

Classroom Diversity, RTI and Their Effects on Inclusion.

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### Classroom Diversity, RTI and Their Effects on Inclusion.

In 1954, there was a huge paradigm shift in our education system. *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* (Commager, Henry p.619) opened the door for thousands of African American students to learn alongside their white peers. No longer would the term “separate but equal” suffice; all students black and white would coexist in classrooms across the nation. This landmark case opened our thinking to the idea of inclusion in education. Twenty-one years later, the education world faced another paradigm shift. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) guaranteed that all students with handicaps would receive a free appropriate education. No longer would individuals with handicaps be denied access to public education. While this act brought us another step closer to inclusion, it still had room to grow. In 1990, EHA is reauthorized under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Here, the provisions are put into place that allow full inclusion in the classroom. Two significant elements emerged: the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). These elements now call for students with disabilities to be educated with their peers in the same classroom as their disability allows.

The landscape of the classroom has now changed. Students with a wide range of abilities are to be educated within the same classroom by the same general education teacher. No longer are students with learning disabilities to be excluded from a class and sent to a separate resource room for their education. The ultimate goal of a fully inclusive classroom is the education of all students without the separate instruction. As this idea of inclusion is implemented however, we find that not all students can be reached with general education practices. Teachers have developed new methods of instruction that appeal to different types of learners, yet some students still cannot achieve at grade level. Schools then put programs such as Response to

Instruction and Intervention (RTI2) in place that attempt to bring students' learning back up to grade level so they can be fully included in the classroom. Instead of being a temporary strategy, RTI2 has become a consistent need for most students who participate in the program because they never reach grade level performance and cannot be fully included in the classroom. Because of this tendency, Response to Intervention exposes the inadequacies of a fully inclusive classroom's ability to meet the needs of all students. However, the goal of inclusion can be achieved through implementation of smaller class size, teacher development, and a reevaluation of the idea of inclusion.

The idea of inclusion in education has grown and matured since the first steps in 1954. Desegregation broke down the initial barriers that created exclusive education for whites. The key idea that Brown versus Board of Education Topeka addressed was the opinion of "separate but equal". The idea that all students, no matter their race, could and should be educated together set the table for inclusion to become mainstream ideology in education. The passing of The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was the next step of inclusion. Working under similar language of Brown vs Board of Education Topeka students with disabilities gained access to public education. The act did not give these students access to the general classrooms. Most were educated in self-contained classrooms in which the students have very limited access to their peers. They were receiving an education but it was only an updated version of "separate but equal". The reauthorization of EHA in 1990 broke the "separate but equal" idea within the schools.

Under IDEA, students now had access to the supports they needed to function within a general classroom. Ann Turnbull, Rud Turnbull, Michael Wehmeyer, and Karrie Shogren (2015) define this access in their book Exceptional Lives as Least Restrictive Environment (p.19). To

make sure students had access to the LRE, teacher's aides were placed with students to help them navigate the curriculum and provide the one-on-one support some students need. Along with authorizing the use of technology, assessment accommodations, and specially designed instruction, the act also authorized Individual Education Plans. An IEP allowed a team of individuals to modify a student's education to meet the needs of that student. This accommodation enabled the student to be part of the general classroom setting while still being educated based on what goals the IEP laid out.

Immediate benefits are becoming evident as inclusion is further implemented in the classroom. Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, and Shogren (2015) state "students with learning disabilities or emotional disorders who were educated in more inclusive settings enrolled in postsecondary education at more than twice the rate of their peers who were not included" (p.45). Not only did students with disabilities have greater achievement when included, they also benefited socially. Nilani Ljunggren De Silva (2013) notes in the article "Inclusive Pedagogy in Light of Social Justice" that "Social relationships and friendship, or peer relationships, are seen as positive traits" (p.421). Ruth Tkachyk (2013) states in her article "Questioning Secondary Inclusive Education" that under inclusion "social benefits far outweighed the occasional disruptions" (p.16). Social interactions under inclusion enabled students with disabilities to model and learn socially acceptable practices from their peers.

