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Inclusion: The Pros and Cons: A Critical Review
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Student Disabilities under No Child Left Behind: Facts and Myths

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, there has been debate and discussion about how the law will impact students with disabilities. There has been confusion and misinformation about NCLB requirements for children with disabilities. Myths have developed. The National Association of Protection & Advocacy (NAPAS) has attempted to dispel these “myths” and misperceptions and to establish the “realities” (Smith, 2004).

Inclusion consists of placing disabled or “learning-impaired” students in general education classrooms and integrating their learning experience with students in the general education classes (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Smith, 2004). Inclusion is made up of four main components: 1) all students receive their education in their home school; 2) placement is based on the concept of natural proportions; 3) there is learning/teaching restructuring so that supports are created for special education in the general education setting; and, 4) placements are grade- and age- appropriate. There is a further distinction between inclusion, where students spend two-thirds or more of their time in a general education classroom, and full inclusion, where students with disabilities spend all their time in a general classroom. Mainstreaming consists in the practice of educating students with special needs in regular, general classrooms during specific time periods based on their skills.

What are the pros and cons of inclusion? What have been the successes and failures of inclusion?

NCLB was enacted to “ensure that all children have a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education.” The problem arises, however, when children with disabilities have to take the same tests as students without disabilities. Critics argue that this goal is unrealistic and unfair. Students with disabilities cannot do well on these standardized tests. The result will be a lowering of their “fragile self-esteem” and the greater chance that they will give up on school. This is the first myth.

The majority of disabled students can keep up with fellow students at their grade level and are able to perform with success on the standardized assessments or tests (Smith, 2004). Some students with disabilities need special accommodations or modifications while others do not. The “vast majority” of students with disabilities do not have disabilities that would not allow them to keep up academically with regular students at their grade level. Special accommodations or approved modifications allow most of these disabled students to take the standardized tests. They “participate meaningfully” in these regular tests. U.S. Department of Education data from 2000-2001 showed that a far greater number of students with disabilities in special education have disabilities that have no impact on their cognitive or intellectual ability.

In the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), legislation which received its name when amendments to the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) changed the name of that Act to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, nine of the thirteen eligibility categories for special education do not include cognitive or intellectual impairment. Based on the 2000-2001 data, 86.5% of disabled students who qualified for special education under IDEA criteria were cognitively impaired. The

percentage of students who had cognitive impairment was 13.4%. But even in this group, “a great many students” are able to perform at their grade level on assessments and tests with or without accommodations and modifications.

It would be tantamount to “discrimination” to exclude additional students with disabilities from the assessment regimen of the NCLB. Disabled students should not be forgotten and allowed to become “completely invisible”. Students with disabilities should not be patronized and dismissed so easily.

Critics alleged that students with disabilities hold school districts back unfairly. They argued that new legislation is required to remedy this problem. This is the second myth.

In fact, several exceptions exist to allow school districts to exclude the test results or scores of disabled students from the accountability regimen of NCLB. School districts can exclude scores for disabled children if “the number of students is too small to yield statistically verifiable information.” Under the “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) standard, districts can exclude these scores if there is a small sample size that is mandated by the state, which varies from state to state. Moreover, even if the AYP score is not adequate based on scores, it can still be satisfied if the scores for that particular group of students improves by 10% or makes progress on other indicators, such as graduation rate. Students with disabilities can take tests that are based on achievement standards that differ from those taken by regular students. Students in schools that have no grade levels can exclude testing altogether. A school may also be allowed to average its data over a three year period. Districts are required to test 95% of disabled students, leaving a 5% cushion of excluded students. Finally, in some districts, they can request a waiver from

the state. These exceptions allow districts to meet the AYP benchmark. Creating more exceptions will only generate lower expectations for students with disabilities.

Critics argued that disabled students have to take tests that are standardized in a rigid system of “one size fits all.” This is the third misconception or myth. There are four options available. First, students can take the regular assessment like other students. Second, they can take the regular assessment with accommodations or approved modifications. Third, they can take an alternate assessment based on the same achievement standards of the regular test. Fourth, they can take the alternate assessment based on different achievement criteria.

