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# Inclusion of special needs students into the regular education classroom

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# Inclusion of special needs students into the regular education classroom

## **Abstract**

Is inclusion really the best environment for students with disabilities? Inclusion remains a controversial topic of discussion in the world of education. Since the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), discussing the idea of inclusion has become more acceptable as school personal become willing to create inclusive classroom settings. This paper will examine the ideas behind inclusion including the history and evolution of inclusion. Throughout this paper the focus will be placed on inclusion issues in the classroom, as well as present various perspectives from individuals involved in the inclusion process. Research cited in this review suggests that when used appropriately, inclusion promotes academic achievement and social development for the student with a disability and the regular education student as well.

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INCLUSION OF SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS INTO  
THE REGULAR EDUCATION CLASSROOM

A Graduate Review

Submitted to the

Department of Education

Division of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

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Masters of Arts in Education

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By

Jennifer S. Hemann

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has been approved as meeting the research requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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### Abstract

Is inclusion really the best environment for students with disabilities? Inclusion remains a controversial topic of discussion in the world of education. Since the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), discussing the idea of inclusion has become more acceptable as school personal become willing to create inclusive classroom settings. This paper will examine the ideas behind inclusion including the history and evolution of inclusion. Throughout this paper the focus will be placed on inclusion issues in the classroom, as well as present various perspectives from individuals involved in the inclusion process. Research cited in this review suggests that when used appropriately, inclusion promotes academic achievement and social development for the student with a disability and the regular education student as well.

## Introduction

According to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2003), inclusion is defined in the education sense as, "teaching challenged children in regular classes, the practice of educating students with special needs in regular classes for all or nearly all of the day, instead of in special education classes" (p. 630). For educators, the term, inclusion, is seen as a more positive term used to describe efforts to include students with special needs into the regular education classroom. "Inclusion can mean welcoming children with disabilities into the curriculum, environment, social interaction, and self concept of the school" (Smith, 1998, p.18). The topic of inclusion is a growing issue in schools today. Inclusion affects teachers, administrators, parents, and most significantly, students. Many schools have recently been changing their views on this issue and have begun integrating students with disabilities into the regular education classrooms full time. But is this beneficial for all students? Strong opinions exist for both viewpoints.

The hope behind full inclusion for students with disabilities is that if a student with disabilities is in the same class as the "average" student, he or she will be more likely to perform at a higher level (Defina, 2003). With full inclusion, students with disabilities are able to go into the regular education classroom with or without an aide in the room to give more one-on-one support to the student with the disabilities. The aide often helps the student with reading assignments, math skills, written language components, listening skills, focusing and providing encouragement for the student. Accommodations that the student with disabilities may need are provided in the regular education classroom. While in the regular education classroom the student with

disabilities may be motivated to perform at the pace of the rest of the students and fit in as much as possible.

On the flip side, students with learning disabilities may experience frustration due to the content of the material and fast pace expectations in the regular education classroom. This frustration may cause feelings of inferiority and possibly behavior concerns, or simply, a student shutting down and not trying at all (Mercer & Mercer, 2001).

There are both positive and negative factors to consider with full or partial inclusion. Students who are learning disabled in some way generally benefit from the regular classroom where they can be a part of various activities (Bos & Vaughn, 2002). For example, in my school a child was placed in an inclusive setting who had a very explosive personality. Noises, changes in routine and other various other classroom activities could lead to an instant breakdown of this child's behaviors. He would explode into tantrums and become fiercely defiant at any given minute. This was a complicated situation where full inclusion was questionable.

However, there were some positive aspects to this child being fully included. Although stressful and disruptive at times for the educator and other students, this particular child's academics improved in the area of independent learning. His social skills at recess and in classroom activities showed significant progress. His paraprofessional was able to spend more time assisting other students, rather than working to calm down or remove the child from the classroom. This student's classmates were supportive and reached out to him when it was difficult for his aide and teacher to reach him. The friendships and positive role models that were displayed for this student

were great examples for this child to be a part of and to see. This particular child was eventually transferred to a special school where his specific needs for learning and behavior could be handled in a more restricted environment.

When schools are looking to move to full or partial inclusion they need to consider a variety of aspects. Educators need to consider the technical aspects as well as the social aspects that will be involved when implementing inclusion into the classrooms (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 2002). Whether we like it or not, there is a stigma attached to words like “special education” and “resource room.” When a student attends a regular education classroom accompanied by a teacher’s aide or paraprofessional, extra attention is focused on this student. Most children, no matter their age, want to fit in with their peer group. Students with disabilities may feel overwhelmed by the content of the material which they are expected to learn and the pace in which this material is presented. If an individual feels he or she is not capable of understanding something, this individual may lose his or her motivation to put forth his or her best effort (Alderman, 2004).

