# The conflict within: resistance to inclusion and other paradoxes in special education

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In the 30 years since the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (PL. 94-142) in 1975 (subsequently the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) special education in the USA as an institutionalized practice has become solidified. Over the years, however, the practice of segregating students because of disability has come under increased scrutiny. Beginning in the late 1980s, an increasing number of parents advocated that their children with disabilities be put in mainstream general education classes. Emotionally charged debates over the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms ensued. In this paper we look at the public debates over inclusion and expose some of the paradoxes within special education that serve to hinder the integration of individuals with disabilities into general classes and, by extension, society at large.

## Introduction

Greatly influenced by the disability rights movement (Shapiro, 1993), efforts by US parents of children with disabilities and their allies led to the passing of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) in 1975, which mandated a 'free and appropriate education for all handicapped children'. Before 1975 an estimated 4,000,000 children with disabilities in the USA did not receive necessary supports in school, with another 1,000,000 received no schooling whatsoever (Friend, 2005). Once P.L. 94-142 (now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA) opened school doors for students with disabilities, clinical teams evaluated, labeled and determined, with parental input, the educational placement for each student. The law mandated that placements, selected from a continuum of options, be provided in the 'least restrictive environment' (LRE). Soon after the implementation of P.L. 94-142 professional debates ensued as to what constituted the least restrictive

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placement. Some questioned whether segregated placements led to either academic or social gains beyond what would be achieved without special education (Semmel *et al.*, 1979). Others doubted that the academic needs of disabled students warranted a wholly separate system (Stainback & Stainback, 1984). For many disability rights activists the LRE was simply a loophole that enabled educational institutions to continue to segregate people with disabilities (Taylor, 1988; Linton, 1998; Russell, 1998), concluding that segregated placements were overly restrictive and contradicted the underlying intent of IDEA (Reynolds, 1989).

Despite mounting criticism, the majority of students with disabilities continued to be taught in segregated settings. As a result, special education became an increasingly separate institution, with its own practices, regulations, certifications and staff. Furthermore, the research base of special education maintained a distinctly separatist stance in relation to other fields of study (Brantlinger, 1997). Grounded in the medical model, special education was characterized as contributing to the longstanding oppression experienced by disabled people (Oliver, 1996). Thus, despite seeing itself as a service to students with disabilities, special education was increasingly positioned as an oppressive force. Aligning with clinical approaches, much of the field either ignored or defined itself in opposition to the evolving social model understandings of disability advocated by disabled people themselves (Gallagher *et al.*, 2004).

The issue of inclusion, while a seemingly simple concept, remains highly contentious. To traditional special educators inclusion constitutes a dismantling of all that is good about existing services for children with disabilities (Diamond, 1995; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995). To others, inclusion is not simply a service placement, but 'a way of life, a way of living together, based on a belief that each individual is valued' and belongs (Villa & Thousand, 1995, p. 11). In this respect inclusion is a philosophy that challenges ableism. As Gerrard (1994) explained, inclusive education is 'an issue of social justice in which separate education and special education students is not only unequal, but detrimental to the development of all students' (p. 58).

The concept of inclusion has fundamentally changed the foundations of special education. Indeed, the very apparatus of what legitimates special education as a field has been called into question, including: the growth of disability categories and their reification; the separate education and certification of teachers; academic journals devoted to specializations; the burgeoning industry of professionals to serve the disabled (therapists, counsellors, evaluators, school psychologists, etc.); separate schools; segregated programs within existing schools; different funding sources, etc. Supporters of inclusion have held a mirror to special education and asked 'What is so special?' Used as a euphemism, 'special' serves as a gauze curtain behind which the word 'disabled' resides—perhaps too painful to be confronted as is. Sadly, more often than not 'special' (i.e. disability) becomes synonymous with exclusion, segregation and marginalization.

