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What is This?
High-Income and Low-Income Adolescents’ Views of Special Education

Ellen Brantlinger

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As a component of a comprehensive qualitative study of social class influences on schooling, 34 high-income and 40 low-income adolescents were interviewed about various aspects of special education. Of the low-income respondents, 55% had been classified as learning disabled, mildly mentally handicapped, or emotionally disturbed and had received special education services at some time during their schooling; whereas only two (6%) high-income adolescents had been classified as learning disabled. Nonclassified low-income students also had considerable contact with friends, neighbors, and relatives who had received special education services. The majority of low-income adolescents had ambivalent or negative feelings about special education. High-income adolescents had little contact with students classified as handicapped and, with few exceptions, they saw special education as a helpful, necessary service. This study indicates that there were social class distinctions in adolescents’ opinions and evaluations of special education.

The number of children who have been classified as learning disabled and emotionally disturbed and who have been placed in some form of special education classroom has increased steadily over the past 2 decades (Carter & Sugai, 1989). Children from minority racial and ethnic groups and from low-income families are especially likely to be classified and placed, hence these groups are overrepresented in special education (Carrier, 1986; Gerber, 1984; Kugelmass, 1987; Ysseldyke, Algozine, & Richey, 1982).

The professional special education community has been engaged in a serious debate about the benefits of handicap classifications and placement in special education classes. On the one side, Braaten, Kauffman, Braaten, Polsgrove, and Nelson (1988) wrote that separate special education programming is beneficial and necessary for many students and judged that maintaining control of certain classified students’ behavior is a challenging task even for the most highly trained special education teacher. Kauffman and Wong (1991) argued that the generic teaching skills of regular education teachers are not sufficient for teaching many emotionally handicapped children. One
rationale offered for separate classes is that the curriculum can be geared to the special needs of less efficient learners (Keogh, 1988). It also has been argued that mainstream teachers and administrators have negative attitudes toward children classified as handicapped, therefore special education placement is necessary to protect students from the damaging effects of these negative feelings (Fox, 1989; Garvar-Pinhas & Schmelkin, 1989; Sabornie, Marshall, & Ellis, 1990; Zigmund & Baker, 1990). An argument that has arisen in informal circles—but rarely in the scholarly literature—is that students with aberrant behaviors or minimal academic skills may have a detrimental affect on other students in regular classrooms.

On the other side of the controversy, professionals who challenge special education typically have argued that special education is a very expensive system that offers no evidence of educational benefits or improvement of life chances for students placed in special education classrooms (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1992; Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Edgar, 1988; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Pugach & Sapon-Shevin, 1987). In addition, those researchers have maintained that children suffer from the stigma of the handicapped label and from isolation from advanced peers. Opponents also have observed that instruction in special education classrooms is not unique but is remarkably similar to instruction in mainstream classrooms (Brantlinger, 1989; Cline & Billingsley, 1991). Reynolds (1988) has argued that the real rationale for separation is not to enhance the lives of classifiable children but to dismiss them from regular education classrooms because teachers find it difficult to accommodate them there. Allington and McGill-Franzen (1992) have contended that such practices as special education placement, developmental prefirst grades, and grade-level retentions are often motivated by school systems’ desire to exclude low achievers from their testing pool due to the pressure of accountability testing.

Special education placement is supposed to result from a consensual process between the professionals who deliver services and the families of children who receive them. Unlike suspension or expulsion, it has not been portrayed as a system to remove troublesome children from mainstream classrooms. Parent participation in placement decisions is mandated by P.L. 94-142 (1975), yet many families may not have sufficient information about school options to make sound decisions (Brantlinger, 1987). Particularly, uneducated parents may lack awareness of their own rights or they may be intimidated by professionals’ language usage and technical expertise (Brantlinger, 1987). Moran (1984) has found that low-income parents feel relatively powerless during interactions with school staff, therefore they passively accept the professional judgment of school personnel. Moreover, parents may have been led to believe that their children will make more
academic progress—even catch-up to their peers—as a result of special education programming (Brantlinger, 1987). Parents who do not prefer special education settings and handicap classifications for their offspring still may consent to placement to avoid the possible frustration of negative circumstances (e.g., low grades, retentions, disciplinary measures, teacher complaints) their children might encounter in regular classrooms (Brantlinger, 1985a, 1987).

Parental consent is required for children and adolescents to receive special education services; however, parents may not understand how their children experience living with a handicap label, and also they do not attend the special education classes. It is students who are most affected by classifications and special education placements. Special education is commonly perceived as beneficial to classified individuals. However, because of the lack of empirical evidence about actual benefits, it would seem appropriate to go to the recipients of these services in order to obtain their personal views of the effects of special education practices. A number of educators (e.g., Greer, 1989; Jenkins & Heinen, 1989; Leone, Luttig, Zlotlow, & Trickett, 1990) have noted the dearth of information about classified students’ attitudes toward special education. Among the rare studies, Warner, Thrapp, and Walsh (1973) found that classified students’ satisfaction with special education decreased with age: By high school, only 20% gave favorable responses about special education placement. Jones (1972) observed that students denied their labels, concealed their placements, were deceitful about their special education status, and none preferred special education. There is evidence that classified students experience considerable emotional stress in school settings because of their disability labels (Dupont, 1989; Elias, 1989; Esquivel & Yoshida, 1985). An indication of dissatisfaction with special education among classified students was the finding that up to 50% of students being educated in special education classrooms drop out of school prior to graduation (deBettencourt, Zigmund, & Thornton, 1989; Wolman, Bruininks, & Thurlow, 1989; Wyche, 1989). This figure is double the national average dropout rate (i.e., approximately 25%) for all students (Fine, 1991).

