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Inclusion in Education

By: Theresa Hubbard



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Meet Johnny. Johnny is in the fourth grade at a public elementary school. He gets high grades in all of his classes and is very popular among the children. He loves nature and can find beauty in anything in the world around him. He seems to be

a happy kid, right? So what's the catch? When Johnny was three years old, he was diagnosed with autism.

Ever since he entered school, he has been put in "special" classes with other children who have disabilities just like him. Johnny is therefore separated from all other children his age and those children in turn frown upon Johnny and make fun of him. Johnny's situation seems to work on the surface, but is this really the right place for him? Should he be included in a public school classroom?

The inclusion debate has been prevalent in schools for the past few decades. As it exists now, the debate is actually more in its later stages of development. Because of this, the current state of the debate is more along the lines of how to incorporate inclusion into the public schools. However, there may still be resistance present within the integration process. This paper will discuss the debate surrounding the inclusion of children with disabilities in the public school classroom as it exists today, making sure to cover suspected resistances and possible methods of how to start the inclusion process.

What is inclusion? We must first look at the root of the word "include." "Include" is a verb that means, "to put in or consider as part of a group or category" (Braham, & Steinmetz, 1993). Inclusion holds much of the same meaning. Inclusion is when a teacher teaches *all* students, not just those that are "educable" (Villa, & Thousand, 1995). It is the consideration of every student. Inclusion is not just an action; it is also an attitude and a belief system. It is a sense of dedication to giving every child in a public school classroom a feeling of belonging, whether he or she is disabled or not.

History and the Law

The idea of inclusion first came into play in 1975 when Congress passed the Education for all Handicapped Children Act, (Public Law 94-142) (Kluth, Villa, & Thousand, 2002). That law, later re-titled the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), set forth six specific mandates that still play a role in the debate today. The six mandates are:

- 1) *Zero Reject/Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE)*: each state is required to educate all children ages 6-17 (Houghton Mifflin).
- 2) *Nondiscriminatory Identification and Evaluation*: sets forth a few actions

- that attempt to avoid misdiagnosis and placement of students.
- 3) *Individualized Education Program (IEP)*: a program must be written to meet the needs of each individual student with a disability.
- 4) *Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)*: every child, whether disabled or not, should learn in an environment that is best for him or her.
- 5) *Due Process*: ensures liability and fairness for students with disabilities and their parents.
- 6) *Parental Participation*: the parents are given the “right to be included” (Houghton Mifflin).

The most well-known mandate of the six set forth by IDEA is enforcement of a least-restrictive environment, since it is the one that most closely states the idea of inclusion in its definition. The law specifically states that all children should learn together in one classroom unless the accommodations necessary for those with disabilities cannot be provided (Houghton Mifflin). The LRE is the setting that is most appropriate to a child’s learning needs.

Because the LRE is the most well known mandate, it is also the most argued among scholars. Steven Taylor, an analyst of the controversy, did not hesitate to state his opinion about LRE. He said it “legitimizes settings that are restrictive, equates intensity of services with the degree of amount of integration ... and it sanctions infringements on people’s rights.” He also argues that LRE is based on the “readiness model,” which is a way of testing students to evaluate whether they are capable of being in a fully-inclusive classroom or not (Villa, & Thousand, 1995).

Despite Taylor’s criticism, LRE proved to be worthwhile for a limited amount of time. It resulted in the introduction and use of mainstreaming. Mainstreaming was an attempt at integrating or ending the isolation of people with disabilities (Villa, & Thousand, 1995). Students who were formerly in special education classrooms were placed in general education classrooms. This action contributed to the jump-starting of inclusion.

Although mainstreaming seemed to be the perfect way to begin integrating students with disabilities into general education settings, it proved to possess many flaws. Integrating students in general education classrooms often led to a student’s partial enrollment in a class. This meant that the students with disabilities were integrated into the general education classroom for some subjects but were separated from their general education class for others, which only added to their feelings of segregation. The students were sent mixed signals because they were told they were competent enough

to enroll in a class of non-disabled students for only a limited amount of time. Mainstreaming often required students to fit the “readiness model,” which Taylor criticizes above. Many students with disabilities were thrown into general education classes without the proper accommodations needed in order to learn successfully. They ended up failing the classes due to poor preparation, which ultimately marked the failure of mainstreaming.