It is no surprise that inclusion has illuminated a growing divide within the field of special education (Friend, 2005). In one commentary a prominent scholar wrote that inclusion was 'virtually meaningless, a catchword used to give a patina of legitimacy to whatever program people are trying to sell or defend' (Kauffman, 1999, p. 246). While a harsh critique of inclusion, Kauffman inadvertently called attention to how

the term has been used in many ways by many people, including being colonized by special educators who depoliticize its intentions, transforming inclusion into a benign, well intentioned, pie in the sky fad. However, this cooption serves to highlight ways in which the field of special education does not recognize the politics of disability, so central to disability studies. This wilful ignorance is painfully evident in the overwhelming majority of foundational texts in the field of special education, which do not mention disability studies or disability rights (Brantlinger, 2006).

## Public discourse on inclusion

In this article we explore resistance to the inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream classes over the last three decades and the solidification of special education as an institutionalized practice. Rather than focus on professional literature (journals and textbooks) we concentrate instead on the public discourse about inclusion in the editorial pages of several major newspapers. We specifically attend to opinions about the merits (and demerits) of special education. Although we both identify as disability studies scholars who remain critical of special education, here we are interested in what can be learned from attending to the ambiguity and paradox of a more complicated view of special education. By asking 'What can we learn from the tangle of parental opinions regarding inclusion?' we contemplate ways in which special education has been both a service and disservice to students with disabilities. We begin by looking at parental support for inclusion before looking at special education first as a service and then as a disservice. This is followed with our analysis of the editorial coverage of inclusion and a discussion of several inherent paradoxes within special education that serve to hinder the integration of individuals with disabilities into general classes and, by extension, society at large.

## Data sources

To explore public discourses on inclusion we examined several major newspapers from 1987 to 2002. During this time there was increased debate over the inclusion of special education students in 'regular' classrooms, particularly after the reauthorizations of IDEA, including the 1990 and 1997 reauthorizations. We collected editorial pages from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, as well as a sampling of other papers, including publications from the UK, which was experiencing a parallel growth of inclusion. Altogether, we collected approximately 250 editorials, 'opposing viewpoints' pieces and letters to the editor. To begin placing these texts in their historical context we first look at the growth of parental support for the inclusion movement.

## Support for inclusion by parents

Convinced of the benefits of inclusion, many parents began to view placement in general education as an entitlement. As Kathleen Boundy, an attorney with the

Cambridge, Massachusetts based Center for Law and Education, said, 'Instead of proving that you have the right to be in you start with the right to be in' (Wilgoren & Pae, 1994, p. B1). In a letter to the editor Ruppmann (1991) directly challenged hitherto taken for granted assumptions about the benefits of special education placements, writing:

> The jury is not out on the question, 'Do children and adults with mental retardation and physical disabilities benefit from being placed together in segregated facilities outside their communities?' The answer is 'No, they do not'. Overwhelming evidence shows that people with severe disabilities do not thrive in isolated programs and settings. They achieve less, and more important, they suffer from the loneliness and lack of choice imposed upon them … . (p. A16)

A mother wrote that she once believed her child had a limited future, but because he was included her son was now 'a self-sufficient young man who is not going to need a group home or supported work environment' (DeFord, 1998, p. W08). Another parent wrote that her child was:

> now in his neighborhood school with his sisters, taking music, art and gym class with his friends and neighbors. He may not be as intellectually capable as others in his grade, but he has greatly improved his self-esteem and his desire to go to school. (Maushard, 1994, p. 1B)

Others report benefits to non-disabled children. An art teacher said 'My own children … [are] much more aware of handicapped people as just kids; they're not as fearful. I think as adults we're accustomed to backing off. … This is a big advantage for everybody' (Applegate & Lu, 1998, p. A1). Conversely, some parents worry about a loss of hard won services for their children. In the next section we look at some of the reasons such parents seek to retain special education as an exclusive system.

**Special education as a service**

Although it is easy to see how special education has been problematic, it is undeniable that the passing of P.L. 94-142 (IDEA) resulted in many benefits for students with disabilities. The IDEA was designed to expand access and educational rights for students with disabilities and it largely achieved its goal of ensuring greater access to schooling and increased provision of services. Yet, an inherent paradox in special education legislation and policy is the dual desire to ensure access to specialized services and individualized education, while guaranteeing greater access to the least restrictive educational setting.

