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Article

Are Inclusive Education or Special Education Programs More Likely to Result in Inclusion Post-School?

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Abstract: The main goal of both special education and inclusive education for young people with learning or behavioral difficulties is their maximum inclusion in the community as adults. The question of which of these two approaches is more likely to achieve this goal is addressed by considering the findings of three outcome studies of young people with moderate to severe levels of learning or behavioral difficulties who experienced either option, or some combination of the two. The overall findings indicate that students who left school from a special education setting had better outcomes than those who completed their education in mainstream schools. This is considered to be due to the vocational curriculum and work experience they gained in their final years of special education, which those in mainstream schools did not receive. This suggests that a policy of full inclusion, with the closure of special classes and special schools, will result in less inclusion in their communities post-school for young people with moderate to severe levels of learning or behavioral difficulties.

Keywords: learning difficulties; behavior difficulties; inclusive education; special education

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1. Introduction

The main goal of both special education and inclusive education for young people with learning or behavioral difficulties is the same—their maximum inclusion in the community as adults. Therefore, the key question is, what research evidence is available or is needed to investigate which of these two approaches is more likely to achieve this goal. It is considered that there is a need to examine the findings of research on the effectiveness of a range of educational settings, especially those of outcome studies of students with learning or behavioral difficulties who have experienced either option, or some combination of the two, and those that include the perspectives of young people themselves and their parents.

2. Evaluating the Effectiveness of Inclusive and Special Education Programs

It is important to evaluate the effect of various inclusive and special education programs and settings on outcomes for children with learning or behavioral difficulties in order that a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of each of these can be provided. This involves examining outcomes for a range of educational options, such as those typically used in many countries [1,2]. A recent study of seven European countries [2] found that, although there was a trend toward increased inclusion of children with learning or behavioral difficulties in mainstream schools, most countries educate some children in four different types of settings, with a range of special education support. These are: (1) being educated in a mainstream classroom with support from a teacher's aide; (2) being educated in a mainstream classroom with an additional support teacher; (3) being educated in a special class within a mainstream school; (4) being educated in a segregated special school, including one attached to a mainstream school.

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the education provided in each of these four types of settings requires evidence from all stakeholders involved: teachers, parents, and children with learning or behavioral difficulties themselves. Measurements need to focus

on parents' expectations of and satisfaction with children's education settings. They also must include teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and their views regarding the extent to which they can effectively provide for children with learning or behavioral difficulties in their classes. In addition, measurements may include the views and achievements of children with learning or behavioral difficulties, both in the short term and with regard to long-term outcomes, which, in the final analysis, are the most relevant to the overall education goal of inclusion in their communities post-school. A summary of the research on the three different types of stakeholder views are outlined below.

2.1. Research on Views of Parents

The findings of research on parents' views of special education and inclusive education programs suggest that they are neither overwhelmingly for nor against the practice of inclusion [3]. Parents sometimes prefer that their children with learning or behavioral difficulties are educated in separate special education settings, while, at other times, they prefer more inclusive placements. Thus, a policy of full inclusion that requires the uniform requirement of placing all children with learning or behavioral difficulties in mainstream classrooms is certain to override the preferences of some parents and deny them the right to choose what they consider to be the most appropriate educational setting for their children. This was the case with a mother of two autistic children who asked the author for advice when the state of Queensland in Australia, where they lived, was about to adopt a policy of full inclusion, closing special schools, meaning that the only option was to attend mainstream schools, which she considered would not work for her children. One option she was considering was to move to the state of Victoria, where the education policy is for both mainstream and special schools to be available and to collaborate with one another.

2.2. Research on the Views of Teachers

The findings from numerous reviewed studies indicate that many teachers have a critical view of inclusion, as envisioned under the *full inclusion* policy stated in Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) General Comment Number Four [3,4]. Empirical research with teachers highlights the necessity for special education expertise, in addition to general teacher training, in order to teach children with learning or behavioral difficulties in inclusive classrooms. Gilmour [5] states that general education teachers are typically inadequately prepared to meet the educational needs of many children with learning or behavioral difficulties. Of critical importance for teachers is the availability of support, most often teacher-aides, and appropriate resources in the classroom. Without a guaranteed support system, the attitudes of the majority of teachers toward inclusion tends to be cautious, if not negative.

