Making Inclusion Work in General Education Classrooms

Festus E. Obiakor, Mateba Harris, Kagendo Mutua, Anthony Rotatori, Bob Algozzine

Education and Treatment of Children, Volume 35, Number 3, August 2012, pp. 477-490 (Article)

Published by West Virginia University Press

DOI: 10.1353/etc.2012.0020

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/etc/summary/v035/35.3.obiakor.html
Making Inclusion Work in General Education Classrooms

Festus E. Obiakor
The City College of New York, CUNY

Mateba Harris
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Kagendo Mutua
University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa

Anthony Rotatori
Saint Xavier University

Bob Algozzine
University of North Carolina-Charlotte

Abstract
The goal of any educational program is to help students maximize their performance. For many students with disabilities, the environment in which to achieve this outcome is under continuing debate and sometimes diminishes the likelihood of achievement. As a result of a long and sometimes difficult history of treatment, individuals with disabilities experience educational professionals and service providers who not only downplay their capabilities and willingness to live a “normal” life, but who also argue that excluding them in educational processes is justified, proper, and right. We believe to increase normalcy in their lives, all individuals with disabilities should be educated with their peers without disabilities in environments that are inclusive. In this article, we discuss how general and special educators can make inclusion work in general education classrooms despite continuing concerns about its practicality.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms has stimulated great debate in education (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 2006; Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006; Kauffman, 2002; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995; King, 2003). For example, King (2003) explained that “inclusive education means that all students within a school regardless of their strengths or weaknesses, or

Correspondence to Festus E. Obiakor, Ph.D., The City College of New York, CUNY, Dept. of Educational Leadership and Special Education, New York, NY 10031; e-mail: fobiakor@ccny.cuny.edu.
disabilities in any area become part of the school community” (p. 152). In this context, students with disabilities attend the same schools as their neighbors and peers without disabilities where they are provided all support needed to achieve full access to the same curriculum. Inclusion is built on the principle that all students should be valued for their exceptional abilities and included as important members of the school community (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 2006; Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008); and, it is an entitlement guaranteed by federal law (Hall, Collins, Benjamin, Nind, & Sheehy, 2004; Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 2006).

Despite continuing debates about the applicability and practicality of full inclusion (see Kauffman, 2002), inclusion seems to have many positive derivatives. For instance, social justice is a grounding principle of inclusion since it supports respect, care, recognition, and empathy and challenges beliefs as well as practices that directly or indirectly encourage the continuation of marginalization and exclusion (Theoharris, 2007). Earlier, Fullan (2003) discussed these same proponents as essential characteristics in building an ethical school. Within ethical schools, social justice is a major component of the belief systems of educators. Activities support achieving and maintaining environments where students are provided with equal opportunity to achieve an education. Frattura and Capper (2007) explained that the inclusion of students in the general education curriculum and environment is an issue of equity and social justice. They contended that in order to develop an inclusive school where all students share in and are a part of the school’s community, administrators, teachers, and other professionals must engage in continuing reflections addressing the current state of the school as it relates to social justice for students with disabilities, what they need to do to get there, and how they are going to do it. With inclusion, students with disabilities are expected to achieve academic and emotional success while learning beside their peers without disabilities (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 2006; Hall et al., 2004; Theoharris, 2007).

The 1954 Brown v. Board of Education case opened the doors for parents and educators to argue for equal access to schooling for students with disabilities. In 1994, the world conference on special needs education, concluded that “regular schools with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all” (Foreman & Arthur-Kelly, 2008, p. 110). Within inclusive classrooms, students with disabilities have access to meaningful, rigorous general education curricula; and special education is specifically designed instruction to assist them in maximizing their highest potential (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 2006;
Exclusionary practices, such as educating students with disabilities within separate facilities and outside of the general education are contradictory to the goals of inclusion and special education. Of course, the critical feature of successful inclusion is what happens (i.e., services and evidence-based practices provided) more than where it occurs (i.e., placement or setting in which instruction is provided). In this regard, preferred, appropriate, and effective inclusive practices are guided by state and federal legislation, directed by codes of ethical and professional conduct, and defined by principles of effective instruction that are not bound by the setting in which children are taught.

