

Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education

Volume 1
Number 9 *Electronic Journal for Inclusive
Education Vol. 1, No. 9 (Fall/Winter 2005)*

Article 4

Winter 2005

Inclusion: Where We've Been, Where We Are, Where We're Going

Marie S. Farmer Ph.D.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ejie>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Special Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Farmer, M. S. (2005). Inclusion: Where We've Been, Where We Are, Where We're Going, *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education*, 1 (9).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education* by an authorized editor of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact library-corescholar@wright.edu.

Inclusion: Where We've Been, Where We Are, Where We're Going

Marie S. Farmer

Georgia College & State University

Abstract

In 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted and its pressure to have all students achieve academically has caused many teachers and administrators to reconsider whether mentally retarded children should be included in regular classes. The purpose of this study was to survey experienced professionals in the field of special education to get their insight about the future role of inclusion for students with mild intellectual disabilities. Members of the Georgia Council on Exceptional Children members were surveyed to find out their expectations for the future of the education of mentally retarded children in the next ten years. While there were differing views, generally the respondents believe that inclusion of mentally retarded children should focus more on socialization aspects and less on academics. This was the model espoused in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. There is some concern for the future of inclusion under current NCLB mandates. NCLB places unrealistic academic demands on mentally retarded students in regular classrooms and does not allow the development of transition skills because of the focus on academic skills. Advocates for Exceptional Children on the national level are now working on a more appropriate application of NCLB in accordance with IDEA guidelines.

Inclusion: Where We've Been, Where We Are, Where We're Going

This paper will investigate the inclusion of mentally retarded children into America's public school system, which has been a hotly debated topic for the past thirty years. The purpose of the review of

literature was to see where we are now regarding inclusion of mildly intellectually disabled students into regular education settings.

Historically, special education first focused on the education of the deaf, then the blind, and later the mentally retarded. The retarded were called idiots, which comes from the Greek language and is an antonym of citizen. This affliction was commonly believed to be the result of demonic possession and was thought to be punishment from God. There were few attempts to educate the disabled until the twentieth century. (Winzer, 1998)

As Edgerton so succinctly pointed out in 1993, mental retardation carries the most significant social stigma. People who are labeled mentally retarded are often considered to be completely incompetent in all areas. Erving Goffman (1963) wrote about the transfer of stigma by association, the belief being that those who are in close association with the retarded somehow pick up the stigma. Laura Bridgman, born in 1829, was rendered deaf and blind when she was two years old. She went to the Perkins Institute in Boston and was taught finger spelling by Samuel Gridley Howe. Laura was very famous, just as Helen Keller was. She had a great interest in helping others who were sick or disabled with one notable exception; she had no regard for those she viewed as intellectually inferior.

Because of the abovementioned beliefs and fears associated with mental retardation, those who were affected were often excluded and segregated from their normal peers. Although there were sporadic attempts to help educate the disabled children of America, it was left mostly to parents to find suitable classes for their children. Advocates were instrumental in the development of special education for the mentally retarded (Yell, 1998).

The progress of inclusion in the United States, since the passage of Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, has been extraordinary. The law was very late in coming, but once it was passed, progress was made in leaps and bounds. This law made provisions for all children to receive a free public education. At the time this law was passed, some states had laws that actually *excluded*

students who were mentally retarded, blind, deaf, or emotionally disturbed from public schools. Only one disabled child in five received a public education in 1970. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s gave the impetus needed to advance the rights of disabled school children (Yell, 1998). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 section 504 was the first legislation to protect the disabled from discrimination based on their disability. This law ordered schools across the nation to open their doors to handicapped students. The law was not enacted until parents of disabled students became advocates for their children and pressured the Secretary of Education to enforce the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Gerry and Benton, 1982). In 1977 the law finally became a reality for the disabled student.

The beginning of early intervention for children with disabilities was 1970 according to Diane Bricker (2000), a pioneer in early intervention for children with handicaps at Peabody University, Nashville. It was discovered that children with disabilities learned new skills from their non-handicapped peers. Ms. Bricker noted that the Peabody studies in the 1970s grouped younger non-disabled students with older students with disabilities to match the developmental ages rather than chronological ages. They found this fostered more interactions between the children (2000). Researchers were excited about the possibilities of interventions that would improve the lives of the handicapped. The seventies and eighties saw the springing up of special education classes virtually everywhere.

However the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 promoted acceptance of individuals with differences in general education classrooms. IDEA encouraged the provision of culturally relevant instruction for disabled learners in mainstreamed classrooms. (History of the Idea) For many students with retardation, IDEA opened the doors of regular classrooms so they could socialize and interact with non-disabled peers. Socialization is a big concern of parents and advocates for the student with retardation for several reasons. While the disabled student sees age-appropriate behavior

modeled by non-handicapped students, the regular students are also benefited by showing tolerance to those who are different from them.

