



Inclusion versus Full Inclusion

by Douglas Fuchs and Lynn S. Fuchs

WHAT IS INCLUSION?

Inclusionists believe that regular classroom teachers and special educators can help children with disabilities acquire important skills, knowledge, and behaviors that, for many, will facilitate high school (or even college) graduation and a good job. Such achievement depends on a continuum of special education placements, which includes the regular classroom.

In principle, each special education placement on the continuum offers specialized, individualized, and intensive instruction that is continuously evaluated for its effectiveness. Teachers in these special settings are instructional experts. To the fullest extent appropriate, these special educators and their students work on the general education curriculum and understand the level of academic accomplishment and social behavior necessary for success in regular classrooms.

Nevertheless, although classrooms can and should be made more flexible and responsive to a broad range of children's instructional needs, there is a limit to how much a classroom can be expected to change and how many students any teacher can responsibly teach. First, the number of children in regular classrooms is large. And second, the students in the regular classrooms are not all performing on grade level. Researchers have found few teachers who differentiate their instruction to address this broad range of academic achievement (Baker & Zigmond, 1990; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bishop, 1992; McIntosh, Vaughn, Schumm, Haager, & Lee, 1993). Instead, many teachers present the same lesson and instructional materials to all students.

When teachers do implement research-backed instructional methods such as cooperative learning or classwide peer tutoring, their responsiveness to diversity increases as does student achievement, including the achievement of many special-needs children. Even so, some children with disabilities typically fail to respond to

these best practices, suggesting that even knowledgeable and dedicated teachers cannot address the special instructional needs of all children in the regular classroom.

WHAT IS FULL INCLUSION?

Full inclusionists believe the primary job of educators is to help children with disabilities establish friendships with nondisabled persons. Moreover, educators should (1) help change stereotypic thinking about disabilities among normally developing children and (2) help children with disabilities develop social skills, which will enable them to interact more effectively within a broad network of acquaintances, co-workers, family members, and friends. Friendship making, attitude change, and social skills development can only occur, say full inclusionists, in regular classes for the simple reason that these objectives require the presence of age-appropriate, nondisabled children.

In addition, full inclusionists claim that the placement of special-needs children in regular classrooms must be full time (e.g., Lipsky & Gartner, 1991; Stainback & Stainback, 1992). First, only full-time placement confers legitimacy on special-needs children's membership and place in regular classrooms. Second, as long as special education placements exist, educators may use them as dumping grounds for the difficult-to-teach student. Full inclusionists predict that by eliminating special education placements, classroom teachers will have to transform their classes into settings responsive to all children. However, this will require fundamental changes in the roles of special and regular educators and the entire teaching and learning process. These changes include a radical constructivist vision of teaching and learning and a concomitant de-emphasis, even rejection, of standard curricula, directed instruction, and accountability standards. "From a holistic, constructivist perspective, all children simply engage in a process of learning as much as they can in a particular subject area; how much and

exactly what they learn will depend upon their backgrounds, interests, and abilities” (Stainback & Stainback, 1992, p. 72).

MANY CHILDREN, MANY NEEDS

How does one explain the dramatic differences between the inclusionists and the full inclusionists? They advocate for different children with different needs. Most inclusionists speak for children with sensory impairments and high-incidence disabilities such as learning disabilities, behavior disorders, and mild mental retardation. Most full inclusionists represent children with severe disabilities. So when full inclusionists argue for regular class placements for children with disabilities, they are motivated by the concern that “their” children make friends, influence attitudes about disability, and improve social skills. If the children’s learning of academic, functional, or vocational skills suffer, this is a sacrifice many full inclusionists seem willing to make. Inclusionists, by contrast, are primarily concerned that “their” children get appropriate academic instruction; if this is most likely to happen in a resource room, separate class, or even a special school, most inclusionists say, “So be it.”

WHY THE FULL INCLUSION MOVEMENT WILL NOT SUCCEED

There are several reasons why the full inclusion movement will not succeed.

Uncompromising and presumptive. To ensure a place in regular classrooms for children with severe disabilities, full inclusionists have pressed for an elimination of special education placements for all children with disabilities. Their antipathy toward special education placements is based on a conviction that, as long as such programs exist, children with severe disabilities will most likely be assigned to and confined in them. They presume to speak on behalf of parents and professional advocates of deaf children, blind children, and children with learning disabilities, behavior disorders, and mild mental retardation. This puts full inclusionists in direct conflict with many in the disability community. For example, Bernard Rimland (1993b), a well-known advocate and father of a child with autism, writes: “I have no quarrel with [full] inclusionists if they are content to insist upon inclusion for their children. But when they try to force me and other unwilling parents to dance to their tune, I find it highly objectionable and quite intolerable. Parents need options” (p. 3).

Accommodating all in one place. Full inclusionists have an unquestioned belief in the capacity of regular education to accommodate all children. However, the limits of the regular classroom and the need for a variety of special education placements are recognized even in Vermont, a state with nearly double the national average of students with disabilities in regular classrooms and long known as a leader in inclusive education (Sack, 1997). Several years ago, Rutland, Vermont, school officials began The Success School, a separate program for disruptive students in grades 6 through 12. According to Rutland’s director of special services, Ellie McGarry, the goal for most students is to return to the regular classroom full time. For others it is gaining the skills necessary to find a job. A handful of students, Ms. McGarry said, “wouldn’t be in school at all if it weren’t for [The] Success [School]” (Sack, 1997, p. 6). The district’s superintendent, David Wolk, says The Success School is “a common-sense way to help the inclusion pendulum settle in the middle. It’s clear this is the best environment for those children” (p. 3).

Special education accountability. We acknowledge that there are major problems with how special education is practiced in many school districts. For example, few special educators document their effectiveness in teaching students with disabilities. And separate special education placements become terminal assignments in the educational careers of too many children. There is insufficient evidence that special education teachers facilitate movement along the continuum of special education services so that children in special day schools, for example, transition into resource rooms or those in resource rooms reintegrate into regular classrooms, where eventually they may be decertified.

For too long, accountability in special education has been defined in terms of process—for example, by whether school districts can produce legally correct IEPs. Our field, however, is in the midst of redefining accountability in terms of student progress in academic, social, and school-behavior domains. Although this redefinition will be difficult to accomplish, it is an important endeavor. We are confident that time will tell that student progress requires options in instruction, curricula, materials, and placements.

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