
The Benefits of an Inclusive Public Education for Children with Down Syndrome

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Introduction

Prior to 1973, the United States was deliberately engaged in academic discrimination against children with disabilities. Much like the civil rights violations against African Americans, children with a properly diagnosed disability such as Down syndrome were prohibited from attending a public school with their typical peers.

Institutionalization of Children

Children born before the 1960s were systematically institutionalized and denied any chance of participating in a regular classroom or being exposed to any meaningful academic material. Many US states upheld primitive laws prohibiting children with disabilities from attending public schools. State institutions were largely restrictive environments where children received basic provisions of food, clothing, shelter, and humane treatment. In 1967, state institutions housed almost 200,000 persons with significant disabilities [1]. By 1970, only one in five children with a disability was educated within the public school system [2]

The main shortcomings of institutionalization were that children became simply accommodated and housed with no effort to evaluate, educate, or rehabilitate the child. Testing was antiquated and grossly inaccurate and often improperly diagnosed the child's disability or intelligence level. Moreover, parents were not included in the decision process about appropriate placement or how their children would be educated.

The Intervention of the Government

By 1968, the federal government finally acknowledged and validated many of the discoveries of parent advocacy groups and began partnering with parents on improved practices for teaching children with intellectual disabilities [3]. These practices in turn laid the foundation for implementing effective programs for early intervention and special education across the United States. Among the most significant milestones from these improved programs included the training of over 30,000 special education teachers and related specialists [4].

With the passage of Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the establishment of Section 504, learning institutions receiving federal funding could no longer discriminate against any child with a recognized disability. Section 504 further established that schools must create reasonable accommodations as needed for any disabled student [5]. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was later enhanced by two other landmark Acts: the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990.

With the passage of these revolutionary laws, the educational opportunities for children with disabilities was finally equalized and allowed all children (regardless of disability) the right to attend a public school if they chose to do so. From these acts of the United States government, our country finally opened the doors to include and discover the true potential of children with physical and mental disabilities as they finally became able to co-exist and learn alongside their typical peers.

Inclusion Practices Begin

As more and more children with intellectual disabilities gained access to an inclusive public education, valuable research began to be conducted with the objective of presenting the long term benefits these children receive by being included in a regular classroom with typical children.

Key benefits observed from the public education inclusion model were improved chances for adult independence and greater abilities to contribute and function as a responsible member of society.

Objectives and Audience of this Research Report

The objective of this research report is to present encouraging facts and success stories that support an inclusion approach over a self contained special education classroom approach in educating children with intellectual disabilities. The primary audience for this research report is new parents of children with Down syndrome who are exploring educational options. Other readers (for example: young adults exploring a career in teaching) could benefit from this research as well.

Overview of Important Educational Laws

Before educational inclusion for children with disabilities was permitted, the United States government needed to recognize inequality within the educational system, author meaningful legislation, and pass laws. These laws established specific requirements and mandates that guaranteed children with physical and mental disabilities rights to attend and participate fully at a public school of their choosing.

The following is a brief history of the laws passed by the United States government from 1973 to the present:

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first major legislation passed to remedy discrimination against persons with disabilities choosing schools, programs, or employment funded by the United States Government.

The Act contains three key sections: Sections 501, 504, and 508. Of these three sections, Section 504 directly addresses and eliminates discrimination against children and adults with disabilities who chose to be educated at an institution that receives federal funding. Section 504 also allows for reasonable accommodations to be made for each disabled student. Section 504 became the first official civil rights act for children with disabilities and allowed disabled children access to a public education for the first time in history.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was signed into law on September 26, 1973 by President Richard M. Nixon [6].

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (also known as Public Law 94-142 or PL 94-142) further enhanced the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 by focusing exclusively on allowing access to public schools for all children with physical or mental disabilities. It further requires any school accepting federal funding to properly evaluate each and every disabled student and design an educational plan with parental input that would emulate the same educational experiences of a non-disabled student.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 also added meaningful administrative procedures allowing parents of disabled children to dispute decisions concerning their child's education. After exhausting all administrative avenues, parents today have the authority to seek judicial review of disputed decisions.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 was signed into law on November 29, 1975 by President Gerald R. Ford [7].

