



Inclusive Education FAQ

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What is inclusive education?

Inclusive education is the practice of educating children with disabilities in general education classrooms alongside their classmates who don't have disabilities. Some people define inclusion as a classroom in which all children are welcomed and where the curriculum is universally designed for all learners so that each and every child has the support he or she needs in order to meet high expectations.

Does it work?

Many respected research studies have found that school achievement and positive post school outcomes are positively related with the amount of time children with disabilities spend in a general education classroom. For example, the largest, longitudinal study of educational outcomes of 11,000 students with disabilities, the National Longitudinal Transition Study, showed that more time spent in a general education classroom was related to higher scores on standardized tests of reading and math, fewer absences from school, and fewer referrals for disruptive behavior. These results held true regardless of students' disability, severity of disability, gender, or socio-economic status.

Another study by Cosier (2010) studied thousands of students across the U.S. and found that each hour that a student with a disability spends in a general education classroom produces a significant gain in achievement!

But what about the effects on children without disabilities?

Many research studies have found that the performance of students without disabilities is not compromised by the presence of students with disabilities in their classrooms. In fact, the presence of students with disabilities provides a catalyst for learning opportunities and experiences that might not otherwise be part of the curriculum, especially relating to appreciation for diversity and equity.

Theoharis and Causton-Theoharis (2010) studied the effects of a whole school approach to inclusion, based in part on Response to Intervention (RtI), on the achievement of students with and without disabilities and found that achievement went up for students with and without disabilities.

Furthermore, when teachers develop curriculum and plan instruction using the principles of Universal Design for Learning all students are provided with multiple ways to access information, multiple ways to engage with instruction, and multiple ways to show what they know. Increasingly, the use of digitized books and other innovative technology makes it easier to design instruction right from the start so that it is accessible to all students.

Aren't some children with disabilities too disruptive to include in a general education classroom?

Inclusion isn't "dumping" children in a classroom without the support that they need in order to be successful. Some children may need assistive technology to help them communicate so that they have a way to express their needs and show what they know. Other children may need help managing the sensory input of a busy classroom and school – just the kind of environment that they will experience when they leave school! Inclusion is not only about including children with disabilities in a general classroom, it is about bringing in to the general classroom special education personnel who share the teaching load and enrich the learning experience for all children.

Don't some students need to learn functional or life skills rather than academics?

The traditional view of education for students with more significant disabilities was that skills like making a bed, tying one's shoes, and setting the table were essential for a successful adult life. Now we know that literacy is one of the most essential life skills for all of our students. We also have found that students with disabilities who are included in general education classes, taught a rich academic curriculum, and who have a typical school experience are more likely to live independently as adults.

What does the law say?

The introduction to the 2004 amendments of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act" says:

“Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities. Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the general classroom, to the maximum extent possible.”

Although IDEA does not mandate inclusion, it requires that “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled.”

What supports do educators need in order to make inclusion work?

Teachers and other staff also need to be supported in order for them to do their best job of creating inclusive classrooms for all children. They need professional development, clear job descriptions, access to technology, time for instructional planning, and the support of administrators who establish a strong vision and provide leadership in the school and community. And finally, perhaps the most important thing that educators need is captured by Mara Sapon-Shevin, a faculty-researcher from Syracuse University.

“Inclusion is not about disability, nor is it only about schools. Inclusion demands that we ask What kind of world do we want to create? What kinds of skills and commitment do people need to thrive in diverse society? By embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for all of us.” Mara Sapon-Shevin