



Is Full Inclusion Desirable?

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Abstract

This article constitutes the culmination in a review of 58 sources by a group of first year master's degree students in a problems and issues in secondary education course to determine "Is Full Inclusion Desirable?" Full inclusion means that all students, regardless of handicapping condition or severity, will be in a regular classroom/program full time. All services must be taken to the child in that setting. There have been several opposing ideas about full inclusion. There are pros and cons to the situation, and these will be discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Inclusion, Learning Disabilities, Special Education, Special Educational Needs (SEN), Special Needs

Introduction

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) of 1975 and its update the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEIA) of 2004 identified specific categories of disabilities under which children may be eligible for special education and related services. As defined by IDEA, the term "child with a disability" means a child: with mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. When "No Child Left Behind" came about, it was important for children with disabilities to be tested along with the regular education children. This put a greater emphasis on educating all children to a certain level and inclusive classrooms facilitate this. Inclusion is a term which expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students). Proponents of inclusion generally favor newer forms of education service delivery. Full inclusion means that all students, regardless of handicapping condition or severity, will be in a regular classroom/program full time. All services must be taken to the child in that setting.

There have been several opposing ideas about full inclusion. There are pros and cons to the situation, and these will be

discussed in the paper. We will give both sides of the argument on full inclusion, and conclude with our position on the matter. Full inclusion is an important matter that every educator has an opinion about. Before forming opinions, research should be taken into the facts for and against full inclusion.

1. Positive Social Outcomes

Inclusion can be successful for children with disabilities in all psychological aspects. Studies have shown that students who enter general education classrooms feel more encouraged to work and learn within a classroom of appropriately developed peers. Students with disabilities can be assigned to an inclusive classroom with a majority of general education students, or a self-contained classroom in which only other students with disabilities are included. Although both concepts work, each has serious implications on the students' social and emotional functioning. Typically, students with disabilities who are placed in inclusive settings tend to fare better than students in self-contained settings (Weiner & Tardif, 2004). The inclusive setting offers students such advantages as being better accepted by peers, higher self-perceptions, and fewer teacher-rated problem behaviors. Students are able to develop bonds with general education students better than if they have been segregated by a self-contained environment. Since the students with disabilities are better accepted within the inclusive classroom, this could lead to a more positive outlook on psychosocial adjustments later in life.

Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pisghahi, & Shelton (2004) reports positive social outcomes for inclusion are not limited to the students with disabilities. These outcomes can significantly affect typical students within the general education classroom as well. Studies indicate that when inclusion is introduced into the general education classroom, students with and without disabilities can benefit socially from their daily interactions. Students without disabilities tend to become more accepting of people with disabilities, if they have been introduced to an inclusive environment. Students bond and become companions within inclusive settings which can result in positive long-term attitudinal differences in acceptance. Basically, typical children in the classrooms are helpful to the child with special needs. Teachers express the belief that the children within the inclusive setting are learning compassion and acceptance of differences at an early age.

Teachers have the additional benefit of witnessing the positive effects of inclusion on their students with and without disabilities. Many educators are hesitant toward inclusion because of their attitude on preparedness for a successful class. The attitudes and beliefs of teachers often determine whether and how inclusive approaches involving young children are put into practice. Most often, general education teachers offer additional support to students with disabilities by incorporating special education teachers into the classroom, or by asking for instructional advice. Inclusion can become most effective if the teacher accesses all possible means of support for the class. Teacher involvement is the key ingredient toward success within the inclusive classroom.

2. Positive Academic Outcomes

Studies have indicated that inclusion for special education students can be desirable. Peetsma, Vergeer, Roelvelde, & Karsten (2001) in one longitudinal study, analyzed with two and four years study provided a comparison of matched pairs of elementary students in mainstream and special education, to obtain longitudinal data about differences in the cognitive and psychosocial development of pupils in various forms of special and regular primary schools. Results showed that, after two years, students with disabilities achieved higher in math in regular education, and motivation was higher than in special education. After four years, those in regular education had progressed more academically than those in special education. Yet, results were somewhat inconclusive. Over the first two years, some students did better in regular education, and some did better in special education. While children in special education usually had lower cognitive scores, only one significant difference in cognitive development was found: at-risk students in regular education made more progress in mathematics than students with learning disabilities. It should be noted that this study was centered on students with mild disabilities so it cannot be generalized to students with more severe mental and physical handicaps. However, all this considered, the study suggests that students in special education do no worse after inclusion in regular education, and probably make more progress academically. Specifically, attention needs to be paid to the psychosocial development of students in special education.

