EQUITY AND INCLUSION OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL WALLS

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Abstract

This conceptual paper discusses the relationship of other children as well as members of society outside the school environment. It brings out the importance of making children with special needs one with the others building up their confidence of being loved and cared for. Social Skills Children without special needs often can become more aware of the needs of others in inclusive classrooms. The basic elements of inclusive education is also considered while dealing with this question. The benefits and long term returns is also brought out, through this paper. Some suggestions and recommendations are given in this regard.

On Inclusion and the Other Kids

Inclusion is receiving considerable attention, both in school districts across the country and in the popular media. Most of the attention is focused on how inclusion affects the students with special needs. But what about the students who don’t have special needs?

Studies have shown no slowdown in the learning of children without special needs in inclusive classrooms. And, surveys conducted with parents and teachers involved in inclusive settings show that they see no harm to the children without special needs and that they have positive opinions about inclusion, research conducted thus far shows that being in an inclusive classroom doesn’t hurt the students without special needs. But does it help them? The growing body of research suggests that students without special needs can gain a number of important benefits from relationships with their classmates who have special needs. Some of the benefits include: friendships, social skills, personal principles, comfort level with people who have special needs, and caring classroom environments.

Friendships The most important function of friendships is to make people feel cared for, loved, and safe. Researchers have documented cases of long-lasting friendships that have emerged between students who have special needs and typical students, in which both
students benefit. Recent research has helped to identify three specific areas of mutual benefit for children with and without special needs who are friends with each other: (1) warm and caring companionship; (2) growth in social cognition and self-concept; and (3) the development of personal principles. Of course, inclusive settings do not mean that all typical children become close friends with children who have special needs. However, even when relationships remain at the level of ‘classmate’ or ‘familiar acquaintance’, versions of these same benefits have been reported in surveys of teachers and other research.

Social Skills Children without special needs often can become more aware of the needs of others in inclusive classrooms. As they become skilled at understanding and reacting to the behaviours of their friends with special needs, they gain an enhanced acceptance and appreciation of each child’s unique gifts. Personal Principles Students without special needs grow in their commitment to their own moral and ethical principles and become advocates for their friends who have special needs. The development of strong personal principles will benefit students throughout their lives.

Comfort Level With People Who Have Special Needs On surveys and in interviews, middle and high school students without special needs say they are less fearful of people who look different or behave differently because they’ve interacted with individuals with special needs. Parents notice the differences in their children, too. An interesting side effect is that these parents report that they, also, feel more comfortable with people with special needs because of their children’s experiences.

Caring Classroom Environments schools and classrooms can be structured to facilitate kindness, consideration, empathy, and compassion for others. Within a caring classroom environment, students have opportunities to learn about their classmates in ways that honour the full range of experiences that each child brings to the classroom.

Basic Elements:

- **Use of teaching assistants or specialists:** These staff have the potential to be inclusive or divisive. For instance, a specialist who helps teachers address the needs of all students is working inclusively. A specialist who pulls students out of class to work with them individually on a regular basis is not.

- **Inclusive curriculum:** An inclusive curriculum includes locally relevant themes and contributions by marginalized and minority groups. It avoids binary narratives of good and bad, and allows adapting the curriculum to the learning styles of children with special education needs.
- **Parental involvement:** Most schools strive for some level of parental involvement, but it is often limited to emails home and occasional parent–teacher conferences. In a diverse school system, inclusion means thinking about multiple ways to reach out to parents on their own terms.

**Benefits of inclusion for children and families:**

**Families’ visions of a typical life for their children can come true.**

All parents want their children to be accepted by their peers, have friends and lead “regular” lives. Inclusive settings can make this vision a reality for many children with disabilities.

**Children develop a positive understanding of themselves and others.**

When children attend classes that reflect the similarities and differences of people in the real world, they learn to appreciate diversity. Respect and understanding grow when children of differing abilities and cultures play and learn together.

**Friendships develop.**

Schools are important places for children to develop friendships and learn social skills. Children with and without disabilities learn with and from each other in inclusive classes.

**Children learn important academic skills.**

In inclusive classrooms, children with and without disabilities are expected to learn to read, write and do math. With higher expectations and good instruction children with disabilities learn academic skills.

**All children learn by being together.**

Because the philosophy of inclusive education is aimed at helping all children learn, everyone in the class benefits. Children learn at their own pace and style within a nurturing learning environment.

**Inclusion leads to lower rates of suspension and drop out, and to higher rates of employment.**

When the NLTS-2 examined the outcomes of 11,000 students with a range of disabilities, it found that more time spent in a general education classroom was positively correlated with: a) fewer absences from school, b) fewer referrals for disruptive behavior, and c) better outcomes after high school in the areas of employment and independent living (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2006). By searching through ERIC, several studies can be found that link inclusive education experiences to postsecondary education, career and technical education, employment, and other adult outcomes. These outcomes include performance in community living and work contexts, interactions with schoolmates and co-workers, independent participation in naturally-occurring activities, and quality and size of a
natural support network. These findings are true for individuals with learning disabilities as well as those who require significant and life-long supports.

**Recommendations and suggestions:**

**What families can do when they meet resistance in accessing inclusive education for their children:**

**Get and share information.**

Some schools do not support a family’s desire for inclusion, because they are used to providing special education services to students in separate classes. Or they may not understand how to make inclusion work for all children. Visit general education classes and separate classes for students with disabilities. Carefully explain to the child’s teachers, principal or IEP team why you believe inclusive education would be best for the child. Share information with the child’s school about the benefits of inclusive education.

**Enlist the help of others.**

Sometimes it is helpful to bring in an expert or advocate. This person will make sure that the preferences about the child’s placement are heard. This person can also help explain the benefits of inclusive education and how to make it happen in the child’s school. You may find someone to help by contacting advocacy organizations, special education parent groups in the child’s school, and local colleges with teacher training programs.

**Become the child’s advocate.**

It takes time and energy to make inclusion happen in a school that is resistant to change. Stay focused on what you believe is best for the child. Listen carefully to the arguments against the child’s inclusion in a general education class and use what you learn to advocate for change. For example, if you are told that the child is not ready for the general education class, ask what supports could be provided to help make her successful in the class.

**References:**


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