Not only is information about the evaluation of special education by students who receive special education services sparse, there are no studies of nonclassified students’ attitudes toward special education. It seems particularly pertinent to understand the attitudes toward special education of students who are not doing well in school and are at risk of being referred, classified, and placed in special education classrooms. Given the differential placement rates for high-income and low-income students, it is also important to examine social class distinctions in students’ perceptions of and attitudes toward special education.
The impetus for a previous study, and eventually the current study, came from 14 years of observations of special education field experiences. During that time, it was difficult not to notice the social class disparities in the nature of the school careers and school outcomes of children. These casual observations led to studies of low-income parents (Brantlinger, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1986, 1987). The results of those studies indicated that low-income parents were aware of social class discrepancies in schooling, but they still valued education and wanted their children to do well in school. Over one third of the 100 offspring of the 35 interviewed parents had received special education services. Many low-income parents of children who received special education services seemed confused about the nature and purpose of special education and seemed ambivalent about their children’s placements in special education classrooms (Brantlinger, 1987). The high rate of special education placement among the offspring of low-income parents, combined with the parents’ ambivalence toward special education, stimulated this author’s interest in extending research to students.

As in the parent studies, a qualitative research design was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, 1967) in order to better understand adolescents’ views of their world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor, 1992; Florio-Ruane, 1987; Young, 1990). Although in the broader study many aspects of schooling (e.g., attitudes toward teachers, preferences about the social class composition of schools, perceptions of trouble and punishment, relationships with peers) were examined, this report focuses on students’ perceptions of special education and their interpretations of the meaning of disability classification and segregated placement. The adolescent age-range was chosen because older students would have had a longer period of time to observe in school, hence were likely to have more information about school. Also, it was assumed that adolescents would be more knowledgeable and articulate than younger students. Finally, because adolescents are known to be concerned about their self image, it seemed that they might be especially attuned to the influences of special education status on others’ perceptions of them. Hence, this report focuses on high-income and low-income adolescents’ views of special education.

**METHOD**

**Participants and Setting**

The study was conducted in a midwestern city with a population of approximately 60,000. The town is the site of a large (30,000 student) state
university. There is distinct residential bifurcation in the city, with low-income families located primarily on the west side and high-income on the east side of town. Because elementary schools are mainly neighborhood schools, children of the same income level usually attend school together. The four secondary schools (i.e., two junior highs, two high schools) are located on the north and south sides of town, and therefore have social class heterogeneous enrollments.

Participants included adolescents (i.e., 13- to 18-year-olds) who lived in high-income or low-income residential areas. The mean age of the 40 low-income adolescents was 15.3 years. Four 16- and 17-year-olds had quit school, but the mean grade level of the 36 remaining in school was 9.1 years. The 34 high-income adolescents had a mean age of 15.2 years and a mean grade level of 9.8 years. Of each group, 85% were European-American and 15% were African-American.

Low-income adolescents were from three different government subsidized housing projects (two on the south side of the city and one on the north side). The local standard of eligibility for public housing for a family of four is a gross annual income of no more than $21,000 a year. In 1985, the average household income in the town was just over $30,000. High-income adolescents were recruited from one neighborhood on the north side of town and two residential areas on the south side of the city. The prices of houses in these three neighborhoods ranged from $70,000, to $200,000. At that time, the average price of a single-family house in that area was just under $60,000.

Adolescents were located through residential areas (see the Procedures section), nevertheless, information collected (i.e., parent educational attainment, parent occupation, family composition) conformed to indexes typically used to establish socioeconomic status (Havighurst, 1966). It might be noted that both groups of adolescents were subsets of broader socioeconomic levels. Low-income adolescents were mainly from single-parent homes, their parent(s) was unemployed, marginally employed, or erratically employed; that is, they were from a group recently referred to as underclass (Kornblum, 1984; Wilson, 1987), rather than working class. High-income adolescents were mainly from professional (i.e., parents were teachers, professors, lawyers), rather than executive elite (management class) or middle class (i.e., white-collar workers with relatively low salaries) families (Ayon, 1980).

**Procedures**

For a variety of reasons, an across-neighborhood census approach was selected to identify participants. First, it was felt that this method would avoid the potential selection bias of locating adolescents through schools, clubs, or
youth agencies. A residential identification approach seemed likely to result in a cross section of adolescents within each income level. Second, it was surmised that adolescents would be more comfortable and fluent on their own turf. Third, it was felt that school-based interviews were subject to the time constraints of school schedules and that respondent inhibitions might result from the interviewers proximity to, and necessary interaction with, school personnel.

