

Reading 11.

Brown, L., Long, E., Udvari-Solner, A., Schwarz, P., VanDeventer, P., Ahlgren, C., Johnson, F., Gruenewald, L. & Jorgensen. (1989). Should students with severe intellectual disabilities be based in regular or in special education classrooms in home schools. Journal of the Association for Persons with Severely Handicaps, 14 (1), pp 8-12.

Should Students with Severe Intellectual Disabilities Be Based in Regular or in Special Education Classrooms in Home Schools?

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All students with severe intellectual disabilities should attend the schools they would attend if they were not disabled; that is, their home schools. In a home school, each student must have an individualized educational program (IEP) that requires individualized instruction in chronological age-appropriate regular education classrooms; individual instruction on school grounds, but not in regular education classrooms; and individualized instruction in a wide variety of integrated nonschool environments that will actually be used during nonschool days and hours. The resources necessary to develop, maintain, and enhance an array of social relationships with nondisabled peers and others over long periods of time and individually appropriate therapy services are also considered critical components of each IEP.

The focus here is whether students with severe intellectual disabilities should be based in special education classrooms or in chronological age-appropriate regular education classrooms in home schools. Ten challenging issues related to these two options are addressed.

DESCRIPTORS: community integration, educational placement, mainstreaming, natural environment

The Special and Regular Education Classroom: Options in the Home School

Each public agency shall insure: that special classes, separate schooling or other removal of handicapped children from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the handicap

This paper was supported by Grants G008630388 and H029D80019 to the University of Wisconsin and the Madison Metropolitan School District from the U.S. Department of Education, OSERS, Divisions for Educational Services and Personnel Preparation.

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is such that education in *regular classes* with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (34 CFR 300.550 (2) [Least Restrictive Environment])

Each public agency shall insure: that to the maximum extent *appropriate*, handicapped children, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not handicapped. (34 CFR 300.550 (a)(1) [Least Restrictive Environment]).

There are those, including some of the authors, who believe that all students with severe intellectual disabilities should attend their home schools but should be based in special education classrooms therein. There are others, including some of the authors, who are convinced that basing students with severe intellectual disabilities in environments in which they would not be based if they were not disabled is segregative and therefore unacceptable. To them, all students, including the lowest intellectually functioning 1%, must be based in chronological age-appropriate regular education classrooms in their home schools. Although both groups disagree about which placement is superior, they agree that simply basing a student either in a special or in a regular education classroom in a home school is a necessary but insufficient condition for a minimally acceptable educational program.

Whether a student is based in a regular or in a special education classroom in a home school, he or she must have an IEP that includes but is not limited to (a) individualized instruction in chronological age-appropriate regular education classrooms; (b) individualized instruction on school grounds, but not in regular education classrooms; and (c) individualized instruction in a wide variety of integrated nonschool environments that will actually be used during nonschool days and hours. Individually appropriate therapy and other specialized services must also be arranged as necessary. In

addition, the development of at least the 11 social relationships with nondisabled peers and others in school and nonschool settings presented in the previous article (Brown et al., 1989) must be an integral part of each IEP.

In this article we delineate 10 issues associated with basing students in regular or in special education classrooms in home schools. Subsequently, some of the major points used by those who support the special classroom base will be presented, followed by some of the major counterpoints used by those who support the regular classroom base. The list of issues and the supportive and counter arguments are not exhaustive, the parameters are not simple, and the correct actions to take will be debated heatedly for some time. Nevertheless, the controversy is exciting, challenging, and among the most important of the day because the stakes are so high, since placement determines many of the most important aspects of a student's program. It is hoped that displaying some of the major theses offered to support each placement option will assist in the quest to provide educational services of the highest quality.

