

Exclusively Inclusive
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The concept of education transcends the mundane act of instruction. “Education” as a word originated from the Latin verb “educere,” meaning “to lead forth (Merriam-Webster Online).” Teachers everywhere indeed must lead to higher plateaus all of their students: those experiencing elementary, managing middle school, handling high school, and coping with college. But remarkably, five percent of this diverse, diligent, and determined American student population is additionally labeled disabled and deserving of special needs. Controversy volcanically erupted over how these children should be accommodated and their needs met – whether in separate classrooms or with their nondisabled peers. Fortunately, most schools favor the latter (“Special Education”). Termed “inclusion,” such an approach is both beneficial and practical because it aptly fulfills the intrinsic essence of education, not just its superficial denotation. In order to augment their social skills, prepare them for independent living, and enrich their classroom setting, students with disabilities should be educated in regular classrooms with their nondisabled peers whenever possible.

Social interactions flourish when special education students are included in the regular classroom. Numerous studies have quantitatively shown that students with special needs *do not* significantly decrease the amount of class time allocated to students without special needs (Katz and Miranda). However, disabled students *do* teach patience to, evoke understanding from, and awaken sympathy in their nondisabled peers (Haas). This is precisely what Friend and Cooke mean when they write that inclusion “focuses on abilities, not disabilities.” As the brick wall of segregation crumbles and the playground of inclusion is fortified, friendships are fortified and intolerance quickly crumbles. Kishi and Meyer showed the demolition of such barriers when they monitored an elementary school’s inclusion program for six years. They consistently reported more social contact with nondisabled peers, more positive attitudes, and more community involvement because of early social exposure (cited in Lipsky and Gartner). Apparently, once such an open environment is established, as long as it remains unobstructed, special education students will feel like they belong in society’s warm embrace, not in seclusion’s frigid fists. This, in turn, leads to augmented interaction and boosted confidence. Instead of spiraling down in vicious cycles, these students will find themselves ascending on golden staircases.

Of course, sometimes students may stumble on these stairs, but because inclusion is a set of resources made to assist them specifically (Conrad and Whitaker), they will never plummet. Among these resources, the three most significant ones can be summarized in three Ts. *Teachers* who are supportive and helpful are a vital component in inclusion (“Special Education”). *Technological* advances guide students with physical disabilities (Shorr). *Tolerance* among students promotes emotional well-being for disabled students (Friend), which is crucial because many of them are easily discouraged (Calefati, “College”). The amalgamated integrating effect of these resources and others can be astounding. A study done in an Iowa middle school revealed surprising results when integrated special education students, many of whom were severely disabled at the onset, rated their classroom essentially the same as did their regular education counterparts (Hansen and Boody). The benefits of inclusion are thus seen on the faces of students, in the connections among students, and even on the responses to surveys.

While inclusion is undoubtedly beneficial up until high school, it is basically necessary at the college level. The stressors of college and post-college life make every attempt to subdue

one's confidence; however, they can still be assuaged by inclusive education. Consider the success tale of Brittany Ross, who was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, thereby classified as disabled. She and her family were both aware that less than half of disabled students receive postsecondary education ("Special Education"), a thought that dominated the seesaw of their hope. However, because of integrated programs like the College Living Experience (CLE), Brittany has learned independent living from making beds to making friends. Brittany now holds a job at Disney, a remarkable feat, considering that "roughly two-thirds of disabled persons are unemployed (Lipsky and Gartner)." She happily recounts the "fifty students who have become [her] brothers and sisters and best friends (Calefati, "Students")." What if Brittany's story applied to all disabled children, and how much inspiration would be released if the smiles on the faces of all successful disabled students could be summed? Definitely more than if she had faced the counterproductive countenance of segregation instead.

If segregation of classrooms were to be prolonged, a number of damaging effects could be engendered. As Diane Haas points out, segregation "limits opportunities for students to learn skills that enhance independent living." This approach sends a psychological message that latches onto their eardrums, constantly stressing their limits instead of limiting their stresses. Curiously, this phenomenon of severe social dependence is present not only in humans, but also in monkeys. Such a comparison illustrates the profundity of segregation's noxious consequences. A highly controversial study done by Maslow in the mid-20th century involved monkeys that were separated – segregated – from their mothers since birth (Myers 151-152). Having been reared in makeshift laboratory cages that only attended to their survival needs, these socially deprived monkeys had no knowledge of the horizons outside their bars. They were stripped of their life's journey and granted excursions to the real world only for the experimenter's convenience. Upon reaching adolescence, the monkeys were released into the wild with devastating results: some fiercely fought to return inside; others screeched loudly; still others covered their eyes with their hands. Albeit an extreme scenario, there is little doubt that for a segregated student with disabilities, whose social capability gradually wilts rather than blossoms, the transition into independent life will be anything but pleasant.

