What is Inclusion?

Jeremy Peters

*St. John Fisher College*

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What is Inclusion?

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay’s first paragraph.

One of the newest and most controversial terms in education today is “inclusion.” Simply defined, it means including disabled students with non-disabled students in every aspect of education, from the same classrooms to the same social activities and support groups. It is a practice that has its own jargon, instructional practices and legal requirements. Disabilities, a phenomenon that encompasses stereotypes, myths, negative attitudes, and inappropriate behaviors, are a major barrier to the successful education and integration of children.

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What is Inclusion?
By: Jeremy Peters

Introduction

One of the newest and most controversial terms in education today is "inclusion." Simply defined, it means including disabled students with non-disabled students in every aspect of education, from the same classrooms to the same social activities and support groups. It is a practice that has its own jargon, instructional practices and legal requirements. Disabilities, a phenomenon that encompasses stereotypes, myths, negative attitudes, and inappropriate behaviors, are a major barrier to the successful education and integration of children.

Implementation of inclusion is not that easy. Disagreements frequently occur between educational professionals, parents, students and the law. Many believe that inclusion should be geared towards everyone with a disability, while others believe it should be specific for each child depending on needs and circumstances. Disagreements also arise about how much extra attention should be given to an inclusive child.

Inclusion is a philosophy where the belief is that everyone has a basic right to participate fully in society. It is a term that accepts differences. Inclusion is a practice that requires collaboration, teamwork, flexibility, a willingness to take risks, and support from a whole array of individuals, services, and institutions. It is designed to prepare all students for productive lives as full, participating members of their communities. Inclusion can be rewarding for all people involved. When correctly carried out, inclusion has benefits for all of the students and teachers involved in the process.

Inclusion is not a fad. It is here to stay, becoming a trend for the future with numerous court cases to back it up. Inclusion does not mean dumping children with special needs in a classroom without proper support and services. Thoughtful planning, continual monitoring and sufficient support are all part of successful inclusion programs. Inclusion is not an easy process. Parents, educators, peers, and administrators are all partners in the inclusion process and need to be involved together for a successful program.

An Inclusive Classroom

Inclusive classrooms look different all the time because the environment is created by interactions between the teacher and the students. It requires many students doing different things with people helping them. It is a classroom that has students moving from one environment to another. It often looks like pandemonium and is sometimes messy, but in a true inclusive situation, the children are smiling, there is work continually going on and the teacher is happy to be there.

Students in an inclusive classroom spend a lot of time in learning centers, making choices on their own, including what to work on. Small groups are often used in inclusive classrooms. Students know that other students will be doing different activities and they accept that, knowing that they are still learning the same lessons. Peers are always helping and supporting each other.

Inclusion leaves a great deal of time for social interactions. Nevertheless, those interactions are not harmful or disallowed, but part of the curriculum. It is a classroom that reaches beyond the capabilities of the teacher and depends on the resources of the community for new learning styles and techniques. That community and the class are student-centered. Students have a high level of responsibility for creating that community. They help structure the rules and are expected to follow them and meet the desired outcome outlined in the curriculum.
**Legal Requirements and Court Cases**

- **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990):**
  "Each State must establish procedures to assure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities ... are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special education, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily." 20 U. S. C. 1412(5)(B)

  From this, schools and teachers are required to ask a number of questions. How can I provide an appropriate program? What services are needed? Who can I contact for assistance? What services and resources are available? What instructional techniques could be used? What behavioral management could be used effectively? All these questions need to be asked and answered before anything can happen.

- **Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973:**
  "No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States ... shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." 29 U.S. C. 794

- **The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990:**
  "No qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such a disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits or the services, programs or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity." 42 U. S. C. 1213

  This means that because schools are public and receive federal aid, students with disabilities cannot be discriminated against. School systems need to place students with disabilities in the regular educational environment, unless the student will be unable to succeed in such an environment.

**What Makes Inclusion Successful**

Everyone involved must share a commitment to the philosophy of inclusion and a belief in the equal value of all students. The educational goals of students with disabilities are of equal value to those of other students. All individuals involved in the implementation of inclusion should delegate tasks appropriately and fulfill their responsibilities. Clearly defined policies need to be set up and executed for program implementation.

Teachers might be the biggest factor in a successful inclusion situation. Regular education teachers are now being asked to teach in a special education role. Some of the competencies that will help teachers include:

- **A realization that every child in the class is their responsibility.** Teachers need to find out how to work with each child, rather than assuming someone will tell them how to.

- **Knowing a variety of instructional strategies and how to use them effectively.** This includes being able to adapt materials and change methods in order to help a child.

- **Needing to work as a team with administrators and parents to provide the best possible atmosphere for the students.** This involves setting a curriculum and support group that is beneficial and meaningful for the students.
• Viewing each child in the class as an opportunity to become a better teacher rather than a problem to be dealt with.
• Flexibility and a high tolerance for difference and change.

