

Inclusive Education: The Least Dangerous Assumption

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Abstract

Inclusive education is a model of supporting diverse learners and needs in a general education setting. While the philosophy and ideals of inclusion are supported by many governmental and educational stakeholders, the practice of full inclusion is often met with resistance by educators. Research on the academic achievement and adaptive growth for students with special education needs and their typically developing peers proves that inclusive practices offer no harm and, in many cases, offer benefits to all students. This article supports the assumption that inclusive, general education programming can support academic and social development of all learners.

Inclusive education is the practice of supporting a diversity of student needs in a general educational setting. Inclusive models aim to provide each student with opportunities to belong and connect with peers, while accessing curriculum through shared educational experiences. The movement toward inclusion, supported by many international and governmental organizations, is based on a variety of principles including the principle of “the least dangerous assumption,” which posits that it is least dangerous for students with disabilities to be supported in a general classroom setting, rather than a special education environment (Boyle, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2013, p. 62). Whether inclusion or special education programs are the least dangerous assumption depends on their academic and social influences on students. In comparison with special education programs, a general education placement is the least dangerous assumption.

Educational inclusion is defined as providing a welcoming and equitable educational environment that meets the needs of all learners, in the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of education (Inclusion BC, 2014; Katz, 2013; Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Salend and Duhaney (1999) described inclusionary schools as those that “seek to establish communities of learners by educating all students together in age-appropriate, general education classrooms in their neighborhood schools” (p. 114). Manitoba Education further defined inclusive practices as those that foster engagement, belonging and personal achievement for all students, by “engag[ing] in practices that allow students with a wide range of learning needs to be taught together effectively” and, in doing so, “enhance students’ abilities to deal with diversity” (Manitoba Education, 2016, “What Does Inclusion Mean”). These inclusive practices are grounded in values of respect, equity, justice, and removal of “exclusionary assumptions and practices” for students with disabilities (Boyle et al., 2013, p. 528).

While classroom practices of inclusion often vary, common elements exist. Students with and without special education needs are educated in diverse classrooms with same-age peers. These students have shared educational experiences, with access to the mainstream curriculum, which is supported to meet students’ needs and abilities (Boyle et al., 2013). These elements of inclusion help to distinguish inclusive practices from other integrative approaches, such as visitation, part-time mainstreaming, physical integration, and reverse mainstreaming (Inclusion BC, 2014). Through inclusive practices, all students are able to develop academically, while fostering growth of adaptive skills.

The least dangerous assumption asserts that, without conclusive data on best practices in special education, educational systems must operate based on the assumption that their practices, if incorrect, will cause the least harm to all students (Doyle & Giangreco, 2013). With this assumption, educators must assume that it is least dangerous for students to be educated in a general education setting, alongside their peers. Rather than assuming “student deficits,” due to their special education needs, it is less harmful to presume that students are competent

and capable of learning interesting content. In turn, educational stakeholders must presume the competence of general education teachers in educating students with special education needs. By doing so, they share the belief that all students have the capability to learn, and that educators have the capacity to support them in doing so.

While the least dangerous assumption is based on the lack of conclusive evidence supporting best educational practices for students with disabilities, there is a growing body of evidence to support inclusive educational practices. Researchers have found that inclusion offers no negative effects in terms of academic and social achievement for students with and without disability (Dessemontet & Bless, 2013; Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Ruijs, Van der Veen, & Peetsma, 2010). In many cases, researchers have found benefits for students in inclusive programming (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1994; Rojewski, Lee, & Gregg, 2015; Salend & Duhaney, 1999). These benefits, or lack of detriments, support the premise of the least dangerous assumption, whereby students in inclusive education programs are least dangerously affected by inclusive, general education practices.

The least dangerous assumption is based on the presumption that students with special education needs are capable of learning curricular content, and that general education teachers have the capacity to teach students of varying ability. Research supports the belief that students with special education needs, participating in inclusive programming, are capable of learning equal, if not more, academic content than those students in special education programs (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1994; Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Waldron and McLeskey (1998) compared the math and English performance of students with learning disabilities, educated in either an inclusive classroom, or receiving resource room support (as cited in Salend & Duhaney, 1999). The results showed that students educated in general education classrooms made significantly greater gains in English and no difference in gains in math, as compared to their peers educated through resource pull-out. Similarly, Freeman and Alkin (2000) found no significant differences in achievement between students with intellectual disabilities who were educated in general classrooms and their counterparts who were educated in specialized classrooms and schools (as cited in Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012). In fact, they found that the time these students spent in general education classroom was associated with increased academic achievement. These findings support inclusive practices, given that students with special education needs show equal, if not more, academic achievement in the general education classes than alternative settings.

