



# ESL MiniConference

## Building an Inclusive Society Why It Matters

Today inclusive education is the law of the land, supported by NCLB, which requires disaggregated annual assessment data for students with special needs, and by the newest IDEA (2004), which stipulates that annual goals on each exceptional student's IEP must address the general education curriculum and which requires justification for any amount of time the student's education plan moves outside the general education classroom setting, in keeping with 94-142's original guarantee of a "free, appropriate public education" and placement in "the least restrictive environment."

Inclusion has become the vision of American public education primarily because it promotes the dual goals of 1) addressing every learner's needs and 2) teaching tolerance for differences (Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Proponents of "progressive inclusion" also cite the need to reduce over-referrals by strengthening general education practices (Wang & Reynolds, 1996). The key aspects of inclusion are 1) all students receive instruction in the building "they would attend if non-disabled"; 2) all placements are together with same-age, same-grade peers; 3) special education accommodations are delivered in general education settings (Sailor, 2002). The common or shared experiences generated for special education and general education students through inclusive education become cultural "markers" (Wehmeyer, 2006) that bridge their differences and bond them, enabling the creation of an equitable, democratic society (Ferguson, 1995).

Any major policy shift brings new staffing configurations and feelings of uncertainty about available resources and support (Wang & Reynolds, 1996). Persistent arguments against inclusion have been that integrated—special education students together with general education students—classrooms would: 1) have negative effects on general education students; 2) limit the money and resources available to provide the "support, experience, and training necessary to work with students with disabilities"; and 3) reduce the likelihood that individualized instruction for IEPs occurs (Kavale & Forness, 2000). Parents of general education students sometimes have doubted whether their children would continue to receive adequate time and attention from teachers in an inclusive setting (Duhaney & Salend, 2000). Further ammunition for

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those arguing against inclusive education comes from NCLB-era emphases on core academic subjects and high-stakes testing, reducing the ability to focus on functional or life skills education (Salend, 2005; Wehmeyer, 2006).

There are special educators who do not agree with the fullest version of inclusive instruction for every child with special needs. Hardman and Dawson (2008) suggest that special education and general education operate on two different models: general education, according to these authors, seeks "the greatest good for the greatest number" and uses a "constructivist" approach to teaching; special education, they say, in order to "recognize and accommodate the diverse needs of each student," requires individualized and "intensive" instruction. This kind of instruction often means students need "more time, resources, and access to teachers," according to these authors, who claim that inclusion classrooms, by logical extension, will prevent certain students from "receiving the instruction necessary to succeed," breaking NCLB's tacit promise.

Many general education teachers also are not convinced that inclusion can work, or that they are capable of making it work. There are two recent studies which have explored attitudes and self-efficacy of general education teacher candidates. Jung (2007) compared the answers of first-year education students and pre-service student teachers on the ORI (Opinions Relative to Integration of Students with Disabilities) questionnaire, and found that the student teaching experience seemed to have caused "a significant decline in the favorability of attitudes toward inclusion." The ORI questionnaire further showed that the student teachers did not have confidence in either their own teaching skills or in the "quality of support cooperating teachers made available to them."

Silverman (2007) used data from the administration of the ORI, but also used an Epistemic Beliefs Inventory (EBI), and found a positive correlation between what are called "high-level epistemological beliefs" and "positive attitudes toward inclusion." The preferred beliefs are that knowledge is complex and uncertain; learning takes effort and time; learning ability can be improved; and learners are "active constructors of meaning," while teachers are "knowledgeable but not omniscient." Silverman suggests that teacher educators need to assess epistemological beliefs and inclusion attitudes very early in a candidates' program and address the need for development in both of these areas. The author cites research on motivation, including Weiner (2003), to support a claim that teachers believing in inclusion will "persist in including these students fully in class activities." Prabhu (1987) also has reported that students

experience greater success when their teachers believe and are invested in the instruction. Silverman additionally points out that other students in the classroom will generally follow the teacher's cue and accept the premise of inclusion if the teacher does.

