Inclusive education refers to a way of structuring educational services so that all students, regardless of labels or putative disabilities, are educated together in a shared community. Inclusive education is not only an administrative arrangement but also an ideological and philosophical commitment to a vision of schools and societies that are diverse and nonexclusionary. As such, inclusive education can be viewed as a civil rights issue, akin to ending racial segregation in schools. Although inclusive education originally was used specifically to describe the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, a more comprehensive definition of inclusion can be extended to discuss the ways in which education is provided that recognize, honor, and respond to other demographic differences—race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, sexual orientation, and family configuration—in addition to differences in students’ skills and assumed abilities. All students have multiple identities; for example, a student may have an identity stemming from having cerebral palsy, but also identify himself or herself as a Spanish-speaking student from a single-parent family. Many of these multiple identities intersect and interact. An inclusive classroom is responsive to all student characteristics.

An ideal model of inclusive education is at odds with other practices of commingling students of varying ability—mainstreaming, dumping, partial inclusion, and the practice of framing inclusive education as a continuum. Mainstreaming gained prominence after 1975 when the U.S. Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that required all students with disabilities to be placed in the least restrictive environment. This was interpreted to mean that students with disabilities could be returned to the regular education setting when they were deemed eligible—able to learn and make progress in the traditional classroom. Under the mainstreaming model, the responsibility to change and adapt was placed on the student. An ideal model of inclusion implies that the classroom organization and the curriculum and instruction of the general education classroom should be designed in order to meet the needs of a wide range of students. The model embodies the belief that students should not have to earn the right to be educated in an inclusive environment; rather, all students should be entitled to be educated with their chronological peers in their neighborhood school or the school they would typically attend if they were not consigned to a special category and given a label. Dumping refers to the practice of placing students in typical classrooms with no preparation or training for their teachers and without a system of ongoing support and resources. Partial inclusion is problematic ideologically and logistically, given that full membership in a community implies that the student is “there” the majority of the time and has his or her learning needs met within the context of the classroom community.

Inclusive education can also be contrasted with education that seeks to provide what is a called “a continuum of services,” a series of placement possibilities that range from full inclusion to full exclusion from the typical classroom. Offering a continuum of services leads to the continuing exclusion of many students with disabilities. Because there are “choices” about where a student will be placed, there is little impetus for systematic change. Structural change and decisions about placement
are often based on limited and prejudicial assumptions about what students are capable of doing and learning. This creates a tendency to fill all the available placement options, thus impeding the development of a unified, comprehensive structure.

One of the key concepts of inclusion is that students with disabilities should be represented in any classroom in “natural proportions.” That is, if children with disabilities represent 10% of the overall student population, no classroom or school should have more than 10% of their students with such challenges. Inclusion policies in particular schools, however, often preclude this configuration. Because administrators look for schools and classrooms whose teachers who will be welcoming and whose curricular and pedagogical practices support diversity and inclusion, students with disabilities are often overrepresented in particular classrooms or schools. In many schools, only certain classrooms are explicitly labeled as inclusive. Although the range of differences present in any particular classroom will certainly vary, all classrooms are inevitably heterogeneous; the difference is between classrooms that explicitly name and address student differences and those that attempt to make the differences invisible.

**Working Toward Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education has implications for classroom organization and climate, curriculum, pedagogy, staffing and service provision, and teacher education.

**Classroom Organization and Climate**

For inclusive education to be successful, extensive consideration must be given to the ways in which the classroom and school climate is welcoming of all students and their families. Issues of voice and representation become paramount if the school is to be truly a community in which all members participate and see themselves recognized and valued. Professionals' ways of talking about differences and their use of students' first languages are critical to creating a learning environment in which differences are acknowledged and addressed. Just as the concept of color blindness has been rejected as a goal or a possibility in multicultural education, the idea that good inclusion is invisible (i.e., you cannot tell who the kids with disabilities are) is replaced with the goal of meeting students' needs without either minimizing or stigmatizing the characteristics that occasion adaptations and modifications. Careful attention is also paid to issues of bullying, harassment, and discrimination. Active programs to combat racism, homophobia, religious oppression, and disability oppression are essential to creating welcoming environments for all students and families.

**Curriculum**

An inclusive curriculum names and values diversity of many kinds. What is taught in an inclusive classroom is broad and closely connected to the goal of having all students become *global citizens* who are knowledgeable about all aspects of diversity and also to the ways in which that diversity must be defended against those who would narrow or distort the stories and perspectives that are presented. In the same way that James A. Banks proposed that comprehensive multicultural education seeks to be transformative rather than additive, inclusive education demands that students be knowledgeable about differences in race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, and sexual orientation and also possess skills to interrupt and challenge oppressive behavior and practices.