In the case regarding the student with the explosive behaviors, it is possible that such a student can be a distraction to the rest of the class. However, the primary rationale for inclusion or mainstreaming continues to reside in the idea that students with disabilities can benefit from inclusion whenever possible, within the regular education classroom (Smith, 1998). This rationale is part of a federal mandate, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law with provisions for students with disabilities to be educated within the least restrictive environment (LRE). According to the purpose behind IDEA and LRE, the removal of students from the regular education

classroom should only be done if a student is unable to make reasonable, successful gains within the classroom (Mostert & Crockett, 2000).

Those involved in the inclusion process must recognize that inclusion not only affects the student who is being integrated, but also affects all other students in the classroom (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 2002), so questions arise. Because of a behavior disability, will this child be a distraction to the rest of the class and affect over-all achievement? Because of a learning disability, will this child impede the academic progress of the class as a whole? Will the included student be accepted by peers, creating a sense of community within the classroom environment or will the included student be made fun of, creating a very hostile classroom environment for all students? Is inclusion of special needs students really the best method of instruction for all students? Are educators considering the federal guidelines cited in IDEA, correlating all the information in order to create the least restrictive environment for our students to become successful, life learners?

These questions along with many others, address factors which need to be carefully considered before integrating students with special needs. This paper reviews the complex issues that must be taken into consideration when educators make decisions regarding inclusion.

### Methodology

I used a wide variety of sources while researching inclusion. These sources came from the Internet, professional journals, books, as well as, personal experiences from my own classroom, colleagues, and parents working and living with children with disabilities. During the research process, I reviewed numerous resources including the

Web, professional journals, and textbooks. I found the amount of information related to this issue to be vast and overwhelming. While reviewing this information, I selected the best sources related to the history behind inclusion, laws dealing with students with special needs as well as the integration of these students into the classroom.

### Analysis and Discussion

Why do we have this movement towards inclusion? Our public education system actually was designed on the idea of inclusion, not necessarily the inclusion of students with disabilities, but the inclusion of students from all areas of our society.

#### *History*

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States became home to people from many different nations all over the world. The political leaders looked for effective ways to educate all children by values that were shared with the rest of society (National Council on Disability, 2005).

Horace Mann, an educational reformer, proposed a solution to these social problems (as cited in National Council on Disability, 2005). Mann suggested that communities establish schools which would be funded by tax dollars. Mann's belief was when children from various backgrounds, including socially, religiously, as well as, economically diverse backgrounds were educated together, they would learn acceptance and respect for each other. Common schools taught common values that included self-discipline and tolerance for others. These public schools would work toward a common goal to socialize children, improve interpersonal relationships, and improve social conditions (National Council on Disability, 2005). These schools became mandatory for all children to attend and brought together children from all walks of life in American

society. This inclusion of individuals from all areas of society was the foundation behind the idea of public schools. The idealistic concept behind this schooling was that if children were all taught common values, they would be able to work together harmoniously in our society.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century institutions which specialized in serving people with problems such as mental and physical disabilities, deafness, blindness, and mental retardation, among others, were created to house these individuals and keep them separate from the rest of society. Many times these institutions were placed in rural and isolated settings designed to remove the individuals from their previous environments (Dorn, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 1996).

#### *Laws Related to Special Education*

Public education took a huge step in the civil rights decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, in 1954 (National Council on Disabilities, 2005). In this case, it was decided that students had the right, and could not be denied access to free, equal education on the basis of race. Segregated schools were banished from public education. The decision made in *Brown v. Board of Education* created a domino effect with parents of children with disabilities. Families with children having disabilities felt it was unfair for their children to be segregated and began to bring lawsuits against their school districts for excluding and segregating children with disabilities. This court decision was a catalyst for issues of equality for various groups, and offered the idea that all children have the right to an equal education. Segregated education is not equal. Therefore, all children should be integrated into equal opportunities classrooms.

