

## Educational Placements and Mental Retardation

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### I Background

During earlier times in the historical evolution of mankind, it is probable that the incidence of mental retardation was much lower than today. The rigors and difficulties of life, a lack of medical support, neglect, inadequate nutrition and even infanticide meant that few babies who had moderate or severe mental retardation survived beyond early childhood, if that long. Many who had mild retardation would have been able to fit in and meet the demands of a simple society and thus would not have been considered to have mental retardation.

As societies have developed and evolved more persons with moderate and severe mental retardation have survived and even more with mild retardation have been identified. In 1994, the World Health Organization estimated 3% of the world population, or 156 million persons including one hundred million in Asia have mental retardation. Some of the causes of mental retardation have been identified, allowing prevention of MR due to them, e.g., iodine deficiency and phenylketonuria. Overall, the incidence of MR appears to be increasing, although exact statistics are difficult to obtain for many reasons.

Only in relatively recent years has education been available to some persons who have mental retardation (PMR). In many countries education is still not a reality for PMR, although in 1971 the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed its Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons in which it stated “The mentally retarded person has a right to . . . such education, training, rehabilitation and guidance as will enable him to develop his ability and maximum potential.”

### II Placements for Persons who have Mental Retardation (PMR)

Placements involve complex and sometimes conflicting considerations. The roles and placements of PMR change over time as societies change. Much of the western world, e.g., has seen a pattern of early neglect, abandonment, rejection and exclusion of those with mental and physical disabilities. Infanticide was practiced by the Spartans when an infant was found defective. This rejection was followed in later centuries by near total segregation in asylums and other large institutions often located a distance from population centers. Segregation was

believed to be protective of the interests of both the disabled persons and the broader community of non-disabled persons. Some educational and vocational programs were eventually developed in some of these large residential facilities, however they were rudimentary at best. Finally, and currently, there is a major movement in parts of North America and Western Europe toward integration, normalization and inclusion with non-disabled persons in all aspects of living—residence, school, work and leisure.

A brief history of this integration movement in part of the western world may be instructive as more and more countries examine and consider that path. Many factors influence a society's journey toward greater acceptance and inclusion of PMR. Many and varied perspectives exist on the relative merits of segregated, specialized programs versus inclusive programs. Personal experiences with people who have disabilities shape and illustrate these perspectives and considerations. (Several real world examples will be provided in story form). These experiences highlight some advantages, disadvantages and unknowns in inclusion.

### III Placements of Students with Mental Retardation in School Settings (SMR)

Many kinds of educational placements are possible for students who have mental retardation (SMR): (a) Specialized, segregated school solely for SMR and/or students who have other disabilities; (b) Specialized, segregated classes for SMR located within regular public (government) or private schools; (c) Special rooms in a regular school to which SMR can go for a portion of the day while remaining in a regular classroom the rest of the time; (d) Full-time placement in regular education settings; (e) Individual tutoring, private or public; and (f) Combinations of these and any other settings, e.g., part-time placement in a community work setting plus attending a specialized class for SMR. (Examples will be provided.)

Among the many questions related to the school system that affect school placements for SMR include whether: (a) SMR have a legal or other recognized right to education, and if so, what is the exact nature of that entitlement; (b) A segregated setting is presumed, due to history, custom, lack of resources, or other; (c) An integrated setting is presumed; (d) A range of placement options already exists; (e) Combinations of placements are possible; and (f) Individualized placement decisions are possible, taking into account all pertinent characteristics of the individual student, his or her needs, and the resources.

When more than one setting is available or desired, controversies often surround decisions about the type of placements to be made. Among the major issues are (a) The relative value attributed to specialized, support services which are often segregated versus the physical proximity of integration with its minimal differentiation of SMR from non-disabled persons; (b) the “equitable” division of resources between SMR and non-disabled students; (c) concepts of appropriate services; (d) the rights, if any, held by disabled and non-disabled students; and (e) how much stigma is attached by the family and the broader society to mental retardation. Disputes over these and related issues occur, in societies where parents are active participants in their children’s education, between professionals and parents . Both perspectives need to be understood. Another crucial question which often divides professionals is whether educational activities and placements for SMR should be based on students’ chronological age or on their developmental/functional age.

Among the advantages generally cited of including SMR students in integrated, normalized settings are several, including a belief that to do so is far less expensive than providing specialized services. Some SMR may learn by watching the appropriate behaviors of the non-disabled students (although some may not be able to imitate others’ behaviors, appropriate or inappropriate). Non-disabled people may come to better understand and appreciate those who have mental retardation. Familiarity may result in better relationships, although this is far from guaranteed. However, it does seem reasonable that the greater the contact the SMR have with ordinary society, the better they may be able to operate in it, experiencing greater choice and independence.

An oft-cited disadvantages of inclusion or integration is the probable loss of what maybe essential specialized services or curriculum which could teach work habits and other necessary daily living skills like preparing simple meals, personal hygiene, etc. Another disadvantage is that few SMR would ever experience genuine success or excellence if always competing with and compared to non-disabled students. An important unknown, as yet hotly debated and not thoroughly researched, is the effect that being only with non-disabled has on the self esteem of SMR. Arguments are made both ways. It is noteworthy that when the age and other circumstances of the SMR allow dating and genuine friendships, almost everyone agrees that true peers, also SMR, are the appropriate group for close interactions.

#### IV Specific Factors affecting Individual Placement Decisions

Important factors that must be considered in making actual placement decisions for an individual student include: (a) the match between the curriculum and the student's needs and abilities;(b) the SMR behavior and its affect on other students and on the SMR own learning; (c ) the training, skills and attitudes of the staff in each possible placement; (d) the need/availability of specialized equipment; (e) the evidence of each program's effectiveness for children who have characteristics similar to the SMR; and (f) future plans and probabilities for the SMR work and living arrangements.

In short, there are no easy or simple answers to the educational placements for SMR/ There is no one answer, no one universally appropriate placement for all SMR. Appropriate placements depend on the needs and abilities of the individual SMR, our concepts of human rights and dignity, our beliefs about the effects of nature and nurture on the course of SMR, and the availability of resources including trained staff and current technology.

Special educators must always remember the nature and the essence of special education includes individualized instruction based on the child's needs and characteristics, tightly sequenced tasks, sensory stimulation, careful arrangement of the environment to minimize distraction and maximize attention to relevant stimuli, immediate reward for correct performance, tutoring in functional skills, and above all, the belief that every child should be educated to the maximum possible for that child.

Now, in 2007, special educators all over the world need to make placement decisions based on objective data showing how well the placement meets measurable goals. We must focus on the results of program and placement evaluation in terms of student progress and performance. Above all, we must advocate for meeting the individual placement needs of individual children and not advocate for one placement for all. No one placement fits all SMR, just as no one shoe fits every foot.

