Personality growth of retarded children in special classes as compared with those in regular classes

Mary Evalyn House

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PERSONALITY GROWTH OF RETARDED CHILDREN
IN SPECIAL CLASSES
AS COMPARED WITH THOSE IN REGULAR CLASSES

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by
Sister Mary Evalyn House, o. s. u.

A RESEARCH PAPER
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION
(EDUCATION OF MENTALLY HANDICAPPED)
AT CARDINAL STRITCH COLLEGE
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
This research paper has been
approved for the Graduate Committee
of the Cardinal Stritch College by

S. Gabriela Nowaković
(Advisor)

Date May 1973
ACNOWLEDGEMENTS
The writer wishes to express gratitude to the Ursuline Sisters of the Central Province for the opportunity to pursue studies in the field of special education, as well as, their interest and encouragement in this endeavor. Appreciation is also extended to the faculty of the Graduate Division of the Cardinal Stritch College.
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CHAPTER I
Introduction

The primary purpose of education is the development of the whole person: morally, intellectually, socially. The goal of education for all children should be self-realization, human relationship, economic efficiency, and economic responsibility.¹

The universal needs of all children are: affection, social recognition, status, self-respect, freedom from guilt and fear, fair balance between success and failure, harmony with reality.²

The feeling of being accepted is a basic need for all human beings. The drive to fulfill this need sometimes becomes exaggerated in the child who is atypical. What one thinks of one's self is influential in determining how one behaves, what one does, what one is afraid to do.³

An important lesson that each child must learn and


relearn is to accept and live with limitations which cannot be altered appreciably. The more the child's self-knowledge evolves the better he is able to view himself in relation to others. The retarded child however is often sheltered, kept in the background under the guise of "protecting" him. Each act of protection on the part of parents, family, friends, educators makes less possible the growth of a realistic self-concept in the child; and is a serious detriment to personality growth.

Statement of Purpose

The ability of a child to function as a human being in every area is related to the extent to which his basic needs have been and are being met. Parents turn to the school to help them in their responsibility of educating their child. The role of the educator is to find, often through research, the most effective means of aiding parents in this task.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to review the research concerning the personality growth of retarded children during their school years. Much has been written concerning intellectual growth of retarded children in special classes as compared to those retarded children remaining in regular classes. The writer's question is—what do researchers find regarding personality growth? Which type of class placement is proving to be more beneficial for the development of the whole child? Is the special class superior in this aspect of growth—or is
regular class placement more beneficial?

Definitions

Personality is a broad and comprehensive concept covering the organisation of an individual's predisposition to behavior and his unique adjustments to his environment. Personality development is a complicated process influenced by a vast number of interrelated and continually interacting factors. It is largely a product of social learning; and a child's social interactions provide the crucial learning situation.4

Special class for the purpose of this paper is considered to be a self-contained class placement in which the educable mentally retarded is placed with other retardates. The children remain in this class throughout the day. It may be a unit within the regular school; or, a class situated in a separate building. The children in this class have been evaluated and labeled mentally retarded and are segregated from normal peers within the school structure.

The writer considers regular class as any class grouping within the school system in which retarded children are integrated with "normal" peers within the structure of the regular school program. This may include the traditional graded structure, ability grouping, non-graded, or individual progress program.

CHAPTER II

Philosophy of Special Class Placement

The school is a social institution created by society to pass heritage of past generations and to educate the child in matters of daily living. In developing educational programs for mentally retarded children the fact must be recognized that the children possess more positive characteristics than negative ones. The aim of the educational program must be to help them utilize the faculties which they have intact in order to compensate to the highest degree possible for those which they are lacking.

Retarded children bring with them to the classroom not only their intellectual deficits, but also emotional and personality problems. They have experienced failure more often than success. Consequently they have a poor self-image and a defeatist attitude. This attitude often conditions them to expect rejection, ridicule, and exclusion from group interaction.1

Special class placement for the retarded is an outgrowth of several assumptions. It has been contended that: (a) unique learning problems of the mentally retarded require special methods and materials to accommodate them; (b) the

de-emphasis upon academic goals, and the emphasis upon social adjustment and personal development cannot be accomplished in a classroom where the major part of the day is devoted to academic pursuits; (c) the regular teacher is not trained to meet the needs of the retarded child; (d) the retarded child is often rejected by his peers, and realizes greater social acceptance in a group of children more like himself; (e) achieving the goals and objectives for the mentally retarded requires a different curriculum from that of regular grades.²

Special classes were first organized in public schools in the middle 1890's. From these initial efforts the programs have expanded into thousands, servicing hundreds of thousands of children labeled mentally handicapped.³ Special classes increased in enrollment over tenfold in the United States between 1922 and 1958. This increase would indicate an acceptance of the advantages of special classes over the retention of mentally retarded children in the regular grades.

