Inclusive Education: Challenges & Practices

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion is an educational approach and philosophy that provides all students with community membership and greater opportunities for academic and social achievement. Inclusion is about making sure that each and every student feels welcome and that their unique needs and learning styles are attended to and valued. Research shows that most students learn and perform better when exposed to the richness of the general education curriculum, as long as the appropriate strategies and accommodations are in place.

Today it is widely accepted that inclusion maximizes the potential of the vast majority of students, ensures their rights, and is the preferred educational approach for the 21st century. Unfortunately, the philosophy has not always been widely held. Our thinking and acceptance has evolved rapidly over the last century, and continues to evolve, in response to federal and state law, along with our changing social and political beliefs. As we strive to meet these challenges, the involvement and cooperation of educators, parents, and community leaders is vital for the creation of better and more inclusive schools.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Teachers, Philosophy, Policy Makers.

Inclusion is both a practice and a basic underpinning of modern educational philosophy. The practice of inclusion in public schools is based on the legal concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Least Restrictive Environment has come to be known, through legal challenges and due process, as that educational experience that is most like that received by non-disabled students. Schools are expected to offer a full spectrum of placements in the best interest of children, from full inclusion, which means receiving all instruction in the general education setting, to residential treatment, when it is in the best interest of the child, and all alternate levels of restrictions have been exhausted.

Inclusion enhances learning for students, both with and without special needs. Students learn, and use their learning differently; the goal is to provide all students with the instruction they

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need, to succeed as learners and achieve high standards, alongside their friends and neighbours. Proponents of mainstreaming hold that students with special needs be placed in the general education setting solely when they can meet traditional academic expectations with minimal assistance. Simply placing students with special needs in the regular classroom is not enough to impact learning. Teachers in an inclusive school need to vary their teaching styles to meet the learning styles of a diverse population of students. Only then can the individual needs of all our students be met. Schools of the future need to ensure that each student receives the individual attention, accommodations, and supports that will result in meaningful learning.

PHILOSOPHY OF INCLUSION

Inclusion is also an educational philosophy. Supported by research, it fosters belief that children with disabilities do better in general education settings with typically developing peers. It also advances the understanding, also supported by research, that best practices in special education, especially differentiation, provides the most success for general education as well as special education students. Unlike "mainstreaming" which proposed to stick students qualifying for special education in general educations to "sink or swim," inclusion holds that students of broadly differing abilities can succeed with appropriate support.

As an educational practice, inclusive education obviously attempts to provide equal access to academic instruction and social opportunities for all students, regardless of ability levels. There are many different advantages to inclusion, including opportunities for social integration (Peck & Scarpati, 2004); ease in accessing the general curriculum (Abel, Bauder, & Simmmons, 2005); academic improvement (Hunt, Doering, & Hirose-Hatae, 2001); and positive outcomes for students with and without disabilities (Idol, 2006).

According to Peters (2007) there are four assumptions underlying inclusive education:
1. All students come to school with diverse needs and abilities, so no students are fundamentally different.
2. It is the responsibility of the general education system to be responsive to all students.
3. A responsive general education system provides high expectations and standards, quality academic curriculum and instruction that are flexible and relevant, an accessible environment, and teachers who are well prepared to address the educational needs of all students.
4. Progress in general education is a process evidence by schools and communities working together to create citizens for an inclusive society who are educated to enjoy the full benefits, rights and experiences of societal life (p.99)

It is generally agreed that schools need a strong philosophy of inclusion which supports the right of all children to participate in an inclusive way (Special Education Review Committee, 2000; Lupart, 2002; Bunch, 1999). Raymond (1995) quotes Klaus Puhlman of the Yellowknife School District, who presents the following tenets of a positive inclusive philosophy:

- Every student has the right to participate in all aspects of school life;
- Every student will participate in a regular homeroom with supports to individual needs provided through that classroom – modification of regular curriculum will take place outside the regular classroom only if specific skills cannot be accommodated within a regular setting;
- All students will be placed in an age-appropriate setting, within the student's attendance area.

The Saskatchewan Special Education Unit (2001) also provides a number of indicators of inclusive educational philosophy. These include:
- Individualization and child-centered programming;
- Sharing of educational responsibility with the student's family;
- Learning with "age-appropriate" peers who do not have disabilities;
- Educational goals "that is functional for the life and life direction of the particular student involved".
- The use of teaching methods that is natural and least intrusive;
- Provision of instruction in multiple environments – classroom, other school environments, the home, the community;
- Integration of needed supports/services and types of instruction.

COMMON PRACTICES IN CLASSROOMS
Students in an inclusive classroom are generally placed with their chronological age-mates, regardless of whether the students are working above or below the typical academic level for their age. Also, to encourage a sense of belonging, emphasis is placed on the value of friendships. Teachers often nurture a relationship between a student with special needs and a same-age student without a special educational need. Another common practice is the assignment of a buddy to accompany a student with special needs at all times (for example in the cafeteria, on the playground, on the bus and so on). This is used to show students that a diverse group of people make up a community, that no one type of student is better than another, and to remove any barriers to a friendship that may occur if a student is viewed as "helpless." Such practices reduce the chance for elitism among students in later grades and encourage cooperation among groups.

Inclusive Model
In an inclusive model, general classroom teachers are the primary provider of instruction for students with disabilities. As a result, they must develop strategies to facilitate the successful inclusion of this group of students (Prater, 2003). Two methods are generally used to facilitate successful inclusion: facilitating the acceptance of the students with disabilities and providing services to support their academic success. Student with disabilities who are included in general education classrooms are not always automatically accepted by their nondisabled peers. As a result it is the teacher's responsibility to promote this acceptance. In addition to facilitating

acceptance, teachers must also implement instruction strategies that can be used to support inclusion. Examples of these include:

- Response to intervention
- Cooperative learning
- Peer supports
- Strategy instruction and
- Self-determination strategies

Classroom teachers possibly play the most important role in the success of inclusion (Hobbs & Westling, 1998). Thus, they must be able to perform many different functions, including:

1. Acting as a team member on assessment and IEP committees
2. Advocating for children with disabilities when theory are in general education classroom and in special programs
3. Counseling and interacting with parents of students with disabilities
4. Individualizing instruction for students with disabilities
5. Understanding and abiding by due – process procedures required by federal and state regulations
6. Being innovative in providing equal educational opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities.

Inclusive Classroom Practices and Design: Teachers Role

- Speak only positively about all children in the classroom and to other staff – present the positive aspects of each student
- Take clues from the child, think in terms of strengths and progress rather than deficits
- Give students a sense of control over their own learning
- Cue students who do not respond well to change in advance of daily program/subject transitions
- If the teacher sets the tone for acceptance, students will follow the example
- Involved students in supporting each other
- Don't carry problems over from day to day
- Don't blame the student for a lack of proper resources
- Express student's positive accomplishments to parents
- Make an effort to listen to and understand the knowledge of parents
- Collaborate with other teachers involved with the same students

CONCLUSION

Inclusive in education is an approach to educate students with special educational needs. Under the inclusion model, students with special needs spend most or all of their time with non-disabled students. Implementation of these practices varies. Schools, most frequently use them for selected students with mild to severe special needs. Inclusion can be organized in several ways and on different levels, but essentially, it is the team of teachers who has to deal with an increasing diversity of student needs within their school and classes, and has to adapt or prepare

the curriculum in such a way that the needs of all students are contented. The current context in which teachers are working is one of rapid change. All areas of education have changed during the past decades, with major changes to the role of teachers, together with the introduction of new approaches to the curriculum and assessment. It is clear that teachers are crucial in building more inclusive schools.

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