Disconnects Between General Education and Special Education: Is There Really a Difference for Inclusion Classrooms?

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Abstract

In the field of education, there is a major discrepancy between how general education and special education is defined and the material that is taught. Students are often segregated out of general education and put into separate classrooms on different ends of the campus as well. But once inclusive education was introduced, that began to change to truly allow special education students to be part of their Least Restrictive Environment; or so everyone thought. Inclusive education has brought new challenges into the classroom. Teachers and special education students feel overwhelmed and not as supported as they should, which takes away from the purpose of being part of the general education environment. Parents have mixed feelings about inclusion as well, often leaving them unsure of the best placement for their child.
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Keywords: Inclusion, inclusive education, special education, least restrictive environment, general education, parents

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage of students in Texas receiving special education services has risen to 15%, an increase attributed in part to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This upward trend is expected to continue. The most common disabilities among these students include specific learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, other health impairments, and autism. As of fall 2022, 95% of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were enrolled in the general education system. However, only 67% of these students spent more than 80% of their school day in general education classrooms. This raises an important question: What is causing the disconnect that prevents more special education students from being fully included in general education settings? Is true inclusion happening? This concern highlights the ongoing challenges in effectively integrating special education students into the general curriculum and ensuring they have equal opportunities to participate alongside their peers.

Background and Definition

Inclusive education can be defined as the combining of special education students into the general education classroom with access to the general education curriculum: "IDEA regulations define the term *general curriculum* as referring to 'the same curriculum as for disabled children' (Agran et al.,, 2002, p. 123). Including special education students in general classrooms has been a significant issue in the education system for several decades for a number of reasons. According to Thompson et al. (2018), less than 1% of students with disabilities require alternate assessments, so the other 99% should be in general education classrooms. However, as of a 2021 *Report to Congress*, "only 64% of students with disabilities are in the general education classrooms [for] 80% or more of their day" (Cole et al., 2023, p. 14).

In seeing this data, educators must advocate for change of inclusion in the education system to ensure that each child receives an equal education and are truly placed in the best learning environment in accordance with the student's least restrictive environment (LRE) as there are too many special education students being educated in more

restrictive environments such as self-contained classrooms: "The LRE for each student is determined on the individualized needs and assumes that students with disabilities are able to learn the curriculum in the general education classroom . . . [but] it could also indicate that students with disabilities are placed in more restrictive settings, which would meet their present levels of functioning more appropriately" (Young & Courtad, 2016, p. 15). LRE is a continuum of options for students with disabilities, not a one-size-fits-all setting: "To guarantee the right of persons with disabilities to have access to an education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, states should ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and for lifelong learning" (Jokinen, 2018, p. 71).

Equal Education Acts

President Ford's Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) aimed to address the denial of educational opportunities for students with disabilities. In 1975, the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensured that all children with disabilities could access a free appropriate public education (FAPE). FAPE is designed to meet a student's unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). IDEA guarantees that every child with a disability has access to FAPE, integrating special education students into the general education curriculum. FAPE is defined as special education or related services provided at public expense, aligned with state standards, and delivered through secondary school in accordance with an Individualized Education Program (IEP). IEPs must be reviewed annually to ensure they continue to meet the student's needs in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Beekman, 2009, p. 44). This review process involves evaluating IEP goal progress, which is based on identifying areas where the student's performance differs from that of their general education peers, with goals aligned to general education curriculum standards (Agran et al., 2002, p. 124).

In 2002, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act highlighted achievement gaps among students, especially in underserved populations such as low-income families and students with disabilities. NCLB aimed to provide support to schools, improve accountability, and strengthen the educational system. In 2004, NCLB was realigned with

IDEA to enhance early intervention services for children needing additional academic and behavioral support, increase accountability and educational outcomes, and raise standards for special education instructors (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Further regulations in 2006 required schools to use research-based interventions for students with disabilities and shifted the responsibility for services to the local education agency (LEA), which is the school district the student attends. LEAs receive state funding when their policies, procedures, and programs align with state credentials outlined in Section 143 of IDEA. Then in 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law, replacing NCLB. ESSA requires that all students be taught to high academic standards to prepare them for college or careers. It also mandates statewide assessments to measure academic growth and holds schools accountable for ensuring success for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

The Current State of Inclusion Issues

Since 2004, general education classrooms have become more inclusive for children with disabilities to ensure all learners are learning the content together in one classroom. However, inclusive education still continues to lack in several areas, which creates barriers for students with disabilities to be able to succeed in that type of environment: "Inclusive education is concerned with removing all barrier to learning and providing quality education, especially to learners who experience barriers to learning and development, who are vulnerable to exclusion and marginalization" (Mahlo & Makoelle, 2016, p. 6).

