Inclusion in Public Education

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It’s a typical weekday in mid-winter for Michigan students. In one classroom, boys and girls from all backgrounds sit at tables clustered together with five of their peers. As their teacher asks them questions, a majority of the students dutifully raise their hands, impatient to show that they know the answer. But what a bystander, someone who has not worked with students before, may not catch is that there are a handful of students who do not raise their hands and participate. Maybe they fidget with a toy they brought from home. Maybe they stare blankly into the white space of the board behind their teacher because they cannot force their brains to pay attention. Maybe they listen intently but cannot comprehend exactly what their teacher is saying.

In another classroom, students play contently with one another, sharing trucks and puzzles and great stories of airplanes soaring in the sky or submarines sinking along the deep. Every student gets along. They fit in with their peers. And when it comes time to learn, every student feels comfortable to attempt situations that may be uncomfortable because of the room’s environment. Both are classrooms within the same building, with students of the same age and backgrounds. So what makes these two classrooms so different?

Both rooms include students that are part of Special Education. Students in both rooms are being subjected to the Least Restrictive Environment Clause of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that was first passed in 1975. But why is there such a noticeable difference between the classrooms? The clause, applying to all public schools, states that “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are to be educated with children who are not disabled” (“IDEA,” 2015). So that begs the question—does the mandate from the federal government align with what research tells us? Is mainstreaming students with disabilities effective (like in the second classroom), or does the decreased one on one time with teachers actually harm their education, much like the first classroom?

Support for Inclusion

For years, educators and legislators have been discussing the impact of the Least Restrictive Environment, or LRE, on students with disabilities. Kathleen Whitbread, Associate Professor of Education at the University of Saint Joseph, supports inclusion. According to Dr. Whitbread, “Although separate classes, with lower student to teacher ratios, controlled environments, and specially trained staff would seem to offer benefits to a child with a disability, research fails to demonstrate the effectiveness of such programs...There is mounting evidence that, other than a smaller class size, there is little that is special about the special education system.” Whitbread also indicates that the negative effects of separating children with disabilities from their peers far outweigh any benefit to smaller classes. (Whitbread, 2005)

First, It seems to be that the environment of a general education classroom helps all students stay engaged, regardless of ability. It is clear to us now that no two students learn alike. Because of these differences, a variety of different teaching practices such as auditory, visual and physical to name a few, keep students better engaged and interested in the material. Mainstreaming students in special education allows them to be subjected to different facets of learning that can stimulate not only their thinking, but their attention span as well.
The History of Inclusion
A survey conducted in 1994 by the American Federation of Teachers polled teachers and parents of students with disabilities and asked their thoughts about inclusion. This was a time when the stride for full inclusion was just gaining momentum. Some parents of students with more severe disabilities stated they were “concerned about the opportunities their children will have to develop basic life skills in a regular classroom setting. They [were] also cautious about inclusion because of fears that their children [would] be ridiculed by other students” (SEDL, 1995).

However, evidence now shows that inclusive education for students with disabilities actually creates a unified and welcoming environment for all students involved. An environment fostered in acceptance, created with support from a teacher, helps these students feel comfortable in putting forth effort and attempting assigned tasks to the best of their ability. This also helps general education students learn the importance of tolerance and helping behavior within themselves. Additionally, inclusion supports the development of peer relationships between students in a class. In Anne Hocut’s, a research professor at the University of Miami, study in 1996, many educators were concerned with the social lives of students with learning disabilities and suggested their constant removal from the classroom to receive services contributed to their lack of membership in the classroom’s social community (Hocut, 1996).

Criticisms of Inclusion
So, it seems Whitbread has a point. There is a substantial amount of evidence that supports inclusion for a number of disabilities for a variety of reasons. In general, students with disabilities in mainstreamed classrooms show improved test performance, grades, behavior, motivation, peer relationships and goal-reaching abilities. But does a student with a Learning Disability (LD) react to inclusion the same way a student with ADHD does? What about a student with an Emotional Impairment? Evidence suggests not exactly.

Anne Hocut believes that placement is not the key factor educators should be focused on. She believes that classroom environment and the quality of instruction have “more impact than placement on the success of students with disabilities (Hocut, 1996), as does the individual student. For example, a study done with students with a learning disability showed that inclusion was not beneficial. The study researched 11 poor-reading students longitudinally in both general and special education classrooms. Researchers Marston, Fuchs and Fernstrom found that these students “gained nearly twice as many new reading words per week in special education as they had in general education”, and that “students with learning disabilities who had been in special education classes and returned to general education made small but steady gains while in special education, but made no gains in general education” (Rands, St. Jules, Bartlett, Litt, Lee & Wentz, 2007).

Hocut’s research does show, however, the positive impact of inclusion on the education of students with disabilities if the general education and special education teachers work together in the best interest of the student. In her study she says: “Students with disabilities in cooperative schools had significantly higher achievement with regard to reading vocabulary and reading comprehension” (Hocut 1996). So in general, when there is an open and communicative environment between the individuals involved in
IDEA or Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was first passed in 1975 to ensure that those with disabilities had access to free and public education, just like everyone else. Since 1975, IDEA has been revised three times. The Least Restrictive Environment Clause, adopted as a part of IDEA, ensures that children with disabilities are educated with their non-disabled peers to the largest extent possible. It means that students with disabilities have equal access to the general education curriculum and programs that non-disabled students have access to.

the child’s life, the educational system of inclusion is most effective.

Inclusion’s Effect on Educators

Some critics of inclusion note that the theory doesn’t address the impact of inclusion on educators. In 2007, research conducted by Rands, Jules and Bartlett, found that general education teachers believed that they had the appropriate training and background to teach students with disabilities but they strongly opposed the notion that all students in special education can thrive and successfully adapt to the general education environment.

Additionally, Jennifer Cassady, a researcher at Xavier University in Cincinnati, OH, conducted another study in 2011. Her results showed that though most general education teachers were willing to accommodate students with disabilities, their confidence and willingness fluctuated as the severity of the student’s disability increased. This suggests there is a flaw in the educational system of teachers, as they don’t feel as prepared when their students’ disabilities are severe.

Conclusions

In general, inclusion has received a lot of widespread support since the 1990s. However, the biggest criticism of inclusion has been its lack of individuation across different types of students. To assert that all students with different disabilities learn the same way has been the biggest pitfall of practical inclusion. The more time a student in special education spends in a general education classroom, the less one on one time they have with a teacher that can address their specific needs. However, evidence supports inclusion as far as its positive impacts on the social and emotional development of students.

Is inclusion the end-all solution to educating exceptional children? Not even close. Other factors such as parental support, teacher involvement, school resources as well as the temperament of the child all play a part. However, one thing we do know is that students in inclusive education can develop better social skills and emotional intelligence in inclusive classrooms.

References