In the early 1970's, two federal court cases played a major role in special education. *Pennsylvania Assn. for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (National Council on Disabilities, 2005), also known as *PARC*, dealt with school districts who were excluding children who were labeled as mentally retarded. This case determined that it was more advantageous for students with special needs to be placed in a regular education class rather than to be placed in a special class specifically for children with special needs (Smith, 1998). *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (National Council on Disabilities, 2005) was a separate case which dealt with suspending or expelling children with disabilities from public schools in the District of Columbia. In this case, the district's defense depended heavily on the high cost of educating children with disabilities. This case mandated that when placing students with disabilities, services such as the right to a hearing concerning the placement, the right to appeal the placement decision, access to all records concerning the child, and written notification to parents informing them of changes and further steps that may be taken in the placement process were made available to parents and guardians. During this case, the idea of mainstreaming was brought to the forefront. This proposal reinforced the idea that students with special needs should be placed in regular education classrooms, providing it is the best environment for the students (Smith, 1998). These cases brought attention to the issue of educating students with special needs in a way that was appropriate and non-discriminatory towards the inclusion process.

In 1975 a new public law called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was introduced (National Council on Disability, 2005). This law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA in 1997 and was re-authorized in

2004. The major components of this law include the following: free, appropriate education for students with disabilities; integration for students with disabilities into regular education classrooms as much as possible; individualized plans for all students who qualify for special education services, also known as an IEP, outlining what is best for the student; active involvement of parents of students with disabilities in all decisions made concerning their child's education.

Finally, states meeting the requirements of this law (PL 94-142) will receive funds from the state to help cover costs of special services. This law also replaced the phrase, "handicapped child," with the phrase "child with a disability." The term, least restrictive environment, or LRE, was also initiated during the revamping of this law when it came to placing students with special needs into the regular education classrooms. (National Council on Disability, 2005).

### *Special Education Guidelines*

Throughout the years as special education has developed, the guidelines that define the qualifications of students needing special services have also become more specific. When looking to place a student into special education, there are several steps that must be followed prior to the actual placement of the student. Additionally, district guidelines may vary in required prerequisites that must be followed. Educators must be aware of these procedures and expectations preceding the problem solving steps.

Children may be referred for services for a variety of reasons. A child may be referred because he or she already has a disability that is diagnosed and is in need of services for assistance. Other children may be referred by parents or teachers because of struggles with behaviors, physical limitations, or struggles in academic areas. This may

come in the form of a written request for further testing to see what or if the child needs any assistance (Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, 2007).

In the Allamakee Community School District in Northeast Iowa, the first step in the referral process is to complete a Stage One problem solving document (Allamakee Community School District, 2003). Included in this document are the reasons why the classroom teacher feels the student is struggling in the specified area. Parents must be contacted and kept informed during and throughout each phase of the referral. During this stage it is a good idea to contact the school psychologist to keep them informed of your concerns. The school psychologist may also want to schedule in-class observations where he or she can monitor the targeted student working in a variety of situations. Samples of student work will need to be collected for reference during this process. After the school psychologist observes, he or she may suggest modifications or adaptations that may help the student in the classroom. These suggestions will then be implemented in the classroom to see whether making these changes will enable the student to perform at a more successful level. If making these adaptations produce successful results, the teacher is asked to continue to watch this student for any further concerns, but to wait before moving to the next stage. However, if these accommodations and adaptations are put to use, but do not produce the wanted results, the teacher is then required to move to Stage Two.

During the second stage, parents are contacted to communicate further steps taken concerning the progress of the student (Allamakee Community School District, 2003). An explanation should be provided regarding the steps taken, as well as what steps are being taken to further assist the child's needs in the classroom. During Stage Two, the

school psychologist will make further observations in classroom settings, but will also pull the student from the classroom for further assessments.

Assessment and eligibility are the next steps within the placement process (Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, 2007). For the purpose of this paper these factors have been combined, as they coincide with each other. As stated, the school psychologist will spend more time observing and will move onto the assessment phase. The assessments must be completed to determine what services, if any, the child qualifies for. The assessments should be connected to all areas connected to the possible disability. For example, there may be testing on cognitive, social and emotional concerns, psychomotor, self-help, behavioral, speech, and language, as well as vocational needs and abilities (Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, 2007).

After the school psychologist has assessed the child, a meeting should be set up between all parties involved to inform and discuss with the parents regarding the procedures taken within the problem solving stages (Smith, 1998). Individuals that may attend this IEP meeting may include the following:

1. The parents of the child
2. Possibly the child
3. The school psychologist
4. The student's teacher
5. The special education teacher
6. Any title or pullout program teachers who have worked with the student
7. The administrator

During the meeting, the school psychologist will explain the findings based on the assessments and discuss further recommendations. This meeting is also a chance for parents to come to a better understanding regarding the problem solving process and discover what services are available to the student. It is important to note that all of these suggestions are just that-suggestions. Parents ultimately have the final say in whether or not they want their child to receive special services. Options and services available will then be presented to the parent and, if they agree, will be written into an Individual Education Plan or IEP for the student.

