



Should All Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) Be Included in Mainstream Education Provision? - A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Traditionally, children requiring special educational needs (SEN) are segregated into separate learning environments. While this education practice has been established for years, other educators and analysts have been questioning its efficacy. Most of them suggest that students with SEN should be included into mainstream schools to maximize their learning experiences. Several other benefits as well as issues have been raised in relation to this educational issue. In this paper, the factors related to the education and inclusion of students with SEN, including the curriculum, attitude of the educators, professional development, equality issues as well as learning experiences, will be discussed. The significance and relevant effects of these factors will be the basis of the conclusion of this paper on whether inclusion should be adapted.

Keywords: Special Educational Needs, Inclusion, Segregation

1. Children with Special Needs: A Historical Account

Historically, people with specific learning disabilities have been segregated from mainstream school practices as well as economic and social activities (Atkinson et al. 1997). Similarly, several people with sensory impairments as well as physical disabilities have been excluded from the society (Humphries and Gordon, 1992). At times, segregation of the disabled had led to severe social practices like sterilization and incarceration. Such practices had been observed due to misconceptions of physical and intellectual characteristics (Oliver and Barnes, 1998). The practice of separating the disabled from the rest had originated from the mistaken notion that human bodies must conform to a certain standard or norm. Foucault had discussed this erroneous belief extensively (Rabinow, 1984).

2. Segregation versus Inclusion

The provision of appropriate educational needs for children with special disabilities has long been a common issue in education. Arguments and debates have been raised in line with the right policies on how to educate children with special educational needs (SEN). According to Jenkinson (1997), children with disabilities are traditionally educated in segregated classrooms, specifically designed to cater to the students' certain incapacities. Educators find this segregation system beneficial, as they are able to apply curriculum formulated specifically for special children. Likewise, children with disabilities benefit from this system not only because of the appropriate curriculum, but also the thought of attending classes with classmates having the same disabilities enhances their confidence or self-esteem as well. Furthermore, being segregated assures the security and sufficient support special children need.

However, in an article written by Dunn (1968), the segregation of special children involves many issues of concern, which were generalized into four main points of argument including the students' academic achievement, the detrimental effects of labeling associated with placement outside the mainstream, the racial imbalance in special education, and recent advances in individually paced curricula which would make it possible to accommodate students with disabilities in the regular class. Furthermore, several educators have argued that exposing children into ordinary education settings will be the most effective means of equipping children into better self-supportive adults in the future (Jenkinson, 1997). The students are not the only ones affected by the segregation system. Teachers or educators are also isolated through this kind of setting. Being isolated, their teaching competencies become limited as well. Considering the significance of this point, educators have suggested to integrate the special needs student into normal education settings (Smith, 1998).

Indeed, the topic regarding the integration of students with special educational needs into ordinary schools has been a common argument. This key educational issue has recently introduced the term inclusion that exemplifies a whole range of ideas about the meaning and purpose of school (Kliwer, 1998).

Inclusion involves the reorganization of ordinary schools, in such a way that every mainstream school is capable of accommodating every student regardless of their disabilities, making it certain that each learner belongs to a single

community. The concentration of inclusion is more focused on the discussion of values. Thus, the principle behind inclusion is founded on the broad agenda of human rights, clearly emphasizing that segregation of any form is morally incorrect (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, 2000).

A familiar statement about the basis for inclusion is the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). Although it makes an explicit statement concerning children's rights, it refers to the level of education and learning rather than inclusion. It does not only state a view on children's rights, but it also asserts children's uniqueness and stressed considering the wide diversity of these children's characteristics and needs. The Salamanca Statement proponent provides an effective education to the majority of children improving the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system (Lindsay, 2003, p. 3). It implies a tension between application of proposed system for all children and a view that it may not be effective for all, implying that inclusion may be a less effective system of education.

