

APPLICATIONS OF EMPIRICALLY-BASED, SCHOOL-WIDE SOLUTIONS REGARDING THE INCLUSION OF EDUCATIONALLY DISABLED CHILDREN IN GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

School-wide solutions regarding problems associated with the inclusion of educationally disabled children in general education classrooms are discussed and summarized. Social and legal antecedents to inclusive education are presented, research regarding benefits of inclusion is reviewed, and data regarding current status and trends of inclusion are presented. Problems commonly encountered by principals and school administrators are identified. Applications of empirically based, school-wide solutions to such problems are illustrated in a case study. A group of school administrators and teachers were invited to review a sample case and suggest ways for maximizing inclusive outcomes and propose possible solutions based on applications of school-wide procedures associated with successful inclusion. Their discussion and recommended solutions are summarized.

During recent years superintendents and building administrators have become involved in a long standing trend to include children with disabilities in general education class rooms. In the 1960s, students with exceptionalities were often afforded limited educational opportunities and housed in segregated school buildings. In the 1970s, these educational services were expanded and students with disabilities were given legal guarantees of free and appropriate education in the least restrictive educational environment. The 1980s brought mainstreaming and a recognition that the least restrictive educational environment for children with disabilities was in their home school. The 1990s brought a developing interest in having all children included in general education classrooms and a growing recognition that children, with or without disabilities, are best taught in the company of their peers.

Today, inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers is a common educational practice. In schools across the country, children with disabilities, who in previous years were placed in special schools and classrooms, are being taught in the educational mainstream. Inclusive education has been characterized as a movement from educational segregation to integration resulting from long-standing cultural and educational trends (Salend, 1998). It has also been related to deinstitutionalization activities of the 1960s and 1970s (Wolfensberger, 1972) and compared with the broader civil rights movements of that period (Rothstein, 1995). School principals and superintendents are now front line people and provision of inclusive schooling for children with disabilities takes their best administrative talents, effort, and creativity (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998).

The U.S. Department of Education (1996) reported that the percentage of students with disabilities served in separate Special Education classrooms gradually decreased while those served in regular classrooms increased substantially. McLeskey, Henry, and Hodges (1999) reported that between 1988 and 1995 there was a 60% overall increase in the cumulative placement rate for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. The percentage of students with special needs who are fully integrated in general classrooms has slowly risen from 26% in 1986-87 to 45% in 1995-96. This trend is presented in Figure 1.

Such trends are, in part, the consequence of legal and legislative initiatives. For example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 and the amendments of 1997 incorporate a strong bias in favor of inclusive education. In both acts the general classroom is presumed to be the least restrictive environment for most students with disabilities. This has been upheld in the courts and is supported by key national organizations such as The Association for the Severely Handicapped (TASH) and The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC).

Empirical Support for Inclusion

A number of benefits associated with educating children with disabilities in general settings have been identified. Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, and Goetz (1994) found that students with disabilities in general education classes experienced improved educational outcomes as compared with peers in special classrooms. They spent more time in academic activities, had more academic objectives, and had more appropriate objectives in their Individual Education Plans. In addition, they experienced increased availability of age appropriate peers and access to the contingencies of typical environments (York, Vandercook, McDonald, Heise-Neff, & Caughey, 1989); increased social and communication skills (Hunt, Alwell, & Goetz, 1988; Madden & Slavin, 1983; Stainback & Stainback, 1981), and enhanced post school success (McDonnell & Hartman, 1989). In particular, increased friendship formation has been linked with educating children with disabilities in the company of their non-disabled peers (Blackman, 1992; Forest & Lusthaus, 1989; Sasso & Rude, 1988; Strully & Strully, 1989). Hunt et al. (1994) found that included students spent more time grouped with other students, spent less time alone, and were more often in the company of persons without disabilities. Logan and Malone (1998) found that students with disabilities received more academic supports in inclusive classrooms.

Students without disabilities may also benefit from being educated in the company of their age peers with disabilities. Some benefits are development of friendships (Blackman, 1992; Forest & Lusthaus, 1989; Sasso & Rude, 1988; Strully & Strully, 1989); and increased acceptance of individual differences (Peck, Donaldson, & Pezzoli, 1990; Stainback & Stainback, 1989). Hendrickson, Shokoohi-Yekta, Hamre-Nietupski, and Gable (1996) found that 38% of over 1,000 middle school and high school students surveyed reported that they had formed friendships with peers with severe disabilities. Peck et al. (1990) reported that such friendships resulted in improved self-concept, social cognition, reduced fear of differences, increased tolerance of others, considerable personal satisfaction for students without disabilities. Reviews of research have not identified problematic outcomes of inclusive education for

either children with disabilities or their classmates without disabilities (McDonnell & Hartman, 1989; Toews, Moore, Brodsky, & Brostrom, 1984).