Inclusion not only effectively mollifies the rock-strewn transition into autonomous living, it also helps to enrich the classroom setting for teachers. It compels teachers to widen their range of teaching methods to accommodate these students with special needs ("Special Education"). An inclusive classroom is not merely an ordinary classroom, and teachers must acknowledge that at all times during their lessons. One math teacher used to believe that writing equations and examples on the board would be sufficient for student comprehension. When a disabled student was enrolled in the class, however, he could no longer rely on that method. By eventually devising new and more interactive examples for all of his students, this teacher admitted that such an experience "opened up a whole new way of teaching (Conrad and Whitaker)."

Another major problem confronting teachers of special education classrooms is the implicit disrespect they receive from "regular education" teachers. They are often looked down upon as "second-rate" instructors (Shorr). The primary contributing factor of this is that teachers of these two classrooms do not interact often – they are segregated along with their students (Jost). When these two environments are intertwined, though, the myriad of past misunderstandings is transformed gradually into a plethora of future compassion. One faculty member of a middle school remarked, "Inclusion brings the staff together (Friend)." Haas corroborates this statement, writing that inclusion programs encourage support among teachers,

encouragement among teachers, and friendship among teachers. Evidently, what inclusion contributes to the students it also bequeaths to the staff.

Even in the face of both qualitative and quantitative measurements of inclusion's positives, critics still charge that inclusion does not tend to the individual needs of students ("Special Education"). These people are wrong not because their reasoning is false, but because their initial definition of "inclusion" is poorly stated, causing their deductive logic to be misguided. According to their concept of it, inclusion is simply a practice whereby students with disabilities are hurled into regular classrooms and are expected to gain social skill. It is not. In reality, inclusion in no way implies that disabled students can never leave a regular classroom (Friend). They are pulled aside or out of the classroom when instructors believe necessary. Furthermore, most special education students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which is designed to provide each disadvantaged student the resources that he or she requires to succeed (Zirkel). Thus, it would be impractical and somewhat absurd to assume that inclusion offers no exceptions and no alternatives, for schools do not seem to assume this in the least. They understand that inclusion opts for students to be taken out of classrooms as a last resort, not as a first choice.

Perhaps the biggest criticism is that inclusion is just a means for schools to save money during this financial crisis (Jost). Opponents elaborate that the number of special education students has been increasing due to the expansion of the definition of "disability (Zirkel)," but school budgets are shrinking in the meantime (Shorr). This perspective, however, neglects the minutia of inclusive classrooms, which must be considered for a more unbiased evaluation. First, there is the obvious issue of legality. Schools can only deny inclusion under stringent conditions, none of which include monetary issues (Conrad and Whitaker). Second, technological supplements must be installed in regular classrooms as resources for these disabled students (Shorr). Whereas equipment such as computers may have existed in a resource room in the school, more of them may now need to be purchased and installed in regular classrooms. Lastly, human resources have to be accounted for. "Speech pathologists, psychologists, audiologists, and other support specialists" might be hired or asked to directly cooperate within the class setting (Jost). When all of these expenses are amounting, inclusion can prove just as costly as exclusion.

Special education children, who are already beleaguered by their extant disabilities, must not be further hindered from progress by their placement in segregated classrooms and by their separation from their peers. Their improvement must not be stymied by the implicit discouragements that echo off the walls of their classrooms. Inclusion promises hope to those who stopped knowing what to hope for. It makes a slit in the fabric of isolation, through which disabled students can rip further and break into a world of opportunity. Moreover, the gains are mutual; these students give back to their peers, to their teachers, to their parents, and to their community. They engender tolerance, compassion, and understanding when they are accepted for what they bring to the world, not for what they take away from it. Only inclusion allows this to happen. And to reuse the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, instead of being "borne back ceaselessly into the past (144)" with diffidence, disabled students under inclusion will be carried forth perpetually into the future with confidence.

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