

**NOTICING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SECONDARY AND  
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: EXTENDING AGRAN, SNOW,  
AND SWANER'S DISCUSSION**

**Douglas Fisher and Caren Sax  
San Diego State University**

We were very interested in the survey conducted by Agran, Snow, and Swaner (1999) regarding secondary education teachers' opinions about inclusion and community based instruction (CBI). Special education teachers in this study believed that both inclusive education and CBI were effective and beneficial ways of accessing peers without disabilities and preparing students with disabilities for their adult life. Agran et al. (1999) noted that their findings were inconsistent with the position that CBI and inclusive educational practices were at odds with one another (e.g. Tashie, Jorgensen, Shapiro-Barnard, Martin, & Schuh, 1996). Although we agree that inclusion and CBI are each important components of the public education experience, we suggest that these efforts be differentiated by the age of the students. That is, we believe that there are, and should be, differences between the educational opportunities for students aged 14-18 (high school) and those over 18 (postsecondary). The respondents in the Agran et al. (1999) study were not asked to explain their opinions, nor was it certain whether these teachers considered the ages of students when reporting on social interactions and benefits. However, the authors suggested that educational programming be balanced between inclusive education and CBI regardless of student age. This prompted us to speculate not only about why teachers answered as they did, but what their experiences had been with both inclusive education and CBI. We believe that students with significant disabilities should be members of age appropriate high school classes and then receive educational and community based services during their postsecondary or "transition" years of 19-22. We would like to extend the discussion about meeting individual student needs in both secondary and postsecondary environments.

### **The Secondary School Years**

Before students with disabilities had access to the core curriculum in middle school and high school, CBI was a reasonable educational alternative. Given that students with significant disabilities could not easily access the general education classroom, CBI provided the individualized education plan (IEP) team a way to address functional skills. Today, in many schools and districts, students with and without disabilities have access

to a rich and diverse curriculum with appropriate accommodations and modifications, as well as personal and technological supports (Jorgenson, 1998; Kennedy & Fisher, in press). Over the past two decades, parents and professionals have learned a great deal about infusing functional skills into natural environments and age-appropriate activities (Giangreco, Cloninger & Iverson, 1998). For example, science classes may not only reinforce basic math skills, but are also ideal for teaching measurement, problem solving and teamwork (i.e., functional skills).

One rationale for the emphasis on inclusive education at the secondary school level includes a knowledge base that students in high school can prepare for their careers and adult life by participating in the full range of activities offered as part of the curriculum and extra-curriculum (e.g., Falvey, 1995; Fisher, Sax & Pumpian, 1998, 1999; Schnorr, 1997). For example, district level content and performance standards typically require that all students explore career options, participate in interviews and resume writing, arrive to class on time, complete tasks assigned by a supervisor (teacher), access technology as a tool for learning, and learn to resolve conflict with peers. Obviously, students with disabilities benefit from these expectations as well. There is evidence that people from disabilities are more often dismissed from a job due to poor attendance and lack of social skills than because of their work skills (Shafer, Banks & Kregel, 1991). We believe that high schools provide a wealth of opportunities for the development of interpersonal relationships and effective work habits.

Furthermore, high school classes offer students with disabilities more than preparation for work. They also may gain membership (Schnorr, 1997), social relationships (Kennedy & Itkonen, 1994), access interesting core curriculum (Jorgensen, 1998), and increase their literacy (Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999). Students without disabilities also benefit socially and academically (Staub & Peck, 1995). Beyond the immediate benefit of inclusive education for students without disabilities, we believe that those who experience inclusion in school will also realize advantages later in life. As the current school-aged population becomes the next generation of neighbors, friends, co-workers, employers, and parents of individuals with disabilities, inclusive education will not be

questioned, but rather will be used as a baseline for examining quality of life issues. Removing students with disabilities from high school classes today not only impacts their postsecondary potential, but also affects the circle of support available for years to come. We will never forget the high school junior who advocated for a peer with a disability in his English class to be hired in a part-time job. Nor will we forget the high school senior who plans to become a pediatrician saying to us, “I will never tell parents to institutionalize their children with disabilities.”