Those writing in support of preserving special education remind readers of how far society has progressed in educating children with disabilities. For example, Joan Goodman (1992) wrote 'As recently as the mid-1960s pediatricians still advocated institutionalization and sterilization for the child with Down Syndrome' (p. A15). Not so distant history serves as a reminder of the severe conditions that existed for children with disabilities, and perhaps accounts for the sense of gratitude expressed by some parents for at least 'getting in the door'. Lewin (1997), for example,

recounted the experience of Judy Heumann, former Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services: 'When I was a kid in Brooklyn and my mother wheeled me over to the neighborhood school for kindergarten, they said I couldn't come there, I was a fire hazard. I was sent away to another school' (p. 1). Such accounts remind us that special education developed largely in response to barriers in the general education system.

Funding is another concern of parents. As defined under federal law, special education ensures 'specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability' (20 U.S.C. sect. 1401 [25]), including supplementary aids and services in the form of personnel and/or equipment. Advocates worry that inclusion will siphon off needed funding away from students who most need it.

Some parents seek a middle ground, reserving the right to have their child placed in a segregated special education environment as a preparation for future mainstreaming. One parent wrote:

> After one year in a self-contained special education classroom, our son has improved dramatically. His ability to socialize and forge friendships has developed into new and rewarding relationships. Unable to hold a conversation just one year ago, he now ventures forth haltingly with a new found confidence. His once-robust personality has reappeared. (Kastens, 1995, p. A15)

It is interesting to note that the parent adds the caveat, 'He will soon attain all of the tools necessary for mainstream education' (p. A15), indicating that general education is still the ultimate goal. For some parents, however, the mainstream setting is not the goal. In fact, this same mother contended '[inclusion] tosses the disabled child into an environment in which the child cannot possibly develop, and in fact, may regress, while simultaneously depriving the remainder of the class of critical instructional time' (p. A15). Thus, the worry is that children will lose ground in a general education setting or they may come to be seen as a burden. Another mother recalled the unfavourable experiences of her daughter, who 'even now, after 20 years … expresses painful memories of those experiences in a normal classroom'. She added that placing a daughter in general education is 'a cruel thing to do to … any handicapped person' (Hunter, 1995, p. 7), revealing her view that exclusion amounts to a form of protection from a merciless world. Thus, special education is sometimes characterized as an entry point to general education, a way of getting one's foot in the door, or as a safe haven from an unwelcoming general education system.

## Special education as a disservice

Special education has had its detractors as well. Despite its rhetoric about least restrictive environment, disabled students have very limited access to general education. There are also gross disparities in the representation of race, ethnicity, class and gender in certain special education categories. Many have also questioned the unprecedented growth in the numbers of students labeled with 'soft' or subjective disability categorizations and an over-reliance on testing. Others disparage the

unprecedented growth in a special education 'industry', as well as the poor academic results of students who are taught in special education.

*Access*

For many students with disabilities gaining entry into general education classes has been a long, hard and litigious road. In a landmark case, *Hartmann v. Loudoun County Board of Education* (1997), parents were denied the right to have their autistic son placed in a general education classroom. The ruling asserted that the mainstreaming provision of IDEA is not considered a mandate, but rather a flexible directive. In addition, the court claimed that mainstreaming was not required when (a) a student with a disability would not receive benefit from such a placement, (b) marginal benefits would be significantly outweighed by benefits that could be obtained in a separate setting and (c) the student is an ongoing disruptive force. Roxanna Hartmann, the child's mother, stated 'We want Mark to be a member of our society. … Mark has gained many skills in the last three years, skills that would be lost if he is put in a class with four other autistic children, as school officials have recommended' (Wilgoren, 1994, p. B3). After the ruling was made public some predicted that the ruling would 'lead other school districts to scale back programs to "mainstream" disabled children' (Benning, 1997, p. D01). Mark's parents eventually placed their son in a private school at their own expense.

