

Facilitating Inclusion: A Team-Approach

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Many schools have been faced with the task of including students with disabilities in general education class environments. IDEA 2004 has been at the forefront in making sure that these students are participating in same settings as those without disabilities. Also, IDEA 2004 mandates that students with disabilities be provided with the same educational opportunities as every other student. A significant part of this equality is granting students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum. According to a study by Muscott (1995), educational systems have had to revamp their educational approaches in order to improve education for all students, especially those with special needs. Additionally, general and special education teachers have been combined as a way of bridging the gap between the special and general education population. Therefore, with the increase of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, schools must be prepared to respond to their needs in the inclusive setting.

The first part of this paper focuses on the elements of inclusive education. The second section focuses on the roles of principals and collaboration between general and special education teachers. Finally, the third section discusses instructional strategies that can be used to successfully include students with disabilities in general education classes. The paper concludes with a discussion of the educational implications of inclusion.

Elements of Inclusion

Inclusion, as stated by Voltz, Brazil, and Ford (2001), “implies a sense of belonging and acceptance” (p.24), and it is how teachers respond to the difference(s) of each child. In order to include students with disabilities in general education classes, there needs to be a level of cohesiveness between administrators, teachers, students, and the community. The following

paragraphs suggest three elements of inclusion that can help facilitate the implementation of inclusion.

As stated by Stainback and Stainback (1992, as cited in Voltz et al., 2001), “the active meaningful participation of students with disabilities in general education classrooms” (p.31) is an important aspect of inclusion. The reference to “active participation” means that the students are involved in meaningful learning. Voltz et al (2001) posed questions that educators should ask in terms of determining if a classroom is an inclusive setting. The questions are as follows:

- 1) Are students with disabilities engaged in classroom learning activities along with their non-disabled peers,
- 2) Are students with disabilities able to participate productively in classroom learning activities,
- 3) Do students with and without disabilities interact frequently, what is the nature of the interaction, and who initiates it,
- 4) What is the nature of the teacher’s interaction with students who have disabilities and is it similar to the interaction with students who are not disabled, and
- 5) To what extent are each students educational and social needs being met. (p. 9)

Educators can use these questions as a guide to judge the participation of students with disabilities in the general education setting.

The second element of inclusion is creating a sense of belonging, which means that the students should feel welcomed in the inclusive setting. As stated by Voltz, et al (2001), “the climate of the classroom facilitates the idea that these differences are natural and that it is desirable for each student to be himself or herself” (p.9), which in turn, encourages respect for individual differences. These differences add a sense of cohesiveness and recognize individual

contributions of all students. Regardless of the differences, each student possesses “a unique knowledge, understanding, and perspective that only they can share” (Hinders, 1995, p. 203).

The sharing of ownership for students with and without disabilities is the third element of inclusion (Stainback & Stainback, 1992, as cited in Voltz et al., 2001). Despite the areas of expertise, general and special education teachers have a level of responsibility in educating all students in inclusive settings (Voltz et al., 2001).

Administrator’s Role in Facilitating Inclusion

Research shows that principals must be involved and invested in the successful outcome of inclusive education. School administrators possess the knowledge and leadership that is required in order to promote an inclusive educational setting. School leaders must also be mindful of what is required to successfully include students with disabilities in the general education setting. Hord (1992) suggested a framework that has helped school leaders provide an inclusive education for students with disabilities. The framework includes “creating an atmosphere and culture for change, articulating the vision, planning and providing resources for teachers, providing training and staff development, monitoring and checking progress of how teachers are implementing inclusion, and continuing to give assistance to teachers” (Hord, 1992, no page). The following section describes each of the components in the inclusive framework.

Creating an Atmosphere and Culture for Change

In order to implement inclusion, school leaders need to create an atmosphere that cultivates inclusion. According to Hord (1992), school leaders can facilitate the implementation of inclusion by analyzing the physical surroundings and structure of the school. This refers to the buildings and classrooms. These factors are important when considering inclusion. By

considering the physical surroundings, school administrators ensure that students with disabilities have access to all facilities (Hord, 1992).

