

## **My Child has a Classmate with Severe Disabilities: What Parents of Nondisabled Children Think About Full Inclusion**

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*This study investigated parents' perceptions regarding the general education classroom placement of students with severe disabilities on their nondisabled children. Eighty-one parents of nondisabled students attending rural and small town schools in Vermont responded to a survey in which they used a Likert-style scale to rate their level of agreement with statements about their son or daughter's experiences as a classmate of a student with severe disabilities. Means and aggregate data indicated that a majority of the parents reported their child's experience was comfortable and positive, had a positive effect on their child's social/emotional growth, and did not interfere with their child receiving a good education. Exceptions to these general response patterns are cited and discussion suggesting further inquiry regarding parental attitudes are offered.*

Reynolds (1988) characterized the history of special education as "progressive inclusion," where the educational placement of students with special needs has moved steadily closer to the educational placement options available to nondisabled students. Stainback & Stainback's (1984) call for the merger of general and special education marked the onset of a new stage of progressive inclusion. As the national debate on including students with disabilities in general education settings ensued, even many inclusion-minded advocates continued to exclude certain groups, such as students with severe disabilities, from their efforts for an improved system of education (Jenkins, Pious & Jewell, 1990; Reynolds, Wang & Walberg, 1987). Some educators presumed the special needs of students with severe disabilities were so different as to justify continued exclusion of this group of children from general education classrooms. Today, advocates of progressive inclusion continue to challenge traditional assumptions about student needs and test the boundaries of educational systems. This has resulted in an emerging practice whereby all students, including those with severe disabilities, attend the schools they would attend if

they were not disabled and are placed successfully in general education classes with the supports they need to receive an appropriate education (Fox & Williams, 1991; Giangreco & Putnam, 1991; Stainback & Stainback, 1992; York & Vandercook, 1990). A growing data base has begun to document the perspectives and impact of general class placement on children with severe disabilities and their families (Biklen, Corrigan & Quick, 1989; Giangreco, Cloninger, Mueller, Yuan & Ashworth, 1991). It is important to recognize that the placement of students with disabilities in general education classes also has potential impact on nondisabled classmates, their families, and society as a whole (Giangreco & Meyer, 1988; Kishi, 1989; Peck, Donaldson & Pezzoli, 1990; Schnorr, 1990; Turnbull & Brunk, 1990; York, Vandercook, Macdonald, Heise-Neff & Caughey, 1992). The purpose of this study was to explore the opinions that parents of nondisabled children have about the experiences of their children as classmates of a student with severe disabilities. In this inquiry, we identified attitudes of a group of parents who might be expected to have an interest in, and be knowledgeable about, the education of their own children, but who are not necessarily interested in, or knowledgeable about, disability related issues.

## Method

### Study Participants

The participants of this study were 81 parents whose nondisabled children, grades kindergarten through 8, had a classmate with severe disabilities. Seven general education classes in six different rural and small town schools, with enrollments ranging from 110 to 812, were the sites for this inquiry. Each class included one student with severe disabilities. Four of the seven placements were full-time. Kindergartens A and B were half-time for all the students and the grade 8 placement was a science class for one period a day.

All seven of the students with severe disabilities had both hearing and vision impairments. Five of the seven students also had severe orthopedic disabilities (e.g., nonambulatory, limited use of arms/hands). Six of the seven students were identified as functioning in the moderate to profound ranges of intellectual disabilities, which describes the student's level of functioning rather than reflects a measure of ability. Given their multiple sensory, physical, and

cognitive impairments, it is difficult to determine which disability or combination was responsible for the students' delayed levels of functioning.

