

CLASSROOM FOR DEBATE

When Students with Autism Succeed in Inclusive Classrooms

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THIS PAPER AIMS TO DETERMINE WHETHER CURRENT PRACTICES ENSURE SUCCESS FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER WHO PARTICIPATE WITHIN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL SETTING BY EXAMINING FOUR PERSPECTIVES: STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER AND THEIR GENERAL EDUCATION COUNTERPARTS, EDUCATORS, FINANCIAL FUNDING FOR SUCH PROGRAMS, AND THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF AUTISTIC STUDENTS WHO RECEIVE THE SERVICE. WHILE MUCH LITERATURE ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IS SUPPORTIVE, THE FINDINGS INDICATE THAT THE SERVICE OPERATES ON QUESTIONABLE INTENTIONS AND PRACTICES THAT MAY OR MAY NOT BE BENEFICIAL FOR ITS RECIPIENTS. DESPITE THE SETBACKS ASSOCIATED WITH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, AUTISTIC STUDENTS ARE CAPABLE OF SUCCEEDING WITHIN THESE CLASSROOMS. SUGGESTIONS CAN BE FORMULATED TO MODIFY SUCH PRACTICES TO ENSURE THAT ALL AUTISTIC STUDENTS ARE EDUCATED IN A MANNER THAT ALLOWS THEM TO SHARE THE SAME LEVEL OF ACHIEVEMENT AS THEIR GENERAL PEERS IN EDUCATION.

Inclusive education is a hot-button issue in the field of special education due to the questionability of the program's intentions for students. Literature on the topic overwhelmingly supports the inclusive education classroom model. Inclusive classrooms create an intellectually stimulating environment for special education students, allow them to learn about appropriate behavior in a general education setting, and ensure that each student is educated in an environment that comfortably meets his or her individualized needs. However, the service may not be effective for all students. Inclusive education can contribute to the social exclusion of some students on the basis of social impairment. In addition, many teachers of inclusive education are not sufficiently prepared to handle teaching both general education and learning-disabled students. A major contributing factor to this difficulty is the inability to apply teaching methods that work for one group of students to all of the students. Special education students are also notably left out of score reporting for standardized examinations, for fear of their performance lowering school averages. In order to ensure success amongst autistic students, inclusive education programs must place a stronger emphasis upon equality, so that students can receive the maximum benefits of their education. By analyzing the views of students, educators, financial funding, and academic achievement, new methods of educating these students can be implemented to allow students to receive more equalized educational opportunities.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

The student perspective on inclusive education is an important one, since the children are the recipients and are directly impacted by the program's services. Despite a limited amount of direct testimony from students, the majority of literature written on inclusive education indicates that students support this classroom model (Chmiliar, 2009; Stein, 2013). One of the greatest benefits of inclusive classrooms is the student's improved attitude towards education. In a case study of five male students within the same school district, all of the participants "reported that this year was the best year compared to previous years and

that they were doing 'better this year'" (Chmiliar, 2009, p.80). The students typically have a more enjoyable experience within inclusive classrooms because they are exposed to strategies that help them develop the skills needed to succeed both academically and socially. When describing their experiences, Chmiliar's participants (2009), similar to many other students educated within inclusive classrooms, reported having a more enjoyable educational experience because of their increased ability to develop stronger relationships with their teachers and peers, complete more difficult classroom assignments, and develop a higher sense of self-perception. These factors contribute to more satisfying experiences at school, as special education students are no longer restricted by the status of their ability and can successfully become assimilated into the world of their general education peers.

General education students also find inclusive education to be more beneficial in meeting their needs. Students in seventh grade teacher Elizabeth Stein's classroom were asked about their attitudes towards having two teachers in the classroom, as opposed to one. The large majority of them responded that they enjoyed this component of inclusive education, because they had an easier time receiving help on assignments (2013).

However, this improved attitude towards school is not seen in all students who are placed in inclusive classrooms. Much of this negative attitude is attributed to the social impairments of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This behavior causes the students to behave atypically in comparison to the general education students that they share their classroom with. According to a study conducted by Chamberlain's research team (Chamberlain, et. al, 2007) using loneliness questionnaires, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnoses reported experiencing feelings of isolation due to spending less time with their friends and not receiving reciprocal friendships. These students are also more likely to experience bullying by their peers because of their limited social skills and sensitivity to an unpredictable classroom setting (Volkmar, et.

