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# Building Background

*The only person who loves a change is a wet baby.*

Ray Blitzer

**W**hat differentiates the typical inclusive classroom of today from the traditional mainstream classroom of the past? Today's inclusive classroom includes all students, with and without disabilities. Previously, students with special needs were included in the classroom only when they were able to participate fully in the class activity. Therefore, students with special needs participated in nonacademic activities such as music, physical education, free time, and lunch. Most instruction occurred in segregated rooms, and all students with special needs received the same classroom placement, no matter what the handicapping condition. They were usually classified as "yours" or "mine" but rarely as "ours." These students reentered classrooms when they reached their academic goals. For example, a student with a three-year discrepancy in the area of reading received a supplemental curriculum in the hopes of closing the achievement gap and "catching up" to the other students in the class. Once the acceptable level of proficiency was achieved, the student was "permitted" to return to the mainstream classroom. For some students, supplemental remediation was sufficient and they "earned" the right to return to the classroom, but for many the gap widened, which resulted in special classes for their entire academic career.

In today's inclusive environments, it is common to see students with and without disabilities playing together, working on projects collaboratively, and supporting one another. All students are an integral part of the classroom community. Upon close observation of today's classroom environment, it becomes apparent that some students are completing assignments and carrying out activities that are entirely different from the activities of their peers. The majority of students may be working on a written language assignment at their

desks, while others may be completing the assignment on the computer or dictating their response to a scribe. During reading, it is rare to see all students with their textbooks open, reading independently and in silence. One student may be seated with a partner, listening to the material as the partner reads it out loud. Another student may be seated in front of a computer listening as the computer reads the text. A small group of students may be seated with an adult, reading in a round-robin fashion or reading aloud simultaneously. During math class, a small number of students may be using manipulative objects and calculators during a test whereas others are completing the test independently. Some students may have a special computer with programs geared to their specific level. Some students also may be working in collaborative groups, in which each student has a specific responsibility within the group. Today's classroom has definitely changed!

In the inclusive classroom, students may also have separate goals and expected outcomes for various educational activities. During large-group instruction, some students may have a socialization goal instead of an academic goal. In contrast to the conventional classroom of the past, today's inclusive classroom has a completely different setup. Rarely in the inclusive classroom will you see all students carrying out the same assignments at the same time while using the same approach to learning.

## ACTIVITIES

Although they are fairly simple in nature, the next two activities can help you understand some of the difficulties that students encounter, both socially and academically, in a dual-education setting.

### Activity 1: Inclusion Versus Exclusion

Materials needed: paper and pencil.

To complete this activity, fold the paper in half to create two columns. Label the left column *Inclusion* and the right column *Exclusion*.

**Inclusion.** What does the word mean? Take a moment to think about an event during your childhood or teenage years when you belonged to a group and felt part of the community. Perhaps you were a member of the band or orchestra, a club, a sports team, or it was a family event. Close your eyes, and step back in time. Think about the event, the people involved, and the feelings associated with the event. Think about how you felt when you participated in or belonged to this group. When you are ready, take a moment to write words in the Inclusion column that describe how you felt when included.

Now think about exclusion. Take a moment to recall a childhood event from which you were excluded. Perhaps it was a bus ride when you sat alone, an activity or party to which you were not invited, or a family event at which a sibling received all the attention. Once again, close your eyes and return to that moment. Think about how you felt. Write words in the Exclusion column that describe how you felt.

Now compare the two word lists. Which is longer? More often than not, the second list pertaining to the exclusion activity is longer. Powerful words such as *lonely*, *misunderstood*, *rejected*, *depressed*, and *unhappy* usually are the first that come to mind. On the other hand, the words associated with the inclusion activity include *content*, *happy*, *belonging*, and *accepted*.

As students enter school, there is a strong desire to be accepted by their peers. They want to belong, feel safe, and be part of the school community. Students accepted by their peers and those who feel part of the group are more liable to learn. Students who are comfortable

and happy are less likely to be afraid to take the educational risks involved in learning. When students are consistently excluded from classroom activities, it is difficult to make friends, establish a sense of belonging, and feel part of the community.

### **Activity 2: What Do I Do Now?**

Materials needed: paper and pencil.

