

The Welfare and Education for Persons with Mental Retardation in Taiwan—Toward Inclusion, Inclusive Education

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I. Introduction

Inclusion is the current trend in developing the education for individuals with special needs worldwide as well as in Taiwan. Not only the newly revised Special Education Law (Ministry of Education, 2004), its Regulations, and related Acts (Ministry of Education, 2003) but also the Welfare Protection Law for the Disabled Individuals (Ministry of Interior Affairs, 2004) and its regulations all centered the importance of inclusion. The definition of inclusion in Taiwan means to put children with special needs into the regular settings with the supports / assistances of SPED. Back to the history of our special education development, we also have gone through the periods from segregation to integration, to inclusion as that of the world trend has. We can say now that we are standing in the transition period from integration to inclusion if the meaning of inclusion is to let every student and adult to be educated and lived with his or her counterparts. In this report, the presenter will focus on the policies and provisions in the last few years and the visions and prospective for the coming years.

II. Current efforts towards inclusion / inclusive education

1. Government

As we all know, inclusion will only be succeeded if the regular education is well - prepared to accept and educate the students with special needs into the regular settings. During the past few years, ROC government put a lot of efforts on the regular education reform. The beliefs of regular education reform for the nine-year compulsory education (from elementary to junior-high levels) are "to take good care of every student" and "to cultivate the students' basic competencies in ten areas and let them take-to-go for the rest of their lives." This reform also brings up the issue to alter the former subject-based curriculum to the domain-based curriculum, which is more real life-oriented and is more possible and flexible to adapt for students with mental retardation. In addition, the government also put much emphasis on the revision of the Special Education law and the Welfare Protection Law, their regulations, and related acts. Hundreds of hearings all around Taiwan were held to gather the ideas and data from various persons and resources, including the experts, the teachers, the administrators, the parents, and the disabled adults. Many new policies and provisions were implemented in according to the inclusive education needs.

2. Non-government

Professionals, parents, and runners of the private institutions also did a lot of efforts on inclusion. For instances, professionals are busy on disseminating the concept of inclusion and training the regular and special teachers. Parents are working on establishing parent organizations and advocating disabled individuals' rights. The private institutions' runners are changing the provisions by putting the school-aged severely disabled children back to the schools to receive their education, running the early intervention programs by putting the regular and special students together, and running the supported employment services to the disabled adults. For instance, SPED Association of ROC (our organization) has put this issue as an important policy and trend for holding many seminars, conference, and always as a topic in its annual general assembly meetings in the recent ten years.

III. Inclusion practices

1. Welfare

(1) Social services

The Welfare Protection Law for the Disabled Individuals states that each city and county government should conduct possible provisions such as various media programs, cultural activities, and talent shows to enrich the cultural and spiritual life of the disabled. Both high-tech and low-tech devices are provided to the disabled for them to access to the public places and communicate with their normal friends. The existing large institutions for persons with mental retardation have been altered into small size and community-based ones to include them into the communities. Besides, the disabled persons can have 50% discount while buying all transportation tickets, and free for entering the public recreational places. All the above provisions make the inclusion of the disabled more accessible and possible.

(2) Employment

As to the disabled adults, continuing education and supported employment especially for persons with special needs were also followed the inclusion trend. For the competitive employment, Quota system is set up to secure disabled persons' job placement. In any government running institute with employees more than 50, 2 % of them need to be disabled. In private sectors, with employees more than 100, 1% of them need to be disabled. The salary for the disabled should be no discriminated and should not less than the basic national salary standard. Besides, all kinds of government exam for getting the job license cannot reject the disabled unless the restriction is obviously shown. Only for persons with mental retardation, sheltered workshops, vocational training centers, and supported employment services are rendered based on their needs.

2. Education

(1) Early Detection and Intervention

Health system has set up a linking bridge with the social welfare and educational systems. For example, medical hospitals should inform the other two systems about each newborn baby with disabilities or high-risk child for the follow-up detection and intervention. Also, the newly revised Special Education Law clearly stated that all children with special needs at age 3 could receive the free and appropriate education and the education settings should be in regular kindergarten with regular children. But long before that, some cities already started programs for partial inclusion. For instance, Taipei City has established the special class program affiliated with the public kindergarten for the mildly, moderately, and severely developmentally delayed preschoolers at age 5 since 1988. Parts of the curriculum for these kindergartens are integrated with the regular kids. Since 1992, Ministry of Education has given many grants for setting up the full inclusion preschool experimental programs for the age 3 to 5 children with special needs in some universities and teachers colleges. Due to the regular and the special kids ratio is about 1 to 2, however, it still did not look like the real inclusive world. In 1997, Taipei city started the formal inclusive early intervention programs by putting a few mildly developmentally delayed and about 30 regular kids in the same class of the same kindergarten.

At present, children with special needs including mental retardation at age 3 to 5 can attend both the public and private kindergartens for all children with subsidies provided by the ROC government. Some other free early intervention programs by integrating the educational, medical, and social welfare disciplines in metropolitan areas are also rendered for children with special needs under age 3. Currently, preschool programs around our whole country have to accept the disabled children and include them with the regular children with normal ratios by rendering special education personnel as coordinators and remedial teachers. The label of all these children was the developmentally delayed instead of the mentally retarded, learning disabled, hearing impaired, autistic, or other categories before age 8 unless their disabilities are very obvious and definite. So we may say this could be a very good starting point for full inclusion in the future.