In another court ruling a judge claimed a teenager seeking to enroll in his neighborhood school would be 'isolated socially and academically' and therefore a segregated school constituted the least restrictive placement (Transfer of disabled student rejected, 1988, p. B6). These examples indicate that despite parental advocacy, students are often not welcome in general education classes. It is common to hear teachers claim that they are not ready and/or unwilling to accept students with disabilities into their classes. For example:

> In a 1994 national survey by the American federation of teachers, the country's second-largest teachers union, only 11 percent of teachers said they were trained adequately. And overwhelmingly, teachers believed inclusion is not appropriate for every child—particularly those with severe and disruptive behavior problems. (Evans, 1996, p. 04H)

One teacher commented, 'some times the learning-challenged students are the least mature and the "biggest bullies" in the classroom. Teachers can't be watching them every minute of the day' (Miller, 2002, p.16). Expressing resistance to inclusion, (admittedly overextended) educators fear that disabled children would be disorderly or disruptive.

*Over-representation of race, class and gender*

Historically, special education has been over-represented by certain groups, including students of color, children from ethnic minorities, working class and poor children and boys. Furthermore, when these markers of identity occur simultaneously there is an increased likelihood that such children will be given a label of disability. Recent research indicates significant disparities between special education referral

and placement rates for European Americans and Asian Americans compared with African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans (Losen & Orfield, 2002). African American students remain three times as likely to be labeled mentally retarded (MR)[1] as European Americans, twice as likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed (ED), and almost one and a half times as likely to be labeled learning disabled (LD) (Parrish, 2002, pp. 22–23). In fact, African American students remain the most over-represented of all racial groups in nine of thirteen disability categories, a fact that contributes to the restrictiveness of their school placement (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; National Association of Black School Educators, 2002). The editorial pages occasionally draw attention to the issue of racial isolation resulting from segregation based on disability. One editor remarked:

> The isolation is most frequent from Black and Latino children. These students are frequently omitted from citywide tests, making it impossible to determine if they are being educated at all. More drop out than graduate. … The current system holds no one truly responsible for these failings. (Remaking special education, 1998, p. A28)

Research also documents the over-representation of males in categories such as LD and ED (Carrier, 1986). In its hyperfocus on medical model understandings of disability special education legislation has failed to adequately directly address issues of poverty that impact on a disproportionate number of students who become labeled disabled (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Differential placement and outcomes by race, class and gender is an entrenched and enduring problem. In a recent report on special education Saulny (2005) documented significant differences in graduation rates by race and gender. The report found that students in special education who are white or Asian are twice as likely to graduate as those who are black and Hispanic. The report also found that girls are more likely to graduate than boys.

Since the early 1970s the US Office of Civil Rights has reported the persistence of over-representation of minority children in categories requiring specialized clinical judgement (Losen & Orfield, 2002, p. xv). As Hernandez (1999) stated:

> most special education students … are classified as 'learning disabled' or 'emotionally handicapped'. Education experts contend that such labels are often loosely applied, particularly in cases in which teachers want to rid themselves of disruptive students. (p. B1)

Thus, special education literally becomes a way to 'keep the peace' by removing students who might disrupt the status quo of the general education classroom.

*The confining nature of special education*

One editor illustrated the powers schools have to '*condemn* … [students] to special education classes where they remain for the rest of their school careers (Remaking special education, 1998, p. A28) (emphasis added). Systematic bias in the assessment of students has been well documented (Artiles & Trent, 1994; National Alliance of Black School Educators, 2002). Education is dominated by an obsession for testing student ability (Giordano, 2005), but this is most pronounced in special education.

Moreover, many school psychologists and clinicians continue to uphold outdated beliefs about mental ability and continue to focus on the use of intelligence tests to defend classifications and placements.