In spite of this apparent acceptance of the special education classes in preference to the retention of the mentally retarded in regular grades, in 1968, Dunn questioned the justifiability of special education for the mildly retarded. According to Dunn, past and present diagnostic procedures have resulted in disability labels and supposedly homogeneous group-

ing of children on the basis of these labels. The avowed goal of this approach has been to look at the complete child, but the outcome has been merely to label him. Only when the child is labeled is he eligible for special education services.

The 1967-68 statistics compiled by the U. S. Office of Education indicate that there are approximately 32,000 teachers of retarded employed by local school systems. About 60 to 80 percent of the pupils taught by these teachers are children from low status backgrounds; broken disorganized, and inadequate homes; and children from other nonmiddle class environments. We must examine the effects of disability labels on the attitudes and expectancies of teachers. We must also keep in mind the evidence that removing a handicapped child from regular grades for special education probably contributes significantly to his feelings of inferiority and problems of acceptance.4

Dunn states:

It is my thesis that we must stop labeling these deprived children as mentally retarded. Furthermore, we must stop segregating them by placing them into our allegedly special programs... We are not arguing that we do away with our special education program for moderately and severely retarded, for other types of more handicapped or for the multiply handicapped. 5

The emphasis is on doing something better for slow slow-learning children and those children labeled emotionally

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4Lloyd M. Dunn. "Special Education for the Mildly Retarded—is Much of it Justifiable?” Exceptional Children, XXXV No.1 (September, 1968), 9.
5Ibid., p.11.
According to Dunn:

There is an important difference between regular educators talking us into trying to remediate or live with the learning difficulties of pupils with which they haven't been able to deal; versus striving to evolve a special education program that is developmental in nature, wherein we assume responsibility for the total education of more severely handicapped children from an early age, or is supportive in nature, wherein general education would continue to have central responsibility for the vast majority of the children with mild learning disabilities with us serving as resource teachers in devising effective prescription and in tutoring such pupils.

As a blue print for change, Dunn offers two major suggestions:

First—a fairly radical departure from conventional methods in procedures for diagnosis, placement, and teaching of children with mild learning difficulties.

Second—a proposal for curriculum revision which will be based on scientific evidence of worth, through examination, study and testing. What is needed are programs based on scientific evidence of worth and not more of those founded on philosophy, tradition and expediency.

As the need for education continues to be felt and becomes more a reality than an ideal, then special education should begin moving to fit into the changing general educational program.

6Lloyd M. Dunn. "Special Education", p. 11.
7Ibid., p. 11.
Recent Trend Toward Normalization

To create wholesome programs, facilities and life conditions for a group which is characterized by wide variations in age and degree of handicap might seem impossible. Nevertheless there is a general principle which expresses the aims, attitudes, and norms implied in quality work for and with the mentally retarded. This principle is given in the formula "to let the mentally retarded obtain an existence as close to normal as possible." This normalization principle means making available to the mentally retarded patterns and conditions of everyday life which are as close as possible to the norms and patterns of the mainstream of society. The principle should be applied to all retardates regardless of their degree of retardation, or whether they are living in the homes of their parents, in homes with other retardates, or in institutions.  

There is an evolving philosophy of maintaining the exceptional child in the regular educational program to the fullest possible extent, rather than placing a label on him as a "type" of child in a self-contained classroom. There seems to be a general consensus among regular and special educators that special education should be a part of and...
not apart from the regular educational program.\(^9\)

Special education should shift major attention to ways of inserting itself back into the mainstream of educational structures. This concept of special education and placement radically revises present views of "categories" of children. It focuses attention on variables that produce interaction effects with alternative treatment systems rather than on simple descriptions or surface aspects of handicaps.\(^10\)

Review of Research

Dunn suggests that we examine the effects of disability labels on the children themselves. Labels are not badges of distinction. Separating the child from other children in the neighborhood, or removing him from the regular classroom for therapy or special class placement probably has a serious debilitating effect upon his self-image.\(^11\)

