



The Journal of Educational Practice for Social Change

Fall 2006

ΦΔΚ

An Overview of Special Education, Motivation, and Achievement From the Perspective of One Exceptional Adult Learner

Sandy Wenzel - Fall 2006
Walden University

Abstract

The article provides an excerpt of an in-depth study emphasizing the history of inclusion in special education placement and service delivery. An interview was conducted that focused on an individual's past experiences as a special education student in childhood, through her experiences as a special education teacher as an adult. Other important factors in considering successful educational and life experiences are socioeconomic, disabilities, and cultural dynamics.

The inclusion and exclusion of many minority groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, disabilities, and other factors have occurred throughout history. For example, African Americans fought for civil and human rights such as the right to vote, the right to take public transportation, and the right to employment, as well as in other areas. People with disabilities joined later and began their own fight for equality in employment, access, education, and other areas.

This article emphasizes a historical approach and inclusion. An emphasis on history and inclusion demonstrates how the focus on the history of societal development and inclusion in societal change has affected special education placement and service delivery. The concept of inclusion in special education has been the focus of many controversial discussions between students, parents, educators, scholars, and others.

One definition provided by Kaufman and Hallahan (2005) characterizes inclusion as the education of students with disabilities in their neighborhood schools and in general education classrooms that they would attend if they had no disabilities. Furthermore, they argued that IDEA calls for inclusion to the extent that is feasible and compatible with the students needs. Kauffman and Hallahan also found that full inclusion of special education students in the general education setting is as illegal as exclusion and not providing students their legal rights. They supported this claim by arguing that full inclusion ignores the CAP options clause in IDEA. In addition, they explained that placement and service delivery is to be determined on a case-by-case basis and is determined based on individual students' needs (p. 67). According to Kaufman and Hallahan, historically, the most frequently used placement option available was a self-contained class-

room. In a self-contained classroom, students are excluded from the general education population and receive a supplanted instruction and curriculum. Now, in many school districts, often the only placement option available is the general education classroom. Many people argue that the current practice of full-inclusion presents barriers to students with disabilities because they can not all receive access to services that will meet their individual needs.

In 1975, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EHCA) was passed. This legislation was very significant in mandating educational rights for children with disabilities. Since then, revisions and reauthorizations of this federal law have occurred, which have advanced best practice placement and service delivery for students with disabilities. In 1997, EHCA was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Additionally, there are basic legal provisions stipulated in this special education law, which assure legal educational rights to children ages 3 to 21 with disabilities. Kauffman and Hallahan (2005) outline these four provisions as:

1. Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), which mandates that all children ages 3 to 21 are entitled to a free appropriate public education.
2. Continuum of Alternative Placement (CAP), which outlines placement options for students in special education that range from separate special schools, hospital schools, or home instruction to special classes, resource rooms, and partial or full inclusion in the general education environment with supplementary aides and services.
3. Least restrictive Environment (LRE), which states that all children with disabilities are to be educated in the LRE that is consistent with students' individual needs, as near as home to possible, and with non-disabled students as much as possible.
4. Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which provides mandates that every student with a disability must have a written IEP, which includes special services to be provided and the goals of these services (p. 6).

An interview study researching a particular student will be examined to show evidence of barriers and benefits of inclusion in special education. The interview focuses on an individual's past experiences as a special education student in childhood, her experiences as a special education teacher as an adult, and her college experiences in earning her bachelor's degree, two master's degrees, and recently her Ph.D. in education.

Interview

Dr. Mirian was selected for this study because she has vast experiences in special education, starting with her personal experiences as a special education student beginning in first grade in 1954. Also, Dr. Mirian gained expertise in her later life experiences when she became a special education teacher. Her unique perspective comes from her personal educational experiences at the undergraduate and graduate levels as a minority woman with an invisible disability. Finally, she provides her well-informed perspectives on inclusion of special education students.

Mirian has an interesting history beginning at birth. Born in 1947, she began her life growing up in the ghettos of the south Bronx in New York. Mirian explained that where she came from mothers were going to bed with their daughters' boyfriends and daughters were hanging out and drinking with their mothers' boyfriends. There was no focus on going to school and getting an education. Education was not a priority for these people because they did not have the money, time, or energy to spend on it.

Mirian also explained that the children who lived in those circumstances wanted to go to school. One reason for this is that many times their parents displayed unsafe behaviors. For example, with her father suffering from alcoholism and her mother suffering from mental illness, Mirian continually faced devastating behaviors at home, including physical and emotional abuse by her parents.