Miller (2008) had education students interview random subjects, aged 10 and older, to elicit their views about inclusion and their impressions from studying together in the same classrooms with learners with special needs. The results were overwhelmingly in favor of inclusion and Miller suggests that young people in American society see inclusion as normal and fair. This suggests that Ferguson (1995) may yet see the school community she envisions as embodying the ideals of inclusion:

..a process of meshing general and special education reform initiatives and strategies in order to achieve a unified system of public education that incorporates all children and youths as active, fully participating members of the school community; that views diversity as the norm; and that ensures a high-quality education for each student by providing meaningful curriculum, effective teaching, and necessary supports for each student. (p. 281)

Lipsky (2005) has listed the features of what she calls "a unitary inclusive system"—"strong leadership, quality teachers, challenging curriculum, differentiated instruction, careful and regular assessments, engagement of parents and community, and a focus on the meeting of standards and the achievement of outcomes" (p. 157)—but she does not believe we are there yet. In an earlier article (Lipsky & Gartner, 1994), she reported data from the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCERI) indicating successful inclusion projects at Kids Kampus in Huntington, Indiana; Mountain Sky Junior High in Phoenix; and JC Sweeny Kindergarten in Pascoag, Rhode Island. She sees NCLB and IDEA merging in significant ways, yet they "remain two largely separate systems" (Lipsky, 2005), instead of there being a single law "obligating school districts to provide an effective education for all students."

Further evidence supporting inclusive education practices came from NCERI in 1995, reporting academic gains for special education students in inclusive settings, including higher scores on standardized tests; better mastery of IEP goals, better grades; better on-task behaviors; higher motivation; fewer incomplete assignments; more positive interactions with general education peers; and better attitudes about school and learning (Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Sailor (2002) reports that students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms show better social competence and communication skills, and that the quality of IEPs has improved for them as well. Salend (2005) reports that elementary students with mental

retardation as well as those with more severe disabilities benefited from inclusive education in that they: learned targeted skills; had more engaged and instructional time; and had greater exposure to academic activities. Furthermore, elementary students with moderate to severe disability receiving inclusive education: "interact with others more often"; 2) "receive and offer increased social support"; and 3) "develop more long-lasting and richer friendships with general education peers" (p. 34).

Secondary school students with mild disabilities learning in inclusive settings perform academically and make transitions on a par with nondisabled peers, according to Salend (2005), who also reports improvements in reading and in classroom work skills for secondary students with moderate to severe disability. Browder et al. (2006) cited evidence that students with severe disabilities have made more progress in literacy and numeracy in inclusive settings. Using Scales of Independent Behavior (SIB) and Assessment of Social Competence (ASC), Fisher and Meyer (2002) found that students aged 6-19, across a range of special education categories, made their greatest gains in inclusive settings where Individualized Education Plan (IEP) objectives were integrated within a general education routine.

In longitudinal studies, parents of general education students reported their children's social interactions with special education classmates benefited them, and that their children's experiences in inclusive education were positive, resulting in improved feelings of self-worth and greater tolerance for differences (Odom et al, 2008). Parents of children with disabilities reported that inclusion promotes acceptance of their children by nondisabled peers, helps their children develop socially, emotionally, and academically, and is better than separate placement for: self image, access to role models and friendships, making children happier, more confident, and more outgoing, as well as "preparing them for the real world" (Duhaney & Salend, 2000).

Sailor (2002) proposes an emphasis on practices rather than placement/LRE for future discussions of inclusion. "How can services and supports be organized in such a manner that all students benefit from the total configuration of resources?," he asks, implying that inclusion should bring benefits to the whole school. As examples, Sailor cites content enhancement routines and learning strategies instruction, citing data indicating that class-wide peer-tutoring, for example, improves spelling and progress in social studies for students with mild disabilities as well as for all students.

Wehmeyer (2006) explains that there have been three iterations of inclusion: 1) the change from separate settings to inclusion in the general education classroom; 2) a focus on improving practices in the general education classroom; and now 3) an emphasis on not only access but progress for special education students in the general education curriculum and universal design for learning (UDL), with a premium on accessibility technology and teaching strategies.

It is also important to realize that there is a powerful strain of social and intellectual elitism in our society today, as I was reminded of when reading a review (Wildavsky, 2008) of a new book, *Real Education*, and the author, Charles Murray's, premise that "the education system is living a lie" in trying to provide greater access and equity for students with cognitive disabilities. According to the reviewer, Murray argues that higher achieving learners are "having their classroom experience dragged down by low-IQ underachievers." Such thinkers have missed the essential lesson of American education, as expressed best by John Dewey (1916):

In order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences. Otherwise, the influences which educate some into masters, educate others into slaves. (chap. 7)

Teachers have two obligations in attending to the needs of all students in inclusive educational communities: first, we must gird ourselves with knowledge, strategies, and sensitivity to the unique needs of every learner so that our instructional interventions have the best chance of succeeding; second, we cannot ignore the social and political context in which we educate students, meaning there is a duty to advocate with persistence and determination on behalf of our students and their civil rights to participate in a fully inclusive society. That is the direction towards which conscientious educators are being driven by the mounting evidence in favor of inclusive schooling practices.

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2008 ESL MiniConference Online



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