If the child qualifies for special services the student will be moved to Stage Three (Allamakee Community School District, 2003). During Stage Three the IEP team works to establish the academic plan for the student who is qualified and will be served in special education. This team may include the following:

1. The parent
2. Special and regular education teachers
3. School psychologist
4. Other members responsible for implementing and working with the IEP and the student.

The IEP will be written specifying any accommodations, modifications, or any other services that are relevant and necessary for the student to receive an appropriate education. The IEP will also contain goals and objectives specifically laid out for the student to measure progress and determine whether the program is working successfully for the student or whether additional accommodations need to be considered (National Education Association, 2007).

After the IEP meeting has established the outline of the services being offered, the placement stage occurs. During this stage a decision will be made in relation to servicing the child in the least restrictive environment according to IDEA. The placement will be determined by looking at the student's goals and objectives as written in the IEP. The placement options range from regular education adaptations or modification, pull out programs, or special residential facilities (Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, 2007).

After the student has been placed into special education services and has an IEP established, continual progress monitoring should be completed. Annual reviews will be necessary to reassess, review, and update IEP information based on student progress. Every three years a more extensive evaluation is completed to review the student's progress and determine the student's eligibility for special education services (Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, 2007). It is important to note that throughout the process, communication among IEP team members occurs regularly, and, most importantly, frequent parental contact is a necessary component for the success of the student involved.

### *Funding for Special Education*

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) stated that all students will have access to a free and appropriate education (Smith, 1998). Therefore, state funding is an important consideration. According to Parrish & Chambers (1996), approximately 12 percent of K-12 public education budgets are allocated to special education. When compared to regular education costs per student, students receiving special services in the special education setting are about 2.3 times more. This funding comes from special

education funds through the federal government, state governments, and local school districts. The levels of funding can vary from state to state. Special education financial responsibilities have increased in recent years due to the fact that more students are being identified as in need of special services.

According to the National Education Association (2007), for every special education student, the federal government has committed to paying 40 percent of the average costs. The current cost averages somewhere near \$7,500 for regular education students and over \$9,000 for special education students (Parrish & Chambers, 1996).

#### *What Does a Classroom with Inclusion Look Like?*

Before school administrators, districts, teachers, and classrooms decide to implement inclusion in their schools, there are some key factors that need to be considered. Within the book, *Inclusion* (Smith, 1998), ten categories were created to ensure schools are ready for the inclusion process to take place successfully:

1. The first attribute suggested is attitude (Smith, 1998). Educators must come to the conclusion that incorporating this movement towards a more inclusive classroom is really the best choice for all students involved. Attitudes towards this movement can play an integral part in the success or demise of improved teaching and learning for all involved. "Collaboration is an effort to unite people and organizations to produce something no one person or organization could achieve alone" (Uhl, 1995, p.259). Educators must be willing to take this message into account to work collaboratively for the ultimate success of students with disabilities.

2. The second factor discussed is relationships (Smith, 1998). Within classrooms, relationships form between the teacher and student and between students. Creating a

classroom that is open to the relationships, friendships and cooperation between all students must be viewed as a necessary expectation. Many of these relationships are built through student groupings. If classroom teachers decide to separate the students into small groups for a subject such as reading, consideration should be factored into the decision of where to place the student with a disability. The educators must weigh multiple factors in order to best assess the placement of the student with disability (Mercer & Mercer, 2001).

3. Support for students is the third attribute (Smith, 1998). Support must be made available for all parties involved in this process. This may come in the form of co-teaching or team teaching between the special and regular education teacher. Many secondary level schools are moving toward the integration of special education teachers into the regular classrooms to assist with the growing demand for full inclusion in the regular education classrooms. Because special education teachers have become specialized in certain content areas and have learned strategies, modifications, and accommodations to help those students with special needs, they spend additional periods of time during the day team teaching in regular education classrooms as co-teaching partners rather than by working in separate pull out programs. These teachers are there to assist the students with special needs, but can also provide beneficial support towards other students in the classroom (Rea & Connell, 2005).

Added support may also come in the form of paraprofessionals included in the classroom to aid with additional support for classroom activities. The goal of classroom instruction is to create the best possible learning environment for students. Therefore support measures for successful achievement should be set in place within the learning

environment. Provide structure within the classroom by providing clear directions expectations and classroom roles. Acceptance is a key factor which allows all members, especially those with disabilities, to feel welcome and comfortable within the classroom setting (Mercer & Mercer, 2001).