Teacher educators, educational researchers, and policy makers are familiar with the foundations of inclusive practices. The purpose of this article is to discuss how general and special educators can make inclusion work in general education classrooms despite continuing concerns about its practicality. Embedded in our discussion is the belief that inclusion works well when all stakeholders collaborate and consult with each other.

Placement Fails to Define Least Restrictive Environment, Inclusion, or Effectiveness

The process of providing special education services often begins by considering appropriate and alternate educational placements (Rizza & Morrison, 2003). It is important that all educators know how such decisions impact the daily lives of students, including access to the curriculum used to teach them and their academic and social interactions with peers. The least restrictive environment (LRE) mandate of the Education of All Handicapped Children’s Act of 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, and subsequent reauthorizations in 1997 and 2004 focused on inclusive practices. According to Turnbull (2003), special education laws directed that students receiving special education must be educated with their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent possible and appropriate. In addition, students may be removed from the general education environment “only if they cannot be satisfactorily educated with the use of supplementary aids and services” (Hosp & Reschly, 2003, p. 68). Sailor and Roger (2005) argued that fully-integrated application of these principles has increased high-stakes assessment and sanctioned accountability outcomes for all students (see the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). In many schools, there are different and thought to be increasingly restrictive placement options for students with disabilities including inclusion, where students participate fully in the
general education curriculum and receive special education services as needed with their peers without disabilities; resource where students are pulled out and provided service outside of the general education environment, usually in the special education classroom; self-contained where students remain in and receive services in a special education classroom for the majority of their school day; and, alternative where students receive services outside of the general public school. While placement does not define practice, placement decisions sometimes create “unrealistic expectations, prejudicial generalizations, illusory conclusions, and deceptive self-aggrandizement” (Obiakor, 2001, p. 84); and continuing conversations are essential in efforts to make least restrictive environments and inclusion effective in providing services to individuals with disabilities.

Pugach and Warger (2001) argued that “… although there has long been much agreement that the general education classroom is the optimal placement of choice for most students with disabilities…the student’s presence alone in general education classrooms is not to be construed as de facto access to the curriculum” (p. 195). Many parents of students with disabilities and other professionals agree that most students with disabilities should receive the greatest portion of their education within the general education classroom with their peers without disabilities (Cardona, 2009). Students both with and without disabilities want to be educated within the same environment. Klinger and Vaughn (1999) synthesized 20 studies that investigated the perceptions of learning of over 4659 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Among this group of students, 760 students had high incidence disabilities. As the studies revealed, students with disabilities want to learn the same material, use the same books, and enjoy homework and grading practices as their non-disabled peers. Additionally, Klinger and Vaughn (1999) found that students with and without disabilities understood that students learn differently; and as a result, need teachers who are willing to teach using a variety of styles in order to reach every learner. These students also appreciated having teachers that slowed down instruction when needed.

Of course, there are occasions where placement in general or special education does not result in improved academic or social outcomes for students with or without disabilities. This is particularly true when few or no adjustments are made to meet individual needs (Obiakor, 2008; Williams & Obiakor, 2009). Conversely, there are occasions when students with disabilities make greater progress in general education than in special education. To a large measure, placement does not define practice and it is important to consider the following suggestions when making decisions about where to educate students with disabilities and their peers (Obiakor, 2001, 2007):
• Race and culture can matter in the education of any student, but placements must be based on needs, not on students’ racial or cultural identities.
• Language differences should never be misconstrued as a lack of intelligence.
• Empathy is an important ingredient of a good educational menu.
• Education in least restrictive environments is preferred, but practices are more important than placements.
• Individual differences are not deficits and they must be valued in efforts to improve problems all students bring to the classroom.
• All students are best served when their due process rights are respected.
• Appropriate inclusion reduces biased exclusion of students in classroom activities.
• Prejudicial placements have devastating effects on all students.

