

# INCLUSION IN THE CLASSROOM: FINDING WHAT WORKS FOR GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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## ABSTRACT

*The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) enabled students with disabilities to be included in a general education classroom. A student can be part of a full inclusion classroom where a general education teacher teaches the students with and without disabilities for the entire day. Exceptional students are also immersed in partial inclusion classrooms where the student spends part of the day in the general education classroom and the other part working with a special education teacher outside of the general education classroom. In a partial inclusion classroom, general and special education teachers will work together to find a method of instruction that will benefit these special students. This article identifies the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion, the laws that govern it, and how general educators can integrate different methods of teaching into their classroom to maximize its success. The writer argues that both forms of inclusion have their benefits, but partial inclusion is the ideal method for students with disabilities.*

**T**he Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 made it possible for students with disabilities to be included to learn in a general education classroom (Hallahan & Kaufmann, 2003). Before this Act, students with disabilities could only learn in special schools. With IDEA, students with and without disabilities did not have to be separated from each other, they were giv-

en the opportunity to learn together in the same classroom. Students with exceptionalities had the chance to learn the same things their peers were being taught.

Although IDEA has had a positive influence in the field of education, it has also made some general educators wary of the classroom. Some educators feel that it may be too difficult to include students with disabilities into a general education

class (Hewitt, 1999). The teacher may already have twenty students, and it could be overwhelming to have a student with a disability added to the group. Some general education teachers believe that they are not prepared to teach students with disabilities.

This paper is designed to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion. Yet, to fully understand inclusion, this paper also discusses the many laws that help govern inclusion in a general education classroom. Because the term "inclusion" is so broad, full inclusion and partial inclusion will be the main focus of this paper. Full inclusion allows a student with a disability to be placed into a general education classroom, where the general education teacher is responsible for children with and without special needs (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003). In a partial inclusion classroom, the student with a disability is placed into a general education classroom for either part of the day, or for the entire day and both the general and special education teachers are responsible for the student's learning. Finally, this paper will discuss how general educators in an inclusion classroom can make the students with exceptionalities have a successful experience in the general education classroom. Although advantages exist for both methods, partial inclusion is the ideal method of inclusion for a general educator and their students who have various disabilities.

### LAWS GOVERNING INCLUSION

In the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the U.S. Supreme Court held that segregated school facilities were inherently not equal. This landmark case opened many doors for children receiving education in segregated schools. This ruling eventually paved the way for students with disabilities to enter traditional classrooms.

The first court case dealing with the

inclusion of students with disabilities was the *Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth* in 1971. The court held that the state of Pennsylvania was required to give a free education to mentally retarded children in a general education classroom. Later, the *Mills v. Board of Education* (1972) case gave the opportunity for a free education, held by PARC, to all students with disabilities. This case strengthened the movement to provide every student with the right to a free and equal education. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was a federal policy that helped to create laws prohibiting the discrimination of individuals with disabilities from programs or activities that received federal funding (Mithaiwala, 2004). Because public schools received federal funding, they were prohibited from excluding students with disabilities from receiving an equal education.

In 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) gave all students with disabilities the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003). IDEA gives students with exceptionalities the right to be included in a general education public school classroom. To ensure the students with exceptionalities receive an appropriate education, IDEA requires an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) to be designed for each student. The IEP is a binding contract that will guide a student with a disability through school to meet their educational goals. An IEP allows students to have modified lesson plans to help them learn the curriculum in general education classrooms.

If a public school fails to comply with IDEA, parents have the right to due process (Mithaiwala, 2004). If parents find the public school has failed to give their child a Free Appropriate Public Education, under IDEA, the parent can file suit

against the school. An example of this was the *Board of Education of the Hendrick Central School District v. Rowley* (1982), which was the first lawsuit under IDEA that went to the U.S. Supreme Court. Amy Rowley's parents felt that she needed a hearing interpreter in order to reach her full potential in a general education classroom. In the end, the Court held that "as long as a disabled child is receiving a benefit from his or her placement; the FAPE requirement will be satisfied" (Mithaiwala, 2004, p. 377). Therefore if the IEP requirements of a student with a disability are met in the inclusive classroom, the school does not need to provide other benefits. The court found that the hearing interpreter would not be of use to Rowley, because she was already excelling in school. Although she had a disability, she was still succeeding in the general education classroom.