Less than 1% of students with extensive support needs are in general education because of the severity of their disabilities (Thompson et.al., 2018). Often, these students may also need personal care or have other needs, which can make it more difficult to be in the general education classroom as they are also needing specific instructional needs, social-communication skills, positive behavior support, and special education collaboration between teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service provides. This small percentage of students are the only ones in special education who truly qualify for alternative state assessments, which could place them in a more restrictive environment with an alternative curriculum not aligned to grade level (Clausen et al., 2023). If a student is placed in a more restrictive environment, that does not mean that less

effective instruction or services are being provided and should not be seen as less desirable (Cole et al., 2023).

Academic Struggles Due to Intellectual and Learning Disabilities

Students with an intellectual disability (ID) make up about 0.6% of the population and are typically identified as having an ID if their IQ is below 70 and they experience challenges in one or more areas of adaptive functioning, such as social skills, conceptual skills, or daily living skills (Bouck & Park, 2016). Historically, students with ID were often denied access to public education and did not attend school. However, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) of 1975 granted students with ID access to the education system through the provision of FAPE in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

Currently, 55.3% of students with ID are placed in self-contained classrooms due to the severity of their disabilities, while the remaining 44.7% spend some or most of their day in an inclusive setting (Bouck & Park, 2016). The only group with a lower inclusion rate in general education settings is students with multiple disabilities. Students with ID often struggle academically in general education settings, primarily due to social isolation and the challenges posed by the rigorous academic environment, particularly given their memory deficits. As a result, these students are frequently placed in settings where the curriculum is modified to meet their current level of understanding, rather than the standard grade-level content.

Students with learning disabilities (LD) also face challenges with the general education curriculum, particularly in areas such as reading, writing, and mathematics. However, it is important to distinguish between students with LD and those who simply have a low IQ or low academic achievement. There is a concerning trend where minority students, especially African American males, are disproportionately diagnosed with LD, which may sometimes reflect academic struggles rather than a true learning disability. This issue relates to the concept of cultural capital, where societal perceptions can influence how individuals are categorized, sometimes leading to discrimination. Consequently, there is a push for re-evaluations to determine whether cultural factors or actual disabilities are causing these academic struggles. The impact of students' lives outside of school, including limited access to resources and support, affects their social capital, which in turn influences their academic performance (Portes, 1998).

According to Portes (1998), only 11% of students with LD are placed in settings with a modified curriculum, meaning the majority are included in general education settings with their peers and may receive additional support through Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI is a strategy that allows teachers to identify students with learning needs who require individualized support; it is used for all students, not just those with disabilities. In inclusive settings, teachers adapt the curriculum and environment to meet the diverse needs of all students, providing necessary supports and accommodations. Whole-class teaching is common in these settings, which benefits all students by reducing the time spent on independent work and minimizing the potential for students with disabilities to feel isolated. While students with LD often struggle with reading, which is a significant barrier in general education settings, they receive accommodations that help them succeed. Additionally, general education students benefit from these inclusive practices, often experiencing improved academic outcomes through more individualized teaching strategies (Young & Courtad, 2016).

Standardized Assessments

Students with disabilities, unless they qualify for an alternative assessment, participate in the same standardized assessments as their general education peers. According to Agran et al. (2002), "To provide measures of accountability and evidence of student achievement, students need to be included in the statewide and local district assessments" (p. 125). However, there is often a disconnect between the activities and lessons provided to students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms and the requirements of these standardized tests. This disconnect contributes to a widening achievement gap between students with disabilities and their general education peers, particularly when test scores are emphasized (Thompson et al., 2020).

Students with disabilities generally show low proficiency on state assessments, which is a significant issue in secondary general education classrooms. Despite receiving accommodations and modifications to the general education curriculum, students with LD still perform significantly below grade-level norms (Young & Courtad,

2016, p. 21). The achievement gaps in reading and mathematics are the most pronounced between general education and special education students, posing substantial instructional challenges for educators: "Closing the gap feels further and further out of reach for our most disadvantaged students" (Friziellie et al., 2016, p. 7).

