

# Attitudinal Research Issues in Integration of Children with Mental Handicaps

## Abstract

*Attitudinal research in the integration of mentally handicapped children into regular schools has tended to ignore the ecological validity and meaningfulness of its results and interpretations. Yet an ethnographic approach to such research has the potential to capture the culture of the school site in relation to integration practices especially when as many relevant school groups as possible are included in the study. Educational researchers need to transcend the idea of the school as an isolated setting and draw on the theoretical and empirical knowledge of the sociology of education when interpreting their results. The methodological and interpretative issues of such an approach are discussed in relation to a pilot integration project of children with Down's syndrome.*

## Résumé

*Les recherches d'attitude sur l'intégration des enfants handicapés mentaux dans les écoles ordinaires ont laissé de côté la validité écologique et l'importance des résultats et interprétations de cette formule. Or, l'approche ethnographique est capable de saisir la culture de l'école par rapport aux pratiques d'intégration, d'autant plus qu'on intègre le plus grand nombre de groupes scolaires dans l'étude. Les chercheurs en pédagogie doivent transcender l'idée de l'école comme cadre isolé et s'appuyer sur les connaissances théoriques et empiriques de la sociologie de l'éducation lorsqu'ils interprètent leurs résultats. Les problèmes méthodologiques et interprétatifs de cette approche sont analysés par rapport à un projet pilote d'intégration d'enfants atteints du syndrome de Down.*

Attitudes toward the mentally handicapped have always influenced their treatment by society. For this reason, studies assessing the attitudes of various groups toward the mentally handicapped are important in examining

the teaching-learning process and the delivery of education in the classroom, and in setting relevant public policies (Gottlieb & Siperstein, 1976).

Today, with the adoption of integration laws, such as PL 94-142 in the United States (U.S. Government, 1977) and Bill 82 in Ontario (Donahue & Smith, 1986), and the expansion of mainstreaming to integrate children with various handicaps into the regular system of education, additional attitudinal research on mental retardation is urgently required. New studies are required to determine not only the nature of societal attitudes toward the mentally handicapped but also how these attitudes may hinder or advance integration.

Such studies, nevertheless, must consider a number of interrelated methodological and interpretative issues. Methodologically, it appears that naturalistic, ethnographic research should take precedence over laboratory research because of the nature of the investigation. Additionally, researchers must be careful not to let the quest for methodological rigor obscure the interpretational outcome of their studies. Constructing a holistic scheme in which to situate individual and group attitudes is a major step in understanding and explaining these attitudes. In other words, an interpretative conceptual scheme which ignores the relationship of attitudes to the systemic educational structure falls short in explanatory ability.

The purpose of this paper is to relate these methodological and interpretative issues to a study examining a pilot project in which children with Down's syndrome were integrated in the regular classroom (Karagiannis, 1988). The methodology and an interpretation of the results of this study are described in the next section. Particular emphasis is given to teacher resistance as related to the organizational structure of the school. This presentation is comprehensive but in no way exhaustive and the reader is reminded that this paper targets general issues, not just a particular study. Consequently, the pilot integration project is not described in complete detail.

### **The Case of a Pilot Integration Project**

The study was conducted in a school located in a major Eastern Canadian city, which had a history of integrating blind and deaf students. The attitudes of the school community (regular education teachers, administration and support services personnel, nonhandicapped peers, parents of nonhandicapped peers, and parents of the three children with Down's syndrome) toward the integration of three children with Down's syndrome were examined. Data collection took place during the third official academic year of the project.

Observation (in classrooms, hallways, the gymnasium, offices, and meetings, and on the playground) and collected school documents aided the

researchers in becoming acquainted with the social context of the school as related to the pilot project and in constructing the main instruments of the study (questionnaires and interviews), drawing partially on similar instruments available in the relevant literature (Ringness, 1960; Baker & Gottlieb, 1980; Siperstein & Bak, 1980; Voeltz, 1980; Childs, 1981). Additionally, a sociometric status-rating instrument (Iano, Ayers, Heller, McGettigan, & Walker, 1973) was administered to the three classes with the children with Down's syndrome. Data collection took place from September through April by means of standard ethnographic techniques for education (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

The approach to the study was both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative results consisted of descriptive statistics derived from responses to the questionnaire, interview, and sociometric status-rating instruments. The qualitative results consisted of verbatim data derived from written and oral responses to the questionnaires and interviews. Qualitative analysis was performed through the use of standard ethnographic techniques for education (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

#### ***Background information on the project***

The initiative to propose an integration project was taken by the parents of children with Down's syndrome. It was agreed that the number of children with Down's syndrome who were to be part of the project would be limited to three, and the school board and school committee voted to accept the project.

