

*Review*

**Criticisms of Full Inclusion in the United States by  
an Organization for People Who are Blind and  
Teachers of Students With Visual Disabilities**

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The purpose of the present review is to examine the criticism of full inclusion that has been put forth in the United States by an organization for people who are blind and by teachers of students with visual disabilities, in order to investigate the implications of these criticisms. The organization for people who are blind criticized full inclusion on the grounds that there has been a lack of understanding of blindness-specific skills and, in the methods of teaching these skills (including separated settings), due significance had not been given to the emotional and social meaning of peer interactions for students who are blind and their role as a member of society, and that the methods required for assisting them to attain social status have been treated as unimportant. Students who are blind have been faced with isolation, poor training, and insufficient participation for society, although they have benefited from long-term education in an inclusive education system. A full inclusion setting definitely ought to be beneficial for students with mild mental retardation and learning disabilities; however, students who are blind have failed to benefit from similar options, because they have not learned such matters as blindness-specific skills that they would have acquired ideally in a separate educational setting.

**Key Words:** criticism of full inclusion, separated education for students who are blind, expanded core curriculum, United States

**Introduction**

In order to establish inclusive education as a basic education system, ideas and systems should be constructed only after taking into consideration the uniqueness of various disability categories. Criticisms of the full inclusion movement were raised by a low-incidence disability group<sup>1)</sup> around 1990. The substance of special education in general, as well as the significance of the curriculum and methods corresponding to each disability category, appear worthy of consideration. The purpose of the present review is to examine criticisms made by an organization for people who are blind, including concerned people and also teachers of students with visual disabilities, who are responsible for the education of the students who are blind, in order to investigate the implications of these criticisms.

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Although full inclusion has aroused a considerable amount of controversy, the movement for full inclusion has primarily focused on developmental disabilities. Disabilities that have a high incidence, such as mild mental retardation, learning disabilities, and severe disabilities, have vigorous advocates. People with those disabilities had been deprived of equal opportunity for appropriate education. On the other hand, auditory and visual impairments, particularly blindness, are low incidence disabilities. Reasons for examining full inclusion from the viewpoint of people with visual impairments or blindness are as follows.

(1) Among children with disabilities, those with visual impairments or blindness and those who are deaf or deaf-blind have the longest history of education. Teachers of students with visual impairments have developed a special curriculum and teaching method.

(2) Since World War II, children with visual impairments or blindness were integrated into and educated in local public schools. Many teachers of students with visual disabilities promoted the integration, mainstreaming, and inclusion of such children until the emergence of full inclusion around 1990<sup>2)</sup>.

(3) It is evident that the present educational situation and a life deprived of full inclusion have become matters of grave concern among people with visual disabilities and those who are blind. There are not many of them, and they have relatively little political power. The realities of their education and daily life are inconsistent with the concepts and theory of full inclusion that consider the person who is blind to be an active consumer and user, rather than a passive recipient of service.

(4) The groups of people with disabilities, such as people who are blind or deaf, who have shared the criticism of full inclusion, have faced a problem pertaining to communication. For people who are deaf, the problem was related to the communication mode; for people who are blind, it was related to Braille literacy.

Initially, the views on inclusion held by people who are blind were roughly surveyed based on statements in position papers published by organizations for people who are blind. Their criticisms were examined with regard to the following points: separation, least restrictive environment (LRE), and stigma; full participation in a democratic society and the means to attain it; and special needs, curriculum, and the education system.

The full inclusion that is referred to in the present review is a uniform system in which children attend a neighborhood public school and learn with their peers of the same age, regardless of disability (Crawford, n.d.), and have no disability-based teaching in a separate environment.

### **Position Statement on Inclusion by Organization for People Who are Blind and Teachers of Students With Visual Disabilities**

In the United States, one of the first position papers on mainstreaming or inclusion that was presented by the organizations for the blind came out as a resolution by the American Council of the Blind (ACB) in 1989. In that year, the

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American Council of the Blind highlighted the fact that “many mainstream placements are made without regard to whether appropriate services are in fact available to meet an individual handicapped child’s unique needs” and that “a residential school or special day class placement may be the most enabling placement for a particular handicapped child” (American Council of the Blind Resolution 89-05; American Council of the Blind, 1989).

