

Vol. (14), No. (49), Part Two, July 2022, PP. 1 – 26

The Impact of Special Needs Student Integration

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Abstract

Since the concept of integrating special needs students in one classroom with their normal peers-be it mainstreaming or full inclusion was introduced, people have been divided between supporting and opposing it. Academics, researches, schools, teachers, parents and activists have been trying to figure out whether the application of this concept would really benefit special needs students without adversely affecting their peers, and without taking a toll on the available resources of schools and their faculty. This research will attempt to reach a conclusion supported by evidence and academic research as well as draw on the experiences of people directly involved with this problem.

Keywords: The Impact of special needs integration at school and community.

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أثر دمج الأطفال ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة

إعداد

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المخلص باللغة العربية

منذ أن تم تقديم مفهوم دمج الطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة في فصل دراسي واحد مع أقرانهم العاديين - سواء كان ذلك في الدمج أو الإدماج الكامل، انقسم الأشخاص بين دعمه ومعارضته. يحاول الأكاديميون والأبحاث والمدارس والمعلمون وأولياء الأمور والنشطاء معرفة ما إذا كان تطبيق هذا المفهوم سيفيد حقًا الطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة دون التأثير سلبيًا على أقرانهم ودون التأثير على الموارد المتاحة للمدارس وأعضاء هيئة التدريس. سيحاول هذا البحث الوصول إلى نتيجة مدعومة بالأدلة والبحث الأكاديمي وكذلك الاستفادة من تجارب الأشخاص المعنيين بشكل مباشر بهذه المشكلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تأثير الدمج على الأطفال ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة في المدرسة والمجتمع.

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Background of the Problem

Disability and Special Needs Definitions

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines *disability* as: "a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions...; also: impaired function or ability" (The Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, 2018).

There is, however, no clear definition of special needs. Special needs can be a variety of needs from physical (visually impaired, hearing impaired), intellectual (learning disability, mild intellectual disability, developmentally delayed) and in truth the list goes on (Francis, 2013). In fact, within these variety of identifications there are other factors which are usually present. For example, a student with learning disability may also have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and have behavior components which make it very difficult to function in the regular classroom setting. The bottom line is that there are a multitude of special needs, and they are rarely put into "simple, neat" categories (Francis, 2013).

History

Before 1975, students with disabilities would have been **excluded**, or removed, from the classroom, and their educational options would have been severely limited (*US Department of Education, Date not specified*). The **Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA)** of 1975, which was later revised to become **The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** of 1990, mandated that special needs students are entitled to receive a free and appropriate education. This led to the **integration**, or

inclusion, of special needs students into traditional classroom settings (*Dance-Schissel, date not specified*).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that a continuum of placement options be available to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The law also requires that: "to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities ... are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be attained satisfactorily." IDEA Sec. 612 (5) (B). (Classroom Leadership Journal – Editor, 2001/2002).

Research Focus and Rationale

This research will focus on comparing the views of the various stakeholders in this concept, including parents of special needs students, parents of their normal peers who will be sharing a classroom with them, teachers of special needs students with or without special training and experience, school management, governmental legislative bodies, as well as academics and researchers. Some of them are pro, and some against, integration. The research will also compare between the benefits and drawbacks of integration.

Full Inclusion vs Mainstreaming

Integration can take the form of either *full inclusion* which happens when disabled students are always placed in a regular or traditional classroom regardless of their individual needs; or *mainstreaming* where students with disabilities are placed in a traditional classroom only after they

have demonstrated the ability to be successful there. Students who are selected for mainstreaming usually begin in special education classes with other students with disabilities, and graduate to mainstreaming once they have demonstrated some level of proficiency. Mainstreaming may mean that the special education student is in a traditional classroom all day or only for specific subjects or times (*Dance-Schissel, undated; Ludden, 2012*).

Views of the Parents – Personal Anecdotal Reports

Parents usually lack the academic background that qualifies them to contribute in a proper scientific way to the subject, so we will have to rely on their anecdotal relating of their experience and draw our conclusion from it. There are parents who insist that their children are better off integrated with the general student population. An example of those is Carla who said that her autistic daughter was doing well in a general education environment but was forced to be placed in a special education classroom where her performance deteriorated and she was terrified all the time. She ended up suing the school and got a settlement. Following that she placed her daughter in a private setting where she seems to be happy (Ludden, 2012).

