

# IS INCLUSION THE ONLY OPTION FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES AND EMOTIONAL BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS?

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*This article addresses the debate regarding the placement of students with emotional and behavioral disorders and learning disabilities in inclusive classrooms. This review discusses the factors that suggest why students with EBDs and LDs succeed more in separate settings emotionally and academically. It also discusses other educational options that bring inclusion and separate settings together, such as co-taught classrooms. There are both academic and social benefits of separate settings for students with LDs. The actuality of inclusion being implemented is addressed with regards to how teachers and school districts are planning for inclusive classrooms. The following research supports that students with LDs and EBDs are better served in separate settings.*

Since the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the topic of inclusion has been a topic of popular discussion. Special education law, specifically the IDEA, requires students to be placed in a least restrictive environment (LRE) which is “a legal term referring to the fact that exceptional children must be educated in as normal environment as possible” (Kauffman et. al, 2009, p. 15). Most people interpret inclusion as mixing special education and general education in one general ed-

ucation classroom. Inclusion is widely debated in the specific areas of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) and students with learning disabilities (LD).

A child with a learning disability is defined as a child with relatively normal intelligence that is having specific learning problems (Kauffman et. al, 2009). There is not one widely accepted definition for emotional and behavioral disorders, but all definitions include the fact that these children have a chronic problem with behavioral issues and

often exhibit behaviors that are not socially acceptable (Kauffman et. al, 2009). Public schools in the US have identified 5-6% of students between the ages of 6-17 years old as being learning disabled (Kauffman et al., 2009). Learning disabilities are the most identified section in special education with about half of the students needing special education in public schools is identified as learning disabled. At least six to ten percent of school aged children exhibit emotional and behavioral disorder, but only one percent of school-aged children in the US are identified as EBD for special education purposes (Kauffman et. al, 2009). The sections will discuss the pros and cons of inclusion in regards to students with learning disabilities and emotional and behavioral disorders, concluding that students with LDs and EBDs are better served in separate settings.

#### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

Inclusion is often argued with regards to the law, especially the least restrictive environment (LRE). The IDEA states that all students must have access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the LRE based on students' needs. The LRE was put into the IDEA to ensure that students with disabilities are not discriminated against and have the same access to education that their peers have in school (Hullet, 2009). The LRE is any setting where a student can learn to the best of their ability and will vary for every student. Since the passing of IDEA, there has been much debate over what constitutes the LRE for the children with disabilities.

Those in favor of inclusion believe that the LRE for all students is in a general education classroom, while advocates of separate settings believe that the LRE for each student varies.

When the lawmakers made the IDEA, they envisioned that the LRE for some students, not all students, was in the general education classroom. What has happened with this provision is many inclusion supporters believe that a general education classroom is the LRE, and therefore that separate settings go against the IDEA. In reality, the LRE is dependent on each individual child. Because children with disabilities need personal attention in the areas of academics and social skills, the general education classroom might not provide the necessary amount of individualized attention that these students need. When the students with disabilities are not given the adequate help they need in a general education classroom, they are not being educated in the LRE (Crockett, 2000).

#### **Support for Inclusion**

The image history has portrayed of students with disabilities is one of isolation from their peers, which has encouraged more people to be supportive of inclusion. Supporters of inclusion believe that generally all children should be placed in general education settings so that all children are equal. It is believed that separate settings for children with disabilities are unequal and discriminatory (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). Many supporters also believe that children with disabilities can receive the specialized education they need in a general education setting without putting them in a separate setting. One advantage for inclusion is that children with disabilities will have improved social skills if they spend time in the general education classroom. Research supports that friendships enhance one's social functioning and are an essential part of social development for all children. When children are not included in a general education class-

room, research shows that these essential friendships are not developed and, therefore, the students do not develop socially along with their peers (Vaughn et. al, 2001). Research has also found that low self-esteem comes from being in self-contained classrooms because the students feel separated (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). Supporters of inclusion believe putting children in separate classes highlights and stigmatizes their differences and, therefore, segregates them from their peers (Kauffman et. al, 2002).