Holloway (2001) found that inclusion programs effectively meet the education needs of only *some* students with mild disabilities. Other students performed better academically when they received instruction through traditional special education programs such as resource rooms. In reading and math, more students made progress comparable to their grade-level peers through inclusion than students in non-inclusive settings. Overall, investigations found small or insignificant differences on measures of academic achievement for inclusion versus non-inclusion, despite large financial and professional resources in inclusion. So, special education does not need a narrow view of services for students with disabilities, but instead a commitment to the use of a complete array of educational opportunities. This commitment is best implemented by a combined service model (i.e., co-teaching) versus an inclusion only model.

A study by Mastropieri et al. (2005) shows that collaboration was extremely effective and conducive for promoting success for students with disabilities in inclusive classes. The relationship between the co-teachers is a major critical component influencing the success or failure of the inclusion of students with disabilities. When co-teachers are getting along and working well together, students with disabilities are more likely to be successful and have successful experiences in the inclusive environment.

3. Negative Social Outcomes

While inclusion has positive outcomes, it also has many negative social effects on the student with special needs. Students with special needs already have a stigma associated with being labeled as a special education student. When placed in a general education classroom, those feelings of inadequacy may become maximized. The lack of understanding from the student, his or herself, the other students and many teachers also contribute to these feelings. There are negative social aspects from all sides, the special education students, general education students, teachers and co-teachers. The sooner the impact of all of these is understood, the faster an inclusion plan that works can be developed.

According to Llewellyn (2000) special education students are often unaware of the components of their disability. This makes it extremely difficult for them to help others understand what is going on with them and thus shuts them out of the social world. They have difficulty making friends and feeling a part of the classroom. When inclusion is not done appropriately, students usually feel isolated and different when all they really want is to fit in. This can lower self-esteem, cause them to be bullied and to make them want to get out of school as quickly as possible, even if it means leaving. Curtin & Clarke, (2001) indicates that students with disabilities in mainstream schools were not provided with the proper psychological and social developmental interventions.

Students who do not have special needs do not understand how their special needs classmates feel and what they go through on an everyday basis. Therefore, they are not empathetic and many times do not give the special students a chance. Their lack of understanding may cause them to be mean and mistreat the students with special needs.

Curtin & Clarke (2001) found another problem that general education students face is the lack of time and attention that they receive in the inclusion classroom and this may cause them to resent the students with special needs. This may lead to mistreatment and bullying.

Another problem that students with special needs face in the inclusion classroom is teachers. Many general education teachers do not understand and do not want to bother with the special students. This leads to the lack of compassion and an increase of resentment towards the special students. This may cause low self concept and may make them do poorly in areas where they could do well. Although special education teachers help the situation by becoming co-teacher, the general education teacher tends to feel intruded upon and this may result in animosity that is seen by the special needs students. In a study of 180 future teachers done by Taylor, Smiley, & Pansamy (2001), the researcher shows that future teachers preferred to work only with general education students. This attributes to the feelings of inadequacy and social exclusion.

While it may benefit the students academically and socially to be included in the general education classroom, it can also cause the students to feel like outcasts. This could do more harm socially than the help that they receive academically. Until we figure out a way to fix this problem, many students should continue to be served outside the general education classroom.

The potential effect of adopting a full inclusion model as the implementation strategy has both positive and negative affects for educating children with disabilities. The attitude of full inclusion has functioned as a mechanism to recognize a principle, a perceived right of children with disabilities to receive their education in the regular classroom. Critics argue that it is unfair to assume all children with disabilities can be appropriately educated in the regular classroom. There are many modifications to be made to incorporate any disabled child into a general classroom; however, to facilitate a child that has been diagnosed with an emotional/behavioral disorder (EBD) presents a difficult challenge. Idol (2006) states the needs for a student diagnosed with EBD are complex and demand the utmost flexibility and patience of those who educate them. Many children with EBD stretch the abilities of the general and special educator. Based on recent studies for many EBD students there must be ways to handle anger and aggression, problem-solving skills, receiving feedback for appropriate behaviors, being taught in a structured and supportive classroom environment, a behavior management plan that encourages cooperation and positive peer interactions, and modifications consistent with his behavior and attention problems. Students that are characterized as emotionally disturbed exhibit externalizing behaviors such as yelling, disturbing peers, hitting fighting, complaining, stealing, lying, and not responding to teacher corrections. 67% can not pass competency exams. Students with ED have the lowest grade-point average of any group with disabilities and highest absenteeism rate of any group of students.

