

# **SPECIAL EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA: WHAT IS AT STAKE<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract: The special education system in California is complicated and families struggle to make informed choices about how to best educate children with disabilities within a flawed system. Using a grounded theory methodology, the author conducted interviews with parents of children with special needs and with educators to explore the wide range of types of education that children can receive in special education and to identify variables that help to determine how well served children will be in special education. The author finds that parents with high levels of cultural capital and advanced educations are in the best position to push the school system to offer their children educational resources. In addition, the quality of special education that is available reflects the severity of the child's disability, the child's race, and the wealth of the school district. The author concludes that although all education in California functions to reinforce social inequality, the variance in educational quality within special education is higher than within the general education population.*

**Keywords:** Education, disabilities, families, cultural capital, social inequality

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the qualities that distinguishes special education from the general education curriculum is that the former is individualized to the specific needs of each child. A number of factors figure into determining which services any given child receives, including the nature of the child's disability, the resources of the school district and the characteristics of the child's family. While some children may receive a truly exemplary, individually tailored education that will help them to move towards college, my research subjects told me about other children in special education who spend their days doing activities like picking up cans to earn money to pay for school field trips. Since 11 percent of the children in California's schools (California Department of Education 2006) are in special education, these programs are key locations where educational stratification takes place.

## **METHODS**

I felt that the voices of parents, families and people who work directly in special education are often neglected in studies of special education, which have typically been quantitative analyses done by psychologists or educators (Harris 2008). To try to remedy this problem, I used a grounded theory methodology to study stratification and special education. I interviewed a total of 29 people, including eighteen parents, ten teachers/special education para-professionals and one former special education student. To find parents and teachers, I posted announcements about my research on the UC Parents Network listserv, the Bay Area special needs listserv and on MySpace. I also approached parents and district staff that I know through my own child or through other social connections. My study was open to all families, teachers and para-professionals who have regular contact with the special education systems in California. Most of the families in the study have focused a lot of their energies on supporting their children's special

education. Half of the families have children who are currently in public schools and of those 70 percent are enrolled at Berkeley Unified School District. A number of other public and private schools in California are also represented, particularly through my interviews with special education professionals.

### **SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICE OPTIONS**

Once a child has been qualified as having a disability, a team of special educators, psychologists, teachers and therapists discuss his or her primary challenges and determine what type of services that child will need to achieve his or her academic goals. The first major decision that families are asked to make is whether their child should be fully integrated into the general education classroom (called full-inclusion or mainstreaming), or whether their child should spend most of each day in a special day classroom (SDC). Children who are in special day classes spend their entire day being instructed by one teacher and several instructional assistants. Classes may focus on academic skills, life skills or vocational training. On occasion, children in special day classes may participate in classes like physical education or science with students in the general education program.

Special needs children in general education classrooms may do some of the same activities as their classmates, but the curriculum is modified to their abilities. For example, while the other children work on long division, a child with a cognitive disability in the general education classroom might do work with his or her instructional assistant on counting. At other times, children with disabilities in general education classrooms leave the classroom to work on specific skills with the resource teacher or with various therapists. Some of those skills are typical academic skills but others may include skills like learning to handle emotions appropriately.

At many schools, the decision-making that goes into placements is complicated. In theory, schools are supposed to place children in mainstream environments unless their disability is so severe that they need to be in an enclosed classroom. Teachers told me that in some schools, children are, in fact, placed according to the severity of their disabilities and in other schools, race seems to be a primary factor that determines placement. The school can push parents to select full-inclusion or a special day classroom but ultimately, the families have the legal right to decide what is best for their children. This means that some severely disabled children may end up in the general education classroom while other children with far less inhibiting disabilities may go into a special day classroom (SDC). For example, my interviewees told me there may be severely retarded children in full-inclusion and children with minor mood disorders in special day classrooms. There are also schools that emphasize one special education approach over the other so the distribution of special needs children may vary by school.

As a case in point, I interviewed one young woman, Karen<sup>2</sup>, who had been placed in the SDC program at her school because she has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and social anxieties. Karen, who eventually dropped out of high school, kept a blog about her time in special education and her writing was of a higher quality than I typically see in third and fourth year college students. There is no doubt in my mind that she could have benefited from the general education curriculum. It sounded as if she, however, did not have an adult who could advocate for her and so the school never explored options for her to participate in the regular curriculum despite her anxiety disorder. As this example indicates, the ability of the parents to negotiate plays a large role in determining whether their child is in full-inclusion or a special day program.

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<sup>2</sup> All names are aliases.

I went into this research process assuming that full-inclusion is a preferable option and I assumed that parents with more resources would insist on mainstreaming their children. In fact, I found that both options have flaws and assets and parents must be careful and knowledgeable to identify the best choice for their children. There are practical reasons why SDCs are not successful in educating students. The SDC model may fail when students with multiple types of disabilities are all placed in one classroom even though they may have vastly different needs. Karen suffers from disabling anxiety. Some of her classmates have problems with anger and violence. Being assigned to share a classroom with violent peers made her anxiety level far worse. Karen dropped out of school after a fight in her classroom caused a peer to be hospitalized. Dropout rates from special education are higher than in the rest of the student population (Gottlieb et al. 1994:459).