The Case of Raul

Educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom promises participation in the general curriculum which is a mandate of the IDEA (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). See the case of Raul below:

At the age of eight, third grader, Raul was diagnosed as a student with a learning disability. He was bilingual and used Spanish whenever in dialogue with his father, a native of Mexico who did not speak English. However, Raul and his Caucasian mother spoke English to one another. The school considers Raul’s home to be a bilingual household in that both English and Spanish were frequently used in the home environment. Raul enjoyed math tasks and demonstrated strength within this area. On the other hand, he was not very enthusiastic about reading. Additionally, he had difficulty with maintaining focus while being instructed by his general education teacher. The teacher was concerned that because Raul was so “busy” during class time he was not retaining the information from class. His teacher reported several behaviors about him that were concerning to her. He was out of his seat more often than he was in his seat and he did not raise his hand to answer questions. The teacher concluded that these behaviors interfered with Raul’s learning and the learning of others and clearly was indicative of a learning disability. His reading skills
appeared to be low and his teacher wanted him tested for special education services. Raul did meet the criteria for a student with a learning disability. Immediately, he was assigned to a special education resource teacher. The teacher pulled Raul out of his general education classroom for reading and writing. This was approximately one to two hours of time spent outside of his general education classroom without his friends in general education. Raul’s reading skills did not get to grade level and his behavior did not improve. However, he remained engaged in math in the general education classroom, even when the curriculum required a large amount of reading. On the contrary, as Raul approached middle school, whenever he had to leave his general education classroom to come to the special education classroom, the behaviors would manifest within the small group at a more intense rate than what the general education teacher reported. It became clear that he would have been better served in the inclusive classroom.

As it appears, Raul’s story is very common in our schools. Sometimes students become a part of a system that is ultimately damaging to their academic and social achievements. Students with disabilities, such as Raul, want to be a part of the classroom community of learners with their peers. They do not want to be excluded or stigmatized based on their placements. For example, Raul needed a culturally responsive teacher who would value his English Language Learner (ELL) experiences. Though having a culturally responsive teacher does not necessarily mean that Raul’s teacher must be a Latino/a, a teacher who understands, values, and incorporates his culture and language in the classroom be best meet his needs. In other words, Raul and many students like him will maximize their potential with effective teachers and service providers who manifest good pedagogical power (Obiakor, 2001).

*Importance of Effective Teaching in Inclusion*

Educators must diversify their goals, assessment, and instruction to accommodate and meet the range of developmental and educational needs present in today’s classrooms (Beattie, Jordan, & Algozzine, 2007; Gadberry, 2009; King, 2003). When students with disabilities are placed in the general education classrooms, teachers must be prepared to accommodate them based on their individual needs (Berry, 2006). For example, in the case of Raul, had the teacher diversified her instruction to meet his needs, he would have found success in the general education classroom and the problem behaviors would have subsided. The inclusion for students with disabilities is most effective when teachers are collaborative and consultative. This collaboration can facilitate the successful inclusion of students with
disabilities (Carter, Prater, Jackson, & Merchant, 2009). Again, Raul’s
teacher should have looked for other ways to collaborate and consult
with his parents concerning classroom problems. But, she was more
interested in labeling and/or excluding him.

It is common knowledge that general and special education
teachers discuss students’ needs. They problem solve together, dem-
strate instructional techniques, participate in professional develop-
ment, share resources, and network with other professionals (Cond-
erman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009). Collaboration within inclusive
settings can be described as co-teaching. As Tobin (2005) pointed out,
co-teaching effectively uses the skills and unique talents of profes-
ionals. Earlier, Vaughn, Schumm, and Arguelles (1997) described five evi-
denced based models of co-teaching in which collaboration can occur,
namely:

One Teach, One Assist: In this model, one teacher provides the in-
struction for all students and the other teacher provides assistance to
the students who need additional support. This model is beneficial for
all students because it not only allows for students with disabilities to
access the general curriculum, but it also provides instructional sup-
port for students without disabilities who require additional support.

Station Teaching: This model requires for students to be broken
into three separate small groups. Two groups work with a teacher
while one group works independently over a block period. Once that
period is over, the students then rotate to another station. This model
is beneficial because it allows for all students to work within small
groups and receive small group instruction.

Parallel Teaching: This model requires teachers to plan the lessons
together then split the students into two groups to provide the same
lesson within the smaller group within the same classroom. This mod-
el is beneficial because it allows students to receive the small group
instruction, but it also provides teachers with opportunities to learn
from each others’ expertise and grow in their own areas of develop-
ment.

