



RESEARCH BRIEF

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The Debate Concerning Inclusion

Introduction

One of the most contentious debates in special education focuses on the inclusion of children with disabilities into regular classrooms. On the one hand, the practice of inclusion has meant opportunities for learning that were routinely denied to countless children for decades. At the same time, contradictions and failures of some ill-conceived inclusion programs have left many parents and teachers appalled and confused. School boards and administrators are often caught in the middle. Motivated by a sincere desire to do what is best for children with disabilities, they turn for direction to a body of research that is often inconsistent and inconclusive. Moreover, challenges by parents seeking inclusion have led to legal decisions that require districts to make a considerable effort to find inclusive placement while leaving several important questions unanswered.

There are clearly no simple answers and no attempt will be made in this paper to offer resolutions or recommendations. However, a look at common definitions, a review of legislation and court decisions, a listing of the major flaws in the research, and an explication of the assumptions underlying the arguments about inclusion can illuminate discussion and facilitate decisions.

Definitions

The following definitions are provided by Research Bulletin Number 11, 1993, from Phi Delta Kappa's Center for Evaluation, Development, and Research.

Mainstreaming: This term has generally been used to refer to the selective placement of special education students in one or more "regular" education classes. Mainstreaming proponents generally assume that a student must "earn" his or her opportunity to be mainstreamed through the ability to "keep up" with the work assigned by the teacher to the other students in the class. This concept is closely linked to traditional forms of special education service delivery.

Inclusion: This term is used to refer to the commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students).

Full Inclusion: This term is primarily used to refer to the belief that instructional practices and technological supports are presently available to accommodate all students in the schools and classrooms they would otherwise attend if not disabled. Proponents of full inclusion tend to encourage that special education services generally be delivered in the form of training and technical assistance to "regular" classroom teachers.

Legal Requirements

The **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** requires that “Each public agency shall insure: (a) Each handicapped child’s educational placement: (1) is determined at least annually; (2) is based on his or her individualized education program; and (3) is as close as possible to the child’s home; (b) The various alternative placements included under Reg. 300.551 are available to the extent necessary to implement the individualized education program for each handicapped child; (c) Unless a handicapped child’s individualized education program requires some other arrangement, the child is educated in the school which he or she would attend if not handicapped; and (d) In selecting the least restrictive environment, consideration is given to any potential harmful effect on the child or on the quality of services which he or she needs.” (34 CFR 300.552)

Section 504 of the **Rehabilitation Act of 1973** requires that “A recipient [of federal funds] to which this subpart applies shall educate, or shall provide for the education of, each qualified handicapped person in its jurisdiction with persons who are not handicapped to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the handicapped person. A recipient shall place a handicapped person in the regular educational environment operated by the recipient unless it is demonstrated by the recipient that the education of the person in the regular environment with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. Whenever a recipient places a person in a setting other than the regular educational environment pursuant to this paragraph, it shall take into account the proximity of the alternate setting to the person’s home.” (34 CFR 104.34)

In short, these regulations require that schools make a significant effort to find an inclusive solution for a child. How far must schools go? In recent years, the federal courts have been interpreting these requirements to mean that even children with severe disabilities must be included in the classroom they would otherwise attend if not disabled. Such students are to be included in regular classes as long as there is a potential social benefit, if the class would stimulate the child’s linguistic development, or if the other students could provide appropriate role models for the student. Recent court judgements indicate that parents are increasingly able to go to the courts to mandate school districts to include their children in “regular” classes (e.g., *Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon School District*, 789 F. Supp.1322 (D.N.J. 1992)). Educators need to be aware of developments in the federal courts because court findings in one case tend to set precedent for future courts considering similar matters.

Research Limitations

Scientifically based research is defined as “rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge” (U.S. Department of Education 1998). Slavin (2003) emphasized the use of experimental or quasi-experimental designs preferably with random assignment. Such research on education programs includes the use of control groups. In a well-designed study, researchers compare several schools using a given program with several schools not using the program but sharing similar demographics and academic performance. Random assignment enters the equation as schools are assigned by a table of random numbers or some similar method to the experimental or control groups. Adherence to this type of research methodology is essential for evidence-based reform. Unfortunately, this type of research is not possible when examining the efficacy of ESE inclusion in M-DCPS. Therefore, the local data collected in this Research Brief and discussed in a later section is after-the-fact or subsequent to the assignment of students to ESE or non-ESE classes and does not conform to the requirement of random assignment.

