

## How Special is Too Special for Inclusion in the Regular Classroom?

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I have no doubt that Paul Collins supports high quality education for all students, including those identified as having a disability. Yet I am troubled by the idea of excluding students who have been classified as disabled from regular classrooms. As I understand Paul, it is the specialness of certain students' needs that could justify their placement in special alternatives. This makes me wonder about the kinds and extent of specialness that might lead to such segregation. United States law currently recognizes thirteen types of disabilities. A brief examination of just one of these, mental retardation, may suggest the difficulty in establishing which needs are sufficiently special to warrant alternative placement.

Since the early 1900s, the determination of who will be classified as having mental retardation has hinged largely on the results of intelligence tests. For decades, individuals scoring 1.5 standard deviation below the mean were deemed mentally retarded. During that period, the incidence of mental retardation among the general population was three percent. In 1959, the American Association of Mental Deficiency (AAMD) changed the point at which individuals would be classified as mentally retarded to one standard deviation below the mean; with this change, the incidence of mental retardation jumped to sixteen percent.<sup>1</sup> Then in 1973, the AAMD decided that only persons whose IQs were two standard deviations below the mean were in fact retarded: "With the figurative...stroke...[of a] pen, a committee sitting around a conference table reduced enormously the potential incidence of mental retardation...only having to say that, hereinafter, mental retardation is such and such rather than this or that."<sup>2</sup> Following his description of the AAMD decision, Burton Blatt noted that, unlike measles or cancer, mental retardation is not so much an "objective disease entity" as it is an "administrative term...a metaphor more than anything else."<sup>3</sup>

Intelligence (however that might be conceptualized) and factors unrelated to this attribute are often conflated, adding to the seeming arbitrariness of the classification "mental retardation." Most notoriously, to this day, children's race bears significantly on whether they will be classified as mentally retarded. According to one recent report, African American children are twice as likely as their white peers to be categorized as mentally retarded, while white children are more likely than their African American peers to be classified as "learning disabled," which has far milder connotations than "mental retardation" (*SU*, 54). Take, for example, the case of the Perry County and Mountain Brook school districts in Alabama, which have roughly the same number of students enrolled in special education.

In Perry County, in the state's impoverished, cotton-farming "Black Belt," 236 students are labeled mentally retarded and 14 learning disabled. The Mountain Brook district is further north, a wealthy suburb of Birmingham. There, the numbers are reversed: 271 youngsters are classified as learning disabled, only 15 as mentally retarded. Demographically, the two

districts could not be more different. Perry County's residents are 99 percent Black. Mountain Brook is 99 percent white (*SU*, 55).

In addition to race, the state in which children reside also affects their chances of being deemed mentally retarded. Shapiro et al. report that in Alaska, three percent of the children enrolled in special education are classified as having mental retardation, while in Alabama over a quarter of all children in special education are thusly classified.

The case of mental retardation illustrates how perceptions of just one identified disability have undergone significant changes. Blatt observes that perceptions of all disabilities — including which differences are defined as disabilities in the first place — are similarly changeable: “This situation exists across all so-called disability areas, and consequently, estimates of various categorical handicaps vary from study to study, culture to culture, and from time to time.”<sup>4</sup> No wonder one commentator recently concluded that over eighty percent of all students could be classified as disabled in light of one or more of the definitions of disability now used (*SU*, 50). Disabilities, in short, are largely made, not given in the nature of particular differences. Yet once identified as disabilities, such differences have profound consequences, educationally and otherwise.

Paul regards students with “serious emotional disturbances...mental retardation, autism, multiple physical handicaps,” as likely candidates for placement in special classrooms. As the foregoing suggests, there is widespread disagreement over how such disabilities are to be conceptualized. But advocates of special placement are faced with another conceptual difficulty: establishing the point at which a so-called disability is so disabling that it justifies excluding students from “regular” classrooms. How many points are too few on an intelligence test and how many physical handicaps are too many before students are placed in special classrooms? Following that, there is the question of how thoroughly students with identified disabilities ought to be excluded: An hour a day, two, altogether? The failure to address such conceptual questions is reflected in a mishmash of practices across the states. In Ohio, students whose IQ is below eighty are classified “mentally retarded” and taught in separate classrooms; in Kentucky, the same students would not be deemed mentally retarded and would be placed in regular classrooms (*SU*, 48). In Vermont, 83 percent of students identified as having a disability are educated in regular classrooms, in Texas, it is just five percent (*SU*, 49).