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 is a complete revision of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The IDEA law is a comprehensive set of mandates that govern how individual states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to all children with disabilities. The IDEA law covers children from birth to age 22 and involves 13 specified categories of disability. In 2006, over 6 million children with disabilities received education services through the IDEA law. The following key mandates are established under the IDEA law:

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is an educational plan designed by a team of educators and parents that is customized for the specific educational needs of the student. The IEP contains academic goals and methods to reach those goals. The IEP also contains data about how the student best learns and what approach will help the student best access general education curriculum. Finally, the IEP specifies what accommodations, equipment, or specialists will be needed to ensure a successful academic experience.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) The Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) mandate was first established under Section 504 under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and later enhanced under the IDEA law. FAPE is defined under the IDEA law as an educational program designed to assist the child in accessing general education curriculum and meeting grade level standards established by individual US states.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirement mandates that any student with a disability should be afforded the same educational opportunities as their non-disabled peers. Moreover, disabled students should have the same access to academic curriculum, extracurricular activities, or any other school program that typical students have access to.

Early Intervention Part C of the IDEA law requires that infants and toddlers with diagnosed disabilities received early intervention services from birth to age 3. These services fall under a special program called the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). Similar to the IEP, the IFSP sets goals for disabled infants and preschool children. These goals include: gross and fine motor skills, feeding skills, speech development, and infant stimulation.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 was signed into law on October 30, 1990 by President George H.W. Bush [8].

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 was a complete update to the IDEA law of 1990. It authorized 15 US states to implement 3 year IEPs on a trial basis when parents agreed on the success of the IEPs. The IDEIA was also intended to align with educational policies under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Many of the IDEIA mandates were created under the Presidential Commission on Excellence in Special Education and included revised requirements for properly evaluating children with learning disabilities.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 was signed into law on December 3, 2004 by President George W. Bush [9].

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009

A provision of the larger American Recovery and Reinvestment Act economic stimulus package included an additional \$12.2 billion in federal funding for IDEIA programs.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) was signed into law on February 17, 2009 by President Barack Obama [10].

The Importance of This Research

All children have potential including children with intellectual disabilities. More importantly, all children have the right to demonstrate and enhance their potential within an educational environment of their choice. No child with an intellectual disability should ever be denied the right to a free and appropriate public education. Fortunately today in the US, no child can be.

However, many stereotypes still exist today about the potential of children and adults with intellectual disabilities. New parents with infants and toddlers with Down syndrome need fresh and relevant information about the promises of an inclusive education and how it will benefit their children into adulthood. Moreover, special needs parents need to understand the complete picture and embrace the fact that they have both rights and choices when it comes to their children's education.

The bottom line is that factual information and success stories (not myths, stereotypes, or outdated information) are what are necessary to enlighten both parents and society about the potential of children and adults with Down syndrome.

Educational Inclusion versus the Special Day Class

According to the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCERI), educational inclusion is defined as:

“Providing to all students, including those with significant disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services, with needed supplementary aids and support services, in age-appropriate classes in their neighborhood schools, in order to prepare students for productive lives as full members of society”. [11]

In short, educational inclusion is an academic environment where a student with a disability fully participates with other typical students in a classroom with all the supports and accommodations the law requires. The student is educated under both an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and state and federally mandated academic curriculum. The student is expected to behave appropriately, follow the same classroom rules and procedures as other students, and complete the same classroom assignments (with appropriate modifications) as other students.

By contrast, the special day class is an academic environment where the student is removed completely from the general education classroom. The classes are typically smaller (10 students or less) and are highly structured and routinized. Special day classes are taught by a teacher trained in special education who works with students at different academic levels. The curriculum and textbooks vary within a single classroom.

The primary goals of the special day class are on developing appropriate social skills and behaviors. Academic expectations are typically lower in special day classes and curriculum is inconsistently delivered due to the varied needs of each student. Students in special day classes are only exposed to other students with disabilities and not typical peers.

In upper grades, special day classes shift the focus towards “life skills” programs which can be taught in the home and do not fully prepare students for vocational, college, or employment opportunities beyond a K-12 education.

Special day classes are often located outside the student’s neighborhood district and require student transportation. Special day classes are also expensive educational options for school districts to budget.

The Educational Challenges Inclusion Study

In October of 1996, the National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS) initiated a research study entitled: *The Educational Challenges Inclusion Study* [12] to examine the effects inclusive education programs had on children with Down syndrome and to gauge teacher and parent satisfaction with inclusion practices in public schools.

