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Disabled Education: Inclusive vs Special Education Classrooms

Approximately one billion people in the world live with a disability. Around one in ten of those people are children (Fazle). There remains a widely debated topic amongst teachers and parents in recent years- should disabled children be taught in a traditional or mainstream classroom, or should they be placed in a special education class alongside other students with needs similar to their own? Which choice is in the best interest of the children? Which one is more cost effective for tax payers? And most importantly to many, who should ultimately be making this decision? Do children thrive more in an inclusion class, where the special services that they need are brought to them in a general education classroom, or do they benefit more in a special education classroom where the student is provided all of the individualized services they need alongside other disabled children? Many questions arise from the topic, but it can be very difficult to give a specific answer when the definition of “disabled children” can be so broad. I believe including children with special needs into mainstream classrooms improves overall learning, academic achievement, self-esteem and social skills of not only the ‘disabled child’, but that of the entire classroom of their peers as well.

Context/Background

Special education was almost unheard of until the 1970’s. First, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 guaranteed civil rights to all disabled people which required accommodations for disabled students in schools. Then in 1975 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA)

guaranteed the right for children with disabilities to receive free and equal education opportunities. The EHA provided unique education in a non-restricting environment to fit the needs of each student. After the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) came into effect in 1997, disabled students finally had equal education opportunities (Lee).

IDEA introduced the use of individual education programs (IEPs). This gave disabled students the right to an education specialized to fit their individual needs (Sylva).

The environment in which a child learns has direct effects on how well they will do later in life. Interactions in early education classrooms have great influence on behavioral development and social skills. Disabled students are no different, yet some schools separate them from “mainstream classrooms” which deprives them from interactions that would ultimately help them to develop intrapersonal skills. There are two main ways that disabled children are taught today, either in an inclusive or special education classroom. Inclusive classrooms, or “mainstream” classes, include typical students learning alongside students with disabilities or individualized education programs. Special education classrooms only include students that have a type of disability that requires special attention. A large concern is too many disabled students are put in these special education classrooms, which inhibits them from making normal everyday interactions with able-bodied students.

Overview of Other Proposals

Different solutions on educating children with special needs have been suggested, but it can be difficult to propose one solution for all “disabled” children. It has been proposed that disabled children be left out of mainstream classes completely, because it inhibits able-bodied students from learning. Likewise, these ‘able-bodied’ students could learn a lot from being exposed to what disabled students go through on a daily basis, and to take in and really

understand their physical and emotional needs. Most parents prefer the inclusion type class for their child, because they want their son or daughter to have the same education opportunities as anyone else. Though in some cases, the student's disability may be too severe in which case the child's physician may recommend to the parents that a special education classroom is best (Room). All parents have personal feelings and aspirations for their child, so ultimately it is up to them to decide if they think their child is able to be mainstreamed or kept separate.

Parents are also saying that they want their children in a friendly, safe environment; which can be hard to promise in mainstream classrooms (Room). In some cases, kids can bully and tease students that are different from them, and disabled students are even more susceptible to bullies. The argument is that if disabled children are placed in a special-needs classroom/school, they are less likely to be discriminated against, and more likely to make friends and feel a sense of safety in a room of peers with similar needs. Some even argue that some teachers training can hinder special needs students (Freedman). In general, the training that teachers receive for educating usually is focused on a very broad scale, so what little they do know about teaching special education students can often be limited. When questioned on this topic a teacher admitted that "Although she earned a bachelor's degree and teaching certificate in math instruction for both elementary and middle school, she had never had to take a class about students with disabilities. She was left to figure it out on the job" (Mader.) It has become increasingly clear that all teachers need training on how to educate special needs students. "Due to the numerous time constraints, the many academic standards that must be taught, and a lack of support, teachers are not only hesitant to implement individualized instruction, but they do not even know how to do so" (Mader). At the very least, schools should have special-education

classes as an option. Many proposals have been made, but it's difficult to find one solution to such a complex problem.

Explanation of Proposal:

I propose that every child with a disability, mental or physical, be given time in a mainstream classroom. Whether they spend all day or 30 minutes integrated in a mainstream classroom, any amount of time helps. I believe this to be beneficial to not only the disabled children in question, but also for the other kids in mainstream classrooms. It gives them a chance to see what disabled children really go through, and they can be exposed to disability at an early age. This could be beneficial because it improves the children's interpersonal and relationship skills. Every child wants to be seen as 'normal', they don't want to stand out or be made fun of, bullied, etc. While this is completely understandable, every child goes through the process of feeling left out at some point in their life. If they are exposed to those feelings early on and they have the opportunity to learn from it, it doesn't affect them so harshly later in life. Children learn from experiences, and as long as teachers are encouraging positive relationships between the two groups, it can be extremely beneficial (Grabmeier).

Authentic inclusion has proven to be the best chance for students with disabilities to live, work, and play in their community. Inclusion also teaches other students to appreciate diversity and learn that diversity can be a positive improvement for their classroom. This can allow other students to be more open minded to change and to develop their own feelings and sensitivity towards people who are different from them (Rosenbloom). If disabled children are forced into special classrooms/schools, this can encourage them to feel ostracized later in life. Why would a one attempt to get involved in the community as young adults if they were always separated in the classroom? Students in a mainstream class would benefit by seeing inclusion of students that

are different from them as something positive, rather than it being a burden or see it as hindering their education.

Inclusion is about providing the help children need to learn and to allow them to participate in meaningful ways (Rose). Inclusive education should be seen as a child's right, not a just a privilege for those who have a parent or caregiver advocating for them. IDEA even states that all children should be educated with non-disabled children their own age and have access to general education information (Room). Mainstreaming also benefits tax payers, as it requires less money than opening special-education classrooms.

Response to Naysayers:

What I've found is when first approached with this dilemma, parents and teachers are more likely to say mainstreaming won't work. When it comes to parents, it's understandable that they want what is best for their child. Indeed, more often than not, they believe their child would do best in a special education classroom (Freedman). "As policy makers push to include more special-education students into general classrooms, factions are increasingly divided. Advocates for the disabled say special-education students benefit both academically and socially by being taught alongside typical students. Legislators often side with them, arguing that mainstreaming is productive for students and cost-effective for taxpayers" (Davis). With teachers, it's become increasingly clear that most don't feel equipped to teach special education. Therefore, the idea of mainstreaming isn't something they support. If teachers were well-informed on how to educate disabled students, they would be more likely to be open to mainstreaming and its benefits.

Conclusion:

Inclusion is definitely on the rise in the United States. "A national push to take students with disabilities out of isolation means most now spend the majority of their days in general

education classrooms, rather than in separate special-education classes” (Mader). All in all, parents, teachers, disabled students, and their able-bodied peers ultimately all want the same thing: safe and enjoyable environment in which to learn. “Although federal legislation, e.g. (Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990) protects the inherent rights of individuals with disabilities, that legislation cannot always protect them from subtle forms of discrimination and prejudice” (Milsom). Both mainstream and disabled students need to be prepared to face challenges when inclusion is first implemented. The more time that is spent with open discussions with teachers about challenges and concerns the better. I feel that encouraging all students (disabled or not), as well as teachers and school staff to have a positive attitude and general open-mindedness towards all involved can be one of the greatest factors in achieving success with inclusion.

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