After the proposal for the study was approved by the human subjects committee, the recruitment of participants was initiated. Although high-income and low-income participants were located in slightly different ways, both procedures resulted in identifying, contacting, and interviewing all adolescents, who agreed to participate, within defined neighborhood boundaries. Of the 49 low-income adolescents identified, 3 did not want to be interviewed and 6 were never found at home. Of the 41 identified high-income adolescents, 4 declined to be interviewed, and 3 were out of town for the summer. In low-income neighborhoods, the interviewers simply went door to door and asked about the presence of someone between 13 and 18 years of age. When a qualified participant was found, permission slips were signed, and the time for the interview was arranged. Following the interviews, participants were asked to identify all other adolescents living in the housing complex. In turn, identified adolescents were contacted and, when permission was granted, they were interviewed. In contrast, with high-income adolescents, the initial adolescent contacted in each neighborhood was known to the interviewers. Subsequently, the same peer identification of all adolescents within defined neighborhood boundaries took place. High-income adolescents were contacted by telephone and arrangements were made for the interviews.

In order to increase the number of interviews and the time spent with each participant, three seniors in a teacher preparation program assisted the researcher with the interviews. Their training involved a thorough introduction to the questions and probes, interview simulations with each other and the researcher, and pilot interviews with adolescents. Interviews were conducted in adolescents' homes. Interviews averaged about 1.5 hours in duration and took place in the summers of 1987 and 1988.

Interviewers took notes as adolescents talked and the interviews were audiotaped. The researcher listened to the tapes while reading the notes of interviews and corrections or additional notations were included when appropriate. The tapes were usually used as backup to the notes; that is, when notes were unclear or when the interviewees spoke to rapidly for notetaking, sections of the tapes were transcribed and added to the interviewees' notes. In addition, parts of tapes were transcribed in order to include verbatim
quotes. Debriefing sessions between the researcher and research assistants were held immediately after each interview. The research assistants were not involved in analyzing the data or in transcribing the interviews, although they verified the recorded and coded information and clarified meanings when necessary. The author conducted 21 of the 40 interviews with low-income adolescents and 9 of the 34 interviews with high-income adolescents.

Measure

After a review of the literature on students' perceptions of schooling (e.g., Fine, 1986; Good, 1983; MacLeod, 1987; Weinstein, 1983), several constellations of questions (e.g., perceptions of relationships with teachers, perceptions of peer interactions, feelings about the purpose of school, perceptions of trouble and punishment) were developed, including a set pertaining to special education (see Table 1). It was felt that open-ended questions would avoid forcing participants into predetermined response categories and would be a productive way to get responses that were true to adolescents' own feelings and perceptions. An attempt was made to transfer the maximum amount of control of the interview agenda to participates by encouraging them to expand on ideas, conjecture about causation, and supply rationale for their replies. Several drafts of the interview protocol were used in preliminary pilot interviews with adolescents. The same set of questions and same interviewers were used with both high-income and low-income informants.

Data Analysis

Each item (see Table 1) provided the original parameters for sorting the narrative response. For example, item one was "respondents perceptions of the special education programs in their schools." The responses to each item on the interview protocol were coded and sorted according to the nature of the response. With item one, responses fell into the categories of aware/not aware of programs in present/past schools, aware/not aware of locations of programs in schools, accurate/inaccurate account of number of programs in school(s), and descriptions of special education recipients as mildly/severely disabled. Responses in these categories were tallied in order to provide the quantitative descriptions reported in the tables or in parentheses in the text. Brief summaries of the nature of the responses also were included. Finally, verbatim quotes were used to illustrate response summaries and quantitative accounts. These quotes included majority, minority, and idiosyncratic views.

Many of the items included an evaluation component (e.g., positive, negative, ambivalent, noncommittal). When there were distinctions between
Table 1: Interview Protocol on Special Education Issues

Tell me about the special education programs in your school?
How do you feel about special education?
What is the purpose of special education?
Have you ever received special education services?
(If yes):
  When? How long? What kind of class?
  How did you feel about it?
  Was it helpful for you? For others?
(If no):
  Do you have friends or relatives in special education?
  How do they feel about it?
(For students who described problematic school careers):
  Would special education have helped with your problems?
  How do you feel about mainstreaming?

the responses of types of participants (e.g., high-income/low-income; special education classified/nonclassified; learning disabled/mildly mentally handicapped/emotionally disturbed), these were included in the report of results. For a couple of the items, such factors as the length of time the student had spent in special education placements, the extent of contact with identified students, and/or the number and extent of problems participants were encountering in regular education classrooms were also identified as important factors in reporting adolescents’ perspectives.

In addition to analyzing the responses to each item on the interview protocol, entire narratives were perused in search of pertinent themes and ideas that overlapped items. Items/responses in the more comprehensive interview protocol; that is, items not directly about, but related to, special education (e.g., feelings about their own intelligence, ideas about how school should be, descriptions of relationships with teachers) were included when they were judged to be relevant to this study. During analysis of the responses within items, additional themes (e.g., feelings about their labels, influence of labels on peer relations) emerged. A cross-item examination of these themes resulted in the new, non item categories of response which were included in this study.