Critics argued that the Department of Education has not allowed adequate time to devise alternate testing strategies and methods. This is myth four. When the IDEA was revised in 1997, states were required to make available alternate assessments. Under the new legislation, the state’s have greater accountability.

The NCLB Act sets higher expectations for students with disabilities. It calls for greater inclusion, and less exclusion. This presents challenges to the accountability regimen in the AYP criteria. The alternate, however, was to exclude disabled students. The data, however, showed that most disabled students were not cognitively impaired. They are excluded based on unfair discrimination. The author made a good case for keeping the legislation as it was (Smith, 2004). The author demonstrated the complexities and dilemmas of equity for students with disabilities under the NCLB Act. There is not an easy way to resolve this issue in a manner that would be fair to all concerned. The author also pointed out many of the misconceptions and “myths” about disabled students.

Because disabilities cut across gender, ethnicity, and racial lines, and socio-economic status, these issues affect everyone the same way. Disability is a fundamental issue of equity for everyone in the school.

Inclusion, Students with Disabilities, and IDEA

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 2003 resulted in a re-evaluation and re-assessment of the successes and failures of IDEA. There have been policy shifts with regard to the treatment of children with vision or seeing impairments, going from full inclusion to lessening services---specialized or related services, special school placements, an expanded core curriculum---for students with visual impairment. Susan LaVenture, the executive director of the National Association for Parents of Children with Visual Impairments (NAPVI), argued that greater parental involvement was the best way to ensure the success of the IDEA with regard to students with visual impairments (LaVenture, 2003).

In the last twenty-five years, IDEA has ensured that students with disabilities receive “a full array of placement options and a full continuum of services.” These services provided by the IDEA for the blind have consisted of instruction in regular classes, special classes, special schools for the blind, instruction in hospitals, institutional care. The policy has fluctuated between providing the full array of services for the blind to lessening the quality and quantity of services provided. The National Association for Parents of Children with Visual Impairments (NAPVI) has sought to ensure that the maximum of services under IDEA are provided to disabled students. NAPVI strongly supported an expanded core curriculum for the visually impaired and additional related

services for students with visual impairment in their Individualized Education programs. These services under IDEA are threatened by governmental agencies, groups, and individuals. The greatest threats posed are those that weaken parental involvement and engagement and procedural safeguards for families. Another threat is the one posed by lessening the responsibility of school administrators for students with disabilities. Finally, the act is weakened when the short-term objectives of the student Individualized Education Programs or Plans (IEPs) are eliminated because there is less feedback and a reduced chance to apply the correct remediation strategy.

The IDEA has been effective in providing services to the visually impaired and blind students for the past 25 years. There have been problems, however, with the implementation of services under IDEA. There was a shortage of teachers of visually impaired students and support staff and personnel. There have been inadequate accommodations and materials for students with visual impairments. There has been limited or no access to the general curriculum. Finally, the quality and quantity of services has varied from school district to school district.

The way to make IDEA most effective is to maintain parental involvement. NAPVI educated parents to be actively involved and to participate in the IEP planning process and to work jointly with service providers. Parents do not understand that they can play a major role in the IEP planning process and that they can be active in ensuring that their children obtain the services that they require. Thus, parents have to be knowledgeable about the IEP process and procedures. They have to take an active role. Parents need to take a much greater role in the process and they must become more informed. This is the

best way to ensure that students with disabilities receive the optimal services provided under IDEA. Parents were instrumental in getting federal legislation enacted in the early 1970s to ensure that students with disabilities are provided the services they need.

Parental involvement and engagement is still needed to ensure the success of IDEA.

Parental involvement is the best way to ensure that students with disabilities receive the full the services guaranteed under the act.

In the last quarter century, IDEA has guaranteed services to students with disabilities. But there has been a fluctuation in the level of services provided. There are many threats to these services since 2003. The way to ensure the success of IDEA is to get greater parental involvement and engagement in the process. Moreover, parents need to be more informed. There needs to be greater parental involvement in the IEP process and in working with service care providers. Parents are the key to ensuring that students receive optimal services under the IDEA. Parental involvement and engagement are necessary to ensure that services guaranteed under IDEA are provided to students with disabilities, particularly those who have visual impairments or who are blind, Moreover, parental involvement and participation in the process will ensure that optimal services are provided to students with disabilities.

