

NPDCI Responds to Wall Street Journal Article on Inclusion

In response to a November 27, 2007 Wall Street Journal article, entitled “Parents of Disabled Students Push for Separate Classes,” FPG Senior Scientist Pamela Winton prepared the following letter to the editor. An abbreviated version of the letter appears in the December 6, 2007 issue of The Wall Street Journal. We invite your ongoing comments.

Letter to the Editor:

Robert Tomsho’s article, “Parents of Disabled Students Push for Separate Classes,” is the WSJ’s second recent front page story to attack the merits of inclusion. While these articles raise legitimate concerns, they distort the issue by focusing only on the symptoms (the conflict), rather than the actual problems that need to be addressed.

Inclusion is like anything else. When done poorly, it doesn’t work. And simply calling something inclusion, does not make it so. In the most basic terms, inclusion flips the old special education model on its head. Instead of moving children to isolated classrooms to receive specialized services, inclusion requires that the services be brought to the child in the regular classroom—the same one that his or her typically developing peers attend. And far from the disastrous outcomes reported by the Wall Street Journal, when done correctly research shows that all children benefit—those with and without disabilities.

For inclusion to be successful, specialists, teachers and families must actively collaborate to best meet the needs of children with disabilities. There must be active support for inclusion from the administration and ongoing professional development. In other words, the resources to support inclusion must be in place to allow all children to reap its benefits. This was clearly not the case in the situations the Journal described.

In some early childhood education programs effective inclusion practices are becoming the norm. And when done well, it is producing significant results for children across a range of abilities. Research shows that children with disabilities make developmental gains in inclusive classroom. They engage in more positive behaviors. Parents report gains in social skills, acceptance by peers, and developmental gains.

Typically developing children also benefit. In one study parents reported that their child was more accepting of human differences, more aware of other children’s needs, had less discomfort around people with disabilities, and had less prejudice about people who behaved differently.

The articles do raise valid concerns for what happens when educators call something inclusion, but in reality practice “dumping”—simply placing children with disabilities in the same classroom as their typically developing peers. Inclusion is much more. Rather than using inclusion as a scapegoat for problems in schools, we should be providing the resources to support it and allowing all children to reap its benefits.

Add Comment

karen salomon [ksal@comcast.net] 17-Dec-07

Dear Editor: I believe the recent anti-inclusion articles featured in the WSJ lacked understanding and discussion of inclusion done properly. The appropriate supports and services need to be provided to "do" inclusion well. Merely dumping kids into a regular education classroom without support(s) is not inclusion.

There is no data that supports segregated education. Research is clear on the benefits of inclusion – for children with special needs and their typically developing peers. Research documents that children with disabilities in inclusive settings demonstrate higher academic and social achievement than their segregated peers. Post-graduate outcomes are also better – included children are more likely to be employed after leaving school; they even earn more money than do peers who were primarily segregated.

I would like to see the WSJ do articles on the self-contained classrooms in most schools. What are kids learning in these classes? Are they even doing grade level work? Please review state test scores for kids with IEPs and see how many are proficient in reading and math. These self-contained classes often are much, much farther behind the typical curriculum, and there are often many behavioral problems that disrupt teaching. Kids in these classes get further and further behind.

If the WSJ is "recommending" more restrictive placements, you owe it to your readers to educate them on what those classes are really like, and what the long-term outcomes are for children placed in these classes.

Reply

colleen tomko [staff@kidstogether.org] 17-Dec-07

Another backwards rational is the belief that supports and services are so limited that they can not be afforded to be provided to children who are included, but somehow the more costly version of providing those supports and services is deemed to magically appear if the students are moved to a segregated setting. That like saying if you change banks you'll have more money for vacation.

To the teacher whose child has autism and no one played with him in preschool, is removing him and placing him with only a few students who have difficulty with social and communication going to really be the answer? And then what? If he was shunned in a typical preschool, just wait till he is surrounded by only kids with autism.

The student with down syndrome who lacked peers to hang out with, will removing her really resolve that issue? Did they use circle of friends, circle of supports, MAPS, or Paths and plan for her involvement with peers?

Kids are not placed in "inclusion to make people feel better", its about the students and their whole being and the bigger picture of society and life. It's not so outrageous to look at the whole child and all their needs in an integrated way, I'd call that common sense. Just because a child happens to also have a disability, doesn't mean they shouldn't be treated the same for the same reasons as every other kid.

