

Ongoing Professional Development: The Prerequisite for and Continuation of Successful
Inclusion Meeting the Academic Needs of Special Students in Public Schools

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Educational reform is constantly changing the ways we teach our students. Some educators see reform as a bad thing; however the most innovative and progressive teachers embrace new ideas and theories. Motivated teachers want to hear new ideas to jump-start their teaching.

Much reform nationally and state-wide has intensely put more emphasis on meeting the individual needs of the children public school teachers serve. Education is still a respected tradition in the United States. At times it is seen as the savior of society, especially when America is challenged with bad times. “With the civil rights reforms, the United States accepted the legal and moral challenge of providing fairness in education for all children, with the influx of so many more children of diverse cultures and languages, the challenge to teach effectively in harmonious schools became a crisis” (Tharp, Estrada, Stoll, & Yamuchi, 1999). Now with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), school districts are held more accountable than ever before.

“Success occurs when each member of the association is held accountable” (Arkansas PTA, 2009). “One of the key elements for a successful inclusion program is the positive attitudes of the teachers. Teachers can make or break any program. Teachers are powerful influences on the success or failure of any program in schools. Understanding how teachers perceive the practice of inclusion is one important step in bringing about effective inclusionary practices in our schools today, for it is these people who are the most instrumental in school reform and work more directly with the students themselves” (Clampit, Hollifield, & Nichols, 2004). Reform and dictates come from higher authorities, yet the implementation and success and/or failure of these reforms are ultimately in the hands of the teachers.

Inclusion practices began as a way to meet the requirements of school reform by mainstreaming special needs or otherwise identified children with disabilities into the general (regular) education classrooms, in previous decades referred to as *homerooms*.

Arkansas laws pertaining to special education students have set up strict guidelines for placing students in the least restrictive environment (regular classrooms). The Arkansas Department of Education states that “special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs *only if* the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily”.

Perhaps more common than not, inclusion has been misunderstood and/or abused by school districts, special education teachers, counselors, and teachers. In some instances, teachers, principals, and special education teachers still know very little about the philosophy/goals of inclusion and how to implement and maintain the practice. Unfortunately, one common practice is that after the student is identified with a disability and the IEP is written, students are often *included* in the regular classroom with no IEP modifications at all. The teacher is left to struggle grasping for modifications with no additional support system, which is the true intention of inclusion (J. Paxton, personal communication, September 1, 2011).

Inclusion requires a joint delivery in instruction which requires both professionals coordinating and delivering substantive instruction and ensuring that both teachers have active roles. Co-teachers should work to ensure that their instructional strategies engage *all students* in ways that are not possible when only one teacher is present (Austin, 2001; Gately & Gately, 2001).

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A persons' perception, ways of construing systems, opinions, intentions, and attitudes influence the successful application of a program (Gurgur, & Uzuner, 2010). It is recommended that schools receive training on implementing inclusion practices and develop a *School Site Inclusion Task Force* made up of teachers and administrators that will aid in increasing awareness and discussion of including children with disabilities into the general classroom. The Inclusion Task Force also has the responsibility of developing an action plan for teaching and carrying out effective inclusion practices in the classroom (Johnson, 2000).

School districts should implement inclusion practices and take the necessary steps to assure that teachers feel confident and prepared. Being prepared gives teachers a sense of ownership over their teaching and a real commitment to their acquired beliefs with inclusion. One research study's conclusions stated that teachers believed inclusion programs could be improved with better planning and more collaboration between teachers (LasGelzheiser, & Meyers, 1996). Thus, floundering, hopeless attempts working with the special needs child can be entirely eliminated by proactive professional development trainings and collaborations of teachers involved in the education of the special needs child.