In 1993, the Joint Organizational Effort Committee’s position paper, which was supported by various organizations for people who are blind, expressed the caution that full inclusion might “seriously endanger appropriate and specialized services for students who are blind or visually impaired,” and anxiety that full inclusion might produce “full submersion, social isolation, lowered self-esteem, (and) poor performance” (Joint Organizational Effort Committee, 1995).

In 1994, the American Council of the Blind called for legalization of blindness-specific skills and demanded “the choice of the parents and students” and “a continuum of alternative placement options including special classes, resource rooms and residential schools’ guarantee of selection” as a conscious effort to extend the full inclusion movement (American Council of the Blind Resolution 94-19; American Council of the Blind, 1994). In 1994, another concerned group, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), held that “genuine inclusion of blind students in all aspects of integrated school settings is a desirable goal,” but opposed a mandate for full inclusion on the ground that “educational services which are unique to blindness” are not a “part of the regular, daily classroom experience” (National Federation of the Blind, Resolution, 94-03; National Federation of the Blind, 1994).

In 2000, the largest organization for people who are blind, the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), published a position paper (American Foundation for the Blind, 2000). The American Foundation for the Blind opposed full inclusion, due to the impossibility of learning the expanded core curriculum in a full inclusion environment (American Foundation for the Blind, 2000). In 2003, the Blind Task Force of the American Council of the Blind issued a white paper on IDEA Reauthorization (American Council of the Blind Task Force on IDEA Reauthorization, 2003) that objected to full inclusion and advocated the maintenance of residential schools for the blind, because full inclusion did not provide students with visual disabilities appropriate teaching, including in orientation and mobility (O&M) or with instruction on blindness-specific skills. The white paper was supported by the American Foundation for the Blind and other related organizations of people who are blind and their supporters (American Council of the Blind Task Force on IDEA Reauthorization, 2003).

As mentioned above, the organizations in the United States for people who are blind have started expressing a clearer and a more definite opposition to full inclusion as the inclusion movement progresses and denies an alternative continuum.

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### Segregation, Least Restrictive Environment, and Stigma

The three themes of segregation, least restrictive environment, and stigma are the basis for the concepts of full inclusion. Limiting the least restrictive environment to a considerable extent is the ideal of full inclusion, which involves termination of the “pull-out” program, special classes, and special schools. Judith E. Heumann, Assistant Secretary (1993–2001) of the U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Department of Education, was a well known full inclusionist, who argued that the “70 per cent unemployment rate of disabled people” was a result of poor educational experiences in residential schools (Heumann, in Crabb, 1994b). Her declaration that “residential schools are immoral” became a focus of criticism among the workers for the blind. Her view that segregation is discrimination and a source of stigma is a fairly popular one among full inclusionists. By relating segregation to racism, Lipsky and Gartner (Gartner & Lipsky, 1995) and Stainback and Stainback (Stainback, Stainback, & Bunch, 1989) associated the special schools with apartheid and slavery (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995).

From divergent viewpoints and ways of thinking, advocates for students who are blind, in contrast, support various levels of separate environments. Therefore, they accept even full inclusion, if it is the optimal placement for a child’s needs. The viewpoints and ways of thinking of people who are blind are multifaceted and include the following: recognizing each student’s individual needs based on his/her own circumstances and environment; teaching each student abilities appropriate for such needs; recognizing the reality pertaining to a full-inclusion environment; acknowledging the necessity of an adult role model for children who are blind; enabling the delivery of services in a separate environment for services feasible only in such an environment; and determining the psychological and intellectual conditions necessary for the social adaptation of people who are blind. These points will be discussed individually below.

From the position held by advocates of segregated education for students who are blind that students’ needs are not only unique to each individual, but also changeable corresponding to the students’ development (Hatlen, 2003), appropriate educational measures for the students also change. A separate environment for students who are blind is an indispensable educational measure for imparting education that corresponds to their educational/social needs (Crabb, 1994a). A pull-out program, that is, special classes or special schools for intensive, separated education, may be required if they are the optimal educational measures for students who are blind (American Foundation for the Blind, 2000). In nearly all cases, even enrollment in a residential school is temporary. For example, in schools in Texas, a student who is blind and who is enrolled in a residential school for three years or more is rare (Hatlen, 2003).

