

**SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICY & PRACTICE:  
A MODELED RESPONSE TO THE LITERATURE ON INCLUSION  
IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

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**Abstract**

Special education policy from the 1990's propelled the trend of inclusive schooling environments for students with disabilities in the twenty-first century. While many educational stakeholders have championed this movement, certain challenges and needs have been exposed through this sharp change in educational programming. Therefore, the term *inclusion* stands today as both a controversial topic and imprecise educational practice. Furthermore, *full inclusion*, which is a more recent educational trend, has presented additional concerns, difficulties, and uncertainties. To better understand the problem area of inclusion, this article will unveil particular literary findings that are associated with the implementation of the practice. In turn, the challenges and complications stemming from inclusion will be exposed, and a model will be offered that illuminates particular remedies for improving inclusive educational practice at the secondary school level.

## INTRODUCTION

Within today's educational arena, the term *inclusion* stands as a controversial topic. Such controversy stems from special education policy and practice that has taken hold during the past two decades. According to the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCEI), inclusion is meant to provide "all students, including those with significant disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services, with needed supplementary aids and support services, in age-appropriate classes in their neighborhood schools, in order to prepare students for productive lives as full members of society" (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). In public education, inclusion involves putting special needs students into the regular classroom setting (Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2000). Such activity has been applied in response to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA), which mandates that students receiving accommodations be educated in the least restrictive environment (section 612(a)(5)). Under IDEA of 1997, special classes, separate schooling, or other means of removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment may occur only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily [IDEA, 20 U.S.C 1412(a) (5) (b)].

As Kozik et al. (2009) revealed, "since IDEA (1997) defined least restrictive environment and encouraged special education within the general education context, fewer students with special needs are educated in segregated settings, and more inclusive opportunities exist" (p. 78). In fact, today, fully inclusive school environments are gaining traction in the United States' public school system. Due to this, significant questions and concerns relating to the issue are now surfacing. Therefore, it is necessary to more thoroughly examine this problem area while better understanding the intent, ramifications, and outcomes of inclusive schooling.

### Special Education Practice in the Twenty-First Century

Educating special education students in the least restrictive environment has produced significant challenges for secondary schools. This is partly due to the fact that the term "special education" is not solely concerned with students who possess learning disabilities. Instead, it includes students classified with autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbances, hearing impairments, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, traumatic brain injuries, and visual impairments (Code of Federal Regulations 300.8).

In today's accountability era of public education, high expectations have been set for special education students who are in need of accommodations. The same is true of regular education students who must work to meet the requirements of state-run standardized testing systems. However, because of particular learning and/or emotional disabilities, special education students often struggle with the demands of subject area curriculum. The strains of the system are enhanced due to regular education teachers' lack of training and/or inability to meet the needs of special education students. Since high school teachers are prepared as content specialists, many are not inclined to make adaptations for individual students (Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2001). Furthermore, while high school teachers are expected to be masters of their content areas, they often receive little instruction and have limited knowledge of special education terminology, issues, and laws (Laprairie et al., 2010; Worrell, 2008).

In recognition of the difficult nature of inclusive educational practice, Cole, Algozzine and Weber (2000) studied the effects of the system and found the following: 1) special education students who are exposed to a curriculum that is frustrating and possibly irrelevant sets the stage for the manifestation of behaviors that result in the emotional behavioral disability (EBD) label, 2) students with the EBD label also have a learning disability, and 3) EBD students have a dropout rate of over 50%, which is twice the dropout rate of the general public (p.28). Other researchers have explored the perceptions of students, teachers, and/or school administrators in relation to inclusive practice, and have found various associated problems. For instance, Van Reusen, Shoho, and Barer (2001) found that teachers who have no or minimal special education training or experiences have negative attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive practice. Dyal, Flynt, and Bennett-Walker (1996) discovered in their study that, rather than holding a preference for full inclusion, the majority of principals favored a continuum of special education services in both regular and special education classes. Smith and Leonard (2005) revealed various intrapersonal and interpersonal problems that manifest among professionals in the era of inclusion, including: time management concerns, increased teacher workload, and insufficient planning time. Not surprisingly, “teachers’ personal woes” was identified as the primary system outcome of school inclusion (p. 274). Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, and Widaman (2007) found that more than fifty-percent of regular education students believe that students with *intellectual disabilities* should not participate in such academic classes as English and mathematics, and that doing so impedes their own learning or creates discipline problems (p. 451). Results such as these coincide with Sailor’s and Roger’s (2005) assertion that inclusion policy has failed to garner much support from the general education community (p. 504).