A Case Study: A Special Needs Intervention

A teacher of technology classes in Topeka, Kansas, Sharon Kenagy applied a special needs intervention successfully in her computer classroom (Kenagy, 1997). In “Sally, a special needs student, succeeds with the Web” from June, 1997, she described how she got a special needs student with “severe and multiple disabilities”, Sally, to master the

Internet. At first, Sally, was overwhelmed by the Internet. Eventually, she mastered the Web and was empowered by the learning experience.

Sharon Kenagy taught at a private Catholic school in Topeka, Kansas. Sally was admitted into the fourth grade when she was 12 years old. Sally had cerebral palsy and language, speech, and learning disabilities. She could not read or write. She experienced problems using her left arm and she had difficulty walking straight. Sally attended the school full-time.

Sally was placed in the 4th grade computer lab to learn fundamental keyboarding skills. This was a case study to determine if inclusion could succeed. It was a regular general education classroom. At first, Sally had anxiety and fear about the computer. Her teacher coached her and worked with her patiently, paying attention to her and explaining the lessons to her. Sally gradually improved to where she could open a computer application and save documents. She also was able to type words phonetically. She could not spell because she had not learned vocabulary words. She lacked confidence about working on the Internet.

Sally then enrolled in two summer classes on the use of the Internet. The first class included students from first to fourth grade. The second class included students from fifth to eighth grade. The classes were in session for five days a week, three hours a day. In the summer classes, there was a much smaller class size, so teachers were able to give more individualized attention to each student. Sharon Kenagy had three teaching assistants to help her teach the classes. The students were to set up a slide show using ClarisWorks.

Sally was more at ease in this summer class because the class was less intimidating. The students were much younger, ranging from five to nine years.

At first, Sally had difficulty on the assignment. She was not interested in anything on the Internet. Kenagy and her three assistants coached Sally and helped her search on the Web. Sally got little from the sites she visited because she could not read the text. Sally still did not show any interest on the second day. But she did participate in the assignment by helping a younger student in the class.

Sally continued to show a lack of interest in the assignment. Kenagy tried to make the assignment more interesting by allowing the class to scan photos. Sally showed interest in this. But she did not show any interest in the web sites the teacher selected for the class. Sally just sat in the class and just observed what everyone else was doing. She was just not responding to the assignment or lesson. Sally did not complete her slide show. She had nothing to present for the day parents and friends were to come to watch the Slide Show presentations.

Kenagy did not give up. She worked with Sally to get her motivated about the assignment. Kenagy went over the objectives for the assignment and she showed Sally more Internet Web sites. Then the breakthrough occurred. Kenagy was able to connect with Sally by showing her a site of the University of Kansas museum. This connected with Sally and she decided to do her project on the University of Kansas.

Kenagy had to help Sally with copying and pasting and selecting images. She was able to finish the project, however, and presented it to the class.

This positive experience in the first computer class carried over to the second class. Sally was now confident and eager. Sally now felt very comfortable on the Internet and was able to improve and correct her earlier Slide Show project. Sally presented her slide show to the teaching staff and to other students, but she felt intimidated about presenting it to the entire class. This second class was a more advanced class with older students. Sally now demonstrated self-confidence and self-assurance. She felt good about herself and her self-esteem was heightened. She improved greatly in reading and her self-concept or self-image was much more positive. She had found the regular general education curriculum to be challenging and she fell behind. The school had offered more supports, in the form of a personal laptop computer with an Internet connection. Moreover, her teachers sent her assignments by e mail to her at home so she could do them at home or in school. These are the accommodations that were provided for Sally. Using the Internet and a computer, thus, was very beneficial for Sally. The Web was a tool that benefited Sally greatly in keeping up with the general education curriculum.

Why was inclusion successful in this case? What was the key to this special needs intervention? The teacher was able to find something of meaning to Sally that transformed her learning experience. For Kenagy, the goal of teaching is to enable each student to find meaning. Students have to be helped and coached to find something that interests them. Once they connected to something of interest, something that had meaning for them, then the learning experience will be beneficial for them. The whole point of education is to pinpoint or identify what interests students. Otherwise, they will be overwhelmed by what is out there. The teacher was successful in this intervention

because she got the student to focus and to find meaning. These goals are applicable not only for special needs students, but for all students.