In an attempt to pick up the slack created by the failure of mainstreaming, the “regular education initiative” was created by the U.S. Department of Education in 1986. The regular education initiative required that general education and special education teachers work together to provide necessary support for all students in a fully integrated class (Villa, & Thousand, 1995). To this day, educators of all kinds are working together to make inclusion successful.

The Debate

At this point, Johnny is in a classroom with many other children his age who do not have disabilities. He has his own personal aide to help him whenever he might need it. He also has a teacher who has worked with his previous special education teachers, so that he and his peers can all learn together and benefit. The question now is if all children really gain from the fully-inclusive classroom. Is the inclusive environment detrimental or beneficial to Johnny? Is the inclusive environment detrimental or beneficial to the other students? Does inclusion really help every student enough to make it worth the extra time and energy to make it happen?

The Pros

Overall, research has proven that the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms is beneficial for every student in the class. Disabled students prosper for obvious reasons: They are no longer separated from their peers and can therefore feel as if they belong in a non-disabled world. They form relationships with non-disabled students in their communities, and learn on a different level that is more in conjunction with their own age group (Sharpe, 2005).

However, disabled students are not the only ones who benefit from inclusion. According to Art Shapiro, the most notable advantage of being a student without disabilities in a fully inclusive class is personal academic improvement. Shapiro, a professor of special education at Kean University, who wrote *Everybody Belongs: Changing Negative Attitudes Toward Classmates with Disabilities* (Sharpe, 2005), argues that when students with disabilities are included, a teacher is more likely to explain the curriculum in ways

that are uncomplicated and easy for everyone to understand. On a social standard, children in inclusive settings are more likely to “learn to accept individual differences.” According to Shapiro, “The best way to help children overcome their misconceptions about kids who have disabilities is to bring them together in integrated settings.” Finally, just like their friends with disabilities, students without disabilities develop new friendships with people they may not initially choose to befriend (Sharpe, 2005).

Furthermore, students are not the only parties that profit from the inclusive classroom. According to Shapiro, parents of children with disabilities are able to participate in their child’s educational environment because the school is closer to their homes. If a child with a disability were to attend a special education facility separate from the neighborhood school, it would be very difficult for parents to participate because of the distance between their residence and the facility (Sharpe, 2005). Parental participation also benefits the school, providing more volunteers, chaperones, etc.

Teachers also tend to come out on top when it comes to inclusive environments. When teaching in a classroom with students who are disabled and those who are not, general and special education teachers must collaborate to make the inclusive setting successful (SFUSD, 2005). This results in dividing the planning and teaching, making it easier for each educator to function in a class of diverse learners. More energy toward teamwork is needed among the teachers, but less individual work is required by each teacher because all of the roles that one teacher took on before are then divided among a few.

The Cons

Despite all these properties, many teachers are wary of inclusion and some researchers do not believe it should be established within the schools yet. Teachers and administrators resist installing fully-inclusive classrooms because it requires them to make many changes. They not only need to add to their curriculums and teaching styles, they must also change them to accommodate the different learning types in their classrooms. A teacher might also resist the establishment of inclusion because he or she has taught a child with a disability in the past. The teacher then knows how difficult it can be to serve the individual child and the class as a whole with many different attitudes among the students (McLesky, & Waldron, 2000).

John McDonnell, chairman of the Department of Special Education in

the Graduate School of Education at the University of Utah, does not believe inclusion should be established in the schools yet. He thinks that for the time being, more research on the topic is needed. The research he proposes should introduce technology that can help students with disabilities do well in a general education class. He also believes there is a need to better educate teachers so they can serve every child in a fully inclusive environment. McDonnell believes there is a need for well-trained general education teachers, as well as special education teachers. Finally, he argues that in order to employ well-educated teachers there is a need for better “education” colleges. “Colleges of education need to begin to be more aggressive in redesigning their teacher education programs to provide novice teachers with this common knowledge base and set of experiences” explained McDonnell as cited in Sharpe’s article.

