

# Curriculum *u p d a t e*

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## Differentiating Instruction

### **Inclusion or Intrusion?**

*Karen Rasmussen*

Sue Lessig remembers when children from the contained special education classes at her school would come to her general education elementary classroom to participate in art, physical education, and music. She "got to know those children and saw what they could do," remembers Lessig, who now teaches grades 3 and 4 at Templeton Elementary School in Bloomington, Ind. "But those kids spent most of their days in an artificial environment."



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Like Lessig, many educators and parents worry that segregating children with special needs from their peers in school deprives those children from the educational and social experiences they need to thrive in a complex world. At the same time, say those who study the issue, educators and parents grapple with the issues surrounding meeting the needs of all children in an inclusive classroom.

### **Access to a Broad, Rich Curriculum**

One important issue facing educators is what children with special needs should be learning. In the past, "kids with disabilities have been prepared to function in a world different from the world other students are being prepared for," notes James McLeskey, professor and chair of the special education department at the University of Florida.

In fact, until the mid-1970s when the U.S. Congress passed P.L. 94-142, a law that guaranteed all children a free and appropriate education, many children with disabilities were excluded from public education. The amended law, known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), mandated that these children be educated in "the least restrictive environment" possible and that educators create an individualized education plan (IEP) for each student with special needs.

The 1997 version of the law, IDEA 97, protects the fundamental educational rights of students by ensuring that all students are involved in the general curriculum. "Special education has been criticized for having a skills-and-drills curriculum," says McLeskey. "Now we realize that many special education classrooms were boring and that kids were being deprived access to a broad, rich curriculum."

All children—including those with disabilities—have the right to a challenging and engaging curriculum, McLeskey asserts.

## **Who Is Included?**

In addition to deciding what to teach children with special needs, educators debate who should be included in the general education classroom.

We must always remember that "people with disabilities are human beings first, and that they want to interact with and contribute to society," McLeskey points out. For this reason, "everyone ought to be included some of the time."

Still, within the field of inclusion, a consensus is emerging that there are times when children need to be educated outside the general education classroom, says McLeskey. For example, some children might need intensive work in reading during the early grades and this might be best done outside the regular classroom.

In addition to academic considerations, educators must consider behavior. "If a child often acts out physically, efforts to moderate his behavior have not worked, and other kids are in danger, then we need to look at the needs of the other kids," says Catherine Diersing, principal of Templeton Elementary School. "But the question is, What do you do with that child?"

Because children have different needs, educators need to make tough decisions on an individual basis, experts contend. It's also important to remember that inclusion is only one option for meeting the needs of some children, notes Frederick Brigham, assistant professor of special education at the University of Virginia. "Inclusion is not the answer to every problem, but it is for some."

## **Good vs. Bad Inclusion**

The teachers, principal, and parents in a local school must decide if and how to implement an inclusion program—and the degree to which children with disabilities are included. Whatever decisions they make, McLeskey suggests three criteria for evaluating a program: (1) students with disabilities should benefit, (2) students without disabilities should benefit, and (3) teachers should receive continuing support to teach disabled and nondisabled students. The teachers should decide how much support they need, McLeskey adds.

Bad inclusion is inclusion mandated by administrators without involving teachers, experts agree. "A good rule of thumb is if a teacher says inclusion isn't working, it isn't," says McLeskey. Most teachers are good people and hard workers who want the best for children, he notes. "But when there's poor planning, poor leadership, and mandates are dumped on the teachers, no one benefits."

## **The Rhythm of the Day**

As with much of education, the bottom line is whether inclusion is good for children. "Maybe," says Brigham. "It depends on the kids, the program, the support, the level of interaction, and the outcomes people expect."

For McLeskey, "good inclusion is good education." Its foundations are differentiated instruction

for mixed-ability groups; student-centered instruction based on high, but different, expectations; and class organization that allows students to be involved in decision making in the classroom.

Another characteristic of inclusion, according to McLeskey, is that children with special needs enjoy the regular school experience. "The rhythm of the day should be similar to the rhythm of the day for other students," he says. For example, when a special education teacher goes into a classroom and takes a group of children to the back of the room to do work, "this disrupts the day for everyone." Because the children are doing something different from the rest of the class, this is not inclusion, he contends.

At Templeton Elementary School, "we focus on meeting the needs of all kids," says Diersing. Students at the school cover the special needs spectrum, ranging from "kids with specific learning disabilities, such as trouble learning in math, to kids with mild and moderate mental handicaps, to students who are in wheelchairs full time and don't have full language capability." For these children, teachers structure the school day around their needs, but their day looks much like the day of any child in the school.

For example, in an elementary classroom, all children might be expected to sit quietly and pay attention when the teacher reads aloud. But for a science activity when children are observing mealworms in trays at their desks and writing descriptions of what they see, a student who uses a wheelchair might stand in a standing brace for the activity. "For that student, standing is part of her physical therapy," explains Diersing, so the teacher works the student's physical needs into the school day.

## **Reinventing Education**

"Good inclusion makes the different ordinary," says McLeskey. Many teachers view inclusion as simply transplanting special education students into the general education classroom, but actually it takes a reinventing of education, he maintains.

For Lessig, this reinvention of education has benefited everyone in her classroom. "Every day we all walk out of the classroom having learned something about how to function better as people in the world," she says. For that reason, "inclusion is best for them, best for other kids, and best for me."

For more information on IDEA 97, visit [www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/IDEA](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/IDEA).

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