April Stuchul — Education

INCLUSION: WHY AND WHY NOT

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There are both positive and negative aspects of inclusion. Through my project, I set out to determine whether the advantages or disadvantages of inclusion outweighed the other. I began by reading four articles from an education journal (Educational Leadership, December 1994/January 1995), two supporting inclusion, and two opposing it. From these articles, I narrowed down what appeared to be the most common claims for and against inclusion implementation. With these claims in mind, I observed three classrooms: a high school special education room, a high school resource room, and a junior high inclusion classroom. I spent one to one-and-a-half hours in each. I interviewed the teachers of these classrooms, as well as the teacher’s aide in the inclusion classroom and a teacher of a non-inclusion classroom. I combined the teachers’ perspectives with the analysis of my articles to reach the following conclusion: inclusion as a concept is beneficial; however, current implementation generally leaves much to be desired. I will specifically elaborate on how this is so throughout the remainder of my paper.

Articles

Albert Shanker, in his article “Full Inclusion is Neither Free Nor Appropriate,” and Douglas Fuchs and Lynn S. Fuchs, in their article “Sometimes Separate is Better,” outline the arguments against inclusion. The basis for many complaints is the practice of full inclusion, which requires all students to be admitted into regular classrooms, regardless of the severity of their handicaps (Shanker 18). Full inclusion is at times implemented for economic benefits—to avoid the high costs of special education—rather than for the social benefit of students (Shanker 18, Fuchs 22). Because of economic motivation, funds are not adequate for proper implementation, resulting in a lack of assistance provided for teachers of inclusion classrooms. Students’ medical needs may become the responsibility of untrained teachers (Shanker 19). Furthermore, students with special needs are likely to lose a wide range of services otherwise available in separate classrooms (Shanker 20). For students with special needs, appropriate education needs must take priority when they conflict with social interaction (Fuchs 22). Another contention against inclusion is that parents’ views are not sufficiently considered in determining how to educate a student with special needs (Shanker 21). Perhaps the biggest
argument against inclusion, based on all the possible negative results, is that implementation is being rushed (Shanker 19, Fuchs 26). Separate classrooms can mean an education more suited to particular students' needs, rather than an inferior one. Shanker recalls that during his school years, many disabled students were not allowed to attend school at all. He states that "this bad policy is being replaced by another bad policy" (20)—full inclusion.

"Not a Way Out: A Way In," by Dede Johnston, Will Proctor, and Susan Corey, describes a district's success with an inclusion program called Team Approach to Mastery (TAM). "How Inclusion Built a Community of Learners," by Kent R. Logan, Elena Diaz, Marisa Piperno, Diane Rankin, A. D. MacFarland, and Kay Bargamian, describes a student's success with inclusion. These articles claim that the advantages of inclusion include individual attention for students, motivation for high-level thinking, academic improvement for non-disabled students, the ability of students to apply their experience as citizens, an understanding and acceptance of differences, and development of empathy and compassion. A good example is given in the article about the success of Katie, a disabled student in an inclusion classroom. As Katie's classmates were learning math, she was learning to discern the number two. It was Katie's assignment to practice picking up two flash cards, while other students were to add the sum of the two numbers on the cards (42).

Although it is encouraging to read of Katie's success, there are still apparent problems with the inclusion concept in general. To begin with, TAM is one inclusion program, and Katie is one disabled student. This minimal display of success is certainly very important, especially to the students who benefit, but it is not evidence that inclusion is always the best solution. The TAM article claims to have no resource rooms, however this does not necessarily mean there are not separate special education classes for some students (46). Furthermore, although the TAM article maintains that non-disabled students benefit from inclusion, it never refers to the benefits of the disabled students (48).

A closer look at the two articles provides support against the concept of full inclusion. The TAM project has gradually implemented inclusion over the past twenty years (46). In Katie's district, only a few students have been gradually included over three years (44). It certainly appears as though these successes with inclusion were not rushed. The TAM article claims that there is a ratio of 2 to 1 (able to disabled) students in its classroom (46). One has to wonder what is being considered disabled when one-third of the students in a regular school district can be described as such. Furthermore, both articles describe the staff present in each inclusion classroom, which in both cases includes at least two or more
adequately trained teachers. It would seem as though these inclusion programs are not under-funded, and therefore are not implemented merely for economic concerns.

The TAM article and the article about Katie are evidence that inclusion can work in specific instances. However, part of their successes would seem to be because they avoid the problems posed by opponents of inclusion—full implementation that is rushed for economic reasons—that are characteristic of the current method of inclusion.

Observations & Interviews

The first classroom I observed was high school special education. There were 6 students, ranging from ages 18-22. It was a small, casual setting with tables and chairs. In the classroom was a small kitchen area with cabinets, a sink, a refrigerator, and coffee. When I first walked into the room, Mrs. "Arnold" had the students introduce themselves to me. Some of the students were very professional in doing so, but others were extremely shy. I could not hear some of them pronounce their names, and one boy even giggled and covered his face.