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al, 2014). Feelings of exclusion can contribute to negative student perceptions towards inclusion, as students would not be able to feel welcomed in an environment that proposes a notion of unity. If a unified relationship cannot be formulated between both types of students within the inclusive classroom, the environment is not right for them, as the general education students will not be allowing their special education peers to develop the skills needed for social and academic successes.

Although some special education students may experience bullying within their inclusive classrooms, this experience cannot be generalized to all students. Even though the autistic students studied by Chamberlain's team (2007) reported experiencing bullying and feelings of loneliness, they were not completely excluded, as some students were able to maintain few, weak ties to the rest of the students while others were able to become more involved with their peers. Weak social connections do not leave autistic students completely isolated from their peers as their reporting suggests. The majority of the students within this study, actually report having lower rates of loneliness than their peers, because the perceived problems contributing to the loneliness of these students result from a disconnect between the student's expectations of being included in groups and their reality. An overwhelming majority of students enjoy the inclusive classroom. As a result, this environment would be more beneficial for autistic students than isolating them from general education, because students in general education would be unable to form such relationships with their peers.

I can vouch for the testimony of these students because I have an Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis, and my Individualized Education Plan (IEP) allowed me to be completely integrated within a general classroom during elementary school. Since my diagnosis allows me to be extremely high functioning, the setting of a general education classroom was most appropriate for me, as I would not have been able to achieve my academic and personal successes within an environment that included only other students with impairments. The inclusive classroom allowed me to learn how to develop longstanding relationships with other people because of the interaction component with teachers and other students. If I were educated within an environment catering strictly to special education students, I would not have been able to form such skills, as the teacher within that environment orchestrates all of the students' decisions. This leaves students with little freedom to explore connections with one another

since they need to be strictly following the guidelines of their I.E.P.s., thus creating dissonance between their educational environment and the world around them. Students who dislike inclusive classrooms dislike them because of this dissonance.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

Similar to the case with students, most literature on the topic of inclusive educational documents teacher support of the issue. Teachers are supportive of this education practice because it allows students to experience an education that appropriately suits them. This movement lies within a context that allows special education students to have more opportunities for success (Chmiliar, 2009; Guthrie, 2003; Idol, 2006). Since the inclusive classroom caters to both general education and special education students, the classroom provides a more intellectually stimulating environment for special education students, as they are taught within the general curriculum.

Even though students are commonly expected to achieve more within an inclusive classroom, their teachers are often unable to provide for these services, thus creating a possibility for the program to discard the interests of special education students. One of the biggest concerns that the opposition holds towards teachers of inclusive education is that the concept does not meet their expectation of a "one-size-fits-all" education. Many educators in the inclusive classrooms are not properly trained to teach both general and special education, since most college teaching curriculums only provide methods for standard K-12 education (Guthrie, 2003; Gabel, 2005). Thus, teachers erroneously believe that these teaching ideas are applicable to all students and do not acknowledge individual differences between the learning abilities of general education and special education students. In addition, teachers of inclusive classrooms are not often certified to be teaching special education. The field of special education is infamously understaffed due to complexities in obtaining the necessary teaching licensure. Unsurprisingly, this understaffing leads to more teachers leaving this workforce than entering it (Guthrie, 2003).

Due to these factors, inclusive education may not be the best option for all students because the term "inclusion" is thrown around as a buzzword rather than truly understood by instructors. Reporter John Tulenko interviewed a special education instructor, Ross Kramer, on whether he would allow special education students to become inte-

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grated into a main classroom. Kramer rejected this notion due to his belief regarding the ineffectiveness of special education accommodations. With the implementation of these accommodations, students are incapable of retaining any material that they learn. (Tulenko, 2016). If a student is unable to retain the general curriculum, then exposure to general education is not appropriate for them as their academic struggles will continue without receiving the proper support.

