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# Inclusion

# Educating Students with and without Disabilities

*Bill Henderson*

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*This article presents an overview of inclusion, a practice that is being utilized increasingly in schools across the country. In inclusive schools, students who have disabilities learn together with their nondisabled peers. Teachers and support staff collaborate to serve all students in integrated classes. After reviewing the social and legal background of inclusion, Henderson describes specific strategies for designing and implementing successful programs. He outlines organizational change, curriculum and instruction modification, and school culture transformation.*

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**I**nclusion is a practice that is increasingly being promoted in schools across the country. Children with disabilities are attending their neighborhood schools and participating in school activities with their nondisabled peers. Inclusion is purposeful integration. In inclusive programs, children who have disabilities learn together with children who have no disabilities. General educators and specialists collaborate to help all students learn and succeed.

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## **Background to Inclusion**

Before the 1970s, children with disabilities had limited access to public education. Many were placed in restrictive institutions; others were totally excluded from schools. Those fortunate enough to attend public schools were often segregated. This situation proved intolerable. Parents, advocates, and concerned citizens fought hard for change and protective legislation.

In 1975, the United States Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142, which guaranteed children with disabilities a free and appropriate education. This legislation was reauthorized in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA, Public Law 101-476. Both laws specify that students with disabilities should be integrated with their nondisabled peers to the

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“maximum extent appropriate” and that special education services can be provided in general education classrooms.

As a result of this legislation and continued advocacy, improvements have occurred.<sup>1</sup> Relatively few students with disabilities are entirely excluded from public school systems. The practice of modifying instruction to meet individual needs is much more prevalent. There is a greater awareness of the potential and talents of persons with disabilities. With the passage in 1992 of the Americans with Disabilities Act, civil rights have been extended to all individuals with disabilities. This law promotes far-reaching opportunities in most areas of American society, including education.

Despite improvements and increased access to services, many have begun to question the overall effectiveness of special education programs. Particular concerns have been raised about outcomes. Far too many youths with disabilities are not achieving desirable goals and are not being adequately prepared. For example:

- Only 57 percent of students who have been served by special education finish high school with either a diploma or a certificate of graduation.<sup>2</sup>
- Only 14 percent of students who have been served by special education go on to postsecondary education or training within one or two years after leaving school.<sup>3</sup>
- Only 49 percent of students who have been served by special education find part- or full-time employment one or two years after leaving school.<sup>4</sup>

These statistics describe outcomes for students classified primarily as having mild or moderate disabilities. If students with severe disabilities were counted proportionally, the numbers would be worse.<sup>5</sup> In addition, although all groups of persons with disabilities fare significantly poorer in terms of education and employment when compared with their nondisabled peers, minorities with disabilities are impacted even more negatively.<sup>6</sup>

The factors affecting the overall poor outcomes of students with disabilities are complex. However, the National Association of State Boards of Education has identified two practices common in many school systems that are particularly detrimental.<sup>7</sup>

1. *Unnecessary Segregation.* Despite the fact that special education legislation expresses a strong preference for integration,<sup>8</sup> large, and in many cases increasing numbers of students with disabilities are still being educated in settings that are primarily segregated.<sup>9</sup> These students often carry the stigma of being kept apart. Their school environments do not reflect real-life situations that usually involve people with a range of abilities. Children in segregated programs lose the many advantages of learning from and with their nondisabled peers.

2. *Ineffective Mainstreaming.* Despite the fact that special education legislation expresses a strong preference for providing services and supports in the general education environment,<sup>10</sup> large numbers of students with disabilities are being pulled out of their general education classrooms for part or most of the school day.<sup>11</sup> Mainstreaming can have the effect of splintering the school life of students, making them feel unsure about where they belong. In addition, problems of communication and collaboration occur frequently among the various staff who work with mainstreamed students. This can lead to fragmented curriculum and instruction.

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## Reasons for Inclusion

Recognizing the pitfalls of segregation, educators have worked with parents and advocates to create programs in which students with disabilities have opportunities to learn together with their nondisabled peers. A large and growing body of research convincingly demonstrates that inclusion produces the best outcomes in most cases.<sup>12</sup> Students with disabilities who are integrated perform better academically, they develop significantly more social skills, and they are more effectively prepared for employment and community life.