On the other hand, there are parents who insist that the presence of special needs students among their normal children is harmful to their children, like the Toronto parents who sued the school board for failing to protect their daughters from a schoolmate with special needs (Giese, 2016).

Academic Arguments

There are arguments for and against the integration of students with special needs in the regular classroom. The question is not entirely clear-

cut and needs to be examined on a case by case basis. Before we can adequately examine this whole idea, we need to discuss what constitutes “special needs”. Indeed, once again there is no clear answer to this question (Dean, 2013). Special needs can be a variety of needs from physical (visually impaired, hearing impaired), intellectual (learning disability, mild intellectual disability, developmentally delayed) and in truth the list goes on. In fact, within these variety of identifications there are other factors which are usually present. For example, a student with a learning disability may also have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and have behavior components which make it very difficult to function in the regular classroom setting. The bottom line is that there are a multitude of special needs, and they are rarely put into “simple, neat” categories. Knowing all this then, what is the argument for putting these students into the regular classroom? (Dean, 2013).

First of all, these students have the right to go to school and be with their friends and neighbors. Too often they have been asked to travel by bus to schools which are a great distance from their home. They will be at these schools with students they barely know and have little chance of forming lasting friendships outside of school hours. They are simply too far away. This is a huge disadvantage in terms of forming social relationships and social skills. Also, in this age of cost-cutting, education resources are tending to be pooled more at the individual school level. This is an attempt to have these students attend school in their own areas. Schools and boards are being given money for this and it needs to be taken advantage of. Lastly, classroom teachers for the most part have recognized their role in all of this. Numerous teachers have received additional

qualifications in the area of special education so they can increase their ability to help their students. It would be a shame not to use this increasing base of knowledge and skill (Madder, 2017).

While there are some good arguments for students remaining in their home schools/classes, there are also points against this. First of all, sometimes the needs of students are simply too great for the neighborhood school to have a chance of meeting them. While resources inside the individual schools may increase to meet these needs, the sad truth is the actual resources are often still sadly lacking. Secondly, if resources are lacking, should the special needs student not be in an environment which is more equipped to help him/her? It would be absolutely frustrating for the student if this were not the case. Also, although other students often try to help those students with special needs, they at the same time are often targets for such things as bullying. This is especially true for less “obvious” special needs such as learning disabilities or behavior disorders. The other students do not understand the needs of the various students and will quite often tease and bully them (Dean, 2013).

Considering the pros and cons of this argument, only one conclusion can really be made. Whether a special needs student is part of the regular classroom or needs to attend a different class/school depends entirely on THAT student. If the needs are too great to be met adequately by the school, alternative arrangements must be made. If the needs of the student can be met by the local school, they should be part of that school and welcomed as part of that community of learners. Teachers should accommodate and modify where needed, and make sure all their students understand the need to treat everyone with respect and as individuals.

Fairness is not always sameness... that is a simple fact. Good teachers know that all students are different and there is no “one size fits all” secret to teaching. Nowhere is this truer than with students with special needs (Dean, 2013).

Benefits of Integration for Special Needs Kids

More than 15 years of research (Winter & O’Raw, 2010) has proven the benefits of inclusion for all involved in the process. All students grow when schools include special needs children in a mainstream environment (Liew, 2016).

Greater access to the mainstream curriculum

Students with special needs have more opportunities for academic growth because they have greater access to the mainstream curriculum. With greater exposure to the challenges of learning, they have better chances to take bigger steps forward (Liew, 2016).

In the above school for children with hearing challenges, students with both reduced hearing levels and Asperger’s Syndrome benefited greatly from integration in the mainstream curriculum, achieving outstanding results. They went on to do very well in various secondary schools (Schmidt & Cagran, 2006).

Improved reading levels

Children with special needs, and hence, reading difficulties, benefit greatly from inclusion in the mainstream. The reading levels of their mainstream peers also increase.

Before entering a mainstream environment, a student who had impaired hearing and difficulties with speech did not have good diction

when pronouncing some of his words. He amazed me a few months later by speaking with increased fluency and better pronunciation. He claimed that he learned to say certain words from listening to a friend sitting next to him (Liew, 2016).

