

## The Benefits of Inclusion for Students on the Autism Spectrum

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### **Abstract**

*Children with autism have a right to be within inclusive classrooms. There are many benefits to having inclusive classrooms, including reducing stigma surrounding autism, creating respectful relationships between all students within a classroom, teaching all students how to act positively with others, and increasing knowledge of autism. To best create an inclusive classroom, teachers should continue differentiating instruction, should teach to a student's interests and needs, and should meet with family members of students with autism to better understand the needs of the child. All students can benefit from being in an inclusive classroom setting, and teachers often already implement teaching strategies that would best support a child with autism.*

Inclusion in a general classroom is a positive option for children with autism. Inclusion has often been a highly debated topic, and if schools are prepared students with autism should be able to be in inclusive settings. Most students on the autism spectrum are included within general classrooms, because they have the right to be taught in an inclusive classroom (Andre et al., 2019). Inclusion can benefit all children, including peers within the classroom. Inclusion of students with autism in the general classroom can minimize stigma against autism while students learn how to communicate appropriately with one another. Having a student with autism in a general classroom also reduces negativity associated with autism, and children will learn how to work with one another. Inclusive classroom settings teach students to build relationships with all peers. Teachers already practise beneficial differentiation techniques for all students, and it should be continued. For teachers to feel comfortable with successfully integrating a student with autism in a general classroom, it would be beneficial for the teacher and the family to meet prior to school starting. Teachers can consider teaching to the students' interests and abilities so that a student with autism is successful in an inclusive classroom. Teachers should ensure that they have some education on autism so that they can successfully integrate a child with special needs in the classroom setting, because a more knowledgeable teacher is more comfortable with inclusion. Inclusion can benefit more than just a child with autism, and should be an option for that child.

### **Benefits of Inclusion**

Inclusion can be defined in many ways. Inclusion can benefit all students and staff within a school, positive attitudes toward autism will make inclusion more successful for a child with autism, and inclusion can teach all students how to have positive relationships with one another. Inclusion can be defined in many ways, but the premise behind most definitions remains the same in that inclusion ensures that all students are included in learning (Jung et al., 2019). Inclusion is an educational program practice that integrates all levels of learners in one classroom and is the "process of overcoming the barriers limiting the participation of all learners" (Meindl et al., 2020, p. 1). Children should have access to inclusion, because the practice of inclusion can benefit all learners (Campbell, 2016). There are many different variations of the definition of inclusion, but, inclusion is allowing all students to learn in social environments together.

Inclusion benefits all students within a classroom by minimizing stereotypes while encouraging learning to occur between all peers. Stigma often follows students who have

autism, and ensuring that students with autism are included within regular classrooms can increase the knowledge around autism, along with creating more positive attitudes toward it (Anthony et al., 2020). Inclusion is beneficial for all students because classrooms “provide valuable academic resources and social learning opportunities” (Ge & Zhang, 2019, p. 1), which encourages all students to learn the same curricular outcomes while also learning from their peers in the form of group work. Students with autism who are in inclusive classrooms demonstrate “better cognitive and adaptive characteristics” (Rattaz et al., 2019, p. 464), because they are able to observe and practise interacting with their peers, and their peers are more likely to respond in a socially appropriate way (Vivanti et al., 2019). Inclusion can benefit not only students who are on the autism spectrum, but other students too.

Attitudes play a prominent role in whether inclusion is beneficial for students with autism. While many students with autism have lower academic motivation (Ge & Zhang, 2019), it is up to a caring teacher to support and create positive relationships with them (Connor & Cavendish, 2018). Caring, motivational, and positive teachers can create learning environments that all students benefit from, and wherein students feel safe enough to interact with others. Inclusion in classrooms increases overall knowledge of autism. If social programs such as Sesame Street and Autism: See Amazing in All children (Anthony et al., 2020) can reduce stigma related to autism and increase positive behaviours surrounding autism, then having students in an inclusive classroom can bring even more knowledge to all students, which can have a positive effect on attitudes. It has been found that students with autism who were in regular classrooms “had less stereotypies compared to children included in special classes” (Rattaz et al., 2019). Inclusion can create respectful and positive environments wherein all students learn how to interact and work together, which benefits all children (Meindl et al., 2020) and makes students more positive toward autism. When students with autism learn how to interact positively with others by being in inclusive classrooms, stigma related to autism will be reduced because peers will be learning about autism while interacting positively. Inclusion benefits all students, because students learn how to be respectful and positive, and to work appropriately with all types of students, which improves attitudes toward autism.

If students want to have success in inclusive settings, they will need to learn how to have positive relationships with all students. If students with autism are in regular classrooms, there will be fewer stereotypes as children of all abilities interact, which can eventually build better relationships with peers (Rattaz et al., 2019). Peers hold an important role in showing a child with autism how to interact properly with others, and as those interactions continue, there is an improvement in social acceptance, interaction, and communication (Campbell, 2016). Students learn from a young age how to be accepting of others, and research shows that social interactions can decrease stigma related to autism while improving knowledge of autism (Anthony et al., 2020). Relationships can be made only when there is no stigma, and if a student with autism is to be fully included within the classroom, being socially exposed to other students is the best way to end possible stigma. Students with autism would benefit from being in an inclusive classroom because they will learn how to build social relationships, while also minimizing stigma so that peer relationships can be formed. There are many different definitions of inclusion, yet they all state that all students are included in learning. Inclusion can benefit staff and students within a school, create positive attitudes toward autism which can create more inclusive classrooms, and teach students how to have proper relationships with one another.