Not surprisingly, many educational researchers agree that the state of empirical research on the efficacy of inclusion in special education is relatively poor. Bass and Ries (2006) examined research studies in special education from 2000 to 2005 and found only two studies that satisfied all criterion as established

for scientific research by the Gifted Education Clearinghouse located at the College of William and Mary. Therefore, at present, policy decisions concerning inclusion should not be based on existing research since it is of such poor quality. There are a number of key flaws in the body of inclusion research that are hard to avoid which are enumerated below.

Lack of Proper Control Group. At the moment a student is identified as disabled, the law requires that he or she be put in a special education program. There is no group of students with disabilities that is not in a special education program with which to compare. Especially with regard to inclusion, students are typically selected and retained in regular classrooms on the basis of inferred and observed suitability. The question of the academic achievement of those suitable for inclusion but not retained in regular classrooms can not be addressed. In fact, “properly designed efficacy studies are illegal,” (Joe Jenkins, University of Washington Seattle; 1996).

Lack of Random Assignment. Research on the relative impact of different kinds of special education programs is subject to other pitfalls. The requirement of random assignment is a key element in sound research practice (Bass and Ries, 2006). Students with the same handicapping conditions are almost never randomly assigned to special or regular classrooms. Matching with students similarly labeled in another school is possible, but may have little validity. Categories of students having the same category label often encompass heterogeneous populations. Furthermore, matching may result in the well-known problem of selection bias.

Lack of Adequate Measurement. In most studies, “effectiveness is defined not in terms of child outcomes but as compliance with the law,” (Douglas Fuchs, Vanderbilt University; 1995). Assessment of special education programs are too often based on whether the individualized education plan is written in accordance with regulations and whether reports are up to date, rather than on the actual progress of the child.

Other research problems include improper use of standardized achievement tests, watered-down curriculum, skills not measured by the test, and difficulties in documenting improvement or pinpointing failures.