Benefits of inclusion did not stop with students with disabilities. The idea of Universal design for Learning (UDL) was an important benefit from inclusion. UDL calls for "multiple means of representation... action and expression ... engagement" to provide access to learning in the classroom (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, and Shogren, 2015, p.40). Angela Evans (2013) expresses in her article "From Exclusion to Inclusion" that the UDL highlighted the need for "a

new set of skills and knowledge that staff had to acquire to enable them to embrace all the children who had previously been excluded from mainstream education” (p.287). As teachers modified instruction practices to accommodate students with disabilities and align with UDL standards, they found that nondisabled students benefitted. All individuals, with a disability or without, learn best with specific styles of instruction. Some learn best through hearing, some through seeing, and others by hands-on engagement. UDL addresses all students’ learning styles, not only those with disabilities.

As Inclusion brought to light many great benefits, it also exposed many shortcomings. A drawback of inclusion is failure of teachers and students to accept the idea of inclusion. De Silva (2013) makes the claim that “participants (classroom teachers, special teachers, peers and pupils) pursue emancipatory social justice, working towards the recognition and inclusion of all by actively building a consensus” (p.421). The idea of inclusion must be accepted by all or it cannot be fully implemented. It is imperative that teachers and school administrations find a way to make sure inclusion is accepted by all staff and students. As long as there are perceptions of social segregation, inclusion will struggle to function. An example of this can be found in Johanna Krull, Jürgen Wilbert, and Thomas Hennemann’s (2014) research, “The Social and Emotional Situation of First Graders with Classroom Behavior Problems and Classroom Learning Difficulties in Inclusive Classes”, which states that “children with learning disabilities were consistently less socially accomplished than their typical peers” (p.170) and “those children had three times the risk of social exclusion compared to their classmates” (p.171). This failure to be socially accepted can have deeper effects on the student. As Krull, Wilbert, and Hennemann (2014) state, “Studies indicate that in inclusive classrooms, children with learning disabilities are affected by a more negative academic self-concept than their nondisabled peers” (p.172).

Another area in which teachers face challenges is in effectively implementing inclusion in the schools. Tkachyk (2013) states “while teachers typically exhibit positive attitudes toward the principles of inclusion, some feel under siege and unprepared to comply with the broad array of requirements” (p.20). The struggle that many educators face is the restriction of time. Teachers are required to cover specified curriculum within a school year, and are measured by students’ achievement levels on state mandated tests, so time must be used wisely. Tkachyk (2013) explains that “these negative attitudes may not be the result of discriminatory beliefs. Teacher attitudes towards inclusion are often simply the result of trying to manage classrooms of 25–30 students with few supports” (p.21). Evans (2013) describes “children with special needs as becoming a magnet for projections from teachers, support workers and peers” (p.295). The effects on the classroom can be tremendous. If the classroom teacher gets caught up in directing education practices solely to a particular student to meet the requirements under IDEA, they risk excluding all other students in the class. It is important that school systems and administrators provide the proper supports for the students so the teaching load does not overwhelm the classroom teacher. Teachers are not only working to make inclusion a success for students with disabilities, they are also working to make it successful for all nondisabled students. School systems need to make training available for teachers to better equip them for the inclusive setting of the classroom. Tkachyk (2013) clearly states that the “fact remains that full inclusion will only work if there are enough supports in place for teachers and students allowing students with learning difficulties to receive the specialized programming necessary for them to experience success and reach their greatest potential” (p.23). Teachers who are better prepared and have the supports to handle challenges will be more effective in implementing inclusion and will achieve higher success with all students in the class.

The greatest problem that inclusion has exposed is the lack of support for students who are struggling but do not have a diagnosis under IDEA to provide them with an IEP. These students face exclusion from services that could greatly benefit their education. These underachieving students continue to fall behind as their education progresses. They find that they are significantly lacking in the knowledge and skills needed to perform in the general education classroom. Good teachers will try to implement UDL for that student in hopes they will respond and return to grade-level learning with their peers. There are instances where these interventions will not work and the students continue to fall behind. Schools may implement a policy that will retain the student for a grade level in hope that they can better comprehend the material and be able to advance with their new group of peers. This is not the best method. Shane R. Jimerson and Tyler L. Renshaw (2012) state in their article “Retention and Social Promotion” that “Retained students are 5–10 times more likely to drop out of high school than nonretained students” (p.13) and that “Individuals who have experienced grade retention are less likely to receive a diploma by age 20 and are more likely to be unemployed, live on public assistance, or be in prison” (p.13). These facts should discourage school systems from implementing these policies. It still leaves the question of how inclusion should work for these students.