As a child, Mirian entered school unable to speak English because her family members and neighbors all spoke Spanish. She had difficulty communicating with her English-speaking teachers due to this language barrier. These issues indicate that culture is a factor in the level of success a child experiences in school. Mirian recalled that she hated going to school because she would try to read and the teachers would laugh at her and accused her of just trying to be funny.

Mirian was in first grade in 1954 when school officials determined she was a special education student. At that time, educational systems did not have legal guidelines or processes to follow in referring students for special education. School staff determined Mirian had special education needs because of her learning and behavioral difficulties, and she was placed in a segregated classroom within the same school building the following day. Mirian reported that school staff told her she was in special education because she was stupid. She recalled feeling embarrassed when this placement occurred, yet happy that she did not have to face her classmates every day in class.

This new classroom had students with various disabilities such as hearing impairments and behavior problems, as well as truant children. Mirian reported that she was not instructed in academics within this setting; rather, the students were given paper and crayons and told to draw. Mirian remained in that program throughout elementary school and received little academic instruction. The school staff placed her into

the general education setting for very limited periods of the day. During this inclusion her education was inappropriate and disgraceful.

Mirian could not see letters and numbers correctly because she is acutely dyslexic, which people were unfamiliar with at that time. Other attempts to include her and other children with disabilities continued when Mirian was in junior high school. They attended gym class with their nondisabled peers, yet they remained separate and excluded. The students with disabilities would change into their gym suits and were required to sit against the wall and watch their nondisabled peers. Mirian's educational experiences continued to be exclusive and inappropriate throughout her junior high school education because she did not receive needed academic instruction or programming for her emotional difficulties. Her home and community life also continued to be full of traumatic experiences. Her teachers and parents continued to devalue her strengths and ridiculed her for her weaknesses. As a result of this attitude toward her and the circumstances at home and in her community, Mirian's behavior grew continually worse.

Following junior high school, Mirian was sent to a high school that had no special education programs. Because of this, she was suddenly put into general education classrooms full time after years in an exclusionary setting. She struggled with academics and when she responded to a math question incorrectly, the teacher laughed at her and said she was stupid. Mirian was also placed in a language arts class, where she had difficulty when she tried to write.

Because of her difficulty in language arts, she was placed in a remedial reading class. This was the first time in her life that she had been tested for her academic level in any subject. She recalled that she had a second-grade reading level in high school. This teacher helped her with her academics. When tested later, she had achieved an early-third-grade reading level. She graduated from high school with a third-grade-level reading ability.

Mirian also recalled some positive experiences she had in school. There were three teachers in Mirian's entire K-12 educational experience who had some positive influence on her education. In high school her first math teacher and the remedial reading teacher were kind and helpful and actually instructed her in math and language arts.

Another life-changing experience occurred when Mirian was in high school. Once every week, one of her teachers gave her tickets and Mirian would leave school, go to a show, and return home. Mirian loved the Broadway shows, but even more she loved the experience of leaving the ghetto for the first time in her life and being in the theatre district in Manhattan.

Mirian was never diagnosed with dyslexia or any categorical label throughout her K-12 education. Had Mirian been in school today, her disability would most likely have been in the categorical areas of

learning disabilities and emotional disturbance. She said educators just referred to her as stupid from first grade through high school.

When the researcher asked Mirian what she would have changed about her K-12 educational experiences, she responded, “I would never have had that little kid [her] pulled out of the classroom.” Furthermore, she would change the teachers into a group that was culturally diverse and she would train all teachers to become more culturally sensitive as well. It is at this point, when school staff are working with children with diverse ethnic heritage, that the significant findings of culture come into play. Mirian said she associated education with living well. Mirian felt that she is well educated and a well-educated person has a better chance in life.

Mirian believes she was a model for her children in demonstrating the importance of education. All of her children see education as very important in their lives. When asked what she would have changed about her high school education, Mirian said,

At the high school level, I would set it up for more student success. Training all teachers about disabilities and special education would be important. In inclusion classes, students do not receive all, if any, of the accommodations they need. Children that are normal in the streets and elsewhere, become so handicapped taking tests. (Personal communication, August 26, 2005)

Mirian noted she would not change the attitude she had throughout her years in school. The researcher asked Mirian what it would have taken at school for her to feel safe enough to tell staff about her home life. She said, “Some caring!”

Right after Mirian’s high school graduation, her brother committed suicide in her presence. Mirian had a job and had saved some money that she used to pay for Frenchy’s funeral. Mirian shared that her brother Frenchy has been another major inspiration to her throughout her education. His words live in Mirian’s mind and heart as a source of energy to accomplish her goals.