4. Along with support for students, support for teachers is just as important (Smith, 1998). If teachers are expected to implement this idea/concept into their classrooms, they must have opportunities for training and research in the topic of inclusion. They must be given a multitude of tools to take with them to manage and run a successful inclusion classroom environment.

Support may also come in the form of time. Time is precious to educators. Time for planning, organizing and creating materials is essential. Time for collaborating with colleagues in order to reflect on your own teaching practices and to gain useful advice for classroom use is crucial. Planning time between the special educator and regular education teacher is a must when implementing effective strategies for the inclusion of all students in your classroom. These support systems should be used carefully and in an organized, efficient fashion to best utilize the support resources available (Rea & Connell, 2005).

5. Administrators must be willing to offer their support and leadership in a positive way for a more inclusive school setting (Smith, 1998). Allowing teachers to meet for planning purposes, for curriculum planning, and for the creation and organization of materials is a wonderful way to lend support.

6. Open communication must also be prevalent between all parties involved in this inclusion movement (Smith, 1998). Teachers need to be able to feel comfortable

sharing their thoughts and concerns in relation to the implementation and management process.

Students greatly enjoy working, helping, and communicating with each other when given the opportunity. Peer collaboration among students in the classroom can be a positive influence, academically and socially between students. Peer tutoring or grouping higher level students with lower level students is one method that allows for that sense of community within the classroom (Uhl, 1995).

7. Flexibility in curriculum is another readiness qualification (Smith, 1998). The curriculum used within the classroom must be diverse for all students' varying learning levels. It becomes an awesome responsibility for an educator especially with classroom sizes expanding. Curriculum should be challenging yet attainable for students who need additional support, but should also be challenging for students who are high level achievers. Therefore accommodations need to be made within classrooms. These accommodations may come in the form of reducing work loads, homework assignments, and written work for students who have learning disabilities (Defina, 2003). All students should be challenged at a means that makes their learning successful and allows for growth of their individual learning.

Teachers need to consider several things when integrating students with special needs into their classrooms (Bos & Vaughn, 2002). Depending on the needs of the student, the classroom set-up, such as desk arrangements, should be considered. Classroom arrangements can be set-up to best suit the students with special needs by placing them close to the front, seating them with a group, or seating them next to individuals who are accepting and motivated to include all classmates whenever possible.

The classroom teacher must consider a student's strengths and use this information in the most beneficial method for student success. Creative lesson planning and classroom management are essential (Rea & Connell, 2005).

Physical limitations that the student may have should also be considered when making necessary adaptations. For example, implementing hearing devices or other technology that may support various handicaps will allow the student with disabilities to feel more comfortable in the regular education setting. The use of computers, self-correcting materials, or other devices may be needed. Teachers must continue to be flexible throughout the integration process, remembering that change will take place in various forms, but these changes will allow teachers to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities (Mercer & Mercer, 2001).

8. Assessment of students is another key factor (Smith, 1998). Evaluation of classroom concepts must be done in a variety of ways so that achievement and goal setting give a true picture of each student's individual accomplishments. These assessments should be continuous and vary in their method of evaluation. It is important for the student, teacher, and parents to see the student's progression. This evidence helps determine future goals for student's needs and curriculum planning. A system for evaluating the program and staff members must be set in place to create the best method of inclusive practices. This evaluation system would be formed in order to keep the focus on the students' best interests and with the goal of creating a successful, positive, inclusive setting which would provide opportunities for academic achievement in a socially accepted environment for each student.

9. Parental involvement is the next factor attributed to successful implementation of inclusion (Smith, 1998). As noted earlier in the paper, parental involvement with students with special needs is integral to the success of the student and the program. Parents are informed throughout the process and are allowed and encouraged to be active advocates for their children. Added to the mix are the parents of students without disabilities. Support is needed from all sides in order for inclusion practices to take place in the classroom successfully. Communication between school personal and all parents can contribute greatly to the success of creating a school with a more inclusive classroom setting (Cook & Swain, 2001).

10. Community support can be a wonderful way to bring inclusion into the schools (Smith, 1998). Keeping the community informed about the school's beliefs and their movement towards acceptance of all individuals can extend the levels of acceptance, support, and inclusion into the community (Smith, 1998).

#### *Summary of the Inclusion Process*

When looking to incorporate full or partial inclusion into the classroom, there are many factors to consider. If schools are willing to make the effort for the betterment of their students, the inclusion process can be rewarding for all involved. Open communication and support are key factors that will allow for success in the implementation of inclusion into the classroom environment (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 2002).