In light of these concerns and issues, inclusive educational practice in the high school setting is a challenge to be addressed by special education teachers, regular education teachers, and administrators alike. While the goal is to ensure that all students are given the fullest opportunity to succeed, regardless of their disability, special education students are not being helped if they are put into regular education classrooms that do not possess the necessary supports. Therefore, the difficulties relating to the proper educational practice for special education students, in relation to both placement and requirements, must be understood and addressed. Furthermore, the remedies for bolstering the subpar performance of inclusive schools must be found.

### **Research on Inclusive Practices**

Various uncertainties, difficulties, and differences have developed as the practice of placing special education students in the regular classroom environment has expanded during the past two decades. In order to create greater clarity, research investigations have sought to examine inclusion from a variety of angles. While certain results of such study have illuminated the worthiness of inclusive educational practice, pertinent questions have been raised and discrepancies have been revealed through these investigative efforts.

Particular strands of research on inclusion have developed due to the significant attention that inclusion has garnered from the educational research community. In order to aptly illuminate the conflicts and questions of inclusion along with the important research findings, it may be helpful to filter the associated topics of inclusion into three domains: 1) professionals’ aptitudes, attitudes, and perceptions toward inclusion, 2) student engagement within inclusive learning environments, and 3) student learning within inclusive settings. Through the following literary

sampling, the multiple issues that accompany inclusive educational practice are accentuated. The sampling exposes the dynamics of inclusion and offers an opportunity to better understand the associated ramifications.

### **Professionals' Aptitudes, Attitudes, & Perceptions Toward Inclusion**

With the trend of inclusion, questions have been raised concerning the extent to which regular education teachers have a positive attitude and/or feel prepared to meet special education students' needs. Unfortunately, many general education teachers continue to report feeling ill-prepared to teach students with disabilities. This stands true after years of recommendations to improve teacher preparation coursework (Smith, 2008) and the installation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which clearly stated that school districts must provide professional development activities that "are high-quality, sustained, intensive, and classroom focused" (Hirsh, 2006, p.59).

Various researchers have focused their work on examining the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of educators in relation to their ability to effectively instruct students with special needs (Cook, 2001; Ellington, 2009; Pierre, 2009; Short & Martin, 2005; Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2001). Ellins and Porter (2005) conducted a mixed method case study that analyzed differences across academic departments. The study's results showed that training in special education enhanced the formation of positive attitudes toward inclusion. Those teachers with no training in the needs of special education students had the least positive scores. Teacher qualifications also presented pertinent results, as it was found that teachers holding a certificate or first degree in education had the most positive attitudes and those with a higher qualification had the least positive attitudes. Also, it was found that the English department had the most positive scores, with the science department holding the least positive. The results of this study suggest that work needs to be done to improve the attitudes among teachers in core subjects, and one way of doing so is to provide training in the area of special education among professionals (Ellins & Porter, 2005).

In their quantitative study, Grskovic and Trzcinka (2011) aimed to identify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are deemed essential for preparing secondary content teachers to effectively teach students with mild disabilities. The results showed that survey items for *Instructional Strategies* received the highest rating. Twelve out of the nineteen standards in this category were labeled as "essential." The second highest rated standard was *Classroom Management*. All six standards in the section were labeled as "essential" (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011). The results highlighting these two standards alone support the notion that general educators need more knowledge of disabilities and more pre-service experience where they interact with students who have disabilities. The results also suggests that regular education teachers need additional strategy instruction in behavior management in order to deal with students' frustrations, and in maintaining consistent expectations (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011).