The teachers were informed about the project before its initiation and agreed to cooperate in its implementation. Though no teacher had expressed any initial opposition to the project, no teachers were forced to accept any of these children in their classrooms. It was also understood that special support services would be an inherent part of the project. A special education teacher was assigned to the school, and the school board psychologist and special education consultant had largely undefined roles and visited the school irregularly. Two teacher aides were also assigned to one of the children with Down's syndrome during the third year of the project. In terms of planned educational intervention, an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) for each child with Down's syndrome was constructed by the special education teacher and the special education consultant.

Various meetings among the support services personnel, the principal, the teachers, some school board members, and the parents of the three children with Down's syndrome, as well as several mini-workshops conducted by integration specialists, took place usually after the school day requiring the contribution of extra, voluntary time. Additionally some of the homeroom teachers, who taught the children with Down's syndrome, participated in integration seminars at a local university.

### ***Background on the three children***

A brief description of the educational background of the three children with Down's syndrome (names changed) follows.

**Helen.** She enrolled in an early infant stimulation program followed by a nursery school. When she was of kindergarten age, her mother took her to the neighborhood regular school where she attended the kindergarten class for two years before the initiation of the pilot project in the same school. During her second year in kindergarten she was identified as a special child. Helen did not seem to conform to the stereotypic physical appearance of a child with Down's syndrome. She had blond hair and was quite open and friendly. She was ten years old at the time of data collection, only one year older than her classmates, and was attending a grade three class.

**Ann.** She attended an early stimulation program from 2 1/2 months to 2 1/2 years of age. When she was 18 months old she was also introduced to an early language program at a local university. At three years of age Ann attended a nursery school, and at the age of four a Montessori school. The following academic year she was enrolled in a regular kindergarten class elsewhere. That school was willing to promote her to grade one the following year but her mother was sceptical and enrolled her, against professional advice, in a segregated school. Ann had to be bussed for over three hours a day to the segregated school so her mother decided a month later to take her back to the previous regular school. After completing grade one, Ann's family moved to another area of the city and she was enrolled in a different regular school for grade two. The following year she was enrolled in the regular school, whose pilot project is presented here, where she repeated grade two. Ann, a very small girl with dark hair, was shy and looked much younger than her age. At the time of data collection she was ten years old, only a year older than her class peers, and was attending a grade three class. She did not seem to have an apparent stereotypical Down's syndrome physiognomy.

**Alexander.** Up to three years of age he was in an early infant stimulation program and was also doing physiotherapy and occupational therapy. From three to five years of age he attended a special school, and from five to six a regular day-care center. Finally, from six to seven he attended a kindergarten class in the pilot integration project during the morning and a regular day-care center in the afternoon. Alexander was a very small boy with dark hair and a very sociable and outgoing personality. He liked to attract a lot of attention and this was part of the reason that he had difficulties with his kindergarten teacher. In fact, this teacher was of the opinion that Alexander should not have been admitted to the project and she declined to accept him

in her class for another year. Her opposition was so strong that the situation almost became a teacher union issue. In the following year, which was the data collection period, he was not enrolled in a class for the first month. Afterwards, a teacher accepted him to her grade one class with the assistance of two teacher aides who were hired for this particular reason. The funds for the two teacher aides were secured by Alexander's parents from an advocacy agency for the handicapped.

### *Expressed attitudes*

Overall, highly positive attitudes were held by most participants. The only exception was among a significant number of regular teachers, which seems to be consistent with previous literature (Byford, 1979; Perkins, 1979; Dixon, Shaw, & Bensky, 1980; Paul & Warnock, 1980).

The parents of the children with Down's syndrome expressed their concern during the initial stages of the project as to whether it was going to work both socially and academically. As expressed at the time of data collection, however, they perceived that their children had made significant developmental gains and it appeared that their positive perceptions about their children's abilities had increased. Consequently, all parents were determined to assure the continuation of the project despite problems and conflicts with some regular teachers.

The overwhelming majority of parents of nonhandicapped children seemed to support the project. Some of them mentioned that their children's education should not suffer because of integration. However no parent perceived that there had been any negative effects on their children's academic progress. They also had no reservation about the benefits to their children because of their familiarity and interaction with the three integrated children with Down's syndrome.