Nearly 93% (n=72) of the study participants were mothers, 6% (n=8) were fathers, and one was a grandmother. Fifty-four percent (n=44) were the parents of girls; 46% (n=37) were the parents of boys. Sixty-nine percent (n=56) of the children were in their first year in class with a student who had severe disabilities. Twenty-five percent (n=20) of the parents reported their children had 2 or 3 years experience having a child with disabilities as a classmate. Six percent (n=5) reported their child had been in class with a student with severe disabilities for four or more years. Nearly 73% (n=59) of the parents reported their children talked about their classmates with disabilities at home. Fifty-four percent (n=44) of the parents wrote additional comments in the space provided. Some wrote additional letters or sent poems or letters their children had written about, or for, their classmates with severe disabilities.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Classes that included a student with severe disabilities were identified through their involvement with the Vermont I-Team, a statewide training and technical assistance service for educational teams who work with students who have intensive educational support needs. Data collection was initiated in 10 different classrooms. Due to time constraints at the end of the school year, the data collection protocol was completed with seven of the 10 initial sites. The purpose and design of the study was discussed with the parents of each of these students with disabilities to be certain that there were no reservations on their part about the distribution of a survey regarding other parents' perceptions of their child's impact on the classroom experience for nondisabled classmates. All of the parents of students with severe disabilities gave their permission to proceed with the study with the understanding that their anonymity would be protected in any dissemination of the results. Next, the research team obtained permission from each school's administration to distribute the survey.

The survey included a brief introductory letter to parents acknowledging that their child had a classmate with hearing, vision, and other severe disabilities. The letter presented the rationale for

this study as a way, "... to determine the effect of this experience on your child as you see it." The first page of the survey included background questions to ascertain demographic information. The second page included a series of statements about their child's experiences having a classmate with severe disabilities. These statements addressed their perceptions of their own child's comfort level, the impact on their child's social/emotional growth, level of positive feeling, degree of interference with their child's educational program, and the parent's overall reaction to the inclusion experience for their child. These areas were selected for inquiry based on observations in schools and discussion with school personnel regarding parental reactions to the general education class placement of students with severe disabilities. Each survey statement was accompanied by a Likert-style scale where 1 was anchored with the phrase "strongly disagree" and 10 was anchored with the phrase "strongly agree." Parents were asked to circle the number (1 to 10) most accurately reflecting their opinion; they were given the option to circle the response "Don't Know." This accounts for the varying size of the n reported for different variables presented in the results section. A comments section was available for parents to write or attach any additional comments that would clarify their family's experience.

Members of the research team contacted the classroom teachers at each site to identify the number of surveys needed for each class. Between March and May of 1991, a sufficient number of surveys were sent to each teacher who, in turn, distributed one to each student in the class to take home to his/her parents. Students were informed of the contents of the survey and were allowed to read it. Teachers were provided with a cover letter and distribution procedures. Pre-stamped envelopes addressed directly to the research team, rather than the school, were provided with each survey to ensure that parents' responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Parents were informed that their individual responses would not be shared with any school personnel.

Approximately 3 weeks after the initial distribution of surveys, a second distribution was completed in an attempt to obtain responses from parents who had not responded initially. Surveys were distributed to a total of 113 families across the seven classes. Class size ranged from nine (half-time kindergarten) to 20. Seventy-four percent (n=84) were returned. Three surveys were not included in data analysis because the parents completed the background information on the front

side of the questionnaire, but did not respond to any of the statements about their children's experiences on the reverse side of the questionnaire. This resulted in a usable response rate of nearly 72% (n=81). Individual classroom response rates ranged from 54% to 92%.

The background information and parental responses to the inclusion statements were assigned numerical codes, then tabulated and analyzed using the *Statistical Analysis System* (SAS Institute, 1985). Written comments were compiled and analyzed using categorical coding procedures (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

The Likert scale data generated from the parents' responses to the inclusion experience statements were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics (e.g., means, standard deviations). Given the 1 to 10 scale has no midpoint, 6 to 10 represents the agreement zone of the scale, with 1 to 5 being the disagreement zone. To assist in interpreting mean scores, standard deviations were augmented by indicating the percentage of parents who responded in the agreement zone of the scale as presented in the results.

