Full Inclusion: Does One Size Fit All?

by Mariah Molnar

In the field of special education the term “inclusion” is sure to spark debates among both general and special education teachers. Inclusion is a method of teaching special needs children that is “seeking to create schools that meet the needs of all students by establishing learning communities for students with and without disabilities, educated together in appropriate general education classrooms...” (Kavale, Forness 279). To put it another way, inclusion is an approach to teaching special needs students in which both students with and students without disabilities are taught in the same classroom.

The debate over inclusion began in 1975 when the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was passed. This act mandates that students with disabilities be provided with an education based on their individual needs in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and that they are educated with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate (Kavale, Forness 281).

Although the ideal situation is for every special education student to be educated in general education, not every student’s least restrictive environment is a general education classroom. According to the Department of Education, 95% of students with disabilities are educated in general education classes to some extent, and over 50% of included students spend 80% of their day in general education classes (Kavale, Forness 279; “Contexts of Elementary and Secondary Education”). Special needs students are included in general education in varying amounts, but supporters of full inclusion believe “...all students, regardless of his or her disability, should be in a regular classroom/program full time, and all educational services the child needs should be provided to the child in the general education classroom” (“Inclusion”). Although inclusion remains a very popular way to educate disabled students, full inclusion may not be the best method for providing an appropriate education for every special needs student. Inclusion should not be the blanket method for teaching all special education students, because

the general education classroom isn’t the least restrictive environment for every special needs child, and therefore more consideration needs to be placed on the individual student as to whether or not they are placed in an inclusive education system.

This effort to make special education more inclusive is called the Regular Education Initiative, or REI. As its name implies, the REI works to place more students with special needs into general education classes. The overall goal is “to merge special and general education to create a more unified education system” (Kavale, Forness 281). In other words, the goal of the REI is inclusion.

In their effort to advance inclusion, the REI was created under several assumptions about students and education. The assumptions made by the REI are: students are over identified as handicapped; students’ failures can be largely attributed to teachers; general education teachers can be trained so that special education is not necessary; and lastly, physically separating students is discriminatory (Kauffman, Gerber, and Semmel 6; Kavale, Forness 281). These assumptions form some of the basic arguments used by the REI for inclusive education.

The first argument the REI makes is that students are over-identified as being handicapped. This means that students are unnecessarily placed into special education classes because they are placed in special education by being inaccurately labeled as handicapped. Current data supports this position. In the past two decades there has been a tremendous increase in the enrollment of special education. As of the 2003-2004 school year, 13.7% of students were being served under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (“Fast Facts”). In 1976, when IDEA started, that number was 8.3% (“Fast Facts”). The percentage of students requiring special education has been continually increasing. One reason for this is “…the lack of definitional integrity; it is suggested that the classification is so vague that it can be used for learning difficulties caused by motivational, constitutional, environmental, or any of these factors” (Biklen, Zollgers 579). Given these loose classifications, it is said that “…80% of school-age youngsters could be eligible for special education” (Biklen, Zollgers 579). This underlines the fact that classifications for special education students are unreliable and ambiguous. Part of the reason there are so many students in special education is that the definitions of handicaps and learning disabilities are
inappropriate, but in no way should this ambiguity be used to support inclusive education.

Furthermore, this argument doesn’t legitimately support inclusion. All that this argument really says is that there is a problem with how students are placed into special education. Putting over-identified students back into general education classes through inclusion doesn’t get at the real issue. The reason for putting a disabled child in special education should be that it is the best learning environment for them, and not that they were mistakenly placed in special education. This should be viewed as a problem with identification, not as a reason for inclusion. Over-identification is an unrelated issue that cannot legitimately be used to support inclusion.

The next argument the REI gives for inclusion is that a student’s failures are the result of a teacher’s failures. According to the REI a good teacher can teach any student (Kavale, Forness 281). The REI fails to see that there is a lot of training special education teachers go through that general education teachers don’t. Regardless of how good a teacher is, there is necessary training for teaching disabled students. Also, this puts all of the responsibility for a student’s success, or failure on the teacher. As one proponent of the REI mentions, “The assumption underlying this theme is that the problem of student failure is not created by deficits in schools- when a student does not learn or behave appropriately, the fault is with the teacher” (Kauffman, Gerber, and Semmel 7). On the other hand, it is just as inappropriate to place the blame solely on the student. The position REI takes overlooks the joint responsibility that the students and teacher share in the student’s learning. Furthermore, “Absolving students of all responsibility for their learning appears likely to contribute to the view of students as helpless victims of a social system to which they do not contribute” (Kauffman, Gerber, and Semmel 8). Using this line of thinking to support inclusion is really nothing more than blame shifting.

The REI also makes the argument that if general education teachers were retrained to teach special needs children, who are often more difficult to teach and are usually taught by qualified special education teachers, they could be placed into general education classes. This view assumes that special and general education students are more alike than they are different, and takes a one-size-fits-all approach to education. It also fails to take the teacher’s opinions into view. A certain amount of resistance should be expected when many teachers are told they are in need of retraining. In addition, a good general education teacher doesn’t necessarily make a good special education teacher. Going back to the previous argument, if a good teacher can teach any student, why should retraining be necessary?

A final argument the REI makes is that separating special education students and regular education students is inherently discriminating. The term discrimination generally refers to some sort of unfair treatment. Is it unfair to place disabled students into classes that are appropriate for them even if they are separated from other students? Or would it be even more unfair to place a disabled student into a learning environment that didn’t take their unique needs into account? In addition, “…the greater the diversity of ability among students, the more difficult and unlikely it is that good teachers will be able to teach most effectively…” (Kauffman, Gerber, and Semmel 10). Discrimination or not, a separate education might be the least restrictive environment for some students with disabilities.