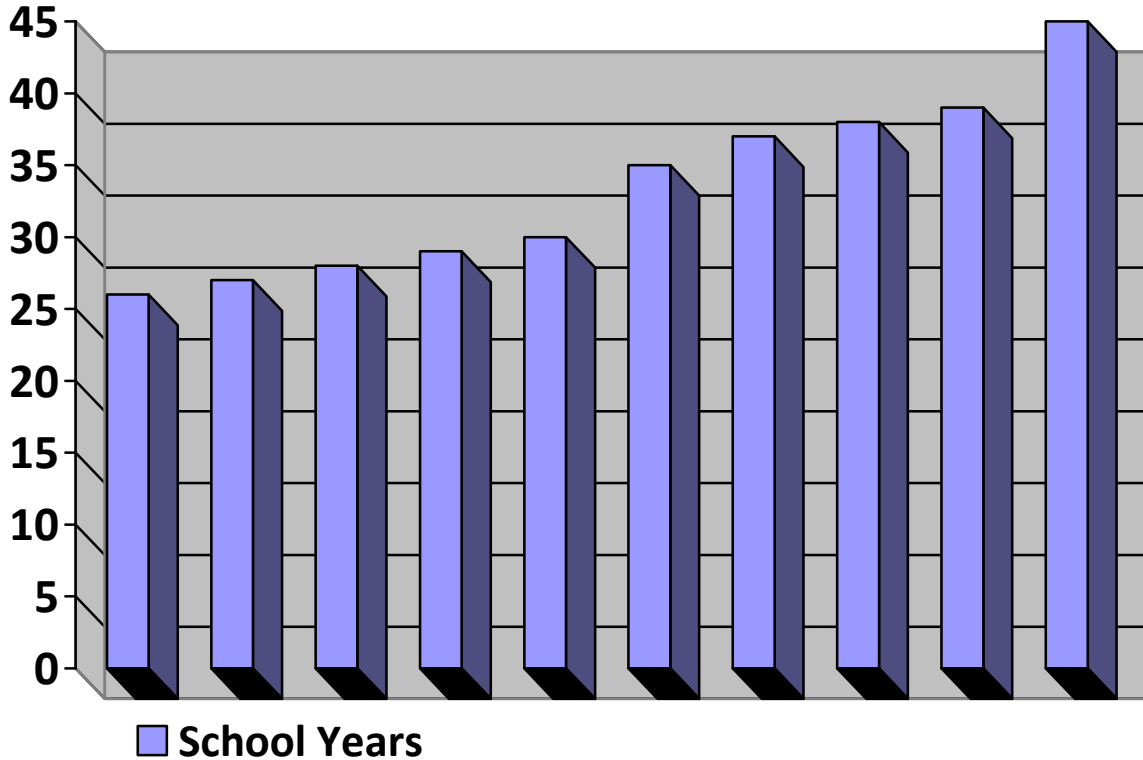


Figure 1: Trends in Full Inclusion Placements*

Current Status of Inclusive Education

Successful inclusive schooling has been reported in many locations and examples of systemic change from segregated to inclusive models can be found in many states; for example, Vermont (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993); Michigan (Conn, 1992); Oregon, (Cloud, 1992), and New York (Salisbury, Palombaro, & Hollowood, 1993). Attempts by individual teachers to include children with disabilities in their classrooms are more common than ever (Hobbs & Westling, 1998). It has been reported (U.S. Department of Education, 1996) that approximately 10% to 20% of students with low incidence disabilities such as autism and traumatic brain injury are now fully integrated in regular classrooms. It has also become commonplace for students with learning disabilities and speech and language impairments to be fully integrated into general education classes. As a consequence, teachers, principals, and superintendents now routinely serve students who, in previous years, would have been taught far from the educational mainstream. The percentage of students with disabilities in different educational environments is presented in Table 1.

* Note. From Twentieth Annual Report to Congress on the Implements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. U.S. Department of Education, 1998, (Report No. 1998-716-273/93547). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Changing Definitions

The increased percentage of children with disabilities placed in general education classrooms is, in part, due to a changing definition of inclusion (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). In the 1980s, it was likely that an educator using the term inclusion was referring to the partial integration of students with disabilities into the educational mainstream. It was assumed that students with special needs would share school environments such as the lunchroom or playground. They would be integrated into some classes that are considered less academically challenging (art and physical education are examples) while remaining in special classes through much of the day. Core academic classes were considered too challenging for this population. It was also assumed that their needs were special and that education to meet those needs was best provided in special classroom settings. Today, a superintendent, principal, or teacher using the same term is likely to mean something very different (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998).

In the 1990s, inclusion came to mean the full integration of students with disabilities in general education classrooms in the company of their non-disabled peers. The changed definition is largely due to an evolving understanding of the concept of least restrictive environment (LRE) (Stainback & Stainback, 1990).

Traditional interpretations of a least restrictive educational environment have been predicated on a multi-level continuum of special education options. Students with disabilities were assessed and placed into this continuum. Students with the most serious educational challenges (such as severe mental or developmental disabilities) were typically placed at the most restrictive end of the continuum in special schools or special classrooms. Those with less severe educational challenges were placed in settings that more closely approximated the classes of their non-disabled peers such as resource rooms in regular schools. It was assumed that students with disabilities could move up the special education continuum into less segregated (and less restrictive) environments based on their success in the preceding level. In other words, by demonstrating their academic readiness, students with disabilities could earn their way along a special education continuum leading from the highly separate and segregated school to eventual education with their non-disabled peers (Maslow, 1952).