A unique criticism from the perspective of people who are blind is that the full inclusion plan does not offer an adult role model that students who are blind can look

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up to (Edwards, 1999, 2000; Littrell, 1995). Furthermore, interaction with other students who are blind is necessary in order for students who are blind to be able to gain confidence and self-esteem, establish a healthy social life, and prevent isolation from a regular educational environment (American Council of the Blind Task Force on IDEA Reauthorization, 2003). These claims deal with the theories of the full inclusionists that difference and discrimination are generated through separation, and that these would disappear through daily and uninterrupted interaction. The full inclusionists never accept the notion of acquiring blindness-specific skills in a separate educational environment or of fostering the identity of students who are blind with a positive self-image notwithstanding their visual disabilities (Edwards, 2000; Martinez, 1999). Despite the theories put forth by the full inclusionists, these feelings are particularly fundamental for human existence and are extremely essential as basic conditions for full participation in society. In the absence of these feelings, students who are blind may be unable to acquire and develop a positive self-image (Mandell, 2000).

The belief that people who are deaf or blind want a separate program, however short its duration may be, leads to the view that full inclusion is the most restrictive environment (Mandell, 2000) and the greatest threat to the education of students who are blind (Lewis, 1994; Spungin, 1994, 1996), a viewpoint put forth by the disability rights movement (Edwards, 2000). Indeed, administrators and full inclusionists have requested the abolition of all specialized schools and the elimination of all special placements (Mandell, 2000; Spungin, 1994).

Teachers who work at residential schools for students with visual disabilities also contemplate the manner in which the educational needs peculiar to students who are blind could be satisfied at a basic level in local public school classes. Examples of such attempts are students attending a public school near their residential school, and students attending summer school programs, short tutored programs, and pre-school summer programs in a residential school (Hatlen, 2003; Reeder & Lovering, 1999). Through these attempts, the merits and demerits of inclusion and of separate programs can be seen to be complementary. Furthermore, advocates of segregated education for students who are blind propose to implement a plan of centralized residential schools (Mandell, 2000; Reeder & Lovering, 1999).

Although one of the unexpected conditions suggested in the 1980's was that attending a residential school helps students to attain social independence (Pfouts & Nixon, 1982)<sup>3</sup>, a former residential school enrollee has also felt the need to attain social independence for people who are blind through the lifestyle offered by residential schools.

### **Full Participation in a Democratic Society and the Difference**

Interestingly, the final goal of an educational system and its elements aimed at the education of students who are blind are shared by both full inclusionists and advocates of segregated education for students who are blind. According to the

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President of the American Council of the Blind, the purpose of education is full inclusion in society (Sanders, 1994). The Joint Organizational Effort Committee (1995) expects that people who are blind will “achieve success and independence as responsible citizens in a fully integrated society” if they are provided with appropriate education (Joint Organizational Effort Committee, 1995). While addressing a convention of the National Federation of the Blind, Gartner and Lipsky (1995) asserted that inclusion is the central and fundamental feature of a democratic society, and also that the purpose of democratic education is to educate all children in the most suitable environment and to raise them to be productive and contributing members of a democratic society (Gartner & Lipsky, 1995). However, the process and the means of attaining these aims can be seen to be completely different from each other, depending on the viewpoint of the person proposing the goal. The concerned people who are blind consider such that full inclusion “would eliminate all special placements” and “would be seriously detrimental to the educational development of many students with disabilities,” and that “appropriate educational opportunities (in separated settings) provide students with the competency necessary to ensure full participation in society” (Joint Organizational Effort Committee, 1995).

Heumann (Heumann, in Crabb, 1994b) argues that people may be able to make a productive and contribution to a democratic society only through their experiences in life and the learning that they have acquired in a normal environment in their homes and schools. However, during such interactions, the role model for students with disabilities is assumed to be other students and adults without disabilities. As already stated, an organization and teachers for people who are blind oppose each of these points and assert the necessity of a separate environment and experiences for interaction with other students who are also blind.

The organization and teachers for people who are blind attach considerable importance to identity, pride, confidence, self-esteem, a sense of belonging, and the dignity of students who are also blind. These components bear a striking resemblance to the “defining characteristic” that full inclusionists have emphasized (Schnorr, 1997). In addition, advocates for separated education for people who are blind support the right of students who are blind to be different and to consider blindness as an enhancer of self-image (Hatlen, 1996; Schroeder, 1994; Spungin, 1996). This latter reminds us of the notions of the culture of people who are deaf (Edwards, 2000); it implies the unique “specific interventions and modifications of their educational programs” for students who are blind in order to accomplish the same goals of education as for students who are not blind (American Foundation for the Blind, 2000).