Although general education is often described as ignoring the needs of students with disabilities, special education is also described as a bureaucratic labyrinth in which students are neglected and fall through the cracks. Reports from segregated facilities are particularly shocking. Ramirez and Patrick (1999), for example, wrote about a 9-year-old boy named Freddy Ramirez, a wheelchair user who was 'frequently … forced to use the school's toilet in a degrading manner. He had to lower himself to the floor and crawl across the bathroom floor to the commode' (p. A24). Such institutional neglect of people with disabilities reinforces the danger of practices that position people out of sight, out of mind (Shapiro, 1993). This fear led two parents to write that they would never put their child back into special education because 'It would be like putting him back to sleep. … Like "OK, you've seen what real life is like, now go back"' (Evans, 1996, p. 04H). The notion of general education being 'real life' and special education as 'outside of real life' is echoed in the following letter:

> She was condemned to spend her adolescent and teen years growing up riding 'special buses' to faraway 'special schools' … . She was cut off by long bus rides from the playtime she had enjoyed with neighboring children. And, with diminished self-esteem produced by the stigma of separation, her socialization skills, despite much love and support, were permanently damaged. … With a lifetime of regret as a platform for advice, I urge other parents to not allow their children who may be showing slow learning tendencies to be shunted out of the mainstream system and into the isolation that is 'special education'. (Dickes, 2001, p. A10)

Other parents decry the low expectations associated with special education. One parent, speaking of her son's placement, wrote 'My fear is that he'll just give up and not complete school. … Special education has affected his ability to even try' (Richardson, 1994, p. A1). Another explained that although 'The first year … [of inclusion] was miserable … he has learned to read and write, which his special education teachers said he never would do' (Evans, 1996, p. 04H). Several stories focused on parents who 'fear that the special education classes, with their lower expectations, will fail to bring out [their child's] abilities' (Goodman, 1996, p. 44). Finally, one mother drew attention to the deficit model in special education, telling other parents 'Don't believe all the things that you are told your child cannot accomplish … find out what they can accomplish' (Matthews, 2002, p. A09).

*Poor results of special education*

Historically special education has yielded very poor academic results (Skrtic, 1991). Because students with disabilities have been exempt from required statewide examinations (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997) they are positioned as literally unworthy of counting. One *New York Times* editorial noted that 'The percentage of special education students who graduated with Regents diplomas[2] increased to 8 percent in 2000, up from 6.1 percent in 1999', commenting 'These gains are modest but suggest that at least some disabled students could have been mainstreamed all along' (Progress in special education, 2001, p. A22).

In a letter, the president of the American Association of People with Disabilities calls attention to disparities in outcomes for students in and out of special education. He writes that:

> Data from the [US] Department of Education show that national graduation rates for students who receive special education have stagnated at 27 percent for the last three years, while rates are 75 percent for students who do not rely on special education. (Imparato, 2001, p. 14)

The message is clear, reliance on special education disadvantages students with disabilities. In a recent report Advocates for Children noted that only '12.3 percent [of New York City students in special education] graduated with Regents or local diplomas. … In addition, 12 percent received an alternative certificate, an Individualized Education Diploma' (Saulny, 2005, p. B5). These statistics confirm those cited by Imparato and point out limitations imposed on students who do not meet standardized graduation requirements.

## Engaging paradoxes in special education

Although we expected to see differing viewpoints in the editorial pages we collected, we were struck by the oppositional views on inclusion, particularly by parents. We define a paradox as two contradictory elements that coexist. Paradoxes defy easy resolution as each side contains elements that exist precisely because they are defined against another. The following are some of these paradoxes we uncovered, along with some questions they raise.

### *Once in, where's best?*

Schleifer (1997), founder of *Exceptional Parent*, described how historically parents struggled just to get children with disabilities in any school program. He wrote 'Not only were many of their efforts thwarted, but school personnel and other "experts" commonly told them that their "unrealistic" expectations were putting their children in jeopardy' (p. 2). Parental knowledge has neither been valued nor heeded, despite legislation that supports their input (Valle & Aponte, 2002). Parents may differ considerably on the issue of placement: 'Those who want their children in regular classrooms all day long may accept no less than full inclusion. Those who feel their children need the security of a separate classroom out of the mainstream, may be no less insistent' (Special focus on special kids, 1996, p. 06B). In essence, if parental or personal input is respected we might expect that two students with the same learning profile and disability classification would be placed in entirely different programs. Of course, 'choice' assumes that each option presented to parents and students is equally compelling and viable.

