

Inclusive Education: Pragmatic Definition

What is inclusion, or inclusive education? To begin to answer that question, we asked thousands of children, adolescents, and adults to identify an event in their lives that caused them to feel included and one that caused them to feel excluded. We also asked the subjects to describe how they felt during and following the two experiences. Figure 1.1 provides a sampling of the feelings that people have reported experiencing when they felt included or excluded.

Figure 1.1. Responses to the questions, “How did you feel when you were ...”

EXCLUDED?	INCLUDED?
• angry	• proud
• resentful	• secure
• hurt	• special
• frustrated	• comfortable
• lonely	• recognized
• different	• confident
• confused	• happy
• isolated	• excited
• inferior	• trusted
• worthless	• cared about
• invisible	• liked
• substandard	• accepted
• unwanted	• appreciated
• untrusted	• reinforced
• unaccepted	• loved
• closed	• grateful
• ashamed	• normal
	• open
	• positive
	• nurtured
	• important
	• responsible
	• grown up

Examining such reactions is a critical element in a book about educating all students. Figure 1.1 makes the powerful point that no one wants to be excluded. Inclusive education is about embracing everyone and making a commitment to provide each student in the community, each citizen in a democracy, with the inalienable right to belong. Inclusion assumes that living and learning together benefits everyone, not just children who are labeled as having a difference (e.g., those who are gifted, are non-English proficient, or have a disability).

In summary, inclusion is a belief system, not just a set of strategies. Mr. Rice's language arts class is not just about accommodations and supports; it is about an attitude and a disposition that a school intentionally teaches by example. Once adopted by a school or school district, an inclusive vision drives all decisions and actions by those who subscribe to it. People no longer ask, "Why inclusion?" They ask, "How do we successfully include all students?"

Inclusive Education Implications

Inclusion, as Figure 1.1 illustrates, is the opposite of segregation and isolation. Segregated education creates a permanent underclass of students and conveys a strong message to those students that they do not measure up, fit in, or belong. Segregationist thinking assumes that the right to belong is an earned rather than an unconditional human right. Norman Kunc (2000) speaks of the casualties of exclusion, or "conditional acceptance." He suggests that many of the current problems facing children and youth at risk (e.g., gangs, suicide, and dropping out of school) are the casualties of an inflexible, insensitive system of education that systematically (although perhaps unintentionally) destroys the self-esteem and self-worth of students who do not "fit the mold." In a seminal work that describes the plight of youth at risk from a Native American perspective, Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (2002) describe *belonging* as one of the four central values that create a child's *Circle of Courage*. The right to belong is every person's birthright. Given the increasing numbers of at-risk students in U.S. schools and the centrality of the need to belong, schools must provide a way to reclaim youth labeled at risk, disabled, homeless, gay or lesbian, and so forth.

The growing diversity of the student population in U.S. schools is a topic of great debate and concern. **Differences among students may include language, culture, religion, gender, varied abilities, sexual preference, socioeconomic status, and geographic setting. The differences are often spoken about as a problem rather than an opportunity for learning what rich variety exists in others' lives and how we can be included, valued, respected, and welcomed for who we are in a naturally diverse world.** In 1992, Grant Wiggins wrote the following about the value of diversity:

We will not successfully restructure schools to be effective **until we stop seeing diversity in students as a problem.** Our challenge is not one of getting "special" students to better adjust to the usual schoolwork, the usual teacher pace, or the usual tests. The challenge of schooling remains what it has been since the modern era began two centuries ago: **ensuring that all students receive their entitlement.** They have the *right* to thought-provoking and enabling schoolwork, so that they might use their minds well and discover the joy therein to willingly push themselves farther. They have the *right* to instruction that obligates the teacher, like the doctor, to change tactics when progress fails to occur. They have the *right* to assessment that provides students and teachers with insight into real-world standards, useable feedback, the opportunity to self-assess, and the chance to have dialogue with, or even to challenge, the assessor—also a *right* in a democratic culture. Until such a time, we will have no insight into human potential. Until the challenge is met, schools will continue to reward the lucky or the already-equipped and weed out the poor performers.

Inclusive Education: School Restructuring

The call for restructuring of American education to establish meaningful educational standards (i.e., student outcomes) and to hold schools accountable for accomplishing those

outcomes with every student requires great individual and collective commitment and effort. All restructuring efforts in schools require, at the minimum, a belief that

- Each student can and will learn and succeed.
- Diversity enriches us all, and students at risk can overcome the risk for failure through involvement in a thoughtful and caring community of learners.
- Each student has unique contributions to offer to other learners.
- Each student has strengths and needs.
- Services and supports should not be relegated to one setting (e.g., special classes or schools).
- Effective learning results from the collaborative efforts of everyone working to ensure each student's success.

Systems change initiatives in special education are paralleling systems change efforts in general education. Such initiatives for change are often referred to as school restructuring. Fundamental questions regarding the most effective strategies for teaching all students are being raised, and numerous innovative and highly effective strategies are being designed and implemented. School restructuring efforts are summarized below:

- **Heterogeneous and cooperative group arrangements of students are used because they are more effective for learning** (Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Lipton, 2003; Sapon-Shevin, 1994).
- **Students are provided with individualized approaches to curriculum, assessment (e.g., nonbiased assessment procedures, multiple approaches to intelligence—see Carr & Harris, 2001; Hock, 2000), and instruction because of high expectations held for all students** (Castellano, 2003).
- **Staff, students, parents, and community members collaborate in the design and delivery of effective education for all students** (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002; Villa & Thousand, 2000).
- **Teachers and other professionals are giving students the opportunity to learn to think and be creative, and not just to repeat information that they have memorized** (Kohn, 1999; Lenz & Schumaker, 1999; Schumm, 1999; Tomlinson, 1999).
- **School staff members are facilitating students' social skills as students interact, relate to one another, and develop relationships and friendships** (Delpit, 1995; Noddings, 1992).

As the characteristics of the school restructuring movement take hold in more and more schools, inclusion of students with disabilities does not become a separate and distinct action; instead, it occurs simultaneously and naturally. The characteristics of both the school restructuring movement and the building of inclusive schools are the same: all students must experience quality education that meets their specific educational needs in the context of political and social justice.