She told her father, “I am going to teach myself to read so I can go to college.” She told him about the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) Program. The SEEK Program allows New York City students who demonstrate academic promise and economic need, but who do not meet traditional admissions requirements, to enroll in 4-year City University of New York (CUNY) colleges. All SEEK students receive the following support services designed to enrich their college experience: intensive academic support, including tutoring, small-group course reviews, and study skills training and individual counseling on academic, personal, career, and financial matters.

Everything Mirian did in her adult life was for her children. Her children were her main motivation to succeed in college and her father's words were the other. Right after her conversation with her father, Mirian continued to pursue her goals by having someone help her fill out the application for the SEEK program and she began teaching herself to read. She had to take a test to enter college and there was no one to help her.

Her first class was English Communication. Mirian wrote her first paper for the professor, Susan, who after reading it called Mirian out of the classroom and asked, "And what the hell is this?" Mirian replied, "I swear I tried my best." Mirian told her that she could not read and that she could not write. Thereafter, every time Mirian had a paper to write, Susan would meet Mirian in the library and help her. Mirian said, "She could not help my disability, but she taught me how to deal with it."

Mirian continued to struggle through college but she got help, improved her language arts skills and completed requirements for her degree in teaching. After receiving her undergraduate degree, Mirian began searching for a job teaching in the field of special education. Mirian took the written district test five times before she passed and received her license.

In 1976, Mirian acquired her first teaching job with high school students in an alternative school for students with severe emotional disabilities. She also described her experience being shot at by a student in the classroom. She has always enjoyed her work with her students with disabilities and had a lot of fun. She recalled that she taught many students to read in the same way she taught herself to read. Over the years, she has taken many of those youths to the theatre, one student at a time.

Mirian taught at her first job at the alternative school for 1 year and then she was hired by a special education director in a school district in Long Island that wanted her to set up an elementary class for students with emotional disabilities. She took that job and remained in that school district for 22 years.

Mirian has always worked with students with emotional difficulties, and she also has vast experience consulting for the federal government in school districts to assist in designing and improving programs for students with disabilities. She has trained teachers, written many grants, and read many educational grants for federal government funding. While teaching children, training teachers, and performing other important tasks, Mirian earned two master's degrees.

When asked to describe changes she has seen in teachers over her years as a student and as a teacher, Marian stated, "When I was a student in special education, the teachers did not know what the hell they were doing, they did not care, and did nothing about it." Mirian believes many very intricate areas need to be addressed in courses for special education teachers. Furthermore, she thinks that teacher training on disabilities needs to encompass every aspect of disabilities, including ideology, and how to identify disabilities.

Others, from the middle or upper class, coming into a class of students are going to have a response that is totally different than the child from a lower class that is sitting next to him or her. I am acting appropriately to my situation. The social setting is where many of the problems lie. It is the home life, the family life the cultural situation, or a traumatic event, that occurred in people's lives that often determine behaviors and responses that individuals exhibit to "normal" situations. (Mirian, personal communication, August 26, 2005)

Late in her career, Mirian entered the doctoral program at Walden University to earn her Ph.D. in education. Mirian said, "People carry that [a disability] around as adults and try to cover it up. Those old feelings never go away and you fight that your whole goddamned life. Special education kids are not miraculously cured."

One of her earliest experiences was negative and controversial when two instructors told her she would not be able to complete writing a research paper in ten years. Mirian said:

You know, no matter how much you try to cover up your disability, no matter how much you try to improve your skills, you are never the same as regular people because it always comes through. It is always embarrassing and the feeling of being stupid always comes out. When I went to go get my Ph. D., I thought I had left all of that behind. I mean in terms of feeling dumb and of that. When I wrote my first KAM, two instructors smacked me back into the reality that I was not smart, that I was stupid. It was all the same thing with different words but all of the same crap. (Mirin, personal communication, August 26, 2005)

She continued to explain that when people have a disability as an adult you do not like to admit it. Sometimes when children are labeled in school, it damages their ego. People carry that around as adults and try to cover it up. When you think you have overcome that, and someone that is a professional, tells you that you'll never be able to write one paper you think that it was the people farthest back in your life that were telling you the truth.

After her instructors' criticisms, Mirian went to the dean to talk. She told him she was not expecting anything special and that what she was expecting was what was fair and what was given to all other students. Specifically, she was referring to when students do not complete assignments on time, they are given extended time to complete them. Mirian decided to write a letter to the president of the university. Mirian wrote that she has dyslexia, but was not asking for a tutor or help and that all she was asking for was a fair extension of time. Mirian said she cried when the president wrote back to her in a very supportive manner telling Mirian she was not going to quit.