#### **Peer Interactions**

While the teacher and student interactions are difficult in classroom with students with EBDs, student-to-student interaction is also negatively affected. As discussed, when there is a negative interaction between the teacher and the student with EBD, it can cause a negative environment. This negative classroom environment could be violent and not nurturing, therefore the students without disabilities may be at risk for lower academic achievement and violent behavior. When there is a negative relationship with the student and the general education teacher, the whole class, even the students without disabilities are affected in their academic achievement and their relationships with the teacher and their peers (Heflin & Bullock, 1999).

In a general education classroom the students feed off one another's behavior, and when children with EBDs are integrated with students without disabilities both behaviors are affected. When the students with EBDs are disruptive and act out, their peers follow their example. When all of the children in the general education classroom feel as if they can act out, the environment is negative (Sutherland et. al, 2008). Students who repeatedly act out tend

to gravitate toward each other and encourage each other's negative behaviors. When these groups form, students see acting out as a way to gain social power and attention amongst their peers (Kauffman et. al, 2002).

The common belief is that students with EBDs will have more success with social interaction in a general education classroom; however, this can be proven untrue. In one study by Fulk et al. (1998), researchers found that male students with LDs felt more alienated than male students with EBDs. In this study, the students with EBDs spent most of their day in a self-contained classroom, whereas the students with LDs were in the general education classroom. It is likely that the students with LDs would compare themselves with their peers in the general education classroom, which would conclude why they felt more alienated (Fulk et. al, 1998). According to the study, if students with EBDs are around a peer group that consists of other students with EBDs, they are less likely to exhibit negative emotions due to the similarity of all students. When students are included in settings with students who are similar to them, they are less likely to feel bad about themselves because they are not different from others (Sutherland et. al, 2008).

#### **Teacher Qualifications**

Children with emotional and behavioral disorders are under identified for special education services because these disorders are often mistaken for acting out behavior. The assumption is that students with EBDs have the ability to change their actions. Teacher and student interaction is key in identifying students with an EBD because they have problems with social skills. Teachers play a large role in how these children will cope in a general education classroom.

Although the IDEA has revisions to incorporate funding and training to instruct teachers how to teach students with EBDs, there seems to be a shortage of actual teachers qualified to teach these students. Gresnick, George, and George (1987) found that 53% of special education program directors were fully certified in this area with 30% working under “emergency” licenses. This statistic shows the lack of qualification among special educators, let alone teachers within general education. An “emergency” license is temporary license that does not fully qualify these individuals to deal with the students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Along with this shortage of qualified teachers, there is also an increasing number of students with EBDs who are being placed in inclusive settings (Kauffman et. al, 2002). In addition to this increase, attrition rates among teachers of EBD students are actually two times that of other teachers working in other areas. An explanation of these rates includes: lack of administrative support, lack of thorough training, and the demands on the special educators in the schools averaging 56 hours a week to these students (Polsgrove & Ochoa, 2004).

When students with EBDs are included in the general education classroom, teachers who are not trained in special education often become overwhelmed with the student’s lack of motivation, disruptions in the classroom, and aggressive behaviors. When the student with an EBD frustrates the teachers, they focus less instructional attention on these children, which results in academic failure. Students with EBDs become frustrated by their academic failure and continue to act out. This vicious cycle continues while the academic achievement of students with EBDs are at risk (Sutherland et. al, 2008).