The results from the nonhandicapped children in the school appeared to support their parents' perception. In their interviews, they revealed highly positive attitudes toward the three integrated children with Down's syndrome and mentally handicapped children in general. Most interviewed children were accepting of the three integrated children to the point of contradicting teachers' perceptions that these three children would become "alienated" from their peers. In other words, nonhandicapped children seemed to have an intuitive understanding and acceptance of the concept of integration.

### *Perceived positive aspects*

In relation to the developmental gains of the three integrated children, the large majority of all participants perceived that these would not have been

possible in a segregated environment. The only exception was a large number of teachers who did not know whether this was the case because of lack of their experience in special schools. Only two teachers with such experience had no doubt about the appropriateness of regular schools.

The principal, the director of student services, the special education teacher, and the two assigned teacher aides supported the project quite strongly. Their support was crucial for the success of the project because of their key positions. Only the principal seemed to have some reservations. Even though her positive attitudes and support were clearly expressed in her interview, it seemed that she could not take publicly a firm stand in favor of the project because of her perceived administrative responsibilities to all the teachers and the school community.

*Perceived negative aspects: An interpretation*

The regular teachers revealed both highly positive and highly negative attitudes toward the project. The resistance of some of these teachers was quite strong mainly for reasons of organizational inefficiency.

One of the situations that reinforced teacher resistance to the project was the lack of expertise in integration of mentally handicapped children at both the school and school board levels. The regular teachers expected that the traditional organizational structure in the school and the school board would run smoothly in providing support services. Nevertheless this was not the case which, combined with Alexander's problematic year in kindergarten, transformed some teachers' reservations into frustration and eventually resistance to the project.

More specifically, the support services role of the psychologist, special education consultant, and special education teacher were largely undefined. The expertise to define these roles and identify available and potential resources was lacking. The role of the regular education teachers in the project was unclear. Consequently these teachers did not know how to use the available support services, and the support services personnel could not identify the needs of the project, anticipate problems and difficulties, or suggest adequate solutions.

Perhaps the most indicative problem with the support services was the process of constructing the IEP for the three children. The regular education teachers did not know who was responsible for constructing the IEPs and felt that they had been excluded. The special education teacher disagreed with the process of developing the IEPs with the special education consultant only, and even doubted the usefulness of the IEP format. It seemed that the IEPs were more or less shelved and that no one used them.

Additionally the lack of a communication mechanism to exchange information, feelings, and ideas about the project contributed to teacher resistance. Schedules among regular education teachers and between these teachers and the support services personnel were incompatible. As release time for the teachers was rarely available, communication problems among various parties created misunderstandings and interpersonal conflicts.

Further, the need to modify the daily school schedules, habits, and routines was not seen as welcome by teachers who were described as inflexible or too structured. It was not accidental that the conflicts of the special education teacher and the parents of the three integrated children took place with the same regular education teachers. These teachers were the ones described as "not willing to change".

The integration of these children into a school which was not familiar with their needs presented a challenge at many different levels – from the school board to the individual teacher in the school. Beliefs about the nature and purpose of education were questioned. Everyday school routines and teaching methods had to be altered. A teacher, who seemed to have a misunderstanding of the philosophy of integration (although she reported to have a clear understanding of it), commented that "if it's only for social grounds the school is not the place, the school is a place of learning." The integration of these three children posed a challenge to this definition of learning as well as to the structure of the school.

All too often, some teachers had closely watched for problems rather than gains of the three children in an attempt to justify their conclusion that integration was not working. The special education teacher and the parents of the three children were of the opinion that these children were in a "fishbowl" being observed all the time for mistakes rather than successes.

Consequently many regular teachers seemed to deduce that integration was not working, when it was the school structure that was not working or there was an unwillingness of some teachers to modify their expectations, routines, and schedules. As indicated by the principal, the high average age of the staff (the youngest teacher was about thirty-six years old) could have contributed to teacher burnout and their unwillingness to "venture".

Teacher "animosity" and lack of official school board policy on integration played a major role in teacher resistance. The regular education teachers appeared to perceive that they were doing a favor by integrating the three children in their classes. They perceived that they should have the discretionary right to accept or reject these children. On the other hand it was also perceived that the school board, despite not having an official policy, was spending a large amount of resources for three children. Many teachers

thought that excluding other children with needs in the school was an unfair distribution of time and funds. However, most of these funds were available to the school board only because of the integration project.

