



4-1-1976

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#### Recommended Citation

Odom, Mildred (1976) "Segregated Classes for the Retarded," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 3: No. 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2066>

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Can we really assess the damage done to children by assigning them to segregated classes based on physical and emotional handicaps?

## segregated classes for the retarded: a disconfirming arrangement

by Mildred Odom



Mildred Odom is a classroom teacher in the Manhattan, Kansas schools. With co-worker Rex Boatman, she designed the research and instructional model used in the "Colony Classroom" in which children with various exceptionalities are "mainstreamed" with regular pupils. For her work with exceptional children, Mrs. Odom has been honored with the Certificate of Recognition from both the Kansas and the National Association for Retarded Citizens. In 1975, she was named Kansas Teacher of the Year, and this year has been selected Kansan of the Year by the Kansas Society of Washington, D.C. A graduate of Texas Women's University and Kansas State University, Mrs. Odom is the author of numerous publications in the area of exceptional children.

Aspirations and self-concept are often at the core of the motivation to learn, and it is a generally accepted principle that a person's concept of self has a decided influence on that person's mental health. The individual who feels good about himself and can approach the learning task with a relatively safe degree of confidence has a plus in his favor before he begins.

If a child perceives certain things to be true about himself and his environment and his experiences confirm this as truth, then he is able to affirm the validity of expectations. But if, on the other hand, society constantly disconfirms what the child perceives to be reality, such disconfirming experiences create in the child a stress with which he may be unable to cope.

It is the purpose of this paper to explore some questions about accepted educational arrangement for the educable mentally retarded, and to look critically at the disconfirming aspect of the separate or segregated class for this group of handicapped children. Anyone who has worked with or lived with retarded persons is aware of how frequently their lives become more complicated by emotional problems. (Webster, 1971). To what extent does the school contribute to separating the educable mentally retarded for educational purposes, and what are some alternatives to this administrative arrangement?

### Background of Separate Classes

It is easy to see how and why the separate classes came into being. One needs only to look at methods of financing the special class to understand its existence. But germane also to its existence has been the force of organized parents who have rightfully demanded that their child, too, be educated. Historically, legislative and political maneuvering over the past 50 years has created the special education class with little evaluation of its effect on the emotional health of pupils until the recent past.

As long ago as 1946, Shattuck called for an integration of educable mentally retarded into the regular class because of the need of both the child and society-in-general to interact for the benefit of both. His call for a change was unheeded until Dunn in 1968 (Dunn, 1968) stated flatly that segregated education for the educable mentally retarded was not only unjustified but was in fact short changing many children so labeled.

Educators acknowledge the deficits in the segregated class for minorities. About the time of the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* educators began

publishing test results confirming lower academic achievement from those pupils who had been segregated for educational purposes. A very large gap existed in the academic achievement levels of those who had participated in a half century of "separate-but-equal" education. This was true throughout the country, both North and South, where children were segregated due to legal barriers, societal mores, or residential patterns. (Weinberg, 1968) Knowing that separate education has not served racial minorities has in no way provided a deterrent to separate education for intellectual minorities. The same question can be asked regarding the educational arrangement for the handicapped that was asked by Negroes and civil rights advocates. Is it possible to achieve quality education with the facade of "separate but equal"? Just as the answer to Negroes was that integration provides the education that is mutually beneficial to society and the individual, so must the answer be for the handicapped.

### Self Concept and the Special Education Class

There is a real need to look beyond what is legislatively and financially expedient to see what effect certain administrative arrangements have on the children involved. The long-standing practice of diagnosing the child who manifests any deviancy as handicapped, and placing him in a special class where all other children also deviate from the so-called societal "norm" may be convenient in order to obtain services, but what does it do to the child when he is labeled and must bear the stigma of the label in society? And how does this stigma influence his school performance? Does the school label alleviate his condition or does it increase his problem?

#### A. What Does the Label Do to the Child

Love (1972) states that the label educable mentally retarded is not only damaging but would be completely unnecessary if teachers gave more than lip service to individual differences. He further states that one of the major causes of depressed educational achievement is social maladjustment. The social maladjustment has its roots in the label which the child bears during his formative school years. Love calls attention to the EMR child's blending into the population after age eighteen but

—"The tag, though, has taken its toll and the damage on the person's personality and ego has been done."

Dunn (1968) is more strident in his demand for an end to labeling when he speaks of the damage done to the child by segregated classes.

"... If I were a parent who had heard of Judge Wright's decision and knew what I know now about special classes for the educable mentally retarded, other things being equal, I would then go to court before allowing the schools to label my child as 'mentally retarded' and place him in a 'self-contained special school or class.'"

Calling attention to the stigma of Special Education, a label more handicapping than low intellectual functioning, Kraft (1973) calls for an end to all special classes which segregate the deviant child. He emphatically states that society is not served and neither is the child by labeling a child with a tag which does not enhance his learning.