The criticism of full inclusion by the organization and teachers for people who are blind reflects the results of adverse circumstances experienced by students who are blind, namely their being “isolated academically and socially within the general classroom” (American Council of the Blind Task Force on IDEA Reauthorization, 2003). According to the organization and teachers for people who are blind, full inclusion takes precedence over its philosophy and neglects the individual needs of

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students who are blind and unique aspects of their education that enable them to become independent (American Council of the Blind Task Force on IDEA Reauthorization, 2003). Full inclusion provides students who are blind only with close proximity to other peers, so that they fall prey to ignorance and dependence, because the education they receive does not help them to cope with their needs nor is it suitable for their learning style (American Council of the Blind, 1993). Thus, millions of students, including students who are blind, are threatened with a return to the regular “unprepared classrooms,” the very places where they were once failing as a result of the schools being unable to satisfy their needs in the past (Bader, in Crabb, 1994a).

Such criticism and concerns from the organization and teachers for people who are blind will become increasingly intense in the present era of decentralization and accountability. Explanation of the results of this type of educational system should be expressed clearly in terms of statistics such as the proportion graduating and the number of college entrants (Edwards, 1999), and in other measurable factors such as performance on standardized assessments, withdrawals, dropouts, suspensions, attendance, and the estimated cost per student (Geurschat & Beadles, 2001). In short, full inclusion must be included in the current “politics of the situations” of assessment and accountability (Geurschat & Beadles, 2001).

### **Expanded Core Curriculum and the System of Education**

Currently, there appears to be a general consensus that the duration of an educational program has a significant relationship with the level of participation in social activities and social independence; this relationship is also applicable to students who are blind, as suggested by Pfouts and Nixon (1982). However, the life conditions of students who are blind tend to worsen as the amount of their education increases. These facts compel the organization and teachers for people who are blind to reconsider blindness-specific skills and methods for acquiring them.

The names of skills unique to people who are blind have changed several times. This implies that the content of the skills was not established and that such skills were recognized to be necessary. At present, these skills are included in the expanded core curriculum as a contrast with the regular core curriculum. These skills include especially Braille literacy, orientation and mobility, daily life skills, and social skills. Acquisition of these skills is necessary for independence and is considered to be the right of students who are blind (Bickford, 1998). The situation regarding Braille literacy was so grave that students who are blind who had recently completed master’s degree programs were not Braille users (Edwards, 1999).

Recently, it has been extremely difficult for students who are blind to acquire skills unique to people who are blind, such as Braille literacy and orientation and mobility skills (Mandell, 2000; Martinez, 2001). Students who are blind “may occupy seats in a regular classroom, and their teachers may even give them all A’s; yet they won’t learn much” (Mandell, 2000).

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Blindness-specific skills, particularly Braille literacy, serve as the nucleus of education for students who are blind. Only Braille literacy “allows us to grow in our ability to express ourselves and ultimately become independent members of society” (Bickford, 1998); “Braille seems to represent competence, independence, and equality” for students who are blind (Schroeder, in Spungin, 1996, p. 271). One teacher of students who are blind expressed apprehension that “we, the blind people, are relegating an entire group of citizens to second class status” because of not providing them with the power of literacy and independence (Bickford, 1998). The indispensable necessity of Braille is parallel to the right of communication of people who are deaf; it can empower their life (Reeder & Lovering, 1999). “The infrastructure needed to facilitate the full inclusion of people with eyesight disabilities is characterized by direct access to information and services” (Martinez, 2001).

Such a view was reflected in an increasing trend of illiteracy among people who are blind, and a sharp decrease in the number of Braille users (American Council of the Blind Task Force on IDEA Reauthorization, 2003; Schroeder, 1996). Although precise nationwide statistics on Braille usage are unavailable, it is probably below 20% of the total number of people who are blind (Anonymous, 1996). One of the reasons for the small proportion of Braille users is that technology, such as recorded media and personal computers, has replaced Braille. The other reason is the lack of instruction in Braille. Bickford (1998), Director of Education of the Washington State School for the Blind, has insisted that computers “will never take the place of Braille,” because “reading (in Braille) must be thought of as the ability to interact with the written word mentally and physically.” Furthermore, “a computer voice program delivers words with no excitement” (Bickford, 1998). Both tape recorder and computer “can supplement literacy skills, but can never substitute for Braille” (American Council of the Blind Task Force on IDEA Reauthorization, 2003). This concern is also relevant to the use of other types of technology, including mobility technology.