A new approach that many states have adopted to help these students is Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI2). The goals of this approach, according to the “TN CORE RTI2 Framework implementation guide 2013,” are “to experience prevention of instructional gaps and early intensive intervention as a best practice, prior to failure, and prior to identification” (p.5). This program specifically targets students who do not qualify for accommodations under IDEA, but it is not exclusive to that group. The umbrella of RTI2 covers all students universally. The TN CORE lays the frame work for RTI2 in three tiers of assistance.

According to the TN CORE Framework (2013) under “Tier I, all students receive research-based, high quality, general education instruction that incorporates ongoing universal screening and ongoing assessment to inform instruction” (p.87). This approach embodies the inclusion idea. No student can be excluded due to the lack of identification under IDEA. The TN CORE Framework (2013) goes on:

In Tier II intervention is implemented when assessment indicates that a student is not making adequate gains from Tier I instruction alone. In addition to Tier I instruction, students are provided small group interventions designed to meet their specific needs. These students are progress monitored weekly or every other week using a tool that is sensitive to measuring changes in the student’s individual skills. In Tier III, more intensive interventions are provided to students who have not made significant progress in Tier II, who are more than 1.5 grade levels behind, or who are below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile. These students are progress monitored weekly or every other week using a tool that is sensitive to measuring changes in the student’s individual skills. (p.87)

Only if the student fails to show progress in Tier III will they be referred for testing to see if they qualify for services under IDEA.

Though it seems RTI2 makes great strides in attempting to correct the shortcomings of inclusion, it actually reinforces the deficiencies of inclusion. For RTI2 to be successful it must add to the regular classroom instruction time. The only way this can be accomplished is by segregating students out of the mainstream classroom. In Tier II, students will be separated from the mainstream classroom to receive intervention. The only time constraint on these interventions is they last no longer than twenty minutes each day. In Tier III, the students may be



segregated up to an hour each day. This separation defies the idea of inclusion. We have reverted back to practices that we have tried to abolish, but it seems to be the only way we can find to help these students. . Should we outright reject any program that causes students to be segregated from their classmates? Tkachyk (2013) points out that her “gradual realization that the unique needs of my students are ...best met in a segregated classroom has caused me to question whether or not the concept of fully inclusive classrooms... is the answer for students with disabilities” (p. 22-23). RTI 2 demonstrates the struggle of what needs we must concentrate on meeting with our students. Is it more important they receive quality education or social interaction? We must consider each student because their needs are so diverse, and there is no “one size fits” all approach.

RTI2 also highlights the fact that teachers are still not receiving enough support within the classroom. Through the best efforts of classroom teachers, students are still not being reached. The small group interventions in Tier II are an example of how a classroom teacher is unable to meet the needs of such a diverse group of students. Once students are in this small group setting, teachers are able to focus on the individual needs of each student. Instruction can be modified on an immediate basis and allow the teacher to find the most effective practice. General education classroom teachers are unable to do this because they are attempting to effectively educate twenty students. The expectation that has been laid on general classroom teachers is tremendous. The demographics of a classroom can include students with IEPs, students who need interventions to keep them at grade level, students who are performing at grade level, and students who are performing above grade level. Teachers are expected to provide differentiated instruction that meets all of the needs of each individual student. This is impossible in these settings.

RTI2 fails to implement a plan for students who do not progress enough to reintegrate in to the classroom yet progress too much to be moved to Tier III or referred for testing under IDEA. RTI2 faces the same difficulty that inclusion faced; it has created group of students that fall into an area where no services are available. Students who find themselves in this area face never being fully included into the classroom. Unlike students who qualify for services under IDEA, they have no protection to guarantee they be included. The inclusion model has again excluded a portion of students.

The only exit from the program or in between tiers is a student showing “adequate progress”. How is adequate progress defined? This is left up to individual school programs. There is no universal language to guide educators though the program. Students with disabilities have this universal language that spells out what services they can access. It makes provisions designed to protect their right to be educated among their peers. This protection will be exclusive to students who are trapped in the limbo of RTI2.

The idea of inclusion is not going away. In fact, the education system is becoming more inclusive. Since this is now the norm for education, teachers and administrators must find a way to implement inclusion in every classroom. We must reevaluate what inclusion looks like and focus on the ultimate goal of the idea.

