

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK/Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.

Inclusive education: right for some

Is there the parent of an autistic child who wouldn't be delighted beyond words if the child would simply blend smoothly into a regular classroom? That is a dream we all share. For a few, the dream becomes a reality. Over the years I have heard from a number of parents who have shared with us their joy, their pride and their good fortune: "Billy has been included in a regular classroom! He is having a hard time adjusting, but he is making it!" But, for every parent whose child "makes it," there are many more who are not so fortunate.

Much as my wife and I would like to have our autistic son Mark be able to cope successfully in a normal school, it is very clear to us that he could not have done so. He has come along much farther than we ever dared hope, and we are quite confident it is because he was always in special classes, taught by experienced, skilled, caring teachers, exhibiting monumental patience, who had gone to great lengths to train themselves in methods which would help Mark and children like him achieve their full potential.

If a child can be effectively "included," he probably should be. Lovaas got excellent results by mainstreaming the most successful of his early intervention group, but only after intensive training (story on page 1). But there is a difference between inclusion and overinclusion.

If your child functions far below the normal child intellectually, academically, and socially, does it make sense to insist that he or she be "included" in a regular classroom? Certainly not, in my view, and in the view of many, if not the vast majority, of parents of autistic children.

Today special schools and special classes for autistic children are under heavy attack by people promoting "full inclusion." What is full inclusion? Full inclusion means abolishing the special educational provisions that are vitally important to autistic children.

Unfortunately, many professionals and parents have adopted the ideology that full inclusion is the only option that should be made available for any child, irrespective of how inappropriate it may be for that child, and irrespective of the wishes of the parents of that child. What is worse, these people have managed to sway legislative and educational policy so that other options are prohibited. A quarter of a century ago those of us who pioneered public education for autistic children struggled long and hard to compel the educational system to provide things that we knew were necessary to the appropriate education of our children. This included, first and foremost, teachers who were trained in the techniques of behavior modification and who understood the peculiarities of autistic children.

In the last issue of the ARRI we published a small article titled "Full inclusion: the right choice?" Our article was based on a report by Simpson and Sasso in which they noted that there was no empirical evidence showing that full inclusion was beneficial to autistic children. That short article brought a

surprisingly strong response from our readers. It seems that the full inclusion movement has been so quickly bought by the educational establishment that those who believe that a full range of options should be available have not had time to organize any meaningful opposition. We received many letters and calls of thanks from parents who were pleased to see that we were addressing this issue (see Letters).

Several years ago I received an urgent plea for help from a group of parents in Michigan whose children attended the Burger Center for Autistic Children. I was invited to speak there and made a tour of the facility. I was impressed. The staff were obviously very much involved with autism, the teaching of autistic children and all the details of autism. They communicated with each other with ideas and suggestions and enthusiasm that won my admiration. They certainly had the support of the parent group. The problem was that full inclusion was being heavily promoted in Michigan, and rational and efficient programs like the Burger School program for autism were in dire threat of being closed down.

I have no quarrel with inclusionists if they are content to insist upon inclusion for their children, or for children of other parents who feel that it is optimum for their children. But when they try to force me and other unwilling parents to dance to their tune, I find it highly objectionable and quite intolerable. Parents need options.

If there are no objective data showing that full inclusion works better than giving people several options, why is it being promoted so avidly? Douglas Biklen attempts to answer that question solely on ideological grounds. In his book, *Achieving the Complete School*, he says of mainstreaming, "To ask, Does it work? is to ask the wrong question." He believes that full inclusion and mainstreaming should be the only choice available to us because it is the right choice, the right thing to do. He makes an analogy with slavery. Slavery, he says, was abolished because it was morally wrong, not because it didn't work. He also asserts that objective scientific data are irrelevant, because the issue is a moral one.

I disagree strongly with Biklen on both counts. Biklen has the slavery analogy exactly backward: making full inclusion the only option does not resemble the abolition of slavery, but instead the imposition of slavery. Like slavery, full inclusion rejects the idea that people should be free to choose for themselves the options they desire, and compels them to accede to the wishes of others. And as for Biklen's rejection of scientific data, I want my children educated in ways that will assure the best outcome, as learned from scientific studies, not in ways that accord with someone's theory, or ideology, or the educational fad of the year.

Special education consultant Laurence Lieberman is one of the very few educators with the courage to speak out and tell the compulsory full inclusionists that they are

wrong. Recently the National Association of State Boards of Education endorsed the principle of full inclusion of students with disabilities. Lieberman's insightful response, published as a letter to the editor in *Education Week* for December 16, 1992, is a classic, and is reprinted here in part:

"People involved in education cannot agree on school choice, on promotion policies, on achievement testing, on curricula, teaching approaches, or the distribution of condoms. But all the state boards of education can agree on full inclusion for all disabled students?

"This is obviously a money issue, pure and simple. The key may be found in the paragraph in your story that says a new report from NASBE proposes that funds be provided on the basis of instructional need, not head counts. That need seems to have been already predetermined by the organization: full inclusion in regular classrooms for all disabled students.

"The article—and quite possibly the report—refuses to deal with the real nature of some children, which might require that they not be in a regular classroom.

"Some educators would place the issue of full inclusion solely in the realm of morality. Anything separate is evil. There may be a higher immorality than separateness: lack of progress, lack of achievement, lack of skills, and splintered learning of meaningless academic trivia.

"There is the issue that special education hasn't been effective. Where, and for whom and why? Because it has been too separate? Unlikely. The regular classroom is not separate by definition. Has it worked? Sometimes, but not all the time. Placing severely disabled students in regular classrooms presupposes a level of individualization that does not exist.

"Some educators believe that disabled children will be much more accepted, and society as a whole will show much greater compassion for the disabled, if all children are in regular classrooms. Knowledge does not necessarily lead to compassion.

"There is a common belief that when disabled children are in physical proximity to normal children they will tend to adopt more normal behavior patterns. This is obviously not the case with many autistic children, who generally begin life surrounded by normal families.

"Full inclusion is not the right thing to do. It is one right thing to do, sometimes.

"Any organization...that endorses full inclusion is taking an extremist position that has no place in an educational system and a society that prides itself on its choices and multiple ways to achieve a desired quality of life."

I agree with Lieberman. If special education for autism is destroyed, it will be lost for at least one generation, and perhaps several.

For the full text of Dr. Lieberman's letter, send SASE to Dr. Laurence Lieberman, 45 Sheffield Road, Newtonville, MA 02160.