(2) School-age and Adult Education

For school-age children, mandatory Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) have to state the extension of including them in the regular education and provide the needed supports and aids in regular education settings. Although resource room programs for mild disabilities, special classes and special schools for

moderate and severe disabilities, and some programs affiliated with the hospitals or institutions for profound and multiple disabilities are still existed in current educational systems, the spirit of inclusion is still the guideline and the regular setting should be the first priority while doing the educational placement. Besides, providing the curriculum and activities to interact with their age-appropriate peers as possible as they can is the major concern while planning the IEPs. In addition, an annual IEP is required for each of the disabled and needs to be documented within 30 days after placement by an IEP team, which should includes teachers both in regular and special education, administrators, parents, and professionals in related services (i.e., OT, PT, & ST). Also, the IEP has to be reviewed at least once in a semester. At present, non-categorical resource room programs for the disabled including students with mental retardation at the elementary, junior high and senior high level by providing direct teaching to the disabled students or indirect services with consultation to the general teachers or providing aids to various disabled students is the main education program for the mildly disabled in Taiwan. For example, many elementary and junior high schools in Taipei area let children with mental retardation educate in the regular classroom as much as possible. As a result, the SPED classes for placing students with mental retardation have reduced and the resource room programs have increased. At present, each public school at elementary, junior or senior high levels has a resource room and SPED section with full time staffs in charge of the SPED and related services for students with special needs in its own school.

In addition, the government also mandated an act for rendering free and appropriate education to the disabled adult who has not received or completed the nine years compulsory education before in the regular adult remedial education system by providing needed supports.

IV. Support system

Program evaluation for all special education services needs to be implemented at least once every two years by the local government. The Ministry of Education also needs to evaluate the local government at least once every two years and budget will be allocated according to their performances. The Ministry of Interior Affairs also implemented evaluation to the institutions for persons with mental retardation periodically. All the above supervisions at least may enhance the quality of inclusion by not just dumping them into the regular settings without any supports. Also, each city and county government has its own Identification and Placement Committee for children with special needs from elementary to senior high levels and has a professional collaboration team constituted by various professional workers (i.e. OT, PT, ST, medical doctors, social workers) to run the interdisciplinary model for educating the disabled. At present, each city and county government has at least set up one resource center on special education for providing data, aids, personnel training, and other resources. In addition, schools in all levels needs to provide parents of children with special needs supported services such as information, counseling, guidance, and training courses.

V. Future trend

Although the inclusion train is on the way in Taiwan now, there are ample of difficulties and problems need to be solved in the future. Main suggestions are:

1. To make the IEP realistic and practical

Right now, still many IEPs look like Individualized Instructional Plans (IIPs) but not the management tool for both administration and instruction. Hopefully, it will become an in-advance plan for the educational program according to each individual's needs.

2. To do the general education curriculum adaptation as possible as it can

We need to consider the general education curriculum as the first priority while doing the curriculum decision for students with mental retardation. It can be taught with or without adaptation based on an individual's strengths and weaknesses. Only after this consideration, the functional curriculum such as life skills curriculum could be implemented.

3. To implement effective teaching strategies such as co-teaching, cooperative Learning, and Direct

Instruction

To make inclusion possible for not neglecting the regular students' educational rights and qualities, co-teaching by cooperate the regular and special teachers in one classroom with multilevel instructions are needed. Cooperative learning is also the major strategy both good for the academic gains and the interpersonal skills. In addition, Direction Instruction (Engelmann and Becker, 1968), which believes all children can learn, teacher should take the full teaching responsibilities, and never underestimate the child's capacities, is an effective teaching strategy as the presenter has been researched on disabled students before.

4. To teach survival and study Skills

Although direct remedial teaching in academics by the special education teachers are still needed in the future, some survival and study skills should be taught before including the disabled students into the regular class or ongoing taught while they are in the regular settings. For instances, teaching note-taking and test-taking skills, training them to be good listeners, teaching them how to behave, social skills, and teacher-pleasing behaviors are all very important for success in the regular classrooms.

5. To improve the assistive technology devices

Inclusion happens only the living and learning environments are universal designed and barrier-free. The advanced technological devices such as computer, eating and drinking system, electric mobile instruments, augmentative communication devices, and special switches, could fulfill our hope. The ROC government now sponsored a lot of research on developing the assistive technology. Hopefully, it will be very fruitful in the near future.

6. To implement ecological and dynamic assessment

For persons with mental retardation, we need to change the environment but not only the person himself/herself to make the desired behaviors emerged. The ecological and dynamic assessment could let us know what kinds of changes we need to do to make them at least partially participated into our societies.

7. To train both the regular and special educators

The teacher training is the key issue while doing the inclusion. We need to provide both pre- and on-service ongoing training. Let the regular teachers know about the special education and vice versa.

8. To emphasize on the gifted-disabled individuals' educational needs

For these twice-exceptional individuals, we need give them both the special and gifted education to fit their both characteristics. They are many students with mental retardation can not read and calculate, but can draw, sing, dance, and remember well. We shouldn't neglect these savants' talents but only concentrate on their academic weakness.

VI. Conclusion

We have seen the beauty and benefits of inclusion, but now we need to implement it into the reality. We all know this is the hardest part especially for a country that has been gone through segregation, and integration periods like Taiwan. Resistance to change has been aroused by the teachers of the general education and special education, the administrators, and even some parents as we anticipated. So there is still a long way to go, but we hope we can at least fully include the students with only sensory-motor deficits (i.e. the hearing-impaired, visually-impaired, physically-impaired) and mild cognitive dysfunctions (i.e. the learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, and mildly retarded), and partially include the severe cognitive dysfunction students such as severely and profoundly retarded, low-functioning autistics, and multiply disabled in the coming years. The consultation given by the SPED staff, related services provided through IEP, and co-teaching the regular and SPED kids in the regular classrooms through the SPED and regular teachers planned and taught together can be the accessible and effective strategies for making this goal possible. Nevertheless, partial inclusion is more realistic and accessible way for persons with mental retardation instead of full inclusion in Taiwan Currently.