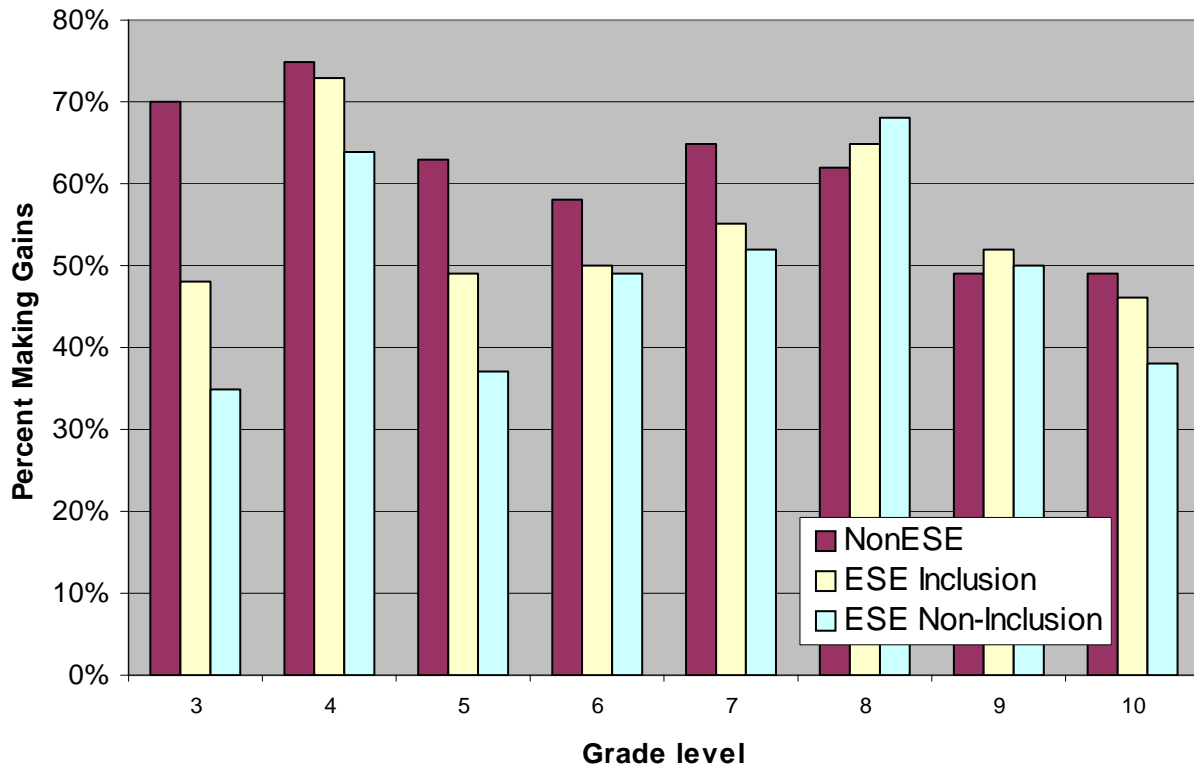
Local Research

These research limitations plague local research efforts as well. Consider the graphs on the following page which display the percent of M-DCPS students making learning gains on the 2005 FCAT comparing regular students, ESE students with more than 80 percent regular classes, and other ESE students enrolled in less than 80 percent regular classes.

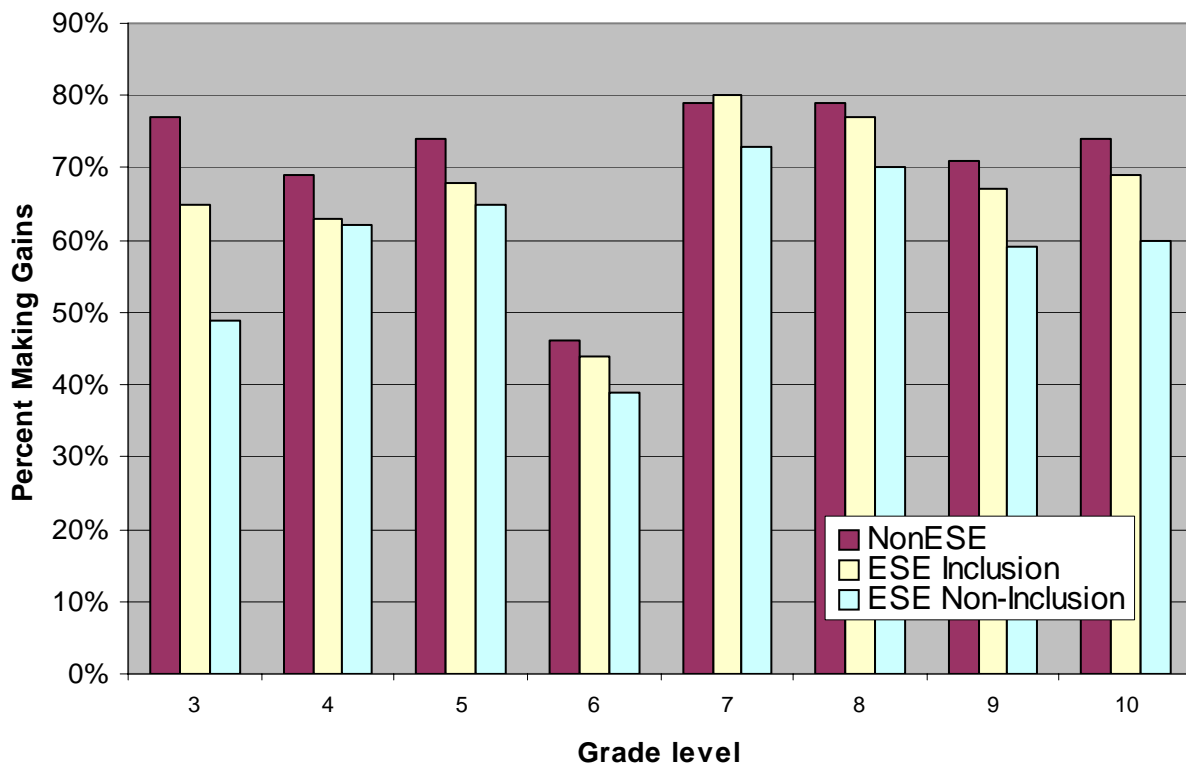
An analysis of local data indicated those non-ESE students in grades 3-10 achieved higher 2005 FCAT reading gains in six of eight grade levels when compared to the two groups of ESE students. However, in grade 8 both groups of ESE students out gained non-ESE students. In fact, ESE 8th grade students with less than 80 percent inclusion out gained non-ESE students and ESE students with 80 percent inclusion. Additionally, the percentage of non-ESE students making gains in the 2005 mathematics test was higher in seven of the eight grades when compared to both ESE student groups. ESE students with 80 percent or more regular classes out performed ESE students with less than 80 percent regular classes at each of the eight grade levels.