Contrary to some beliefs, every child is capable of growth: "[They] contain their own capabilities for growth" (Schrio, 2012, p. 116). Despite this potential, a study by Agran et al. (2002) found that 85% of teachers believe that students with any disability should not be held to the same benchmarks or standards of progress as general education students.

Lack of Resources and Supports for Teachers

Since the 21st century, the focus of educating students with disabilities has shifted from addressing individual deficits to proactively planning differentiated lessons for all students in the same classroom (Young & Courtad, 2016). However, this shift presents challenges for teachers, particularly regarding their attitudes toward students with varying types and severities of disabilities. Research shows that teachers' attitudes are influenced by the severity of the disability; for example, they may prefer working with students who have more severe disabilities because they believe these students will receive more support (Saloviita, 2019).

A study by Saloviita (2019) found that 93% of teachers reported that students with Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) create extra work for them. Due to a lack of adequate support, 70% of these teachers recommended placing students with ADHD in more restrictive settings. In contrast, teachers felt that students with conditions like Cerebral Palsy or ID required less work because they would receive more support in the classroom. However, 78% of teachers still believed these students should be in specialized settings due to perceived deficiencies in their own teaching skills.

Teachers also expressed negative attitudes when they felt that a student's disability disrupted the entire classroom, impacting other students' learning (Saloviita, 2019). Many general education teachers feel unprepared to support students with disabilities, citing a lack of time, resources, and communication with special education staff. This sense of unpreparedness is particularly acute in overcrowded classrooms, where accommodating diverse learners and managing challenging behaviors adds to the stress. Teachers often struggle with implementing Behavior Intervention Plans for students with disabilities, which can further contribute to their frustration and negative attitudes.

For inclusion in general education settings to be successful, teachers need to feel capable and prepared to include students with disabilities (Clausen et al., 2023). This requires better training in effective teaching practices and a willingness to adapt methods to meet the needs of all learners. Teachers must shift their mindset to see adapting their instruction as essential to supporting all students, not just those with disabilities (Mahlo & Makolle, 2016).

Parent Perspective on Inclusion

Parents have diverse views on the inclusion of children with disabilities, with both positive and negative perspectives. Palmer et al. (2001) found that many parents of children with severe disabilities support inclusive education for the social benefits it offers, such as interactions with typically developing peers and participation in the broader school community. However, some parents are skeptical of full inclusion, fearing their children might be marginalized or inadequately supported in general education classrooms. These parents often advocate for a balanced approach that combines inclusion with specialized instruction tailored to their child's needs.

Elkins, Van Kraayenoord, and Jobling (2003) expand on this by highlighting concerns about the resources in inclusive settings. Many parents would favor inclusion more if schools provided additional resources like specialized staff and educational materials. However, a smaller group of parents prefers special placements, believing their children may not receive sufficient attention or support in a general education environment, similar to the concerns noted by Palmer et al. (2001). These varied attitudes reflect the complexity of parental views, shaped by their experiences and perceptions of how well inclusive practices meet their children's needs.

Reverse Inclusion

An alternative approach to traditional inclusion is reverse inclusion. According to Schoger (2006), reverse inclusion involves bringing typically developing peers into

self-contained special education classrooms, rather than integrating students with disabilities into general education settings. This method provides meaningful social interaction opportunities for students with disabilities in an environment where their specific needs can be met more effectively. Reverse inclusion offers a way to promote social integration and peer relationships without compromising the specialized instruction that students with severe disabilities require. This could be an answer to the question.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal for students with disabilities is to ensure they have meaningful access to the general education curriculum, leading to successful and impactful outcomes. However, resistance to the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms remains a significant challenge. If general education teachers are not fully supportive and equipped to meet the needs of these students, the promise of inclusion cannot be fully realized.

Providing adequate support for general education teachers, including comprehensive information on accommodations and Behavior Intervention Plans is essential. This support can alleviate the stress teachers face and facilitate a more inclusive environment. Ultimately, achieving truly inclusive education requires a shift from a one-size-fits-all approach to one that prioritizes the unique needs of each student. As Jokinen (2018) emphasizes, "A truly inclusive education means a transition from mainstream needs-based teaching to student needs-based learning" (p. 75). This shift is crucial for creating an educational system where all students, regardless of ability, can thrive.

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