T-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to explore potential differences among parental responses based on their child's sex, age, class, grade and location. The Scheffe post hoc analysis was used in conjunction with the ANOVA because it allows for comparison of groups with unequal sizes (Kirk, 1982). Additionally, its conservative nature controls for experiment wise error rate (Glasnapp & Poggio, 1985). Only one significant difference was identified based on these analyses, therefore data are presented aggregately and the single exception is presented.

## Results

As indicated in Tables 1 and 2, the vast majority of parents reported that: a) their children feel comfortable interacting with a classmate who has severe disabilities; b) their children's social/emotional growth has been effected positively by interacting with a classmate with severe disabilities; c) their children feel positively about having a classmate with severe disabilities; d) having a classmate with severe disabilities has not interfered with their children receiving a good education; and e) overall, having a classmate with severe disabilities was a positive experience for their children.

Table 2: Data Regarding Responses to Inclusion Statements by Site

Variables	Kindergarten A		Kindergarten B		Grade 2		Grade 2-3		Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 8									
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD							
COMFORT	6	9.83	0.41	7	6.43	3.95	13	8.92	1.50	16	9.44	0.81	11	9.91	0.30	13	9.08	2.75	11	6.73	2.10	
% ≥ 6 of 10	100.			57.1			92.9			94.1			100.			85.7				58.3		
SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL GROWTH	6	9.67	0.52	5	7.80	3.90	14	8.50	2.41	16	9.25	1.06	10	9.20	1.62	13	9.07	1.19	9	7.67	2.70	
% ≥ 6 of 10	100.			57.1			85.7			94.1			81.8			92.9				50.0		
POSITIVE FEELING	6	9.17	1.60	6	7.83	2.96	12	9.25	1.14	16	9.31	1.01	11	9.18	1.66	11	9.54	0.52	10	7.10	2.92	
% ≥ 6 of 10	100.			71.4			85.7			94.1			90.9			78.6				50.0		
INTERFERES WITH EDUCATION	6	0.17	0.41	7	1.00	1.53	14	0.71	1.86	16	0.06	0.25	11	0.73	1.42	13	1.38	2.84	12	1.92	2.31	
% ≥ 6 of 10	0			0			7.1			5.9			0			21.4				8.3		
OVERALL POSITIVE EXPERIENCE	6	9.33	1.63	7	7.86	2.48	13	9.38	1.04	16	9.63	0.62	11	9.45	1.51	13	9.38	0.96	11	8.18	2.09	
% ≥ 6 of 10	100.			85.7			92.9			94.1			90.9			92.9				75.0		

Table 1: Overall Responses of Parents to Inclusion Statements

Variables	N	M	SD	% of scores ≥ 6
1. COMFORT: My child feels comfortable interacting with his/her classmate who has significant disabilities.	77	8.73	2.24	85.2
2. SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL GROWTH: The opportunity to interact with a classmate who has significant disabilities has had a positive impact on my child's social/emotional growth.	73	8.81	1.98	81.5
3. POSITIVE FEELING: My child feels positively about having a classmate who has significant disabilities.	72	8.86	1.84	81.5
4. INTERFERES WITH EDUCATION Having a classmate with significant disabilities has interfered with my child receiving a good education.	79	0.86	1.85	07.4
OVERALL POSITIVE EXPERIENCE: Overall, I feel that having a classmate with significant disabilities has been a positive experience for my child.	77	9.13	1.52	90.1

When exploring the differences among classes, a statistical difference was identified on the COMFORT variable. As depicted in Table 3, the grade 3 class differed significantly from both the grade 8 class and kindergarten B,  $F(6,70) = 4.97, p < .0003$ . The mean scores for grade 8 ( $M=6.73, SD=3.95$ ) and Kindergarten B ( $M=6.43, SD=3.95$ ) both fell in the agreement zone of the Likert scale ( $\geq 6$ ). As shown in Table 2, 58% and 57% of the grade 8 and kindergarten B parents respectively rated the COMFORT variable in the agreement zone.