2.3. Views of Young People with Learning or Behavioral Difficulties

The views of children with learning or behavioral difficulties should be taken into account when deciding on where they are best educated. Following placement, their views should be sought with regard to whether they are satisfied with the education they are receiving [6]. The views of young people after they leave school, looking back on their experiences, are rarely sought but are of great importance, as is illustrated by a study of young people who attended a residential special school for children with emotional or behavioral difficulties, which is discussed later [7,8]. Those young people were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences at the residential special school but consistently negative about their experiences at the mainstream schools they attended following their time in the special school.

2.4. Short-Term Achievement of Children with Learning or Behavioral Difficulties

While at school, it is important to assess the development of academic skills, especially literacy and numeracy, social skills, such as relating to others, and daily living skills. Recent studies have shown that special education interventions can be effective in meeting the

needs of children with learning or behavioral difficulties in order to help them develop academic skills [9,10], whereas Wilcox [11] reports on several studies which found that students in inclusive classrooms made less academic progress than those who received specialized interventions. In another review, Gilmour [5] reported on a study which found that a special education intervention was more effective than inclusive education in improving the mathematics skills of children with learning difficulties. Cook and Cook [12] reviewed highly cited studies and reviews of research on the efficacy of inclusive education and concluded that claims that inclusion is typically more effective than special education interventions are not justified based on a rigorous evaluation of the research evidence.

2.5. Long-Term Outcomes for Children with Learning or Behavioral Difficulties

Long-term outcomes, examining the extent to which young people with learning or behavioral difficulties are included in their communities after leaving school, are by far the most important measures to be concerned with because they evaluate the extent to which the major goal of their education, inclusion in the community post-school, has been achieved. Three studies that the author has been involved with provide evidence about the outcomes of special education and inclusive education. Two of the studies involved young people with intellectual disabilities, referred to as having moderate learning difficulties (MLD), and one involved young people with emotional and behavioral difficulties (EBD). These are discussed below. The first is an anecdotal report of a case study of teenagers with MLD taught in a secondary school special class in New Zealand, who left school from the special class in the mid-1970s. The second is a follow-up study of young people with MLD in the North of England in the 1990s. In this study, participants were admitted to mainstream schools for the last few years of their schooling, after being in special schools for most of their school lives. The third is a follow-up study of graduates of a residential special school for children with EBD in New Zealand in the 1990s, who transferred back to mainstream schools after an average of 18 months at the special school.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed is a comparative analysis of the findings of three long-term follow-up studies of young people with special needs that the author was involved with over a period of 30 years. The purpose of this analysis is to be able to compare the outcomes of these examples of special education and inclusive education interventions in terms of the levels of inclusion achieved in their communities post-school for the young people involved.

4. Findings

4.1. Case Study of a Special Class in New Zealand

For three years, from 1974 to 1976, the author taught young people aged 14 to 16 years in a special class for young people with MLD within a mainstream secondary school in New Zealand. A social and vocational training curriculum was used, with those in the second year of the two-year program spending one day per week in 'work experience' jobs, organized and supervised by the class teacher. The focus of work in the classroom was on functional academics, daily living skills, social skills and vocational skills. They did not follow the academically focused New Zealand National Curriculum, but instead followed a curriculum designed to match their needs. Special class activities included: class discussions, problem solving and role play of challenging situations; functional reading, such as completing application forms and finding information from newspapers; using listening posts to learn the Road Code in order to obtain their driving licenses; work simulations using a production line; shopping for ingredients and cooking lunch in groups of three; playing table tennis in the classroom for social skill development; trips to the city to observe people at work, attend films and gain independence; work experience one day per week in the second year to develop vocational skills.

Outcomes of the Special Class Experience

Over the three years the author taught the special class, out of the 30 young people who left school, 28 acquired jobs in open employment and only two went to sheltered workshops. Many were employed in the jobs they worked at in their one day per week of work experience. The author was able to carry out some informal follow-up until around three years after those he taught had left the school and found that the special class graduates typically kept their jobs or acquired new ones. Few were unemployed and several had managed to purchase their own cars. These anecdotal findings supported the view that a vocational curriculum, including work experience, in the last years of school for young people with MLD, helped them gain employment and achieve a good quality of life. Similar findings have been reported in studies and reviews of research on this issue [13–15], confirming that vocational curricula and work experience are key factors in achieving positive outcomes for these young people.