Not surprisingly, my review of the literature revealed inclusion means different things to different people. Programs identified as inclusive vary on several different dimensions. (Odom, 2000) Too often inclusion has been defined in terms of what constitutes least restrictive environments for handicapped students rather than defining inclusion in a positive way. It has frequently been left up to the courts to decide what is a least restrictive environment. School districts, short on funds, have often jumped to conclusions based on court decisions in other districts as to what inclusion (least restrictive environment) means. Too often in special education programs the implementation of inclusion has been reactive (what are the courts likely to say?) rather than proactive (what is best for the child?)

In the nineties, special education students were not being tested like regular students and a push toward including disabled students in state assessments began (Thurlow, 2000). Mentally retarded students make up only a small part of all handicapped students in public schools. Learning-disabled children make up a much larger number of students served in special classrooms. These children have IQs that are average or above average, and they have a specific disability in some area that requires specialized instruction for them to succeed academically. This is not the same as mental retardation. With the advent of standard-based reform, (Thurlow, 2000), came the era of modifications and accommodations for standardized testing of disabled students. This allowed many disabled students to take standardized tests. The blind could use Braille or other adaptations, the deaf could use sign language, the student with attention deficit disorder (ADD) could receive the test in smaller settings, and all special students could receive accommodations to enable them to participate on a more even footing with average students. The mentally retarded child could take more time and have the test read to them. Any accommodation that was used and documented in the special class could be used for state testing.

The passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 has called for all children to read at grade level by grade 3. NCLB has placed severe constraints on schools that do not perform to what many consider unrealistic goals. NCLB is creating serious problems for those who are striving for inclusion of the mentally retarded into regular classes in public schools.

The purpose of this study was to obtain a sense of where the inclusion of mentally retarded students should be headed according to experienced workers in special education in light of our present accomplishments. My hypotheses were that (a) Council on Exceptional Children members would state that inclusion of mentally retarded students into regular classrooms favorably impacts the socialization skills and behavior of disabled children. I also expected the survey's respondents to (b) state that academically, the majority of mentally retarded students are unable to keep pace with their non-handicapped peers and require academic instruction at a slower pace with much more practice than is available in the regular classroom. I also thought that (c) some respondents might note that inclusion helps to break down social barriers and stigmas associated with mental retardation. I expected (d) many to cite conflicts of these goals with NCLB.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were members of the Council for Exceptional Children. CEC members were targeted because of their dedication to special education and the expertise they would bring to the study. The group was comprised of 4 classroom teachers, 3 special education administrators, and 4 college professors. The minimum number of years spent working with mentally disabled students was ten years. Most of the respondents had twenty years or more working with mildly intellectually disabled students. They were all working in Georgia at the time of their response. The grade levels taught spanned preschool to post-secondary. The gender and age of the respondents were not identified.

Instrumentation

A 16 question, open-ended questionnaire was given to CEC members with a request to complete and return by mail. All responses were anonymous. Fourteen questions solicited the respondents' views about inclusion. Two questions related to demographics of the participants. The questionnaire asked the respondents to think about a particular student's successful experience with inclusion and what factors affected the success or failure of that pupil's inclusion into a regular classroom. The questionnaire allowed for answers with some elaboration. See appendix.

Procedures

The survey was given to 26 CEC members. Eleven returned the completed survey; the survey was piloted on a small scale with special education teachers to determine if there were any obvious flaws. None were discerned.

I was allowed to hand out my survey at an executive board meeting of the Georgia CEC members; four surveys were completed at the meeting and handed back to me. I also distributed six surveys to local CEC members; two were handed back to me. The remaining surveys were returned by mail. I allowed four weeks for the completion of the survey.

Results

The responses were studied and the answers to each question were broken down into groups. Similar or same answers were grouped together. The directions told the respondents to think of a successful instance of inclusion of a student with mild mental retardation.

Question 1 asked: At what level did this successful inclusion occur? The respondents were asked to circle either preschool, elementary, middle, secondary, or post-secondary. One participant indicated preschool, 4 participants cited elementary, 2 cited middle, and 3 indicated secondary and 1 post-secondary, which was identified as a sheltered workshop. The survey did not ask if the student was served in a public or private school setting.

Question 2 asked: Did the inclusion get easier or more difficult after the first year? Inclusion became more difficult after the first year for 6 students, while it became easier for 5. Inclusion became easier after the first year for 3 elementary students, 1 middle school student, and 1 secondary student. .

