

The Desperate Need for Professional Development
Implementing Inclusion in Public School Classrooms

Kevin C. Costley, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education
Arkansas Tech University

Lattie Richardson
Graduate Student/Public School Teacher

Abstract

Educational reform is constantly changing the ways teachers teach their students according to mandated reforms. Some teachers are in favor of reform and embrace it fully; some do not. Some reforms in education improves teaching and learning; some do not. Presently, there is a desperate need for reform in the area of special education concerning professional development implementing Inclusion in public school classrooms. The common procedure is to form teams to write individual education programs (IEP's) with modifications and accommodations for those students identified with one or more designated disabilities. These same students are included most, if not all of the day, in the regular education classrooms. In many schools, there is a lack of communication after the writing of the IEP and little if no communication or support from the special education teacher for the regular education teacher. This article speaks to this re-occurring practice (or lack thereof) and the need for carefully planned professional development for inclusionary practices. It is believed that many teachers want this type of improved communication/training; The literature reveals that teachers are more than willing to work with special education students in their regular classrooms with proper training, advice, a collaborative effort, and sound, practical advice.

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Educational reform is constantly changing the ways we teach our students. Some educators see reform as something to dread; however, the most innovative and progressive teachers embrace new ideas and theories. Motivated teachers want to hear new ideas to jump-start their teaching.

Much reform nationally and state-wide has intensely put more emphasis on meeting the individual needs of the children public school teachers serve. Education is still a worthwhile tradition in the United States. At times education is seen as the savior of society, especially when America is challenged with hard times (Ryan & Cooper, 2008).

The turbulent, erratic decade of the 1960's brought on Civil Rights reform. With the attempt to reform education in meeting the needs for all learners, reform was a noble and moral challenge of providing for all children with equality of education. The influx of children from diverse cultural backgrounds and languages raised awareness for schools to teach more effectively, yet schools were still in a crisis meeting the needs of diverse students (Tharp, Estrada, Stoll, & Yamuchi, 1999). Several decades later with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), school districts were held more accountable to meeting all children's educational needs.

As one can see in prior decades, reform is not an unusual practice in American education. During the early 1900's, children with disabilities were excluded from attending public schools. Because of powerful, outspoken parent advocates, legislatures passed laws to give all children a free public education. For many years, special needs students were pulled out of classrooms and others were even sent to special schools segregated from regular classroom for instruction. In

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the middle 1970's, PL 94-142 was passed requiring that all students with identified disabilities receive a free and appropriate public school education. Yet, even at this point in time and several decades after the enactment of the law, some special children were still excluded from the regular classroom all day long. The *least environment principal* was often not practiced in part or in whole (Lewis & Smith, 2010).

The later practice of *inclusion* in the 1990's was advocated for special needs students. The basic purpose of inclusion is to fulfill the *least restrictive environment principle* to the fullest extent possible. Rather than removing the child from the regular classroom all day, part days, or even shorter periods of time, the goal is to have the child in the classroom with normal peers as much as possible with specifically planned instruction from a resource teacher. (Lewis & Smith, 2010).

Yet, how can inclusionary practices be successful for all individuals combined – the student, teacher, and the school? “Success occurs when each member of the association is held accountable” (Arkansas PTA, 2009). Success in school programs can come about in many ways, yet teachers are the key of success in the ultimate success in all programs, especially inclusion programs. Teachers are powerful with their voices, actions, and reactions. Teachers can determine the success or failure of an inclusion program. Teachers must believe that an effective inclusion program *can work*, or the program will fail. Ultimately, teachers have a lot of influence, consciously and subconsciously, in the success or failure. Teachers are the most influential in school reform (Clampit, Hollifield, & Nichols, 2004). In reality, reform and dictates come from higher authorities, yet the implementation and success and/or failure of these reforms are often in the hands of the teachers. Teachers have more power than they perceive themselves to have.

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Inclusionary practices began as a way to meet the requirements of school reform by mainstreaming special needs or otherwise identified children with disabilities into the *general (regular) education classrooms*; in previous decades regular education classrooms were referred to as *homerooms*. Arkansas laws pertaining to special education students have set up strict guidelines for placing students in the *least restrictive environment* (regular classroom). The Arkansas Department of Education states that

“special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with identified disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs *only if* the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (2008).

Thus, the Arkansas law concerning the education of children with identified disabilities is clear and concrete as to what an appropriate, least restrictive environment is for these special needs students .

Perhaps more common than not, inclusion has been misunderstood and/or abused by school districts, special education teachers, counselors, and teachers. In some instances, teachers, principals, and special education teachers still know very little about the philosophy/goals of inclusion and how to implement and maintain the practice. Unfortunately, one common practice is that after the student is identified with a disability and the IEP is written, students are often *included* in the regular classroom with no IEP modifications at all. The teacher is left to struggle grasping for modifications with no additional support system, which is the true intention of inclusion (J. Paxton, personal communication, September 1, 2011).

Inclusion requires a joint delivery in instruction which requires that both the special education teacher and regular education teacher coordinate and deliver substantive instruction and ensure that both teachers have active roles in the education of the child. Co-teachers should

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work to ensure that their instructional strategies engage *all students* in ways that are not possible when only one teacher is present in the classroom (Austin, 2001; Gately & Gately, 2001).