As mentioned above, blindness-specific skills, i.e., the expanded core curriculum, has to be acquired systematically and individually. If not, students who are blind will be able neither to overcome the restrictions of blindness nor to participate in society. Due to their special nature, these skills cannot be acquired in a local public school class. The organization and teachers for students who are blind deny the view of full inclusionists like Stainback (Stainback et al., 1989), who held that students who are blind can be taught by regular educators with related services in a regular environment (Nakamura & Oka, 2005).

The full inclusionists are not acutely aware of the serious importance of the individual pull-out program designed for special needs. Therefore, the organization and teachers for students who are blind consider that “many blind children [sic] in a mainstream classroom do not have access to such an environment in which children can learn effectively” (American Council of the Blind Task Force on IDEA Reauthorization, 2003). The view of the causes of poor learning in the case of students who are blind is entirely different in the case of the full inclusionists and the organization and teachers for students who are blind. The latter support special needs and methods for



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learn special skills on the basis of disability category, and the former “allow[s] little opportunity to learn skills specific to the management of particular disabilities [blindness]” (Mandell, 2000). “Much of the vision specialist’s time is taken up with endless paperwork, record keeping, and assisting with preparation of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) reports. Most itinerant teachers don’t have time to plan and teach a detailed curriculum in skills of blindness” (Fields, in Mandell, 2000).

Braille has been excluded from the curriculum for students who are blind (American Foundation for the Blind, 2000). Insufficient time is assigned for daily life, orientation and mobility skills, and special training about blindness, and students who are blind have little work experience and a poor career-guidance program in high school. “Right now rehab is sending its clients to work almost naked. Rehabilitation is not just training a person to do a job” (Edwards, 1999).

More than anything else, it is a grave issue that teachers’ aides have taken charge of teaching, virtually without themselves being trained to do so (American Council of the Blind Task Force on IDEA Reauthorization, 2003), and their teaching abilities have varied widely (Edwards, 1999). Students who are blind are not provided with textbooks prepared exclusively for students who are blind (American Council of the Blind Task Force on IDEA Reauthorization, 2003); there is an absence of collaboration between educators and the teachers of students with visual disabilities (Edwards, 1999), and regular educators have become exhausted (Bickford, 1998).

### Conclusion

The organization and teachers for students who are blind have criticized full inclusion on the grounds that there has been a lack of understanding of blindness-specific skills, and of the methods of providing these skills (including separate settings). Due significance has not been given to the emotional and social meaning of peer interactions in the case of students who are blind, and their circumstances as a member of society, and the methods required for them to attain social status, have been treated as unimportant.

Students who are blind have been faced with isolation, poor learning, and insufficient participation in society, although they are able to receive long-term education in an inclusive educational system. A full inclusion setting must definitely to be beneficial for students with mild mental retardation and learning disabilities; however, students who are blind have failed to benefit from similar options, such as blindness-specific skills (the expanded core curriculum), which ideally they would have acquired in a separate educational setting.

Compared to the number of children who are not blind, there are only a very few children who are blind. However, having small numbers does not necessarily imply a lesser amount of research though Scholl (1990) does suggest that there is less. Each field of special education has constructed its wisdom based upon accumulated experiences in the history of that field. In the case of full inclusionists, shortcomings in the system of education for students who are blind appear to stem from neglect of

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the expertise in the field of blindness that comes from 100 years or more of history since “coeducation” in Braille classes with children who are not blind was established in the Chicago public school in 1900.

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### Endnotes

- 1) Fuchs and Fuchs (1994) classify “two distinct groups advocated for the REI”: “high-incidence,” including people with learning disabilities, behavior disorders, and mild/moderate mental retardation, and “low-incidence,” including people with severe intellectual disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994, p. 196).
- 2) Because of the prevalence in the 1940s of retinopathy of prematurity (ROP), originally called retrolental fibroplasias, and rubella (German measles) the parents of children who were blind had to choose to have their children attend local public schools, rather than a more distant residential (boarding) school. An integrated system had been the main form of education of the majority of children who were blind, as 68.5% of all children who were blind were enrolled in public day classes in 1972 (Lowenfeld, 1975).
- 3) According to Pfouts and Nixon, “it is young, married, well-educated white males who are most successful.” An unexpected finding was “the extent to which education at a state school for the blind was associated with adult employment success” (Pfouts & Nixon, 1982, p. 41).

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