While this statement maybe true, it cannot be applicable to all students since an autism diagnosis does not affect students in the same manner. Autism is characterized as a spectrum with a wide variety of differing symptoms, so some students will require more assistance in their classroom than others. I have a diagnosis of Asperger’s, a highly-functioning classification of autism, I was able to succeed within an inclusive classroom because I have limited impairments in comparison to other individuals on the spectrum. This lower amount of limitations allowed me to adapt to an environment that integrates both regular education and special education students more easily because I only needed assistance with communication within the classroom. An inclusive classroom would not be an appropriate setting for an individual with a lower-functioning diagnosis on the spectrum, as their individualized needs would extend beyond what a classroom catering to general education students can provide for them. These students may have additional behavioral or learning difficulties that would require them to be educated within the services of a more restrictive, resource room-type classroom since they would be unable to cope with the demands of a general education classroom.

Humanity is the driving force behind the continued presence and acceptance of inclusive classrooms, as teachers believe that all students are entitled to the right of an equal educational regardless of ability. By taking on the role of educating students of varying capabilities, teachers engineers of social change for being able to challenge the politicalized injustice of marginalizing special education students by teaching to their individualized needs (Gabel, 2005). Inclusive education is a socialized movement that has been occurring over the last four decades. Prior to 1975, special education students received schooling in iso-

lated environments, such as resource rooms, that did not entirely and properly provide for their needs (Guthrie, 2003). Under the mandates of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, special education students receive an IEP that is implemented in the educational environment that least restricts the student’s abilities, known as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Guthrie, 2003). IEPs and LREs contribute to the theme of humanity ensuring that the student’s needs are being appropriately met, regardless of the circumstances behind them. If a student with a documented special need, such as an autism diagnosis, does not receive the opportunity to be educated in accordance with their individual needs, then such a system is unjust for depriving students of their right to a free and appropriate education, as the student would be educated in a manner contrary to the regulations that are federally imposed upon schools.

FINANCIAL PERSPECTIVE

Despite federal statute, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, that requires that all special education students to be granted free and appropriate public education, these services are underfunded. The federal government continually fails to meet its required quota of funding 40% of the excess costs because it maintains that more localized sources should contribute more; students are receiving their education on the local level (Guthrie, 2003; Power-deFur, 1997). It is odd that the government provides special education students with mandates to ensure that they receive the most out of their education based on their individualized needs, yet they do not supply the largest percentage of the services required to allow this to occur. This is counterproductive to their mandates, because as students may not be able to have their educational needs met due to budgeting conflicts and the availability of reliable resources that occur within the most localized levels of the funding system.

The notion of opposition towards inclusion is evident in claiming that the program receives excessive funding. The overallocation of resources towards inclusive education will divert funding away from the special education classroom and towards the general classroom, where opponents find extra funding to be more appropriate (Guthrie,

2003). This extra funding serves the purpose of covering the excess costs of a student's education. State governments spend \$9,600 on nondisabled students, while spending approximately twice as much on special education students due to the growing prevalence of disorders, such as autism, that require more intensive services (see Appendix). Even when special education students have less severe limitations, the spending allocated to them is still greater than that for general education students, merely because the student is documented as having a disability (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2013).

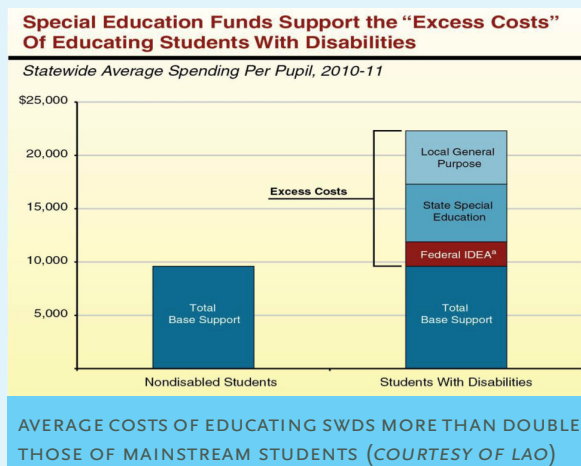
In the face of the argument that inclusive education spends an unnecessarily large sum on special education students, many local communities are making the most out of the budget that they implement. Communities utilize strategies such as resource pooling, which combine the available educational resources to produce a product that is believed to guarantee a more effective education (Guthrie, 2003). This combination of resources aims to reduce the costs spent upon inclusive educational practices, as the service will be grouped along with other programs for students who need assistance to succeed the classroom, such as these who have limited English language proficiency (Guthrie, 2003). Frequency of service helps limit the costs of special education services. For example, many local education agencies (LEAs) offer a method of teaching known as the "itinerant model", which employs a general education teacher to special education classes for one or two hours each week (Odom, et. al, 2001). Since special education students will only be exposed to the general curriculum for brief, infrequent periods of time, the cost-per-hour rate for this method is much lower than