The president also directed Mirian to obtain a mentor and assessor who would understand her situation and who would work with her. Mirian sought Dr. S. as her mentor. Mirian had heard Dr. S. was going to be presenting, so she went to the presentation and afterward asked Dr. S. how her curriculum addressed the disabled. Mirian asked Dr. S. if she thought it was a waste of time for the disabled to pursue their Ph.D. Mirian recalled that she had always told her students that if she limited them, they would stay back and Mirian felt that Dr. S. had the same attitude. It is like teaching a child how to walk. When the presentation was finished, she recalled going over to Dr. S. and asking her if she would consider being her mentor, how she would feel mentoring a disabled individual, and how she would handle a disabled student. Dr. S. asked what the disability is and Mirian replied that she could not read or write. Dr. S. then became Mirian's mentor.

Mirian did not feel there were other barriers within the college after her initial experiences in her doctoral program. The president was very happy to hear that and she asked Mirian who she had chosen as her mentor. Thinking back to her doctoral program experience, Mirian did not think it was as bad as she thought it was going to be except for the writing. Mirian discussed the difficulty of writing and learning APA style writing. Additionally, Mirian said that at the doctoral level, there is a need for proper resources and help for people with invisible disabilities. College resource centers are often not enough to assist students with disabilities.

The interview turned to Mirian's expert opinions on special education. She feels that placing all special education children into regular education classes is a mistake because with full inclusion there will be more dropouts. Mirian said that she cannot see any way of remediating that situation except perhaps through revamping laws for individuals with disabilities and dropping the full-inclusion concept.

Employment of people with disabilities presents other barriers, which may be overcome by more laws or protected by an organization. Many organizations exist to help children who are learning disabled or who have other disabilities, but there is nothing similar for adults.

Mirian also discussed her views on solutions to problems in the field of education as they relate to teachers of students with disabilities. She believes there is a lack of training and education on disabilities. Part of the curriculum for regular education teachers at the undergraduate level should contain a course about the different areas of disabilities such as learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and others. If all teachers must deal with inclusion, they need to learn about laws for special education, individual education plans, evaluation, behavior assessment and management, and other important skills prior to entering the classroom.

Mirian also discussed qualities she believes make an excellent teacher. One major characteristic she discussed was that excellent teachers are caring. Additionally, she believes that an excellent teacher is well

trained. Furthermore, teachers need to become well versed in understanding the fine line between being caring and being an instructor. Teachers need to make it very clear to students that they are not friends because the children will lose respect for their teacher. Rather children need to know their teachers care about them, and while teachers are with the children they are going to impact their lives in a positive way to help them move ahead academically, socially, and emotionally. The children need and want structure and teachers can provide that.

Curriculum for K-12 systems should also be provided to teach all children about disabilities whether relating to learning, behavior, physical disabilities, or others she said. Teaching children about behavior and social skills is as important as teaching academics sometimes because it is teaching them how to handle life. They are going to run into different types of people in their lives with diverse abilities, behaviors, and social skills and it is important to learn early how to interact with everyone. A K-12 curriculum on disabilities is also important because children who have disabilities would learn more about themselves.

In concluding this application, it is important to recognize the qualities, achievements, and lessons of Mirian. She is a loving, determined, intelligent woman who has overcome seemingly insurmountable circumstances. Mirian inspires me to know that every child that I come across in my teaching experiences has a 100% chance to make it in life despite the struggles and abuses they may experience. Additionally, Mirian taught many lessons throughout this interview. She taught that it is important to expose children to other lifestyles. She taught that the educational system in this country has made many gains and many mistakes with regard to children and adults with disabilities. Other important factors in considering successful educational and life experiences that Mirian taught about were socioeconomics, disabilities, and cultural dynamics.

In a discussion of these three major issues, Mirian said that it is critical that each placement decision depends on the unique needs of each child. Some people need to overcome their cultural socioeconomic issues to succeed. For some children, inclusion can be appropriate given the proper accommodations and support.

Mirian taught that the words and actions of educators can make the difference between failure and success for people with disabilities, whether they are in first grade or at the doctoral level. Mirian completed her doctoral program and earned her Ph.D. in July 2005. She is one individual who has engaged in the initiation of positive social change.

References

Kauffman, J., & Hallahan, D. Special education What it is and why we need it. Boston: Pearson Education Inc., 2005.

PL 94-142. (1975). Education of All Handicapped Children Education Act.

PL 105-17. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge).

<http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/provost/enrollmentmgmt/seek/aboutseek.html> [electronic source]

retrieved 09/06/2005.



JEPSC

2006

The Journal of Educational Practice for Social Change