

A STUDY ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION:

Inclusive education is an approach to schooling in which students with many different kinds of disabilities and learning needs are educated in classes with non-disabled and typically developing students. In an inclusive arrangement, students who need additional supports and services spend most of their time with their non-disabled peers rather than in separate classrooms or schools. This article begins with a brief consideration of the ways inclusive education has been defined and an exploration of inclusion's roots in broader movements for civil rights in democratic societies. This is followed by a discussion of the challenges of managing an inclusive classroom, along with several strategies that can help teachers address these challenges through the creation of a "culture of inclusion."

WHAT IS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

There is no universally accepted definition of inclusion and no consensus on a standardized set of procedures that must be followed in order to practice it. One way to distinguish inclusion from another non-segregationist approach called mainstreaming is that in an inclusive classroom, there is a strong emphasis on trying to meet the diverse learning needs of all students without removing them from the classroom. By contrast, when children with special needs are mainstreamed, it usually means (at least in principle) that everyone in the class is expected to follow one standard curriculum regardless of their differences, or that particular children are taken out of the class for a large proportion of the day to receive their lessons and services.

The term "inclusive education" is most often used to mean the inclusion of persons with physical and mental impairments, such as sensory or mobility limitations, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, language disorders, behaviour disorders and autism spectrum disorders. Some educators and theorists also use "inclusion" in a broader sense, to refer to an educational system designed to ensure access for all groups that have been marginalized in society and in schools. Thus, inclusion is sometimes envisioned as the deliberate and self-conscious structuring of whole-school and classroom environments so that they are accessible and congenial not only to students with impairments, but also to those who can face exclusion or disempowerment due to their ethnicity, social class, gender, culture, religion, immigration history or other attributes. Because inclusion also has this broader meaning, it is sometimes endorsed as a means of achieving a more comprehensive form of social justice.

Advocates of inclusion argue that it is a form of schooling that puts the values of a democratic society into practice. Although there are multiple theories of democracy and numerous perspectives on how to achieve social justice, it is generally accepted that contemporary democratic societies are founded on the premise that all human beings have equal worth and should have equal rights, including the right of access to education.

Proponents of inclusion emphasize an additional democratic moral imperative, which is a responsibility to respect and respond to human diversity, including people's limitations or impairments.

INCLUSION IN THE CONTEXT OF HISTORICAL AND LEGAL TRENDS

Inclusive education is an outgrowth of several social and political movements that have emerged since the middle of the 20th century. In the United States, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s intensified awareness that even in liberal democratic societies, many individuals were still being excluded from social institutions, including schools. By the late 1960s and 1970s, movements such as second-wave feminism, gay rights, and disability rights arose in order to also combat other forms of exclusion such as those due to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability. One significant outcome of these movements, both in the United States and in many other countries, was the passage and implementation of laws and policies designed to ensure citizenship rights and opportunities of all kinds, including access to education. In the United States, federal and state laws were passed, mandating that children with disabilities were entitled to public education and that the government and its schools must actively facilitate these opportunities. The first such federal law was the Education for Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975. Legal theorist Martha Minow has pointed out that until the 1970s, many children with disabilities did not have access to formal education, and the majority of those who did attend school were educated in separate classrooms or even segregated in special schools. During the 1970s and 1980s, owing to the passage of the EHA as well as a number of state laws, a larger percentage of children with disabilities were provided with educational opportunities and support. Much of this support continued to take the form of special education classes or schools.

In 1990, the EHA was replaced by another federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA reflected and extended three already existing trends. First, there was a growing insistence that communities be responsible for educating children in their neighbourhood schools, rather than segregating them in separate schools or even in separate classrooms. Second, there was a related demand to educate children in the “least restrictive environment.” Third, there was a move towards more individualized assessment of children, in order to devise education plans that could accommodate each child’s distinctive needs. The IDEA has undergone several revisions and expansions in the years since it was first passed.

Many countries around the world have passed laws and instituted policies implementing inclusion. Inclusive education has been also mandated by international and non-governmental organizations. For example, the Salamanca statement of the United Nations (1994) and the UNESCO Dakar “World Declaration on Education for All” (2000) note the importance of inclusive schooling, both as a means of ensuring access to educational opportunities for all children, and as a way to combat discriminatory attitudes and to socialize rising generations to be more accepting of all kinds of diversity.

Management in the Inclusive Classroom: Challenges and Strategies

Teachers want to create environments in which all students can accomplish their best learning. This can be especially daunting when the goal is a fully inclusive classroom.