Teachers' perceptions of inclusion programs are important. Teachers' perceptions, ways of construing systems, opinions, intentions, and attitudes influence the successful application of a program (Gurgur, & Uzuner, 2010). Girgir and Izimer recommend that schools receive training on implementing inclusionary practices and develop a *School Site Inclusion Task Force* made up of teachers and administrators that will aid in increasing awareness and discussion of including children with disabilities into the general classroom. Continuing, regular discussions are vital to the success of these programs. The Inclusion Task Force also has the responsibility for developing an action plan for teaching and carrying out effective inclusionary practices in the classroom (Johnson, 2000).

School districts should implement inclusionary practices and take the necessary steps to assure that teachers feel confident and prepared. Being prepared gives teachers a sense of ownership over their teaching and a real commitment to their acquired beliefs of inclusionary practices. One research study's conclusions stated that teachers believed inclusion programs could be improved with better planning and more collaboration between teachers (LasGelzheisert & Meyers, 1996). Thus, floundering, groping, and hopeless attempts working with a special needs child can be entirely eliminated by adequate professional development trainings and collaborations of teachers involved in the education of the special needs child. Without knowledge, there is hopelessness. With knowledge, there is power.

Some teachers involved in collaborative partnerships often report increased feelings of worth, renewal, partnership, and creativity. Yet on the other hand, teachers also voice dissatisfaction with the entire inclusion process, indicating that there are poorly defined role

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descriptions, lack of clear expectations from administrators, and frustrations with implementation issues (Gately & Gately, 2001). All of these are understandably frustrating to teachers. In these schools, teachers are expected to implement specialized teaching strategies they do not know. Because the overall attitudes and beliefs about inclusion impact each teacher differently, **it** is important to determine why teachers feel the way they do. Both critics and supporters of inclusion need a way to express their beliefs in a manner that is both professional and constructive, without fear of negative consequences, shame, and disapproval.

Studies have been conducted concerning teacher attitudes about inclusion in various states and even in other countries. In 1994, a survey was conducted over the southeastern section of the United States with elementary, middle, and secondary teachers. The study revealed that the majority of the teachers had many concerns about inclusion in the regular classroom. Some of their main worries included: concern for general education students, workload, litigation, and implementation of inclusionary practices. (Clampit, Hollifield, & Nichols, 2004).

Published the same year as the previous study, a second study reveals that there were, negative attitudes toward inclusion in classrooms where proper supports (helps) were not available. These supports had to do with assisting students with disabilities in the regular classroom. Participants of the study made a point about the issue of *fairness*. They argued that **it** is both inappropriate and irresponsible to place these students in inclusionary settings without the needed resources. Fairness was an issue with both teachers and students (Clampit, Hollifield, & Nichols, 2004).

Another study by D'Alonzo, Giordano, and Cross (1995) states that a definite advantage of inclusion would be an overall higher level of acceptance for students with

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disabilities. Another advantage of having inclusion would be possible academic success for those students. On the contrary, other researchers believed that the instructional strategies in inclusion may not be effective. These teachers stated that staff had not been properly trained and that their program lacked the necessary funding. (Clampit, Hollifield, & Nichols, 2004)

Another concern with inclusionary practices has to do with English language learners. As more special education and ELL (English Language Learner) students begin entering regular education classrooms, the ideas and concerns of the regular education teachers can greatly affect the outcome of an inclusion class. In addition, teacher attitudes and beliefs toward inclusion have been found to be *powerful predictors* of successful efforts to create inclusive learning communities (Cullen, Gregory, & Noto, 2010).

Because the teachers are held responsible for implementing inclusionary practices, it is extremely important to find out the opinions of those teachers. If teachers are able to voice their opinions, the valuable information and feedback that comes from them could be used to improve inclusionary practices. To reiterate, teachers are powerful in impacting program success and their feedback is vital.

In the past several years, there has been a push for more special education curriculum in undergraduate teacher training programs. Some universities have shifted the instructional focus of special education training more to graduate studies; whereas in some past decades, undergraduates received more special education training in their undergraduate training (J. Paxton (personal communication, September 1, 2011). The National Curriculum for Teacher Education and Curriculum Framework for Quality Teacher Education both expressed the importance of teacher training for disadvantaged children as well as the need to equip

teachers with better ways to deal with inequalities, differences, and special needs (Gafoor, & Asaraf, 2009).

Conclusion

“Though regular classroom teachers are willing to take the responsibility of all children, including those with special needs; they will not be confident if they are not equipped with necessary skills. (Gafoor & Asaraf, 2009).” In many public schools, the general classroom teachers have little or no formal training on the specific needs of special education students. They need more training on appropriate modifications and accommodations for special learners. Therefore, teachers do not feel they can adequately provide what inclusion students need (Cullen, Gregory, & Noto, 2010).

Recommendations to Promote Successful Inclusion

1. Read the educational literature about successful inclusion programs. Focus on the successful essentials for inclusion.
2. Initiate discussions with other teachers who have successfully worked as special educators implementing inclusion in regular classrooms focusing on the essentials of successful inclusion.
3. Initiate discussions with other teachers who have successfully implemented inclusion in regular classrooms.
4. Promote discussions with regular classroom teachers who have been successful collaborating with the special education teacher with inclusion students.

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5. Seek out professional opportunities to learn about inclusion (ie. Training sessions/seminars). Teachers should encourage their instructional leaders to provide professional development on this important subject. With knowledge, there is power and confidence!
6. Teachers need adequate and ample time to collaborate with each other about teaching methods, lesson plans, classroom behavior, and other areas of concern.
7. Regular classroom teachers need a special time to collaborate one on one with the special education teacher developing individualized inclusion strategies. (J. Paxton (personal communication, September 1, 2011)).

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