The students were working on a Christmas shopping unit. They had worked on a shopping vocabulary list over the past few weeks, as well as visited some stores. Each student had the name of someone else in the class, for whom they would buy a gift. As I observed the class, the students were counting the money each had brought to class that day. Each week they would bring some in and add it to their total Christmas shopping money. With this money they were also going to buy gifts for their families and a girls’ shelter. After counting their money, Mrs. Arnold made a list on the board of gifts that each student might want. Each student secretly copies the list of the person they were to shop for. Later that afternoon, the class was going to do the first half of its Christmas shopping at nearby department stores.

I found out more about the class in my interview with Mrs. Arnold. Her classroom consists of multiple-handicapped (MH) students. She and her assistant have been working together for ten years. The students they are currently working with have Down syndrome, are severely mentally retarded, or have a combination of other physical and mental difficulties. Some of her students have been with Mrs. Arnold for six years. Two of her less-severe students attend a regular gym class each morning. One of the students also attends a regular art class; the assistant goes with him.

Each day when the students arrive at school, they have jobs for which they are responsible, such as cleaning the sink or desks. Mrs. Arnold and her assistant also check the student's hygiene, such as whether they have
brushed their teeth, put on deodorant, and combed their hair. The academic work is done in the mornings because this is the time the students are most alert.

Students also participate in non-academic work. Two days a week the students travel to the home economics room to cook. The students shop for the ingredients, measure them, and prepare a dish two days in a row. Each student has his or her own kitchen to work in. They are graded on performing certain functions, such as proper measuring and running the garbage disposal, rather than on the outcome of their dishes. Students also spend time each week working, either for a factory, or for the class’s own house-cleaning company. The students receive checks from the school every two weeks, just as the teachers do. Some students are able to keep their factory jobs after graduating from high school.

The students receive report cards and diplomas just as regular students in high school do, but theirs have special codes. Mrs. Arnold explained how varying parental support could be in regards to her students. Some parents are very supportive of their children; others do not attempt to reinforce what is learned in school. Mrs. Arnold related how frustrating it could be to visit a student at home and find that his or her parents do not require him or her to maintain personal hygiene. At the other extreme, there are also parents with unrealistic expectations considering their children’s conditions. Mrs. Arnold had spoken to one parent who commented that she thought her daughter would have “grown out of this phase by now.”

Concerning inclusion, Mrs. Arnold assists any parents who request that their child participate. However, she feels as if she barely has enough time to spend with her students before they are expected to be able to function on some competent level. But she certainly does not underestimate the students’ needs for social competency.

The next class I observed was a high school resource room at the same school. During this particular resource time there were fourteen students, in grades 10-12. In order to get into the resource room, one has to pass through the special education room. Teachers of both classes shared the kitchen supplies, and the teachers worked together on various levels. The resource room also has tables and chairs. Each class period, during which different students come and go, is rather short. It was difficult to tell just by looking at the students that they had learning difficulties.

The class I observed had a quiz on measurement abbreviations. Miss "Hill" would say a measurement out loud, and the students would write the abbreviation. The students were also keeping menus, recording what they ate each day, for their future study of nutrition. One student
kept making disrespectful comments to Miss Hill throughout her instructions. Miss Hill realized that the student had just found out that she would be moving from the district, which was probably the cause of her unusual behavior. However, she did respond very authoritatively to the outbursts.

Miss Hill was very eager to answer the questions I asked in my interview. She teaches developmentally handicapped (DH) students. She informed me that detection of students with developmental difficulties has recently improved. The school now has two separate classrooms for these students, with two separate teachers. Some of Miss Hill's students are fully included in regular classes through the school's vocational program. Others are partially included—they participate in regular Math or English classes. Many of the developmentally handicapped students come from deficient homes, or have experienced traumatic situations. Because the teachers cannot physically see these students' difficulties, they often go on undetected for some time, until they develop into a handicap. Some of Miss Hill's students have criminal records. She frequently works with parole officers and child protective services representatives.

Miss Hill bases her curriculum on teaching students functional skills. She does not use a textbook, but rather a combination of worksheets that focus on things such as checkbook management or renting a home. Miss Hill's students also work in the housecleaning business. They save half of the money they earn each week for a summer trip. In the past they have traveled to Washington, D.C., New York City, and Disney World. Upon graduation, Miss Hill continues to help her students find living arrangements, jobs, and transportation to social interests.

When she was a graduate student, Miss Hill gave a series of lectures concerning inclusion. Her belief is that inclusion is a good idea, but that most teachers have not been trained to manage an inclusion classroom effectively. Currently there is not enough assistance offered to teachers to make inclusion a successful venture.

The final classroom I observed was an eighth grade inclusion classroom in which seven of twenty students are DH or learning disabled (LD). The desks were situated in a U-shape around the room. When I was first introduced as a student observer from Kent, one of the students sitting near me informed me that she went to therapy at Kent. The beginning of the class time was spent by students finishing up their projects on a humor unit. Each student either read a dramatic reading, or showed a movie clip. Each then explained why he or she chose his or her particular selection, and what type of humor it was. This class was behind the other classes in completing the project.
After the humor unit was concluded, Mrs. "Kerr", the English teacher, and Mrs. "Jones", her assistant, checked the students' progress on papers they were working on. Those who had completed their assignments were allowed to cross the hall to Mrs. Jones's room to work at activity centers. Mrs. Kerr accompanied them. Those who had not completed their assignments stayed in the English room with Mrs. Jones to get caught up. The set-up used by the teachers was beneficial because both could work with small groups of students.