### *Contrasting positive and negative aspects*

With regard to the perceived positive versus negative aspects of the project, most of the positive ones related to benefits of both the three handicapped and the nonhandicapped children, whereas most of the negative ones related to the organizational structure of the school. Adult participants in the study thought that positive aspects related to the following: how well the children with Down's syndrome fit in the school and how much they could learn, and the building of accepting and tolerant attitudes in nonhandicapped children. When it came to negative aspects of the project the following were mentioned by adult participants: inadequacy of support services, inadequacy of release time for teachers, communication problems between the teachers and support services personnel, and distrust of school board by teachers. This finding is in accord with the view that there is a tendency to put the weight of change on the handicapped rather than on the schools (Goldstein, Arkell, Ashcroft, Hurley, & Lilly, 1975; Sapon-Shevin, 1978; Forest, 1984; Kunc, 1987).

It seems that the organizational structure of the school and its human resources were not made or developed for integration practices and resulted in frustrations, conflicts, and resistance to the project. Consequently some school professionals, mainly regular education teachers, perceived that the integration of these three children had failed when it was really the school structure which had failed to accommodate fully integration practices.

Despite some regular teachers' resistance, all the other participants in the study held highly positive attitudes toward the project and integration of the three children with Down's syndrome. In general it appeared that the pilot project had been a success for the three children with Down's syndrome and the nonhandicapped children, at least in the short-term. More teacher acceptance and support, however, would only enhance this success.

### **Methodological Issues**

Many have doubted the value or relevance of research in the field of mental retardation (Crammond, 1970). Experimental laboratory research has been especially criticized for a tendency to ignore the social-cultural dimension of mental retardation. Brooks and Baumeister (1977) have urged researchers "to leave the security of laboratories . . . and go where people actually live" (p. 415).



Traditionally, it appears that attitudinal research in mental retardation has suffered in three ways. First, most of the studies conducted on attitudes of nonhandicapped children toward mentally handicapped children have been conducted in the laboratory. Mentally handicapped children have been represented by videotapes, audiotapes, photographs, or written vignettes (Bak & Siperstein, 1987). Second, the attitudes of groups of people toward the mentally handicapped have been examined in a vacuum free of the specific social context in which they were developed. These studies have tried to assess attitudes through mailed questionnaires to respondents whom the researchers had never met within their social milieu. Third, the attitudes of a group of people in a setting have been examined without reference to the attitudes of other groups in the same setting. Thus these studies have been unable to explain why attitudinal discrepancies exist among different groups in the same setting (Karagiannis, 1988).

Clearly, those approaches to the study of attitudes toward the mentally handicapped are of doubtful ecological validity or explanatory ability. A certain degree of naturalistic, ethnographic approach to research in mental retardation, and especially to attitudinal research, is necessary to grasp, analyze, and understand the activities of a setting or a group of people (Edgerton, 1984). In other words, the researcher should personally spend an adequate amount of time to become acquainted with the participants of the study and the setting.

In studying the attitudes of a school community toward the mentally handicapped, consideration should be given to the fact that these attitudes are developed within a particular context (the school community) and under specific circumstances (the existence and type of mainstreaming practices in the school). Also attention must be given to the attitudes of as many groups of people in the school community as possible. The reasons for such an approach are: (1) attitudinal discrepancies among the different groups are likely to exist because of different kinds and levels of involvement, and (2) attitudinal discrepancies from one school community to another may exist due to specific events and situations.

A holistic, ethnographic approach has the potential of revealing conflicting accounts of integration situations by different groups. In the mentioned pilot project, for example, many regular education teachers had perceptions largely different from the other groups. If the study had focused on the teacher group only, other attitudinal dimensions of the problem would not have been detected.

Studies having a holistic ethnographic perspective also have the potential of resolving previously conflicting literature by bringing to surface the particularities of the sites which may contribute to differences in results from

school to school. It has been strongly stated that educational intervention is needed to enhance the integration of handicapped children (Bradfield, Brown, Kaplan, Rickert, & Stannard, 1973; Guralnick, 1981; Hamre-Nietupski, Nietupski, Stainback, & Stainback, 1984; Haring & Billingsley, 1984; Kohl, Moses, & Stettner-Eaton, 1984). The results of differing or similar educational interventions in different sites can be detected and contrasted by ethnographic research.