### **Student Engagement Within Inclusive Learning Environments**

Since collaborative and/or socially-based modes of learning are hallmark methods of inclusive practice, various researchers have explored the reality of inclusion as it relates to student engagement in regular classroom environments. For example, Bouck (2006) conducted a qualitative multi-case study to examine the interactions of special education students who

possessed mild mental impairments with peers and adults in the general education and special education settings. The study was concerned with the least restrictive environment for special education students and whether or not they maintained successful interactions with their peers and adults in both regular education and self-contained classroom settings (Bouck, 2006). Overall, the students had fewer interactions in the general education setting (including the classroom, lunchroom, and hallway). Across the students, the average number of interactions per class period with peers and adults in general education settings was 9.59 as compared to 13.97 in the special education setting. One teacher commented that her students often struggle with how to participate and get involved in general education courses (Bouck, 2006).

The study's results indicated that these particular secondary students with mild mental impairments initiated more interactions with adults and peers than they received, and this finding went across educational settings. The study also indicated that the special education students had a greater amount of interactions with others (peers and adults) in special education settings than general education settings (Bouck, 2006). Bouck concluded that the educational field must continue to examine students' needs, both academically and socially, when making decisions regarding instructional environments.

The Bouck (2006) study also exposed characteristics of particular special education students and revealed these students' thoughts about their interactions in the regular education setting. Often, student voices are not heard, and students are placed in an academic environment that adults believe is the proper placement. This study took into consideration the voices of the special education students, and they clearly believed that they could interact more successfully in a self-contained classroom.

Albano (2008) conducted a case study to examine the differences in self-perception of social competence in high school students with learning disabilities in self-contained and inclusive settings. The examination was three-fold. First, the researcher examined how high school students with learning disabilities perceived their own social competence. Next, the researcher examined if the setting, inclusive or self-contained, was predictive of those perceptions. Finally, results of the student survey were compared to the responses made by teachers on the same survey (Albano, 2008). The results of the Albano study indicated that students with learning disabilities who received services in a self-contained environment reported higher perceptions of social competence than their peers in inclusive settings. In addition, the teacher ratings in the study mirrored those of their students. Teachers of participants in self-contained classes rated their students as higher in social competence than did their colleagues who taught students in inclusive settings (Albano, 2008).

The Albano (2008) study suggested that the social environment for learning is one that continuously needs to be addressed by both teachers and students. The study is valuable since it highlighted social issues relating to the placement for students with disabilities. The results of the study showed that both students and teachers felt the best social environment for students with disabilities was the self-contained classroom. However, because of the focus on inclusion in public schools, interest is growing in regard to how to effectively support special education students in the general education environment, both academically and socially.

### **Student Learning Within Inclusive Settings**

Along with gaining insights regarding the social engagements of special education students in the inclusive classroom, it is important to assess and understand the actual learning

material and associated academic outcomes of students who are placed in either the regular education or self-contained classroom. To assist in meeting this end, various researchers have focused on analyzing the academic qualities of special education placements.

Dymond, Renzaglia, Gilson, & Slagor (2007) conducted a mixed methods study to determine regular education teachers' and special education teachers' definition of "access to the curriculum" for students with severe cognitive disabilities (SCD). This study was part of a larger investigation conducted at one urban high school located in a small city in a Mid-western state. The school was selected because many teachers and administrators were interested in investigating methods for providing students with SCD meaningful access to the general curriculum in inclusive academic classrooms (Dymond et al., 2007).

Similarities and differences between special education teachers and general education teachers were apparent in the results. General education teachers defined access as receiving the same curriculum and materials as students without disabilities in the general education classroom with support from a special education teacher or paraprofessional. Special education teachers defined access as an adapted curriculum that is relevant to the student's life and meets the student's individual needs (Dymond et al., 2007).