Inclusion requires all participants to be equal partners. Teachers will be working together in and out of the classroom. Teachers need to realize that all the children in the school are theirs, not just the students in their specific class. They need to work together to find out what works for each child. Shared ownership in inclusion is a must and educational professionals need to find the necessary supports for the education of all children. Listening to other professionals and peers and respecting their opinions are the keys to making inclusion work. Teachers cannot disallow opinions due to their personal philosophy and/or techniques. Teachers need to have an open mind when it comes to inclusion. Flexibility must be present in every stage of inclusion. Teaching models are often changed, curriculum adaptations are made, and unique needs are always being addressed. All participants in inclusion need to accept, compromise and try new situations.

School administration also plays a role in the success of inclusion. There are four aspects of an administrator's role in inclusion:
• Vision and agenda
• Structure and organization
• Staff training
• Allocation of resources

Administrators provide the vision of how their school will look if its education is geared toward all students. The administrators then plan and implement techniques to take their school toward that vision. Administrators must know and understand the role played by each professional when dealing with inclusion, so they can effectively deal with problems that arise.

Careful assessment and planning guarantees that the student's curriculum is appropriate and that his or her needs are being met. Assessment should focus on the child's strengths rather than the disability itself and the weaknesses attributed to the disability. An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) should be carefully made and implemented for all students in the inclusion program with the help of the parents.

Good leadership by administration is a must. It sets the tone for the entire process. Principals and superintendents need to convey a positive attitude towards inclusion and make sure that teachers are working in a supportive environment. This includes praising teachers when they do things right, lending help when things are going wrong and allowing time for teacher interaction. Teachers who have the encouragement of their supervisors are always more successful during times of change.

Administration needs to foster a supportive environment for inclusion. Staff training, continuing education, and ongoing professional development opportunities will be necessary. Administrators need to provide in-service training that addresses teacher's needs for inclusive education. The training needs to be top notch, so that the teachers learn as much as possible and the students will benefit to the greatest extent possible. Administrators also need to build time into teacher's schedules for planning, collaborative problem solving, team meetings, peer coaching sessions, and adaptation of materials. A creative distribution and pooling of resources is essential to implementing and maintaining inclusion.

Parents of inclusive children also play a vital role in the success of the program. Along with making the IEP for their child, support and encouragement are always needed. Welcoming parents into the classroom and the school is a must. Parents are most often the
driving force behind their child's success, and inclusion children need to see that support during the day while they are at school as well as at night while they are at home.

Parent education is also another key for helping parents of non-inclusive children who question, or have a hard time dealing with, inclusion. Parents need to realize that inclusion brings forth social, interpersonal, and personal gains, as well as strong academic gains. An inclusive setting does not detract from the usual education program, but enriches the educational environment for all children. Parents of inclusive children must also be assured that their child will not be teased or harmed.

Last, but surely not the least part of inclusion, are the students themselves. This includes students with disabilities and those without. Inclusion effects non-inclusive children just as much as those who are in the program. Students without disabilities need to help out those with disabilities. They need to learn to accept their peers. Peers are positive role models for appropriate behavior. Peers offer support in and out of the classroom: in cooperative learning situations, in peer support groups, and on the playground. Friendships that develop due to inclusion have the opportunity to extend far beyond the classroom.

Students need to be educated about inclusion. Every student needs to identify what areas of inclusion they are comfortable with and what they are not comfortable with. They should read books, watch videos, and talk about inclusion. Visiting other inclusive settings often leads to students building a self-confidence and self-esteem for inclusive education.

When teachers, administrators, parents and teachers work together, inclusion brings about unlimited benefits. Inclusive education helps the development of all children in different ways. Students with specific challenges make gains in cognitive and social development and physical motor skills. They do well when the regular environment is adjusted to meet their needs. Children with more typical development gain higher levels of tolerance for people with differences. They learn to make the most of whomever they’re working with. When people are excluded, it ultimately costs more than including them.

**Financial Considerations**

Financial concerns for inclusive education includes the actual costs of providing services to all children, cost efficiency and personal costs to the student. Schools need to take into account that providing services increases earning, reduces use of alternative programs, reduces program costs, and improves the quality of life for all parties involved. Schools also need to consider whether they will look at academic, personal, and quality of life indicators as benefits of the program.

If school districts specifically share all the money marked for special education with all the children, students will be better served and benefit more from an environment that better meets the needs of all students. Inclusion is a program that affects everyone. Therefore, the money should go to everyone. Education is an investment, not an expense.

Inclusive education usually costs more in the beginning. Increased costs for personnel, professional development, and renovation of school buildings are necessary. Nevertheless, most of these are one-time only expenditures. Some of the costs can be, and most often are, offset by decreased costs in special education, transportation, and resources. Most districts hire paraprofessionals to help in the whole building, not just with one or two students with disabilities.

That is just the financial aspect. One parent has an interesting remark when it comes to the cost of inclusion. She says that inclusion is extremely expensive. After her son was included in the local high school, she had to buy football tickets, basketball tickets, date dance tickets, dinner dates, corsages, new clothes and a lettermen’s jacket to begin with.
She says that she and her husband never expected to pay so much. Nevertheless, it has been the most fun that she has ever had spending money.