Even if the conceptual difficulties were cleared up and it were agreed that a “special need” could best be met outside the regular classroom, it is important to consider how many “ordinary” needs would go unmet by such exclusion. We all stand to learn from others who are different from ourselves, and peers are often among our best teachers. When they are included in regular classrooms, students with identified disabilities typically have many non-disabled peer-tutors and role models to help with learning academic subjects and social skills. (It is worth noting that “normal” students have much to learn from their “disabled” classmates as well, although the topic is beyond the scope of this essay.) If, as some have argued, interactions in inclusive classrooms also help to create understanding and good will,

this may also serve the long term as well as more immediate needs of students classified as disabled. After all, today's students will someday have a say in social policies that profoundly influence the lives of individuals with those differences called disabilities. It is not unreasonable to expect that in the long run inclusive classrooms will foster a greater willingness to support "disability friendly" policies.

There is, however, a huge body of literature arguing that children with so-called special needs do not fare better when they are placed in special education programs. Indeed, some have argued that special education causes the very problems it is supposed to alleviate. Jane Mercer, for example, observed that when children are labeled mentally retarded and placed in special education programs, they tend to act in ways that are consistent with the label. At home and in other extra-school contexts, these same children acted remarkably like their "normal" peers. Mercer called these "6-hour retarded children" — children who are retarded for six hours a day, that is, when they are in special education.<sup>5</sup> More broadly, ways in which "disabled" and "normal" children may be alike, and differences between children who are classified as disabled, as well as differences between "normal" children, are all obscured when a single attribute is thought to require special placement. At the same time, such placement greatly magnifies a single difference — the identified disability.

While Paul reads the supporters of inclusion as arguing for regular classroom placement "regardless" of student's needs, I read them as arguing for regular classroom placement *in light of* students' needs. With appropriate curricular and other modifications and extra help from teachers and aides, regular classroom placement is widely thought to meet the needs of students with identified disabilities better than special alternatives. Given advocates' acknowledgement that inclusion requires such accommodations, it is clear that they do not equate uniform classroom placement with treating all students alike. In classrooms where there are no children classified as disabled, teachers regularly treat their students differently depending on what they perceive to be individual students' needs. Especially when they are given adequate assistance, there is no reason to assume that teachers are unable to individualize instruction in this way when children with identified disabilities are added to the mix.

Paul and the advocates of inclusion share one overarching goal: to meet the educational needs of students identified as having disabilities. As his paper makes clear, a key disagreement between the two is over where these needs can best be met. In closing, I would like to suggest that the question of where students' needs might best be met would be advanced by closer analysis of how these needs are conceptualized. Because what is thought to constitute the needs of students with identified disabilities is linked fundamentally with how "disabilities" are conceptualized, this question would also benefit from a closer analysis of the concept of "disability." As I have tried to stress, what is regarded as a "disability" is unstable. Some differences that were once counted as disabilities are no longer so counted, while, over time, other differences have been identified as disabilities.

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1. Robert Bogdan and Steven J. Taylor, *Inside Out: The Social Meaning of Mental Retardation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 12.

2. Burton Blatt, *In and Out of Mental Retardation* (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1981), 227.
3. See, for example, Joseph P. Shapiro, Penny Leob, David Bowermaster, "Separate and Unequal," *U.S. News and World Report* (13 December 1993): 54. For all subsequent references this essay will be referred to as *SU*.
4. Blatt, *In and Out*, 228.
5. Jane Mercer, "I.Q.: The Lethal Label," *Psychology Today* 6 (September 1972): 95-97, cited in James Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 260.