

Mainstreaming, Inclusion, or Segregation: Which Offers the Most Benefits for All?

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Abstract

The concept of how to best meet the needs of special education students has been debated for many years. Education should be available to all, but some cases prove too extreme for a traditional classroom setting. There are three main options to consider for the education of a disabled child. The first of these is mainstreaming, a process that places impaired students into a normal school classroom with little to no aid. The second choice is inclusion, in which a special needs student takes part in a class of average children, but is given regular assistance from an education professional that knows how to meet his/her needs. The final consideration is segregation, in which a disabled student is completely removed from the traditional school environment, and instead placed in a program focused on meeting the needs of special education children. There are points of debate for any of the three options, and it is clear that this type of decision cannot be generalized to all special education students.

The debate about how to best accommodate the needs of impaired students has extended back many years. A challenge has been posed to educators around the world about integration of students with learning, social, or behavioral disabilities. Fortunately, many countries have taken action to protect the educational rights of those who could otherwise be seen as outcasts.

The United States government has implemented the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for schools across the nation. Under this federal law, students with special needs are offered the right to a quality education, same as a child without such impairments. The Understood website comments three main functions of IDEA: schools aid eligible students with disabilities to the greatest extent, they evaluate any child considered to have a disability, and schools may limit their assistance to exclude the extreme cases that would challenge the learning of others (Understood, 2015).

One of the problems in deciphering how to best implement special education within normal classrooms is ignorance about the issue. In education today, there are three major options for teaching students with learning, social, or behavioral disabilities. The first choice is mainstreaming children into a traditional school setting. According to the Masters in Special Education website, *mainstreaming* means that “a school is putting children with special needs into classrooms with their peers who have no disabilities” (Masters in Special Education, 2016). In this situation, impaired students are placed with normally-developing peers, and given little to no adjusted instruction. Another option for the education of special needs students is inclusion. From the Special Education Guide website, *inclusion* is defined as “a term which expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and

classroom he or she would otherwise attend” (Special Education Guide, 2016). A child is welcomed into the classroom, but with regular assistance of a special education professional. One major misunderstanding here is that *inclusive education* does not have to entail only impaired children. Instead, the term refers to teaching by meeting the needs of *all* students. In the context of this paper, though, the debated issue is whether or not the best option for special needs students is inclusion into normal learning classrooms. The third option (usually for the severely disabled) is classroom segregation. The Special Friends Foundation comments that with segregation practices, “[a] child will only associate with children with special needs” (Special Friends Foundation, 2012). Students with disabilities are placed in a learning environment separate from traditional schools. Here they are surrounded by peers who are in similar situations, and they are constantly given intentional assistance.

Should special needs children be placed in normal school classrooms, or should they be placed in separate programs catered to working with educational disabilities? How can teachers modify curriculum to adjust to the needs of *all* students, not solely the academically skilled? Which system allows for the most success in the life of a special needs child (and those around him/her)? Parents and teachers encourage children to respect and care for one another, but what happens when an academic or social outlier is brought into the picture? How might we expect children to react to a peer who commonly misbehaves in a classroom setting, or inappropriately reacts to punishment? On the other hand, how does a child with a learning or social disability manage being a part of an average educational classroom? This paper aims to focus on studies from different education systems in countries all over the world. Below are considerations about education for disabled or impaired children from the perspectives of

teachers, parents, peers, and the main subjects, those who are handicapped. For the purposes of this paper, the author chose to consider the options of mainstreaming and inclusive education together, in contrast with segregation of special education students. The author hopes to strengthen the understandings of readers on the accommodations that must be made so that all children are offered the quality education that they rightly deserve. Different situations call for alternating responses.

Benefits of Including Special Education Students in Traditional Schools

There exist a number of reasons why mainstreaming has positive benefits, specifically when inclusive practices are earnestly worked toward. The first point in the argument for inclusion is that immediate access to inclusion programs may slightly help academic and social readiness. One recent study conducted in Tulsa, Oklahoma sought to discover the effects of early intervention in the education of special needs students. What they found was that “...the impact of pre-K on the achievement test scores of the children with IEPs (Individualized Education Program) was not statistically different from the impact of pre-K on the scores of their typically developing classmates” (Phillips, Meloy, p. 484). With specialized instruction at an early age, no obvious learning gap was observed between the special education students and their average peers.

There is an opportunity for all children of a classroom to learn important morals and values, especially in the context of religious education. In Hong Kong, another study took place to test the effects of faith as the basis of learning. What is apparent is that “children learn to respect others and themselves, care for and work with one another as a team. It is through this kind of life education where children learn that they are all brothers and sisters and should treat

one another with love and respect” (Lai, Zhang, p. 820). In a nurturing environment centered on acceptance, children learn empathy, politeness, respect, and cooperation. With exposure to a core belief system, humans are given a purpose for their lives. The realm of special education often comes with a negative outlook on potential in life; however, religious guidance offers hope that there is meaning behind the existence of every human, despite physical, social, or learning impairments (Lai, Zhang, p. 823). Every person has potential to contribute to society; this concept simply looks different in action from one person to another.