the cost of educating a special education student full-time within this environment. Despite the existence of such low-cost services towards inclusive education, more funding should be allocated in order to provide higher quality education to the students. Children who have special educational needs will be unable to benefit from underfunded special education services, such as the itinerant model, because of the limited amount of instruction time from a general education teacher. As itinerant model students receive the majority of their education from a special education teacher, they are unprepared for integration into a general classroom.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Academic achievement is the main motivation for providing inclusive educational services due to the program's ability to educate students in a manner that most suits their academic needs. This purpose appears to be ideal as it promises to enforce federally mandated statutes on educating special education students to allow them to achieve success in their least restrictive educational environment, yet achievement is a questionable topic when performance reporting is either incomplete or dishonest (Idol, 2006; National Center of Educational Outcomes, 2015). Many school systems throughout the United States need to rely upon their performance on standardized testing in order to secure portions of their funding, thus, poor test performances will reduce funding if they are released in annual score reporting (Guthrie, 2003). In response to this threat to both the school's budget and reputation, administrators commonly choose the practice of the exemption of special education students from score reporting, and standardized testing itself (Guthrie, 2003).

Such dishonest score reporting discourages academic achievement for the special education population, as their exclusion from mandated examinations allows them to place less effort on their coursework. According to Idol's study, anywhere between 15% and 67% of students are exempted from the school's standardized examinations (2006). Similarly, the National Center for Educational Outcome's reporting on the 2012-2013 academic year (2015) indicates that out of all the states and territories within the United States, only 52 of the participating 61 areas reported data, with 85% reporting participation and performance for all state assessments, 12% not providing any reporting data for the state assessments, and 3% only providing data for some of these assessments. With such a large number of students not receiving accreditation for



any academic accomplishments that they have made, actual achievement rates may be lower than they appear. Instead, special education students receive examinations that are much simpler for them to complete out of suspicion that they may not be able to adequately display their content mastery on the regular examinations (2006).

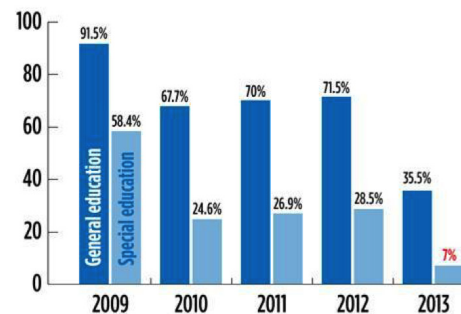
In order for the academic accomplishments of a special education student to be truly acknowledged, he or she should be awarded to complete the same examinations as their general education peers. This belief is necessary since the aspect of passing or failing should be more important in determining whether a school is successful in preparing its students, rather than whether the student is documented as receiving special education services. Students who need special education services are required by federal law to have an IEP that documents the personalized educational services that they are to receive in the classroom (Guthrie, 2003). This documentation requires material to be presented to students in a specific manner, which allows students to develop better relationships with their peers and teachers since they need to be involved in the planning process of their services. Having an IEP allows students to reliably receive assistance on classroom assignments. Students can comfortably approach a teacher or a general education classmate for assistance, a task that may have been difficult or nearly impossible in a resource room occupied by students with varying special needs. Failing to provide students with an I.E.P. thus negatively impacts a student's academic achievement. If a student does not receive the benefits of their status within special education, it is likely that their academic successes would be hindered, since they would be placed within classrooms that satisfy the his or her educational needs. Test score reporting is also skewed in face of the spectrum characteristic of autism diagnoses. Since individuals with higher functioning forms of autism, such as Asperger's Syndrome, typically have high levels of intelligence, they are more capable of performing well on these examinations than peers who have lower-functioning forms of autism or even learning disabilities. As the intellect of these students contributes to their ability to attain high test scores, these students should be included within a school's score reporting procedures because they are benefiting from the services that they are receiving at school in order to obtain the general education curriculum.