Question 3 asked what are the student's strengths? Social skills were the child's strongest point for 64%, while 27 % answered academics, and 9% indicated the student had no real strengths.

Question 4 asked: What is the participants' definition of successful inclusion of students with mild mental retardation? Successful interaction with peers was thought to be successful inclusion by 18%. A combination of socialization and academic skill acquisition would be the definition of successful inclusion for 45%, and 35% indicated that academic progress would be their criterion.

Question 5 asked if the academic benefit in an inclusion setting was greater or less than expected, and 63% indicated that it was greater than would be expected in a self-contained classroom, 36% said it was less.

Socialization benefits did live up to expectations for 73% of the students (question 6), The disabled students made friends with non-disabled students 73% of the time, (question 7). Question 11 asked if the student had a formal circle of non-disabled friends, and only 45% were said to have achieved this level of socialization. One participant did not understand the question.

In answer to question 8, the group thought the teacher involved with the inclusion of their students was unusually supportive, collaborative, or involved personally (82%). To question 9, they said the teachers employed some type of special skills, or modifications or special delivery while working with 91% of the MID students.

When asked what the teachers did or did not do that contributed to the success of this student (question 10), a variety of answers were obtained. Working with the special education teacher, communicating and planning, and modifying lessons were given by 36%. Peer tutoring and/or buddy learning were mentioned by 18%. Supportive and accommodating teachers (9%), reducing the number

of problems (9%), expectations that the student would join in and be productive (9%), and not singling student out with difficult questions (9%) were all mentioned. Apparently different students needed different support from their regular education teachers. Working with the special education teacher was very important for a third of the students. One response indicated the regular teacher was unable to accommodate the student in any way due to the structure of the school.

Question 12 asked: What would have been the ideal outcome for the student in an inclusive classroom? Achieving both academic and social gains would be ideal according to 45%. Social contacts that continued after school would reflect the ideal for 18%. Passing the state exit exam was ideal for 9%, a combination of inclusion with special education academics would have been the ideal for 9%, and another 9% said the ideal was not achievable due to the school's lack of support.

Question 13 asked what was the most discouraging aspect of inclusion for their particular student? Academics were too difficult in the regular classroom for 45%. Lack of support for inclusion was the most discouraging for 18%, and low expectations for 9%. Another 9% believed lack of peer interaction, and 9% felt that the student's physical handicaps, in addition to her mental disability, were the most discouraging aspect of inclusion.

I was interested in knowing what these CEC members believed to be in store for the future of inclusion. Question 14 asked: What do you foresee in the next five years in regards to the inclusion movement for students with intellectual disabilities, and what do you believe will happen in ten years? Again, there were varied responses, but 45% said they believed there would be some form of modification to the current trend in five years. Inclusion would decrease as long as No Child Left Behind remained in effect according to 9%. The "pendulum would swing back" where the students' needs would be better supported in more restrictive classrooms thought 18%, and 9% foresaw an increase in resource classes and perhaps even separate schools because the handicapped students' needs are not being met in inclusive settings. No one believed the current trend in inclusion would continue

unchanged in the next ten years. Court cases would change inclusion's future said 18%, and another 18% cited lack of job skills as an impetus for change.

Question 15 asked: What are the most important issues for mentally retarded students at this time? Training for work and transition from school is the most important issue for 45% of my respondents, and 45% percent stated that appropriate academics are the big problem facing these students. Socialization was 9% of my participants' most important issue, and "gradual inclusion, as appropriate, not forced" was one response.

Discussion

Clearly, inclusion requires many factors to be successful. The same factors do not impact every disabled child equally. Each child comes to school with a unique set of abilities and disabilities, and it has been the mission of the special education classroom to address these individual differences. Is it possible for the regular classroom to take over this function? Do we want it to?

The CEC members who participated in this survey represent many different parts of Georgia and different levels of involvement with MID children. Their views were diverse as to what makes inclusion work, and what were the most important outcomes of inclusion for mildly intellectually disabled learners. Because they foresee change on the horizon, I think we can say that inclusion will be debated for years to come.

In a relatively short period of time, 31 years, mentally disabled children have moved from being totally excluded from public education in many parts of the country to being included at varying levels in all public school settings. I believe we still have much to learn about what should be expected from the education of these students. Since we have not thoroughly addressed the needs of all "normal" students in general education classrooms, it seems obvious that the needs of special students are likely to be overlooked or simply not met as well in regular settings that do not employ significant modifications and accommodations.