The purpose of the study was to determine what the definition of "access to the general curriculum" means to both special and general education teachers. The study accomplished the purpose by showing that special education teachers and general education teachers do have distinct definitions of "access to the general curriculum."

The results of the study raise pertinent questions for the practice of inclusion. First, why do educators not have the same definition as to what "access to the general curriculum" means? Second, how can special education teachers and general education teachers collaborate to help students with SCD if the definition of access to the general curriculum differs? In order to meet the goal of learning for all, it seems apparent that special education teachers, regular education teachers, and administrators need to be consistent in defining access to the general curriculum.

Lane, Wheby, Little, & Cooley (2005) focused their study on the comparison of the progress of students with emotional behavioral disability (EBD) receiving special education services in either a self contained school or self-contained classroom, in order to determine if these students were benefiting from placement in their respective settings (Lane et al., 2005). Results revealed limited academic improvement in either setting with no significant differences between groups on any of the standardized or curriculum-based measures, with the exception of written expression. There was also limited progress in the behavioral and social domains. There were no significant differences in the progress of students in either setting in social skills, externalizing behavior, or disciplinary contacts (Lane et al., 2005).

The Lane et al. (2005) study relates to the problem of inclusion in that it demonstrated a lack of success in both self-contained classrooms and self-contained schools. If the least restrictive environment for students labeled with EBD is determined to be a self-contained classroom or self-contained school, these placements may be justified only if students within these settings show growth academically and socially.

Taken together, the research findings in this discussion have exposed both the significance and multiplicity of inclusive educational practice, and have revealed the importance of: 1) the perspectives of students and professionals, 2) the effects of inclusion on student social engagements, and 3) the associated learning outcomes of students. The studies and findings of this review offer a guide for the exploration of this topic, since many pertinent questions have been posed. Furthermore, it is important to properly depict and illuminate the challenges and

necessities that are associated with inclusive educational practice. In meeting this end, a model will be offered for educational leaders to consider when attempting to manage the concerns and meet the needs of special education students in the inclusive environment.

### The Inclusion Model

Figure 1 offers an integrated model for inclusive schooling, which stems from research findings across the various sectors pertaining to inclusion. This model proposes that, in order to successfully install and maintain high quality inclusive practices, certain efforts need to be made in properly developing school personnel along with the educational environment.

