

Inclusion Inconclusion

The value of heterogeneous class groupings is not proven.

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There are bumper stickers which read, "Don't confuse me with the evidence. My mind's already made up!" This appears to be the motto of today's education bureaucracy.

Every few years, educators come up with an appealing idea that they feel will reform education. The idea is then "sold" to other educators and school systems without first being subjected to research scrutiny. Schools nationwide jump on a bandwagon and gear up with materials and programs. Teachers, parents and students are told that everyone benefits. After several years, educators discover that practices put in place to implement the new idea are ineffective. The practices are discarded and our schools are ready for yet another round of reform.

Last August, in an article in *The Houston Post*, we raised questions about recent trends in public education. One of the most worrisome to us was what we called "Inclusion." Inclusion maintains that heterogeneous classrooms are preferable to homogeneous groupings.

The article resulted in a large number of responses. Responses from teachers, students and laymen were overwhelmingly positive. However, many bureaucrats, administrators and education professors strongly objected to our suggestions. These objections were seldom well-reasoned; more frequently, they were strident.

Almost all of the objectors failed to address the issues raised and instead questioned the ability of the "lay" public to participate in a meaningful dialogue. In their opinion, parents and the public at large lack the knowledge and the expertise needed to question the opinion of experienced educators. This refusal to debate, to allow inquiry, or to engage in dialogue represents the very weakness in the system that we tried to address.

In our article, we presented serious misgivings about Inclusion. Our misgivings were directed toward the very conceptual foundations of the practice. We questioned its impact on the poor student who can never excel because the competition is above his level, the bright student who cannot be challenged and the teacher faced with the impossible task of teaching students with different abilities and interests while making the classroom interesting and relevant to all.

In criticizing our article, the education bureaucrats informed us in no uncertain terms that our arguments were faulty because "research indicates" that both weak students and good students academically benefit from being grouped together. The assertion that Inclusion is a research-proven practice was repeated by the state commissioner of education, school principals, professors from local universities, and various educational gurus.

Accordingly, we lowered our heads in shame and prepared to retire into the corner, severely admonished for our lack of preparation. Before doing so, however, we asked our chastisers to point us in the direction of their research base.

The university professors instructed us to do an ERIC computer search. The Texas Education Agency sent us a bulky package containing numerous articles. We received materials from Ivy League schools and from the U.S. Department of Education. We read the material carefully and repeatedly found the assertion that research indicates that both good students and poor students benefit from Inclusion. But none of the material contained actual empirical research findings!

Our own search did, however, produce two statistical analyses that analyzed all available empirical research on Inclusion. These studies indicate that

certain kinds of ability groupings are actually beneficial and preferable. Further, these studies said that bright students were held back, and poor and average students did not benefit as much from Inclusion as they did when given appropriate group-specific instruction.

What shocked us during our search process was the tendency of many Inclusion advocates to characterize as "research" mere anecdotal reports or quotes by others making positive statements without foundation. We also found that Inclusion advocates attempted to use non-academic indicators when there was no evidence of improved student performance.

After four months of searching, it is apparent that the assertion that "research indicates" that Inclusion is beneficial to both high-achieving and low-achieving students is mythical, non-existent and actually a big lie.

We are not against the practice of "Inclusion" as part of a total school program, a part designed to promote cooperation and understanding. However, we are angry at the attempt to force Inclusion in its extreme form. In trying to make one size fit all, schools may damage all. Most of all, we feel angry that an ideology is being forced on us under the guise that it is derived from empirical research.

We have no problems with people advocating an ideology. If one believes in Inclusion, so be it! But, let it be stated openly that Inclusion is an experimental, unproven approach. This will open the issue to public debate and allow questions to be raised. Stifling debate by misrepresentation should not be allowed. We can only wonder how many other so-called "research-based" but really unproved trends in education are being forced on an unsuspecting public.

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