The Pros of Inclusion

What are the pros of inclusion? Inclusion has resulted in greater communication skills, greater social competence, and greater developmental skills for all special education students who have been a part of the inclusive setting (Bennett, DeLuca, & Bruns, 1997). A second benefit of inclusion is that disabled students make more friends in the general education setting and interact with their student peers at a much higher level (Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995). Not isolated in the special education classes, inclusion allows disabled students to be an active part of the larger student body. A third benefit is that the costs of inclusion are less over time than teaching the special education students in special education classes alone.

The Cons of Inclusion

What are the cons of inclusion? Educators who are critical of inclusion argued that placing special education students in the general education classroom may not be beneficial. They maintained that full-time placements in general education classrooms will prevent some disabled students from obtaining intensive and individualized attention and teaching (Andrews, Carnine, Coutinho, Edgar, Forness, Fuchs, et al., 2000; Macmillan, Gresham, & Forness, 1996). Instruction in the general education class would dilute and dissipate the specialized attention they would normally receive in a special education class.

A second criticism of inclusion is that the financial resources are not available for inclusion to be effective (Fox & Ysseldyke, 1997). Critics of inclusion have asserted that special education funds have not been appropriated to general education in a sufficient amount to make inclusion viable in all cases. In other words, in order for inclusion to work, funds need to be available to make inclusion effective and viable in the general education setting.

A third criticism of inclusion was that general education teachers do not possess the requisite training or qualifications to teach disabled students effectively (Schumm & Vaughn, 1995). Moreover, general education teachers do not have opportunities to work with or collaborate with special education teachers. In other words, there is usually not enough time to plan and coordinate lessons and teaching strategies between general and special education teachers. Additionally, class size should be reduced if special education students are included. But this was not always possible.

The Benefits of Inclusion

The benefits of inclusion far outweigh the costs. A major benefit of inclusion was that it allowed for the societal integration of disabled students. Disabled students are much less segregated and isolated from the general student population. This was consonant with the goals and objectives of the IDEA and No Child Left Behind Act. All students should be treated equally; there should be equal protection and equal services. While not always possible, this is a worthwhile goal. Inclusion furthers this goal of achieving full integration for all students. Inclusion, thus, results in greater social cohesion, a greater

sense of empathy, and a greater sense of diversity. Inclusion is a worthy goal that should not be abandoned.

The Effects of NCLB on Inclusion

Researchers have assessed the overall influence or effect of the “test-driven accountability” policy of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) on special education programs in public schools, with a focus on the impact as a whole on public schools across the U.S. (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). They noted that results in individual schools and school districts varied, but emphasized that focusing on its overall, broad impact on public schools in the U.S.

The research methodology employed consisted of conducting case study interviews, sending surveys to officials in state departments of education across the U.S., administering a questionnaire to a nationally representative sample of school districts in the U.S., conducting case studies of selected school districts and schools, and in monitoring the implementation of the NCLB Act.

They found that tests for disabled students were not effective under NCLB (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). The researchers found that for “the past three years ... states and districts have repeatedly identified as NCLB problem areas the law's testing and accountability provisions for students with disabilities.” They further found that “requirements to administer state exams to students with disabilities ... for disabled students with cognitive impairments, the state test may be inappropriate and serve no instructional purpose.” The U.S. Department of Education had made “administrative

changes” in the area of student with disabilities, but state and school district officials found that these changes were insufficient to remedy the problem.

The negative results for students with disabilities need to be addressed. The testing and accountability requirements for students with disabilities and for students learning English are causing persistent problems for state and school administrators. These requirements need to be fixed because they have increased cost while not raising student achievement.

They found the percentage of schools on state "needs improvement" lists had been constant. The U.S. government was taking a bigger role in education by having the U.S. Department of Education approve testing programs and accountability programs before they can be implemented by the schools or districts. The requirements of NCLB have resulted in expanded roles for state governments and school districts in school operations. The researches concluded, however, that although their duties have expanded, there are not enough federal funds for them to carry out their functions and duties under the NCLB.

