

Inclusion Doesn't Always Mean Included

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Abstract

Children identified for special education services were once denied access to regular education classrooms and their peers regardless of the nature of their disabilities. In recent decades, efforts have been made to integrate more exceptional children into mainstream environments. The term inclusion has manifested itself into modern education through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), all of which provide provisions as to how exceptional education students would co-exist with their mainstream peers. However, not everyone has embraced this form of integration and questions linger about just how effective the laws have been in regulating the education system so that no child is discriminated against.

Inclusion Doesn't Always Mean Included

Inclusion is one of the most controversial issues in public schools across America today. The decision in the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* spearheaded legal reform for people with disabilities, resulting in major legislation. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), Public Law 94-142, and Section 504, were all passed to make provisions for how people with disabilities were integrated into society.

Despite the passage of key legislation, there are still barriers to inclusion that prevent many exceptional students from transitioning into mainstream classrooms. Although the movement for inclusive education is part of a broad human rights agenda, many educators have serious reservations about supporting the widespread placement of pupils with special educational needs. Mdikana, Ntshangase, and Mayekiso, 125). One barrier to transition is the availability of preservice and in-service training in diverse practices. Because they lack training, many teachers are faced with questions: how does a teacher include a student whose disabilities are substantial? What is the importance of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in the classroom? The underlying assumption here is that professional attitudes may well act to facilitate or constrain the implementation of inclusive education. (Mdikana, Ntshangase, and Mayekiso, 125). An understanding of the attitudes is essential for curriculum planning and in-service and pre-service training programs; and could have a significant impact on current and future educational policy, program planning, and funding decisions. (Mahat, 82).

Few traditional teacher education programs provide in-depth training to prepare educators to meet the needs of all learners. In fact, most colleges offer nothing more than

a single course in diversity to prepare student teachers for the workforce. Center and Ward's (1987) study with regular teachers indicated that their attitudes to integration reflected their lack of confidence both in their own instructional skills or management skills on the part of the teacher. (cited by Mdikana, Ntshangase, and Mayekiso, 126).

Information about learning disabilities has been so slow to "trickle down" that misconceptions abound even among teachers and other education professionals. (Smith and Strick, 5). Accommodating instruction to meet the needs of all students to student learning differences is one of the most fundamental problems of education and often leads to politically and emotionally charged politics. (Slavin, 311). This is particularly true when exceptional students are placed in classrooms with teachers who are ill-equipped to teach them.

One reason for so much confusion when it comes to inclusion is that the term learning disabilities refers not to a single disorder but to a broad range of handicaps that can affect any area of academic performance. (Smith and Strick, 5). Because of this, teachers find it difficult to provide lessons that are diverse, and students fail to make gains in school. According to Slavin (1997), however, schools cannot practically meet the precise needs of every student. (430). This sentiment is held by many educators who feel overwhelmed by the expectations being placed on them on federal, state, and local bureaucracies. Others disagree, pointing to Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, the influx of culturally diverse students, and learning differences as evidence that one-size-fits-all is a detriment to the education system. Boyles and Contandino (1997) share this belief, saying that the presentation and development of lessons must be designed to say

the same thing a number of ways using a variety of experiences before meaningful learning can occur for all students. (p. 47).

In my experiences as a reading teacher, exceptional students have always been a part of my classroom. I remember feeling overwhelmed about how to differentiate lessons, handle behavioral problems, and other issues that often accompany ESE students. I had no background in education and the one class in diversity that I took did not really prepare me any more than I already had been. Without a doubt, many of my students did not receive the full benefit of having a teacher who was professionally sound enough to give them what they needed to be successful readers. Unfortunately, this is often the case as new teachers are hired to meet the critical shortage of teachers in the classrooms. Many do not have the appropriate background and are not given any rigorous training to support them in classrooms that are represented by students of all learning abilities. One solution for would be to make district-level in-service training mandatory, similar to what many counties in Florida have done with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). If a teacher is flagged for having an ESOL student, then that teacher must complete training in ESOL in order to keep their jobs. School districts can hold educators and administrators accountable the same way. Trainings should be rigorous in structure to include ongoing workshops, mentorships, and observations. Additionally, universities should redesign their teacher preparation programs to include more courses in diversity and inclusion. Students should have the opportunity to gain field experience in classrooms that service students with disabilities and work with other teachers in preparing lessons that are multifunctional.

References

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