### *Included in what?*

General education classes are not always perceived as adequately prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners. The 'readiness' of teachers in particular is often claimed

to be lacking. As one member of the public noted, 'It is absurd to plan inclusion of students with significant disabilities in overcrowded classrooms where the teacher has received no more than a crash course in special education' (Puddington, 1998, p.16). Although we most often talk about isolation in special education, alienation can occur for disabled students in general education settings. One parent recounted the experience of her 8-year-old son with autism: 'Some children tell him he is different, weird, and he doesn't know how to handle it. … He has no friends at school. He is devastated about that' (Moore & Hayasaki, 2002, p. 1). In a letter to the editor a wheelchair user with cerebral palsy who had been included in 1970s recalled: 'I was not greatly accepted socially by my peers' (Perricone, 1994, p. 81). One teacher, cynical of inclusion, revealed: 'Many of us see this as sharing the air in a building, but not really having anything to do with the educational value for special education children. This is not an education plan but a space plan' (Saslow, 1999, p. 3). Thus, simply allowing students to be present and visible is not the same as promoting interaction or integration. Anything short of full and meaningful participation, which will require fundamental changes in general education, violates the principles of inclusion.

### Inclusion as oppression

In *The illusion of full inclusion* Kaufmann and Hallahan (1995) featured essays by scholars who support maintaining separate educational facilities for children who are blind and deaf, conveying the need for certain groups to be taught separately. Such sentiments were supported in a newspaper article written by a sign language interpreter for a deaf girl in a Grade 11 inclusive classroom. In the article Cohen (1994) described how the student was not included fully in academic or social activities and, as a result, became overly dependent. Cohen believed that the student would benefit from a school for the deaf 'where all the students can converse with each other, all the information is presented visually, teachers sign and deaf adults serve as role models …' (p. 11A). In addition, increased activities such as participation in student government, acting in school plays and access to the deaf community would also be possible. Cohen did not believe that her role as a sign language interpreter benefited this particular student, and concluded by stating: 'To many Deaf people … [inclusion] is at best maddeningly naïve; at worst, chauvinistic. The history of Deaf people is one of mandated assimilation: we can make you more like hearing people, we can make you more normal' (p. 11A). Cohen's observations raise questions such as: does inclusion serve students with some disability, but not others?; are segregated or exclusive spaces important in fostering community among disabled youth?

### Inclusion as cost cutting

The cost of special education is enormous, with segregated placements costing as much as three times that spent on non-disabled students (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). Given such poor results, funds may better be deployed elsewhere, such as in inclusive settings. Inclusion has been viewed as a cost-cutting device, not motivated by humanistic

reform, but rather a means to bureaucratic fiscal prudence. Contrary to cost-cutting theories, inclusion may prove even more costly than segregated education, depending on how thoroughly and responsibly it is implemented (Villa & Thousand, 1995). However, the inflexibility of funding sources sometimes impinges upon how inclusion is put into practice. For example, providing and mobilizing staff on an as needed basis does not provide the job stability and security sought by many professionals.

### Inclusion as a civil right

Implementation of inclusion varies enormously. Pat Jones, parent and advocate for disabled children, explained: 'Inclusion is a sense of belonging' (Librach, 1992, p. 1). How does inclusion as a 'sense of belonging' compare with inclusion as a civil right? While proponents of inclusion see it is a matter of social justice and civil rights (Gerrard, 1994), courts have not always supported this stance and acted to 'protect' non-disabled students from 'disruptive' students (*Hartmann v. Loudon County Board of Education*, 1997). One parent wrote 'I feel strongly that my children in regular classrooms have a civil right to learn without having their paths to progress disrupted and diverted by the demands of a disabled child' (Kastens, 1995, p. A15). How do we weigh what are perceived to be competing civil rights?