Just what effect such class placement has on the actual development of a child's self-concept and personality growth has been the subject of much research. Only those studies related directly to the problem will be reported here. One such study was conducted by Blatt in 1958. The


Implications of his study are that mentally retarded children in special classes appear to be more socially mature and emotionally stable than mentally retarded children in regular classes. However, comparisons were based on scales that have no established validity or reliability. Therefore, it has been recommended that investigations be undertaken to ascertain whether special class children are more socially mature and emotionally stable than children in regular classes; or whether special teachers because of special training and experience, tend to accept retarded children more than do regular class teachers, and how acceptance or rejection influences the total development of children.12

Cassidy and Stanton, with a stratified sampling of special class and regular class educable in Ohio, used an exhaustive battery of psychological and educational tests, as well as a questionnaire, to compare performances of the two groups. Results of this study indicate the regular class retardates to be superior in personality and social adjustment. Results of the questionnaire showed that special class teachers were more interested in social and personal adjustments for their pupils than academic achievement. The academic superiority of the regular class retardate is not surprising.

in view of the fact that the better academically-oriented retardates in all probability remained in regular classes whereas the poorer ones were placed in special classes.\textsuperscript{13}

From July 1, 1959, through November 30, 1964, Goldstein, Moss, and Jordan did a study which was to compare intellectual development, academic achievement, and social and personal adjustment of educable mentally retarded children in special classes with children in regular grades. Personal adjustment of the experimental and control group children inside school and outside was considered. Investigated in this study were: parents' views of their children; children's relationships with peers; their success-approaching or failure-avoiding in school. Findings on personal adjustment suggested that special classes encouraged retardates to display originality and flexibility in their thinking. This encouragement, perhaps, stemmed from the fact that in the special class program emphasis was placed upon the individual's initiative, taking risks in being wrong when trying out solutions to problems, and formulation of unique solutions to classroom problems in a classroom atmosphere having little interpersonal tension.\textsuperscript{14}


The findings of this investigation suggested that in the regular classroom there was evidence that retarded children tend to be rejected. Interaction in the special class is freer and social relationships are not as structured as they are in the regular classroom. As a result, there is probably less rejection and social isolation in the special class than in the regular classroom. Possibly, this difference in the structure of classroom relationships results from the lesser emphasis upon academic achievement. Greater emphasis is placed upon the differentiation among the members of the class on basis of individual non-academic achievement and personal characteristics. The difference in aims between the special class and the regular class seems to facilitate the personal adjustment of the retardate in the special class while impeding his adjustment in the regular class.  

Guthrie, Butler and Gorlow designed a study to identify patterns of self-attitudes that characterize sub-groups of retarded children. This study represents an attempt to develop a system of personality assessments based on the retardate's conceptualization of himself and his world. The retarded person learns a set of attitudes, favorable or unfavorable, about himself, his worth, his talents, his threat to others, and these reflected appraisals influence many aspects of his behavior.  

15 Ibid., p.12.  
Thurstone, in an evaluation of educating mentally handicapped children in special classes and regular classes discovered that mentally handicapped children were found to be rejected and social isolates. Special class children seemed to be adjusted in school and have more friends than regular class retardates. The conclusion of her study gives evidence of superior social adjustment among special class pupils. However, it also notes that mutual acceptance of each other within the special class is not evidence that these children are not as maladjusted as retarded children remaining in regular classes, in the area of relationship with normal siblings and peers.17

After reviewing the studies of the efficacy of special classes, Johnson concluded that mentally handicapped children in special classes achieved significantly less than comparable children who remained in regular grades. He also concluded that any advantage in personal and social development which might be found in the special class groups is slight and probably not meaningful.18 At the same time Kearn and Pfaefle found that retarded children in special schools and special classes showed much better adjustment that did retardates in regular classes.19

In a study of peer groups and special classes, Mayerowitz found that educable mentally retarded children of second grade age seemed neither to be rejected nor sought as playmates within their own neighborhood. He also found that regular class retardates were better known than special class retardates.20

Gottlieb, in a research study quoting Danto and Machler, asks: Is it reasonable to assume that attitudes toward educable mentally retarded children in the classroom are similar to attitudes toward the retarded at play? The primary reason for assigning children to special classes is their inability to maintain the academic standards expected of them, rather than their deficiencies during play. We may expect therefore, that the classroom behavior of the retarded is less favorably valued than their behavior while at play. However, this study indicates that the relatively poor abilities of retardates in academic situations results in less favorable evaluation of them in situations where their deficiencies are not so pronounced.21

After reviewing the research, Brown questions the effectiveness of special class placement. Research rather consistently shows that the mentally retarded remaining in the regular classroom tend to do better academically than do


those retardates placed in special classes. For the mildly retarded there does not seem to be a particularly high degree of difference in their social and personal adjustment. Lower functioning educable mentally retarded children, however, tend to profit more in academic growth as well as in social and personality development in special class programs than their counterparts who have remained in regular classes.