This then gives rise to the conflict of implementing an uncertain reform that supports human rights against a politically structured educational system for the special children. Moreover, the inclusion system had been described as follows by Oliver (1996, p. 84): a process rather than a fixed state; problematic; political; requires changes in school ethos; involves teachers who have acquired commitment; requires changes in the given curriculum; involves recognition of moral and political rights of pupils to inclusive education; recognition that students with special needs are valued and that their achievements should be celebrated; acknowledgement of the importance of difference rather than sameness or normality; and inclusion requires struggle.

In spite of these apparent conflicting and varying views, certain significant factors should be discussed in order to determine whether the inclusion system should be implemented into present school systems.

3. Inclusion and Child Development

Inclusive schools are established primarily for improving the special children's learning and development. Specifically, inclusion aims to benefit special children through improvements in their learning outcomes, including their social skills, academic achievement and personal development. So as to meet all the learning needs of the children within a community, inclusion promotes the initiation of mainstream school restructuring. According to Ainscow (1991, p.3), inclusion aims to establish more effective schools that recognize students' difficulties in learning; hence, effective schools support the need for appropriate reforms.

In general, inclusive schools are characterized by strong emphasis on quality instruction as well as administrative leadership; emphasis on the student's acquisition of basic abilities; high levels of expectations for students as well as confidence in teachers' ability to deal and support the individual needs of their students; obligation to give a balanced and broad coverage of curriculum experiences appropriate for all children; promotion of secured and orderly environment conducive for both teaching and learning; and close evaluation and monitoring of each student's learning progress (Hopkins, Ainscow and West, 1994; Ainscow, 1991).

Indeed, inclusion illustrates an almost perfect educational system. However, is there any proof that these aims were successfully attained? Several tests and research have been done to answer this inquiry. A number of studies deal with the inclusion of children with certain disabilities in general education classrooms. A previous study of three preschoolers with profound disabilities (Hanline, 1993) established the social and communication benefits of full inclusion for these children. The results of this study conflicted with previous studies of preschool children with disabilities who seemed to be socially isolated in general classrooms (Peterson & Haralick, 1977; Peterson, 1982; Faught, Balleweg, Crow, & van den Pol, 1983). A further study (Cole, 1991) examined social integration of children with disabilities in 43 Minnesota classrooms. The 2-year study compared integrated and segregated (special education only) sites and determined that developmental skill progress was similar in both types of schools, but that children in integrated sites progressed in social skill development while the segregated children actually regressed.

While social skill development may vary based on numerous results of previous studies, inclusion is capable of enhancing children's academic achievement through speech and language programs, improved parent-teacher communication, greater use of group work, a student participation in class discussions, and increased community acceptance of people with disabilities (Jenkinson, 1997, p. 155). Students at mainstream schools were more likely to have higher academic achievements than those at special schools, even when developmental level was similar. Against these benefits, inclusion also brought its share of challenges. From the evidence set by Jenkinson, in his survey, she said that some focus group participants felt that students with disabilities are receiving too much attention and concerns with inadequate resource provision for these special students meant that students without disabilities were missing out on the attention and encouragement they needed. Evidence indicates that nearly all children with physical and sensory difficulties, including children with no other impairments should be educated at mainstream school but it is important not to overlook their emotional and social needs (and in some cases medical or personal needs). Success or the ease of inclusion shouldn't be decided on the basis of who requires the least fuss needed to monitor emotional and social well being.

In a study done by Carlberg and Kavale's (1980, p. 301-302) the researchers commented on the failure of inclusion in enhancing academic achievement. This study showed that the average Behavioral Disability (BD)/Emotional Disability (ED) or Learning Disability (LD) student in special class placement was better off than 61% of his/her counterparts in a regular class. This study provided evidence that segregation is better than inclusion. However, the results of this study are not applicable to the general context. There is an example of a male child with learning difficulty in a regular U.K. class. This boy is always at the bottom academically which means he can't read, write; and he has displayed chronically bad behavior as evidenced by his use of an electric stunning device for scaring other students while considering it a fun game. For security reasons, he has been sent to a special school. This change to a new environment that provides more attention has positively impacted the boy. He is now very happy, gets more individual instruction and attention, and as a result, is no longer getting into trouble thanks to the special school. Such cases provide evidence that shows integration should be based on individual needs.