With the presence of special education learners in traditional classrooms, children learn how to interact with those who differ from themselves. As with the example of faith-based education above, integration of disabled children presents the opportunity to teach empathy to all. Involvement in activities allows a special needs student to build up confidence in both his identity and capabilities, and will likely contribute to higher performance levels later in life. While average children learn the importance of inclusion, those children with impairments are given the opportunity to socialize in an accepting environment. Making friends as a child can be challenging as is, but is infinitely more difficult with the label of *outcast*. Respect is put into action in integrated classrooms. One might argue that the children exposed to cognitive, social, or behavioral differences in peers will grow up to be more considerate and compassionate adults than those who receive no such opportunity.

One important aspect of special education is preparation for real-world scenarios. In an interview study taking place in the Bahamas, a number of high school teachers “suggested curriculum revision to integrate workforce ready skills and diverse learning activities” (Cambridge-Johnson, Hunter-Johnson, Newton, p.15). Whereas children typically

grow up learning math facts, grammar, and spelling, special education students are often more likely to succeed from straightforward instruction about how to carry themselves in a work environment. The main objective of school attendance is to learn how to function as a member of society. For disabled students, sometimes the best option in preparation for the real world is skipping a step or two along the way that likely would only frustrate them in the first place.

From a different perspective, teacher exposure to special education likely will increase confidence in their own abilities. Instructing children with learning, social, or behavioral disabilities is no walk in the park... this often poses an enormous challenge to teachers! Effective inclusion practices in schools requires that teachers adjust what they teach so that all students have a chance to understand the material. It can be difficult to focus on one or two slower students, while others might excel more naturally. This method expects from teachers a tremendous amount of patience, and with successful understanding from students, it offers the teacher a boost in confidence. A study in Greece looked at the idea of inclusive education and its effects on teachers, noting that “the additional experience working with and managing of autistic children strengthens teachers’ self-esteem and upgrades their position in the class, enabling them to have an active leading role within working teams on autism, including specialized scientific staff, parents and institutions” (Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, Tripsianis, Polychronopoulou, p. 765). Continued work with impaired students leads to greater awareness about how to best work together, and later how to mentor those who are prepared for the challenge. Their hard work and patience makes the difference for countless students in the long run, while simultaneously strengthening their own abilities to teach all children effectively.

The proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” comes to mind when considering the concept of inclusion of special education students in traditional schools. The child’s teacher obviously cannot constantly be with the student all hours of the day, so there must be teamwork among society when it comes to teaching a child. Teachers can bring students to a level of academic success within a classroom, but the issue also rests on the shoulders of the parents of the disabled child. There must be a continuation of learning in the home environment, as well as in the school setting. The whole world can be a place of observation and training, but with that comes intentional action on the part of peers, teachers, and especially parents to help an impaired child to make those connections. The study in Hong Kong mentions that the success of the integrated students is largely reliant on parent connection with the child’s learning. The authors state that the “schools have regular communication with the parents to continuously update them of their child’s learning progress” (Lai, Zhang, p. 821). Learning experiences for these students is not only measured in the classroom, but continues outside of the school environment.

There are plenty of positive reasons for including children with special needs into elementary schools, middle schools, and/or high schools. The success of such programs relies heavily on the attitudes and patience of those involved. A few factors that strengthen integration are increased teacher support, small class sizes, parent involvement, teacher workshops, and passion! Teachers that have a desire to see all students succeed could make an enormous difference in both the current and future life of a child. Raising awareness of the issue to students and teachers will better allow schools to continue programs such as these. Developing a mindset of empathy for others can only improve a learning environment. There exist, on the other hand, a handful of situations in which a special education program cannot succeed. In that case, there is

no point in forcing such a system, but rather to work toward making a change in attitude, involvement, or leadership.

Disadvantages of Including Special Education Students in Traditional Schools

In the case that a Special Education program does not run smoothly, there is no sense in forcing its continuation; the result is frustration on the part of the teachers and the students. This certainly would not be a fair representation of quality education for either party! Systems integrating disabled students into the classroom sound wonderful in theory, but sometimes fail in practice.

Within society there is a negative stigma surrounding those . People fear what they do not understand, but sadly, few make an effort to learn about the patterns and behaviors connected to different disabilities. While it would be wonderful to eliminate these adverse assumptions, in reality that would be nearly impossible to eradicate completely. Children pose a particular challenge in convincing them not to feel threatened by something new to them. There is a lack of awareness among children of the needs of special education students. To work on changing the mindset of children would be an enormous challenge in itself, and would take a great deal of time. Many argue that it is for the protection of special education students to remain separated from other children. The mistreatment that the disabled children would likely receive in this environment is far worse than falling behind academically.