Imagine that you are taking a class at the university. You arrive late, just as the professor is concluding the lecture. You slide into your seat with the hope that the professor does not notice. On the table is an assignment that you must complete. Because you were not in the class for the lecture or instruction, you have no idea what to do.

As an adult student, you have several choices. You can decide to set up an appointment with the professor to discuss the assignment, perhaps ask colleagues for help, or choose to write a note on the assignment that you arrived late and therefore cannot complete it. As an adult, you are able to make these decisions. And the professor is more likely to be lenient because you are an adult.

Now, let us change the hypothetical situation to involve an elementary-level student. Imagine that John, a sixth-grade student, has encountered a similar situation in his classroom. He returned to his class from the resource room where he receives individual reading instruction in a supplemental reading series. (John is currently reading at a fourth-grade level.) The class finished its reading lesson early, and the English block has started. As John sits down, he glances at the English assignment on his desk. He has no clue how to proceed. He missed the classroom instruction and cannot read or complete the assignment alone. What options are available to John? Take a moment to list as many options as you can think of, and compare the options you listed to the following possibilities:

1. John tries to complete the English assignment without instruction.
2. John sits quietly until a peer or the teacher is available to assist him.
3. John completes an unrelated assignment or project.
4. John begins to talk and disrupts the other students who are working.

In the classroom environment, these situations frequently occur. Upon examination, each option is a difficult situation for John. Let us examine why.

#### ***Option 1: John tries to complete the English assignment without instruction.***

Students with disabilities often need extra time to complete assignments without appropriate modifications. In this situation, John not only missed the instruction, but also has less time to complete the assignment. He may need support with both reading and writing; therefore, it may be very difficult for him to find the answers in a text or to read another student's notes. It is unlikely that he will be able to complete the assignment on his own.

#### ***Option 2: John sits quietly until a peer or the teacher is available to assist him.***

John must transition between the resource room and his classroom. During each transition, approximately 10 minutes of actively engaged learning time is lost, including time spent gathering and returning materials in each class. It is also likely that John met a friend in the hallway or stopped by the bathroom, which could easily extend the transition time

to 20 minutes. If he returns to the classroom and does not know what to do or how to complete the assignment, he must wait until help arrives. With 25 or more students in the class, the teacher is unable to attend to John immediately.

On a weekly basis, these short time periods can easily amount to over two hours of active learning time. If John leaves the classroom more than once a day, the active learning time (time on task) decreases substantially.

*Option 3: John completes an unrelated assignment or project.*

This is a frequently used option. John may use the time to complete other class work, assignments, or projects that he can do independently. In this scenario, several assumptions are frequently made by the others in the classroom. Classmates may think that John is not required to complete the same assignments. They often feel that this is unfair. The misconceptions of others may end up having a negative impact on John's self-esteem.

*Option 4: John begins to talk and disrupts the other students who are working.*

John returns to class with no available support. No appropriate assignment is available, so he begins to talk to or disrupt other students. The teacher reprimands him.

With each of the previous options, there are additional questions to address. If John is required to complete the English assignment, when will he find the time? Will he need to complete the assignment as homework? During recess? If he does not complete this assignment, will he be able to complete the next assignment or is this assignment a prerequisite to the next lesson? With these options, it is very easy to see that John could soon begin to dislike school and lose the desire to learn. Additional homework, staying in during recess, and using free time to catch up are not viable options for an energetic elementary-age boy.

It is very difficult for a student to be successful in the classroom setting while working within a fragmented educational program. In a dual-educational system, it is often the case that students who require the most consistency in programming receive the least. They must manage two curriculums, two classrooms, two (or more) teachers, and, frequently, two sets of rules.

Special education is not a place or a special room. It is a service provided to a group of students. Although the classroom setting is not appropriate for all students with special needs, it is the first option for placement. For some students, simple accommodations help them experience success. For others, modifications and additional support is required. Frequently, paraprofessionals are the people who provide this additional support, and with it the majority of students will learn and flourish in the classroom. With paraprofessionals in the classroom, the students' time on task increases because valuable learning time is no longer lost during transitions. Also, the flexibility of general education teachers increases because they do not have to wait for students to return to the class. Lesson times can be monitored and adjusted immediately, increasing the actively engaged learning time for all students.