**Pedagogy**

Within an inclusive classroom, the ways in which children are taught should include extensive
differentiated instruction (not tracking), a recognition of multiple intelligences (as defined by Howard Gardner and by Thomas Armstrong) and a commitment to exploring multiple modes of presenting, exploring, and assessing student knowledge and performance. It is widely recognized that rigid, lockstep curriculum is incompatible with thinking inclusively and flexibly about a wide variety of learners. Many structures and ways of framing instruction have been developed and refined that make schooling more accessible to a broader range of learners. The concept of universal design, for example, asks that instruction be designed from the outset to be available to all, rather than retrofitting the curriculum and the pedagogy after the fact. Cooperative learning, when designed to actively include all learners, can be used in order to allow for all students to participate while still working toward a shared goal. Peer teaching and peer support are also key components of inclusive education, recognizing that peers can offer each other essential teaching and emotional support while also strengthening the classroom community.

**Staffing and Service Provision**

Inclusive education requires an end to segregated staffing patterns such as exclusively designating certain teachers as *special education teachers* who serve students with labels and designating others identified as *regular education teachers* who serve students without labels. The vast proliferation of students without formal labels who are still *high-needs* due to economic, language, and emotional challenges makes it imperative that teachers have a skill set that crosses traditional boundaries. The term *role release* applies to the need for particular teaching and therapy skills to be available to, and practiced by, a broader range of educators and staff members. Models of co-teaching, in which teachers with different backgrounds, certifications, and expertise share responsibility for a heterogeneous group of learners, are important to the success of inclusive education. Paraprofessionals also play an important role in inclusive classrooms, although it is critical that these aides or assistants not limit their interactions and support to students with designated disabilities, as this tends to perpetuate student segregation.

**Teacher Education**

Preparing teachers for inclusive education entails disrupting typical patterns of preparing teachers for either special education or regular education and moving beyond even dual programs or double majors to programs that are specifically designed to prepare teachers for inclusive settings. Syracuse University had the first teacher education program in the United States to prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms; now such programs are far more common throughout the country. Teachers who are prepared for inclusive teaching have skills in designing inclusive curriculum, implementing differentiated instruction, promoting inclusive classroom communities, teaching about differences, working with parents, collaborating with other educational professionals, and are active advocates for inclusive educational practices. Most important, those prepared as inclusive teachers both expect and welcome the heterogeneity of their classrooms and have the skills to create and teach within inclusive environments.

**Challenges to Inclusive Education**

Challenges to inclusive education include the ideological, political, and structural. There are still those who are not comfortable with creating classrooms that include all children within a common framework. They worry that the needs of children with disabilities cannot be met within the context of general education. They believe that the education of “typical” children will be negatively impacted by the
presence and inclusion of children with disabilities. They also believe that the current models of segregated special education are acceptable and/or optimal. Those who defend special education argue that special education instruction is individualized and that this cannot happen in the regular classroom. Opponents of inclusion refer to inclusion as a one-size-fits-all model and believe that both typical students and students with disabilities will be denied an appropriate education.

Other opponents of inclusive education argue that students with disabilities will not be safe in the regular school environment and will be victims of harassment, bullying, and exclusion. Other objections include the fact that most teachers have not been prepared to teach to a wide range of differences in the classroom and will not be accepting of inclusive education.

Proponents of inclusive education believe that these objections to inclusive education stem from an inability to imagine, actualize, or advocate for classrooms and schools that are organized and supported differently. It is certainly true that many schools are structured rigidly, with a narrow curriculum, limited pedagogy, and unimaginative and poorly supported teachers. Proponents of inclusive education point out that these problems go beyond inclusive education and are simply highlighted more dramatically when the range of student learners is explicitly more heterogeneous. They also believe that making schools better for students whose needs are more obviously divergent can occasion improvements for all students. Research supports the contention that inclusive settings that include adequate and ongoing support for teachers, a broad curriculum, creative and differentiated teaching strategies, parental involvement, and careful attention to school climate and community are optimal learning environments for all students.

As some observers have noted, the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act and the use of other forms of high-stakes testing and regimentation have also negatively impacted the implementation of inclusive education. Similarly, models that reward teachers based on the performance of their students also dissuade teachers and schools from including students who may require additional time, skills, and resources in order to be successful.

See also
Accommodation, Reasonable, Children With Disabilities, Families, and Public Institutions, Equity, Educational, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Learning Disabilities, Social Categories, and Educational Practices, Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), Special Education, Special Education and Inclusive Education in Europe

Further Readings


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