In my interviews, however, I found parents and teachers who feel that the children in SDC classrooms learn effectively and who had serious reservations about full-inclusion.

A mother talked about her son's experiences in a special day classroom setting:

[In full-inclusion] his self-esteem was starting to go down the tubes. He couldn't read . . . He was having trouble decoding and so at that point, we had an IEP . . . and switched him to a special day class for kids with learning disabilities . . . It was fabulous. The teacher there . . . is fantastic . . . She's just a very gifted teacher . . . He really flourished in that program.

Parents of children in full-inclusion commented that the full-inclusion approach emphasizes socialization over academic instruction. A mother said, "Philosophically [full-inclusion] makes sense and I know why it came about. Then there's the reality of is our kid getting any actual instruction [in full-inclusion] and all he's doing is getting socialized." Another mother commented, "The best aspect of him being in a regular classroom is the social aspect for him. It's really been much better than I expected in terms of how the other kids accept him and how

the other kids interact with him.” Teachers also see benefits to having disabled children in classrooms because they feel that it promotes diversity awareness and acceptance.

Many parents said that a drawback to full-inclusion is that children see how far behind their peers they are in developing some specific skills and their self-esteem may suffer. A mother said:

No amount of telling a child, “You’re bright, you’re bright, you’re bright” and if you go to school every day and you finish two lines and your friend finishes two pages . . . no amount of your parents or other people saying, “Oh, you’re smart” can really change the impact of the reality of what you see on paper when you’re doing your schoolwork.

Interestingly, even when I asked teachers and parents direct questions about the benefits of full-inclusion, no one mentioned that children in full-inclusion benefit because they have the same access to the general education curriculum as their peers. I find this omission curious because the rationale for full-inclusion is to make sure that all children, including children with disabilities, have access to the same schooling. I am not sure quite why no one addressed this topic. When I first started my interviews I did not ask a lot of questions about the way they perceive full-inclusion versus special day classrooms so perhaps this omission was brought on by my interview style. It is also possible that full-inclusion is so entrenched as educational dogma in today’s schools that no one thought to defend it. One special education teacher said that questioning full-inclusion in her field is considered “heresy.” It may simply have seemed obvious to my research subjects who are happy with full-inclusion that full-inclusion is the preferential educational choice.

## **VARIANCE IN THE QUALITY OF ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION**

A number of parents feel that children receive too little academic instruction in special education, be it full-inclusion or special day classes. Most of their stories about their frustrations with the level of actual academic instruction in special education speak for themselves. In one

telling case, a former special education student said that she had to devise her own curriculum to try to prepare herself to pass the high school exit exam (as of this year, special education students are not exempted from the high school exit exam and cannot receive diplomas if they do not pass the exam) (California Department of Education 2008). One mother said of her son, “As far as getting actual instruction, I mean, he’s years behind.” A different mother said that her son essentially received no education for an entire school year because the full-inclusion teacher at his school that year did not support the idea of educating children with cognitive disabilities:

He had a full-inclusion teacher who really did not understand what full-inclusion really was . . . He watched a lot of videos [with that teacher]. They would watch, my favorite, I think it may have been Dumbo . . . I’m not positive but I’m pretty sure. No one was really overseeing anything. The inclusion specialist was running around hopelessly frazzled and ineffective and actually promoting negative thinking. She would say negative things about kids, and aides and teachers. And I heard some of those first hand. I can give an example of her referring to a full-inclusion child as “it.” [The full-inclusion teacher said,] “I’ve got to deal with it now.” I can give another example of rolling her eyes on another occasion when she told me she had to deal with this same certain child and how this just wasn’t the right place for her and how the parents just don’t get that.

That mother characterized her son’s services in these terms:

The services at the school were close to abysmal . . . and he just wasn’t getting what he needed . . . The way I see it on a very fundamental level is that some of the therapists don’t really relate to the kids very well and . . . don’t have a really high level of training in a broad range of kids that they know how to treat.

A mother reported that rather than pay for a laptop with software to help her African-American son to read in his English literature class, the school administration suggested that the boy could, “Get on the internet. You can get those little short synapses of books.” This child’s mother sees racism as a factor in why children in special education, including her son, may receive substandard educations and poor treatment. She said, “He came to me that night [after visiting the resource classroom] and said, ‘Mom, it’s all Black students in her class and she was chewing them out. She [the special education teacher] was threatening them.’ ”

Several parents, all of whom have professional jobs and most of whom live in upper-middle or middle-class areas, shared encouraging stories about special education. A professional mother who lives in Marin, an affluent County, talked about her daughter's education and had positive things to say about all of the staff who work with her child:

I think, right now, I'm lucky because I like what they're offering me. I feel very privileged to be in the classroom that she's in now . . . and I'm just kind of crossing my fingers because I feel very fortunate right now and even though I could see us having more, it's still a good situation . . .

