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ABSTRACT

Federal legislation for educating students with disabilities guides the selection of educational placements on the basis of the least restrictive environment, which must encourage the promotion of social interaction between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers and must provide students an appropriate education. Some advocacy groups believe that social interaction is, itself, the appropriate education for students with disabilities, and reject the idea of special education placements. These full inclusionists believe that special education placements are inherently unequal and that their elimination will result in transformation of regular classrooms into more responsible, resourceful, and humane systems. However, the "separate is unequal" position fails to recognize that special education programs can be nurturing, demanding, and empowering in a way that mainstream education is not. Good special education is individualized, in contrast to regular education's "one size fits all" approach. The full inclusionists presume to speak for everyone despite the fact that several advocacy groups have issued public statements strongly endorsing special education placement options. Full inclusionists, who generally advocate for children with mental retardation, cannot seek their policy agenda only for children with mental retardation, as such a qualification would be construed as support for special education placements and their children may be the ones so placed. (Contains 24 references.) (JDD)

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Running head: SEPARATE IS SOMETIMES BETTER

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Separate Is Sometimes Better:
A Case for Keeping Special Education Placements

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Separate Is Sometimes Better:

A Case for Keeping Special Education Placements

For more than a decade, a debate has simmered within the disability community about how best to reform special education services. Thanks to two new ingredients, it is now boiling over, aggravating many in special and regular education. The first of these catalysts are the full inclusionists, of which there are two kinds. One type argues for a complete dismantling of special education: no more special education placements, no more special education students, no more special education teachers (e.g., S. Stainback & W. Stainback, 1992). The other variant of full inclusionist says special educators should provide services to disabled (and nondisabled) students, but only in regular classrooms (e.g., Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993). What both types have in common--what makes them full inclusionists--is the belief that all children should be in the education mainstream full time.

The second catalyst roiling the waters are school administrators and fiscal conservatives who have seized on full inclusion as a strategy to reduce special education costs (e.g., Leo, 1994). Although we are sympathetic to the too-little-money-to-go-around problem, and whereas we recognize that in some districts too many students are placed in special education programs, we believe full inclusion is tantamount to throwing the proverbial baby out with the bath. In this article, we first describe the case for full inclusion; second, we argue why it is wrongheaded; and last, we explain how it is turning friends into adversaries.

Least Restrictive Environment

We begin by defining a basic principle in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), our most important federal law for educating students with disabilities. The principle is called the "least restrictive environment," or LRE. Its purpose is to guide the selection of educational placements for special-needs students. The LRE concept has two parts. The first

part encourages the promotion of social interaction between students with disabilities and their nondisabled, age-appropriate peers. It says teachers and others must "assure to the maximum extent appropriate, disabled children...are educated with children who are not disabled." As a practical matter, this part of the LRE principle encourages educators to place students with disabilities in the mainstream alongside nondisabled children.

The second part of the LRE concept requires that special-needs students be provided an appropriate education, or one that permits the child to benefit from instruction. It says: "...special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of disabled children from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature and severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily." Implicit is the recognition that the mainstream may not be capable of providing an appropriate education to all students. Senator Robert Stafford of Vermont, an original sponsor of the IDEA, was explicit on this point. He said that when developing the LRE notion, Congress was well aware that the regular classroom may be harmful to some special-needs students (Stafford, 1978). Accordingly, Congress developed a "continuum of alternate placements"--from part-time resource programs to self-contained classes in regular schools to separate day and residential treatment facilities--to ensure an appropriate education to all students with disabilities. This continuum became part of the regulations governing the IDEA and the LRE principle.

Thus, legally speaking, an LRE must satisfy two criteria: It must be located as closely as possible to normally developing, age-appropriate peers and it must provide students with disabilities an education appropriate to their unique learning needs. When a student is not benefiting from instruction in a regular class, a compromise must be struck between the legitimate social needs and the equally valid educational needs of the child. A majority of the

disability community in this country supports this two-part definition of LRE and the logic for balancing social and educational needs. However, a small but influential group of advocates for children with mental retardation rejects all this...and more.

A Case for Full Inclusion

Why all children should be in the regular classroom. According to many of those who reject the LRE notion, including The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps and the Arc (formerly, the Association for Retarded Citizens), schools should have but two essential and related goals for children with disabilities: to improve their social competence and to change the attitudes of teachers and students without disabilities who, some day, will become parents, taxpayers, and service providers (e.g., Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). LRE critics argue further that this can happen only when special-needs students are placed in mainstream or integrated settings: "The rationale for educating students with severe disabilities in integrated settings is to ensure their normalized community participation by providing them...instruction in the skills...essential to their success in the social...[settings] in which they will ultimately use these skills" (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987, p. 386).