Hornby (1999, p. 157) commented on this aspect of inclusion and noted that the level of inclusion, either locational, social, or functional, should be based on the needs of each child and the exigencies of the situation. Once these factors have been identified and considered, the focus of the educator can now be a combined view of mainstream and individual educational children with SEN.

Aside from integrating mainstream and individual need factors of children, inclusion can enhance academic achievement of children through the proper learning environment. According to Jenkinson (1997, p. 193), the environment shall be designed to ensure maximum interaction between students with severe disabilities and their chronological age peers, and at a level that should also occur in the wider community. This will be the main purpose for integration. For an appropriate school and classroom environment, Sailor (1989) identified six minimal requirements for successful inclusion of students with severe disabilities (Jenkinson, 1997, p. 192).

Classroom and learning environments should be age appropriate; close enough to the students' home in order to minimize excessive time spent on traveling to school; provide program interaction within the school building; procedures shall be implemented to encourage interaction between students with disabilities and non-disabled students; and no more than ten percent of students in any school should have severe disabilities. In considering the proper learning environment, it should not be based on Sailor's view alone, but other needs and support should be considered and provided to them.

Kaufman, Agard and Semmel (1978) identified a number of environmental factors that were related to performance. Taking an example of age appropriateness, in larger special schools it is often possible to have a loose grouping in terms of CA and MA. Crocket and Kauffman (1999) researched on inclusion in relation to different SEN/disabilities and also individual differences within individuals with the same disability, and identified dilemmas that often increased with age. A 16 year old student with an MA of five years could not be included full time with a class in inclusion school. Peer shall be considered as a person of the same age, status or ability. Peers learning together are not only occurring in academic settings, but also in interaction, culture, and other activities that relate to psychological conditions. Intellectually disabled children who are 16 years old in five year-old pre-school may be not suitable to grow up with similar physically age children. Physical difference may have a negative impact for children with disability. In the same age group, children with disability will develop to identity with their peers. Increasing interaction is more difficult if there is a large age gap for group activities outside of the classroom. In short, students in mainstream schools were more likely to have higher academic achievements than those in special schools, even when developmental level was similar (Jenkinson, 1997, p. 57).

Secondly, a range of individual differences within an environment may require a large variety of curriculum materials and public equipment to be accessed to suffice children with difficulties. Funding is always a burden for mainstream schools if they only take ten percent of children with disability; if it is for a minority and not for the majority, the function of the facilities could then be considered a waste by some. In order to provide a better environment for the quality of class activity participation, relationship interactions with the peers is an option.

4. Attitude of the Educator

While inclusion is beneficial for developing the competencies and skills of both students and teachers alike, implementing a program of inclusion will most likely put teachers under considerable pressure brought about by the required environmental restructuring. Based on several studies, reports of teachers unable to find enough time for the application of inclusion were frequent and common (Diebold & Von Eschenbach, 1991; Semmel et al., 1991).

Teachers face constant dilemmas (Dyson, 2001). The dilemma includes pace, learning styles, seating arrangements, and individual attention. Catering to a range of needs in a single class was difficult for some teachers. Where adequate resource staff were available, successful integration could be jeopardized by poor coordination between resources and classroom teaching, or by over dependence on an untrained teacher aide (Jenkinson, 1997, p. 23).

Teacher perceptions of full inclusion have been studied, with varying results. A survey of 381 special and general

educators (Semmel, Abernathy, Butera, & Lesar, 1991) discovered that teachers believed that "full time placement of students with mild disabilities will not have positive social benefits for these students." Another study (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993) with nineteen teachers who actually had students with disabilities in their classrooms, concluded that 17 of the teachers underwent a transformation from initial negative reactions to the placement of students in their classrooms to a more positive viewpoint. Teacher interviews included numerous reports of benefits to students with disabilities, their classmates, as well as teachers themselves.