## **INCLUSIVE PRACTICES: MYTH AND REALITY**

Inclusive programs are not all the same. There is no blueprint for the development and structure of an inclusive program. They vary among states, districts, schools, and even classrooms in the same building. Federal law provides the framework, and each program is designed around the students' unique needs.

There are many myths related to inclusive education. To help dispel them, let us look at the most common.

**Myth:** General education students receive a watered-down curriculum to compensate for students with special needs in the classroom.

**Reality:** The general education curriculum is adapted and modified to meet the specific needs of individual students. Adaptations and modifications may include alternate forms of testing, extra class time to complete assignments, reading materials aloud to students, and adjusting the goals and objectives for individual students. These changes have virtually no impact on the curriculum for the other students.

**Myth:** All students with disabilities must complete each assignment in the same manner as the students in the general education classroom.

**Reality:** Each student's needs are determined in an individualized education plan, which is a legal document that lists special accommodations and modifications.

**Myth:** Students placed in the general education class are expected to achieve without support and assistance.

**Reality:** In a well-organized inclusive education program, paraprofessionals and special education teachers provide support to general education teachers. This support may be in the form of consultation, adaptations, modifications, team teaching, and paraprofessionals providing assistance under the direction of the supervising teacher in the classroom setting.

**Myth:** Inclusive education is not beneficial for general education students.

**Reality:** As school populations become more diverse, curriculum and materials are adapted, modified, or changed for students with special needs. These adaptations may be used to accommodate students who experience difficulties, at-risk students, and Title I students. Students in the general education classroom setting often are exposed to sign language, Braille, communication boards, medical devices, and special equipment. They learn at an early age that all children have the same kinds of thoughts and feelings, regardless of their limitations. Most important, they learn that they are more alike than different. A strong sense of community develops within the classroom environment.

Each inclusive setting is unique to the school system for which it is developed. An inclusive setting does not just occur naturally. The groundwork is in place before any students enter the classroom. Many students experience success in the classroom environment with the support of paraprofessionals, and it would be very difficult for students to be included in the classroom without this additional support. And the added support (although intended for students with special needs) helps all students. With an extra adult in the classroom, there are additional opportunities to individualize the instruction and monitor student progress. Paraprofessionals are also positive role models for students.

A small percentage of students require an alternative placement. In inclusive settings, a continuum of services is available and ranges from full-time classroom placements to full-time placement in a segregated setting, with many options in between. Alternate placement is available for students who are unable to make academic gains after assistance and modifications to the curriculum or environment have been implemented in the general education setting. Therefore, paraprofessionals may work with students in many capacities either in the classroom environment or in an alternative setting.

## **BENEFITS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

Think about the negative feelings generated in the Inclusion/Exclusion activity earlier in this chapter. For the majority of students with special needs, inclusive education helps increase their self-esteem. No longer are they removed from the classroom to attend a special class, with a special teacher, in a special room. They view the classroom setting as a safe place to participate and take the risks that are necessary to learn and succeed.

Inclusive education supports the current educational system. In the general education classroom, modifications and strategies directed toward students with disabilities are beneficial to the general education students because they help improve and individualize the existing curriculum for all students.

Inclusive education encourages effective collaboration. No longer are there two separate educational systems. Rather, there is one united system, which is beneficial for the following reasons:

- Communication and collaboration increase with the new educational team.
- No individual is expected to have all the expertise required to meet the educational needs of all students in the classroom.
- When team members with knowledge in many diverse areas collaborate to problem solve, results are achieved more quickly.
- Inclusive education improves the quality of on-site training. Instead of providing separate inservice training for specific disabilities or modification strategies, the educational team learns together. Inservice training directly relates to individual students and is relevant because all members of the team have accepted ownership for the students. Team members learn by doing.
- Inclusive education benefits the majority of students. When two (or more) adults work collaboratively in the classroom, questions are answered quickly, projects are easily monitored, and all students receive more individualized attention. Students accept one another as contributing members of the school community.

Inclusive education is and will continue to be a controversial issue in education. Much time and energy continues to be dedicated to the debate over whether inclusive education is best for students. In the meantime, students with special needs are in the classrooms, and they need support. These students have a desire to learn, to be accepted, and to be successful. It is the job of the educational team to provide the appropriate service to students with the resources currently available.