The NDSS is one of the largest Down syndrome advocacy organizations in the United States. Founded in 1979, the NDSS has over 350 affiliate groups across the US and has spent millions of dollars funding the research efforts of over 45 scientists advancing cutting edge research to benefit persons with Down syndrome. In addition to research, NDSS employs 15 full time professionals and a three person policy team that direct legislative and advocacy efforts across the US and in Washington DC [13].

The methods of obtaining data for this study involved the design and distribution of two separate questionnaires: one designed for parents of children with Down syndrome to express opinions and provide personal testimonies about inclusion and the other questionnaire for teachers to analyze inclusive teaching practices. The objectives of this study were to analyze the successes of inclusive practices while determining benefits to Down syndrome students and survey national trends in inclusion programs for children with Down syndrome [14].

Over 320 questionnaire pairs were mailed out to parents of organizations affiliated with NDSS and their children’s teachers (grades pre-kindergarten through 12th grade). Efforts were made to match the experiences of the teachers with that of the students. Several outside school district were also solicited for this study.

The parent questionnaire for the study was designed to collect write-in responses. The following six areas were considered [15]:

- Background and previous experience with the school district.
- Basic classroom information (for example: teaching arrangement and staff to student ratios)
- The transition process/degree of preparation
- Parental involvement and communication with the school.
- The child’s adjustment, experiences, and behavior changes.
- The evaluation of parent and professional attitudes (For example: contact with professionals, treatment from professionals, and confidence in professional judgments).

The teacher questionnaire for the study was designed to collect write-in responses, rating scales from 1-5, and checklists. The following four areas were considered [16]:

- Background of the teacher (for example: experience and knowledge of special education and inclusion)
- Preparation for inclusion and the transition process.
- Classroom information on curriculum, class arrangement, therapies, and support services (for example: team teaching between regular and special educator, special education consultation, resource room pull-out, and inclusion aide in the classroom).
- Classroom management, instruction and behavioral strategies, and teacher attitude.

In the fall of 1995, 125 parent and 120 teacher questionnaires were returned and collected including 90 parent/teacher pairs. The evaluation of responses was conducted in three parts: an examination of the parent responses, and examination of the teacher responses, and an examination of parent anecdotal records. The responses were confidential and no judgments were rendered on the quality of school programs.

A statistical snapshot of the study is listed below [17]:

Children that attend their local school	88%
Mean age of child	9.3 years
Mean grade of child	3.8
Mean class size	25 students
Class containing other student with disabilities other than Down syndrome	56%
Team teaching situation in class (collaboration)	30%
Resource room (pull-out) service	32%
Aide present in classroom specifically for child with Down syndrome	82%
Computer in the classroom	72%

Discussion

This study was undertaken with the following established understandings about inclusion in general and inclusive educational philosophies [18]:

- Inclusion, by definition, is the act of belonging and being together from beginning to end. From the moment of birth until the time of death, each individual has the intrinsic need to be included in society.
- The practice of a separatist educational system where students with disabilities do not actively participate in a typical educational environment has lowered teacher expectations of students with intellectual disabilities, resulted in poor self esteem, limited academic gains, impeded proper socialization, and minimized opportunities in obtaining employment.
- An inclusive education is defined as a “home school placement” where students with disabilities attend the school near their home and are integrated in a regular classroom with students the same age and grade. To ensure maximum success within this environment, the student is provided all the supports necessary to produce an appropriate educational experience.
- An inclusive education is based on the premise that children of differing abilities and backgrounds can benefit both academically and socially in a learning environment that is programmed along with normally developing students. Moreover, the diverse needs of all children can be accommodated to the maximum extent possible within the general educational curriculum.

From the multitude of findings discovered from this study, this research report will focus exclusively on the social and academic factors.

Parental Responses on the Social Benefits of Inclusion

Overall, parents of students with Down syndrome stated a positive inclusion experience. Among the findings, parents reported that their children had good role models among the typical students and that adult attitudes towards Down syndrome were positive. 33% of parents reported that extra efforts were necessary at home to complete homework loads. Parents also reported that the curricular style of the class was appropriate for their children [19].

One of the most important factors parents stated contributing to successful inclusion were classroom friendships that developed between their children and other typical students. Another key factor was having their children included in school social activities (for example: school dances) where appropriate social skills could be properly developed and practiced [20].