In previous studies, research that focused on the attitudes of educators on inclusion has been reported. Previous American studies related to full inclusion have concluded that several educators were not supportive of placing special students in mainstream schools. For instance, in study conducted by Coates (1989), general education teachers teaching in Iowa neither exhibit any negative views towards pulling out of programs nor did they extend any support on the full inclusion system. Semmel et al (1991), showed similar research findings. After surveying 381 elementary educators from both general and special schools, the researchers also concluded that the participating educators were not supportive of placing special students in mainstream schools.

In a study conducted by Vaughn et al. (1996), the researchers concentrated on the perception of both mainstream and special educators' towards inclusion by means on focus group interviews. The research concluded that the majority of the respondents who were not participating in any inclusive programs had strong negative thoughts and feelings about inclusion. Moreover, the participants stated that such a system was impractical for decision makers to implement as it is not applicable to classroom realities. The teachers identified several factors that would affect the success of inclusion, including class size, inadequate resources, the extent to which all students would benefit from inclusion and lack of adequate teacher preparation.

While there were several studies showing the negative insights of educators towards inclusive schooling, contradictory findings have also been reported. For instance, a study conducted by Villa et al. (1996) provided results that favored the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools. The researchers noted that teacher commitment often emerges at the end of the implementation cycle, after the teachers have gained mastery of the professional expertise needed to implement inclusive programs. Similar findings were reported by LeRoy and Simpson (1996), who studied the impact of inclusion over a 3-year period in the state of Michigan. Their study showed that as teachers' experience with children with SEN increased, their confidence to teach these children also increased. The evidence seems to indicate that teachers' negative or neutral attitudes at the beginning of an innovation such as inclusive education may change over time as a function of experience and the expertise that develops through the process of implementation.

Research has suggested that, although teachers' attitudes can be affected by several interacting factors, one of the most important is the level and nature of support that they receive. Based on this assumption, Clough and Lindsay (1991), referring to the UK context, have argued that there might be variations in teachers' attitudes within the UK, reflecting the levels and history of support in each Local Education Authority (LEA). Indeed, LEAs vary in the provision they make to schools either directly through staffing and capitation, or through support services (such as special needs support teachers, educational psychologists) and this is likely to affect teachers' attitudes. Moreover, some authorities have promoted inclusive education (Bannister et al. 1998; Lindsay et al.1990), while in others the pace of change has been slow. Despite the disparity among research results and the overwhelming number of variables associated with establishing success with inclusion, the call for full inclusion of all students into general education schools and for most students into general education classrooms continues (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1992).

From this summary of studies on teachers' attitude towards inclusion, one may wonder how others can disagree with inclusion in spite of its many advantages on learning. What then is the essence of being an educator when no time is allotted for the children's benefit? How can special children learn effectively when their educators are not even open to challenges geared towards better education means? The inclusion system then effectively emphasized the primary goal and purpose of educators for special and ordinary students alike. In spite of difficulties the inclusion system involves, educators must not initially discourage the idea. Considering the benefits the system can possibly lead to, in addition to an educator's role of applying an educational means where his students can learn more effectively, inclusion system should be treated with a more open and positive outlook.

5. Inclusion and Resources

The process of education should be given to children with disabilities to make them part of society. While inclusion may help achieve this goal, the inclusion of children with learning difficulties in mainstream schools requires greater attention. Sufficient resources would have to be allocated to support these children's learning. Funding should thus support provision for enough facilities, teaching materials, appropriate curriculum and learning activities. Unfortunately, lack of funds is often times an obstacle for development. Aside from the establishment of proper learning institutions for disabled students, teaching also becomes a critical issue. The issue tends to be problematic as teachers pay less attention to their special students within mainstream classrooms. Furthermore, the formulation of the proper curriculum, one that is adaptable to every child's educational needs, has been a problem as well.

