

What Do **Students** Think About Inclusion?

We know that the practice of inclusion — teaching students with disabilities in the context of regular education classrooms — is controversial among educators themselves. But has anyone ever bothered to ask students how they feel about it? Mr. Miller assigned his class of prospective teachers to do just that.

BY MAURY MILLER

LEARNING to be a teacher means learning about students, understanding their preferences, and considering their points of view. The best way to get these student views is to go to the students themselves.

I make this point every year in a course designed to prepare future teachers to work with the students with exceptionalities who will be in their classrooms. Students in my course are sophomores and juniors who are just beginning their formal teacher education. They are preparing to be teachers of general education in elementary, middle, and high school classes. While they have made a satisfying decision and have even begun to picture the classrooms they will have, their mental images rarely include students with exceptionalities, at least initially. They imagine their classrooms' design, decorations, and even furniture, and they imagine eager, achieving children who all want to be there and are enthusiastic and capable learners.

If these teachers-to-be have been in inclusive classrooms themselves, most seem to have taken little notice. They arrive in my class without having thought much about the varieties of learners they will have in

their classrooms. They have not considered ways to meet the individual learning needs of the diverse range of students likely to be present in their classrooms, and in particular they have not considered interactions between students and ways to foster them.

It is not unusual for the views of students to be overlooked. It is rare for researchers even to consider students' views in their studies. In fact, I attempted to locate studies that asked students with disabilities about their views of and preferences regarding inclusion and found very few.¹ What I did find, though, was the complaint, voiced by several researchers, that students are rarely asked their own views of any initiatives at their schools. Students of all kinds are not asked what they

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would prefer, nor are they given an opportunity to give input into decisions or express any of their concerns.

Since so little is known about students' own views, it is not surprising that there is little opportunity for prospective teachers to find out what students are thinking. Lin Logan's 1996 *Kappan* article, "Want to Teach? First Go to the Mall," describes sending preservice teach-

though the students in my course aspire to teach at various levels, they are not required to interact only with students whose age is the same as those whom they will teach.

Before my students encounter their first interview subjects, we spend some time discussing interview methods and approaches. For example, because they will prob-

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ers to the mall to interview adolescents about their likes and dislikes, as well as more substantial topics.² Logan's purpose was to enable the college students to find out about adolescents in general. I decided to follow that lead with a narrower purpose — to discover the views of today's young people with regard to the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in their own classrooms.

Although initially I wanted to have my students go to the mall to find young people to interview, the largest local mall would not permit it. They regarded it as "soliciting." So my students and I brainstormed where we would be likely to find today's students and came up with a list including sporting events, recreation facilities, churches, movie theaters, parks, and, simply, the neighborhood.

When I send out my students, I emphasize that they should talk to students who are old enough to have noticed the differences among their classmates. So my students don't interview subjects younger than 10. Even

ably be interviewing students whom they don't know, how should they make a safe initial contact? They can often break the ice by telling a prospective interviewee that this is for a college assignment and asking for help.

Then we discuss wording, and this turns out to be quite a conundrum. Of course, we want to select terms that do not, in themselves, suggest a perspective, but we also want to use what is regarded as correct vocabulary. For instance, although *disability* is now preferred to *handicap*, maybe *handicap* is the word with which the young people to be interviewed are most familiar. But this term may lead the interviewee to think only of physical disabilities, rather than the learning and behavioral disabilities most likely to be seen in the regular classroom. From our discussions, my students select several terms that they think might be useful, and they work to provide descriptions without tainting the views of the young people they interview.

Some of our discussion then focuses on how to interview today's students, getting their views as a news reporter would without attempting to use the exercise to teach or to change anyone's views. For these eager young teachers-to-be, remaining neutral can be a challenge.

After the interviews have taken place, I ask my students to prepare reports in pairs, synthesizing the results from both students' efforts. Since they usually interview different students, of different ages, and with different experiences, this collaborative exercise, by itself, requires them to explore different views. For the final part of their reports, they are to consider how they might respond to students in their future classrooms who might share the views of the students they interviewed.

My college students are usually pleasantly surprised to learn that many young people are quite willing to describe their experiences and perspectives. And my students often find that, once they have successfully ex-

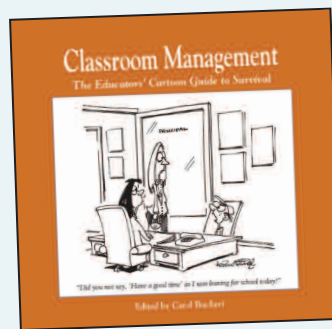
plained the purpose of the project, the students they interview tell them that their classroom interactions with students with disabilities have been positive — both for themselves and for the included students.

Young people today consider it right and natural for students with learning and behavioral difficulties to be in their classes, although they are sometimes puzzled about the comings and goings of those children who leave the classroom during the day to attend resource rooms. In the interviews, those young people who addressed co-teaching found it to be something easily adjusted to. The few who did think that students with disabilities needed a separate special education expressed that view positively: the students with disabilities had educational needs that could, perhaps, be better served outside the general education classroom.

My students reported that unique and interesting experiences turned up in the interviews. Some of the young people revealed that they, themselves, were students who received special education. Others mentioned a sibling who had a disability. One girl stated that her boyfriend had a learning disability. These students had personal acquaintance with an individual with a disability, and all supported including students with disabilities in the classroom. Indeed, they asserted each student's right to be there, "just like all the other kids." Some of them told stories of the trials those students could face in those classrooms, ranging from hearing negative comments, to being ignored by classmates, and, even, to being subjected to demeaning comments from teachers. However, all were quick to also tell stories of good friendships and helpful teachers.

In addition, as Logan found, some of my students deliberately sought out individuals who were not like themselves. They found students whose race or style of dress or hairstyle marked them as different from the interviewer. To their surprise, these students could be highly positive about having students with disabilities be a part of their classrooms. One quiet, demure college student from a small town determined to grit her teeth and approach a teenage girl who was decked out in a leather jacket and lots of chains. This biker might have been intimidating to my student, but on learning the topic of the interview, she enthusiastically stated, "Listen, my brother is retarded, and I'm the best protector that kid has!" She went on to speak forcefully of her brother's "right" to be in class and described the friends he had there and the support he was receiving from others.

In their own summaries, the prospective teachers in my class showed a strong interest in delving into students' opinions. They were quick to think of ways that



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the views of those they interviewed could be made richer, and they thought of numerous ways that students with disabilities could be important in their classrooms. When the students they interviewed either showed no experience with students with disabilities or revealed less-than-positive attitudes, my students were able to generate ideas for supporting these students and their interactions in their general education classrooms.

Although it is not common for investigations in education to explore the views of students — and notably absent are the views with regard to classmates with disabilities — these college students planning to become teachers learned the value of soliciting these opinions. They were able — sometimes in fairly clever ways — to find students who were willing to express their views, and they discovered that listening to them sometimes altered their own opinions. I am hopeful that such experiences will lead my students to consider the viewpoints of their future students with regard to the design of learning in the classrooms where they will teach.

1. Maurice Miller, Pamela Garriott, and Deanna Mershon, "Special Education Students' Placement Preferences, as Shown in Special Education Journals," *Electronic Journal of Inclusive Education*, Fall/Winter 2005, www.ed.wright.edu/~prenick/Fall_Winter_05/7_Miller.htm.

2. Lin Logan, "Want To Teach? First Go to the Mall," *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1996, pp. 383-84.



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