A Regular Class Base is Extreme and Radical

When changes are perceived as reasonable extensions of existing policies and practices, they are more likely to be supported and accepted and less likely to be resisted and rejected (Lieberman, 1984). Some believe that the prospect of basing students with severe intellectual disabilities in regular education classrooms will be perceived by too many as extreme and radical. If the regular classroom option is forced, people will become unnecessarily hostile, defensive, and resistive. The best way to get people to accept and support basing students with severe intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms is to first base them in special education classrooms in chronological age-appropriate home schools. When the dust from that maneuver settles, they can gradually be infused into regular classrooms. This two-step sequence will not be perceived as extreme or radical. Thus, less resistance will be experienced and the end goal of having all students based in regular classrooms in home schools will be realized easier and sooner.

Others believe that the presumptive ideological and curricular value must be that all students should be based in the regular education classrooms in which they would function if they were not disabled. In their view almost every new educational development is perceived as extreme or radical by some. Public Law 94-142, sex education, and discussions of Darwin's theory of human evolution and acquired immune deficiency syndrome in schools are examples. However, the reactionary views of some should not be allowed to impede general educational progress. If a practice is or might be beneficial, it should be implemented, or at least tried. In fact, the regular classroom option is already operative and producing remarkably positive benefits in many

school districts across North America and Europe (Ayers, 1988; Biklen, 1985; Forest, 1984; Gaylord-Ross, 1987; Goodwin & Wurzburg, 1987; Marwell, 1988; Thousand, Fox, Reid, Godck, Williams, & Fox, 1986.) Finally, it is unnecessary, inappropriate, unduly restrictive, and harmful to students both with and without disabilities to be required to proceed through drawn out sequences of superfluous approximations. Depriving students with severe intellectual disabilities opportunities to grow up with nondisabled peers in the same classrooms, simply because the idea might be resisted by a few, is untenable.

Will They Be "Dumped" into Regular Classrooms?

Many people are concerned that students with severe intellectual disabilities will be "dumped" into regular education classrooms without appropriate supports. Specifically, if a student is not based in a special education classroom, many needed resources and services such as physical, occupational, speech and language therapy, special curricula, and individualized adaptations will not be provided. Furthermore, providing therapeutic and other services in regular classrooms may be disruptive and stigmatizing.

Others counter that under no circumstances should any student with disabilities be dumped into regular education classrooms without the services and resources appropriate for the educational and social growth of all involved. If an IEP legally requires specific supports and services, they must be provided, regardless of where the student functions. Millions of students with other kinds and degrees of disabilities receive needed supports and services in regular education classrooms; so can those with severe intellectual disabilities. If the provision of services in regular education classrooms is stigmatizing or disruptive, they can be provided elsewhere, but not necessarily in special education classrooms. When such services are completed, the student can return to his or her regular education classroom base.

Will a Regular Classroom Base Affect Nondisabled Students?

There are those who are afraid that basing students with severe intellectual disabilities in regular education classrooms will negatively affect the educational and social growth of nondisabled children. They predict that less instructional time will be given nondisabled students because those with disabilities will require more attention. In addition, many parents do not believe that their nondisabled children should be exposed to or distracted by others who may have unsightly and atypical features and challenging behaviors. A boy without arms and legs, a girl who screams and drools, and someone with facial disfigurements are examples.

Others are confident that if the appropriate resources and services are provided in regular education classrooms, almost any difficulty can be addressed in ways

that do not negatively affect the growth of nondisabled students. In fact, many of the values, individualized curriculum development, and modification techniques and behavior management strategies used by special education personnel will be learned and used by regular education teachers to solve problems manifested by nondisabled students. The possibility exists that a particular student, even one who is severely intellectually disabled, can interfere with the growth of others in a classroom. If professionals with reasonable experience, expertise, and resources are unable to address effectively such interfering actions, the classroom may not be the most appropriate environment at certain times of the day. However, this does not mean that the student should then be confined to a special education classroom. In fact, the most appropriate environment during these times may be the school library, a local shopping center, an integrated community work site, a public bus, or a restaurant. Finally, in a pluralistic society all children must grow up with others who are different. Exposure and involvement from an early age will prepare all to function peacefully and constructively. More generations of adults who become "upset" and distracted when they see a person with a disability cannot be tolerated.