When creating an inclusive setting, school leaders also should consider scheduling especially to accommodate students with disabilities in general education classes. As stated by Worrell (2008), flexible block scheduling is a way school leaders can facilitate inclusion and helps to better meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Since some students are required to take intensive math and reading classes that provide them with fewer opportunities to participate in electives, block scheduling allows students to participate in more elective classes. This also lessens the number of daily transitions (Worrell, 2008). Block scheduling also reduces teacher-student ratio and increases learning opportunities and small group instruction (Hord, 1992), which is a factor that helps students with disabilities to be actively engaged when included in general education classes.

In addition, school principals must also address the school culture when implementing inclusion. Attitudes and beliefs, school norms and relationships compromise a school's culture. School leaders must address the school culture when attempting to implement inclusion.

Hord (1992) mentioned that the attitudes of students, teachers, support personnel and administrators are to be considered when implementing inclusion. Hord (1992) also stated that leaders can influence the attitudes and beliefs of individuals involved in facilitating inclusion by providing examples of successful inclusion as well as involving parents, teachers, and students in the planning process. School leaders can also influence the attitudes of others or norms of the school by recruiting personnel who are committed to the philosophy of inclusive classrooms.

Another component of a school's culture is improving the relationships between teachers and their peers, students and teachers, students and their peers, and between school and the community (Hord, 1992). He furthered stated, "leaders can facilitate positive relationships among teachers by encouraging collaboration and team teaching. Leaders can also influence student and teacher relationships attitudes of high expectations for all students" (Hord, 1992, p. 283). Stainback and Stainback (1992, as cited by Voltz et al., 2001), emphasized that school leaders can promote the integration of students with exceptional needs into general education classrooms by providing all students with opportunities to be accepting of others. They also stated that relationships between school personnel and the community is a prominent factor in students with disabilities being successfully included in general education classrooms. When school culture provides opportunities for staff to develop relationships, individuals feel supported and are more likely to experiment with new ways to reach students (Worrell, 2008).

Articulating the Vision

A second component for facilitating inclusion involves articulating the school's vision with parents, students, and teachers. School leaders should believe, regardless of ability, that every student has the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment (Hord, 1992). In most cases, the LRE should be the general education classroom, where the student population is more diverse. Not only should school leaders articulate the vision, but they must also demonstrate their beliefs by acting in a manner consistent with such beliefs (Worrell, 2008). They should demonstrate their enthusiasm for inclusion as well as clearly communicating the true meaning and purpose of inclusion. Also, school leaders should make all decisions based on the vision of all students being educated within general education environments. Stainback and Stainback (1992, as cited in Voltz, et al., 2001), expressed that leaders must also go beyond

articulating the vision; they must share the influence, authority, responsibility, and accountability with others so that there is shared ownership of the vision. To promote the successful implementation of inclusion, school leaders must use a team-approach in order to enhance the quality of education in an inclusive setting.

Planning and Providing Resources

The third way school leaders can facilitate inclusion is by planning and providing for needed resources. As stated by Hord (1992), school leaders must identify, plan, and provide for time, money, building space, personnel, and other resources needed to “appropriately educate all students in general education classrooms” (p. 283).

Providing Staff Development

The fourth way school leaders can facilitate inclusion is by providing staff development for all teachers and staff. The implementation of inclusive practices requires that school personnel be provided with opportunities to develop skills. Hord (1992) further stated that ongoing staff development should focus on the development of attitudes, commitment and competencies required to work effectively with students who have diverse needs. Staff development programs as described by Hord (1992) should include awareness training, communication, collaboration, compromise, and consensus building. Even though a staff development program should be implemented to provide support and training for school personnel, it should also be based on a needs assessment, as emphasized by (Worrell, 2008).

Assessing Progress

The fifth way leaders can facilitate inclusion is by regularly monitoring and assessing the how teachers are implementing inclusive practices. Monitoring is necessary to coordinate inclusive efforts within the school and deal with problems which may arise (Hord, 1992). According to Henders (1995), monitoring entails the collection and assessment of data regarding what is occurring in the classrooms. Hord (1992) also suggested that effective school leaders can informally monitor by frequently visiting classrooms, walking hallways, attending departmental and grade-level meetings, and conducting random conversations with teachers and staff. After formal or informal observations, school leaders should also provide feedback for improving their use of new practices (Hord, 1992).