4.2. Follow-Up Study of Young People with MLD in the UK

A study was conducted with an ex-principal of a special school, who had been employed to close a special school for children with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) in the North of England, by way of transferring all of the young people to mainstream schools [6,16]. Twenty-nine young people were transferred from a special school for young people with MLD to mainstream schools, with teacher-aide support organized by the principal. The first part of the study involved interviews conducted by the principal with the young people and their parents after their transfer to mainstream schools [6]. These were followed-up by more interviews several years later, once all the young people had finished school, and they were at an average age of 22 years [16]. Out of the 29 young people, 24 were located and interviewed [6]. They had spent an average of seven years at the special school and an average of three years in mainstream schools following this to complete their education. All of the young people had followed a mainly academic curriculum in their mainstream schools, although some were placed in a special class and some of these were able to participate in work experience. Eleven out of the 12 who were in a special class within a mainstream school saw their transfer positively, compared with only four out of the 12 who were transferred into mainstream classes, while eight saw it negatively. This difference was also found in their parents' views, with more parents of children transferred to the special class satisfied with this placement than those whose children had been placed in mainstream classrooms.

Outcomes at Average Age of 22 Years

In the second round of interviews, conducted when the young people had reached an average age of 22 years, 17 out of the 24 young people were unemployed, and only three were working full-time [16]. Eight out of the nine who had held jobs at some stage after leaving school had participated in work experience at secondary school, or at a Further Education College, compared with only four out of the 15 who had not had any work experience. Out of the 24 interviewed, 17 were living with their parents, while only four were living independently of their parents. Sixteen out of the 24 were on a severe disability allowance, which meant they were deemed unable to be employed. This shocked the ex-principal who had organized their transfer to mainstream schools, as he considered that most of them should have been able to find jobs given what he knew about them. Their outcomes were considered very poor and extremely alarming to the ex-principal.

4.3. Follow-Up of Young People at a Residential Special School for EBD in New Zealand

Twenty-nine out of the 51 young people (and/or their parents) who attended a residential special school for children with emotional or behavioral difficulties (EBD) in New Zealand between 1989 to 1992 were interviewed ten to 14 years after they left school [7,8]. Criteria for entry to the school included having at least an average IQ, along with a level of emotional or behavioral difficulties that could not be coped with in a

mainstream school. The length of time they attended the special school ranged from 10 to 30 months, with an average of 18 months. Government policy at that time was to have a maximum of 24 months at the school, and then be transferred to mainstream schools for the remainder of their schooling. When transferred back to mainstream schools, they had transition plans and visits from special school staff for the first year, but the reported feedback on this indicated that the implementation of this advice by schools was poor. When interviewed, they were aged between 21.7 and 27.5 years, with an average of 24 years.

Outcomes at an Average Age of 24 Years

The outcomes of the interviews conducted indicated that 27 out of the 29 participants left school with no qualifications whatsoever [7]. Of the 29, 17 left school before the legal age for leaving school, which, at that time, was 16 years of age. Nine of the 29 were working full-time, and six were working part-time at the time of interview. Four out of the 29 were in jail at the time of the interview and nineteen of the 29 reported that they had criminal records. Eleven of the 29 were in de facto marital relationships but none were married.

The participants were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences at the special school [8]. They commented on how they had been helped with their learning difficulties and enabled to achieve more academically and to manage their behavior better, whereas participants were consistently negative about their experiences at the mainstream schools they had attended after their time at the special school. They particularly noted the bullying they had experienced from other children and the labelling and lack of understanding they experienced from mainstream school teachers.

5. Conclusions

The positive outcomes of young people with MLD taught in a secondary school special class in New Zealand stand in contrast to the poor outcomes from the follow-up research conducted with young people with MLD in the UK who had attended a special school and then were transferred to mainstream schools for the final years of their schooling. The contrasting findings suggest that the young people who left school directly from the special class in the mainstream school were more successful when it came to being included in their communities post-school than those who had left school from the mainstream schools they had been transferred into for their last few years of schooling. It is inferred that this finding is related to the difference in curricula that these young people experienced during their final years of schooling. The New Zealand special class program had a vocational curriculum, including work experience, as outlined above, whereas, because of the transfer to mainstream schools, the UK sample followed a mainly academic curriculum with only a few of the students having had the opportunity to participate in work experience. The special school that these young people were transferred out of had had a mainly vocational curriculum, including work experience in the final two years, but because they were transferred to mainstream schools for the last few years of their schooling, the young people in this study were not able to benefit from this.