Classrooms are made up of a diverse population of learning levels. Quality teachers are continually reflecting and changing their curriculum and structure of their classrooms in order to best meet the needs of all students. When the topic of inclusion is

brought into the mix teachers must learn to modify and adjust their current instructional models and classroom set-up in order to open up their teachings to even more diversity (Fletcher-Campbell, 2000).

It is imperative to apply different teaching models to create a more diverse learning outreach. Whole class instruction, as well as, small groupings should be used throughout the day (Bos & Vaughn, 2002). It is important to allow for interactions among students to students and among teacher to students in various groups during classroom work. This may occur during whole group instruction or within small group settings (Defina, 2003).

### *Co-teaching*

Special education teachers are finding themselves moving into the classroom full time. This may allow for co-teaching or team teaching to occur more frequently. This is a system that allows the students with disabilities to have the necessary support within the regular education classroom. In order to successfully incorporate these collaborative teaching style teachers must be willing to share ideas and work together to plan what occurs within the classroom (Rea & Connell, 2005).

As classrooms have moved more towards inclusion and team teaching two models, the consulting and collaborative models, have made their way to the fore front. The consulting model and collaborative method became necessary for successful implementation of full inclusion (Bos & Vaughn, 2002).

The consulting model and collaborative method invited teachers to work together to plan instruction. The teachers would confer with each other in the area they

collaboratively taught. Lesson planning, planning of instruction methods, and grading would be done together (Rea & Connell, 2005).

When collaborative teaching comes to mind, certain concerns need to be addressed. Teachers need to be given support from colleagues, parents and administrators (Smith, 1998). Co-teaching can be difficult for all parties involved and should be put into practice carefully. Pairing general educators and special educators is a key factor in the success of the inclusion process. Teachers must be willing to open their classrooms and teaching methods to additional persons working in the classroom. Clear expectations and roles need to be discussed and defined between teachers. Naturally, open communication and organization is a must. Shared roles and responsibilities need to be established. Teachers working together to combine their knowledge and resources to help plan curriculum and instruction is such an important concept related to co-teaching. This sharing of ideas, accepting each other's ideas and concerns and collaborating to find solutions to their problems will benefit student academic and social success in the classroom (Smith, 1998).

If general education teachers are to work within an inclusion classroom appropriate training is also a necessity for regular educators to learn new strategies, laws pertaining to IDEA, and role responsibilities for successful inclusion of all students (Rea & Connell, 2005).

Regular educators should be willing to provide reinforcement and encouragement to assist students' learning. Relationships among all students should be established as well as getting the student with disabilities involved comfortably in regular classroom

activities. Routines, rules and expectations should also be established (Rea & Connell, 2005).

Parental collaboration and communication is an important element in the inclusion process. Parents should expect teachers to come into the inclusion setting with training and support to enhance the implementation of an inclusive environment. Parents should be advocates for their children and lend support to the classroom teachers whenever possible. Clear expectations and goal setting should be discussed between teacher and parent throughout the school year. Parents should feel comfortable sharing ideas and expressing concerns. Open communication is just as important when working with parents as it is with other educators throughout the inclusion process (Cook & Swain, 2001).

Teachers should work to create a parent friendly environment that stimulates positive inclusion implementation. Overall, parents want their children to be successful and positive members of their communities. Parents want teachers who help instill these concepts in their children and provide a positive learning atmosphere, where the best interest of their child is put in the fore front. Open communication and collaboration between parent and teacher is also a key factor when working effectively with family members or students with disabilities (Mercer & Mercer, 2001).

Independence is necessary for children to function in their environments. Support from parents, students, colleagues, and administrators help to create this independence. It is important to teach choice and decision making skills, plus self advocacy skills. Creating a classroom that allow students to feel comfortable and able to express themselves freely in a structured, positive setting is the best environment for students to

learn and develop socially and academically. Bringing inclusion into the classroom, allows students with or without disabilities the opportunity to learn acceptance and appreciate and understand differences in others (Mercer & Mercer, 2001).

### *Pros and Cons of Inclusion*

Another important thing to consider about inclusion is how do those involved feel about it? The parents, teachers, and students should all have a say in how inclusion and special education should move forward. We will take a look at the positive and negative points. We will also examine perspectives on the academic curriculum.