In analyzing the narrative response to the questions, it became clear that there were tacit meanings underlying the direct statements of adolescents. Therefore, it was important to go beyond surface (explicit) remarks in order to discern more subtle meanings. Characteristics such as emotionality, intensity, and tone (sarcasm, defensiveness, embarrassment) were noted. Terminology usage (e.g., brains, know-nothings, piece of trash) as well as indications of identification or affiliation (e.g., we/they, the preppies they . . . , grits
are . . . ) figured greatly in making sense of students’ interpretations of the school scene. Thus, an attempt was made to delve below the surface to interpret subtleties in adolescents’ stories about school and themselves as students.

**Reliability and validity.** Reliability of the coding procedure was examined by providing nonparticipant judges with random sets of coding protocol (e.g., those provided in the first paragraph of data analysis) for corresponding sections of narrative data. Interrater coding reliability (i.e., correlation with the researcher who coded the data) was .92 and .88 for the two judges. Of course, it was difficult to evaluate the reliability of the more general perusal of the narratives for relevant themes and for subtle messages. However, the university students who helped interview, reviewed drafts of the study and were asked to comment on the authors’ interpretations and conclusions. They concurred with the author’s observations but typically offered additional observations of their own.

In qualitative research, results are considered valid when pieces of evidence fit together, make sense, and are consistent (Eisner, 1979), when they seem authentic and plausible, and when others see how they are relevant or transferable to their settings and circumstances (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, the reader must judge the validity of this study in light of personal experiences. However, one way of demonstrating validity in qualitative studies is getting substantiating information from a variety/number of data sources.

Support for the validity of the adolescent study comes from comparisons of earlier studies of low-income parents, as well as subsequent studies of high-income parents and school personnel. Consistencies in the perspectives of these various groups and individuals in the community become apparent. Similarly, the high number of low-income adolescents who were identified as handicapped was consistent with findings of the earlier study of 35 low-income parents in the community. That study revealed a similar lack of school success among offspring. Of the 44 school-age children, 16 (36%) were in full-time special education placements (9 learning disabled; 7 mildly mentally handicapped). Of the 46 postschool children, 20 (43%) had graduated and 26 (57%) had dropped out of school (Brantlinger, 1987). None of the high-income parents who were interviewed had offspring who received special education services, although a few parents felt their children had problematic school careers. Teacher and administrator participants in the subsequent study verified that low-income students were disproportionately represented in special education classrooms in the district. These studies provide corroborating evidence of overrepresentation, and thus serve to establish the validity of this investigation.
RESULTS

Special Education Status of High-Income and Low-Income Students

The school careers reported by affluent adolescents were dramatically different from those described by their low-income counterparts (see Table 2). Perhaps the most important finding of this study was the discrepancy between the numbers of low-income adolescents and high-income adolescents classified as handicapped. The fact that low-income students are disproportionately represented in special education has been well documented, but this study may be unique in using an across-neighborhood census approach, albeit on a small scale, to demonstrate the extent of the difference. Moreover, the types of placements varied for the two groups. The majority of low-income classified adolescents were served in self-contained special education classrooms. The two high-income adolescents were both classified learning disabled and both received resource room support one period a day for their college preparatory classes.

In addition to the 14 low-income students (36%) who received special education services at the time of the interviews, another 4 had been in special education classrooms in the past. Besides the 18 low-income students (45%) who had been in special education classrooms, 17 others (43%) had experienced unsuccessful school careers (e.g., grade retentions, low performance evaluations in regular education, school suspensions, leaving school prior to graduation). Four of these reported having been referred for special education services, but they had not been placed because they had not been found eligible after being tested or because they had gone to summer school or had been retained a year instead. Only five low-income adolescents were on grade level and received average or above average grades. Three of these five adolescents were in college preparatory classes. In contrast to the mainly problematic school careers of low-income adolescents, all of the high-income adolescents were on or above grade level, and none reported grade point average below the 2.0 level (on a 4.0 scale). All of the high-income adolescents who were at the high school level were in college preparatory tracks.

Views of Special Education and Classified Students

Both high-income and low-income respondents attended the same four secondary schools. Each of the four schools had at least four full-time classrooms for students with learning disabilities, one or two for those with mild mental handicaps (i.e., corresponds to the classification educable mentally retarded), and one for students with emotional handicaps. All of the
Table 2: School Status Reported by Adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Status</th>
<th>Low Income</th>
<th></th>
<th>High-Income</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above grade level</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On grade level</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retained 1 year</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retained 2 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning disabled</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(In self-contained)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(In resource rooms)</td>
<td>(4)(^a)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>(2)(^a)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mildly mentally handicapped</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally handicapped</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. These adolescents are also included in first four categories.

schools had between one and four classes for children with moderate or severe disabilities. In spite of having attended the same schools, high-income and low-income adolescents’ views of local special education programs and their perceptions of students classified as handicapped varied substantially. High-income respondents mainly alluded to students with severe handicaps or physical stigmata (e.g., “the ones in wheelchairs and stuff are in a class by the home ec room”), whereas low-income participants referred exclusively to students with mild handicaps (e.g., “Sometimes people are put there because their grades are low. It’s not that they’re dumb, but they need extra help”). Many high-income adolescents were not aware of the presence of programs for students classified mildly handicapped or had little specific information about them (e.g., “I don’t know about special education. I haven’t really thought about it. I usually don’t converse with them because of different schedules”).