The poor educational attainments but positive views of most young people with EBD about their time at the residential special school in New Zealand contrasted sharply with the negative views of all of them about their time in mainstream schools. This suggests that the transfer back to mainstream schools to finish their schooling was counter-productive. Apparently, the gains they made during their time at the special school were not continued after they transferred back to mainstream schools to complete their education. This is evidenced by the high numbers of these young people who dropped out of their mainstream school as soon as they could. These findings are supported by international research reporting disappointing outcomes for children with learning or behavioral difficulties who had been in inclusive settings at the secondary school level [5,12,17,18].

It is realized that the three studies described in this article are small-scale studies conducted without the use of control or comparison groups, in changing contexts over many years, which, to some extent, rely on the interpretations of the author who was

involved with them. Therefore, the overall findings must be viewed tentatively and, furthermore, rigorously designed studies should be conducted before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

However, the tentative overall conclusion that could be considered from these three studies is that effective specialized instruction, vocational curricula and work experience, as part of a planned transition from school to post-school life, are of greater importance for optimizing outcomes for young people with moderate to severe levels of learning or behavioral difficulties than simply being included in mainstream secondary schools that are attempting to be as inclusive as possible. If this is indeed the case, then it is important to question the current international trend towards the closing down of special classes and schools in favour of including young people with moderate to severe levels of learning or behavioral difficulties in mainstream classrooms.

The Long-Term Negative Impact of Inclusion

Secondary school special classes like the one the author taught in during the 1970s have now been closed in line with the New Zealand Government policy of creating inclusive schools. Therefore, students with MLD now have no option but to attend mainstream schools, where, in most cases, they will not be receiving the vocational preparation and work experience that would help them find jobs and become as independent as possible when they leave school. The special school for young people with MLD in the North of England that was closed to facilitate the transfer of its pupils to mainstream schools subsequently re-opened as a school for young people with EBD, meaning that young people with MLD in that area of the country have continued to have no access to a special school. Additionally, despite the residential special school in New Zealand, whose graduates participated in the above study, continuing to receive positive evaluations of its effectiveness in helping children with EBD from education officials, it was closed a few years after the research was conducted in a government cost-cutting exercise, justified by the philosophy of inclusion.

Once these special classes and schools are closed down, instead of receiving the specialized education that they appear to benefit from, many young people with MLD and EBD have no alternative but to attend mainstream schools. This has come about mainly because of the ideology of inclusion, without any plans for evaluating the outcomes of this policy or of alternative options. Therefore, it seems that, despite the weight of evidence found in this review from the three studies, indicating that these types of special education programs were more effective in helping young people achieve inclusion in their communities post-school, they are no longer available and the only option for young people with moderate to severe learning or behavioral difficulties is now one of full inclusion, which the evidence suggests is the less effective option of the two.

Given the above findings, it is suggested that a more effective approach for optimizing post-school inclusion in their communities for young people with MLD and EBD than inclusion in mainstream classrooms is one of Inclusive Special Education [19,20]. This includes a range of program options rather than the only possibility being placement in mainstream classrooms. The theory of inclusive special education (ISE) is a combination of the philosophy, values and practices of inclusive education with the interventions, strategies and procedures of special education [19]. ISE provides a vision and guidelines for policies, procedures and teaching strategies that provide effective education for all children with learning or behavioral difficulties, whether they are in inclusive schools, special classes or special schools.

The key aspects of ISE are as follows: making available a continuum of placements, from mainstream classes to special schools; educating as many children with learning or behavioral difficulties as appropriate in mainstream schools; ensuring that education is provided in the most appropriate setting throughout children's entire school lives, with regular assessment data used to trigger transfers between different types of settings when required; collaborating and sharing expertise between mainstream and special classes

and schools; using evidence-based practices from both special education and inclusive education; and effective organization and use of resources within all schools to meet the needs of young people with learning or behavioral difficulties.

It is considered that evaluating the effectiveness of different types of education programs in achieving inclusion in the community post-school for young people with learning or behavioral difficulties is a necessity [17]. This needs to include the views of parents and teachers, as well as an assessment of young people's views and their short and long-term outcomes in various educational settings, such as mainstream classrooms, special classes or special schools [3]. This is considered to be the best way of evaluating the quality of the education that young people with learning or behavioral difficulties are receiving, and of gaining feedback in order to continuously improve outcomes, as well as evaluating the cost effectiveness of the various settings and programs used.

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