*Parents.* In his book, *Inclusion*, Smith (1998) lists several reasons why parents would advocate for their child to be placed in the regular education classroom. Most parents of a child with a disability want their child to live a “normal” life. In most parents’ eyes, normal includes going to a regular education classroom with other “normal” children. Many parents say that their child learns best when they are around peers their own age in a setting where acceptance is apparent. After all, children with disabilities are capable of learning and have a right to an education. It would be discriminatory towards the child if the student wasn’t allowed to attend classes along with other students based on their disability. Not being included in a regular education classroom could damage that the student’s self esteem and possibly hinder the student’s learning.

Another reason that a parent may want their child with a disability to attend a regular education class is that many children with disabilities have made good academic gains in the regular education classrooms (Fletcher-Campbell, 2000). Classrooms that provide a structured setting with attainable goals and expectations will allow the student

to be successful within the regular education classroom. These gains help the students feel good about themselves. Students with disabilities don't want to be labeled, or seen as different they want to feel just like any other child. Therefore working in the regular education classroom as much as possible, allows the child and parent to feel a sense of normalcy (Smith, 1998).

Probably the most compelling argument a parent could make for including students with disabilities in regular education classroom is the reality that in the real world the ratio of "normal" people to people with disabilities will be similar to the ratio in the classroom. The child with the disability will have to learn coping skills in order to productively work in the real world, as he or she would need to learn to feel successful in the classroom. Ultimately students with or without disabilities must learn to help others, be productive and be a positive contributing member of a community (Cook & Swain, 2001).

Parent of students with disabilities may also experience feelings of anxiety when moving their child from a resource room to a regular education classroom (Smith, 1998). Many parents have concerns about the class size when moving to the inclusive classroom. The teacher-student ratio is much better in a resource setting; therefore parents feel their child may not receive the necessary assistance he or she was receiving in the resource room.

*Teachers.* A teacher faces many new challenges when a student with disabilities is placed in their classroom. Teachers must always be aware of what is happening in the classroom, but when a student with special needs is in the class even more awareness is needed. The teacher must watch very closely for any bullying or feelings of insecurities

that may occur. If this happens repeatedly, it can cause a major problem in the inclusion of the student with disabilities successfully (Bos & Vaughn, 2002).

The regular education teacher must be willing to collaborate with the special education teacher (Rea & Connell, 2005). Adaptations need to be made for the student with the disability. The special education teacher has the training and the ability to help with these adaptations. Depending on the needs of the students in the classroom the special education teacher's role will vary. Will he or she take an active role in general instruction? Will he or she be a guide-on-the-side for students needing more assistance? The needs of the students must be carefully considered when planning curriculum and procedures to be used (Defina, 2003).

Providing a classroom with an inclusive setting has many benefits for students involved. Classrooms where successful implementation of students with disabilities creates a community type of environment. Children are often more willing to help out and realize what behaviors are expected if they are to be positive members of a community. Children become more sensitive with language as they practice mutual respect for all class members in spite of differences (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 2002).

Having a student with special needs in the class may create more work for the teacher, but the rewards definitely outweigh the extra time spent planning curriculum and making needed accommodations. Working with inclusion allows teachers to collaborate and problem solve with colleagues. It enhances teacher accountability and provides new challenges as a member of a multidisciplinary team (Defina, 2003). This new inclusive setting allows positive interactions for all students involved when working in a structured, well organized setting.

*Students.* A student's perspective is just as important to consider when looking into the inclusion process. According to the article, *Students' Perceptions of Inclusion and Resource Room Settings* (Vaughn, 1998), students with disabilities do not necessarily prefer the regular education classroom setting versus the pull out setting.

There are multiple reasons why students may prefer the resource room setting over the regular education classroom. Some students see the resource room as a quiet place to work with fewer distractions. They may also enjoy the small group setting and one to one support that is received. Students also prefer the pace setting within the pull out program. Activities seem more enjoyable and are more at the student's individual level which lessens the chance for frustration (Defina, 2003).

Acceptance among peers is also an issue of concern. It is a known fact, that children with special needs often have a difficulty making friends, socializing, and problem solving in social interactions (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 2002). According to Vaughn (1998), students find it easier to make and keep friends when working in the pull out setting. This may be because students feel more able to relate to other classmates in the pull out classroom.

On the flip side, the regular education classroom allows students with special needs to have a sense of involvement and belonging to a larger group. It provides opportunities for peer modeling and motivation. The inclusive setting allows for a stimulating atmosphere for all students to cultivate, learn and enhance self respect when the curriculum, instruction, and management allow for respect for all kinds of students. The student with a disability may give more effort to his or her academics because he or she is trying to keep up with the rest of the class. This motivation to perform well is a

great example for all students to follow. Teachers are able to recognize that all students have individual strengths, even students with disabilities and appreciate the diversity surrounding them (Defina, 2003).