A teacher, who works at an affluent school, also had glowing things to say about the quality of the special education personnel at her school and about the benefits children at her school receive from participating in special education:

Fortunately, at our school and at our district, supposedly the special education is pretty strong just because our district has a lot of resources, so the aide I was working with [the instructional assistant assigned to a student in her class] was phenomenal. She was really wonderful . . . She'd have to be able to figure out how to support my student herself and she was very good with her. And we've got another aide . . . and he was actually phenomenal and it was really great just to have a man . . . and so sweet and so supportive.

In some cases, even in less affluent districts with low-income parents, a dedicated teacher is able to create a positive special education program in his or her school, despite having few resources. Most of the time, these teachers work far more than a standard work week and often have to spend their own money to stock their classrooms. Many parents and teachers commented on the role that individual teachers play in making special education a success or a disaster. A mother talked about how reliant her son's school was on the ability of one particular teacher. She said that after that teacher left because of a crisis in her personal life:

It crumbled . . . Should that have happened? Should a program be that dependent on one person? Of course, it says how skilled she [the teacher who left] was . . . but if your program is so dependent on one person, that puts it in a very precarious place. So once she left, things just fell apart completely.

Parents of children with more severe disabilities feel better served by schools than parents of children with mild learning disabilities. Of the parents I interviewed, the ones who were the happiest with their public school special education programs have children with moderate or severe disabilities. Parents of children with learning disabilities are less happy often because they feel their children do not receive adequate support or because they see few options available to children with learning disabilities. One mother of a child with a learning disability talked about how the full-inclusion model does not work but there are very few special day classrooms that cater to the needs of students with learning disabilities, as opposed to just serving children with more severe needs. She criticized the special education system overall for making funding decisions that emphasize the needs of more severely disabled children, who will never be independent members of society, over the needs of the far larger number of children in schools with learning disabilities. That mother, who is also a special education teacher, said:

I think because so much of the public school's emphasis goes with kids with more severe disabilities, you know, they're where the regular model doesn't fit the most . . . The whole thing about kids should be in the mainstream. That's a theory and sometimes to the detriment of kids, the theory overrides the practicality of what's really working and what's really not for a particular child . . . Kids with learning disabilities . . . these are the kids who ultimately will be out in society supposedly functioning independently and if they don't have their sense of self-esteem intact, if they don't learn . . . They're going to suffer and society is going to suffer and I think they need to be looking at some other models. This business of having kids just mainstreamed with some pull out doesn't cut it . . .

Parents of children with learning disabilities, as opposed to parents of children with more severe disabilities, also seemed to be more concerned about their children's self-esteem in special education. A mother of a child with a severe disability observed, "For children performing closer to grade level, I think that sometimes is harder in terms of the school experience because more is asked of them, and they're more aware of not being up to par and don't necessarily enjoy school as much."

Overall, although I do not see evidence that the solution to special education's problems does not lie with re-distributing resources within special education itself, there is evidence that the school system is less effective with children with learning disabilities than with children with more severe needs. Of the parents I interviewed, the three parents who had the most positive things to say about the school system all have children who are retarded or who have a severe neurological disability. The angriest parents all have relatively less disabled children with learning disabilities.

### **VARIABLES THAT PREDICT SERVICE QUALITY**

As the descriptions above document, I found great variation in the quality of services that children receive through special education and very little consistent information about which special education models are best. Some families have wonderful things to say about the scope of the services that their children receive. Others feel the district is deceitful and deprives their children of their basic rights to an education. While families in special education are generally aware that they need to advocate for their children, no one is quite clear on what they should advocate for in order to assure their children the best possible educational experience. From my earlier research, I would have assumed that higher income families would receive high quality special education services for their children while lower-income children would essentially be warehoused and deprived of the chance to learn (Harris 2008). What I actually found is that because the special education system is extremely complicated, parents play an unusually important role in making sure that the system functions well for their children. In particular, parents need a high level of education to understand the types of educational options that are available to their children. Although all of the parents I met were concerned about their disabled children getting a good quality education, they employed a wide range of different strategies to

try to make the system work for their children. In particular, the parents need the ability to negotiate a complicated system of competing interests in order to support their children's learning in such a disorganized structure. Parents of children of color face even greater barriers in asserting their children's educational needs because historically special education placements have been made primarily based on the race of children and not on their best interests.

The quality of the special education services also reflects the overall financial positions of the districts. Of the various school districts that were represented in this study, I heard most uniformly positive things about special education in affluent communities such as Palo Alto, Albany and Marin. All three of these communities have highly educated parents and relatively little poverty. Some parents openly speculated that the quality of special education in their district reflects the income and overall privilege level of the parents. A low-income White mother with a bi-racial African American/White son shared her theory about why Berkeley has so many problems in its special education department:

Schools with totally rich populations . . . they don't waste time with this [fighting over service levels with parents]. They'll end up in court. Berkeley has enough low-income people. They can try to play the odds. I told you what my son said – he walked into the [special education] class and saw all Black students.

Again, this means that for families who cannot afford to live in Palo Alto, Albany, Marin and the like, their children with special needs are less likely to receive the education they need to go to college or to pursue jobs that will move them into a higher class position. Although unequal access to education is a problem for all students, these problems appear to be more exaggerated for students in special education.

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