Labeling a child educable mentally retarded may actually interfere with his right to quality teaching. Finn (1972) reviewed the research of teacher expectation and educational environment as it related to the teacher's attitude toward the child's ability to learn. He found that teachers expect less and provide less challenge if their pupils have been presented to them as being of less than average ability.

It would appear that labeling a child "educable mentally retarded" is an act that in itself may spell failure for the child. Failures plus the compulsory posture as a person who is deviant from the accepted norm is a terrifying burden to place on a child. What is the result in terms of the child's mental health?

#### B. Self-Concept and Success in Learning

A person who doubts himself  
Is like a man  
Who would enlist in the ranks of his enemies  
And bear arms against himself  
He makes his failure certain by himself  
Being the first person to be convinced of it.

Alexander Dumas

There is a wealth of information relative to the self-concept as an integral part of learning.

Vitro and Yvon (1972) state,

"An individual must accept himself as an 'adequate human' before he can perceive himself and behave as an 'adequate student'."

Webb (1972) goes a step further and says that not only must the pupil bring to the learning task a positive self-concept but the learning experience must serve to maintain this positive self perception.

A child who perceives himself in a positive fashion characteristically accepts new challenges. Failures are a temporary set-back: not the terminal experience. He is confident of eventually overcoming his obstacles. On the other hand, the child who perceives himself negatively, as a person of little worth, expects failure and in this failure he finds reinforcement of his negative self perception. Characteristically this child will not attempt new tasks. (Parker, 1974).

Society in general, and education in particular, provide the educable mentally retarded child with the kinds of experiences to disconfirm his expectations in life. The school sees him as an educational problem, not an asset. He is labeled, marked as less than what he should be, sent to a class which is often out of his neighborhood. He is constantly reminded of his inadequacies by having his peers taunt him with his label "retardo" and "dum-dum." Knowing he is different and inadequate, he is ever confronted with his educational failure as he stands outside of the mainstream of his school, unable to participate in most of the activities of his age mates. He is often even compelled to take home a grade card that is different, periodically reminding his family that he is inadequate.

It is small wonder that emotional disturbances are considered to be underlying manifestations of mental retardation. This emotional malfunctioning in the retarded child results from unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships and not organic brain disorder according to Menalascino (1971). Menalascino reports several research studies showing an ex-

tremely high incidence of emotional problems relating to the condition of retardation which contributed to the problems of learning.

Thus the retarded child can be seen as one who suffers from the impact of the conscious and unconscious hostility in his environment. The rejection, the lack of success, the lack of acceptance which he experiences work together to disconfirm the expectancies which are the birthright of every child.

Newell Kephart (1968) issued a call to educators to re-examine the segregated class as an accepted administrative arrangement for any child with a learning handicap.

"A continued or increased isolation of special education from the main stream of the educational system can, in my opinion, only lead to eventual disaster." (Kephart, 1968)

There is a consensus among many educators, psychologists, and some parents that labeling a child as less-than-he-should-be, and separating him from the main stream of society, not only provides no help for the child's learning problem but adds the additional burden of overlying emotional problems. Repeated studies have shown that the educable mentally retarded child educated in the regular classroom does better academically. (Dunn, 1968; Carroll, 1967; Nelson, 1971) These reports, and others, support the theory that regular class placement (integrated education) provides a basis for healthier self-concept and promotes the child's confidence in himself.

The question remains: how shall education for the educable mentally retarded be achieved with optimum conditions for healthy emotional development?

#### **Is Segregation Necessary to Provide Education for the Educable Mentally Retarded?**

Perhaps no one is actually suggesting that the child with educational problems be left with his needs unmet. There are many administrative arrangements which are feasible without disconfirming the child's expectations.

The resource room is an acceptable arrangement in many school systems. This arrangement follows accepted procedures used for remedial reading and speech therapy. Such arrangements could conceivably provide supportive tutorial services for the educable retarded child while allowing him to remain a part of the regular classroom. (Haring, 1970)

Individualized instruction is also the dream of many and the actualized reality of a few. This procedure would provide a more meaningful educational experience for all children as well as the educable mentally retarded. (Lord, 1970)

There are several other arrangements currently being tested for appropriateness in retaining the handicapped child in the regular classroom. Jerry Chaffin's (1974) Teacher Managed Instructional Support System, Gallagher's (1972) Contract Model, and Adamson and Van Etten's (1973) Fail-Save Program are but a few designed to offer continuing support to the educable mentally retarded child as he strives to be educated as a worthwhile human child.

Perhaps out of some of the current research will come a plan which will allow each child to be educated in dignity and with every reason to believe he is a worthy person. If the schools are to foster healthy emotional development, the self-concept of each child must be nourished.

Oh, let the self exalt itself,  
Not sink itself below;  
Self is the only friend of self,  
And self self's only foe.

Hindu Scripture

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