Although non-ESE students made greater gains in the majority of cases, ESE students with 80% or more regular classes were not far behind in four of eight grade levels in Reading and five of eight grade levels in Mathematics. However, because of unavoidable bias due to the manner in which students are chosen for inclusion, meaningful conclusions concerning program effectiveness are not justified. Other data such as survey information could be collected on these populations, but would not substantially contribute information that would help guide policy decisions. Moreover, the legal demands of program assignment hinder adequate research design as well.

FCAT Reading 2005



FCAT Mathematics 2005



Assumptions Underlying Arguments About Inclusion

Jay Heubert (1996), who teaches courses on school law at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, offers the following analysis of the conflicting assumptions underlying the arguments of advocates and critics of the Regular Education Initiative (REI), first proposed by the U.S. Department of Education in 1986 as a strategy for unifying regular and special education. Heubert also finds five points of consensus, listed on page 6. School administrators may find this analysis a useful starting point for a discussion of assumptions about inclusion with teachers, parents, and school boards.

REI Assumptions

1. Labeling and segregation are inherently bad, just as racially segregated schools are “inherently unequal.”

2. Students with disabilities aren’t different from nondisabled students in any meaningful way; everyone is unique; all students “differ.”

3. Students with mild mental disabilities can best be served in regular classrooms rather than in resource rooms or more restrictive settings because

- teachers have lower expectations when all students in a class have mental disabilities;
- many students with mental disabilities just get a watered-down version of the regular curriculum;
- even though the law calls for an individualized education plan, many mentally disabled kids don’t get truly individualized instruction;
- special education classes are a dead end for many kids with mental disabilities;
- virtually all regular education teachers can teach disabled students in regular classrooms and are willing to do so;
- if there’s any doubt as to whether a mainstream setting or a more restrictive setting is best, the law says we must prefer the regular classroom; the burden of proof is therefore on those who argue that a more restrictive setting is superior.

4. Special education is, in general, too costly, fragmented, and inefficient.

5. Many students in special education are not, in fact, disabled, but are placed there by faulty referral procedures and questionable evaluations; kids who aren’t actually handicapped are really hurt if they are placed in special ed.

Counter-Assumptions

1. Labeling is not bad if the labels describe real and significant differences; it’s the only way to ensure that funds go to the neediest kids.

2. Students with disabilities are different from nondisabled kids precisely because they have disabilities and require special services to be able to learn most effectively.

3. Most kids with mild mental disabilities who are not mainstreamed are being better served in separate special education programs because

- special education teachers have high expectations for their students;
- the curriculum, designed for special classes, is not watered down but appropriate;
- in smaller classes with specially trained teachers, mildly mentally disabled kids get far more individualized attention than in regular classes;
- special ed is not a dead end; nationally, about 14 percent of special ed students move on to regular ed;
- regular ed teachers don’t want disabled kids in their classes and don’t consider themselves trained to serve them;
- given the historical failure of regular education to serve kids with disabilities, the burden of proof should be on those who argue that regular education teachers are suddenly ready and willing to accept this new responsibility.