Overall, they found that students in all groups and subgroups were taking more tests under NCLB. Schools were much more concerned about “achievement gaps” and were focusing more on the learning needs of particular groups of students, such as students with a disability, low-income students, and minority group students.

The conclusion that Jennings and Rentner made was that NCLB had had “a major impact” on American public schools. There is greater accountability and more tests. Low-performing schools are being addressed. The needs of low-performing students such as

students with learning disabilities, are being addressed. Teacher qualifications are being stressed more. Finally, the scores on state mathematics and reading tests have gone up. These have been the positive results of NCLB.

State departments of education do not, however, have the capacity to administer all the NCLB programs effectively. Neither do the school districts or schools. They do not have the resources needed or the funds for complete and full implementation of NCLB. The result has been a lack of funding and larger class sizes for students with disabilities. The researches saw this as the major problem with NCLB. Their recommendations consisted in recommending that the U.S. Congress specifically address these issues and problems when the reauthorization discussions on the NCLB began in 2007. They concluded that the NCLB could be effective but that these changes must be made to correct the problems of the Act.

Conclusion

The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are the federal regulations that established the guidelines for inclusion. The IDEA, which was reauthorized on December 3, 2004, requires that students with disabilities be educated in regular education classrooms. IDEA mandates that: “Each State must establish procedures to assure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities ... are educated with children who are not disabled” unless “the nature and severity of the disability is such that education in the regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.” The U.S. Supreme Court has held that no one is excluded from the requirements of IDEA. Everyone is entitled to a free and

appropriate public education (FAPE). The 1997 Amendments, moreover, made general education teachers part of the team that develops the Individualized Education Program or Plan (IEP). Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the requirements of a Least Restrictive Environment, “the educational setting that provides the greatest exposure to an interaction with general education students and persons without disabilities”, and the use of supplementary aids and services for students with disabilities, were established. Schools are thus required under law to attempt to include students with disabilities in the regular general education classes. Courts will carefully examine the facts in individual cases to determine whether school districts have offered an appropriate placement out of a continuum of placements available for every child with disabilities who is enrolled in the district. Courts will examine IEP team processes to ensure that placements are based on the individual needs of each child.

Inclusion is crucial because it ensures equality and nondiscrimination on the basis of disability and allows students to receive a “free, appropriate public education.” There are pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages, to inclusion. The Sally case study shows the successful results that can be achieved with inclusion. Cognitive and social development improves for students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom. Moreover, students and teachers learn tolerance by developing and fostering a sense of community where diversity and differences are valued. The segregation and ostracism that results from separate special education classrooms is avoided. Finally, under the contact theory, the more interaction there is with individuals with differences, the more tolerance, empathy, and understanding there is that is fostered and developed.

The cons or disadvantages of inclusion are that it costs more to educate students with disabilities. Based on data from the U.S. 2005 Special Education Expenditures Program (SEEP), it costs 1.6 times more to educate a student with disabilities than it does to educate a student with no disabilities. The yearly cost to educate a student with disabilities ranged from \$10,558 to \$20,095, while the cost for a regular education student was \$6,556. Nevertheless, in general, the costs of inclusion are lower than keeping the student in a separate, special education classroom. Critics of inclusion also argued that inclusion lowered the general standards for regular and honor students in the classroom. Teachers have to devote more time and attention to students with disabilities, who required much greater individualized attention than regular students. Critics argued that this takes away from time that could be spent on regular students. Regular and advanced or honor students are cheated of learning time. Inclusion lowered the quality and quantity of instruction.

The pros or advantages of inclusion are that proponents rely on research findings to argue that inclusion classrooms are more academically effective than exclusion classrooms (Kavale & Glass, 1982; Madden & Slavin, 1983; Weiner, 1985). There are no conclusive comparative data or research findings that show the academic advantages or disadvantages of an inclusive versus a non-inclusive setting.

Research conducted by the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities has shown that inclusion classrooms build self-esteem and an improved self-concept or self image in students with disabilities. Inclusion settings build social skills by interaction especially in children with autism (Wolfberg & Schuler, 1999).

While there are pros and cons to inclusion, the benefits outweigh the costs. Inclusion is essential if education is to foster equality, equity, social and community integration, tolerance, diversity, and achievement for all students.

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