It would appear that elementary students fare better in inclusion settings than other grade levels. There could be a number of reasons for this. Elementary settings may be more nurturing and less exacting than higher-level classrooms. Elementary students may be more accepting than older students of students with differences. The curriculum may be more in line with the needs of the mildly mentally disabled student than middle and secondary grade curriculum. The majority of my survey respondents said inclusion became more difficult over time.

Obviously, if there are major behavioral or social problems the student's likelihood of success is jeopardized. Social skills are an asset according to the respondents. The best outcome for mildly disabled students seems to depend on the needs of the student, not just academic achievement. Attaining academic success may be part of successful inclusion but it is not considered the only criteria for the majority of my participants. Socialization is still considered a big benefit of inclusion. It was implied that the student's feelings about himself was a factor in his ability to succeed or fail in inclusive settings.

There are many concerns about the future of including mildly mentally retarded students into regular classrooms that are being forced to attain certain achievement scores or face federal repercussions. Special education teachers across the nation are grappling with what No Child Left Behind means to their students' futures. Principals and administrators are under great pressure to raise test scores in their schools. It would appear to many that No Child Left Behind overlooked the mildly intellectually disabled student. A small percentage of students, (3%), may receive alternate assessments under No Child Left Behind. That does not allow all mentally retarded students in most systems to elect whether to take standardized tests. Students in self-contained mildly mentally retarded classrooms are required to take the CRCT in many Georgia systems and elsewhere.

The availability of appropriate courses for special education students in regular settings has been declining for years. Home Economics, shop classes, and other vocational courses are disappearing.

Special students are often forced to endure classes that in no way address their needs, or retreat to more and more self-contained settings. The CEC members who participated in my survey predict more court cases due to the inappropriate educational options of mildly cognitively disabled students. Several of my participants predicted that the “pendulum would begin to swing the other way,” meaning that academics would become less important than gaining job skills that would help meet transition goals. Obtaining marketable skills should be the highest priority for high mildly mentally retarded students. While there were differing views, generally the respondents believe that inclusion of mentally retarded children should focus more on socialization aspects and less on academics. There is concern for the future of inclusion under current NCLB mandates. NCLB places unrealistic academic demands on mentally retarded students in regular classrooms and does not allow for transition skills to be developed in high school.

References

- Bricker, Diane. (2000). Inclusion: How the scene has changed. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 20(1)*, 14-19.
- Edgerton, R. (1993). *The cloak of competence* (Rev.ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press, 184. APA 229
- Gerry, M. H., & Benton, J. M. (1982). Section 504: The larger umbrella. In J. Ballard, B.A. Ramirez, & F.J. Weintraub (Eds.), *Special education in America: Its legal and governmental foundations* (pp. 41-49).
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice.
- Odom, Samuel. (2000). Preschool inclusion: What we know and where we go from here. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 20(1)*, 20-27.
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Twenty-five years of progress in educating children with disabilities through idea*. Retrieved July 22, 2004 from U.S. Department of Education Web site: <http://www.ed.gov/print/policy/speced/leg/ide/history.html>

Thurlow, Martha. (2000). Standards-based reform and students with disabilities: Reflections on a decade of change. *Focus on Exceptional Children*. 33(3). 1-15.

Winzer, Margaret. (1998). A tale often told: The early progression of special education. *Remedial & Special Education*. 19(4). 212-218.

Yell, Mitchell. (1998). The legal history of special education. *Remedial & Special Education*. 19(4). 219-229.

Appendix

Survey submitted to Georgia CEC members

As you answer the following questions, please think about a successful instance of inclusion of a student with mild mental retardation.

1. At what grade level did this successful inclusion occur?
2. Did inclusion for this student get easier or more difficult after the first year?
3. What were this student's particular strengths?
4. What is your definition of successful inclusion of students with mild mental retardation?
5. Was the academic benefit greater or less than would be expected in a self-contained special education setting?
6. Did the socialization benefits for this child live up to expectations?
7. Did the student make friends with non-disabled students?
8. Were the teachers involved in the education of this student unusually collaborative, supportive, or involved with this student personally?
9. Were the teachers involved with this student using their day-to-day teaching styles or did they utilize special methods?
10. What did the teachers do, or not do, that contributed to the success of this student?
11. Did this student have a formal "circle of non-disabled friends" at this school?
12. What would have been the ideal outcome for this student in an inclusion setting?
13. What was the most discouraging aspect of inclusion for this student?

14. What do you think will most likely happen to the inclusion movement for students with intellectual disabilities in the next five years?

In ten years?

15. What issues do you consider to be most important for mentally retarded students? at this time?

16. How many years have you worked with mentally disabled students?

Are you a classroom teacher? If not, please indicate your position.