Students often have widely disparate capabilities, learning styles, ways of expressing themselves and modes of interacting with their physical and social environments. They can diverge significantly in their abilities to focus and pay attention, sit still, make sense of and respond to social cues, and regulate themselves in response to stimulation.

Sometimes, a student’s limitations and needs only become evident in the context of particular classroom activities and interactions.

Three types of challenges or dilemmas associated with inclusive education are especially relevant to classroom management. First, there is the challenge of how to create and maintain the order, structure, and safety that are necessary for a successful learning environment. Classrooms, like all other social situations, involve routinized activities and patterns of interaction. Teachers seek ways to include all their students in the social rituals through which learning and community building take place; they also strive to find creative, constructive ways to handle potential disruptions. Effective management thus is not only about accommodating students' learning needs, but also about helping them regulate their behaviour. Second, there is the challenge of how to meet the learning, social and developmental needs of all students, both those who are typically developing and those with special needs and impairments. Here, the goal is to devise and implement academic and social curricula that can reach every child while also maximizing each individual's potential. Third, there is the challenge of how to confront the ever-present risk of stigmatizing those who are perceived as "different." In other words, there is a need to recognize and to try to lessen the many forms of literal and symbolic exclusion that may emerge, even in a setting that is devised to minimize these problems.

CREATING A CULTURE OF INCLUSION

There is no perfect answer to these dilemmas, no solutions that will work for all children, and no standardized set of procedures that will fit all schools, grade levels, and situations.

However, all three of these concerns can be addressed through the creation of a "culture of inclusion." Forging this kind of inclusive classroom culture is not simply a matter of instituting particular practices, activities or lessons. Rather, many different practices and other elements work together in mutually reinforcing and synergistic ways. Another feature of effective inclusion is that teachers and other adults associated with the school are able to collaborate, both inside and outside of the classroom. Over time, the adults working in the classroom can become like the members of a well-functioning sports team: each teacher is tacitly aware of what the others are doing at a given moment, and is able to reflexively respond to situations in which additional support might be needed. In a study of effective inclusive schools, researchers and policy specialists Thomas Hehir and

Lauren Katzman found that this collaborative mentality also pervades other aspects of the school's organization: teachers, administrators, service providers and parents are able to work together to discern and address particular needs that students might have and challenges that various stakeholders might face. They also point out that effective inclusion is facilitated by a strong administrative leader who is able to inspire and mobilize teachers, students, parents and service providers to work together. This leader can encourage all stakeholders to bring a creative and open-minded approach to tackling challenges, and can support teachers by providing the material and human resources they need.

THREE STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE INCLUSION

Three ways to address these challenges are highlighted below. They are: (1) a flexible approach to giving students the support they need; (2) an integration of universal design and differentiated instruction; and (3) the "normalization" of the reality of human differences.

A FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO PROVIDING SUPPORT

In an effectively inclusive environment, teachers and staff are open to finding creative ways of helping a child function in the class. The goal is to provide all children with what they need in order to accomplish their best learning and to become members of the classroom

community. As mentioned above, a school day is made up of a series of social rituals, in the sense that students and teachers engage in routinized interactions that are repeated every day. In preschool and early elementary grades, these rituals can include “drop out,” “circle time,” “choice time,” “snack,” “rest time,” and “outdoor time.” In order to participate in these rituals, some students require individualized forms of support. For example, some young children need additional sensory input in order to sit quietly or pay attention. During circle time in an inclusive class, one might observe children sitting in several different kinds of seats, depending on what has been found (often through trial- and-error) to work best for each particular child. These seats can include rocking chairs, “beanbag” chairs, floor cushions, benches or (in a preschool class) even assistant teachers’ laps. Other material supports that can help young children over the course of the school day include weighted vests and “bear hugs” (a weighted blanket in which a child can enfold himself) and indoor swings to aid with sensory integration. Some children who need additional tactile or oral sensory input can also use objects such as “fidget toys” and “chewies” (gum). Or they may need to take frequent breaks from focused or organized activities; often, a child can be taught to develop greater self-awareness so that he becomes able to discern when an assistive object or break is needed.

As teachers get to know their students’ individual limitations and sensitivities, they often can anticipate situations that are likely to prove especially difficult or overly stimulating. They can take preemptive steps to minimize a student’s discomfort and thereby help to preserve the harmony of the group. If the class is going on a field trip, teachers and parents can prepare the child beforehand, explaining what to expect and rehearsing what the class will be doing. If they think a special assembly or performance might be overstimulating to a child, they can also try to arrange for a parent, caregiver or other adult to be with her. For example, when a music performance took place at an early elementary school, the teachers asked a relative of a very young child diagnosed with sensory integration dysfunction to be there with her. This enabled the child to attend the performance, because there was also a provision for her leave the room unobtrusively if she began to show signs of distress.