The distinctions in awareness of the presence of special education programs in the schools and in perceptions of students with handicaps by high-income and low-income adolescents has several likely explanations. First, these distinct views appeared to be related to the differing rates of classification and placement for the two socioeconomic groups (see Table 2). Second, the general lack of school success of most of the low-income students could make them more aware of the probability of being referred and placed. Third, the social class distinctions in unique perceptions also were likely to be influenced by the nature and extent of contact with classified schoolmates. Low-income respondents typically reported having siblings, neighbors, and “lots of” friends in special education, whereas few high-income adolescents
could name anyone in special education programs. In addition to the two classified students, only one other high-income adolescent claimed to have contact with students in special education. He was a "peer tutor in a moderate classroom." Low-income adolescents used personal referents in discussing special education students, in contrast to upper income adolescents' use of the impersonal "them" (e.g., "Some people are slow learners, special education helps them." "I guess it's a good thing for kids that can't do alright otherwise—so they don't have to go without an education. It helps them lead a normal life").

Attitudes Toward Special Education

Attitudes toward special education varied according to special education status and general school success, thus, according to socioeconomic status (see Table 3). High-income adolescents were substantially more positive about special education than were their low-income counterparts. In discussing special education they used such descriptors as helpful, beneficial, or necessary. One of the two who were negative said: "I've heard it costs a lot of money and doesn't do much good." The other asserted, "I don't like it." When asked why, she said, "I don't know I just can't see the point of having classes for kids that can't learn in the same school as the rest of us."

With little personal exposure to special education classrooms and students, high-income adolescents spoke abstractly and appeared to be quoting parents, teachers, or the media in their discussions of special education (e.g., "I think it's good because some can't get into the mainstream of school and this gives them the special attention they need." "To my knowledge it's going well. It may have funding problems"). The rationale for special education provided by high-income adolescents was that schools should accommodate differences in learners (e.g., "Special education gives them a chance to do better at their level." "I think we really need to educate people according to their ability"). They saw special education as a helpful service, but one that was developed for other people, not for them.

Attitudes were entirely different for students with more personal exposure to special education. Of the 18 classified low-income adolescents (i.e., 14 currently served; 4 previously served), 2 were entirely positive about special education. One of the positive students was a youth who was classified as emotionally handicapped. His father has been imprisoned for abusing him. This adolescent was particularly fond of his most recent teacher and aide, claiming: "I like special education. They treat you better. I think it's a good thing. [My teacher] has turned me around. He's helped me. Special education gives you more chances." The other totally positive adolescent was classified
Table 3: Adolescents' Attitudes Towards Special Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Income</th>
<th></th>
<th>High Income</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonclassified Students</td>
<td>Classified Students</td>
<td>Nonclassified Students</td>
<td>Classified Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Includes students who no longer receive services and those who went referred and classified but not placed.

as learning disabled. He had received resource room services while he was in the fifth and sixth grades. He said, "I was in special education and it helped me. I was glad because I was not doing well by myself. It's helpful. They shouldn't put people down for being in special ed."

Five responses, including three of the four currently served in resource rooms, were categorized as ambivalent (see Table 3). Two thought that special education was necessary for them because, as one put it, "I don't think that I could do the work in regular high school. It would be hard for me and I wouldn't pass. I would never graduate. But I wish I didn't have to be in it." The other said: "I guess the smaller classes help me. I'd rather avoid it. I used to hate it. Now I just don't think about it. I don't like it when people call me stupid." Two of the ambivalent students expressed negative feelings about the placement, but positive affect toward teachers (i.e., "I felt bad when I heard I was going to be in special education. I'm sort of used to it now. It's embarrassing to be in special ed., but the teachers are better there. They're not as mean" "I feel good about some of it. Some of it I don't. The teachers are nice").

At this point it may be worthwhile to discuss the findings of the component of the interview that focused on adolescents' attitudes toward teachers. It is important to note that of the 17 low-income adolescents (43%) who had mainly positive feelings about teachers, 14 were students who received special education services. Hence, only 4 students in special education classrooms were ambivalent or negative about teachers. It is worth noting also that the 7 low-income adolescents who were consistently negative about teachers (i.e., could not name any they liked) were the ones with the most negative school careers in regular education (i.e., one or two grade-level retentions, the lowest grade point averages, reports of being in frequent trouble in school). It might be concluded that even though most special
education students were embarrassed about their labels and placement and many felt they would be learning more in regular classes, they were grateful to special education teachers. There was a strong association between “feeling liked by teachers” and “liking teachers” among all participants. Apparently, special education teachers had communicated to their students that they liked them.

The two high-income students who were classified (i.e., learning disabled) were fairly neutral about special education (i.e., “I guess it’s okay.” “It doesn’t bother me”). One stated that his special education status was “my Mother’s idea. She wanted me to get better grades.” When asked if it was helpful, he hesitantly said: “Oh maybe, sometimes, a little. She (the teacher) gets me organized.” The other appreciated “help with my papers and studying for tests.” Both felt that their peers were unaware that they went to resource rooms for tutoring. The fact that none of their neighbors mentioned either of the boys when they were asked whether they knew any students who received special education services, confirmed these two adolescents’ perceptions.