Alternative Teaching: This model allows one teacher to teach and
the other teacher to pre-teach and re-teach students who need addi-
tional support.

Team Teaching: This model involves both teachers providing the
instruction together to students within the same classroom. The ben-
efit of team teaching is that all students have the same access to each
teacher at the same time within the general education classroom.

For inclusion to become a reality within the school, teachers and
service providers must be willing to provide differentiated instruc-
tion in schools and have the wherewithal to implement it within their
classrooms. Again, in the case of Raul, the teacher should have tried to practice differentiated instruction to see how he could have been reached to maximize his fullest potential. Differentiated instruction acknowledges the fact that not all students are alike and therefore do not all learn the same. It is an approach to teaching that advocates active planning to respond to individual student differences in classrooms (Hall, 2002; Tomlinson, 2001, 2004). Differentiated instruction requires teachers and service providers to be flexible in their teaching approaches and flexible in adjusting the curriculum rather than expecting students to modify themselves for the curriculum (see the case of David below). Earlier, Tomlinson (2001) noted that in order for differentiated instruction within inclusive settings to be successful, teachers must adhere to the following guidelines:

- Clarify all key concepts and generalizations.
- Use assessment as a teaching tool to extend rather than simply measure instruction.
- Emphasize critical and creative thinking as a goal in lesson design.
- Engage all students in learning.
- Provide a balance between teacher-assigned and student-selected tasks.

The Case of David

David was a 7th grade student, with a learning disability, attending an urban elementary school. He sat in the back of the general education classroom with the other nine students with disabilities. He did not participate in class discussions and was hardly called upon to participate by his general education teacher. He did not feel a part of the classroom community and furthermore did not feel valued as a learner. David received “resource” services from the special education teacher, Ms. Norris, a novice teacher, who visited the general education classroom frequently. She established a positive relationship with the general education teacher, Mr. Ellis, very quickly. Ms. Norris talked to Mr. Ellis about the progress that students were making in the resource room. She expressed how actively they were engaged in learning within the small group. She suggested to Mr. Ellis that perhaps students would be more inclined to participate if they were spread out throughout the classroom. Mr. Ellis agreed and decided to move the students’ desks. Now the students were no longer identified as the students in the back of the class. Ms. Norris and Mr. Ellis began to plan together what was being covered in the curriculum. Ms. Norris
would pre-teach the content to students in the resource classroom and they began to gain confidence to participate in the general classroom. Soon, Ms. Norris and Mr. Ellis began planning on how students could remain in the classroom for the entire day. The two teachers decided to team teach. They broke up the subjects and each was responsible for teaching certain subject areas. The students were no longer pulled out of the general education classroom. They received their special education services within the general education classroom from both teachers. This was beneficial for all students within the classroom. David became one of the leaders within the classroom and provided support to other students who needed it.

As it appears, the above case shows that, like other students, David just wanted the opportunity to show that he could be successful within the general education classroom. He had not developed the skills to do so; and, this is often the case with many of our students who want to participate within the discussions and assignments in class, but lack the required skills to do so (Obiakor, 2008; Williams & Obiakor, 2009). Many times, when students are removed from the general education classrooms to receive their special education services within a special education classroom, they sometimes receive a watered down curriculum that places them at an even further disadvantage. This leaves the impression that students with disabilities are not expected to learn as much as other students without disabilities (Ellis, 2002). Based on David’s case, inclusion can be successful when students are involved and empowered and when teachers and service providers collaborate and consult using some guiding principles.

**Guiding Principles of Successful Inclusion in a Reform-minded Age**

A few years ago, Sailor and Roger (2005) proposed that inclusion must be addressed using a school wide model that benefits the maximum number of students both with and without disabilities. Every learner needs to be seen as a permanent member of the general education classroom (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008). Sailor and Roger (2005) provided six evidence-based principles for a successful inclusion within the school, namely:

General education accepts responsibility for and directs all students’ learning and parents are encouraged to participate in supporting the model. All students attend their regularly assigned school and are considered general education students. The general education teachers are responsible for all students; and they are instructed from the general education curriculum.