*Academics.* Concerns have been raised pertaining to the issue of the academic curriculum in relationship to inclusive classroom settings. Some individuals have concerns that the curriculum becomes too “watered down” when students with disabilities are included in the regular education classroom (Zigmond & Baker, 1996). As educators work with inclusion as it becomes apart of our classrooms, a realization of the purpose of inclusion must be fully understood. Teachers must keep in mind the positives of inclusion. The research has shown students gain academically and socially when in an inclusive setting (Fletcher-Campbell, 2000).

Studies have shown that an inclusion classroom is a better environment for academics and socialization for student with disabilities. Students served in the regular education classroom have earned higher grades in all areas of academics. These same students have also shown improvement in standardized testing and have increased school attendance averages (Defina, 2003).

Students with disabilities who have been incorporated into inclusive environments have shown higher confidence levels, have developed friendships with regular education peers easier, have shown a greater level of positive self esteem and have higher academic expectations for themselves (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 2002).

Skeptics of inclusion often are worried that there will not be enough academic rigor for the regular education students in an inclusion classroom because of the adaptations being made for the student or students with disabilities. Without this

academic rigor students will be less likely to learn (Zigmond & Baker, 1996). However, regular education students have also shown positive gains within inclusive settings. According to Fletcher-Campbell (2000), when looking at achievement test data there have been significant gains made by regular education students when working in an inclusion classroom.

### Conclusion

The integration of students with special needs into the regular education classroom is a challenging, yet necessary, task. Both sides of the inclusion issue have very valid points, and because of this, I believe that we need to reach a compromise. We have come to the overwhelming conclusion that all students learn differently. We create IEPs for some students to accommodate their individual needs. Understanding that an IEP is created for an individual student and specifically planned by a team to help that particular student be successful, why would we reason that full inclusion for all students with disabilities is a viable solution? Or, why would it be reasonable to conclude that limited inclusion is the best answer for all students? Based upon the professional literature I believe that each student should be evaluated individually and it should be a collaborative decision between the student, the parents, and the teachers of this student when deciding whether the child should be included in the regular education classrooms and to what extent they should be included.

This topic will continue to be a part of educational conversations. Decisions should be made to best suit the individual student rather than students with disabilities as a whole. It is important to note that inclusion may not work for all students.

Consideration for the individual child should always be in the forefront. What truly is best for each child's needs?

Noll (2006) stated, "Teacher attitude becomes a crucial component in the success or failure of placements of disabled students in regular classrooms" (p. 264). The effectiveness of inclusion of students with disabilities lies in the hands of teachers. Our role is vast and determines the success of our students.

In order to continue to move forward with inclusion in a more productive manner, educators must be more accepting to the idea. Our curriculums must be well planned and more open to the diversity within our classrooms. According to the article, *The Effects of Inclusion on Learning*, "Of the many issues related to the inclusion or integration of children with disabilities into regular classrooms, none is more important than the effects on students' learning and social relations with classmates" (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995, p.33). This statement rings true. As educators, our planning and curriculum choices affect our students in every way. We want our classrooms to be productive learning environments for all students, socially and academically. What better way to produce this classroom than to include students with special needs into the regular education classrooms? We must be steadfast in our goals to provide the best possible education for all students, no matter what their needs may be.

Teachers need to self-evaluate and reflect continuously as the needs change in their respective classrooms. We need to keep in mind that flexibility is crucial in our teaching styles. We must adapt styles that fit us as teachers, but most importantly, we must adapt our teaching style to accommodate our students as well as we possibly can. This may change year to year, month to month, or even day to day depending on the

many changes that may be happening in our lives or in our students' lives. This change is even more apparent when students with disabilities are brought into our classrooms.

We also try to achieve a certain level of consistency so that our students are surrounded by structured learning that provides an accepting environment for all learners. Many students are most successful when they are in a cycle which seems normal or comfortable to them. Continued training and a willingness to open your classroom to all students is the only way to provide an environment that allows for successful academic and social success.

A review of the literature related to inclusion, my personal observations and my first hand experiences have led me to the conclusion, that inclusive environments should be created if it is in the best interest of the student. Above all the student should be the main focus when making this important decision. Parents have a strong voice in this matter and must consider what is best for their child, even if it may not coincide with their own feelings. Teacher support, attitudes, and willingness to collaborate with the many members involved in the inclusion process is crucial to the success of students with special needs.

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