Equally important, the same research indicates that integration can also benefit students who have no disabilities. Nondisabled students can take advantage of some of the additional resources and supports provided in inclusive programs. They continue their academic progress. They develop communication and interpersonal skills. They certainly gain a broader perspective on diversity, and they are better prepared to live and work in a multi-abled world.

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## Strategies for Inclusion

The dynamics of creating a successful inclusion program start with practices common for creating any effective school program. Strong leadership, agreed-upon goals and high expectations, maximum time devoted to teaching, positive school climate, frequent monitoring of student progress, ongoing professional development, and active family involvement are characteristics of effective schools.<sup>13</sup> In addition to these dynamics, however, there are other strategies that are necessary for promoting inclusion. These are particularly important in working to transform programs that previously relied on segregation and pullouts.

### *Organizational Considerations*

Space is a key consideration in inclusive programs. No longer should students with disabilities be educated in sections of buildings that are apart from their nondisabled, age-appropriate peers. Accessibility and accommodation should be priorities. Although no facility can be made perfect, there needs to be a sensitivity to children's special needs and a commitment to modify the physical environment within classrooms and throughout buildings.

Time is a critical factor. Students' schedules must be set so that children with disabilities can readily participate with their nondisabled peers in the wide spectrum of school activities. Staff schedules must be arranged so that general educators and specialists can adequately communicate and collaborate.

Resources are essential. Funds that were previously spent to serve students in segregated or pullout programs should be redirected to serve students in inclusive programs. Integrating students with special needs can reduce transportation, administration, and space requirement costs. Moneys saved should be utilized for increased staff and resources. As is the case with any effective program, resources in addition to those provided by school systems are desirable. Student teachers, volunteers, and funds raised from businesses or foundations are most beneficial to the development of inclusion programs.

Relationships must also change. Special and regular education can no longer be treated as separate disciplines. General educators and specialists have to collaborate to meet the needs of all students within their building. The entire school staff, including teachers, administrators, secretaries, custodians, and lunch monitors, have to develop sensitivity and skills for working with students with disabilities. Specialists have to demonstrate a willingness to go into regular classrooms and school situations to assist students and staff with the integration process.

### ***Curriculum and Instruction Considerations***

Simply putting children with disabilities in classrooms with their nondisabled peers and telling them to just read their books, write their assignments, and listen to teacher lectures will never work. Modifications in curriculum and instruction should occur in any classroom. In inclusive programs with heterogeneous or mixed-ability classrooms, such changes are essential.

Effective curricula and instruction are based on a number of key premises.<sup>14</sup> All children can learn. All children learn differently. All children have different ways of showing their multiple abilities. Effective teachers use a variety of instructional approaches that build on and validate students' prior knowledge and experiences. Sensitive to the variety of learning styles, they strive to create curricula that are stimulating, challenging, and developmentally appropriate. They help students construct their own knowledge and develop skills important for their futures.

The following are some practices that have proven effective for helping students with disabilities learn and succeed in integrated classrooms.

Whole language is an approach for teaching reading and writing based on research that children learn best from whole to part.<sup>15</sup> Because so many children with disabilities have been taught by their spending inordinate amounts of time learning sometimes isolated skills, whole language presents an interesting alternative. In whole language, emphasis is put on children's own language, and the students become more active participants in their own learning. Big books, children's literature, and creative writing are frequent components in classrooms using whole language.

Cooperative learning has proved to be an effective instructional practice.<sup>16</sup> In cooperative learning, students work in small groups on common tasks. There is much interaction, and everyone is responsible for contributing. Cooperative learning is often deliberately used as a practice to promote inclusion. Students with disabilities can make significant academic and social gains, and the experience can have similar benefits for nondisabled peers.

Hands-on activities are highly recommended.<sup>17</sup> Students participate in more active learning experiences. They use a wide range of materials in addition to books and worksheets to explore problems, create solutions, and demonstrate knowledge. Hands-on activities can generate a great deal of excitement and provide more opportunities for learning and success.

Thematic or interdisciplinary instruction is more commonplace.<sup>18</sup> With thematic instruction, teachers and students focus on topics. The curriculum is more connected. Skills and knowledge associated with particular subject areas are developed through in-depth study. The curriculum is more connected. Students have greater opportunities to participate in a wider range of activities, and they can be evaluated on the progress they make throughout the project.