4. Negative Academic Outcomes

Based on recent studies, regular education students are not tremendously impacted by inclusion academically; however, there are some issues that are directly correlated with special education students being integrated into the regular classroom.

Some educators have expressed the concern that the presence of students with disabilities impairs the academic achievement of students without disabilities. This is usually dictated by the type disability and severity of the impact of the disability on special education student. In a more recent study by Idol (2006) a group of educators were asked to rate the impact of the presence of students with disabilities in general on the other students across three variables (academic skills, course grades, and statewide test scores). Specifically, the educators were asked if the other students improved, did about the same, or did worse as result of being educated together with a student with disabilities. Thirty four percent of respondents said that they thought the presence of students with disabilities negatively affected their class in these areas.

Many teachers fear inclusion will interfere with their ability to teach in addition to limiting the educational experiences of the

majority of students. Teachers do not want to fathom that social skill and peer relationships are equal to or more important than achievement. To some classroom teachers most problems that are being incurred are technical and logistical. It also has been noted that in cases in which inclusion has failed, the general education teacher was not involved in program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Ongoing consultation and administrative support was nonexistent. Other factors that contributed to academic failure in regards to teachers were: not individualizing to meet students needs, overusing instruction instructional assistants, underestimating the effectiveness of explicit instruction and assuming that sitting quietly is an appropriate alternative to participation.

Hanson, et al., (2001) state co-teaching should enhance the classroom environment by blending the area of expertise between two professionals. As the two teachers interact, students should gain new perspectives on content and expose themselves to different ways of expressing ideas. However, in general education classrooms in which the roles and responsibilities of classroom teachers and special education teachers are not clearly defined, the students grades are affected negatively in the classroom. Conflicts arise from personality differences and from a lack of clarity about appropriate role functions. The classroom and special education teacher's role is pivotal in the success of the general education class academically. In some cases the special education teacher is perceived as a consultant with no obligations to the teacher or to the students. He or she was not held accountable, involved in planning or support.

Conclusion

The Council for Exceptional Children states that inclusion is a term used to describe the ideology that each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, should be educated in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. Inclusion brings services to the children with special needs instead of moving the child out of the general education classroom to receive the extended services. According to this analysis of the literature, full inclusion is desirable to many educators; however, inclusion requires a series of events to take place before it is successful in the real world. Full inclusion is becoming more evident in classrooms across America each year. To increase the probability of success, school systems, administrators, teachers and parents must collaborate and work as a team to be supportive of the aspects of inclusion and improve the education of America's children. School systems must be supportive and provide the adequate funds that are needed for each school in its district. Administrators and school principals must be prepared to serve as leaders and team players when tackling the issue of full inclusion as well as providing their teachers with the adequate resources and training that they need to be successful in teaching in an inclusion classroom. Teachers need time to get to know their co teacher before they begin to work together to make a successful class. The teachers need to be able to work together and plan the class as one. The teachers must realize that they are both educators and the children in the classroom are the most important thing. The teachers need to be able to feed off each other and facilitate the lesson to every child even if this requires modifications and/or accommodations to take place.

One important aspect of inclusion is the social gains that all the children in the classroom can achieve. The children with special needs can gain confidence when working in a group with their typical peers. General education students can learn to accept their peers with special needs and become more aware of the feelings of these students. Full inclusion gives all students opportunities to interact with their peers and this can help all students in learning that not everyone is the same but that all people, no matter what their intellectual or physical ability may be, are people and deserve respect.

Regular education students have been found to be very receptive and positive towards their classmates with special needs and do not seem to decline academically, which indicates that inclusion is not as harmful as many people once thought it to be. For the inclusive classroom setting to be academically successful, positive attitudes, cooperation and communication must be present from the school administration, the regular education teacher, and the special education teacher. Teachers and administrators must work closely together to plan appropriate lesson plans for the special needs students, and if need be outside assistance should be provided.

While full inclusion is a good idea for some students, there are still exceptions for some. Whereas, some students with special needs, including those with severe disabilities as well as emotional and behavioral issues, may not fit into the full inclusion model, this does not exclude the fact that they too need to have interactions with their non disabled peers. Students with mild disabilities can make more progress in an inclusive classroom and may need the social and academic atmosphere to gain confidence and maturity.

The controversial topic of inclusion is becoming more popular with students, parents, teachers, and school administrators voicing their concerns. Each person is entitled to their opinions on the issues of inclusion but needs to remember that the children are the most important part of the classroom. Since there are no definite answers for full inclusion and, since many opinions on the topic vary, there is still a tremendous need for more updated studies to show the true effects of full inclusion in America's classrooms.

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