The majority of classified low-income students (14, 77% of those placed) were mainly negative about special education, some unremittingly so (e.g., “I hated it. That’s why I quit school. I couldn’t take another year there.” “It’s awful. When you first go they say it will only be for awhile, but you never get out once you’re there”). Others started out neutral (e.g., “It’s okay”) but became progressively more animated and critical as they continued to talk. For example, one adolescent, who was classified learning disabled, first said, “It don’t hurt me none. People are different—they’re born that way. That’s just the way it is.” However, later she stated, “To me, you see, being in special education makes a difference. To me, intelligence makes a difference. I try to be smart. I study hard. I prove myself to the teacher. I would really like to be smart. Maybe other kids don’t care. Being in special education tells other people that you’re dumb.”

The most intensely negative sentiments were expressed by the adolescents who had been in special education placements the longest. Many had spent most of their school careers in self-contained placements. A high school senior, who was classified learning disabled, related, “I started in special [ed.] when I was in fifth grade—twelve years old! I’ve been in it ever since. I don’t like it. I’m supposed to be getting out. It’s nice to have because it helps some kids, but everybody makes fun of you. I can’t take that. I would learn more in regular.” At another point in the interview, in response to being asked about his life goals, he replied, “To get out of special education!” A student classified as “mildly mentally handicapped,” who had quit school on her 16th birthday, recalled
I went to special ed. when I was at [Elementary School]. I could tell the difference. I felt like I learned more in regular. I was upset at first. Mom and Dad didn’t want me to be there. I wished I could have been in regular. I could have succeeded without special ed. Special ed. was not really that good. (Interviewer: “What about your classmates? Did they need to be in special ed?”) More of my classmates could have done regular education. The whole idea of special ed. is not good. I was embarrassed being in special. I pretended I wasn’t. I told people I wasn’t in special ed.

Students who denied the appropriateness of special education classification and placement for themselves were always asked if their peers in special education benefited from the services. It was hypothesized that they might see the others as “retarded” or “emotionally disturbed” even if they felt such labels were not valid for themselves. Such an admission might reveal the classified students’ sense of the basic legitimacy of special education. Students mainly maintained that it was not beneficial for anyone, or that a small minority might need it. For example, the young man quoted earlier (i.e., “It is nice to have because it helps some kids”) was one of four who alluded to benefits for others.

Of the adolescents who no longer received services, two were ambivalent, one was negative, and the fourth was one of the two respondents who was quoted as feeling that special education services had been helpful. In contrast to the totally disparaging comments of those categorized as negative, of those judged as ambivalent, one wavered: “I hated it. I don’t know, maybe it helped me. I’m glad I’m out.” The other, who said his mother had insisted that he be put back in regular, maintained: “It might be okay if it was handled right. It was not handled right for me. It did not help.” The negative student replied: “It was too easy. It didn’t really help me. You’re labeled there. Other people think it means that you are stupid. I can’t help it if I’m kind of slow. It does hurt my feelings.” Hence the range of attitudes for those no longer receiving services mirrored those of their peers who continued in special education.

The responses of low-income adolescents depended somewhat on their placement status (see Table 3). Nevertheless, even the low-income adolescents who had never received special education services were more negative about special education than were their high-income schoolmates (e.g., “I don’t know. I guess it’s good for people who need extra time, but a lot of kids in it don’t like it.” “If I needed it, I wouldn’t mind. It’s helpful for kids who need it. But, my friends there don’t like it. They don’t think it does much good.” “It’s a good thing to try to help them, but when they graduate they will not know the same things that others know.” “I’ve never been in it. I
don’t think they should have it. My friends are only doing first- or second-grade work. I have heard you don’t learn much.” “I don’t know exactly what happens in it, but they’re way behind”). It may be assumed that these adolescents’ perceptions were based on familiarity with the judgments of special education made by their classified peers (i.e., friends, neighbors, siblings, other relatives) as well as their personal observations of what happened in special education classrooms.

Adolescents who were not doing well in regular education were particularly wary of special education (e.g., “It’s probably good for people that don’t understand, but I don’t think I’ll need any classes in it.” “It’s a slow class for people who don’t quite do the work, but it’s not for everybody who has problems in school. You have to have, well, real bad problems with learning, you know, special problems.” “That’s when they put people who can’t do that good together. Most have problems. Everybody in those classes has the same intelligence”). When asked if special education might help with their problems, they were emphatically negative. One said: “It’s good for people who need it, but people who don’t need it shouldn’t have it. Because of my grades they were going to put me in special education. The school informed my mom. They gave me a chance to repeat a year instead.” One low-achieving student did feel that special education might help her: “I did too good on the tests to get into special. I went to summer school. Special ed. could help me I think. Special ed. does help the type who need it.”

A unique perspective was given by a school dropout who resented the extra help students in special education received:

No, I was never in anything like that. I knew a lot of people who was. I had to go to pre-first. Then I flunked again. I flunked again in eighth—that’s when I quit school. I didn’t feel that school’s helping them was fair. They wanted to put me in special education, but my Mom didn’t like it. She wouldn’t let me be in them classes.