**From the Trenches**

Janice M. Peters is an elementary music teacher in the Frontier (NY) Central School District. She has a Bachelor's in Music and has been teaching for over 20 years. Her only training in special education has been attending two separate workshops. Everyday she is faced with mainstreamed classes in the second and fourth grades and consequently, inclusion children.

Her school, and Frontier as a district, does not have homerooms that are mainstreamed. All special education children learn in special education classrooms with teachers and other professionals that are specifically trained. Only the specials; music, art, physical education and library are inclusive. That is, special education classrooms divide during the specials time. A fourth of the class joins a non-inclusive class in music, while one-fourth of the class joins another non-inclusive class in art.

Mrs. Peters' teaching is not affected by inclusion. However, her modeling, practice, and guidance are. She refuses to "water down," or omit challenging parts of her lessons, just because of mainstreamed children. She feels that it will hinder the rest of her students. What she does do, however, is check those children with special needs first, and two or three more times during the lesson. She has to take time to make sure that they understand what is going on when other children are ready to go on to the next lesson.

Each inclusive child in her classroom has a student helper from the non-inclusive class. This helps a little but does not solve her problems. Her inclusive children often lose their attention when talking to their neighbor or blurtling out. Mrs. Peters attributes this to their frustration. She teaches lessons, especially in the fourth grade, that involve reading the textbook, specific pitches and technical musicality. These tasks are sometimes hard for the non-inclusive children, making the tasks impossible for the inclusive children. Many of her mainstreamed children cannot read and write.

She feels educationally non-effective when it comes to teaching these children. With very little special education training, she doesn't really know what to do to help, other than what her instincts tell her. She feels that the non-inclusive children do not pull up the inclusive children like the program is geared to do. Unfortunately, she observes the exact opposite of inclusion's intended effect everyday.

This program was given to her and her fellow teachers. The Special Education Coordinator in the district wants to eliminate special education. Mrs. Peters was told that this was going to happen before she, or any of her colleagues, were asked for their opinions. She is not an inclusion supporter. She dislikes the program, aside from the obvious problems, because inclusion has become a group activity. Once geared towards individuals that could handle inclusive classrooms, it is now geared towards every child that is labeled "special needs." She concludes that "It's an easy way out."

Thomas E. Peters has been an Assistant Superintendent for the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo (NY) for about ten years. Mr. Peters has been in the field of education for twenty-eight years and holds a Bachelor's and Master's in Elementary Education and a Certificate in School Administration. He holds no special education degree or training. Mr. Peters is faced with the administrative side of inclusion on a regular basis.

Even though Mr. Peters is not directly involved with the implementation of inclusion, he is constantly kept in the know about situations throughout the Diocese. His most recent case, and the most documented, involves a boy with Downs Syndrome. This fifth grader
started in Kindergarten and has worked his way up, through all the grades, helped by a untrained personal aide.

This is his most prominent case; it has been documented by many other school districts and local media as a success story. Mr. Peters also oversees the direction of other inclusive classrooms that have less distinct disabilities, including mild learning disabilities and attention disorders. These cases are easier to deal with in the classroom and are socially effective.

Mr. Peters stresses the background work that needs to be done to make inclusion work. Teachers need to know a little about the type of student they are receiving. They should have some special education training and should always use the support group formed by peers and colleagues. Mr. Peters also says that inclusion does not work if a district gives less than 100% cooperation. If inclusion is dealt with and administered properly, it is a program that works.

Mr. Peters believes that inclusion helps both children with special needs and those without. Special needs children succeed in a classroom where their peers are allowed to see them. Socially, inclusion is excellent. The non-inclusive children are afforded the opportunity to interact and get to know children that they would normally shrug off or make fun off. Inclusion eliminates many of the negative stereotypes and rumors that are associated with students with special needs. Mr. Peters is an inclusion supporter because those students with special needs, allowing them to do better, while growing in a more socially acceptable environment, receive the motivation generated by non-inclusive children.

**Conclusion**

"The place for a child to solve real life problems is in real life." This is an interesting quote that makes complete sense. Inclusive classrooms work, but are strongly opposed by some teachers, administrators, and parents. Children are entitled to learn with their peers. Students in a classroom need to be engaged in learning that is appropriate to their skills and needs. Children need to take the responsibility for helping each other to learn and grow. If these three principles can be met, inclusion can be a great success.

To fully understand the notion of inclusive classrooms and inclusive schools, we must believe that diversity helps students and teachers. As our society and neighborhoods become more and more diverse, we need to learn to celebrate those differences instead of shrugging them off. All students differ. Why should we put those that differ more in other settings? We could split children into classes based on race, gender, creed, family background, motor skills, and food preferences. We don't do that, though, because it would be unfair. Yet, education splits up those children with disabilities from those children that do not have disabilities. Cooperative, inclusive classrooms are the way of the future and they meet the social and academic needs of all students because they create supportive educational environments for all children.
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