All school resources are configured to benefit all students. This
means that they are included in all activities; and they benefit from all resources. In other words, this means that the school effectively incorporates all students in the instructional process.

Schools address social development and citizenship forthrightly by incorporating positive behavior supports at the individual, group, and school-wide levels. To a large measure, these positive behavior supports benefit all students, not just those with behavior challenges.

Schools are democratically organized, data-driven, problem solving systems where all personnel take part in the teaching/learning process. This includes administrators, teachers, and support staff such as school social workers, psychologists, and speech therapists. Additionally, paraprofessionals are expected to deliver supervised instruction and report the outcomes of that instruction to teachers. In addition, parents and community members become a part of the inclusion community.

Schools have open boundaries in relation to their families and communities. They understand their role in fostering positive working relationships with students’ families, by seeking input from them on various ways to bring their cultures into the classroom community of learners. Parent liaisons within inclusive schools work with other parents and school teams to ensure that voices of parents are heard. It is also useful for schools to have successful inclusive programs to develop and implement a family resource center, where families can seek information on a variety of topics that may be useful to themselves and their families. Furthermore, partnerships with local businesses, different service learning opportunities, and community-based instruction all serve to benefit students, families, and schools.

Schools enjoy district support for undertaking an extensive systems-change effort. However, for this to occur there must be a departure from traditional bureaucratic management and communication processes that have district support. This shift will allow for results sharing from the building level to the district level.

In addition to the aforementioned principles, principals and other school leaders must play critical roles in the educational reform of moving students from segregated classrooms to inclusive schools that are responsive to the growing heterogeneity of students attending schools (Salisbury, 2006). Clearly, it will take effective leaders to move educational reform of social justice forward. According to Fullan (2001), effective leaders (a) have an explicit “making-a-difference” sense of purpose, (b) use strategies that mobilize many people to tackle tough problems, (c) hold themselves accountable by measured and debatable indicators of success, and (d) must be ultimately assessed by the extent to which they awaken people’s intrinsic commitment,
which is none other than the mobilizing of everyone’s sense of moral purpose. To prepare teachers for inclusive practices within schools means that school leaders must share the vision of inclusive education and secure commitment from teachers and service providers (Carter et al., 2009; Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008). It is imperative that school administrators encourage and implement progressive teacher practices that buttress inclusion in their schools.

Effective leaders must create inclusive cultures of success that encourage teachers and service providers to be effective. Grant and Gomez (1995) reported that effective teachers and leaders (a) have high expectations for their students and believe all students are capable of academic success; (b) communicate clearly, pace lessons appropriately, involve students in decisions, monitor students’ progress, and provide frequent feedback; (c) use culturally relevant teaching approaches that integrate students’ native language and dialect, culture, and community into classroom activities to make input more relevant and comprehensible; and (d) use curricula in teaching strategies that promote coherence, relevance, progression, and continuity. As Causton-Theoharis and Theoharis (2008) suggested, school leaders must work with educators to ensure that membership within the general education classroom is not optional or awarded to the “well behaved” students. Classroom membership within general education must be given and supported so all students are equipped to participate within an inclusive society. Additionally, school leaders must invest more funding into building strong general education classrooms for all students while also eliminating the spending that creates separate rooms for students (Vesely, Crampton, Obiakor, & Sapp, 2008). Finally, these leaders must be available to provide support to teachers and service providers when it is needed. The goal must be clear, that is, to provide inclusive practices that maximize the fullest potential of all leaders with and without disabilities.

Conclusion

We understand that the practicality of full inclusion is debatable; however, we also understand that inclusion buttresses social justice, human valuing, and team-work. In this article, our premise is that educating students with disabilities within the general education classroom signifies that these students are not only members within the classroom and school community, but also are valued members within that community. Though inclusion requires qualitative and quantitative efforts by the school community, the burden of inclusion should not rest on the shoulders of teachers and service providers alone. School leaders, parents, community members, and other stake-
holders must be involved in the process. In the end, inclusion works well in inclusive schools and communities where consensus building is the order of the day.

References


