intelligent lives | OPENING DOORS

The History of Educating Students with Intellectual Disability in the United States

Micah Fialka-Feldman talks with a peer during his Personal and Social Health class at Syracuse University.

For students with intellectual disability, American society has typically provided one of two educational paths. Some students with mild intellectual disability have always attended school. However, they were often promoted from grade to grade without having mastered basic literacy skills, or they dropped out before graduating from high school. These students usually had the skills necessary to work in agriculture or non-technical manufacturing jobs; they married and had children, and lived independently in their communities.

Children with more significant intellectual disability fared much worse. Thousands were warehoused in public or private institutions and received little or no formal education. They were placed there by their parents, who were convinced by professionals that housing their children in institutions or relinquishing guardianship were their only options due to a lack of community support services. Students with more significant intellectual disability languished in these institutions. They were subjected to inhumane treatment, often dying at a young age because of neglect or the lack of access to medical treatment, and the idea of a formal education was inconceivable. At this time, universal access to public education was nonexistent. For example, in 1970, U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities, and many states had laws excluding certain students from school, including students who had a more significant intellectual disability.

In 1970, U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities.

As a result of advocacy, the first comprehensive U.S. special education law was passed in 1975—Public Law 94-142, The

Education for All Handicapped Children Act—that guaranteed all students with disabilities access to a free public education in the least restrictive environment. Since the enactment of that law, research-based practices have changed radically. In the first few years following the implementation of P.L. 94-142, educational practices were often guided by the "developmental model," which maintained that students with disabilities needed to progress through each developmental stage of learning and maturation before they could progress to learning a new skill. A belief emerged that children with disabilities would be able to "catch up" developmentally, ensuring that they would be "fit" for some type of work and community living after leaving school. Students who were taught using the developmental model usually continued to live at home with their families, attended day habilitation programs, or were employed in sheltered workshops for the rest of their lives. Inclusive living in the community had not yet materialized.

Led by the work of Lou Brown and colleagues from the University of Wisconsin, a second shift occurred in educational programming for students with more significant intellectual disability. The field of special education began striving for something different in post-school life for their students—integration into all aspects of community living including paid work, non-institutional housing, and participation in community and recreational activities. These adapted expectations in the lives of adults with disabilities caused a shift in educational programming to one based on functional, life skills being taught in natural environments. Educational curricula began to include instruction in functional academics (e.g., telling time, reading street signs); recreation and leisure; domestic skills (e.g., doing laundry, preparing meals); vocational skills; and community-access skills (e.g., using public transportation). For the first time, educators using this curriculum model began teaching students in the appropriate environments for those skills,

Naieer Shaheed listens to his teacher during his U.S. History class at the Dr. William W. Henderson High School in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Naieer is on the autism spectrum and has been fully included in regular classes his entire life.

and "community-based instruction" was born. Students with more significant intellectual disability often left the school building for a portion of their day and were now taught in real community environments.

Some students with significant intellectual disability eventually finished school and transitioned into group homes and worked in supported employment jobs. However, most continued to live at home or in congregate housing with other people with disabilities, were grossly un- or under-employed, and had few meaningful relationships with non-disabled people. Researchers began to look carefully at those rare individuals with significant intellectual disability who seemed to have lives that were more well-rounded, and found that a common denominator in the lives of these individuals was the amount of time that they had spent with classmates without disabilities while they were attending school. Increasing numbers of families and professional organizations began to advocate for students' integration into general education classes. They believed that the most important outcome of schooling was developing friendships, and that improved academic outcomes were a welcomed, but unanticipated benefit. This was called the

Garrett Shows, 18, who is featured in the film *Garrett Shows: I'm in Charge*, participates in a Principal's Advisory Committee meeting at ConVal High School in Peterborough, New Hampshire.

"era of integration" and although the struggle was far from over, some families were—and continue to be to this day—satisfied if their children spent at least some time in classes with peers without disabilities.

A growing number of families, researchers, and teachers observed the benefits of integration and concluded that the next logical step was inclusion—that is, students with disabilities being welcomed into general education classrooms as valued members (not just visitors), fully participating in academic instruction with individualized supports, and having reciprocal social relationships. They advocated for the abolition of self-contained classrooms and the delivery of special education services within the general education classroom. Over 40 years of research on the effects of inclusion on students with and without disabilities shows positive benefits for both groups, both in school and in adult life.

Although inclusive education has been adopted by some schools in some states, it has failed to become an accepted educational practice throughout the entire United States. Only 17% of students with intellectual disability spend at least 80% of their school day in a general education classroom, and placement data vary widely state to state and even from district to district. According to the 38th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2016), the percentage of students with intellectual disability who were educated at least 80 percent of the day in general education classes ranged from lows of 4.8 percent in Illinois, and just over 5 percent in Washington, New Jersey, and Nevada, to highs of 65 percent in Iowa, 45.7 percent in Puerto Rico, and 43.4 percent in Alabama.

Only 17% of students with intellectual disability spend at least 80% of their school day in a general education classroom.

There have been federally-funded projects that support system-wide change to improve inclusive practices for students with disabilities, including intellectual disability. Projects such as SWIFT (Schoolwide

Integrated Framework for Transformation) and the TIES Center (Increasing Time, Instructional Effectiveness, Engagement, and State Support for Inclusive Practices for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities) work with the premise that change needs to be both top-down and bottom-up. The state, district, and schools need to work together to align policies and practices that support inclusive education. Concurrently, families, individuals with disabilities, and other advocates need to push for inclusive practices for all students. Understanding the history of discrimination against people with disabilities and the power of inclusion for all people is an important first step to building sustainable inclusive practices.

Writers

Cheryl M. Jorgensen, Ph.D.,
Inclusive Education Consultant

Contributors

Deborah Taub, Ph.D., OTL Education Solutions

Mary Schuh, Ph.D., Center on Inclusive Education, Institute on Disability at UNH

References

Brown, L., et al. (1983). The critical need for non-school instruction in educational programs for severely handicapped students. Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 8, 71-77.

Cosier, M., Causton-Theoharis, J., & Theoharis, G. (2013). Does access matter? Time in general education and achievement for students with disabilities. Remedial and Special Education, 34(6), 323-332.

Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. U.S. Public Law 94-142. USC 20, 1401 et seq.

Gartner, A., & Lipsky, D. (1987). Beyond special education: Toward a quality system for all students. Harvard Educational Review, 57(4), 367-396.

Jackson, L.B., Ryndak, D.L., & Wehmeyer, M.L. (2008-2009). The dynamic relationship between context, curriculum, and student learning: A case for inclusive education as a research-based practice. Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 33-4 (4-1), 175-195.

Kurth, J., Morningstar, M., & Kozleski, E.B. (2014). The persistence of highly restrictive special education placements for students with low-incidence disabilities. Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 39(3), 227-239.

Strully, J.L., & Strully, C.F. (1989). Friendships as an educational goal. In S. Stainback, W. Stainback, & M. Forest (Eds.), Educating all students in the mainstream of regular education (59-68). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Trent, J.W. (1994). Inventing the feeble mind. A history of mental retardation in the U.S. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

University of Kansas (2015). SWIFT Center. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas. Retrieved from http://www.swiftschools.org.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (2010). Thirty-five years of progress in educating children with disabilities through IDEA. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

U.S. Department of Education (2014). Thirty-fifth annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2013. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep/2013/parts-b-c/index.html.