Exceptionality

Toward an Understanding of Social Integration: A Special Issue

Gary N. Siperstein [a]; Robin C. Parker [a]
[a] University of Massachusetts, Boston

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INTRODUCTION

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Gary N. Siperstein and Robin C. Parker
University of Massachusetts Boston

Whenever I am asked to write or speak about social integration, I am always reminded of an encounter I had with a parent many years ago at the Down Syndrome Congress where I was presenting on the social aspects of mainstreaming. While sitting in the back of the auditorium waiting my turn to speak, I noticed a mother across the aisle with an infant in her arms—I was quick to realize she was most likely the mother of a child with Down syndrome. Her demeanor and actions suggested that she was unsure about why she was there. At the break I approached her, introduced myself, and asked if she was all right. It then became apparent that she was in fact a new mother of a child with Down syndrome. After a brief exchange, it became clear that she felt lost and was still reeling from the news that she was the mother of a child with a disability. I asked if she had any questions I might be able to help answer, and, looking down at her child, she softy asked, "When my daughter grows up, will she have friends?"

Over 50 years ago, G. Orville Johnson, an early pioneer in the field of Special Education, posed the simple question: Are students with disabilities socially accepted by their non-disabled peers in the regular classroom? In other words, are they socially integrated? Johnson's question was prescient, given that it was posited two decades prior to Public Law 94-142, which introduced the concept of the least-

Correspondence should be sent to Gary N. Siperstein, Center for Social Development and Education, University of Massachusetts Boston, 100 Morrissey Blvd., Boston, MA 02125. E-mail: gary.siperstein@umb.edu

restrictive environment and sparked the push to include students with disabilities in the general education environment. The answer to Johnson's question was, of course, "no," children with disabilities were not socially accepted by their non-disabled peers (Johnson, 1950). The studies that followed confirmed what Johnson found—children with disabilities were socially marginalized in general educational settings (Baldwin, 1958; Dentler & Mackler, 1961; Lapp, 1957; Miller, 1956). As the practice of "mainstreaming" students with disabilities in the general education environment gained momentum in later years, it became apparent that simply moving children with disabilities from segregated special education schools and classrooms to the regular education environment did not ensure their social integration. Today, almost 60 years after Johnson posed the question, special educators and researchers still grapple with how to promote social integration for students with disabilities.

Inclusion today might be best understood as comprised of three dimensions: physical integration, instructional integration, and social integration. It is true that although inconsistent across states and Local Education Agencies (LEAs), a growing number of children with disabilities spend substantial parts of the school day physically integrated in general education classrooms. Physical integration is easily monitored, as it simply involves measuring the amount of time a student with a disability is present in the general education classroom. Data from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (2006) reveal that just over half of students with disabilities spend at least 80% of their day in a general education classroom. Perhaps as expected, percentages vary widely across different categories of disability. For example, almost 90% of students with speech and/or language impairments spend the majority of the school day in the general education classroom, compared with 14% of students with intellectual disabilities.

The second dimension of inclusion, instructional integration, is more difficult to define, and thus, less easily monitored. The 2004 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act require that students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum, as well as appropriate and meaningful adaptations and accommodations to promote their academic progress. It is, however, difficult to monitor the degree to which these modifications and accommodations are implemented or their resultant effect on academic performance. In fact, it has been suggested that our schools' uncertainty about how to ensure the access of students with disabilities to the general curriculum is a major challenge to instructional integration (e.g., Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002). We acknowledge the complexity of this issue and the discussions that have centered on how children with disabilities should be taught and what they should be taught, particularly children with intellectual disabilities. This is perhaps a topic for a future special issue.

The third dimension of inclusion, social integration, which is perhaps the most difficult to operationalize and monitor, has garnered significant attention, particularly among parents. In fact, social integration was the catalyst that drove the early movement toward mainstreaming, as parents advocated for legislation that would allow their children opportunities for normative life experiences. Parents of children with disabilities were then, and are now, motivated less by the desire for their children to learn algebra and more by the wish to provide their children with the normative

social experiences of school—having a friend, being invited to a birthday party, or just having a playmate.

Today, children with disabilities are more likely to be physically included and have access to general education curriculum than they have ever been; however, little ground has been gained with regard to social integration. Although it was expected that physical inclusion of students with disabilities in schools and regular classrooms would result in their increased social acceptance, this has not been played out (e.g., Freeman, 2000; Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002). In fact, children with disabilities in today's inclusive classroom settings still, as was the case years ago, experience social rejection or isolation (e.g., Heiman, 2000; Sabornie & Kauffman, 1987; Sale & Carey, 1995). A recent study found that children with intellectual disabilities in particular were three times more likely than their non-disabled peers to experience rejection in the classroom (Siperstein, Brady, Freeman, & Parker, 2006). This lack of acceptance is underscored by the findings in a national survey of more than 6,000 youth that only 10% reported having a friend with an intellectual disability (Siperstein, Parker, Norins-Bardon, & Widaman, 2007). More than three decades ago, it was observed that "the term 'integrated' is more of an expression of wishful thinking than a description of the social relationships" (Richardson, Ronald, & Kleck, 1974, p. 144), and, regrettably, this still rings true today.