### Accountability and the No Child Left Behind Act

The intention of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (PL. 107-110) is to improve the academic achievement of all students. Students with disabilities are no longer exempt from high stakes achievement tests. In such a high stakes testing environment disabled children are more likely to be perceived as problems. A letter from a teacher confirmed this phenomenon. She wrote 'We have seen such children become "unwanted" because they affect the league tables in a negative direction and we have evidence of schools refusing to take such children before national tests' (Chambers, 2000, p. 6). Others have echoed Chambers' concern that the relentless preoccupation with high stakes testing will—as it has done in the past—serve to justify the exclusion of children with disabilities, a form of educational triage (Meier & Wood, 2004). That government desired standardization of all students is a frightening notion, serving only to further reinforce socially constructed notions of (ab)normalcy. We ask to what degree can inclusive practices be compatible with prioritized high stakes testing? What alternatives exist for students with disabilities who cannot meet benchmarks dictated by the state?

## Significance and limitations of the evidence

Engaging with the media is a dynamic process in which textual representations mirror reality while simultaneously influencing how reality is shaped. Similarly, newspaper readers engage with diverse voices and opinions about inclusion. Readers therefore engage in a democratic experience, as they open themselves to polyphonic influences

from the general public—including parents and teachers, disabled and non-disabled—via letters or interviews, as well as writers and editors who 'have something to say'. The concept of inclusion, important to every citizen, is no longer merely in the hands of a small coterie of policy-makers and academics; it moves from governmental offices and 'ivory towers' into the streets. The everyday press is important because it informs and shapes public knowledge about all aspects of life, including people with disabilities and their place in society.

A strength of engaging with the media may also be perceived as a limitation. Every publication has an ideological grounding that influences its position on all topics. In brief, information can be skewed in a particular direction, arguably misleading or distorted, even consistently over a long period of time. In her study of how special education was represented in the *New York Times* for three decades Rice (2006) concluded that the periodical largely portrayed special education as costly, ineffective, bureaucratic and out of control. In our own analysis inclusion is often portrayed as an idealistic, cost-cutting device that will tip the scales and destroy general education (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Rice pointed out, and we concur, that traditional special education discourses within the mass media do not include the concerns of disability studies (aligned with an inclusive philosophy), such as increased access to all aspects of society, participation, citizenship, civil rights, social justice, empowerment and self-determination.

## Conclusion

In closing, we must observe that special education is not the nice, orderly system of structures, categories and services that introductory textbooks would have us believe (Brantlinger, 2006). Instead, while predominantly (and tenaciously) rooted within the medical model of disability, special education is also an increasingly complicated arena in which legal, psychological, scientific, social, cultural, historical and a host of other discourses compete. However, despite being a field replete with tensions and contradictions, special education is a space of much debate, but little action toward social change. For example, we must ask, when much of what is done in the name of inclusion is unsuccessful, how much of the failure is due to an educational system that is not wholly interested in change or equity? Also, are the majority of non-disabled 'special' educators more invested in maintaining their own sphere of influence than making substantial changes for people with disabilities?

We acknowledge that special education is a field that genuinely seeks to best educate children with disabilities and certainly many parents doubt their children's needs would be met without it. Yet, given the overwhelming evidence of its shortcomings, perhaps the greatest paradox of special education is that is both a service and a disservice. Given the trends of the past 30 years it appears likely that we will continue to debate the need for 'special', but let us remember the terms of exclusion which put special into motion. Instead of being satisfied with the way things are, we might do well to view students in special education as a statement about insufficient progress towards the integration of people into society at large—and continue to push for inclusive education.

## Notes

1. All of these categories, MR, ED and LD, are legal/education terms when referring to specific disabilities in the USA. We have used the phrase 'labeled' to signify their cultural significance.
2. All children in New York State are now required to graduate with a Regents diploma, which means they successfully pass all high school courses over a 4 year period, as well as pass five examinations.

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