

Inclusion in the Classroom

The Importance of Inclusion

According to UNESCO's 2009 Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (2009), the inclusion of students with disabilities in the everyday, regular curriculum and classroom is a cornerstone of quality education. Over several decades of research inclusive practices have been shown to:

- **Increase academic achievement** in at least one subject area for both students with disabilities and general education students (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004),
- **Increase educational attainment** of students with disabilities (Cole, 2006),
- **Increase the social skills**, and social emotional skills, of both students with and without disabilities (Tapasak & Walther-Thomas, 1999; Staub, 1999), and
- **Increase the employment level and job readiness** of students with disabilities (Cole, 2006).

Despite of the abundance of research and legislative acts promoting inclusion, there are few federal, state, or local level guidelines outlining exactly how inclusion should look in schools. Without specific regulations and definitions for what constitutes inclusion, there is too large a crack in the infrastructure of public education, through which students with disabilities will undoubtedly fall through and suffer the consequences.



The Current State of Inclusive Education Practices

Neither Florida state law or federal law specifically uses the word 'inclusion' in their mandates for a free, appropriate education for all (Florida Department of Education, 2005). In fact, there is no federal definition, or regulation, of what exactly constitutes inclusion. Instead, federal and state regulations require students with disabilities be taught in the 'Least Restrictive Environment', which is decided on an individual, case by case basis, as determined by the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (Florida Department of Education, 2005). This is ostensibly so that each student can receive the placement and services that they need to succeed; however, as multiple researchers have noted, this leaves a loose implementation framework for inclusion practices (Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Mitchell, 2006; Singal, 2008).

Even though the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion specifically mentions equal opportunities for education in a 'neighborhood school' (NCERI, 1995), there are no federal or state laws that require every school to use inclusionary practices. Instead, federal regulations in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), require that school districts, to the largest extent possible, educate students with disabilities in the school they would normally attend if they didn't have a disability as part of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

Unfortunately, while LRE is intended for the benefit of the student with a disability, it is often misapplied due to unfounded concerns that students with disabilities impede the progress of their non-disabled peers in an inclusive setting. To the contrary, research indicates that that inclusion of students with disabilities results in either a neutral or positive affect for students without disabilities (Kalambouka, Farrell, and Dyson, 2007; Sermier Dessemontet & Bless, 2013).

Inclusion in Practice

Because of a lack of clarity of what constitutes inclusion and the subjective nature of LRE placements, inclusion in the school system can look extremely different from school to school, district to district, and state to state. In the wake of the school accountability movement and the mainstreaming of high-stakes testing, this is extremely troubling as it opens the floor for bad inclusion practices. Even just a few short years after the adoption of No Child Left Behind there had been a detrimental effect on inclusion, as teachers and administrators began to blame students with disabilities for bad school scores. Likewise, researchers noticed that in response to No Child Left Behind, schools began to focus on those most likely to make growth and therefore most likely to affect the school grade, to the detriment of students with disabilities (Cole, 2006).



Policy Recommendations

In order for quality, inclusive education to be fully realized in this country, the terms 'inclusion' and 'inclusive education' need to be explicitly defined. Just as inclusion is the gold standard of education, there has to be a gold standard of what inclusion should look like, an ideal that every inclusion classroom, school, and school district should strive to achieve. This definition then needs to be added to existing federal, state, and local regulations so that schools have a model to follow, and there is a legal imperative for every school and district to a) require inclusion when applicable and b) have inclusion practices that are relatively similar regardless of the severity of disabilities exhibited by students, or the location of the inclusion classroom. Furthermore, there needs to be more clarity regarding what constitutes a Least Restrictive Environment, as well as more explicit instructions and guidelines on how to determine the LRE for a student with a disability or disabilities.

Having clear and consistent guidelines for what constitutes inclusion will cut down on the misplacement of students with severe or multiple disabilities, who have typically been excluded from inclusion, as well as offer a better opportunity to realize the NCERI's vision of inclusion: *"equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services, with the needed supplementary aids and support services, in age appropriate classrooms in their neighborhood schools, in order to prepare students for productive lives as full members of society"* (1995, p.99).

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