Inclusion Classrooms in Today’s Education
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Introduction

Over the last several years, most states have implemented some type of standards-based curriculum to their school systems. Sharpe (2003) says that the standards are being set in order to hold all students to a high measure of learning with great accountability for student results (p.3). While many of the efforts have led to a clear idea of what students should learn and be able to do, there have been questions regarding the participation of students with special needs in the new standards-based education system.

In 1997, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was amended to emphasize the need for students with disabilities to have access to the general curriculum. These students must have access to the general curriculum in order to meet the standards that have now been set and applied to all children in education. Therefore, a strong professional transition for both general and special education teachers has surfaced quickly. According to Sharpe (2003), “teachers nationwide now find they need to develop new skills and strategies to meet these challenges” (p.3). Also, these teachers must open up to new ideas and work as a team so that all students are accountable for the state standards.

Along with the 1997 amendments to the IDEA, came the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. This act was presented by President George W. Bush, “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach or exceed minimum proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (Sec. 1001, Part A, Title 1 of ESEA; 20 U.S.C. 6301). In other words, the pressure is on for schools to have all students meeting
the identified standards. This act greatly emphasizes the need to increase collaboration among teachers and initiate further instructional services to school populations.

Together, the new standards-based education, amendments to the IDEA, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) have set high goals for educators and students. The goals are to have all students proficient in the educational standards and able to pass the necessary state tests for accountability. More specifically, IDEA and NCLBA have led to an increased amount of inclusion classrooms in schools around the country. Inclusion classrooms meet the need for students with disabilities to have access to the general curriculum.

Defining Inclusion

Inclusion is a word heard very often in today’s educational world. However, there are many different definitions of the idea floating around. In order to work collaboratively, it is important for teachers to have a common understanding of the meaning of inclusion education. King (2003) gives a proper definition by explaining:

Inclusion education means that all students in a school- regardless of their strengths, weaknesses, or disabilities in any area- become part of the school community. They are included in the feeling of belonging among other students, teachers, and support staff. Inclusion, as operationally defined by York (1994), involves students’ attending the same schools as siblings and neighbors, being members in general education classrooms, having individualized and relevant learning objectives, and being provided with the support necessary to learn. (p.152)
Proponents of inclusion say that inclusion is an attitude rather than a practice. Inclusion is a value or a belief system to those who make it successful (p. 152). In schools that practice inclusion, administrators usually designate certain classrooms as inclusion classrooms. The classroom teachers are expected to use the existing curriculum, including the state standards. They do, however, often change their delivery of information, including instructional strategies, grouping methods, assessment strategies, and pacing (p.152). This is to meet the needs of all of the students in the classroom, including those with special needs and Individualized Education Programs (IEP).

Also, there are often specialized supports available for inclusion teachers. These supports can range from teacher’s aides to additional classrooms resources, depending on the school, students, and available funds. The focus is on the learners and the learners’ outcomes. The need for the teacher to vary instruction and classroom procedures to increase student accountability is acknowledged by the administration and support staff, and supported with means available to the school. Unfortunately, administrators are often strapped for funding or resources to support the inclusion classrooms as much as is desired.

Concerns in Inclusion

Although there are many supporters of inclusion education, there are still many concerns facing the movement. According to Sharpe (2003), one of the most prominent concerns is that teachers do not feel they are prepared to undertake the responsibility of an inclusion classroom (p.5). This lack of confidence can by explained in many ways. Some general education teachers do not feel knowledgeable in the area of special
education. They are unsure how to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Others do not know, or are unwillingly, to vary their teaching according to students needs. After all, it is a lot of work to individualize curriculum, and it is difficult to plan this each day. Furthermore, some teachers do not know how to manage classroom time in order to make sure everyone’s learning styles are met. A varied curriculum is hard to maintain with just one person in the room.

Another concern in inclusion classrooms is how to align the state standards with students’ IEP goals (p. 4). It is time consuming to align the standards with individualized goals, especially if there are several students with IEPS in one classroom. This is another aspect of individualizing the curriculum to the students, and when can teachers find enough time in the day to plan that, let alone teach it?

Furthermore, teachers and parents are often concerned about including students with special needs into a general education classroom (p. 4). Most times, the teachers are not sure what to expect socially. Will the students get along? Will there be inappropriate comments? Will some students become outcasts? Engelbrecht (2003) states that the acceptance of learners with disabilities seems to raise the most sensitive issues for teachers within inclusion classrooms (p.293). Teachers want to avoid hurtful situations in their classroom, and they seem unsure how to deal with such negativity.