Common Arguments and Counter-Arguments

Even though the law cannot be changed, administrators still encounter resistance when trying to implement a fully-inclusive environment in a public school. These resistances are shown by the parents of the students with or without disabilities, the community, and among the teachers.

One topic that is often questioned is the cost of the project. Will inclusion cost more? The IDEA is only 40% funded by the national government, leaving 60% to be paid for by local governments. All of the money is needed to fund each of the mandates set forth by the IDEA as well as pay the salaries of special education teachers. “There is no way to cut back on the funds because the teachers will leave if they are not paid,” states Margaret Hubbard, an administrator and educator at St. Mary of the Mills School in Laurel, Maryland. Also the schools will not be able to accommodate students with disabilities unless all of the mandates are funded. Therefore, with the addition of the IDEA, taxpayers will have to pay more in order to give the local governments enough money to fund the 60 percent not funded by the national government.

However, when it comes to the difference in cost between a special education facility and a general education facility, the price is mostly balanced. The money used to pay for the special education facility will simply be carried over to the public schools when the facilities close. The money that was formerly used to pay for teachers and resources in the special education schools will then be used to pay for special education staffing and resources in the public schools.

Another claim that community members present is the idea that inclusion slows down the children without disabilities. They feel as though, in an attempt to present the information at a pace the students with disabilities can handle, the teachers must cut back the curriculum. In this case, the students would learn less and the teachers would teach at a slow pace that would bore the students without disabilities. A parent may think that his or her child is too smart for the slow pace and will request to put this child in an accelerated program that the child may not be able to handle.

While all of these parental and community concerns are quite valid, they are also unnecessary. Teachers do not have to cut back on the curriculum; they simply need to manipulate it so that they can teach at a slower pace but still manage to teach all of the material that is in the curriculum. Robert Marzano, a Senior Scholar at Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning in Aurora, Colorado, and author of 20 books and more than 150 essays on instruction in the fields of reading, writing, and others, claims that if teachers follow the “best teaching practices,” they should be able to successfully manipulate the curriculum to work for themselves and their classes. Best teaching practices are strategies used by teachers to successfully meet all of the needs of all the students in the classroom. Several books, such as Robert Marzano’s work with several other scholars in education, *A Handbook for Classroom Instruction that Works*, have been written on these practices and how to implement them into the teachers’ classrooms.

One question that is asked within the schools is whether the schools have enough money to support the implementation of the IDEA. Teachers often need to purchase new materials for their classrooms each year. To compensate for a fully inclusive classroom, teachers also need to get materials that make it easier to meet the needs of every one of their students. This sometimes takes a great deal of time and creativity on the teacher’s part. “When I had Ben in my class, I needed to be creative. I went out and bought packs of paper and markers so I could make easy-to-read books,” comments Hubbard, thinking back to when she had a child with Down Syndrome in her class. “I would draw pictures and make one sentence captions for each, making it easier to read. It was very easy; however it did take a lot of time. I also did need to spend some of my own money, but it was cheap, so I didn’t mind all that much. Teachers in similar situations need to be willing to put this kind of time into teaching their students with disabilities.”

This kind of time and dedication relates again to the best teaching practices. The best teaching practices include dedication to each student and being

able to take the time to identify the ways that each child can learn and what materials can be used to successfully teach each child. There is also a need for support and encouragement from the school's administrative faculty. The administrators need to promote outside planning and work as well as devotion to every student and his or her specific way of learning. Including students with disabilities in the general education classrooms is a team effort; the teachers cannot do everything themselves.

One last resistance that is often touched upon is the fact that every student cannot be assessed the same way. Teachers need to be able to assess each of their students differently. Does this mean that students with disabilities take easier tests than those children without disabilities? If so, is this fair?