Parents also reported that typical classmates often made up for the shortcomings of staff and came along side their children to assist with class assignments or classroom routines. Parents believed that having a peer tutor in class encouraged their child to become more independent and motivated to impress other students of their abilities and gain respect within the classroom. Moreover, the modeling of typical and appropriate behaviors was identified as key benefit to a child engaged in inclusion that is not possible in a special day class environment [21].

Parental Responses on the Academic Benefits of Inclusion

In addition to open communication, parents reported that successful inclusion required the following three important teacher commitments [22]:

- Teachers treat parents with respect and as equal partners in the educational process.
- Teachers have high expectations for the child with Down syndrome.
- Teachers are willing to modify classroom materials as needed for the child to succeed.

A key finding important to parents was teacher preparation and training. The study found that 55% of public school teachers participating in the study had no formal inclusion training [23]. However, the most important factor parents stated in the study was the flexibility and willingness of the teacher to adapt classroom materials to meet the unique needs of the Down syndrome student.

Parents stated that inclusion works best academically when there is a balance of development needs with chronological needs. This means that Down syndrome students benefit most when taught by a flexible teacher open to curriculum modifications while holding high expectations for the student with Down syndrome as he or she learns with others of the same chronological age [24].

Teacher Responses on the Academic Experiences of Inclusion

A majority of the teachers responding to the study possessed a bachelor's degree in education with credits towards a master's degree. 63% of the teachers had some special education training. The average number of years teaching was 14 [25].

Teachers reported that students with Down syndrome effectively used computers for added practice of math and reading skills just like other typical students. Teachers reported that the most effective learning arrangements for students with Down syndrome were one on one and small group instruction. Peer tutoring, team teaching, and computers were also found effective [26].

74% of teachers believed homework was beneficial to students with Down syndrome for two reasons: to inform parents about what the child is doing in school and to give the child the necessary extra practice with basic concepts. 44% of teachers stated that typical peers were extremely effective instructional agents to students with Down syndrome [27].

Teachers typically reported not having to modify any behavior management systems within the classroom. Students with Down syndrome responded to the same behavior management techniques as the rest of the class. Teachers did not feel that they gave preferential treatment to students with Down syndrome. Teachers maintained the same high expectations for students with Down syndrome as other students in the classroom.

Teachers reported that when presented with recommendations for improvement, all desired more information on learning characteristics of children with Down syndrome. 66% of teachers participating in the study regarded the experience of teaching a child with Down syndrome more rewarding than anticipated.

Overall, teachers found the inclusion experience challenging, rewarding, and of great value to their typical students [28].

Conclusions from the Study

The study concluded that the inclusion of students with Down syndrome into a typical classroom is a valid option for educational programming provided that the proper supports and administrative cooperation are present and functioning. More importantly, the study found that the learning characteristics of students with Down syndrome are more similar to their typical peers than they are different.

A majority of the teachers participating in the study enjoyed the experiences of teaching children with Down syndrome. Teachers found the students responsive and eager when given any kind of encouragement. One teacher stated the following: *“I found inclusion to be the single most interesting and rewarding experience of my teaching career. I would advise new inclusion teachers to make friends with the students and go with the flow.”*[29]

The general consensus from all teachers and parents was that while inclusion requires significant effort from all parties, it is definitely worth it.

Success Stories

The following success stories are testimonies to the benefits of an inclusive education:

Kimberly’s Story

Kimberly Lynn Dal Poggetto is a 19 year old with Down syndrome who lives in Petaluma, CA [30]

My name is Kimberly Dal Poggetto. I’m 19 years old and was born May 25, 1990. I live with my two parents, Judy and Glenn, and my two brothers, Aaron, 14, and Danny, 16.

I graduated last year from Casa Grande High School and am currently in the S.C.O.E. (Sonoma County Office of Education Program) I’m currently working at Petaluma Valley Hospital folding linen and breaking down packages and boxes. A couple of days a week my group goes to Santa Rosa Junior College to do work with computers, English, and Physical Education. I’ve also learned how to ride Petaluma’s Public Transportation through the S.C.O.E. Program.

Sports I play through Special Olympics are Softball and Basketball. I’ve played these sports for the past nine years. My teams and I have won many gold and silver medals in both sports.

