Inclusive Education

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The adoption of inclusive education strategies—where special education students are immersed in classrooms with typically developing peers—has increased rapidly in recent decades. More than 60 percent of students with disabilities spend at least 80 percent of their school day in general education classrooms, according to the US National Center for Education Statistics.

Studies have shown that inclusive learning benefits all students in the classroom by providing thoughtful, personalized instruction and promoting individuality and equity. A student with autism might feel calmer when surrounded by a diverse peer group, while a nondisabled student might learn how to form positive relationships with a greater variety of children.

Establishing a successful integrated learning environment is a complex task involving teachers, administrators, and families. Special education and general education teachers often work together to develop a curriculum and create a positive student culture. In an inclusive classroom, special education teachers have the essential role of ensuring that students with disabilities or special needs receive a quality education.

**Why Adopt Inclusive Learning?**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that students with individual education plans (IEPs) must be educated in the least-restrictive environments (LREs) available. Under IDEA, inclusive education (or mainstreaming) has become a standard operating procedure for US public schools. Students with IEPs can range from individuals with Down syndrome or forms of autism to those with speech impediments or dyslexia—all of which require varying levels of support.

Under IDEA, if a differently abled student’s needs can be met in a general classroom, with or without the support of a special education teacher or paraprofessional, they must be educated in that environment. When needs are not fully met in a general classroom, some students spend part of their days in a resource room or in pullout sessions, while others are educated entirely in a special education classroom.

While there is some debate about whether inclusive instruction is the best way to serve students with disabilities, there is mounting evidence that inclusive learning improves educational outcomes. Inclusive educational settings lead to stronger math and reading skills, higher attendance and graduation rates, and fewer behavioral problems, according to an evaluation of more than 280 studies from 25 countries by Abt Associates. In addition to promoting academic success for students with disabilities, inclusive learning can help improve social cognition in typically developing students.

**Role of Special Education Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms**

For inclusion to show positive benefits, the learning environment and instructional models must be carefully established to provide strong learning opportunities for all students. Special education and general education teachers must have mutual respect and open minds toward the philosophy of inclusion, as well as strong administrative support and knowledge of how to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The involvement of a special education teacher is crucial to the success of a combined learning environment in a number of areas:

**Curriculum Design**

Special education teachers help craft the lessons for inclusive classrooms to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are considered. Teachers may work together to develop a curriculum that is accessible to all students, or the special education teacher might make modifications to the general education teacher’s lesson plans. A special education teacher will also create supplemental learning materials for specific students, including visual, manipulative, text, and technology resources, and determine when one-on-one lessons might be needed.

Teachers must examine students’ strengths, weaknesses, interests, and communication methods when crafting lessons. The students’ IEPs must be carefully followed to meet achievement goals. As many general education teachers have limited training in inclusive learning, it is important for the special education teacher to help the instructor understand why certain accommodations are needed and how to incorporate them.

**Classroom Instruction**

Many inclusive classrooms are based on a co-teaching model, where both teachers are present all day. Others use a push-in model, where special education teachers provide lessons at certain times during the day. It takes extensive cooperation between general and special education teachers to implement a truly inclusive classroom. Special education teachers often sit with or near students with IEPs to monitor their progress and provide any special instructions or supplemental learning materials. Students require varying levels of individual instruction and assistance, based on their unique needs.

Teachers might also pull students out of the classroom for one-on-one lessons or sensory activities, or arrange for time with counselors, speech therapists, dyslexia coaches, and other specialized personnel. Special education instructors may need to make sure that paraprofessionals or therapists are present in the classroom at certain times to assist the students. To help maintain a positive climate, they also might assist the general education teacher in presenting lessons to the entire class, grading papers, enforcing rules, and other classroom routines. General and special education teachers might break classes into smaller groups or stations to provide greater engagement opportunities.

**Learning Assessments**

Another role of special education teachers in inclusive classrooms is to conduct regular assessments to determine whether students are achieving academic goals. Lessons must be periodically evaluated to determine whether they are sufficiently challenging without overwhelming the students. Students should gain a feeling of self-confidence and independence in general education settings but should also feel sufficiently supported. Special education teachers also organize periodic IEP meetings with each student, their family, and certain staff members to determine whether adjustments need to be made to the student’s plan.

**Advocating for Students**

Special education teachers serve as advocates for students with disabilities and special needs. This includes ensuring that all school officials and employees understand the importance of inclusion and how to best implement inclusion in all campus activities. Advocacy might include requesting inclusion-focused professional development activities—especially programs that help general education teachers better understand inclusion best practices—or providing information to community members about success rates of inclusive teaching.

Communication with parents is also essential for inclusive classroom success. Families should receive regular updates on a child’s academic, social, and emotional development through phone calls, emails, and other communication means. Parents can help students prepare for classroom routines. Expectations for homework and classroom participation should be established early on.