Table 3: ANOVA and Post Hoc Results Regarding Parental Responses to Statements about Inclusion

Variable: COMFORT

Alpha = 0.05 Confidence = 0.95 DF = 70

MSE = 3.8203 Critical Value of  $F = 2.23$

$F = 4.97 p < 0.0003$

Group	N	M	SD
Grade 3	11	9.91	0.30 a
Kindergarten A	6	9.83	0.41 ab
Grade 2-3	16	9.44	0.81 ab
Grade 4-5	13	9.08	2.75 ab
Grade 2	13	8.92	1.50 ab
Grade 8	11	6.73	2.10 b
Kindergarten B	7	6.43	3.95 b

**Note:** Superscript letters positioned to the right of the standard deviation column indicate if groups are significantly different. Groups that share a common superscript letter are not significantly different. Conversely, if two or more groups do not share a superscript letter, it indicates that a significant difference exists.

Written comments from parents indicated that the interactions between their children and the classmate with severe disabilities were friendships, helping relationships, or both. Helping relationships were illustrated by comments such as, "I'm told by his teacher that he is there for the child when he needs help" and "My child enjoys helping the disabled classmate." Friendship relationships were illustrated by comments such as, "My son feels he is a good friend of his classmate with disability," and "They were good friends with

Laura...." The combination of friendship and helping was captured in comments like, "My child enjoys helping his friend," and "They've learned to depend on one another."

Parents described their child's acceptance of the classmate with disabilities and ability to see past the outward manifestations of the disability to the classmate as a person with comments such as:

I feel my child realizes now that inside the disabled child is a normal, thinking being.

She [my child] is given a chance to grow up with these children and see that they are real people too. When I was growing up I was very afraid of these people because I was never exposed to them.

My son looks at this student as a person, not an inconvenience or a bother.

My son went to the same daycare as the disabled child [before they started school]. He doesn't look at disabled people as being handicapped; it's just the way they are.

Parents also described a range of reactions their children had to the classmate with severe disabilities. As indicated in Tables 1 and 2, many responses were positive. A parent of a third grader wrote, "My son and I were talking about Amy one day; he said, 'Mom, she's just like you and me; she just needs a little help'." Another offered, "Renee says she would really miss her [the classmate with disabilities] if she wasn't in class." Several parents described an accepting, rather nonchalant, attitude by their children. As one mother shared, "I'm proud and pleased at the casual attitude my daughter has developed toward special people."

A relatively small number of parents described negative reactions by their children and themselves to the presence of a classmate with severe disabilities. One parent wrote, "I don't understand why they want to mainstream these children. I think it would be extremely hard for the handicapped child to be placed in this atmosphere." Another parent questioned the value of spending money on children with disabilities, when "... the exceptionally bright child could pay more

back to society."

Parents concerns about whether the presence of a child with disabilities would interfere with their child's education were roughly divided into two schools of thought. One set of parents' children did not experience interference, "I don't feel that Amber's education has suffered at all by having a child with disabilities [in her class]." Other parents reported potentially disruptive behavior by the student with disability, without disruptive effects. "The child in my daughter's class can be disruptive in a loud and physical way. Gina and the other classmates seem not to be bothered, but when I visited the noise has oftentimes made me nervous. The kids tune him out." These comments were corroborated in the survey data with only 7% of the parents rating the INTERFERES WITH EDUCATION variable in the agreement zone of the Likert scale ( $\geq 6$ ).

Parents' written comments provided examples of how the experience of having a classmate with severe disabilities was positive for their child. The benefits of inclusion identified by parents were: (a) increasing personal enjoyment and friendship; (b) increasing a constructive sense of responsibility; (c) appreciating individual differences among people; (d) enhancing social/emotional growth; and (e) broadening their children's personal experiences. One parent summed up her feelings by writing, "I feel it is a good experience for children to be exposed to others with differences as it widens their opinions."