The challenges of nurturing social integration appear quite formidable. Yet, there are positive signs that social integration is not entirely elusive. Our recent review of the past 50 years of research included several examples of programs that have been successful in facilitating the social integration of children with disabilities (see Siperstein, Norins, & Mohler, 2006 for a review; Webster & Carter, 2007). The most commonly used approaches incorporate structured contact between children with and without disabilities. While the methods vary greatly (e.g., cooperative groupings and cooperatively structured activities, role-playing, peer tutoring, peer buddy activities) there is evidence to support their value in promoting positive peer relationships (e.g., Favazza, Phillupsen, & Kumar, 2000; Jacques, Wilton, & Townsend, 1998; Kishi & Meyer, 1994; McConkey, McCormack, & Naughton, 1983; Piercy, Wilton, & Townsend, 2002).

In non-academic settings as well, structured contact has frequently been used to promote the social integration of children with disabilities (Mulvihill, Cotton, & Gyaben, 2004; Rynders et al., 1993). For example, after-school recreational programs have used a wide range of cooperative activities (such as role-playing, team games, cooking tasks, and art projects) to demonstrate that children with disabilities are able to contribute to tasks through the same means of effort and teamwork as children without disabilities (Rynders et al., 1993). Tasks such as these also provide mutual satisfaction for participants with and without disabilities, and are designed to be fun (Rynders & Staur, 1995). This aspect should not be underrated, as the opportunity and capacity of children to have fun together has been identified as an essential component to development of positive social relationships (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996).

Our recent work on the social relationships of children with disabilities in a recreational summer program supports this notion. When designing and implementing this program, we sought to incorporate cooperative activities in which all children

would participate equally. Throughout the activities we emphasized personal skill development and achievement, teamwork, and above all, fun. In doing so, we found that the majority of children with disabilities were socially accepted and made new friends. In fact, nearly every child without a disability befriended a child with a disability during the program (Siperstein, Glick, & Parker, under review). These results suggest that a recreational setting can support not only physical integration but also social integration.

Throughout the literature there are examples of studies that suggest progress is being made not only in the physical integration of children with disabilities but also in their social integration. It is also apparent, however, that there is still much to learn about how the contextual factors and social ecology of the classroom, including teachers and children that are a part of that classroom, influence social integration at the preschool, elementary, and high school levels. This special issue focuses on social integration in the school setting. The shared value of the studies featured in this issue is that they go beyond merely documenting the presence or absence of social integration in the classroom and focus on fundamental factors and processes that lead to social integration. Specifically, these three studies address a range of factors at the classroom, teacher, and student levels that may promote or inhibit social integration.

In the first article of this special issue, Tsao, Odom, Buysse, Skinner, West, and Vitztum-Komanecki examine the factors and processes that contribute to social integration at the preschool level, with a particular emphasis on the social ecology of the classroom. As preschools incorporate inclusive practices, it is important to understand how the variation that exists in the organizational service models (e.g., community-based programs, public school-based programs, Head Start, and blended programs) and the differing ecological features of these preschool models impact the social integration of children with disabilities. The authors' suggest that organizational structure is an important factor influencing the social ecology of the classroom, particularly the degree to which programming centers around adult- or child-initiated activities, which in turn contributes to the social engagement of children with and without disabilities.

In the second article, Diamond, Hong, and Tu examine social integration in the preschool context through the perspectives of children without disabilities. Specifically, the authors document preschool children's understandings of physical disabilities and how these understandings affect their decisions about whether to include peers with disabilities in various play contexts. As expected, the results suggest that children's perceptions and expectations of their peers with disabilities are critical to the social ecology of the classroom. This work extends on a long line of programmatic research that focuses on young children's perceptions of their peers with disabilities.

In the final article, Carter and Pesko focus on the teacher as a critical element in the social ecology of the high school classroom. Specifically, they explore the degree to which teachers actively employ instructional techniques and interventions that promote social integration. The authors contend that although empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of a variety of intervention strategies for promoting social outcomes for children with disabilities, the important question for educators is how acceptable are these intervention techniques and strategies given today's educational zeitgeist, in which the emphasis is placed squarely on academic achievement, particularly at the

high school level? The findings suggest that teachers must perceive these interventions as not only feasible but also as valuable if they are to incorporate them into the day–to-day instructional routine of the classroom.

We cannot begin to assume that a single special issue on social integration can do justice to such a broad topic or adequately explain its complexities and associated challenges. The conclusion we can draw across the present studies and studies that have been conducted over the past 50 years is that physical inclusion in any context will not in and of itself yield social integration. The social acceptance of children with disabilities in our schools takes effort, intervention, and collaboration on the part of all stakeholders.

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