Mullens and Itkin conducted a five-year study in which they attempted to determine under what circumstances children make better progress in special classes, and under what circumstances they make better progress in regular classes. In this study the researchers compared the social as well as the academic progress of the two groups. Results of this research, which studied high and low achievers among the mentally retarded in both regular and special classes, indicated that special-class placement was superior to regular-class placement for some children. The children for whom this special class placement is superior are those children who have an added handicap, visual and or motor as well as retardation.

Critics of the efficacy research have denounced the method of comparing retarded children from regular classes with retarded children from special classes, on the grounds

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that the comparison is biased in favor of the regular class by the process of selection of subjects. In school systems where some of the retarded children are left in the regular class and some are placed in a special class, it is assumed that the children with the greatest learning and adjustment problems are the ones who are recommended for special class placement, and that those who are more stable and able to adjust to the regular class remain there.  

On the basis of available research it cannot be denied that special classes do serve the needs of some mentally retarded children. It would seem too that the personality growth of retarded children in special classes in many instances exceeds the personality growth of retarded children who remain in the regular class.

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CHAPTER III

Summary

As was stated earlier, personality is largely a product of social learning. A child’s social interactions provide crucial learning situations. Relationships with teachers and peers are as highly significant to the child in his personality growth as is his relationships with members of the family or others with whom he may have contact. This is true of mentally retarded children as well as of normal children.

A young child’s behavior is likely to be awayed by his playmates’ reactions. As the child’s world expands, he encounters many new situations demanding adaptation in personality structure or behavior. Experiences on the playground or in the classroom may lead to major readjustments and significant alterations in a child’s personal-social behavior.

When the child arrives at school he brings with him his own unique physical, social, emotional, and intellectual level of development. He brings his past experiences, his relationships with his family, friends, peers. He has developed attitudes and values and has begun to develop his own view of the world.25

If the child is surrounded by negative and indifferent attitudes he accepts the concept of failure and defeat. Unless some positive action is taken to make the child realise his worth, his level of aspiration will remain low.  

Implications of Research

Special class placement for the retarded is an outgrowth of the assumptions that: (a) unique learning problems require special methods and materials; (b) de-emphasis upon academic goals, and emphasis upon social adjustment and personal development cannot be accomplished in classrooms where the major part of the day is devoted to academic pursuits; (c) regular teachers lack necessary training; (d) the retarded child is often rejected by his peers, and realises greater social acceptance in a group of children more like himself; (e) achieving the goals and objectives for the mentally retarded requires a different curriculum from that of the regular grades.  

Many researchers have made comparative studies of retarded children in regular classes and their counterparts in special classes. Studies have been conducted regarding academic growth as well as social and personality growth and adjustment. In many instances results have been

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27 Ibid., p.68.
negative toward special-class placement as regards academic growth. With regard to social development and personality growth, research findings are somewhat more positive in favor of special-class placement. Critics have questioned the method of comparing retarded children from regular classes with retarded children from special classes, on the grounds that the comparison is biased in favor of the regular class. It is assumed that the children with the greatest learning and adjustment problems are the ones recommended for special class placement, while those who are more stable and able to adjust are allowed to remain in the regular-class.

The present emphasis in education seems to be that of mainstreaming children in special classes into regular classes and then adjusting the daily program to each child's academic, social and personal needs. However, on the basis of available research, it cannot be denied that special classes do serve the needs of some mentally retarded children.

Conclusion

In spite of the fact that some critics of research have questioned the methods of research which compare retarded children from regular classes with retarded children from special classes, some positive findings have been made. There is a continuing need for research in the area of personality growth and social adjustment of the mentally retarded child. Retarded children, whether in the regular class or in a special-class placement continue to have the
same basic universal needs as all children. Since the primary purpose of education is the development of the whole person, educators and researchers alike must continue their efforts to find effective means to help each individual child reach his full potential development academically, as well as in the areas of personality growth and social and economic responsibility.
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