The Special Education continuum served as an alternative to general education classes for many years. Within this construct, decisions regarding least restrictive educational environment placement were typically limited to matching a student's current achievement with a concurrent slot in the continuum. Increasingly, superintendents, principals, and others do not rely on traditional assumptions regarding least restrictive placement for students with disabilities and gradually have come to define the least restrictive environment as the regular classroom. Today, when the term inclusion is used in an educational context, it typically refers to the full integration of children with disabilities into regular classrooms (Stainback and Stainback, 1992).

Problems Associated with Inclusion

Implementing the new definition of inclusion and achieving a least restrictive environment for all students can be a challenging and problematic process. Principals and school administrators can expect to face many problems as they deal with changes associated with inclusive education. Hobbs (1997) reported on a survey of classroom teachers regarding problems they had observed or encountered while including children with disabilities in general education classrooms. In this study, teachers were asked to describe specific instances of problematic situations and sort their experiences into several categories. The resulting descriptions illustrate common problems that superintendents, principals, and others must address as they attempt to implement inclusive education. These problems are summarized in Table 2.

School-Wide Solutions

A number of school-wide practices and procedures have been identified as being associated with successful inclusive education (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). School administrators who routinely employ these practices and encourage others to do the same can expect to improve the inclusive outcomes in their schools. These practices are summarized in Table 3 and, collectively, can be considered as a battery of reliable procedures for superintendents, principals, and others interested in solving problems and supporting inclusive education.

Case In Point: An Applied Example

In the case presented in Table 4, a principal is faced with a potentially serious problem. A student's parents are concerned that their child with special needs may be in a classroom that is considerably more restrictive than is appropriate. There is disagreement between the special and general education teachers. This situation is typical of problems experienced by superintendents and principals as they attempt to meet the needs of students, parents, and teachers regarding inclusive education.

Table 4
Case in Point

Jenny

Jenny is 10 years old and has a mild cognitive disability that limits her academic achievement. She is approximately two to three years behind grade level in most academic areas. Her difficulties are principally in the areas of reading and math. She has a minor, but noticeable, speech difference (she occasionally stutters when asked to talk to groups or present in class). She is currently a student in a special education classroom at an elementary school approximately six miles from her home. This school is not in her neighborhood and is in a different local than the elementary school attended by her older sister. In the past, Jenny has had a minor behavior problem that involved occasionally touching others in a private manner. This has not occurred in the past six months.

Jenny currently spends lunch, art class, and some other school activities (such as music and school-wide assemblies and sports events) with her age peers who do not have disabilities. The remainder of the school day is spent with Ms. Anderson, an experienced and highly qualified Special Educator. Jenny's parents (who are very involved in her education) have recently attended a state level education conference regarding inclusive education. They were very impressed by what they saw and heard and have requested a new IEP meeting as soon as possible. They wish to discuss her full inclusion in a regular fifth grade class at the local elementary school. Ms. Anderson has asked "What do they want? I'm a good teacher, aren't I?" The regular fifth grade teacher has declined to come to the IEP that has been scheduled. The parents insist that full inclusion is a reasonable and appropriate move for Jenny.

Applied Solutions

A group of school administrators and teachers were invited to review this case and suggest ways for maximizing a successful inclusive outcome for Jenny. They were asked to discuss the case and propose possible solutions based on applications of school-wide procedures associated with successful inclusion. The outcome of their discussion and their recommended solutions are summarized in Table 5.

Conclusion

It is apparent that increasing numbers of students with disabilities are being fully included in general education classrooms. This is a long-standing trend that is the result of historic changes and an evolving understanding of the need for all students to be educated in the least restrictive environment. Clearly, this is not a temporary phenomenon. Full inclusion of children with disabilities in the educational mainstream is not a fad, and cases like Jenny's are not rare. Superintendents and principals throughout the country are being challenged by problems associated with inclusive education on a daily basis. With leadership and an understanding of school-wide solutions (reduced class size, access to information, increased planning time, and community and family support), superintendents and principals are dealing with these challenges.

The professional literature (Lutz, 1993) gives added support. Clearly, superintendents and principals of included schools are the most important links in the problem solving process. They must be accountable for the outcomes of all students in their charge and also serve as the educational leader to their teachers.

A few basics can help administrators in this process (Weir, 1999):

- Place a high priority on sustained teacher training. All teachers will need ongoing instruction in working with a diverse student population. Gear the training toward the needs of a teacher in an individual building rather than using one generic program for the entire district.
- Integrate inclusion into all aspects of the district, such as hiring policies, construction, budgeting, and personnel evaluation.
- Avoid labeling children. Instead, identify the types of services and accommodations needed.
- Do not avoid those individuals who oppose inclusion. Give them time for open discussion and public debate as the process unfolds.

Ultimately, superintendents and principals are the forces behind successful inclusionary practices that work for children with disabilities in the school setting (Weir, 1998). Teachers look to their administrator for leadership. Board of Education members look to the district superintendent for leadership. Parents and community members look to both levels of administration for leadership in taking the concept of inclusion from theory to reality.

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