

Inclusive Education: What It Means, Proven Strategies, and a Case Study

By Lilla Dale McManis, PhD • November 20, 2017

Considering the potential of inclusive education at your school? Perhaps you are currently working in an inclusive classroom and looking for effective strategies. Lean into this deep-dive article on inclusive education to gather a solid understanding of what it means, what the research shows, and proven strategies that bring out the benefits for everyone.

What is inclusive education?

Inclusive education is when all students, regardless of any challenges they may have, are placed in age-appropriate general education classes that are in their own neighborhood schools to receive high-quality instruction, interventions, and supports that enable them to meet success in the core curriculum (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010; Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

The school and classroom operate on the premise that students with disabilities are as fundamentally competent as students without disabilities. Therefore, all students can be full participants in their classrooms and in the local school community. Much of the movement is related to legislation that students receive their education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). This means they are with their peers without disabilities to the maximum degree possible, with general education the placement of first choice for all students (Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

Successful inclusive education happens primarily through accepting, understanding, and attending to student differences and diversity, which can include physical, cognitive, academic, social, and emotional. This is not to say that students *never* need to spend time out of regular education classes, because sometimes they do for a very particular purpose — for instance, for speech or occupational therapy. But the goal is this should be the exception.

The driving principle is to make all students feel welcomed, appropriately challenged, and supported in their efforts. It's also critically important that the adults are supported, too. This includes the regular education teacher and the special education teacher, as well as all other staff and faculty who are key stakeholders — and that *also* includes parents.

The research basis for inclusive education

Inclusive education and inclusive classrooms are gaining steam because there is so much research-based evidence around the benefits. Take a look.

Benefits for students

Simply put, both students with and without disabilities learn *more*. Many studies over the past three decades have found that students with disabilities have higher achievement and improved skills through inclusive education, and their peers without challenges benefit, too (Bui, et al., 2010; Dupuis, Barclay, Holms, Platt, Shaha, & Lewis, 2006; Newman, 2006; Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

For students with disabilities (SWD), this includes academic gains in literacy (reading and writing), math, and social studies — both in grades and on standardized tests — better communication skills, and improved social skills and more friendships. More time in the general classroom for SWD is also associated with fewer absences and referrals for disruptive behavior. This could be related to findings about attitude — they have a higher self-concept, they like school and their teachers more, and are more motivated around working and learning.

Their peers without disabilities also show more positive attitudes in these same areas when in inclusive classrooms. They make greater academic gains in reading and math. Research shows the presence of SWD gives non-SWD new kinds of learning opportunities. One of these is when they serve as peer-coaches. By learning how to help another student, their own performance improves. Another is that as teachers take into greater consideration their diverse SWD learners, they provide instruction in a wider range of learning modalities (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), which benefits their regular ed students as well.

Researchers often explore concerns and potential pitfalls that might make instruction less effective in inclusion classrooms (Bui et al., 2010; Dupois et al., 2006). But findings show this is not the case. Neither instructional time nor how much time students are engaged differs between inclusive and non-inclusive classrooms. In fact, in many instances, regular ed students report little to no awareness that there even are students with disabilities in their classes. When they *are* aware, they demonstrate more acceptance and tolerance for SWD when they all experience an inclusive education together.

Parent's feelings and attitudes

Parents, of course, have a big part to play. A comprehensive review of the literature (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010) found that on average, parents are somewhat uncertain if inclusion is a good option for their SWD. On the upside, the more experience with inclusive education they had, the more positive parents of SWD were about it. Additionally, parents of regular ed students held a decidedly positive attitude toward inclusive education.

Now that we've seen the research highlights on outcomes, let's take a look at strategies to put inclusive education in practice.

Inclusive classroom strategies

There is a definite need for teachers to be supported in implementing an inclusive classroom. A rigorous literature review of studies found most teachers had either neutral or negative attitudes about inclusive education (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011). It turns out that much of this is because they do not feel they are very knowledgeable, competent, or confident about how to educate SWD.

However, similar to parents, teachers with more experience — and, in the case of teachers, more training with inclusive education — were significantly more positive about it.

Evidence supports that to be effective, teachers need an understanding of best practices in teaching and of adapted instruction for SWD; but positive attitudes toward inclusion are also among the most important for creating an inclusive classroom that works (Savage & Erten, 2015).

Of course, a modest blog article like this is only going to give the highlights of what have been found to be effective inclusive strategies. For there to be true long-term success necessitates formal training. To give you an idea though, here are strategies recommended by several research studies and applied experience (Morningstar, Shogren, Lee, & Born, 2015; Alquraini, & Gut, 2012).

Use a variety of instructional formats

Start with whole-group instruction and transition to flexible groupings which could be small groups, stations/centers, and paired learning. With regard to the whole group, using technology such as interactive whiteboards is related to high student engagement.