Even though methodological rigor is required, it should not become a preoccupation at the expense of explanation and theory-building. According to Johnson and Johnson-Lee (1988) ethnographic research in education has placed too much emphasis on methodological issues while ignoring ethnographic intent. Ethnographic intent is defined as the aspect of ". . . acquir[ing] an extensive and balanced understanding of cultural meanings for occupants of the educational setting" (Johnson & Johnson-Lee, 1988; p. 235). In other words, the major purpose of ethnographic research is not just to give a surface description of the events and circumstances of the educational setting. Rather it is to uncover and explain its social milieu and the meaning of the roles of its participants in the setting. But how are the physical and cultural boundaries of the educational setting to be defined? This is an important question, inextricably linked to the ethnographic intent.

### Interpretative Issues

Restricting ethnographic research to surface description defies the purpose of ethnographic intent. Similarly, narrowing the definition of the educational setting to a classroom, school, school community, or school board while attempting to theoretically interpret data of integration studies seems to limit ethnographic intent. The study of societal attitudes (or school community attitudes) toward integration cannot and should not be separated from their wider social context: the structure and history of education, the history of mental retardation, and the history of mainstreaming and integration.

The reason may not seem obvious immediately. For example, teacher burnout and resistance to integration were perceived by the principal to be a function of teacher age. Thus the analysis could have stopped at that level preventing a more meaningful interpretation and conveniently blaming the teachers. Age may play a role in teacher burnout but it does not seem to be the determining factor when the level of analysis shifts to the entire educational system as the setting.

That teachers work very hard, under very strenuous conditions, without significant monetary rewards or social prestige, is widely known. During the first two years of the pilot project, teachers had to contribute an extraor-

dinary amount of time for in-service training after regular school hours. This was done without any monetary compensation, building resentment and putting additional stress on the already stressed teachers. According to Shor (1986) "teacher burnout . . . [is a] social proble[m] of an unequal system and cannot be fully addressed by . . . classroom remedies alone" (p. 412). While many individual teachers and teacher associations bear great responsibility for their resistance to integration, scapegoating teachers means losing sight of the larger picture.

According to Clifton (1989) teacher education programs in Canada (as well as in the United States) are based more on a philosophy of mythology rather than a philosophy of knowledge. Tradition and compartmentalization of information take precedence over rationality and interrelatedness of information. Programs are so irrationally organized that student teachers do not see different fields of education as interdependent (Britzman, 1986). Rarely are there courses on the sociology of education, history of mental retardation, mainstreaming, and integration. It is even more likely that teacher education makes prospective teachers passive recipients of mostly technical information. Most student teachers are deprived of historical insight that could provide the basis for a critical examination of their place and role in the educational system (Shor & Freire, 1986). This lack of critical thought tends to perpetuate the impression among student teachers that the present educational structure is the only possible reality (Apple, 1982; Britzman, 1986). Therefore, the present structure and content of teacher education programs seem to undermine the philosophy of integration. It is no wonder that teachers resist educational reform, especially when it comes to integration.

Similarly, school structure is constructed to reflect ritualistic practices which are an impediment to educational innovation and reform. In this pilot project most teachers were not willing to modify their daily routine to accommodate arising needs. On the one hand they (rightfully) complained about lack of time to consult with support services personnel, but on the other they felt (rightfully again) excluded from the process of designing the IEPs. The school structure was a situation where teachers with positive attitudes did not have the time to get involved more deeply, while teachers with negative attitudes had a very good excuse not to get involved. When the support services personnel tried educational interventions to classroom routines teachers with negative attitudes felt intruded upon. The result was conflict, brought on by incompatibility of schedules and feelings of intrusion and resentment which perpetuated further conflict.

It is quite apparent that the analysis of attitudinal studies regarding integration practices has to go hand in hand with the holistic perspective of ethnographic intent. Interpretation should not stop short of including the systemic structure of education. This requires that a connection be made with

research and theory in the sociology of education. Microlevel ethnography in the classroom and school should be combined with macrolevel theory in the sociology of education for a more meaningful interpretation of data. In this way the problems regarding integration practices can be put in a more illuminating perspective. The interpretation of the pilot project results presented previously offers only a surface description of the problems of integration of the mentally handicapped without the connection with previous research and theory in the sociology of education.

The effort to make such a connection by adherents of integration for the handicapped in general does not seem to be of any systematic nature. If integration policies and practices are to succeed in the long run a thorough understanding of the sociology of education (including the history of education) is needed. Theory-driven integration has the ability to foresee and put problems in their wider context. Only in this manner will there be meaningful interpretation and theory building, and appropriate long-term intervention.

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