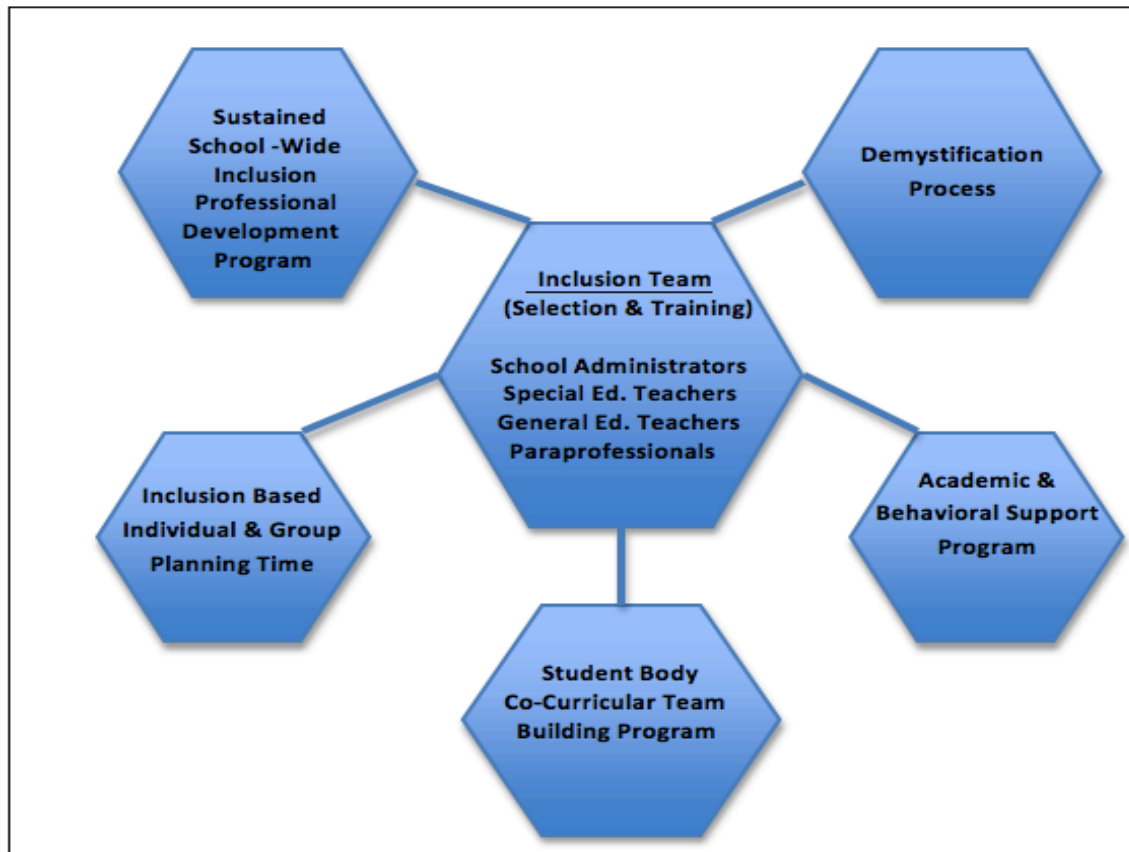


Figure 1: The Integrated Model for Inclusive Schooling

The *Inclusion Team* lies at the core of *The Integrated Model For Inclusive Schooling*. Creating the team entails selecting and training particular individuals who will be involved with the inclusion process. This step is foundational, since it holds the capacity to establish and/or build: 1) positive teacher perspectives; 2) baseline knowledge sets regarding special education terminology, issues, and laws; 3) collaboration skill sets; 4) administrative involvement and support; 5) a special education instructional repertoire; 6) appropriate assessment procedures; and 7) teacher and student schedules that are conducive to the inclusion design. As Worrell (2008) discussed, if such concerns are not considered and processed appropriately, barriers may develop and the inclusion program may become ineffective.

The second prong of the six-part model, *The Professional Development Program*, extends the reach of the inclusion team, as it involves the school's entire professional staff. Here, common knowledge is expanded; program processes, goals and objectives are exposed; measurement strategies and processes are outlined; and the crucial ingredients of a common school culture, based on participation and outreach, are formed. The professional development program is both sustained and in-depth, as it takes into account the necessity of not only unmasking and then revolutionizing the school's educational structure and programming, but also establishing and maintaining a culture of inclusion that is co-curricular and extra-curricular in nature. As Coleman, Webber, and Algozzine (2013) explained, a committed effort in developing and maintaining a worthy inclusion program not only best serves special education students, but also works to correct "the inadequacies of the general education classroom for the benefit of all students" (p. 7). As a professional mind shift takes place among the school's faculty and staff, the school organization may be able to see the benefit of new ways of operating, and, in turn, may re-mold their instructional work in ways that match the best practices of the teaching profession.

Part three of the model, *Inclusion Based Individual and Group Planning Time*, recognizes the need for the school administration to provide classroom instructors with ample planning time to produce lessons that are worthy of the instructional change process. Since the inclusion process generates new dynamics in the regular education classroom, the teaching staff will need to consider how to best implement their lessons in order to effectively manage and lead the process. Furthermore, both self and group reflection will be crucial, as teachers will need to analyze and evaluate the lessons that are employed and decide how to alter their practices in the future. Without individual and group planning time that is reserved for this purpose, it will not be possible for the faculty, as a whole, to meet its instructional potential. On the contrary, the implementation of this component will not only provide the opportunity for improved instructional practice, but may also play a part in collaborative, data-driven decision making that, as Sailor and Roger (2005) discussed, "is focused on interventions designed to enhance academic and social outcomes for students" (p. 508).