People who support the inclusion of special children in mainstream schools call for total restructuring, including the incorporation of radical changes in the curriculum. Inclusion advocates pointed out that separate curricula further promote exclusion, segregating children who can learn normally and those who cannot (Ainscow, 1991 & 1994; Jenkinson, 1997).

According to Ridsale and Thompson (2002, p. 22), the problems related to the formulation of the curriculum have always been connected to the inabilities of the children, when in fact such an issue is brought about by curriculum inadequacy. Alongside this issue, others have argued on whether curriculum that was developed by special educators for disabled students should be so readily discarded. Although the curriculum for inclusion has been modified to suit the educational needs of the students, there is still a growing pressure for special schools to follow a core curriculum similar to the one applied in mainstream schools Jenkinson (1997, p. 169). Certain dilemmas and difficulties are encountered in designing a common curriculum that will meet all students' needs. For instance, students with disabilities may require special methods of instruction to compensate for their disability, or they may need special equipment or communication technology to enable them to learn from an unmodified curriculum (Jenkinson, 1997, p. 169).

Inclusion, as well as the implementation of a modified curriculum, may be seen to be impractical and uneconomical for some as the closure of special schools and classes imply an end to many of the resources, expertise and other benefits. If disabled children will be included into mainstream schools, the outcome will not only require the withdrawal of many resources needed by students with disabilities, but this will also place unfair burden on regular class teachers who are attempting to face several changes implied by the restructuring of the education system as a whole (Jenkinson, 1997, p. 170).

In order to properly implement inclusion, changes should be done not only to the curriculum. The people who will implement and take charge of the implementation, as well as those who will monitor and evaluate the outcomes of inclusion, should be properly designated and recognized. For this purpose, the quality of teaching should be based on the different needs of students. Teachers should be able to sort out special children's behavior and able to cope with the lack of resources. Professional training is not the only necessary and essential quality educators should possess. Experience, ability, passion, and patience for the children with difficulties are also important.

As Jenkinson stated, inclusion provides several demands in terms of extra time, knowledge and skill required to prepare adapted curriculum materials and implement special instructional techniques. In addition, the adequacy of resources is difficult to determine as every child has varying educational needs (Jenkinson, 1997, p. 173). However, in this discussion, the significant role of the educator has been implied for the successful implantation of inclusive schooling.

6. Inclusion and Equality

Other than the development of students and teachers capabilities, the involvement of equality is probably the most significant aspect of the inclusion system. Out of this correlation, inclusion has given rise to key principles on equality and special children. These principles state that students with special educational needs should not be treated differently from other pupils (this principle is particularly true as many children with SEN encounter difficulties during their education); the purpose and goals of education should be common for all students; if it is possible, students with special educational needs should have these needs provided through mainstream schools; in order to obtain these educational needs, mainstream teachers should take charge; in terms of decision-making regarding placement and school provision, students with special educational needs, together with their parents, should be involved; and that students with special educational needs should be evaluated accordingly.

The relation established between the principle of equal opportunities and special educational needs was further strengthened even at the international level by means of three important legislations formulated by the United Nations. Though it is known that other countries have not signed up or adhered to the conventions and rules of the United Nations, these legislations are still important and worth noting. For instance, Article 2 of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) specifically mentions disability and states that all rights shall apply to all children without discrimination on any ground, including those with special educational needs. In Article 23 of the same legislation, it was stated that education should be designed in a manner conducive to the child "achieving the fullest possible social integration".

In Rule 6 of 22 under the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993), integrated education was clearly defined as the vehicle for equalizing opportunities, noting that countries should ensure the education of people with disabilities is an integral part of the educational system. The statement written on Point 7 (p. 11) under the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) invites countries to respond to a conceptual framework of action based on a direct commitment to inclusive schooling. Moreover, this legislation clearly states that, "The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles of and rates of learning and ensuring quality to all through appropriate

curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships, with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school".