The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, the Arc, and others reject the LRE principle because they refuse to accept the idea that social interaction and appropriate education are different objectives that sometimes compete with each other. Rather, they believe the two are one and the same: Social interaction with nondisabled peers is the appropriate education for students with disabilities. It follows from this belief that any placement outside the regular classroom is inappropriate. These critics, then, not only reject what in their view is the LRE's specious social interaction-appropriate education dualism, but also turn their backs on the entire continuum of special education placement options. At the same time, they advance a policy of

full inclusion, whereby literally all children with disabilities would be in regular classrooms full time.

Why full inclusion for all? Because adherents believe that as long as special education placements exist, the children they care about most--those with mental retardation--most surely will be placed in them. How come? First, they argue, special education historically has served as general education's "dumping ground;" special education has made it too easy for classroom teachers to rid themselves of their "undesirables" and "unteachables." Second, children with mental retardation are frequently viewed by classroom teachers as the most undesirable and unteachable pupils. Full inclusionists say that abolishing resource rooms and separate classes and schools will force mainstream teachers both to deal with the children they heretofore had avoided and, in the process, to transform regular classrooms into a more responsible, resourceful, and humane system.

Why no children should be in special education. Full inclusionists are also opposed to special education placements for reasons that inhere, they say, in educating students apart from the mainstream. Invoking the judgment of the U.S. Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education, which declared racially segregated schools unconstitutional, full inclusionists charge that special education placements are inherently unequal; that is, they stigmatize and create low expectations--first, in the minds of teachers, then in the hearts of students--and reinforce feelings of inferiority, culminating in poor school performance. Indeed, some full inclusionists have denounced special education as the moral equivalent of apartheid (Lipsky & Gartner, 1987) and slavery (S. Stainback & W. Stainback, 1988).

A Case for Special Education Placements

Separate is sometimes better. As provocative as the Brown analogy may be, Kauffman (1989) has argued that it is unfair and misleading: Equating ethnic origin with disability is (a)

demeaning to blacks who suffer discrimination simply because of the color of their skin and (b) trivializes the needs of students with disabilities whose differences require accommodations far more complex than a court ruling that disallows skin color as a criterion for access or opportunity. At minimum, Kauffman's analysis raises questions about whether Brown applies to special education.

Recent actions of judges, politicians, and educators similarly have suggested that "separate is unequal" may not apply to single-sex education or to historically black colleges. For example, in a court case involving the all-male Virginia Military Institute (V.M.I.), the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth District in Richmond ruled in October, 1992 that separate could be equal. A Federal judge in Roanoke, VA, had earlier ruled that V.M.I., a public college, could not justify the exclusion of women based only on gender. But the appeals court recognized the benefits of single-sex education and ordered that women who might want to attend V.M.I. should go to an alternative program devised by the state and subsidized by V.M.I. (Manegold, 1994). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, a women's-studies scholar who testified on behalf of V.M.I., said she had done so because of a commitment to single-sex education and because "we're on the verge of eliminating all institutional choice" (Jaschik, 1994, p. 30).

Responding to a lawsuit in which black plaintiffs maintained that the state of Mississippi was providing inadequate support for black colleges and maintaining a two-tiered, unequal college system, the Board of Trustees for the State Institutions of Higher Learning proposed to close one black campus completely and merge another with a predominantly white university. In response to this proposal, 15,000 black college students, educators, and politicians recently converged on Jackson State University to demonstrate support for black colleges and to express concern that the state of Mississippi appears to be using this desegregation case as a tool for closing black colleges (Mercer, 1994).

V.M.I. and historically black colleges have this in common: Each provides a unique setting or culture addressing the strengths, needs, fears, or dreams of the groups seeking them out; each is nurturing, demanding, and empowering in a way that mainstream education is not and, probably, cannot be. Much the same can be said of many special education programs.

What's special about special education. Although it has become fashionable to complain that special education flat-out doesn't work (e.g., National Association of State Boards of Education, 1992; Shapiro, Loeb, Bowermaster, & Toch, 1993), reviews of research on the effectiveness of resource rooms and self-contained classrooms indicate that many special education programs are superior to regular classrooms for some types of children (e.g., Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Madden & Slavin, 1983; Sindelar & Deno, 1979). Furthermore, descriptive studies of effective special educators suggest that the teachers' organization, intensity, and systematicity of instruction may help their students outperform special-needs students in the mainstream (e.g., Howard-Rose & Rose, 1994). Good special education instruction is also individualized, often through an inductive process. Well-trained special educators depend on a variety of techniques, curricula, materials, motivational strategies, grouping patterns, and an evaluation system that keeps track of student progress. By carefully combining and recombining these instructional techniques, materials, and so forth, while monitoring individual student growth, effective instructional plans are induced. This trial-and-error strategy is in marked contrast to the "one-size-fits-all" approach observed in many regular classrooms (e.g., Baker & Zigmond, 1990; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bishop, 1992; McIntosh, Vaughn, Schumm, Haager, & Lee, 1993).