If teachers continue to be unprepared for students with EBDs, then the cycle will continue and cause a negative environment in the classroom. This negative environment of the classroom will not provide the LRE for the students with EBDs, and could have a negative effect on the students without disabilities (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). General education teachers may fall victim to the myth that students with EBDs can change their behaviors voluntarily. Because of this assumption, they often do not make the necessary academic accommodations to meet the needs of these students. When teachers do not make the necessary academic accommodations for students with EBDs, the students’ academic performance suffers which causes the cycle to continue occurring (Sutherland et. al, 2008). Another consequence of under qualified teachers is the development of learned helplessness seen among students with EBD. When teachers do not adequately teach the student skill to succeed independently, their academic performance fails and the student learns to count on the teachers extra support (Sutherland et. al, 2003). In order to best support students, teachers must have a background in special education.

#### **Benefits of Separate Settings for EBD**

Many advocates believe that the general education classroom must be the LRE and that separate settings are “clearly unjust,” but the debate should be much more nuanced (Kauffman et. al, 2002). Research shows separate settings better meet the needs of children with disabilities, whether it is academic or socially (Kauffman et. al, 2002). Academically, separate settings allow for the students to have more individualized attention for their specific problems. Students with EBDs need more direct instruction than students without EBD.

Direct instruction includes different structuring, pacing and sequencing of lessons and it provides more of an opportunity for more constructive feedback. This direct instruction is available in the separate settings because, with fewer students, the teachers can focus more attention on each individual student. Students with EBDs often have trouble paying attention to academic related tasks. When the classrooms are smaller and more individualized, the teachers can ensure students are staying on task. With separate settings, the students have more attention focused on them, which helps them with their academic achievement (Landrum et. al, 2003). One common problem for students with EBDs is a high drop-out rate, yet with separate settings, this probability decreases. Washburn-Moses completed a survey of 117 schools, in which 90 percent stated that their separate setting practices incorporated curriculum leading to a high school diploma. Ninety-eight percent stated that this curriculum was based on self-paced instruction, which caused more students to reach the goal of receiving a high school diploma (Washburn-Moses, 2009).

In separate settings for students with EBDs, specialists provide services outside the academic atmosphere. Some of these services include crisis and behavioral intervention, social work, drug and alcohol clinics, and childcare. When students with EBDs are given services outside of the academic atmosphere, they are equipped with emotional strategies that allow them to focus more on their academic achievement. These services are even associated with improved academic success (Washburn-Moses, 2009). Another service that is offered to students with EBD in separate settings is pragmatic language skills; research has shown that many students with

EBD have language disorders (Landrum et. al, 2003).

In separate classrooms, students receive more individualized attention and have several opportunities for academic success. In these situations, many children’s opinions about school changed. Students now looked forward to school and saw their classroom as a positive, rather than negative environment (Kauffman et. al, 2002). Separate setting classrooms allow for a more disciplined environment that can meet the needs of each student on an individual basis. In a general education classroom teachers do not have the freedom of individualized behavior plans because it stigmatizes other students. With classroom sizes increasing, teachers struggle to differentiate instruction to the degree required for students with EBD’s. The separate settings allow for the teachers to focus on the behavioral issues that many students with EBD face (Landrum et. al, 2003).

#### **Co-Taught Classrooms for Students with EBDs and LDs**

One compromise between inclusion and separate settings is co-taught classrooms. In a co-taught classroom there are two teachers, one general education teacher and one special education teacher, in a general education setting who collaborate on how to teach the class. These classrooms are used for students both with EBDs and LDs. The structure of these classrooms varies with the roles of the different teachers take on, but the most common structure is when the general education teacher serves as the more dominant teacher and the special education teacher serves as an assistant (Harbort et. al, 2007). It is believed that this is beneficial because there is a highly qualified general education teacher and a special education teacher who meets the needs of the special education

students, in one classroom.

One reason that this is not the best method is because the special education teacher is required to act as an assistant rather than be the main facilitator. Another problem with co-taught classrooms is that the general education teacher has to do more work in accommodating another teacher in their classroom, which causes stress and contempt between the teachers. Many of the academic problems that students with disabilities in a general education classroom are not solved by adding a special education teacher because the instruction is still not as individualized as these students need (Harbort et. al, 2007). Many argue that a co-taught classroom is less stigmatizing for students with disabilities, yet when the students with disabilities have the special education teacher with them it can be more stigmatizing. When the other students are made aware of the students with an assistant, it can be more stigmatizing than if the children would be taken out to a separate setting (Heflin & Bullock, 1999).

