

Why inclusive schooling?

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Research shows that everyone benefits

Inclusive schooling is an idea that has many benefits for people with developmental disabilities. It is easy for us to understand the ways in which people's lives improve when they have a sense that they belong in a community and are sharing in common pursuits with their peers. Did you know that research is also telling us that there are just as many benefits for students *without disabilities* in these settings?

A frequent concern about the involvement of students with developmental disabilities in general education classrooms is that their presence will be detrimental to others in the class. Three main themes emerge from the research addressing this population.

1. The performance of typically developing students is **not compromised** by the presence of students with disabilities in their classrooms.

Early investigations into the impact of students with disabilities on the developmental progress of typical students were conducted in programs involving students with varying degrees and types of disabilities. Findings of studies with and without the use of control groups consistently demonstrated that the development of typical students did not decelerate as a function of the diversity of students in the classroom. (Bricker et al., 1982; Odom et al., 1984; Sharpe et al., 1994)

Several studies have sought to investigate concerns that students with disabilities require a disproportionate amount of teacher attention, and therefore take away from educational opportunities for other students. One study (Hollowood, Salisbury, Rainforth & Palombaro, 1994/5) focused on the use of instructional time, comparing the teacher's use of time in classrooms with and without students with severe disabilities. Results indicated no difference in engagement rates between classrooms, suggesting no negative impact on instructional opportunities. McDonnell et al. report similar findings (1997).

Skill acquisition of typical students who are involved in small instructional groups containing a student with a severe disability has been examined by Dugan et al., (1995) and Hunt et al., (1994). In each case, the general education students and the students with

disabilities that were part of small cooperative groups demonstrated academic gains.

Finally, at least one study responded to the issue that typical students would model inappropriate behaviour exhibited by some students with disabilities. In a year long observational study conducted in an inclusive classroom, Staub and his colleagues did not find evidence to substantiate this fear.

2. Typically developing students **derive benefits** from their involvement and relationships with students with disabilities.

Much of the evidence documenting positive outcomes for typically developing students has been survey research in which these students themselves are the respondents. Six types of benefits were described in a study conducted by Peck, Donaldson and Pezzoli, (1990) where 21 typical high school students were interviewed about their involvement with students with severe disabilities. The benefits identified were improved self-concept; social-cognitive growth; reduced fear of human differences; increased tolerance; more established principles of personal conduct; and development of relaxed, accepting friendships. Some of these benefits were further confirmed in Kishi and Meyer's work (1994) with 183 public school children whose contact with students with developmental disabilities resulted in higher levels of self-acceptance, self-security and self-assertion. Worthy of note is the fact that early contact in this study was also associated with higher levels of support for community participation among these students.

In 1993, Giangreco, Edelman, Cloninger and Dennis interviewed parents of 81 students without disabilities about the impact of inclusive approaches on typical children. These parents reported direct positive influence on their child's development as a result of inclusive educational experiences. Parents also reported that their children experienced social-emotional growth and felt comfortable interacting with a child with severe disabilities. It was also found that benefits arising from relationships with peers with disabilities persist far beyond the time that students are actively involved with each other (Kishi & Meyer, 1994).

3. The presence of students with disabilities in the general education classroom **provides a catalyst** for learning opportunities and experiences that might not otherwise be part of the curriculum.

In a review of program models designed to support students with disabilities in regular classrooms, Manset and Semmel (1997) write that the most consistent positive results across program models are gains for non-identified students. This suggests that some of the instructional strategies and organizational approaches typically introduced for the purpose of supporting identified students actually yield academic benefits for a far wider range of students.

In the context of providing ongoing supports and accommodations for students with disabilities, issues of fairness and equity naturally arise. Dialogue around these issues results in a highly sophisticated understanding of fairness and equal treatment, even among kindergarten students (Evans et al. 1994).

A final observation relative to this theme, from a study by York and Tunidor (1995), indicates that students reported a willingness to do far more than they were asked to do by adults in efforts to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms.

The situation creates opportunities for students to serve in roles or assume responsibilities that were previously not available. Clearly, some students are willing to take advantage of these opportunities and experience considerable personal growth as a result.

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