The fourth prong of the model, *The Student Body Co-Curricular Team Building Program*, speaks to the need of influencing the social tendencies of both regular education and special education students. Through planned activities and diverse grouping mechanisms that take place both inside and outside the classroom, the objective of having special education students sufficiently interact with regular education students may be realized. As Bandura (2001) reasoned, while an individual (such as a special education student) may act as an active agent in designing his or her own social system, external agencies also may act to coordinate and secure desired social outcomes for the individual. As school personnel devise social systems and, in doing so, demonstrate the value of heterogeneous student activity through mixed ability groupings, each student will be provided with significant opportunities to interact with diverse members of the student body. In doing so, the social aims of inclusive educational practice may be met.

The model's fifth part, *The Academic and Behavioral Support Program*, engages students, parents, teachers, and the community in providing the proper supports for all students, which are aimed at improving learning outcomes and behavioral tendencies. As revealed by Adams (2006), specific supports including: a positive discipline system, strong communication networks, the ability to identify and address underlying student problems, and having a well-rounded professional staff that possesses strong behavioral management skills will go a long way



in making sure each student has his or her needs met, and a culture of learning is developed and maintained.

The *Demystification Process* stands as the sixth necessary prong of the integrated model for inclusive schooling. Levine (2002) discussed the concept of demystification, as it relates to the students themselves, and broke down the process in the following terms:

1. **Introduction:** The student learns the importance of self-understanding. The student is reassured that all people have parts of their minds that need to be worked on. Diagrams and/or metaphors may be used to help explain terms and brain processes that relate to personal problems/experiences.
2. **Discussion of strengths/affinities:** The student is told about his/her areas of competency and a discussion ensues about personal interests and motivations.
3. **Discussion of weaknesses:** In understandable language, the student is told about his/her dysfunctional area(s) and breakdown points.
4. **Interventions & Accommodations:** The student learns that improvement is possible through specific activities or tasks (interventions) designed to mend or at least improve a dysfunction. The student also learns about accommodations, which are practices used to work around a student's area of weakness.
5. **Mentoring Process:** The educator leading the demystification process assures the student that he/she, along with others, will be helpful in the future, continue to hold a genuine respect for the student, and respect what the student can become. The alliance provides a source for security, coaching, problem-solving, and encouragement for the student.

The process is enhanced as additional educators surrounding the student develop a better understanding of the student in terms of strengths, weaknesses, and needs, and work together with the parents in supporting and assisting the student in meeting educational challenges and goals.

## CONCLUSION

As Skilton-Sylvester and Slesaransky-Poe (2009) declared, in order to live up to the "civil covenant" of effective inclusive schooling, innovation must be the rule during the planning and development phase of the inclusion process. Furthermore, in order to meet the needs of all students, key changes must take place in both the classroom and wider school environments that are based on the proper perspectives, attitudes, and practices of all involved school personnel. There is evidence that when the proper attitudes, collaboration, and instructional activities take place, inclusion can make a positive difference to a school and its students (Arnold, 2010; Signor-Buhl, S., Leblanc, M. & McDougal, J., 2006). Unfortunately, remnants of past special education policy and practice persist, and such vestiges and their causes weaken the prospect of sustained change (McCarthy, Wiener, & Soodak, 2012).

Through the implementation of the model that has been forwarded in this article, it may be possible for a school to dodge many of the roadblocks that have been mentioned in the literature as being responsible for ineffective inclusion practice, and instead, leap in the direction of holistic educational functioning that is based on a strong school culture and positive gains across the attitudinal, behavioral, and instructional/learning dimensions. With such focus and

purpose, a tighter coupling between the aspirations of school policy and actual educational practice may take place, and, in turn, optimal student learning outcomes may be achieved.

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