Regarding flexible groupings: for younger students, these are often teacher-led but for older students, they can be student-led with teacher monitoring. Peer-supported learning can be very effective and engaging and take the form of pair-work, cooperative grouping, peer tutoring, and student-led demonstrations.

Ensure access to academic curricular content

All students need the opportunity to have learning experiences in line with the same learning goals. This will necessitate thinking about what supports individual SWDs need, but overall strategies are making sure all students hear instructions, that they do indeed start activities, that all students participate in large group instruction, and that students transition in and out of the classroom at the same time. For this latter point, not only will it keep students on track with the lessons, their non-SWD peers do not see them leaving or entering in the middle of lessons, which can really highlight their differences.

Apply universal design for learning

These are methods that are varied and that support many learners' needs. They include multiple ways of representing content to students and for students to represent learning back, such as modeling, images, objectives and manipulatives, graphic organizers, oral and written responses, and technology. These can also be adapted as modifications for SWDs where they have large print, use headphones, are allowed to have a peer write their dictated response, draw a picture instead, use calculators, or just have extra time. Think too about the power of project-based and inquiry learning where students individually or collectively investigate an experience.

Now let's put it all together by looking at how a regular education teacher addresses the challenge and succeeds in using inclusive education in her classroom.

A case study of inclusive practices in schools and classes

Mrs. Brown has been teaching for several years now and is both excited and a little nervous about her school's decision to implement inclusive education. Over the years she has had several special education students in her class but they either got pulled out for time with specialists or just joined for activities like art, music, P.E., lunch, and sometimes for selected academics.

She has always found this method a bit disjointed and has wanted to be much more involved in educating these students and finding ways they can take part more fully in her classroom. She knows she needs guidance in designing and implementing her inclusive classroom, but she's ready for the challenge and looking forward to seeing the many benefits she's been reading and hearing about for the children, their families, their peers, herself, and the school as a whole.

During the month before school starts, Mrs. Brown meets with the special education teacher, Mr. Lopez — and other teachers and staff who work with her students — to coordinate the instructional plan that is based on the IEPs (Individual Educational Plan) of the three students with disabilities who will be in her class the upcoming year.

About two weeks before school starts, she invites each of the three children and their families to come into the classroom for individual tours and get-to-know-you sessions with both herself and the special education teacher. She makes sure to provide information about back-to-school night and extends a personal invitation to them to attend so they can meet the other families and children. She feels very good about how this is coming together and how excited and happy the children and their families are feeling. One student really summed it up when he told her, "You and I are going to have a great year!"

The school district and the principal have sent out communications to all the parents about the move to inclusion education at Mrs. Brown's school. Now she wants to make sure she really communicates effectively with the parents, especially as some of the parents of both SWD and regular ed students have expressed hesitation that having their child in an inclusive classroom would work.

She talks to the administration and other teachers and, with their okay, sends out a joint communication after about two months into the school year with some questions provided by the book *Creating Inclusive Classrooms* (Salend, 2001 referenced in Salend & Garrick-Duhaney, 2001) such as, "How has being in an inclusion classroom affected your child academically, socially, and behaviorally? Please describe any benefits or negative consequences you have observed in your child. What factors led to these changes?" and "How has your child's placement in an inclusion classroom affected you? Please describe any benefits or any negative consequences for you." and "What additional information would you like to have about inclusion and your child's class?" She plans to look for trends

and prepare a communication that she will share with parents. She also plans to send out a questionnaire with different questions every couple of months throughout the school year. Since she found out about the move to an inclusive education approach at her school, Mrs. Brown has been working closely with the special education teacher, Mr. Lopez, and reading a great deal about the benefits and the challenges. Determined to be successful, she is especially focused on effective inclusive classroom strategies.

Her hard work is paying off. Her mid-year and end-of-year results are very positive. The SWDs are meeting their IEP goals. Her regular ed students are excelling. A spirit of collaboration and positive energy pervades her classroom and she feels this in the whole school as they practice inclusive education. The children are happy and proud of their accomplishments. The principal regularly compliments her. The parents are positive, relaxed, and supportive.

Mrs. Brown knows she has more to learn and do, but her confidence and satisfaction are high. She is especially delighted that she has been selected to be a part of her district's team to train other regular education teachers about inclusive education and classrooms.

Summing Up

The future is very bright indeed for this approach. The evidence is mounting that **inclusive education** and classrooms are able to not only meet the requirements of LRE for students with disabilities, but to benefit regular education students as well. We see that with exposure both parents and teachers become more positive. Training and support allow regular education teachers to implement inclusive education with ease and success. All around it's a win-win!

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