Finally, the major concern of parents and students placed in an inclusion setting are being accepted by the classroom peers and being successful educationally. Fitch (2003) found that students wanted to make friends and seem intelligent in the inclusion setting (p.241). They did not want to be targeted as special needs students. Parents were
less concerned about academics, and more worried that their child would be an outcast. They don’t want them to feel “lower” than the other students.

Overall, the concerns surrounding inclusion are rather straightforward. Teachers who are willing to express their doubts lead to helpful communication and solutions. Parents and students who are willing to be confident and supportive of one another lead to a better educational experience, both academically and socially.

Solutions to Concerns

The concerns that I have identified are all legitimate, and it seems that several of them may be easily resolved. To begin with, Vanderfaeillie (2003) states that attitudes and beliefs concerning inclusion play a very important part in its implementation (p. 265). This means that people, who believe that inclusion is best for students, will make inclusion the best for students. Along with teachers, parents and students who believe in this idea are going to be more successful in the situation.

Secondly, there are many training programs being designed for teachers of inclusion classrooms. Dahle (2003) emphasizes the need for teachers to be properly trained on students’ disabilities, especially when it comes to disorders such as autism (p. 67). Teachers become much more confident once they are knowledgeable on the subject at hand. For example, I would not teach the civil war if I knew nothing about it. So, how can a teacher teach students with disabilities if they know nothing about special education or disabilities? It has been shown that teachers, who are properly trained, feel much better about inclusion. It is an idea that becomes imbedded after proper education.
In addition, teamwork is a must have when it comes to inclusion. General education teachers, administrators, special education teachers, and families need to be on the same team. Everyone working together will lead to a positive situation for the students. It is especially necessary, states Sharpe (2003), for special educators and general educators to collaborate. Special educators must become more adept in content knowledge and curriculum, while general educators must understand their role in implementing IEP goals and objectives. (p. 4) Both parties must be active in communication and commitment to meet the students’ needs. The special educator should also be present in the inclusion classroom when possible.

Socially, students seem to do better than expected in an inclusion setting. Everyone is very concerned with making sure all of the students get along, but this isn’t such a large barrier when inclusion is put into practice. If the teacher is confident, then the students are confident. If the teacher is accepting, the students seem to follow, and there can be no toleration of any negative behavior. After awhile, inclusion feels natural. Students learn to help each other and work as a team. It has been shown that all students benefit socially when educated in an inclusive setting, as they become members of the classroom community (Fitch, p. 237). This sense of belonging alleviates any worries from the teacher, parents, or child.

These solutions are not too difficult to achieve. If there is enough funding available for professional development workshops to train teachers, the rest will follow close behind. Most of the solutions come with a positive attitude and confidence that inclusion will be successful. It is important for all people to be able to live and work
together in society, so I think it is appropriate to expose youngsters to all types of people and situations in school. Inclusion can help to prepare students for the real world.

Conclusion

Inclusion is a major issue in our educational system. It is also becoming an issue in many other countries around the world. It seems that we are working towards a world of equality and accountability. Some people do not feel that inclusion equals equality, while many do. Inclusion classrooms are becoming more and more prominent in the United States. I think it is important for teachers to embrace the idea of inclusion, because it is not going away. We will make it more successful by becoming educated and being open minded about its benefits for students.

Since more disabilities are being identified in children each day, teachers need to be trained in how to help students with special needs. We need to help these students early. By allowing students into the least restrictive environment, we hope to benefit them to the fullest. With the help of outside resources, our work is more successful. Many inclusion classrooms are working successfully in this country. Since there is always room for improvement, it is necessary to continue researching the topic and building on our current practices. Further knowledge will lead us to better success. Hopefully, we will be able to help as many students reach today’s high standards as possible.

Personal Thoughts

As a new teacher, I feel that most students with special needs should be included in a general education classroom. I also feel that some disorders are too difficult for a
general education teacher to work with in a full classroom. In these instances, the special
education students may be better in a separate setting. To me, being educated is most
important. I want to know how to help special students because I want them to be
successful. I believe in varying curriculum to my students, and I do it every day. Not all
students learn the same. Varying the curriculum and teaching strategies is important
whether or not you teach in an inclusion setting.

This research has been very interesting. After encountering some teachers who are
completely against inclusion, I was glad to see that it is successful in numerous ways.
There is still tweaking to do, and I think we will only improve. My goal as a teacher is to
push all of my students. I want them to love learning and to succeed. I hope to make
education a better place by keeping an open mind and being a life-long learner myself. I
end with a quote from Mahatma Gandhi that leads my life each day, “You must be the
change you wish to see in the world” (King, p. 157).
References