Multiculturalism is also a priority. Educators recognize the impact of culture on language, learning, and thinking.<sup>19</sup> Teachers need to be sensitive to the cultural diversity of their students. They need to incorporate resources from their students' backgrounds into the curriculum, and they need to interact with students in ways that are supportive and validating. Children need to be prepared to live in a world that is increasingly diverse. They need opportunities to meet, work with, and learn about the contributions of persons from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and ability backgrounds.

### *Social/Political Considerations*

It has been well documented that, as a group, Americans who have disabilities fare significantly worse in areas such as education, employment, and standard of living than Americans who have no disability.<sup>20</sup> Unless we solely "blame the victim" for such large discrepancies, we have to examine systemic causes. Many persons with disabilities have reported that their problems stem more from prejudice and discrimination than from functional impairments. "Handicapism" is a term that has been used to describe such barriers to the successful integration of persons with disabilities.

Handicapism is a phenomenon that encompasses beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Like racism and sexism, handicapism has long historical roots and has been reinforced throughout the media. Handicapism has impacted all aspects of society. Despite improvements in recent years, educators need to examine the role of handicapism in education in order to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Beliefs are affected by handicapism. Some common stereotypes and myths are that persons with disabilities are sad, sick, contagious, and not whole. Simply categorizing children as "handicapped" causes some educators to focus on deficits and view "the disabled" as primarily incapable. These educators tend to lower expectations and abrogate responsibility for outcomes. Children with disabilities need and deserve teachers and staff who believe in them and will work hard with them to develop their abilities.

Attitudes are affected by handicapism. Some common negative attitudes felt by others toward persons with disabilities are fear, aversion, and discomfort. Educators who have such feelings are inhibited from engaging in and promoting positive interactions. Children with disabilities need and deserve teachers and staff who are comfortable and positive in working with them.

Behaviors are affected by handicapism. Some common inappropriate behaviors directed toward persons with disabilities are exclusion, rejection, hostility, ridicule, and paternalism. Consciously or not, educators sometimes stigmatize or patronize children with special needs. Some teachers have resisted becoming involved with the provision of services and accommodations. Others have been overprotective and have not encouraged maximum opportunities. Children with disabilities need and deserve teachers and staff who treat them with dignity and fairness and challenge them to develop their abilities.

There are no "quick fixes" for handicapism. Disability-awareness programs are a proven first step toward increasing understanding and improving attitudes and behaviors.<sup>21</sup> Educators need to know and learn more about persons with disabilities, and about their ordinariness and accomplishments.

Educators need to know that just because someone with a learning disability has difficulty reading doesn't mean that person can't be a great writer like Hans Christian

Andersen or a great scientist like Thomas Edison. Educators need to be aware that just because someone with a head injury has difficulty staying focused doesn't mean that person can't be a great social leader like Harriet Tubman. Educators need to be reminded that just because someone with a physical disability has difficulty "standing on his or her own two feet" doesn't mean that person can't be a great president like Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

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### Commitment for Inclusion

Schools should prepare students for the real world, not for separate worlds. There are no special-needs McDonald's or special-needs Xerox factories. All students, including those who have and those who do not have disabilities, need to be better prepared to live and work in an increasingly diverse and multi-abled society.

Can we successfully educate all children with disabilities in classrooms in neighborhood schools with their nondisabled peers for the entire school day? Perhaps we are not yet ready to say "all," and "all the time" may not always be desirable. However, who can make such claims about any group? We must not allow disbelievers to use those few exceptions or our few failures as rationalizations for maintaining an unacceptable status quo.

Most children with disabilities can be successfully integrated with their nondisabled peers in classrooms in neighborhood schools for most of, if not the entire school day. All children should have the opportunity to start their education together with their peers in inclusive programs. Every effort should be expended to make it work for every child. We have the expertise to educate and integrate children with disabilities successfully. We know what resources and supports are necessary. With commitment and the concerted effort of the entire community, inclusion will continue to demonstrate its power for transforming the education and quality of life of all students. ♡

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*“We spend as a country \$230 billion on elementary and secondary school systems . . . Anyone who comes up the steps can get in and that’s good stuff . . . But private industry spends \$210 billion a year on training and one-fourth of the costs are for remedial education — basic skills that [the graduates] didn’t get in school.”*

— Dale Mann