Social Relationships with Nondisabled Students

There are those who believe that all of the needed kinds and amounts of interactions with students who are not disabled, including the 11 delineated by Brown et al. (1989), can be arranged and realized from a heterogeneous special education classroom base in a home school.

Others argue that it is qualitatively better to be a member of a group and then to take short leave than it is to be an outsider that comes in for instruction (Wang & Birch, 1984). When a student with severe intellectual disabilities is based in a special education classroom, he or she is an outsider coming in. Only if the student is based in a regular classroom will he or she be perceived as a true member of the school community and be given a reasonable chance to develop extremely important social relationships with nondisabled students continuously, spontaneously, and naturally.

Student-Staff Ratios

The position of some is that special education classrooms offer efficient student-staff ratios and that regular education classrooms do not. Thus, teachers in regular education classrooms that contain 25 to 30 students simply cannot provide the individualized, low-ratio instruction critically needed by students with severe intellectual disabilities.

The counter position is that students with severe intellectual disabilities should be included in, not added to, regular classroom rosters (Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987). Then, the personnel needed to generate the

individually appropriate instructional ratios that will ensure the reasonable growth of all must be provided. In most instances, the creative redistribution and more efficient utilization of existing resources can ensure quality education for all in regular classrooms.

Specialized Materials and Techniques

Millions of valuable tax dollars have been devoted to developing materials, teaching techniques, and specialized instructional experiences that can be used to teach students with severe intellectual disabilities. Most of this technology has been developed within, and for use in, special education classrooms. Many are fearful that if students are based in regular education classrooms, the potentially positive effects of this technology will be attenuated.

When others examine the actual technological phenomena, they conclude that almost all can be transported reasonably into regular education classrooms and other integrated environments and used effectively. Picture communication booklets, voice synthesizers, adapted calculators, head pointers, and electrical switches represent a few examples. However, under some circumstances a particular instructional intervention may best be provided outside of a regular classroom. If so, a student could leave his or her regular classroom base, go to another environment such as a student commons area or the school library, receive the specialized experience, and then return to the classroom.

Teacher Comfort

Some special education teachers have become accustomed to the personal autonomy and professional independence associated with being the leader of a "special environment." They feel that if forced to function in a regular education classroom they will be uncomfortable and less effective. In addition, many regular education teachers are accustomed to teaching "to the norm" in their own classrooms. If forced to teach students outside their usual range of intellectual functioning and to collaborate with special education teachers, they will become frustrated and less effective.

Others stress that tax dollars are not appropriated to meet the emotional needs of inflexible, selective, and autocratic teachers. They are intended to ensure reasonable educational services to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environments. With experience and training, many regular and special education teachers have already learned to use their knowledge and expertise in cost-efficient, cooperative, and effective ways in integrated environments, including regular education classrooms; others can, too. In addition, many teachers would love the opportunity to function in integrated classrooms, but are not allowed to do so.

Homogeneous-Heterogeneous Groupings

According to some, when students with severe intellectual disabilities are based in special education classrooms in home schools, they can benefit from instruction in small groups with others who have similar disabling conditions. In these homogeneous groups they will feel accepted, learn from each other, and experience success. If they are based in regular education classrooms, a special instructor will be assigned to them and provide too much one-to-one instruction; they will never feel or be accepted as equal members of the class, and they will rarely experience success in these highly competitive environments.

To others, the basic purpose of an educational program for a student with severe intellectual disabilities is to prepare for functioning in integrated environments and activities throughout adulthood. The closer the school program represents actual integrated postschool life, the more valid it is as a preparatory experience. The more the school experience differs from the realities of integrated postschool life, the more difficult it will be for a student to function therein. Putting two children with autism together in the same classroom so that they can compete is absurd. Putting two people who are totally deaf and blind in the same classroom so they can feel accepted is meaningless and counterproductive. Putting two children with no arms and legs in the same classroom so that they experience success is demeaning. The more severe a student's disabilities, the more the friendship, assistance, and guidance of experienced nondisabled others is needed.