Providing Assistance

A sixth way school leaders can facilitate inclusion is providing direct assistance to teachers. School leaders need to be aware of the teacher's concerns and provide leadership that supports those concerns (Hord, 1992). Continuous assistance is imperative for the success of inclusion. School leaders can provide assistance by "coaching" (Hord, 1992, pg. 285), which ensures that new practices for successful facilitation of inclusion are appropriately incorporated, into general education classrooms (Worrell, 2008).

Collaboration between General and Special Education Teachers

Research shows that both general and special education teachers have a pivotal role in successfully including students with disabilities. An important aspect as it relates to inclusion is collaboration. As stated by Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norland, and McDuffie (2005), a goal of collaboration "is to support the participation of students with special needs in the general

education classroom” (p. 264). By supporting their participation, students with disabilities will have an increased opportunity of being successful in the general education setting. Likewise, they must also establish classroom settings that are supportive of students with disabilities (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). Through collaboration, general and special education teachers can create productive learning environments for students with disabilities. As mentioned by DeSimone and Parmar (2006, as cited by Cahill & Mitra, 2008), “collaboration has been identified as the most useful resource available to general educators” (p. 149). As a result, general education teachers gain an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of those students included in their classroom. They also began to build a relationship with special education teachers. Through this relationship and support from special educators, general education teachers began to “develop expectations about the student’s performance in the classroom” (Kluth & Darmody-Latham, 2003, as cited by Cahill & Mitra, 2008, p. 150). Furthermore, this collaborative relationship between the teachers ultimately leads to better support and academic performance of students with special needs.

This collaborative relationship also helps general education teachers understand the individual needs of each student as well as be introduced to techniques that facilitates the needs in the inclusive setting (DeSimone & Parmar, 2006, as cited by Cahill & Mitra, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative that general and special education teachers structure the learning environment so the “inclusion of learners with disabilities” (Voltz et al., 2001, p. 25) is beneficial for all. To make this happen, teachers can use accommodations as a means of approaching the learning styles and needs of each student.

Moreover, general and special education teachers must collaborate in order to create classrooms that are conducive and socially accepting of students with special needs. Both

teachers have the responsibility of establishing environments that are academically inclusive (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008), however, they must also create settings that are socially accepting of students with disabilities. This social acceptance can be created by providing opportunities for students to interact with others who disabled and non-disabled. Based on their review of research, Meadan and Monda-Amaya (2008), noted that “including students with disabilities in general classroom settings offers them opportunities to develop relationships with same-aged peers” (p. 160). By promoting social interaction within the classroom setting, there will be an increased chance that the students will develop and build long-lasting relationships, which can be beneficial later in life.

Teacher collaboration can result in socially enriched environments that promote respect for diversity among peers with and without special needs. A respectful classroom environment, as described by Miller and Pedro (2006), is a “place where all students feel physically and emotionally safe and valued for whom they are” (p. 294). When this sense of security is present, students are better able to focus on their academics as well as form relationships with peers. Also, Meadan and Monda-Amaya (2008) emphasized that teachers can provide students with opportunities to “understand and celebrate the diversity in their classrooms” (p. 16) by facilitating and encouraging social engagements. Through these engagements, students get to learn about each other’s background and share ideas of common interests as well as “maintaining their sense of dignity and appreciating other’s individuality” (Miller & Pedro, 2006, p. 295). With this being said, collaboration between general and special education teachers is a key component in facilitating the acceptance of students with disabilities in general education environments.

Instructional Strategies

The effectiveness of inclusive education depends on the types of instructional techniques used and how teachers incorporate these strategies in their instruction. Johnson (1999) emphasized, “as students with disabilities enter regular classrooms, teachers must develop and implement instructional approaches that facilitate the learning of all” (p. 72). Since general education teachers provide instruction to a diverse student population, it is important for them to have a toolkit of strategies that can be used to help meet the needs of students with disabilities. The following paragraphs present instructional strategies that have been proven to be effective in inclusive settings.