Due to factors regarding academic ability, students can still face struggles in their academics as their disabilities prevent them from playing catching up on the content that is

easily processed by their general education peers. The 2013 reporting for the New York Common Core math curriculum during the elementary and middle school years indicates that only 7% of special education students are capable of achieving passing grades in the curriculum (engageNY, 2013) (See Appendix). A one-size-fits-all approach to teaching does not apply to special education students, as their needs in passing such classes are not understood by educators or peers, unless some method of accommodation is provided within the student's I.E.P. A similar trend is exhibited in the standardized testing performance of special education students due to the perceived notion of their failure, if they were to complete such assessments with the capability of their general education counterparts. Only 15% to 40% of special education students are capable of completing their English Language Arts examination with a score of proficient or higher; in comparison, 40% to 70% of general education students are able to accomplish this feat (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2013) (See Appendix). While this reporting may be skewed by the exclusion of special education students from examinations and score reporting, the findings of the California Legislative Analyst's Office cannot be applicable to all students identified by the "special education" label. As previously mentioned, students with Asperger's diagnoses should be excluded from this labelling as "failures" within the general curriculum because their higher intellectual capabilities enable them to develop a better understanding of the general curriculum. While it is true that some special education students struggle with this material and cannot pass mandated examinations, it is important to know that these students may not necessarily be autistic.

Just 7 percent of Special Ed students pass Common Core math

New York state students in grades 3-8



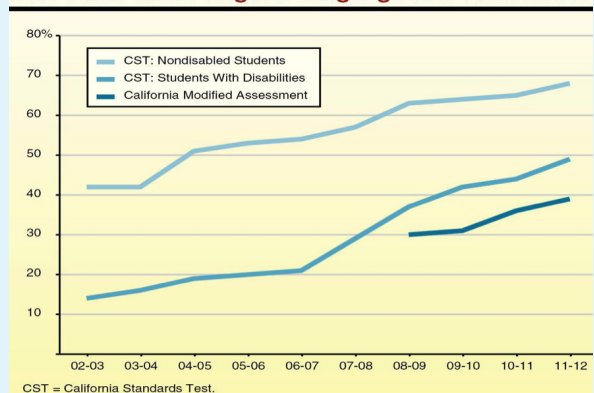
Source: A New Baseline: Measuring Student Progress on the Common Core Learning Standards, August 2013, engageNY

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS PASSING COMMON CORE MATH (COURTESY OF LAO)

CONCLUSION

In spite of the challenges associated with inclusive education, it is still manageable for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder to succeed within this classroom environment. The highly positive attitudes that these students hold towards the classroom would allow for them to better enjoy their education through meaningful connections with peers and teachers. As teachers are able to modify curriculum practices to include special education students, they are able to properly apply their teaching methods, rather than erroneously applying ideals that can negatively harm a student's performance. Academic achievement results indicated by standardized testing performance should no longer continue to be skewed in favor of a positive image for the educational institution as students with Autism Spectrum Disorder do not necessarily perform as poorly on their examinations as students who may have other forms of learning disabilities. Accurate score reporting for special education that includes students rather than diminishing their accomplishments is more beneficial than the skewed reporting that is continually being released, as it will allow the school systems to understand where students are experiencing difficulties. By seeing where these difficulties exist, schools can determine where extra attention should be directed in order to improve testing performance, rather than ignore the presence of special education students within a testing community. Some of these students do not perform as poorly as expected, so test reporting should include their results as stated rather than skew them for the sake of a school's image.

Percent of Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced On Fourth Grade English Language Arts Assessmen



CST = California Standards Test.
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS PASSING ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS ASSESSMENT (COURTESY OF LAO)

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