While many people will agree that inclusive practices can offer academic benefits to students with special education needs, some may argue that inclusion is done at the expense of the education of their typically developing peers. However, research confirms that academic achievement of typically developing students is not negatively affected by the inclusion of students with special education needs (Dessemontet & Bless, 2013; Ruijs, Van der Veen, & Peetsma, 2010; Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Multiple studies comparing the achievement of typically developing students in inclusive and non-inclusive environments have found that the inclusion of students with special education needs in a general education setting has no effect on the reading, language, and arithmetic achievement of the students without such needs (Dessemontet & Bless, 2013; Ruijs et al., 2010). Furthermore, this lack of effect is true for all achievement groups, including low-, average-, and high-achieving students. Interestingly, when comparing to other background factors that are correlated to achievement, inclusion is less predictive of the achievement of typically developing students than both country of origin and gender (Ruijs et al., 2010). This comparison reveals that including students with disabilities in general education classrooms has no more effect on the academic achievement of other students than their gender or the country in which they were born, which most people would agree are not significant predictors of academic or lifelong success. When put in this context, it becomes apparent that inclusive practices offer no detrimental effect on the academic achievement of all students.

One of the purported benefits of special education programs is the emphasis on life-skills programming, which often focuses on adaptive behaviours, such as communication and social skills, which many students with special education needs require for adulthood. However, comparative research does not support this claim. Dessemontet et al. (2012) assessed adaptive behaviours, including communication, social skills, community living, leisure, and self-care abilities, among others. They compared the adaptive skill growth of students with disabilities in inclusive settings and special placement programs. Regardless of the type of classroom placement, both groups of students made notable progress in the adaptive behaviour domain, with no significant differences between the two groups. In an older study, Saint-Laurent, Fournier, and Lessard (1993) found that students in fully integrated programs developed better social behaviours than their counterparts in community and developmentally based programs). Other aspects of adaptive behaviour were similar, regardless of program type. While effect sizes vary between studies, in a meta-analysis, Baker, Wang, and Walberg (1994) found a small-to-moderate benefit of inclusive programming, in comparison to non-inclusive practices. They noted that regardless of effect sizes, which varied between studies, research has rarely demonstrated negative effects of inclusive education. Students in inclusive programs demonstrate equal, if not greater, advances in adaptive behaviours than their peers in special placement programs.

Furthermore, in terms of long-term success, Rojewski, Lee, and Gregg (2015) found a significant, positive correlation between inclusion and participation in post-secondary education, with students who received at least 80% of their secondary education in inclusive settings being 2.1 times more likely to enrol in post-secondary programs than the less inclusive group (p. 214). Beyond this research, a national study focusing on transition into adulthood found that students who took a greater number of high school courses in a general education setting were more likely to gain employment, attend post-secondary programs, live independently and have greater social integration than their counterparts who spent more time in a special education setting (Salend & Duhaney, 1999). While the development of life skills, or adaptive behaviours, is an important and valuable goal for all students, including those students with special education needs, these skills can be taught and supported in a general education classroom equally, if not more effectively, than through special education programming, offering further evidence that inclusive placements are the least dangerous placement option.

Inclusive practices benefit not only students with special educational needs, but also their typically developing peers, or students without such needs, through a greater development of social skills and behaviours. Students involved in inclusive practices develop more positive attitudes toward people with disability, which in turn fosters acceptance of peers (Dessemontet & Bless, 2013). In a survey of 181 middle years students without disabilities, most students were supportive of inclusive practices, believing that these practices had positive outcomes for students with special education needs and helped typically developing students to develop more positive attitudes toward peers with disabilities (Salend & Duhaney, 1999). In comparing teachers' ratings of typically developing students in less inclusive (less than 10% students with special education needs) and more inclusive (more than 10% of students with special education needs) educational settings, Ruijs, Vanderveen, and Peetsma (2010) found no significant differences in student self-confidence, behaviour, effort, popularity, and teacher-student relationship. In student reports of social integration and well-being, no significant differences were found between the inclusive and exclusive groups. However, students in the more inclusive group reported significantly greater self-confidence than the less inclusive group. Through inclusive programming, and with heterogeneous peer groups, students can develop improved social and adaptive skills and behaviours, as compared to alternative programs.

Inclusive education is a practice supported by many governmental and educational organizations. The goal of inclusive education is to support diverse classrooms and meet the needs of all students, including those students with disabilities, in a general education setting. Inclusive education is supported by the principle of the least dangerous assumption, which

posits that it is least dangerous for students with disabilities to be taught in a general education placement, rather than a special education environment (Boyle et al., 2013). While the evidence base is still developing, research shows that including all students in general education classes, regardless of their education needs, offers no harm and, in many cases, offers benefits to all students. This research supports the assumption that inclusive, general education programming can meet the needs and support academic and social development of all learners. Inclusive education is, therefore, the “least dangerous assumption.”

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