Collaborative/Co-Teaching

According to Jones, Michael, Mandala, and Colachico (2008), “collaboration is a method of teaching and learning in partnership with another teacher to address students’ learning difficulties” (p. 203). Co-teaching, as defined by Gately and Gately (2001), is “collaboration between general and special education teachers for all of the teaching responsibilities of all students assigned to a classroom” (p. 41). Co-teaching also requires general and special education teachers to interact in ways that meet the needs of a diverse population and they work together to teach students in inclusive settings (Jones et al., 2008). When using co-teaching, both teachers are responsible for the delivery of instruction. The general education teacher is primarily responsible for teaching the content and introducing concepts related to the lesson, while the special education teacher assist students who need assistance in learning the content (Jones et al., 2008). A means of meeting students’ needs are through accommodations or modifications, in which material is adapted to match the learning style of each individual student. They also

explained that special education teachers address student needs individually or in small groups. This individual attention or small group setting allows for the skills to be taught or explained more explicitly and the teacher devote more time to the lesson, at least until the concepts are thoroughly understood.

Even though the teachers have different responsibilities in co-taught classes, they still have to work together to set goals and plan for what is going to be taught. Gately and Gately (2001,) emphasized that both teachers “provide one another with a variety of options to activities and assignments that address the interests and needs of all students” (p. 46). This support is beneficial to students with disabilities due to their need for more simplified and meaningful instruction. Through this co-taught relationship and sharing of responsibilities between general and special education teachers, regardless of need, all students are better able to acquire the information (Jones et al., 2008), which eventually leads to successful experiences in general education inclusive settings. In addition, it is safe to conclude that co-teaching is an instructional strategy that can be used to help facilitate the inclusion of students with special needs.

Class- Wide Peer Tutoring

Another instructional strategy that supports inclusive education is class-wide peer tutoring (CWPT). According to Bond and Castagnera (2003), CWPT has been “successful in increasing academic skills for all students” (p. 225). Class-wide peer tutoring is an effective strategy to use in inclusive settings because it has the ability to enhance the social and academic aspects of the students while being a motivating factor to learn (Bond & Castagnera, 2003). When using the CWPT strategy, students are paired, most likely a disabled with a non-disabled peer, and they help each other learn the content. In most cases, students with good academic

standings are assigned to a student who may not be doing as well in his/her academics. With this approach, both students are actively instructing the other on the information that is to be learned (Bond & Castagnera, 2003). They also expressed that when students teach each other, there is improvement in student learning, and the pair gain academic growth in the content that is being taught.

Furthermore, Bond and Castagnera (2003) discussed a concept called “peer tutor elective course” (p. 226). This is described a useful way of meeting the needs of students with disabilities who are integrated in general education classes. As a part of this concept, tutors attend classes with a student who has an identified disability and provide one-on-one support (Bond & Castagnera, 2003). The authors also stated that the peer tutor becomes a part of the daily instruction of the student with disability. With this approach, the tutor and tutee, gains confidence in their abilities and shows improvements in academics and social skills.

Therefore, effective instructional practices are essential to facilitating the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Effective instructional practices are also needed in order to provide individualized support to support to students with disabilities and to ensure their success in inclusive classroom environments.

Discussion

The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms has been a goal for many since the implementation of IDEA and No Child Left Behind. As research has indicated, there are components that should be considered for inclusion to be successful for all students. The implementation of inclusion is an entire school’s responsibility. In order for inclusion to be effective, everyone must share the same vision and set goals for student

achievement. Our vision should be for all students, disabled and non-disabled, to be educated by highly trained and qualified teachers who are able to implement teaching strategies that meet the learning styles of all students. The use of inclusive practices should be thoroughly planned so that students with disabilities are provided with the same educational and social opportunities as non-disabled peers.

Administrators must guide and provide adequate support to teachers, parents, and students so all needs are met. Most importantly, administrators must ensure that general education teachers have the necessary skills and knowledge to facilitate a positive learning environment for disabled students. Administrators must also provide on-going trainings and opportunities for collaboration between general education and special education teachers. The involvement of administrators, teachers, parents, and the community are key factors to the success of inclusion in our schools.

Furthermore, general education teachers need to gain more knowledge and familiarize themselves with instructional strategies that are effective in inclusive settings. In doing so, they need to rely more on the expertise of special education teachers in order to learn different ways of meeting the needs of diverse learners. Likewise, special education teachers need to rely on the expertise of general education teachers in gaining knowledge in content areas and ways of disseminating information to all students.

With all this being said, the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms are made possible when everyone shares the same vision and realizes the educational opportunities gained for all students. The facilitation of inclusive practices in general education settings prepares students to live in a diverse society.

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