When asked if she felt special education placement would have helped her, she replied: “No. I wouldn’t want to be in with them. All they done was act like little kids. They did stupid stuff.”

The Influence of Special Education Status on Peer Relations

Although students were not directly asked about how their special education status influenced peer relationships, their complaints about teasing, rejection, and stereotyping as a result of their placement emerged as one of the most important negative aspects of being in special education. Classified
students were bothered that being in special education was stigmatizing and
that peer rejection and lack of popularity resulted from their special education
status. One admitted: “I felt bad when I heard I was going to be in special ed.
Everybody in school laughs at you.”

The few classified respondents who did not directly complain about peer
rejection in the context of describing their feelings about special education,
still said that most of their friends were other special education students
and/or they worried about having “no friends” in their discussions of peer
relations (Brantlinger, 1991a).

The Stigma of Placement

Classified adolescents were bothered about the stigma of their label and
of their special education placement. Recall the student who said: “Special
education tells other people that you are dumb” or the one who said:
“You’re labeled there—it means you are stupid!” A low-achieving nonclas-
sified adolescent described special education as: “It’s for students who have
the same intelligence.” At one point or another in their interviews, most
of the classified adolescents confessed to embarrassment about their
placement.

Many adolescents who attended special education classes admitted that
they attempted to conceal their status. One who was classified as “learning
disabled,” divulged: “Me and my friends don’t like being in special educa-
tion. It’s embarrassing. We try to go into the special education room when
nobody’s around.” Another, who was no longer in special education, recalled:

I always went to the bathroom until after the bell rang. I didn’t want my
friends to know I was in special. The teacher always said: “How come you
ride the same bus with the others, and you’re always late? I don’t understand
it.” she’d say. I kept being put in in-school suspension for tardiness. I hated
being in special education. My mother wouldn’t sign the papers, so they
couldn’t put me in it. She says: “Okay, if you hate it so much, I won’t sign
them papers.”

Another related: “I don’t like other kids to know I’m in special education. I
come to school early and go right to my class. I sit in the back so kids can’t
look in and see me. If the others know you’re special ed., they make fun of
you.” One described carrying thick books in the halls so people would “think
I’m smart—think I’m in those hard classes.” Two admitted that they covered
their special education books with book covers (e.g., “We only get baby
books—they are way too easy. I cover them up so nobody sees them. I hate
it when people ask if you’re in special”).
Attitudes Toward Their Labels

The three adolescents who were classified mildly mentally handicapped were evasive about their exact label, using only the generic term special education. (Their classifications were traced through the names of their teachers.) It is unclear if they were really confused or if they simply disliked and avoided the term mentally retarded. Two referred to themselves as “slow” and the other as “backwards.” The terms “mental” and “retard” are among the most common derogatory epithets used by local adolescents. Similarly, the youth classified emotionally handicapped never used that term but talked about special education in a generic manner. In contrast, those classified learning disabled (LD) seemed content with that label but avoided using special education, which they appeared to associate with mental retardation (e.g., “I’m not exactly in special education, it’s something a little different—a little better.” “I used to be in special ed., but now I’m in LD resource”). Thus special education seemed to be associated with full-time, self-contained placements.

The Impact of Special Education on Learning

Nine of the 14 students in self-contained classrooms felt that they were not learning as much in special education as they would in regular classes (e.g., “It keeps repeating itself.” “I learned the stuff way back at elementary school.” “They treat us like babies in special ed.”). Although none of the respondents felt that they were learning more, five stated that they were “doing better” that is, they were receiving better grades (e.g., “I’m not failing now”). One of these students felt that she would not be able to do the work in regular education, so special education placement was necessary for her. Three of the four in resource rooms thought the support they received there was somewhat helpful; the other said “I don’t think it does much good; I’m still failing.”

Attitudes Toward Mainstreaming

Perhaps because of the close co-mingling of low-income students in special class and lower track placements and their almost total isolation from high-income students, low-income respondents had little to say about mainstreaming. The term had to be defined (i.e., placing special education students in regular education classrooms), but even then they seemed unsure of the rationale for, and significance of, the idea. In another part of the interview, however, 32 (80%) endorsed the idea of schools with heterogeneous enroll-
ments, stating that different kinds of children should attend school together in integrated settings (Brantlinger, 1991b).

High-income respondents, more distant from special class students, had more definitive—even if abstract—reactions to mainstreaming. Twenty-four (70%) were mainly positive about it (e.g., “They need special attention because of their handicaps, but I don’t feel they should be secluded all the time.” “They should take normal classes—the ones they can handle—with normal kids.” “I don’t get to see them. I think it may be bad for them.” “I’m not sure what goes on in those classes because the teachers and the students in it are separated from the rest of the school. I think they probably should mix more.” “I suppose mainstreaming would get them with other kids. It doesn’t bother me. I see them as regular people.” “It’s a good idea to mix them in with society since they live here”).

