Canaries in the Coal Mine

Who could forget the image of the Little Rock Nine—students requiring the protection of federal troops to force the integration of the racially segregated high school in Little Rock, Arkansas? Much like canaries in a coal mine, metaphorically these students “tested” the system, clearing the way for all who followed. Students of education history know that though the struggle for civil rights was primarily geared toward achieving racial equity in public life, the ensuing legislation—especially the landmark Brown v. Board of Education case—influenced the nation’s perspective on equal education opportunity. That the case for civil rights was significantly played out in our education system speaks to the school’s special place in developing and reflecting American culture. As schools go, the nation follows.

It’s not hard to make the connection between Brown’s focus on equal opportunity, regardless of race, and the ensuing legislation on students with disabilities. The 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, reauthorized in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), appropriately turned the lens on providing the 6.8 million children and youths who have disabilities with an equal education opportunity.

A less common connection, however, is that these students also serve as figurative canaries in the coal mine because strategies to ensure their success inevitably help us to gauge the viability of the system as a whole. When we prioritize making provisions to ensure the best quality education for students with disabilities, we inevitably raise the bar for all intervention strategies. Planning special education services and early intervention strategies helps all education stakeholders facilitate successful special education interventions, such as the Individualized Education Program (IEP). In just two months since he started school, his vocabulary and desire to communicate have increased, and his motor skills have improved. My colleague’s eyes shine when she shares that her son called her “Mama” for the first time!

My point in sharing this experience is not to sentimentalize, but rather to reiterate the important role that parents play in this equation, and to illustrate the characteristics that facilitate successful special education interventions, such as early intervention and support networks that include parents, schools, and coordinated services, benefit all children. For example, although IEPs have long been used to support students with disabilities, more recently they are being used for struggling students in regular education classrooms as well.

Today, my colleague’s son is making significant progress in his classroom. And though we don’t know yet what he will be when he grows up, we do know that, not unlike a canary testing the air quality of mines, his journey will help us to develop new learning strategies and support networks for the students that follow.
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