In more advanced grades, where academic instruction takes up much of the day, many different kinds of accommodations enable students to overcome limitations that might interfere with their learning or their ability to demonstrate what they know. For example, students who have fine motor impairments can use slanted writing boards, a student who is unable to write her name can use a stamp, and a non-verbal student may be able to communicate effectively using a text-to-sound (Kurzweil) machine. A visually impaired student, who cannot see the board or screen from a distance, can be permitted to get up from his chair and go to the front of the room to read what is written or displayed.

All of these examples underscore a few basic themes: attentiveness to children’s individual needs, flexibility and openness to trying new strategies, and a collaborative attitude.

INTEGRATION OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN AND DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

There are many ways to adapt pedagogical techniques, curricula and other aspects of teaching and learning to the varied needs and abilities of students. Universal design and differentiated instruction are two types of strategies that can make schooling accessible to a wide range of learners. Much has been written about both strategies, sometimes emphasizing the differences between them. In practice, however, they intersect and can complement each other.

The term “universal design” refers to the construction of environments intended to be accessible to everyone. Although often associated with the need to make physical spaces accessible to those with motor or sensory impairments, the principle of universal design is also relevant to other aspects of education. It can be applied to the way material objects are used, as well as to how teachers plan and execute curricula. For example, in many early elementary classes, children “sign in” when they arrive in the morning. This is not only a technique for teaching children to spell their own names and read the names of others, but also a ritual that helps them make the transition to starting the school day.

In addition, adding one’s name to the list of one’s classmates fosters a sense of belonging to the group. Recognizing how important it is for all children to engage in this ritual, a kindergarten teacher, who had several children in her class who were unable to write their names due to fine motor impairments, arranged for all her students to sign in by spelling their names with magnetized letters they placed on a board.

“NORMALIZING” THE REALITY OF HUMAN DIFFERENCES

Inclusive educational practices do not deny or disavow the existence of differences, including ability differences. Rather, a key element of effective inclusion is that it makes differentiated needs and supports seem less strange or disturbing, by teaching children to regard them as a routine fact of life. Thus, inclusive education is not only about improving access and opportunity for those whose impairments might otherwise limit them. It is also about making impairments less central to the way a child is viewed by others, as well as to the way she sees herself.

With younger children, one way to make ability differences and needs seem more ordinary is to allow all children in the class to become familiar with the devices and services used by children with special needs. This is a strategy employed at the Eliot- Pearson Children’s School, the early elementary laboratory school of Tufts University in Massachusetts. Initially, objects designed for children with impairments or disorders (for example, different types of seats, as well as chewies and writing boards) are made available to all of the children to explore or even to try. One reason for this is that when children are first getting to know each other, it is helpful not to have a child’s identity strongly associated with his use of a particular type of assistive device. But the aim of this strategy is not to induce dependency in children who do not need such adaptations.

Rather, it is just the beginning of a longer process whereby, over the course of weeks, only those children who really require accommodations “for their best learning” come to use them. The point is not to make everything available to everyone, or to deny that impairments and special needs exist. It is to routinize and normalize the fact that such differences exist, including differences in the type and amount of support students need. This is also the rationale behind another strategy used at this school, a strategy related to how children receive services (e.g., occupational, physical and speech therapy). Instead of taking a child out of the classroom, service providers often work with their clients inside the classroom. And, whether they remain in the classroom or not, a child can ask a friend (who is not necessarily receiving services) to accompany him when he works with a service provider.

Inclusive education is also facilitated by lessons and activities that encourage students (as well as adults) to reflect on the fact that everyone has strengths, as well as limitations and areas they can try to improve. It is also helpful to offer formal and informal lessons that promote empathy and perspective-taking. These dimensions of inclusive education are important because effectively managing an inclusive classroom has as much to do with

influencing all students' sense of self and relationships, as it does with developing teaching techniques that are accessible to, and maximize the potential of, all students.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Inclusive education has many strong proponents but has also drawn criticism. A number of different concerns have been raised, both by educators and by parents, only three of which will be noted here. First, while some advocates insist that all children can be successfully educated in this way, others raise questions about the limits of inclusion and its ability to work well for everyone, particularly as some children get into later elementary school and beyond. A second concern, which is a perennial challenge for all democratic institutions that strive for equality and fairness, is how to balance needs of those who require extra attention and resources against the needs of typically developing children. A third concern has to do with the need for resources. In order for inclusive education to be viable, teachers and schools need to be given sufficient financial and material resources, training and other forms of support.

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