4. Opponents of special education just want to save money at the expense of needy students.

5. Most kids in special education belong there; referrals are generally reliable; there is always an evaluation before placement; the evaluation tools are the best we have – don’t throw out the thermometer if it gives you information you don’t like.

Points of Consensus

1. More students with mild mental disabilities can be served in regular classrooms if regular education teachers get proper training and support.
2. It's worth trying several ways of serving children with disabilities in regular classrooms before the students are referred for full evaluation.
3. We need better research on what works instructionally for students with different educational needs.
4. We need improved coordination between regular ed, special ed, bilingual ed, and vocational ed teachers.
5. The role of administrators is crucial in improving communication, coordination, and support services for children with disabilities and their families and teachers, because administrators control the schedule and have authority over those staff who need to work together.

Conclusion

Joy Rogers, author of the Phi Delta Kappa Research Bulletin previously cited and member of the Board of Education of Matheson School District, offers these summary comments.

The diversity of children in today's schools is often already very great. The inclusion of a child with a disability into this mix is most likely to add one child who has more needs than the others, but not needs that are more severe than needs already represented in the class. The best teachers in inclusive classrooms are simply the best teachers. The best teachers teach each individual student rather than try to gear instruction to the average of a group. The best teachers have a high degree of "with-itness," that is, they are highly aware of the dynamics of their classrooms. The best teachers are versatile. They are comfortable using many different teaching techniques and can readily shift among them as needed. The best teachers enjoy and value all their students.

Inclusion has become such a value laden word that it is currently very difficult to state opposition to inclusion. Thus, extensive debate on the question of whether "inclusion" is a good idea has produced much heat, but little light. More useful outcomes are likely to result when the staff of a school works together to determine how it can meet the needs of those specific children who live in its attendance area.

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Helpful Resources

1. *Examining Inclusion: Disability and Community Driven Development*. This 2005 report is available from The World Bank at www.worldbank.org/cdd. It examines case studies to ensure the inclusion of disabled people.
2. *Special Teaching in Higher Education: Successful Strategies for Access and Inclusion*. This 2003 book edited by Stuart Powell is available at <http://chronicle.com/teaching/books/>. Covering the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA), this book addresses the learning needs of impaired and disabled students higher education.
3. *Inclusion of Disabled People in Every Aspect of Society*. This 2004 article by Inge Komardjaja is available at the Disabled Peoples' International website at www.dpi.org.
4. *Winners All: A Call for Inclusive Schools*. This 1992 report is available from the National Association of State Boards of Education, 1012 Cameron Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314. It features descriptions of how various schools, school districts, and states have transformed their schools into effective learning environments for all children.
5. *Special Education at the Century's End: Evolution of Theory and Practice Since 1970*. This 1992 collection of readings is edited by Thomas Hehir and Thomas Latus and is available from *Harvard Educational Review*, Gutman Library, Suite 349, 6 Appian Way, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138. The readings are particularly useful in developing an understanding of how the concept of inclusion arose within special education.
6. *Integrating General and Special Education*. This 1993 volume is edited by John Goodlad and Thomas Lovitt and is available from Macmillan Publishing Company, 866 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022. The chapters represent a wide variety of viewpoints about how general and special education can work more effectively together.

7. *Techniques for Including Students with Disabilities: A Step-by-Step Practical Guide for School Principals*. This 1992 volume by E. John Shinsky is available from Shinsky Seminars Inc., 3101 North Cambridge Road, Lansing, Michigan 48911. It provides numerous reproducible checklists useful in developing readiness for inclusion among school personnel.
8. *Behind Special Education*. This 1991 volume by Thomas Skrtic is available from Love Publishing Company, Denver, Colorado 80222. It offers a conceptual analysis of issues in both general and special education underlying contemporary calls for change.
9. *Regular Lives*. This 1988 video was produced by Syracuse University and is available from the Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, Virginia 22091. It portrays students of different ages in inclusive settings.
10. *Curriculum Considerations In Inclusive Schools*. This 1992 volume edited by William and Susan Stainback is available from Brookes Publishing Company, P.O. Box 10624, Baltimore, Maryland 21285-0624. Its chapters describe inclusive strategies that may be useful in various educational settings.