Students with special needs can receive assistance both in and out of the general education classroom. Although some general education teachers question inclusion, it does have its advantages. In 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Because students with disabilities are now included in general education classrooms, they are required to take the same standardized test as students without disabilities in order to meet the state standards for student performance. However, NCLB has provided accommodations for students with disabilities, so that they are able to take the test. For example, students with exceptionalities can be allowed longer testing times, changes in how the test is presented, and students can be given a different method of responding to questions on the exam (Keele, 2004).

Another benefit that NCLB has provided for the inclusion of students with disabilities requires every state to provide an IEP for the students with disabilities

(Shindel, 2004). If students with disabilities are going to participate in general education classrooms, each student must have an IEP, which is required by IDEA. Rather than trying to figure out the best way to teach a student and reach the desired goals on the first day of class, a teacher has been provided with an IEP to know the needs of the exceptional learner. General education teachers may also have access to different kinds of technology such as CD-ROMs and educational videos in order to help a student with a disability learn the course material (Brucker, 1994). Furthermore, according to Renzaglia, Karvonen, Drasgow, and Stoxen (2003), a person is better able to use problem solving and life skills in a regular environment, which is fostered by the IEP.

In a full or partial inclusion classroom, the teacher is encouraging the student to be more independent by including them in a classroom with students who do not have disabilities (Renzaglia et al., 2003). The students with disabilities will be able to learn how to work with students without disabilities. Yet, in a partial inclusion classroom a general education teacher is able to receive more immediate support. Because a general educator works with a special education teacher, the general educator can have help in assisting the student with exceptional needs. Also, instead of having the general education teacher working with the student all day, the special education teacher is able to take the student during portions of the day to work on the specific needs with the student inside or outside of the classroom. This also allows the general education teacher to direct needed focus on all students. This key advantage of partial inclusion makes including students with disabilities much more successful in a general education classroom.

The inclusion of students with disabilities may have its advantages, but

there are also disadvantages that arise with this issue. Although NCLB has made accommodations for students with disabilities to be included in taking the standardized tests, some exceptional students, despite accommodations, will not perform well on the exam. Students with severe cognitive disabilities may still have trouble completing the exam, even with the 3% of those who have accommodations made for them (Keele, 2004). Also with so much riding on these high-stakes tests for general education teachers, the teachers may feel the need to take away their individualized attention from the exceptional students in the full inclusion classroom in order to ensure that the students without disabilities meet the state standards.

Many educators and critics share similar concerns about inclusion. Some teachers feel that inclusion was forced onto them, and they are concerned that their teaching will not be as beneficial to their students (Bruneau-Balerrama, 1997). This can be overwhelming for a teacher. The general educator will be working with students with and without disabilities, especially in a full inclusion classroom, the teacher may feel that she is unable to reach out and help all of her students during class time. Teachers may also feel they are spending more time working with students with disabilities rather than the students without disabilities. This can take up more class time than the teacher originally planned. This leads to another disadvantage of full inclusion. General educators feel they are not allowed enough time to cover certain lessons (Bruneau-Balerrama, 1997). Depending on the student's disability, it may take longer to connect and comprehend the information presented through the lesson. Because the general educator must take more time to help the student make the connection, this hinders the teacher from using the time to

teach a full lesson. This could potentially make the class fall behind in learning the required curriculum. In partial inclusion the teachers use a team approach with the special education teacher providing the appropriate aide to students with special needs while the general education teacher keeps the whole class moving forward.

On the other hand, when dealing with partial inclusion, special education teachers sometimes feel that they are working more with the students without disabilities than the students with disabilities (Hewitt, 1999). This gives special educators the sense that they are used more as "instructional aides than fully qualified teachers," (Hewitt, 1999, p. 134). Taking the teacher's attention from the student is essentially taking away instructional time from that student. It also makes it more difficult for the special educator to stay on task. If the special education teacher is helping more general education students than students with disabilities, it may be difficult for the teacher to stay focused on what is being taught. Yet, the general education teacher can eliminate this problem by making certain rules with the classroom about the purpose of the special education teacher.

Having a special education teacher in the classroom is not the most difficult issue to solve in the inclusion movement. One of the largest problems is that regular classrooms are lacking the special equipment and materials that students with disabilities need to learn (Hewitt, 1999). It is nearly impossible to teach students with disabilities if the classroom does not have the recommended resources the students need in order to learn. Without the proper materials, educators may become increasingly frustrated with teaching in an inclusion classroom. It is difficult to have any form of inclusion without knowing the proper way to integrate the students with disabilities into the classroom environment.