The first area that must improve is class size. Smaller classes will allow the teacher to have a chance to learn the needs of the individual students. RTI2’s example of smaller group intervention demonstrates the need for focused instruction. The smaller class size will benefit students with disabilities, students who are under performing, students on grade level, and students above grade level. Elizabeth Hertling, Courtney Lenard, Lidia Lumsden, and Stuart

Smith's (2000) article "Class size: Can School Districts Capitalize on the Benefits of Smaller Classes" states that teachers report "a major advantage of small classes... is that they can devote more time to instruction because they do not need to spend as much time on classroom management" (p.5). This extra time that can be given to instruction could replace Tier II interventions. Teachers would be able to keep all the students in the classroom while servicing the individual groups who would need more support. Assessment methods that tracked student performance and progress against curriculum standards could be implemented, and teachers could respond more effectively to the information they received from those assessments. The same study also notes that "when tested, students in smaller classes consistently outperformed students in regular-sized classrooms" (p.2) and "the most notable student gains came from low-achieving students" (p.2). The smaller class size effects were still evident in reading and math through the eighth grade (Hertling, Lenard, Lumsden, and Smith, 2000, p.2). This research establishes that Tier II intervention is needed only because general classroom teachers lack the necessary time to meet the needs of the individual students.

Another area where inclusion would benefit from small class size is the social environment. Hertling, Lenard, Lumsden, and Smith (2000) state that "both students and teachers have better attitudes toward smaller classes. The atmosphere is one of less anxiety and tension" (p.4). They found in their research that students in smaller classes "develop more positive attitudes, perceptions, and human relationships" (p.5) they "have fewer fears of being ridiculed or bullied" (p.5) and they are "more motivated and have a better self-concept" (p.5). Having a smaller class would allow teachers to focus on social climate. Dr. Kalin Gaydarov (2014) states in his research titled "Psychological Wellbeing in the Context of an Inclusive Education" that "school plays a significant part as it has to create an environment of acceptance of and support

for the ones who are different. This is the only way these children can get a chance for social inclusion” (p.1). If teachers had the opportunity to create these types of environments, we would see reduced social exclusion for not only students with disabilities, but all students within the classroom. We could foster a culture of acceptance and tolerance. Tkachyk (2013) notes that “inclusion is a complex proposition that requires more than helping a youth develop a superficial friendship with a pro social peer” (p.19). With smaller, more intimate settings teachers would be able to dig deeper and help develop peer-to-peer relationships. However, reducing class size creates a need for more teachers, and that costs money. Funding is the largest barrier to establishing a truly effective inclusion model. Schools are constantly facing reduced operation budgets, and many have turned to consolidations to combat the reduction. This may give the school a larger budget, but it causes class sizes to increase, further complicating the issue of inclusion. How do we overcome this barrier if we find we are unable to implement small class size? Research suggests that if we cannot reduce class size, then the next best approach is for school systems to focus on teacher development. Benjamin Clark and Alexandria Gilbert (2013) note in their article “Following the Money: A Tennessee Education Spending Primer” that, in Tennessee, “Less than 54 percent of total spending is directed at classroom instruction, such as teacher salaries, textbooks, supplies, and other instructional spending” (p.1). This example shows us that there is opportunity for our school systems to enhance the quality of education. Harry K. Wong’s (2001) article “There Is Only One Way to Improve Student Achievement” states, “The most important factor, bar none, is the teacher. An ineffective teacher can affect student learning for years, but having two ineffective teachers in subsequent years can damage a student’s academic career” (p.1). Wong (2001) notes that “every additional dollar spent on raising teacher quality netted greater student achievement gains than did any other use of school resources”

(p.1). Tkachyk (2013) highlights this in her article when she states “teachers seemed to feel that they hardly had any information and once the student was enrolled in their classroom the help they received was minimal” (p. 21). If a teacher is faced with a classroom where they feel they are inadequately prepared, how do we expect them to deliver a quality education to the students and model inclusion when they may not even fully understand it themselves? Selma Akalin and Bulbin Sucuoglu (2015) note in their article “Effects of Classroom Management Intervention Based on Teacher Training and Performance Feedback on Outcomes of Teacher-Student Dyads in Inclusive Classrooms” that “Teachers in mainstreaming classrooms are expected to meet the needs of all children, yet teachers indicate they lack the knowledge and skills on mainstreaming” (p.740). We can focus spending on teacher development programs that emphasize inclusion practices. The overall atmosphere of the classroom will be impacted as these teachers are better prepared and have the confidence to implement these practices. This alternative to smaller classrooms gives districts the ability to improve the inclusive environment of their schools.