#### Academic Achievement for Students with LD

Along with students with EBDs, students with LDs have been included in the debate of inclusion versus separate settings. Students with LDs have been spending more time in the general education classroom over the last two decades. In fact, by the 2007-2008 school year, the percentage of students with LDs who spent at least 80% of their day in the general education classroom increased from 22% to 62% (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). This very dramatic change calls attention to the extent of which these general classroom settings produce desirable student outcomes. Research shows that it is not always simply the placement of

the student with an LD that affects the performance and, therefore, outcome of achievement, but it is the instruction provided that influences the student the greatest. Findings show that although inclusive settings for those with LDs are possible, they do not provide the "high quality" of instruction that is needed to make considerable academic gains (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). If high quality instruction is offered in separate settings, where teachers can provide consistent, closely monitored instruction, the student will achieve more than being in a general education classroom where teachers make minor adaptations to the students' needs (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Those minor adaptations cannot be discounted, because students with LDs can learn in an inclusive setting. However, the adaptations will not produce the same results as higher quality instruction and do not meet the basic needs students with LDs require, especially in areas of reading and math (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

Research shows that students with LDs in the general education class may be provided with a very high quality general education, but instruction does not give these students the best individualized education that they need to succeed (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Changes for students with LDs included reduced workload and accommodations on tests, which were commonly seen among all students regardless of a learning disability (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

Studies show that students with LDs achieve best in small groups of about one to three. Here they can receive special attention. They typically need this specialized instruction 40-60 minutes a day, 4-5 days per week (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Students with LDs, in general education classrooms, often have minor adjustments made for them

(listed above), but this is not equivalent to the high quality, specialized education that children will receive in the separate setting. Students in the general education classroom are receiving a great general education, however, this does not serve their specific needs (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Studies are now showing that for most elementary students with LDs the instruction they receive in a high quality inclusive classroom is not enough to ensure they will acquire important reading math and reading skills (McLeskey & Waldron).

#### Inclusion an Illusion?

While research supports that students with LDs should be included in the general education classroom with small groups in learning-intensive settings, little research suggests that schools are actually following through with this mandate to ensure students with LDs are being accounted for. In the 1980s, there were more students with LDs being placed in separate settings yet in the 1990s there were more strides to place students in general education setting. At the beginning of the decade, placement rate increased 110%, however towards the end of the 1990s it only increased 24%. In this time period, 15 states moved towards students being placed in general education classroom, while 30 states remained substantially at the same rate educating students in the separate settings. While the number of LD students being placed in general education is increasing slightly, there has also been an increase in students being diagnosed as learning disabled. The controversy examined here is that there is an illusion created that inclusion is being implemented, while in fact it is just the increase in students with having learning disabilities that creates this illusion and little moves have been made towards mainstreaming students

(McLeskey et al. 2004).

#### Conclusion

Many supporters of inclusion often ignore realities about children with disabilities. It is often argued that when children with disabilities are taken from the general education classroom to go to separate settings, it shows the other students that these children are different from them. In reality, everyone is different and some students need more individual attention than others, which they might not be able to receive in a general education classroom. When children are not given the help they need in order to prevent them from looking different by leaving the classroom, the child's educational achievement and even self-esteem are at risk. It is important to recognize that children with disabilities are different from other students and therefore they require different educational techniques that cannot always be met in a general education classroom (Kauffman & Konold, 2007). Overall, not all students can receive the best free appropriate public education in a least restrictive environment in the general education classroom. It is important that educators review each child's needs and makes the best decision for their placement without previous misconceptions in mind.

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