Increased social opportunities and exposure to proper role models

Integration into the mainstream for the child with special needs means the chance to interact with peers from mainstream environments. Such play is a way of developing proper socialization skills for any child and is indispensable. The role modeling helps to nurture social skills (Liew, 2016).

Increased skill acquisition opportunities

The mainstream curriculum presents the special needs child with more chances to acquire the skills that are not necessarily included in a special needs curriculum. For instance, more mathematical concepts would be included in a mainstream curriculum than in one targeted at children with more needs (Schmidt & Cagran, 2006).

Increased parental participation

Parents whose children have special needs are often motivated to volunteer in their child's school community and their child's needs.

A proponent of integration, Dr. Thomas Armstrong gives 6 reasons for integration special needs students in the classroom (Armstrong, 2016):

- 1- Students with disabilities add to the diversity of the classroom. Diversity enriches our lives. Biodiversity adds new medicines, cultural diversity provides new ideas, and what I'm calling

“neurodiversity” adds new possibilities that make for a more interesting classroom. How boring it would be if every student looked and acted the same in school! (Armstrong, 2010).

- 2- Students with disabilities bring new strengths into the classroom. Unfortunately, all too often we focus on what children with disabilities lack when we should be paying attention to what they do well. New research is emerging on a yearly basis (Winter & O’Raw, 2010) regarding the many strengths of those with disabilities including high spatial ability for many kids with dyslexia, creative thinking in students with ADHD, systemic capabilities (such as excellence with computers) among those with autism spectrum disorders, and personal charm and human warmth in many students with intellectual abilities such as Down syndrome (*Karten, 2017*).
- 3- Students with disabilities help promote a climate of giving in the classroom. The autistic daughter of anthropologist Roy Richard Grinker was fully included in the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center in Washington, D.C., and her teachers commented: “It’s not just that Isabel introduced diversity into the classroom. . . Isabel made the other children less selfish.” When Isabel was absent, the students were more competitive and irritable, but when she returned, they returned to a more giving attitude toward each other as well as Isabel. Similarly, students with special needs can humanize any educational environment by sending a message to students that we all need to pitch in to help each other out in life (Grinker, 2007)
- 4- Students with disabilities do better when in a setting where more is expected of them. We know from the “Pygmalion in the Classroom”

experiments that when teachers expect more from students their achievement goes up, and the reverse is true as well. When students are excluded from regular classrooms and placed in enclosed “special ed.” classrooms, the potential for stigmatization, ridicule, and self-condemnation are heightened, and teachers tend to treat these students as less able compared with so-called normal children. In an inclusive classroom, children with disabilities have the opportunity to experience what it’s like to be considered normal enough to learn in a regular classroom environment, they are inspired by the positive performances of their peers, and they rise to the higher expectations of their teachers (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968 - book; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968 - article)

5- Students with disabilities challenge us to provide better ways to educate ALL kids. To create an effective inclusion classroom, educators need to build a learning environment that provides a variety of ways in which learning content is represented, engaged with, and assessed (see below for some suggestions). This process benefits all learners, not just those with disabilities, since research reveals that all children have different ways of learning (Armstrong, 2010).

6- Children with disabilities’ brains develop stronger neural connections in a richer learning environment. Studies with rodents done in the 1960’s by Marian Diamond at the University of California, Berkeley (Sher, 2013), revealed that rats living in a richer and more “inclusive” environment (more social interaction, more physical exercise opportunities) had more dendrites or branches extending out of neurons or brain cells and connecting with other

neurons than rats in a more “excluding” or isolated environment. Since that time, research has extended this understanding to humans, particularly in the newly emerging field of neuroplasticity. Young children are in a sensitive developmental period with regard to their openness to neural imprinting from external stimuli, thus all children, including those with special needs, benefit greatly from an optimal learning environment (Armstrong, 2010).

Social Benefits of Inclusion

Children Learn by Example

Whether they learn certain behaviors from their family and parents, peers and schoolmates or teachers and authority figures, children learn how they’re supposed to behave based on examples that are set forth for them. For many children with special needs in special classes, the example set for them there on a daily basis is simply other children with special needs, therefore, they become accustomed to that restricted environment (De Vivo, 2013).