It is true that every student should be assessed differently, but this does not necessarily mean that one party will need to take a harder test than another party. Teachers need to teach using a "standards-based curriculum," which is when general rules are set that provide the teacher with specific skills each student needs to obtain in order to do well. The teacher will then assess each child on whether they have obtained the skills that are set by the standards-based curriculum, keeping in mind that these are general rules and each child may do it differently. For instance, the standards-based curriculum may say that each child needs to write a friendly letter using a proper greeting, message, and closing. There are no specifications set about the length of the letter or what the letter regards. Each child will turn in letters of different lengths and all saying something unique to their personality. The teacher needs to look at the letter and determine whether the guidelines given were met. Is there a proper greeting, message and closing? After all of the components have been identified, the teacher can properly assess the students' performance on the assignment.

Teachers also need to be able to design tests and teaching practices based on the talents and interests of each student. The idea of multiple intelligences comes into play. Multiple intelligences are when one person is not smart in one subject, but is completely gifted in another. Hubbard claims that James, a student of hers, possessed severe learning disabilities. "[He] had such a hard time reading, but was very talented in the arts. Since this was the case, why would I make him read in order to test him? Couldn't I just test him through the fine arts?"

The Current State

Since the IDEA was passed in 1975, there has not been much debate about whether inclusion is worthwhile or not. The law states that schools need

to make a move toward including all students, disabled or not. The big question now is how do the schools do this?

Researchers have developed a number of theories that can help schools implement top-of-the-line inclusion programs. McDonnell suggests that students with disabilities be spread out among teachers to make this inclusion easier for teachers to handle. He also proposes that students with disabilities receive additional support so they can be successful in the general education classrooms. Finally, he recommends that teachers use many different teaching strategies such as “curriculum and instructional adaptations, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and layered curriculum” (Sharpe, 2005).

The Utah Education Association (UEA) also has some pointers on how to make inclusion work. Similar to McDonnell, the UEA suggests students be provided with extra supports and services and professional development for teachers and administrators. They also offer the idea that teachers need to have time to “plan, meet, create, and evaluate the students together,” as well as collaborate with parents and administrators to keep everyone up to date on the status of the students. The UEA recommends that class sizes be reduced based on the severity of the needs of students with disabilities. Lastly, the UEA points out the need for adequate funding so schools will be able to form programs based on the needs of the students, not on the availability of money (Cromwell, 2004).

The Conclusion

Although the IDEA and inclusion in general seem pretty far along in their growth, there are still many glitches that need to be worked out. The funds, for example, need to be provided. Because the IDEA is a federal law, the federal government must ensure it is completely funded. It should not be left up to the local governments to pay for the slack left by the federal government.

Another issue is that teachers are not all being taught the same way, even when these teachers are willing to make inclusion work in their classrooms. Teachers must be educated in teaching students with disabilities and many are receiving this necessary education. Because one teacher might seek an education at a different institution than another teacher, each will get a different education. This could be positive because it gives collaborating teachers different opinions and views, but it could also be negative because the views may be conflicting. These conflicting views may make it more

difficult for them to work with each other.

Johnny's teachers worked past all of these bumps in the road in order to fully include him. They worked together and spent a lot of time thinking of new strategies to help Johnny learn in their general education classes. His inclusion was quite successful.

Johnny is now in college and hopes to pursue a career in computer science. He goes to a four-year university where he lives and attends classes with other students with diverse educational backgrounds. Without inclusion and the decelerated classroom pace, Johnny may not have been able to get to where he is today. Because he was given the opportunity to participate in fully inclusive settings and because he was given the aide and support he needed to succeed, Johnny has grown into a successful and independent learner. He requires no extensive professional help and is able to attend school just like every other student.

As is evident in Johnny's case and many others, inclusion can work to help children with disabilities survive in the real world and learn like other students his age who do not have disabilities. With more development and enthusiasm from associated parties, inclusion can become very strong and worthwhile, creating a feeling of belonging in each child with a disability. §

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