

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

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Abstract: Inclusive education is about looking at the ways our schools, classrooms, programs and lessons are designed so that all children can participate and learn. Inclusion is also about finding different ways of teaching so that classrooms actively involve all children. It also means finding ways to develop friendships, relationships and mutual respect between all children, and between children and teachers in the school. Inclusive education does away with the practice of segregating students with learning and/or physical challenges from the rest of the student body. While the practice of inclusion places extra demands on students and facility logistics, there are numerous benefits to all students, both disabled and non-disabled.

Key Words: Inclusive Education, children, schools, challenges, opportunities.

1.0 Inclusive School Education Inclusive education is not just for some children. Being included is not something that a child must be ready for. All children are at all times ready to attend regular schools and classrooms. Their participation is not something that must be earned. Inclusive education is a way of thinking about how to be creative to make our schools a place where all children can participate. Creativity may mean teachers learning to teach in different ways or designing their lessons so that all children can be involved. As a value, inclusive education reflects the expectation that we want all of our children to be appreciated and accepted throughout life.

2.0 Challenges for Inclusive Schools

Teachers in inclusive classrooms must incorporate a variety of teaching methods in order to best reach students of varying learning abilities. This has benefits even for those students who would be placed in a traditional classroom, as this increases their engagement in the learning process. Even gifted and accelerated learners benefit from an environment that stresses responsiveness from all students. Perhaps most importantly, inclusive classrooms encourage open and frank dialogue about differences as well as a respect for those with different abilities, cultural backgrounds and needs.

2.1 The Widespread Misperception That Teaching is Easy- Teaching is a uniquely difficult job, one that comes with a set of huge responsibilities; however, many people fail to recognize the teacher's role. The various disabilities of the students with whom special education teachers work multiplies the job's difficulty. Special education teachers are largely unrecognized and unsupported by the public.

2.2 Non-Instructional Responsibilities- Many teachers are trained and willing to teach but find themselves burdened with responsibilities that remove them from the classroom. Special education teachers often find themselves being required to go to meetings, conducting assessments and dealing with loads of paperwork.

2.3 Lack of Support- At a time when many large school districts are experiencing high levels of growth, special education teachers are being asked to do more with less. Salaries are being cut in many districts, and there is often very little in the way of technical assistance provided by school administrations.

2.4 Dealing with Multiple Disabilities- A special education teacher's classes may have students with various disabilities. Since each student is a unique case, the teacher must modify their lessons to suit each disabled learner by providing individualized education programs.

2.5 Handling Death- Among students in a special education classroom, there are often some with severe chronic illnesses that may result in death. Handling this is a challenge to which special education teachers will have to adapt.

2.6 Handling the Problems of an Inclusive Classroom- The concept of having classrooms that contain both special needs students and students who are developing typically is becoming a popular one. This type of education poses new challenges for a special education teacher. For example, many students who have no disabilities are unaccustomed to dealing with those who do. Teachers in these classes are charged with eliminating cruelty and insensitivity from among their students and ensuring that those with special needs are treated with respect.

2.7 Professional Isolation- The nature of a special education teacher's work is very different from that of traditional teachers; the result of this is that standard classroom teachers may not view them as colleagues. There may be a professional stigma attached to the work of teaching "slow" students. Special education teachers often work with smaller groups and may focus on skills rather than content, thereby leading to the perception that their work is easier or less important.

2.8 Lack of Support from Parents- Some parents of special needs children are disinterested in the welfare of their children and fail to provide them with adequate care. Alternatively, they may be overly protective. Both can be problematic for the child and for their teacher. Disinterested parents may have no involvement with their child's education or interaction with their teachers, whereas overprotective parents may have unrealistic expectations from the child and the child's teachers. Both attitudes can shape children in negative ways. Parental disinterest may make special needs students less motivated and parents who are overprotective often diminish their child's confidence and make it harder for them to learn.

2.9 The Difficulty of Discipline in a Special Needs Classroom- Disabled child may have behavioral issues including restlessness and moodiness. They may also exhibit problems like a short attention span or an inability to understand what is being taught. Special education teachers have to learn how to deal with these problems as well as how to take appropriate disciplinary measures.

2.10 Budget Problems- Across the nation, special education programs are facing increasing enrollment and decreasing budgets. The result is that there are fewer teacher assistants available, which results in a greater workload for special education teachers. They may also face shortages of essential resources and equipment for delivering effective lessons.

3.0 Opportunities for Inclusive Schools

3.1 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.

3.2 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.

3.3 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.

3.4 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.

3.5 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.

4.0 The Benefits of Inclusive Education In Inclusive Schools

Over the years, the benefits of providing an inclusive education to all children have been shown. Inclusive education (when practiced well) is very important because:

- All children are able to be part of their community and develop a sense of belonging and become better prepared for life in the community as children and adults.
- It provides better opportunities for learning. Children with varying abilities are often better motivated when they learn in classes surrounded by other children.
- The expectations of all the children are higher. Successful inclusion attempts to develop an individual’s strengths and gifts.
- It allows children to work on individual goals while being with other students their own age.
- It encourages the involvement of parents in the education of their children and the activities of their local schools.
- It fosters a culture of respect and belonging. It also provides the opportunity to learn about and accept individual differences.
- It provides all children with opportunities to develop friendships with one another. Friendships provide role models and opportunities for growth.

5.0 Conclusion

Inclusive education has been found to have equal or better outcomes for all children – not just for children who experience disability. This includes better academic and social outcomes. Inclusive education involves supporting each child in belonging, participating, and accessing ongoing opportunities, being recognized and valued for the contribution that he or she makes, and flourishing.

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