What a shame to have a legislature that doesn't understand what inclusion really is. Some things, such as civil rights issues are not a matter of choice, it a matter of treating people of equal value and worth.

To the mom whose son had depression, How were his interactions facilitated, what specially designed instruction was use? How could removing him give him more positive interactions with nondisabled peers and magically make depression go away? As far has only having a few friends, a lot of people only have a few friends. Its not the number but the quality that matters. As far no one coming to a pool party, which may also have to do with other issues of planning, such as schedules, what kids that age do, if the invitations were timely etc, but even so if no kids came just because, how is keeping the child away going to build

relationships or make him popular?

Mark Finkelstein, stated "it's easy to say that all kids should be in the mainstream schools but let's talk reality?, to which I say Yes let's talk reality. No one said education needs to be easy, its about doing what is right. Its takes work, it takes planning, it takes resources, communication and collaboration, and it can be done and it is worth doing.

As far as the "Bright Learning Center", having a hallway lined with walkers and wheelchairs hardly sound like a picture of success, it seems like a rather dim goal to aspire to. Would it be considered a positive statement if people of the same skin color were lined up, what's the point? The description of a teacher and four aides working with seven students, was that placed in the article as a means to say, "see, this is a lot of work to teach these kids, so therefore they need to all be together?" What about some descriptions of children with disabilities successfully participating in general class activities with peers without disabilities? There are plenty of those examples available too!

How dare a reporter, in this day and age, imply that having cerebral palsy is "suffering", and what is with the "largely" unverbally. Is this to emphasize how significant the needs are? The aide is being gentle, so they can only be gentle in a segregated setting? And are they describing this in such a manner as to some say that there is no way this student can participate in the general class? Well, others who understand inclusion can right away imagine this child making choices and answering questions using technology with peers.

The mother of Valerie talks about what her daughter is now learning that she is in a private school, one has to wonder what were they teaching in the regular classes she was in? It sounds like what she was being provided was not appropriate, so why is the answer move the child? Why isn't anyone looking at what the school is not doing appropriate and correcting the schools?

"If inclusion worked for all of our residents," the superintendent says, "they wouldn't be fighting so hard for these new schools." Did this person ever step back and think that maybe they are just fighting for things their kids need and if those things were appropriately provided inclusion would work for more students? Why is it if it doesn't work, the assumption is segregated classes will actually meet a child needs, if it is because the services are there, then the problem is with moving services to where they are needed. If a kid has social, behavioral, academic needs, they will still have the same needs no matter where they are educated. The general classes are the only settings that can prepare all students for a diverse world, and can provide appropriate models for academic, communication, social and behavioral skills, as well as provide natural opportunities to learn to function with others of various ability. The shared experiences are what will provide the students with the greatest likelihood to build relationships, which can also be facilitated and nurtured by adults who plan.

Colleen Tomko

<http://www.kidstogether.org>

<http://www.theparentside.com>

Reply

julie phillips [jphillips@mcg.edu] 18-Dec-07

I agree with the comments already made about the benefits of inclusion. What saddened me the most in reading the article was parents like Mary Kaplowitz and Senator Sweeney. I am so sad to hear children asking why they are being made fun of or not having friends visit them, but excluding these children from typical settings will only make that worse. When typically developing children are around children with special needs, they learn that they are more alike than different and learn that differences are ok. If children with special needs are sent to special schools and not allowed to interact with their typically developing peers, we will never create a society that accepts people regardless of their abilities. As a person

that grew up with an aunt that mentally retarded, I can say that being around her was a valuable lesson that taught me to accept everyone for their unique gifts.

Reply

orah raia [orah55@optonline.net] 19-Dec-07

Hello,

As a resident of New Jersey I am all too familiar with the issues presented in this article. I was interviewed by the reporter who wrote this article, Rob Tomsho. He spoke to me at length on the phone then came to my house and interviewed me for another 2 hours. I showed him evidence of the progress my son had made after returning to the public high school from a segregated school. I spoke of the limited expectations the teachers had for him in the private school, the benefits of inclusion for him and his classmates. He also met with a director of special education in my town and several parents, who told him of the success their children have had after returning from private schools back into the public schools. Therefore, he heard a great deal about the positive benefits of inclusion, when the supports are there. I pointed out that many of the negative experiences of families were due to not providing supports for teachers and students. Why he chose to present only one side of the story is a mystery to me.

The private school lobby in this state is very strong, they continually push for building more of their schools. Our state has the most amount of children in segregated settings in the entire country. We have a system where everyone has a belief that private is better and many public schools are eager to place the students there rather than learn how to increase capacity in their own schools.