Hobbies that I enjoy are: playing my guitar and electric keyboard, listening to all kinds of music, traveling, swimming, riding my bike with my family, and playing softball and basketball with my team and family. My life is full of loving and caring people such as: my grandparents, aunt, uncle, two cousins, my two brothers, and my two parents.

Kate's Story

Kate Bartlett is a 25 year old with Down syndrome who lives in Arlington, MA [31]

Throughout her life, my daughter Kate Bartlett had the opportunity to be educated in regular education classrooms. The benefits to Kate, who has Down syndrome (DS) are both obvious and great. At age 25, Kate is an articulate socially appropriate college student and part-time employee. She works hard and learns by observing and absorbing everything around her

As her parents, we knew a typical educational experience and social life were important to Kate's development. We gently coaxed the school system to include Kate in regular education classes, insisted it was worthwhile to let her try and promised we would help at home with school work and assist in class when it was necessary. From time to time, a few administrators and teachers resisted, but Kate's motivation and ability quickly won over most of them. This successful experience required Kate's hard work and determination with much support from her family and teachers. Less obvious was the tremendous peer support her classmates provided.

Less obvious, but just as important, are the benefits that including Kate brought to her classmates. They were great kids, who are becoming wonderful adults. I like to think that the experience of going to school with, supporting and standing up for Kate made them a little more empathetic, understanding, and tolerant. The kind of people who offer help to those they meet in life. The kind of people we'd all like to count as our friends.

Tim's Story

Tim Harris is a 25 year old with Down syndrome who lives in Albuquerque, NM [32]

The famous quote from Walt Disney, "If you can dream it, you can do it" has been the driving force behind the life of Tim Harris. Born in 1986 with Down syndrome, Tim's life has been defined by exceeding expectations.

As a 2004 graduate of Eldorado High School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Tim was elected homecoming king by the highest margin of votes in school history. During graduation week, Tim was also voted Student of the Year by the administration, faculty, and staff.

In the fall of 2004, Tim moved to Roswell, New Mexico to attend Eastern New Mexico University. Tim earned certificates in Food Service and in Office Skills and worked at a variety of local restaurants including CiCi's Pizza, Golden Corral, IHOP, and Peppers Bar and Grill. Tim lived in a college dorm and graduated in the summer of 2008.

After college, Tim has worked as a host at Applebee's restaurant in Albuquerque and has participated in Special Olympics competitions throughout New Mexico. Tim enjoys basketball, volleyball, polo hockey, track and field, and golf. He has won dozens of gold medals as a Special Olympian.

Tim spent much of 2009 and 2010 living aboard a sailboat with his parents and traveling throughout the Bahamas. Tim is now widely known throughout the Bahamas and is an excellent sailor and offshore fisherman.

During high school, Tim worked as a host at a Red Robin restaurant in Albuquerque. During this time, Tim learned a lot about welcoming guests at a restaurant and developed a loyal following of customers.

After observing the effect Tim has on Red Robin restaurant and its customers, an idea emerged regarding Tim owning his own restaurant. In May of 2010, a lease was signed for a facility in Albuquerque and a construction company was hired for tenant improvements. On October 1, 2010, Tim's Place opened for business.

Today, Tim Harris is the owner of Tim's Place Restaurant located at 8050 Academy Road NE, Suite 101 in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Conclusion

While research cited has concluded that the inclusion model is the most effective approach to educating children with intellectual disabilities, it is neither the easiest nor the option chosen by all special needs parents. Fortunately, much modern research has illustrated that the long term benefits far outweigh the challenges involved.

Successful inclusion requires a solid spirit of cooperation between parents and educators, an unwavering commitment by a school district to deliver the necessary staff, equipment, and best practices needed for the child to succeed academically, and an uncompromised commitment by both parents to advocate for their child at all times.

From the practice of inclusion, children with intellectual disabilities enjoy all the benefits of building friendships with peers, exposure to typical behaviors and social interaction, heightened academic expectations, and participation in realistic academic curriculum and recreation.

The United States is a country that strives to celebrate and respect the diversity and differences of its citizens. Having an inclusive public school system is one more opportunity of demonstrating diversity and acceptance that will shape attitudes for generations to come.

Society will benefit most when its citizens are self sufficient, contributing, and responsible individuals. The best hope we can offer children with intellectual disabilities is preparation for the real world by educating them inclusively within a realistic classroom.

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