Curricular Appropriateness

Nondisabled students are required to learn to multiply and divide fractions, the customs of the people of Micronesia, the 50 capitals of the United States and those of the Canadian provinces, complex computer languages, the message of the "Mayor of Casterbridge," the names of all known minerals, and how to dissect frogs. Some argue that it is totally inappropriate to require students who are deaf, blind, and severely intellectually disabled, who have severe autism, and so forth, to participate in these activities for several reasons. First, there is no reasonable probability that they will ever understand or acquire the information being presented. Second, even if they might learn some of the information, such as demonstrating the ability to verbally reiterate the capitals of five states and provinces and the names of seven minerals, they will never be able to use the information in meaningful ways. Third, the modifications in the regular education curriculum that are necessary for students with severe intellectual disabilities to participate meaningfully are so extreme that the academic development of nondisabled students would be seriously jeopardized.

Others counter that when normal students are dissecting frogs, it may be more appropriate for a particular

student with severe intellectual disabilities to receive instruction elsewhere in more individually meaningful activities. Learning to communicate manually to a store clerk, receiving tutoring from a nondisabled peer in the school library, and learning to function in an integrated work site in the community represent a few examples. However, there are many regular classroom activities that can be appropriately adapted to meet the individual needs of a student with severe intellectual disabilities. Forming an object from clay in an art class, learning to play a musical instrument in a music class, putting a daily picture schedule together during homeroom, playing a rudimentary video game during "free time" in a computer class, and enjoying integrated recess and lunch are but a few possibilities.

Administrative Feasibility

Some interpret local, state, and federal rules and regulations to mean that in order to receive tax dollars for special education services, students with severe intellectual disabilities must be with five or six others of their own kind in a classroom with a teacher specifically certified to teach them. In addition, some argue that basing students with severe intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms in home schools would be too costly; that is, the needed therapists, teachers, instructional assistants, nurses, health care professionals, space, and equipment are simply not affordable.

Others argue that just as rules and regulations can be interpreted to support segregating students in special classrooms, they can also be used to support integrating the same students in regular classrooms. If it is legal and in accordance with regulations for some students with disabilities to receive appropriate and individually significant special education services in regular education classrooms in home schools, the same holds true for those with severe intellectual disabilities. Finally, Public Law 94-142 requires the provision of appropriate educational services in the least restrictive environment. The absence of dollars cannot be used as an excuse not to do so (Biklen, in press). In fact, serving students with severe intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms in middle and high schools may cost taxpayers less than other alternatives, primarily because of the savings in transportation costs. The costs of serving one or two students with severe intellectual disabilities in an elementary school may be slightly higher than existing alternatives. However, the savings realized from long-term integrated outcomes can certainly justify modest increases in early expenditures (Piuma, in press).

Summary and Conclusions

Forty years ago a major issue was whether or not children with severe intellectual disabilities should receive tax supported educational services (Goldberg & Cruickshank, 1958). They should. Fifteen years ago a major issue was whether they should attend integrated

or segregated schools (Sontag, Burke, & York, 1973). Integrated schools are clearly superior. A few years ago whether they should attend home or clustered schools became a major issue (Brost & Johnson, 1986; Brown et al., 1989; Strully & Strully, 1985). Home schools are better.

We now know that where a student is placed critically affects the nature of the educational program that can be offered. Thus, each student must be placed in an environment that allows him or her to develop the most meaningful skills, attitudes, and values. The major placement issue of the day is whether students with severe intellectual disabilities should be based in regular or special education classrooms in home schools. It is time to find out which is better so that we can get on to the many other issues critical to our quest to engender life experiences of the highest quality for all.

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Received: July 5, 1988

Final Acceptance: November 14, 1988

Editor in Charge: Robert H. Horner