A second reason why inclusion programs are considered a bad idea is that children who do not operate at average levels face a childhood marked by social isolation. In a room full of children that function well cognitively, socially, and behaviorally, those with disabilities clearly become outliers. There is a possibility for feelings of self-consciousness as students are made

aware of their differences compared to the others. As a result, their confidence, friendliness, and other positive attributes are diminished. In a survey seeking to assess the social acceptance of children with autism from the perspective of other children, what they found was this: “students with [autism] were significantly less well accepted by their peers and had significantly higher social rejection ratings than comparison students” (Jones, Frederickson, p. 1100). It makes sense that children have a difficult time cooperating with a special needs student; they process information at a slower rate, do not recognize appropriate social behavior, and do not know how to work well with other children. It is possible to encourage positive social behaviors towards impaired children, but often times mental disabilities hinder the social aspect of a child’s life. The argument here is to keep special education students in their own learning environment, where they are surrounded by similar peers, receive specialized attention, and face little to no pressure to avoid falling behind.

It is no secret that the more extreme the child’s disability, the more distracting their behavior appears; this can be especially evident in public situations. Many teachers do not appreciate the disruptions caused in a classroom when special education students are integrated with typical students. While it does not make sense to integrate children with extreme cognitive, behavioral, or physical impairments, it proves challenging to draw the line where more mild disabilities too greatly hinder the learning of the other present students. During a survey of the opinions of teachers in Botswana, it became evident that “in general, teachers view the inclusion of students with severe disabilities as being inappropriate and disruptive, a potential obstacle to the academic progress of such students’ same-age peers” (Chhabra, Srivastava, p. 224). Is it worth the risk of inhibiting the education of many, for the possible success of a few? For many

people, the answer to this question would be *no*. Instead, special education students should remain in a classroom of their own, where they can learn at a pace that is manageable for them. In this respect, far fewer students face the risk of falling behind in their education.

Teachers are not doctors, nor are they disability specialists. Placement of special education students (albeit these feelings typically arise from extreme cases) into classrooms places the extra strain on untrained educators to meet the needs of the impaired. They cannot be expected to care for severely handicapped, especially without proper training. They should not be held responsible as the managers of academia, discipline, or appropriate behavior when they were not trained to fill that position in the first place. One resulting comment from the survey of teachers in Botswana mentioned that they feel “apprehensive about meeting the individual needs of students with disabilities... [and] about the availability and supply of resources to assist in the implementation of inclusionary programs” (Chhabra, Srivastava, p. 221). Most educators lack confidence in their abilities to accommodate the needs of impaired children, but that is not their job in the first place. Some teachers suggested that the presence of trained professionals would improve such a system; unfortunately, in most cities and school districts there are not enough specialists to attend to most or all children being included in normal classrooms (Phillips, Meloy, p. 473). Most schools simply do not possess the manpower or resources needed to support the learning of disabled students. In place of an inclusion system, children should remain in special education programs, as it is far easier to localize assistance to a group of children in one area than to a few children spread across different schools and grades.

Integration of special education students into classrooms does not account for all those who are disabled. Just because students *can* be added into traditional school settings, does not

mean they *should*. One study of teachers' misperceptions of inclusive education concluded that "there is no doubt that expanding the role and scope of responsibility of mainstream schools regarding inclusive education will be essential, although it is not correct to make this the basis of an argument for repudiating special schools" (Sanagi, p. 112). It cannot be expected that all special needs children will fare well in an inclusion program. Many teachers do not have the time or patience to manage all children, even if their disabilities are mild. It is already challenging enough as is to keep all students on the same page, much less to have students that work at much different paces from one another. Mainstreaming special education students will not somehow *fix* a disability. In the study of autism and inclusion, one main observation is that "...educated teachers on [autism] had the opinion that autism cannot be overcome to a large extent" (Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, Tripsianis, Polychronopoulou, p. 760). Integrated education does not pose the opportunity to defeat past learning obstacles; rather, doors of opportunities might be opened here and there in the child's future. Very rarely will a disability be completely conquered. There is no point in forcing a child into an inclusion program if there is no projected effect on his success.

Personal Opinions

The obvious lesson here is adaptability. If one system does not work, that does not mean a solution is impossible! Disabled or not, children learn by different strategies. For any teacher, it is important to recognize problems with current learning tools, and be able to adjust appropriately so no student falls behind the others. That being said, it is no simple task. A great deal of extra work is required on the part of the teacher, and some educators are not prepared for that challenge. As a future educator, the author is intrigued by this issue and the ways to involve

special needs students in traditional education. She believes that inclusion practices pose an excellent opportunity to teach morals, and to offer students of all different backgrounds a quality education. That being said, these situations should be approached case-by-case. Teachers of disabled students must be willing to go the extra mile; while it is challenging with only a teaching credential to meet the needs of impaired students, the author still believes that teachers should make the best attempt possible, in hopes of continuing success in the life of that child. The author's own high school took pride in its special education program. Students with special needs participated in many of the lesser academic classes, yet there was a hallway on campus designated for these students, with many special education professionals offering assistance. In this way, these students were exposed to other peers their age, took part in a number of different classes within the high school, but also had the safety of learning at a slower pace with the help of specialists that knew how to work with them effectively. Similarly, the author found the opportunity to work alongside these students valuable, as well; learning how to cooperate and communicate with others who processed the world differently provided a wonderful lesson in empathy. While she recognizes that this situation cannot be implemented at all schools, this, in the author's opinion, is the ideal situation for special education students and those around them. Students can branch out to learn more about the world and its functions, but still have a firm grasp on a comfortable environment in which they thrive.

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