## Discussion

Results of this study should be interpreted with the understanding that: (a) the parents surveyed are all from rural or small town Vermont communities; (b) the opinions of the 28% of the families who did not return the survey are unknown; (c) nearly 93% of the respondents were mothers; and (d) it is not certain that the parents' perceptions of their child's experience match those of their child. This study presents generally positive reactions from parents of nondisabled children regarding the experiences of having a classmate with severe disabilities. One exception was the difference identified regarding the comfort levels of students to their classmate with severe disabilities. Although all class means on the COMFORT variable were in the agreement zone of the Likert scale, the grade 8 class and kindergarten B

differed statistically from the grade 3 class. Both the grade 8 and kindergarten classes were not full-time experiences. Schnorr's (1990) study showed that a student included part-time in a general education class and who spent the rest of the time in special class was often considered a visitor rather than part of the class. Although this raises questions regarding what role frequency of contact plays in students' level of comfort with peers who have severe disabilities, the fact that Kindergarten A (Table 3) was not significantly different, and the limited extent of data collection precludes any confident explanations for this difference.

Positive responses by parents to their nondisabled children's experiences being a classmate with someone who has severe disabilities suggests that many of these parents consider this innovation to be consistent with the mission of the school for their own children. Parents indicated that some long-standing outcomes sought through public education were strengthened through this experience (e.g., developing responsibility, accepting individual differences, expanding horizons, promoting social/emotional growth) and did not interfere with other educational outcomes. This raises the question about places where inclusion efforts have not been favorably accepted. Does the community perceive that benefits to nondisabled children have not been sufficient? Continued efforts to gauge the level of community support may help advocates of quality education for all students avoid the pitfall of being a "one issue advocate" whose only concern is for the needs of students with disabilities (Giangreco, 1989).

Two of the negative comments written by parents of nondisabled students present interesting directions for further inquiry. One parent's comments depicted what we suspect is a common adult behavior -- she speculated on the inclusion experience by saying, "I would think it would be extremely hard for the handicapped child to be placed in this atmosphere [general class]." The value of such speculations are limited in that they are based on the parents' own experiences both with persons with disabilities and education, rather than being based on actual experiences with either the child with disability or the inclusionary school experience. Conversely, many of the positive comments written by parents reflected information they had garnered directly from their children or their visits to the classroom. This highlights the need to base adjustments in inclusionary educational practices on first-hand information from teachers, students, and others

rather than on speculation about experiences which may be the result of socialized assumptions, values, and beliefs about persons with severe disabilities and their needs. It would be unfair to limit our children's options and experiences based on our own lack of experience and our speculations about it.

A second negative comment from one parent questioned the economic value of educating students with disabilities when she perceived that society would receive a greater "pay back" from "exceptionally bright" children. Return-on-investment talk has been heard for years. Our efforts on behalf of all students in public schools must be equitable. Public schools have been charged with the dual missions of developing a skilled and qualified work force and, at the same time, engendering and promoting social concepts of interdependence and community. The return-on-investment mindset is a narrow view of education that neglects the function of education to socialize a diverse population who can work and live together, and assumes the only contributions valued by society's decision-makers are economic. Just like their nondisabled counterparts, some children with severe disabilities will become adults who economically contribute partially or fully to their own support. People who responded with positive comments regarding the integration of people with and without disabilities expressed the recognition that people can contribute to society in noneconomic ways as well. Parents in this study recognized and valued the contribution the students with disabilities made for their children already. Making friends, developing responsibility, enhancing social/emotional growth, learning to accept individual differences, and broadening a child's horizons are difficult to put a price tag on.

A danger of conducting an investigation like this, tapping parental attitudes, is that advocates of varying viewpoints may use the results as ammunition to either promote or impede the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Many parents who have children with disabilities fear negative reactions by parents of nondisabled schoolmates and other community members. It would be inappropriate to include or exclude a child from general education opportunities based on public opinion alone. Although opinion surveys can document the relative support certain innovations have within a community, their role is more appropriately to shed light on areas of need in our schools (e.g., facilitating comfort with human diversity; establishing strategies to promote social/emotional growth) to

improve education for all children.

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