There was a second WSJ article published on December 14th, you can find it at: [http://online.wsj.com/\[...\]/SB119758950772128219.html?mod=dist_smartbrief](http://online.wsj.com/[...]/SB119758950772128219.html?mod=dist_smartbrief)

Clearly the WSJ is intent on presenting one side of this issue. It is very frustrating and I can only hope that another paper may be convinced to do a series of articles on this in a non-biased way.

Reply

stacey [stacey.paquin@sbcglobal.net] 19-Dec-07

Discrimination, based on ignorance and lack of experience is alive and well. IT takes all kinds, it TAKES all kinds, it takes ALL kinds, it takes all KINDS, whether we like it or not. I happen to like it, most likely because I have seen the beauty and value, even when it gets ugly...

Reply

pam winton [pam_winton@unc.edu] 19-Dec-07

The Wall Street Journal has done a great disservice to its readers with its series denigrating inclusion. The problem is not inclusion as the paper suggests, the problem is doing something you call "inclusion" for the wrong reasons.

It's no surprise that districts that employ "inclusion" to cut costs ultimately fail children. Inclusion, real inclusion, by its very nature is driven by children's needs. Services are not cut when inclusion is done correctly—they are just delivered in a different environment. Children get the services they need—the same ones that were available to them in isolated classrooms; they just get these services in a classroom with their typically developing peers.

For inclusion to be successful there must be active support for inclusion from the administration and ongoing professional development. In other words, the resources to support inclusion must be in place to allow all children to reap its benefits.

Reply

doug iliff, md [douglasiliff@cox.net] 19-Dec-07

I have a very specific question, but I need to preface it with some background. This is a very sensitive issue for parents with special needs children, and I don't want to provoke an emotional response.

I am an experience family physician (age 58) who has been trained in research technique and published in refereed medical journals. My wife is an award-winning elementary school teacher with 25 years of experience in a private school, a suburban public school, and most recently an urban public school with a high proportion of special needs students.

She has concluded that SOME special needs students-- those with disabilities which cause classroom disruptions and require inordinate time demands from the classroom teacher-- make it difficult for average students to obtain enough "time on task" and instructional attention to achieve their academic potential. We're not talking about students with cerebral palsy, mental retardation, or ADHD.

Her school district really cares about all their kids. They don't have unlimited resources, but they try hard. There are good and bad classroom and special education teachers. In other words, it's real life. Not every teacher is working on a research grant. Some are grading papers till midnight, and some do as little work as humanly possible.

Her question was simple. She hears constantly that "research shows this" and "studies prove that." She wanted to see the research designs for the situation described above, and I told her I would try to find the studies.

I have been unsuccessful so far. The "What Works" website is wonderful, and they seem to have exactly the right idea about critically examining study designs. However, they have not examined the issue of the effects of disruptive students on the progress of average students (I wrote a proposal that they do so).

There is plenty of research on preschool special needs students, including their effect on other students. A lot of it looks at self-esteem issues, which is NOT what I'm asking about.

I can't find any studies on elementary school students.

I have read the WSJ articles, and the responses. In my opinion, and I think I have an open mind on the issue, the burden of proof lies on the advocates of inclusion, especially when dealing with some forms of autism and behavioral disorders. Common sense says that the more disordered the classroom, the more difficult it will be for average students to learn. Common sense says that highly trained specialists, working with small groups of special needs students in a controlled setting, will make more progress than a harried classroom teacher attempting to coordinate a three-ring circus of students, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals.

Common sense may be wrong on occasion. Maybe I could do brain surgery in my office with a neurosurgeon coaching me from the corner of my exam room. I don't know; it's never been studied. But I know where the burden of proof lies, and I think the WSJ is fair to raise the question.

Is there an answer?

Reply

pam winton [pam_winton@unc.edu] 08-Jan-08

Unfortunately educational research traditionally is not as rigorous as medical research and there is no Campbell or Cochrane Collaborative that serves as a repository for evidence-based practice. This makes searches like yours difficult.