## INTEGRATING INCLUSION INTO THE CLASSROOM

When integrating either full or partial inclusion into the classroom one important aspect is to keep the parents involved. "Parents are viewed as valuable assets to the school community and should be encouraged to take an active part in the child's academic program," (Hewitt, 1999, p. 134). Parents know their child best, especially if their child has a disability. The family can help the teachers in determining what is important for the child's IEP. This will help the parents to be aware of how their child is being taught in school. It can also help the teacher to determine the special resources the student needs in order to learn. Parents can also keep the teachers updated on the student's success outside of the classroom. For example, if a student with a disability learns an integrated lesson about independent living, parents will be able to determine if the child is able to use this skill at home. This will enable the teacher to know if the method of teaching is benefiting the student.

An experiment by Praisner (2003) demonstrates that the more experience an educator has with inclusion, the more positive view one will have of it. Although this seems it would be true in any case, many educators currently find inclusion troublesome, even stressful. Yet, there are different methods to using inclusion in a general education classroom that will be beneficial to the student as well as the teacher.

One method used in an inclusion classroom is an integrated curriculum that involves combining a regular lesson with life skills that students with disabilities will need in the future (Reisberg, 1998). Under IDEA, these skills are included in the student's IEP. This method can be used in a full and partial inclusion classroom. Students with disabilities also "need additional instruction, skills, and knowledge in such areas as self-help and independent

living..." (Reisberg, 1998, p. 272). Integrating these skills into the curriculum will benefit these students by allowing them to learn skills that are essential to everyday life. Yet, combining life skills with a lesson plan will probably be more beneficial to the students in a partial inclusion classroom. Students without a disability are usually fully capable of performing everyday tasks, so the multidisciplinary lesson may not be as beneficial to them. On the other hand, students with disabilities tend to struggle with these life tasks. A special education teacher can work with the student with a disability to combine the skill into the lesson, while the rest of the class is learning. Instead of focusing on one subject during the class period, teachers are able to incorporate lessons such as life skills the student with the disability will need (Reisberg, 1998). Exceptional students will be able to use the skills learned in the curriculum in school as well as outside of school.

Another method to integrate inclusion into the classroom is by collaborative teaching. Collaborative teaching is predominately used in partial inclusion. This type of inclusion requires a general and a special education teacher to work together inside or outside of a general education classroom to meet the special needs of an exceptional student (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003). The blending of personalities and teaching styles will allow the student to get the most out of a lesson (Bruneau-Balderrama, 1997). The students with disabilities will be able to learn the lessons that students without disabilities are learning, but have the lesson modified so they are able to learn better and grasp the information they are being taught. Collaborative teaching is crucial when working with students that have disabilities. The student is able to get the special attention he or she needs, and the general educator does not have to feel overwhelmed with the respon-

sibility of teaching both students with and without disabilities. This form of teaching allows the student with a disability to learn in an environment he or she is most comfortable. This will allow the student to keep their focus on the lesson being taught. This is one of the main reasons why having partial inclusion in schools is so important.

According to Brucker (1994), the inclusion movement may allow special education to be viewed as a valuable component of general education. Over the years, different laws have been made to make the inclusion in a general education classroom possible for students with disabilities. These laws have provided the means for general and special educators to work together to give their students the best education. Yet, determining the degree of inclusion that will work best in the school system is a more difficult issue to examine. Although in a full inclusion classroom, teachers and students can be introduced to a diverse group of children, some feel that this method is impractical. General educators feel that having both students with and without disabilities in the classroom is difficult, because they are teaching students that learn from opposite sides of the spectrum. Students with disabilities often prefer working in special programs designed for their needs, rather than in an all-inclusive classroom. Some students with disabilities also feel that these special programs offer them more support in receiving a proper education (Kavale, 2002). This is why partial inclusion is the best method for having students of various abilities in a general education classroom. Exceptional learners will be able to work with a general and special education teacher during the school day. These students will have the option of learning with the rest of the class or receiving the special assistance they will need from a special education teacher inside or outside of the classroom. Students with disabilities will also be able to

interact with students without disabilities, which will teach all students to embrace diversity. In the end, partial inclusion is the ideal method of making inclusion in schools a success.

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