Gerry Rosenberg, father of 5-year-old Danny who has cognitive and physical disabilities, recently told Congress why his family chose Longview School, a publically supported day treatment program in Gaithersberg, MD, for his son. Commenting on special education's

approach to individualizing instruction, Rosenberg (1994) said, "For students like our son there are no bright road markers to assist in indicating what teaching techniques will work. Longview [School] serves as a laboratory in diagnostic and teaching techniques. [The staff's] wealth of experience allows for constant experimentation in what is appropriate educationally for Danny."

Well-regarded special education day schools and residential programs also offer a comprehensive setting in which instruction can be interwoven throughout the day. This "wrap-around" environment is evident in Cohen's (1994) description of the Lexington School for the Deaf in Queens, NY: "Few public schools can offer what most prelingually deaf children need: a visually oriented setting, communication access to all activities, interaction with deaf peers and deaf adults, and at least minimal sign language fluency on the part of teachers and peers. And no public school can offer the richness and nurturance of a deaf cultural environment" (pp. 55-56).

Those who work with children with severe emotional and behavioral problems refer to this comprehensive environment as milieu therapy, defined by Weisman (1994) as an "environment in which everyday events are turned to therapeutic use. Any activity in a child's day--from refusing to get dressed in the morning to answering a question correctly at school to picking a fight--offers the child-care worker an opportunity to teach, change, or reinforce behavior through therapeutic intervention. [Milieu therapy] aims to seize the moment while it is happening and the child's feelings are still fresh" (p. 46). Weisman describes exemplary residential treatment schools for emotionally and behaviorally disturbed children--places like The Villages, Woodland Hills, The Walker School, Green Chimneys, and Boys Town. "The best institutions," says Weisman, "offer...children a chance at a second childhood. This antidotal second childhood must be highly structured and predictable as well as safe. Treatment communities impose rules, chores, and schedules, and emphasize neatness, cleanliness, and

order. 'Everybody wakes up at 7:30 in the morning,' writes eleven-year-old Robert, describing his day at The Children's Village, where hairbrushes, combs, toothbrushes, and toothpaste tubes are lined up with military precision on bureau tops. 'The first thing we do is make our bed, wash our face, brush our teeth, last but not least put on some clothes. We eat our breakfast by 8:15 and do our chores. At 8:45 we go to school. In school the first thing we do is math, then reading and spelling. We go to lunch at 12:00 noon...'" (p. 52).

We are not suggesting, of course, that all students with disabilities require settings like Longview School, Lexington School for the Deaf, or Boys Town. In fact, relatively few require such organized, intensive, systematic, individualized, and comprehensive approaches. Nor do we suggest that all special education placements are successful; alas, they are not. Moreover, we would be among the first to assert that too many children currently are placed in special education programs. But none of this diminishes the fact that separate is better for some children; that to abolish special education placements in the name of full inclusion is to deprive many of an appropriate education.

What the majority wants. Despite the fact that most full inclusionists are concerned primarily about students with mental retardation (a group that constitutes about one-tenth of all students with disabilities), they presume to speak for everyone when they state without qualification that the regular classroom is the only acceptable placement for special-needs children. They presume to know what is best for all as they push for an end to special education placements despite public statements by the American Council on the Blind, the Commission on the Education of the Deaf, the Council for Children with Behavior Disorders, the Council for Exceptional Children, the Council for Learning Disabilities, Learning Disabilities Association, and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities strongly endorsing special education placement options and, implicitly or explicitly, rejecting full inclusion.

Are these supporters of special education placements less concerned about integration than full inclusionists? Not at all. Supporters and critics of special education placements are equally invested in integration. Supporters, however, recognize that it may be a long-term goal for some children, while some critics insist it be immediate. For supporters, immediate placement in a regular classroom means closing the door on many children's opportunities to learn to read and write; to go to college or vocational school; to control their behavior and to learn to like themselves; to become responsible and productive citizens. In short, supporters of special education placements see such options as means toward an end.

At the same time, the professional and grass-roots groups supporting special education placements do not presume to dictate the placements of children with mental retardation. The position of supporters of special education placements seems best expressed by Bernard Rimland, father of a son with autism and a well-known advocate. Rimland (1993) stated, "I have no quarrel with [full] inclusionists if they are content to insist upon inclusion for their children. But when they try to force me and other unwilling parents to dance to their tune, I find it highly objectionable and quite intolerable. Parents need options" (p. 3).

Unfortunately for those in the disability community who seek solidarity through compromise, full inclusionists cannot permit themselves to stipulate that their policy agenda applies only to children with mental retardation. Such a qualification would be construed by others as support for special education placements. And as long as such options exist for any child, there is a chance that children with mental retardation will not make it to or remain in the mainstream. Full inclusionists' insistence that all acquiesce to their vision reminds us of a few fundamentalist preachers in our adopted home town who declare that the Second Coming requires the conversion of everyone to the teachings of the Bible: All educators must become full inclusionists and work toward the elimination of special education placements; only then can

there be heaven in the schools. Whereas full-time placement in the regular classroom will be appropriate for many children with disabilities, it will fall considerably short of a heavenly experience for others--a prospect that will not go unchallenged by a majority of the disability community.

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