I interviewed Mrs. Kerr, the Junior High English teacher. At the beginning of the year she was notified which students were "included", but Mrs. Kerr can no longer remember precisely which students those are, because she has some who are on the borderline but are not considered disabled.

Mrs. Kerr and Mrs. Jones started working together three years ago. Mrs. Kerr had a meeting for the parents of the special education students when they first implemented inclusion. Only one parent attended. Mrs. Kerr also has five students with similar disabilities to those in her inclusion class in one of her morning classes. Although a tutor works with these studies outside of class, Mrs. Kerr does not have an assistant. In the district, the parents of MH children have thus far preferred to keep them in separate classes. Mrs. Kerr believes, as do the other teachers I spoke with, that parents are the largest determining factor in any disabled student's education.

Concerning inclusion, Mrs. Kerr thinks it is necessary for current education students to be more thoroughly trained to work with variously handicapped students because of its increasing implementation. She also feels that team teaching is a necessity in an inclusion classroom. It is especially beneficial for cooperating teachers to be able to compare learning strategies and analysis of their effectiveness.

I also interviewed Mrs. Jones, whose training is in elementary education and special education. She travels with her inclusion students throughout the day to different regular classrooms. At the end of the day students return to their resource room for support. The inclusion of students was implemented by Mrs. Jones and other teachers because they thought it was necessary for the disadvantaged students to learn to cope socially with their peers as they would be expected to do so in society. As far as any economic advantages involved in determining students' education, it only applies to the special education students from five districts who are combined together at one separate facility for financial purposes—because there are so few in each district. Mrs. Jones related to me a problem she has experienced with some of the parents of her students. Some of the students would be better off in separate classes provided by Mrs. Jones in
certain subjects. However, the parents of LD students are generally not fond of having their children grouped with the DH students.

Mrs. Jones believes that inclusion is necessary for her students, and that most actually prefer it. She also informed me that "inclusion" was no longer the politically correct term, but rather "Least Restrictive Environment" was the term they were instructed to use.

My final interview was with Mrs. Dawson, an 11th grade history teacher. Although in a few of her classes she may have a DH or LD student, most of her classes consist solely of regular students. Mrs. Dawson does not object to the concept of inclusion. She has felt very gratified when she has been able to help a student with a little more difficulty than the average. However, she is less optimistic about more wide spread inclusion. Although it is great to help a disadvantaged student, it does take time from each activity. This is not necessarily harmful for the benefit of one student, but she worries that if she were to have many inclusion students in one class, that it may slow the class down. Teachers already have a difficult job to do in attempting to motivate the average student.

Mrs. Dawson would also be concerned for the progress of the disadvantaged students. She trained to be a history teacher. She certainly believes that history can be an instrument to promote reasoning among all students, but is concerned that she is not prepared to motivate students with special needs. Mrs. Dawson recently read an article about a student confined to a bed who was admitted into a regular classroom. She could not remember whether the student had any mental difficulties. Mrs. Dawson believed that if the student did not have mental problems, that a regular classroom was certainly the appropriate place for her. But as a teacher she admitted that it would be very difficult to teach a student with such a handicap.

Summary

The primary problem with full inclusion is that it requires students with a wide variety of handicaps to participate. These students have special needs that are often best met in a smaller setting. They work at a slower pace and have a more difficult time retaining material. A teacher in a regular classroom has a difficult enough job without having to take care of the extreme special needs of students. I am in no way implying that these students are less important than any others. They are just as important, but still different than the average. There is nothing wrong with this, nor is there anything wrong with there being separate classes best suited for different learners. It would be best to encourage other students to accept these differences, rather than try to accommodate students with special needs the same as regular students are.
Economic justifications for full inclusion are obviously undesirable. It would be great if successful inclusion produced economic efficiency, but it is more likely that these are contradictory goals. In the near future it will be very difficult to hire extra personnel when finances are not available for current education systems. But the more qualified teachers there are in each classroom, the more individual attention each student will get from a positive role model. In this way, education has the potential to foster progress concerning many social ills. Considering decisions made about education, student improvement ought to be the primary basis.

Finally, the benefits to all students are certainly questionable with current inclusion implementation, especially for MH students. But the concept itself is still desirable and ought to be strived toward. It is good for both able and disabled students to learn to interact with people different from themselves. However, because students’ welfare, especially those who have not been properly cared for by the education system in the past, is at stake, inclusion should be moved towards cautiously. A case-by-case approach should be taken rather than a sudden full-throttle attempt. Constant evaluation and adaptation should be made so that every student involved definitely benefits. After all, it is the job of schools and teachers to enable each student to achieve his and her full potential.

Works Cited