Some teachers involved in collaborative partnerships often report increased feelings of worth, renewal, partnership, and creativity. Yet, teachers also voice dissatisfaction with the entire inclusion process, indicating that there are poorly defined role descriptions, lack of clear expectations from administrators, and frustrations with implementation issues (Gately, & Gately, 2001). Because the overall attitude and beliefs about inclusion impact each teacher differently, it is important to determine why teachers feel the way they do. Both critics and supporters of inclusion need a way to express their beliefs in a way that is professional and constructive.

There have been several studies conducted concerning teacher attitudes about inclusion in various states and even in other countries. In 1994, a survey was conducted over the southeastern section of the United States with elementary, middle, and secondary teachers. The study revealed that the majority of the teachers had many concerns about inclusion in the regular classroom. Some of their main worries included: concern for general education students, workload, litigation, and implementation of inclusion practices. (Clampit, Hollifield, & Nichols, 2004)

Published the same year as the previous study, a second study reveals that there were, “negative attitudes toward inclusion in classrooms where proper supports were not available to assist students with disabilities in the regular classroom. Participants of the study argued that it is both inappropriate and irresponsible to place these students in inclusionary settings without the needed resources” (Clampit, Hollifield, & Nichols, 2004).

Another study by D’Alonzo, Giordano, and Cross (1995) states that a definite advantage of inclusion would be an overall higher level of acceptance for students with disabilities. Another advantage of having inclusion would be possible academic success for those students. On the contrary, other researchers believed that the instructional strategies in inclusion may not be effective, that staff had not been properly trained and that their program lacked the necessary funding. (Clampit, Hollifield, & Nichols, 2004)

As more special education and ELL (English Language Learner) students begin entering regular education classrooms the ideas and concerns of the regular education teachers can greatly affect the outcome of an inclusion class. In addition, teacher attitudes and beliefs toward inclusion have been found to be *powerful predictors* of successful efforts to create inclusive learning communities (Cullen, Gregory, & Noto, 2010).

Because the teachers are held responsible for implementing inclusion practices, it is extremely important to find out the opinions of those teachers. If teachers are able to voice their opinions, that much needed input and information could be used to improve inclusion practices; therefore, improving the overall educational experience for both teachers and students.

In the past several years, there has been a push for more teacher education concerning special education students. Some universities have shifted the curriculum about special education to graduate studies; whereas in some past decades undergraduates received more special education training in their undergraduate studies. The National Curriculum for Teacher Education and Curriculum Framework for Quality Teacher Education both expressed the importance of teacher training for disadvantaged children as well as the need to equip teachers with better ways to deal with inequalities, differences, and special needs (Gafoor, & Asaraf, 2009).

Conclusion

“Though regular classroom teachers are willing to take the responsibility of all children, including those with special needs; they will not be confident if they are not equipped with necessary skills. (Gafoor, & Asaraf, 2009)”. In many public schools, the general classroom teachers have little or no formal training on the specific needs of special education students. What training they had was in their undergraduate pre-service teachers courses, yet had little opportunity during their university days to apply modifications and accommodations to real children in real public schools. Therefore, regular education teachers do not feel they can adequately provide what inclusion students need. (Cullen, Gregory, & Noto, 2010). Note the following recommendations.

Recommendations for Promoting Successful Inclusion

1. Read the educational literature about successful inclusion programs. Focus on the successful essentials for inclusion.
2. Initiate discussions with other teachers who have successfully worked as special educators implementing inclusion in regular classrooms.
3. Promote discussions with regular classroom teachers who have been successful collaborating with the special education teacher with inclusion students.
4. Seek out professional opportunities to learn about inclusion (ie. Training sessions/seminars). Teachers should encourage their instructional leaders to provide professional development on this important subject. With knowledge, there is power and confidence!
5. Teachers need adequate and ample time to collaborate with each other about teaching methods, lesson plans, classroom behavior, and other areas of concern.
6. Regular classroom teachers need a special time to collaborate one on one with the special education teacher developing individualized inclusion strategies. (J. Paxton (personal communication, September 1, 2011).

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