### **Preparing an Inclusive Classroom for a Child with Autism**

Teachers should continue to implement differentiation for students, and should meet with families to communicate about appropriate practices for students with autism. Students may benefit from being taught to their interests and abilities, and teachers should ensure that they have training on autism. Teachers often implement differentiation, along with many good teaching practices and accommodations that benefit all students. When including students with

autism in a general classroom, students have indicated that they like when the teacher creates support plans that are unique to their personal needs (Connor & Cavendish, 2018). Differentiating learning can include being a multi-modal teacher because it is important for all students, and it is important for teachers to provide visual and auditory instruction to ensure that all students are able to receive instruction, especially if there are learners with autism (Connor & Cavendish, 2018). When teachers diversify the curriculum for students who have autism, there are more positive attitudes toward the teacher and the inclusive classroom from the student with autism (Larcombe et al., 2019). Students with autism also state that having more time to complete assignments, having access to another room for test taking, receiving notes prior to learning, and being able to use technology is beneficial for learning (Accardo et al., 2019). Students with autism also thrive on receiving individual affirmation from a teacher, and are more engaged in class when a teacher praises them individually (Andre et al., 2019). Teachers have already been implementing many forms of personalized differentiation for students, and should continue to do so for the benefit of all students.

Prior to a student with autism being enrolled within an inclusive classroom, it would be in the best interest for the teacher, support staff, parents, and child to meet. The relationship between a student with autism and the teacher is more beneficial and positive if the teacher gets to know the student and their needs (Rudy, 2020). Teachers may find it useful to ask students for their input of what supports they want, or what they find to be effective (Accardo et al., 2019). Often teachers learn about students by reading their educational records, but if a teacher wants to learn more about a student with autism, it may be best to ask that student or their family to provide what works for them (Kluth, 2010). Families are able to share what teaching procedures are most effective for that child, too (Kluth, 2010), which will make planning for that student easier on the teacher. Effectively collaborating and communicating with families can better prepare a child for inclusion within a classroom (Rattaz et al., 2019). Communication can create better understanding between school and family, and can create a clear vision of what education is to look like for a child with autism. Prior to a student with autism being enrolled in a classroom or school, it would be beneficial for the student, family, and teacher to meet in order to make the transition into an inclusive classroom more successful.

Students with autism can be taught to their interests and abilities, which will make them more successful in inclusive classroom settings. Differentiation of instruction is suggested for all students, and can include differentiation of the curriculum (Strogilos et al., 2018). Differentiation of the curriculum encourages teachers to teach to students' interests, which makes learning in an inclusive setting more beneficial for that student. To have a successful inclusive classroom for a student with autism, it would be beneficial for teachers to teach to a child's interests and strengths (Kluth, 2010). For students with autism to be socially engaged within an inclusive classroom, teachers could provide choice for students by allowing them to choose assignments that match their personal abilities and interests (Andre et al., 2019), while still having the opportunity to converse with their peers about the topics at hand. Teachers are encouraged to differentiate within inclusive classrooms, in order to ensure that all students are being taught to the best of their abilities, because it "can be fruitful to encourage interests of autistic children" (Wood, 2018, p. 126) so that those students can be engaged and successful in their learning.

Teachers need training to have increased knowledge and understanding on how to ensure that a student with autism is part of a successful inclusive classroom. Training for teachers is crucial, because many teachers feel underprepared to teach a child with autism (Meindl et al., 2020), and education will better prepare teachers to instruct a child with autism. Parents and therapists have found that when students have a positive experience at school, it is often due to the teachers and educational assistants with whom the students work (Larcombe et al., 2019). Teachers who have confidence in how to assist an autistic child, due to having some education, will have a more positive demeanour that students will pick up on. This positivity is needed for successful inclusive classrooms. Knowledgeable teachers can create better plans with educational assistants so that students can work and learn to the best of their abilities. Often

students with autism are negatively viewed by others, but teacher knowledge and positivity toward autism and inclusion can improve students' overall attitudes toward autism and inclusion (Rodriguez et al., 2012). Teachers have stated that receiving training and information is crucial for understanding how to include students with autism into their classrooms (Rattaz et al., 2019). Teachers already differentiate and use good teaching practices and accommodations for children with autism, and they should continue to do so. It may be beneficial for families of a child with autism and the teacher to meet and discuss student abilities prior to school starting. For the benefit of the students with autism, teachers can teach to that child's interests, and teachers should have some formal training on autism.

## Conclusion

Children with autism have a right to be within an inclusive classroom. There are many benefits of having all students together in an inclusive setting as long as teachers, parents, and support staff all work together to make inclusion beneficial for students. Students with autism not only learn from their peers in inclusive classrooms, but they also teach their peers about autism while reducing stigma, which creates more positive attitudes and relationships in regard to autism and inclusion. Both students with and without autism require interaction with their peers in order to learn how to interact positively with others, which also increases knowledge and acceptance of autism. Inclusive classrooms can reduce stigma due to the positive interactions among all students. Many teachers already practise differentiation in their classrooms, and those practices should be continued when there is a child with autism in the general classroom, because those differentiations assist student learning. Teachers, families, and support staff should attempt to meet prior to school beginning to learn about the best learning strategies for a student with autism. Students with autism can be taught to their interests and abilities when in an inclusive classroom, because that may create more success for that child. Students with autism have a right to be within an inclusive learning environment in general classrooms.

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