On the surface these appear to be good arguments, but there is absolutely no support for them, because “…[REI] is based on unexamined, implicit assumptions that provide a poor foundation for attempting to reorganize education for handicapped and other difficult to teach students. It promises only an uncertain future” (Kauffman, Gerber, and Semmel 11). In their effort to make all special education inclusive they overlook the individual needs of each student. When treated as a collective, few students with special learning needs, will actually be placed in the educational setting that works best for them.

An important factor to keep in mind when discussing inclusion is that an inclusive education affects both the special needs students and general education students. Some studies have been done to explore the effects of placing disabled students into general education classes because, “valid reservations relate to the possible detrimental effects on other students and on the maintenance of safe school environments” (Heffin, Bullock 106). One such study focused specifically on the teacher’s attitude towards inclusion, which is something that often gets over-looked when speaking about inclusion. In order to gain insight into teacher perceptions of inclusion related issues, the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders brought teachers together to look into some of these concerns. Within this study, several different Texas schools of various sizes attempted inclusion on a trial basis. Upon completion of the study, general education teachers “…reported varying degrees of skepticism and fear. They were willing to try including students with
special needs as long as the “appropriate support” was in place, they said, but they were skeptical that the support would continue beyond the initial trial period” (Heflin, Bullock 108). As far as the students are concerned, the special needs students were neutral about the experience with a few exceptions (Heflin, Bullock 104). In the smaller sized schools involved in the study, the general education students were protective of the special education students. At the larger elementary schools, it was reported that the unpopular general education students made efforts to interact with the special education students. Overall, “None of the professionals reported unequivocal acceptance of the special education students; as one teacher stated, “They were treated as special, but treated well” (Heflin, Bullock 104). However, it was a different story at the middle and high schools. As the study indicated;

“...two teachers reported that some of the students who were included became the class scapegoats; at the high school some general education students convinced one special education student to snort ketchup... The middle school special education teacher reported that the special education students told her they felt rejected by their peers” (Heflin, Bullock 104).

In the end, less than a third of the teachers said that general education classes were an appropriate placement for special education students.

The study also cited some of the teacher’s concerns about full inclusion. Some of the concerns were: insufficient time and training, being unable to meet the needs of the included special education students, behavior management, and the imbalance between special and regular education students (Heflin, Bullock 109). This demonstrates the fact that there is a rift between

the assumptions and reality of inclusion. One teacher included in the study attests to this by saying, “full inclusion is laudable in theory, but falls short in practice” (Heflin, Bullock 109).

After concluding this study, when referring to the appropriateness of inclusion half of the teachers used the phrase “case-by-case” (Heflin, Bullock 109). This seems to be the most sensible way to approach inclusion. As this study indicated, inclusion seemed to produce some positive effects at some schools, while in other schools and in different situations inclusion didn’t work. There are a lot of factors involved in whether or not inclusion will be successful or not. Overall, inclusion is not going to work as the blanket solution for educating special needs students. Those who suggest that inclusion is the best way to educate disabled students as the REI does, need to place more consideration on the needs of the individual child.

In a perfect world general education would provide an appropriate education for every disabled student. It is unfortunate, however, that “Almost all students with disabilities are expected to keep up academically with the rest of the class, and three of four students do so. However, almost 20 percent of students with disabilities in general education academic classes do not meet performance expectations (“Inclusion”). If 20% of disabled students aren’t doing well in general education classes, that must mean they are not receiving an education in their least restrictive environment, which the Individuals with Disabilities Act mandates they receive.

Although IDEA doesn’t explicitly require inclusion, it does “require that children with disabilities must, to the maximum extent appropriate, be educated in the least restrictive environment” (“Inclusion”). However, “IDEA considers the general education classroom to be the least restrictive environment” (“Inclusion”).

The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is a vague term that has a different definition for every student. The broad meaning of a least restrictive environment is the educational setting that works best for a student depending on his or her own strengths and weaknesses, in which they are most likely to succeed in. General education may be the LRE for one student but not for another. IDEA makes the assumption that every student’s LRE is general education.

Over time, the way LREs have been fleshed-out has changed considerably. Consequently, “As the interpretation of least restrictive environment has changed, the proportion of students with disabilities included in general education has increased dramatically” (Villa, Thousand 20). As of the 2004-2005 school year, 52.1% of special needs children spent 80% of their day in general education classes (“Contexts of Elementary and Secondary Education”). As mentioned earlier, 20% of these included students are failing to meet expectations. This would mean that the LRE for at least 20% of included students obviously, isn’t general education.

Rather than placing every special needs student in only general education classes, partial inclusion might provide a good alternative. Placing disabled students in classes like art, gym, or music would give students the social interaction supporters of full inclusion hope for without as many academic consequences. Alternatively, some special needs students might succeed in general education science classes, but not in general education math classes.
Disabled students excel in different classes at different amounts, and should be placed into general education classes in which they can do well. This approach would give more consideration to each student’s individual strengths and weaknesses.

Full inclusion fails to account for the fact that “Students with disabilities are an extremely heterogeneous group, varying by type and severity of disability, as well as by the many variables found in the population at large....” (Terman 6). To place every special education student in general education classes ignores this fact, thereby setting up many included students for failure. The theory behind inclusion is admirable and can be successful if applied to students appropriately. The degree to which students are included needs to be based on a student’s unique disability and his or her strengths and weaknesses, not as a cheap cop-out for special education.

WORKS CITED