Another positive effect of enhancing teacher training is the retention rate of teachers. Experienced teachers can be hard to come by in many schools. Education faces a high rate of teachers leaving the profession. The influx of new teachers that have not had the opportunity to enhance their skills in the classroom can prove counterproductive for inclusion. Tkachyk (2013) talks of the symptom of de-personalization as part of teacher burnout (p.21). Many teachers face this when they are given minimal support in their classroom. Tkachyk (2013) finds “a positive correlation between the proportion of students with special needs in the classroom and the level of depersonalization” (p.21). Teachers can become overwhelmed as they face the challenge of adapting curriculum and teaching strategies to meet the needs of such a diverse range of students. Wong (2001) relates that “Of every 100 new graduates with licenses to teach, 30 do not. Of the

remaining 70, at least 21 will have left teaching within five years” (p.1). This can leave school systems at a loss to find experienced teachers. Seasoned teachers have had the opportunity to face and overcome these challenges. As with any work, greater efficiency develops from practice. Experienced teachers have also had time to test multiple methods of inclusion practices and are able recognize which methods are successful and what effect can be expected from them. Through career development and training, we can give these teachers the tools they need to become successful long term. These trainings will help propel them past the burnout stage and will equip them with the necessary methods to affectively implement inclusion in the classroom.

While all of the proposed methods give us pathways to achieve inclusion in the classroom, we must consider that under some circumstances an inclusive classroom may not appear to be fully inclusive. Tkachyk (2013) points out in her article that “parents were worried about social isolation as well as the quality of instruction and the possible loss of needed services” (p. 22). This is interesting to consider when students who qualify for services under IDEA are guaranteed these rights. Tkachyk (2013) coincides this with “increased emphasis on meeting the standard curriculum goals (mainly goals to permit students to move to colleges and universities) other life skills, vocational, and prevocational courses are unavailable for many of the students who need them” (p.22). Keeping students with special needs in the general classrooms can be counterproductive based on the needs of the student. We must make sure that we are looking to the needs of the student and not just getting them into the classroom. Tkachyk (2013) notes that among students with special needs “stress levels and negative behaviors decreased after being placed in an environment where they could receive appropriate programming with positive supports that allowed them to experience success for the first time in their schooling” (p.22). As long as the students remained in the general classroom, they faced

the possibility that they would never succeed. Teachers must be aware of this as they approach the education of individual students.

This applies not just to students with special needs, but to all students. Some students may have greater success in life if they are allowed to seek vocational classes. The ultimate goal of inclusion should be to meet the needs of all students. Yet our school systems restrict these students to a curriculum that does not account for the diversity of each student. Inclusion can and should have the flexibility to give all students an education that meets their needs. This flexibility could allow a child with a disability to receive an education along with their peers or in a separate classroom where they can receive intense instruction all day. We must move away from superficial appearances and find what the individual student really needs. Inclusion is not implemented just because a diverse group of students are receiving an education within the same classroom. It is implemented when all students receive an education that meets their needs. If we reevaluate how we understand inclusion, we will move closer to meeting the goals of inclusion.

Inclusivity in education has been evolving through the last sixty-one years. Brown vs the Board of Education was the catalyst of change that brought about a huge paradigm shift of inclusion. This idea that all students could be educated within the same classroom has guided our educational legislation and programs for decades. It has changed how teachers educate through differentiated instruction and universally designed lesson plans. The quality of education for students has grown by leaps and bounds. Along with this growth, however, we have found new challenges. Programs such as Response to Instruction and Intervention have exposed the inadequacies of inclusion to meet the needs of all students. Though inadequacies exist in the idea, we cannot discard inclusion completely. If we fail to effectively implement inclusion into the classroom, however, we risk creating a more exclusive educational experience for all

students. As our educational landscape changes, it is imperative that our paradigms change with it.



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