While special needs children can benefit from spending time with other special needs children, problems can arise when they spend all of their time with children with similar behavioral issues. Inclusion improves learning for both classified and unclassified students. After all, many children learn by example and they may begin to imitate behaviors that aren’t beneficial for them (De Vivo, 2013).

By being in a classroom with children that don’t have behavioral issues, some individuals with special needs may be able to develop better social skills through example. When children who have learning problems

are included, students without disabilities tend to perform better academically. For example, a teacher is more inclined to break instruction into finer parts or repeat directions if he or she has a student in the room who is deaf, blind or has a developmental disability (De Vivo, 2013).

Inclusion Helps Children Adjust

The issue of inclusion is passionately debated, but most advocates (Daly, 2017) believe that attending regular classes and spending time in standard classroom settings, even if they don't do it full-time, can help children with special needs better adapt to the rest of the world – a world that is predominantly made up of others that do not have the same needs.

Many advocates of full inclusion (Daly, 2017) believe that special needs children who attend regular classes will be better equipped to handle the world in their teen and adult years due to their exposure to children without special needs. For many children with developmental disorders who may be working to overcome them, that means easier friendships and work situations later in life, and less overall shock when it comes to adapting to the world later on (De Vivo, 2013).

It Goes Both Ways

Children with special needs may be able to develop better social skills by attending regular classes and spending time with other children that do not have special needs, but the issue goes both ways. One thing that many advocates of inclusion tend to forget is that children who do not have special needs can also develop better social skills and empathy by being in classrooms with special needs children (De Vivo, 2013).

Problems with Integration

The main problem is that teachers in mainstream classrooms rarely have the education or expertise to work with complex disabilities that include difficulties with behavior. Rates of diagnoses of autism, for instance, are growing exponentially, and kids with conditions like this require very particular accommodation, including high teacher-to-student ratios, educators with extensive and specialized training, additional therapists and mental health workers, and environments designed to reduce stress (Giese, 2016).

How to Make Integration Work

Years of research (Winter & O’Raw, 2010) have contributed to our knowledge of how to successfully include students with disabilities in general education classes. Listed below are the activities and support systems commonly found where successful inclusion has occurred.

Attitudes and Beliefs

Belief that integration will work and the attitude that accompanies that belief are very powerful tools that makes integration work (Oluremi, 2015).

- The regular teacher believes that the student can succeed.
- School personnel are committed to accepting responsibility for the learning outcomes of students with disabilities (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000).
- School personnel and the students in the class have been prepared to receive a student with disabilities.

- Parents are informed and support program goals (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000).
- Special education staff are committed to collaborative practice in general education classrooms.
- Services and physical accommodations (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000).
- Services needed by the student are available (e.g., health, physical, occupational, or speech therapy).
- Accommodations to the physical plant and equipment are adequate to meet the student's needs (e.g., toys, building and playground facilities, learning materials, assistive devices) (Classroom Leadership Journal - editor, 2001/2002).

School Support

- The principal understands the needs of students with disabilities.
- Adequate numbers of personnel, including aides and support personnel, are available (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000).
- Adequate staff development and technical assistance, based on the needs of the school personnel, are being provided (e.g., information on disabilities, instructional methods, awareness and acceptance activities for students, and team building skills).
- Appropriate policies and procedures (National Education Association, 1992) for monitoring individual student progress, including grading and testing, are in place (Classroom Leadership Journal - editor, 2001/2002).

Collaboration

- Special educators are part of the instructional or planning team.
- Teaming approaches are used for problem-solving and program implementation (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000).
- Regular teachers, special education teachers, and other specialists collaborate (e.g., co-teaching, team teaching, teacher assistance teams) (Classroom Leadership Journal - editor, 2001/2002).

Instructional Methods

- Teachers have the knowledge and skills needed to select and adapt curricula and instructional methods according to individual student needs (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000).
- A variety of instructional arrangements are available (e.g., team teaching, cross-grade grouping, peer tutoring, teacher assistance teams).
- Teachers foster a cooperative learning environment and promote socialization (Classroom Leadership Journal - editor, 2001/2002).

Appendix: A Template for School Policy on Integration

Schools need policies in place to govern integration (National Education Association, 1992). Following is a policy template that could be adopted by schools applying or considering inclusion of students with special needs (*ippn.com, date unspecified*).

Insert School Name N.S.

