is that inclusion will be very poorly implemented and pushed to destructive extremes. As a result, we may have a counter movement that will result in more—not less—needless separation of kids.

What I hope happens is that people come back to the principles articulated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. We should ask first "What does this child need?" and then ask "What's the least restrictive environment in which we can provide these services?"

For many kids, but not all, the least restrictive place is the regular classroom. But if we lose placement options, we're going to fail a large number of kids. Eventually, and I hope very soon, people will recognize this and reject the radical rhetoric that calls for the full inclusion of all kids with disabilities in regular classrooms.

Mara, where do you see the inclusion movement going?

Sapon-Shevin: Certainly, the goal is not going to go away: the idea that we want to create a world in which all children are welcome, in which all children grow up comfortable with, knowledgeable about, and supportive of, all kinds of other children. Inclusion is consistent with multicultural education, with wanting to create a world in which many more people have opportunities to know, play, and work with one another. So I can't foresee the many people who have fought so hard for their children's right to be full members of the community changing their minds.

> "Inclusion will succeed to the extent that it links itself with other ongoing restructuring efforts."
> —Sapon-Shevin

Of course, I also worry a lot that school districts will do inclusion badly, that they'll leap into it with no planning or preparation.

But in general, I see educators recognizing that we need to create schools and classrooms that meet the needs of all children. And I really believe that we'll see many more innovative, creative ways of providing services. We might find that multi-age grouping is most conducive to working with diversity. Maybe we'll have teachers taking more initiative in designing curriculum, and we'll find ways to prepare them and to help them collaborate with aides and support staff in new ways.

Inclusion will succeed to the extent that it links itself with other ongoing restructuring efforts: with the detracking movement, authentic assessment, site-based management, and so on. Restructuring means looking at not just what kind of classrooms we want, but what kind of a world we want, and how we prepare children to be members of that broader community. ■

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