### **Postsecondary School Years**

Before natural supports were widely available in colleges or the workplace, students with disabilities rarely accessed postsecondary education or integrated employment (Mank, Buckley, Dean & Cioffi, 1996). Today, competitive employment, supported living, and lifelong learning are expectations for adults with significant disabilities (Nisbet, 1992). School systems are responding to this need by establishing postsecondary (or transition) programs in the community (Johnson & Rusch, 1993). These programs provide the link from high school to a valued adult life for students with disabilities from age 19 to 22. Many of these programs are located in the community to facilitate job development, job training, and continuing education, which cannot easily occur on the high school campus. Further, students use public transportation to go to work, college or community events; increase access to stores and public services; and adjust to schedules that mirror adult life.

For most of us, postsecondary education and our subsequent career development differed from our high school experience. Most of us physically left the high school campus, remained with our same age peers, and pursued unique and challenging futures. Unfortunately, for many students with disabilities, there is little or no difference between high school and postsecondary education and career development. Students over the age of 18 often remain on the high school campus, lose access to their nondisabled peers, and continue working on similar educational goals and objectives year after year. Thus, consistent with the expectations for students without disabilities, a distinction must be

made between high school (students 14-18 years of age) and postsecondary education (individuals over 18).

Where people with disabilities spend time, with whom they interact, and the activities they choose are key considerations for program development and service delivery options. These choices must reflect the range of experiences that students began exploring in high school and expand to include career, continuing education, and social opportunities alongside their peers without disabilities. As students with disabilities increase the quality and quantity of their participation in these experiences during high school, the more likely they are to have access to the support required for success in postsecondary environments. If, as the study by Agran et al. (1999) suggests, students do benefit from a mix of inclusive education and CBI, then we must say that the primary deciding factor should be age. We are in no way suggesting that 16 year-old students with disabilities should not be supported in work experience classes or after school jobs. The school system should continue to provide coordination and support, but in natural postsecondary environments (Certo, Pumpian, Fisher, Story, & Smalley, 1997). Thus, we agree with the teachers in the Agran et al. (1999) study, that both inclusive high school experiences and well-coordinated postsecondary experiences are necessary preparation for adult life. However, we maintain that there are differences between inclusive secondary education and integrated postsecondary options that are worth discussion.

### References

- Agran, M., Snow, K., & Swaner, J. (1999). A survey of secondary level teachers' opinions on community-based instruction and inclusive education. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 24, 58-62.
- Certo, N., Pumpian, I., Fisher, D., Storey, K., & Smalley, K. (1997). Focusing on the point of transition. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 20, 68-84.
- Falvey, M. A. (1995). *Inclusive and heterogeneous schooling: Assessment, curriculum, and instruction*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Fisher, D., Sax, C., & Pumpian, I. (1998). Parent and careproviders' impressions of different educational models. *Remedial and Special Education*, 19, 173-180.

Giangreco, M. F., Cloninger, C. J., & Iverson, V. S. (1998). *Choosing outcomes and accommodations for children: A guide to educational planning for students with disabilities (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Johnson, J. R., & Rusch, F. R. (1993). Secondary special education and transition services: Identification and recommendations for future research and demonstration. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, 16*, 1-18.

Jorgenson, C. M. (Ed). (1998). *Restructuring high schools for all students: Taking inclusion to the next level*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Kennedy, C. H., & Fisher, D. (in press). *Middle schools that work: Where all students achieve and belong*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Kennedy, C. H., & Itkonen, T. (1994). Some effects of regular class participation on the social contacts and social networks of high school students with severe disabilities. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 19*, 1-10.

Mank, D., Buckley, J., Dean, J., & Cioffi, A. (1996). Do social systems really change? Retrospective interviews with state-supported employment systems-change projectors. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 11*, 243-250.

Nisbet, J. (Ed.). (1992). *Natural supports in school, at work, and in the community for people with severe disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Ryndak, D. L., Morrison, A. P., & Sommerstein, L. (1999). Literacy before and after inclusion in general education settings: A case study. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 24*, 5-22.

Schnorr, R. F. (1997). From enrollment to membership: "Belonging" in the middle and high school classes. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 22*, 1-15.

Shafer, M. S., Banks, P. D., & Kregel, J. (1991). Employment retention and career movement among individuals with mental retardation working in supported employment. *Mental Retardation, 29*, 103-110.

Staub, D., & Peck, C. A. (1995). What are the outcomes for nondisabled students? *Educational Leadership, 52* (4), 36-40.

Tashie, C., Jorgenson, C., Shapiro-Barnard, S., Martin, J., & Schuh, M. (1996). High school inclusion. *TASH Newsletter, 22* (9), 19-22.