These legislations then showed not only an increasing recognition of the rights that children with disabilities and special educational needs have, but a description, albeit in fairly abstract terms, of what inclusive education might look like. The Salamanca Statement acknowledges that schools must change if they are to genuinely provide equal opportunities for all pupils.

While it is not difficult to promote or stress on the importance of equality, putting it into practice takes extreme effort. Equality issues in relation to inclusion presents two main problems. One is that attaining total equality in practice is close to impossible particularly in group teaching situations. Another problem is based on the observation of Berlin (1997) wherein it is conceptually unintelligible that "Great Goods" or values such as equality can be combined with others. Isaiah Berlin cautioned people into believing that complete equality is attainable. He suggested that embracing this idealism may be dangerous as it will involve the overruling of other significant interests.

Without a doubt, such generalization is true and inevitable. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily suggest that inclusive schools should be disregarded. Rather, this correlation between equality and disability implies that educators, school administrators and parents should recognize that we have to adjust to certain dilemmas and difficulties within school and learning environments.

7. Inclusion and Psychology

Based on individual needs, the psychologist's decision is what matters. If children with learning difficulties lack any progress on academic or social ability in mainstream schools, it is unnecessary to insist on mainstream schools or integration into regular class. With experts giving tests and attaining judgments, it is they who decide whether to stay in mainstream or move to special school. It is important that the parents should not intervene regarding this matter because it is the instinct of most parents to insist that integration will be better for their children. Many parents argue this issue forcefully, and may even go to court. This approach may at times not be sensible and could even be harmful for their children. The real question is not whether or not they insist that their children with disability go or not go to a special school, but whether or to not be negatively labeled or stigmatized.

Teachers will be in the best position to know and help promote the learning process of children. If parents ignore teacher's suggestions in these regards, it may give them the wrong direction for their children with disability. If most students are happy to make real progress at special schools, why are people insisting that human rights automatically require a push to be integrated? This is a kind of discrimination when not factoring in the children's individual needs; it is not fair as well. The provision shall be based on the flexible needs, as well as rights, of each child.

Labeling special school based on parent's concern is problematic on the values of our society. Why should children not go to special school if they need to? Our responsibility as educators is to educate people fairly and to understand the situation of students with disability. They need to have rights to choose what the best is for them.

8. Conclusion

Based on the discussion and comparison of inclusion and segregation, indeed, certain difficulties may be encountered by letting children attend mainstream schools. However, considering the positive impact of inclusion, inclusion appears to be an educational system worth striving for. The concept of inclusion may have its own set of drawbacks. Nonetheless, such disadvantages can be resolved primarily through effective training of educators (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, 2000). In several surveys, the significance of training has been overly stressed (Bowman, 1986; Center and Ward, 1987; Leyser et al., 1994). Not only does training enhance the capabilities of teachers, more importantly, training facilitates the establishment of positive attitude towards inclusion. Such a generalization was proven by the findings gathered by Beh-Pajoooh (1992) and Shimman (1990). People involved in the students' learning environment, particularly the educators, school administrators and parents, should coordinate with one another towards their children's better development. Furthermore, educational systems should not be constricted to norms and established practices. Rather, education should be adapted based on the needs of the children and correct conceptualization of their disabilities.

The final decision whether or not to place special needs students in mainstream schools must be made after careful consideration of all concerned participants: teachers, parents, school administrators, students, as well as the society at large. All stakeholders must have full input: Without all fully participating in the process, a less than optimal outcome for the special needs student may occur resulting in lower academic achievement than what otherwise could be obtained. History is filled with examples of those who have overcome extraordinary disabilities to achieve greatness. We must all do our part to help them on the path to achieve to the best of their abilities.

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