As you note, more research exists for early childhood education than for the K-12 system. The National Professional Development Center on Inclusion has a summary of research available on preschool inclusion available on its website at [http://www.fpg.unc.edu/\[...\]/NDPCI_ResearchSynthesis_9-2007.pdf](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/[...]/NDPCI_ResearchSynthesis_9-2007.pdf)

The document, Research Synthesis Points on Early Childhood Inclusion, is a summary of key conclusions or "synthesis points" drawn from a review of the literature or research syntheses on early childhood inclusion. I realize this doesn't give you quite the information on k-12 research that you are seeking. On a positive note, you may have noticed in the WSJ's most recent article that Robert Tomsho references a study on inclusion and high schools. He writes, "'Last year, a federally funded study that examined inclusion programs nationwide held up Choctaw, as Adam's high school is known locally, as a model. Researchers were particularly impressed by the unusually high degree of coordination between special- and general-education teachers at the school.'

I believe that he referring to a 2006 report published in Learning Disabilities Research & Practice entitled, "Good High Schools for Students with Disabilities." The authors describe the report as the findings from a "3-year study of high schools that have strong participation and positive results for their students with disabilities. It can be found online at [http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/\[...\]/j.1540-5826.2006.00213.x](http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/[...]/j.1540-5826.2006.00213.x).

It seems that there is significantly more research at the early childhood level. Many early childhood programs have been practicing inclusion for some time, so perhaps the K-12 system could learn from these experiences. Does anyone have stories about positive early childhood experiences that they would be willing to share?

Reply

stephanie smith lee [slee@ndss.org] 08-Jan-08

There has indeed been solid research that has identified academic, social, and behavioral advantages for students with and without disabilities in inclusive elementary school settings: Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Grossi & Cole, 2006; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Waldron and McLeskey, 1998, University of Indiana Inclusion Study

See this link:

http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/cell/docs/IIS3_Final_Report.pdf

Here is the first paragraph from the Executive Summary, "Recently, researchers from the Center on Education and Lifelong Learning, Indiana Institute on Disability and Community completed a yearlong study on the academic progress of students across inclusive and traditional settings (Waldron & Cole, 2000). The results from this study indicate that students (with and without disabilities) educated in inclusive elementary settings made as great or greater academic gains than students educated in schools that utilize a more traditional, pull out model for supporting students with disabilities. Not surprisingly, school personnel and others concerned with effective school practices responded to the year one report with the question, "What is happening in the inclusive schools where student academic progress was great?" The purpose of the present study is to examine and describe the teaching practices and school structures that exist within three inclusive elementary schools. Using a descriptive case study design, it provides a detailed portrayal of the teaching practices and school

structures in three elementary schools that consider themselves to be inclusive."

Here are some social benefits:

--Students with disabilities in general education classes had more friends. (Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997; Newton & Horner, 1993; Vaughn, Elbaum, Schumm, & Hughes, 1998)

--Teacher ratings showed improved social skills.

Students do not demonstrate high levels of loneliness.

Kozleski & Jackson, 1993; Tapasak & Walther-Thomas, 1999; Vaughn, Elbaum, Schumm, & Hughes, 1998

Here are some social benefits for students without disabilities:

Improved self concept.

Reduced fear of human differences.

Increased tolerance.

Improved social emotional growth.

Improved personal conduct.

Positive outcomes for high school students who had interaction with students with disabilities.

Giangreco et al., 1993; Helmstetter, Peck & Giangreco, 1994; Peck, Donaldson, & Pezzoli, 1990; Staub, 1999

Behavior benefits for SWD:

Higher level of engagement in school activities.

Sharp decline in discipline referrals after shift to inclusive practices for students with and without disabilities.

Kemp & Carter, 2005; Krank, Moon & Render, 2002

And some academic benefits:

Students earned higher grades and higher scores on standardized tests.

Greater progress in reading and math when compared to students educated in resource settings.

Higher high school completion rates and college attendance.

Achievement increased in at least one academic area for students without disabilities

Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Grossi & Cole, 2006; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Waldron and McLeskey, 1998, University of Indiana Inclusion Study

Above info from a powerpoint presentation by Ricki Sabia, National Down Syndrome Society Policy Center (with permission)

Additionally, the research and resulting TA on positive behavior supports, strategies and interventions, that started out to benefit SWD, have benefitted a wide range of students. Schools that adopt school-wide behavior practices are finding tremendous improvements for all students.

Hope this is helpful.

Reply

Concern

The concern that I have begins with the title of this article. I am very disappointed that a publication like the Wall Street Journal would not have someone in the field correct them before publishing a title that does not use person-first language. This immediately discredits the entire article for me.

Reply

Concern

Tiffany...I could not agree more. We are making every effort to help media use person-first language

when engaging with them around issues. Thanks for your input.

Pam

[Reply](#)