Ten high-income adolescents (30%) were more hesitant about mainstreaming. Seven (21%) were concerned about the treatment of special education students (e.g., “Special education itself is good, but they are tormented so much at school.” “They shouldn’t have to go to the public school and be subjected to the kind of treatment they get here.” “It makes me mad when people make fun of them.” “I don’t think it’s fair for them to go to a school like [junior high]. They get harassed—made fun of. I understand that they want them to be with normal kids, but it is just not fair to them”). Three (9%) admitted that they disliked personal exposure to people with handicaps (e.g., “They should be in this school, I guess, but the way they act bugs me.” “Personally, I’d rather not have them here.” “They’re embarrassing. I guess it’s good for them to be with us though”). Again, it must be noted that high-income respondents associated special education with students with moderate and severe disabilities and physical stigmas.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that a disproportionate number of adolescents from low-income neighborhoods were classified as handicapped and were being educated in self-contained special education classrooms. Only 6% of the adolescents from high-income neighborhoods had special education classification, whereas 36% of the low-income adolescents were currently receiving special education services. In addition to those classified and placed, many low-income students were experiencing very problematic school careers (e.g., low grades, grade-level retentions, school suspensions) (Brantlinger, 1990, 1991b). Only 5 of the 40 low-income adolescents reported being on
grade level and claimed to be receiving at least average grades in their secondary school classes. This study used a self-report technique and self-reports are influenced by complex motives and thinking processes. There were likely to have been constraints and exaggerations in divulging status and feelings. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that respondents might underreport negative information about themselves, thus the findings could be biased in a positive, not negative direction.

Although the overrepresentation of low-income students in special education (and other low-status school arrangements) has long been known (e.g., Anyon, 1980; Bastian, 1988; Coleman et al., 1966; Havighurst, 1966; Jencks, 1972; Lightfoot, 1983; MacLeod, 1987; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Mercer, 1973; Rist, 1970), the across-neighborhood census identification procedure used in this study was effective in revealing the extent of social class disparities among special education clientele. In making comparisons with the rates of placement of children from various social strata in other locations, it must once again be cautioned that the participants in this study did not represent a cross-section of the traditional socioeconomic classes. Recruited from subsidized housing projects, low-income adolescents typically were from single-parent homes in which the adult was unemployed or marginally employed. The sample did not include children from working-class families. At the same time, high-income adolescents were primarily from what Anyon (1980) has called the “affluent professional” subgroup of the high socioeconomic group and did not include adolescents from executive elite or middle-income white-collar families.

A second finding of this study was that exposure to special education, either through personal classification and placement or by being in close contact with classified peers, was integrally linked to adolescents’ perceptions of special education and classified students and their evaluations of special education services. Generally, adolescents with closer and longer contact with special education expressed the most negative sentiments about it. Although students who received special education services did voice appreciation for caring teachers and passing grades, most resented the labels and reported negative feelings about placements. Special education represented inferiority to them, as did other inadequacy-confirming experiences. Views of special education also were influenced by the probability of referral for special education placement. Students who reported problematic school careers had more negative attitudes toward special education than did students who were successful in school. Respondents from high-income neighborhoods had little personal contact with students in special classes, and they perceived classified students as very different from themselves. With few
exceptions, high-income respondents spoke calmly and positively about special education, describing it as a beneficial service for others, but one they were personally unlikely to need.

The assumption underlying separate special education services is that students benefit from the services academically and socially. Given the challenges to the assumptions about the positive affect of special education placement, as well as evidence of the negative repercussions of labeling and segregation, the traditional professional role might be questioned. If, indeed, students are being eliminated from mainstream settings because they might interfere with the education of others, then that issue must be addressed by professionals and that rationale for exclusion from the mainstream must be communicated explicitly to parents and students. From another perspective, Allington and McGill-Franzen (1992) believe that such practices as labeling, retaining, and excluding students from schools and classrooms may be motivated by school officials’ desire to raise the scores in accountability testing in their school buildings or districts—perhaps a less justifiable reason than the typical “for their own good” rationale associated with special education placement.

Educators have been accused of finding it easier to label and segregate children whose families wield little power than to consider the contextual variables in children’s school careers (Brantlinger & Guskin, 1987; Mehan et al., 1986; Oakes, 1985; Poplin, 1988; Sapon-Shevin, 1987; Sleeter, 1986). There is evidence that low-achieving children, who are not classified and placed in special education, also experience less positive interactions with school personnel and less constructive school careers than do high-achievers (Bender, 1988; Good, Slavings, Harel, & Emerson, 1987; Moran, 1984; Parker, Gottlieb, Gottlieb, Davis, & Kunzweller, 1989). Public schools are credited with increasing equity and facilitating social mobility. Educators and affluent constituencies may prefer to believe in the positive aspects of schooling, hence may resist discussions of negative social class influences on school status. A tactful approach might have been to avoid casting the results of this study in the context of social class. Adolescents who personally had been in special education might have been compared to those with little or no personal experience with special education services. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the relation between social class status and special education status. Future studies might attempt to identify reasons for the social class distinctions.

It is not possible to know how it feels to be in special education unless one has personally experienced being there. Like many of the high-income adolescents in this study, professionals tend to experience school from a school-successful position. It is important for professionals to attempt to see
things from the perspective of people from differing social class backgrounds. One way to do this is to go directly to students on their own ground and ask them how they see their world. Students should be treated as active, opinionated, and articulate consumers of education rather than passive recipients. It is important to be sensitive to the feelings and preferences of the students involved when making decisions about educational arrangements.

REFERENCES


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