Insert School Logo

Policy on the Integration and Inclusion of Special Needs Children into Mainstream classes

Introduction:

The need for a policy on inclusion developed from the collective desire of the teaching staff to have a defined and uniform whole school approach to the issue of integration. The policy was devised following consultation with all stake holders including mainstream and support teachers, as well as the National Education Psychological Service (NEPS). The school strives to include all children in curricular learning experiences.

Rationale:

The policy was formulated so that

- teaching staff had clear well-defined guidelines on best practice
- there was consistency throughout the school
- optimum learning experiences were provided for all the children

Aims:

To provide a teaching and learning experience that enables pupils with Special Needs become exposed to learning in a mainstream setting

- to enable mainstream children to observe at close quarters, the special needs of some children in society
- to develop the social skills and self-esteem of the Special Needs child

Staff Roles:**Principal:**

- direct responsibility for co-ordinating an effective whole school approach to integration/inclusion
- responsibility for the provision of in service training and adequate resourcing
- monitoring the effectiveness of the policy and making relevant adjustment following consultation
- working with parents and out of school agencies

Special Class Teachers:

The Special Class teachers will

- identify the appropriate curriculum area the Special Needs child should experience
- ensure S.N.A support is available during integration
- collaborate and consult with mainstream class teachers in setting realistic targets
- assume responsibility for an ongoing individual education plan in consultation with support services, parents and Principal

Class Teachers:

The mainstream class teachers will

- adjust programmes to meet the needs of the Special Class pupil
- provide a suitable seating arrangement in the mainstream setting
- collaborate with the Special Class teacher and the S.N.A

Implementation:

The school promotes a policy of integration with age appropriate peers on a social level and ability appropriate on a curriculum level

For integration/inclusion to be effective it must

- further develop social skills
- not interfere with the level of learning within each class
- be done in conjunction with and have the goodwill of the class teacher

The process must be open to review at all times. The school insists that a maximum of 2 children per class be integrated at any given time. Early levels of integration into mainstream are on a social level only. The Special Needs child will not partake in general class learning until they have mastered the art of –

- entering the class without trepidation
- sitting down at a designated desk
- interacting on a social level with child(ren) nearest them
- having lunch with the whole class
- engaging in a “buddy” system at playtime
- re-acting to general teacher instructions within the classroom setting

Curricular Integration:

When the Special Needs child has adjusted on a social level he/she will slowly be introduced to areas of the curriculum appropriate to ability level. Art & Craft classes at Junior and Senior Infant level will be targeted initially. Integration into this class will continue up through the classes.

The school also designates Music as a curricular area open to integration. Integration into mainstream music classes can extend to additional levels of integration such as school choirs (communion), carol singing groups and school plays and recitals.

The school policy also offers Physical Education as a curricular area open to integration. The Special Needs child is integrated into the class that best suits his/her physical condition. Games are taught to all classes by an outside coach and sessions are timetabled by the school. Children from the Special classes are also integrated for mainstream school outings and mainstream activities such as Sports Day and Fire Drill.

Reverse integration:

The school operates a policy of reverse integration and this extends to all classes.

- Special Needs children being integrated for core curriculum subjects such as Maths and English do so through the reverse integration route initially. This involves withdrawing 3-4 children from mainstream to work with the Special Needs child in his/her own environment. Hopefully this will lead to conventional integration into mainstream in the long-term
- children from mainstream Junior/Middle classes engage in life skills integration with the Special Needs children on a weekly basis
- children from the Senior Classes provide reverse integration by accompanying the Special Needs children on weekly swimming sessions
- a timetabled “Buddy System” involving the Special Classes and children from 4th/5th and 6th classes is operational for all playtimes, throughout the school year.

Staff Development:

Opportunities for in service and staff development in relation to the implementation of a workable system of integration will be provided once a year by a suitably qualified practitioner.

Assessment:

Assessment by observation and testing will be conducted by the class teachers covering 3 aspects of development

- social integration
- language and communication
- play and behaviour

Home – School Liaison:

Each child takes home a class diary detailing the level of integration the child has engaged in each day. The parents can then progress this aspect of their child's learning through additional hours of one to one learning which is available through Home Tuition.

I.C.T:

All children will have access to a computer, both in mainstream and in the Special class.

Review:

This policy will be reviewed in XXXX as more information on techniques to ensure effective integration becomes available.

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