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# Removing Stigma Around Disabilities in the Classroom: The History and Benefits of Inclusive Education

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**REMOVING STIGMA AROUND DISABILITIES IN THE CLASSROOM:  
THE HISTORY AND BENEFITS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

By

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A senior project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts in Literary and Intercultural Studies

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## **Abstract**

The right to an equal education for students with disabilities is not something that has been available to all children until recently. In 1975, the passing of Public Law 94-142 started the movement of social justice and inclusion for all people with diverse learning abilities to receive equal access to an education. This law has been restructured and is currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). Through this law, there are a growing number of students with disabilities (physical, learning, and intellectual) who are being placed in the least restrictive environment and spend most, if not all, of the day in a general education classroom. By looking at the history and understanding the policies and mandates that have generated the inclusion movement (for example, IDEA, Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and No Child Left Behind), this paper will define inclusive education. By exploring teaching practices and methods, this paper will also discuss how teachers can accommodate diverse learners in their classrooms. This paper hopes to bring awareness and highlight the benefits inclusive education facilitates so teachers, educators, parents, and everyone within the school community, and society at large, can be more accepting and accommodating to people with different learning abilities.

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## Introduction

Imagine a world in which children (or adults) with any semblance of a disability were shut away in an institution, out of the way of “normal” society, all the while being perceived as uneducable. People with disabilities were once considered by some to be a humiliation and disgrace to their families, the very people who were expected to show them unwavering love and support. The stigma faced by people with disabilities had, and still has, a strong presence in society and was certainly reflected in how people with disabilities were (and are) treated. Some people held the view that disabled people were inadequate, abnormal, and people to pity; they were considered by some to be unworthy of, or unfit to receive an adequate education. This unwelcoming world, unfortunately, is one that persisted until very recently. It was not until the 1970s that things began to change in the way children with disabilities were educated and the way people with disabilities were perceived by the public.

The topic of inclusive education has been, and is currently, generating many discussions, research studies, and implementation strategies from the different perspectives of educators, parents, school communities, and policy makers. According to Osgood (2005), “These developments have not occurred without debate, controversy, or struggle” (p. 1). For me, however, inclusive education is a topic that I am personally connected to. My younger sister, Taylor, was born with special needs. Our family did not realize this until she started missing some important milestones, such as beginning to talk, and subsequently read and write. These delayed milestones make it hard for her to communicate and express her feelings to others. Unfortunately, she also suffers daily from seizures. Consequently, Taylor has always been placed in a special education setting, rarely being grouped with general education students. I have always wondered why she did not learn alongside her nondisabled peers.

My interest in inclusive education came about when I observed Taylor's high school for a special education class I was taking. The special education teacher at my sister's school told me that, at that school, they try to have special education students in the general education classrooms as much as possible; however, some students with severe disabilities were unable to attend general education classes.

During my observations of lunchtime on campus, it warmed my heart to see some general education students come over and hang out with my sister and her classmates. Seeing how they interacted with each other was something special; these were real, genuine friendships. They laughed with each other, shared lunches together, and talked about their plans for the summer vacation. After this experience, I started wondering about other benefits of inclusive education.

This paper will: highlight influential laws and policies that created the foundation for the inclusive education movement to take place, define inclusive education, review the history and parallels of inclusive education to school segregation and the American Civil Rights movement, discuss what an inclusive classroom looks like in today's society, as well as highlight the arguments over this ongoing debate, while pointing out the numerous benefits of inclusive classrooms. I hope to bring awareness to the benefits of such inclusive practices while educating others to be more accepting and accommodating to people with disabilities.

### **Conceptualization: Laws, Policies, and Regulations**

In order to fully understand the inclusion movement, one must be familiar with some essential policies and laws associated with inclusive education. In the following paragraphs, I describe four laws: The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), Section 504 (1973), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001).

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), commonly known as ADA, was influenced by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This ADA law, passed on July 26, 1990 by president George H.W. Bush, made it illegal to discriminate because of one's "race, color, religion, sex, or National origin" (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division) in a variety of areas. The Americans with Disabilities Act guarantees protection and equal opportunities to people with disabilities through "employment, public accommodations, transportation, State and local government services, and telecommunications" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, *Americans with Disabilities Act*); it seeks to prohibit or ban discrimination against people with disabilities in virtually all public settings. The law is designed not only for people with physical disabilities, but also for people with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), learning disorders, or executive functioning issues (i.e., trouble with organizing, planning, prioritizing, transitions, etc.) (Lee, 2014). If students are diagnosed with any of these issues, even if they are performing well academically in school, they will remain protected in compliance with ADA (Lee, 2014). The Americans with Disabilities Act works with and supports other laws put in place to protect and provide equal educational opportunities to people with disabilities.

One law the ADA supports is Section 504 (1973), part of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Like the ADA, under Section 504 (1973), any programs receiving federal money from the United



States Department of Education must protect the rights of people with disabilities. According to a document on the U.S. Department of Education's website,

No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States . . . shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance . . .

Section 504 (1973) seeks to eliminate discrimination based on disabilities in an educational setting. Rules and regulations are put into place to ensure an individual's right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under Section 504 (1973) in public elementary and secondary schools. Schools are expected to provide regular, or special education, as well as any additional aids or services, such as: physical or speech therapies, extended time for tests, "note takers, interpreters, readers, and specialized computer equipment" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, *Disability Discrimination*). These services and aids are provided for any students with disabilities to ensure they have the same opportunities in education as their nondisabled peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, *Disability Discrimination*). Other examples of providing students with disabilities equal educational opportunities are: learning in a general education classroom setting, learning in a general education classroom with accompanying aids or services, or learning in a special education classroom setting with similar assistance (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, *Protecting Students with Disabilities*).

At the college level, it is mandatory for institutes of higher education to offer proper "academic adjustments and auxiliary aids and services" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, *Disability Discrimination*) that allow someone qualified for Section 504 (1973) to participate in the programs, activities, and events offered at the school.

Section 504 (1973) has rigid guidelines, definitions, and evaluation processes to ensure that someone is not unintentionally misrepresented. To qualify for Section 504 (1973), the individual must “(1) have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; or (2) have a record of such impairment; or (3) be regarded as having such an impairment” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, *Protecting Students with Disabilities*). The ability to hear, see and communicate, as well as being able to walk and learn are all considered major life activities. In the school setting, the student must have a preliminary evaluation and is required to have reevaluations over time, conducted in a way that showcases academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, *Protecting Students with Disabilities*).

In order to fully understand the progress made regarding inclusive education, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) must be discussed. NCLB (2001) was signed by President George W. Bush in the beginning of 2002 and its main goal was to improve the quality of education children were receiving and to reduce the achievement gap—variations in students’ academic success amongst different groups of students (i.e., African American, Hispanic/Latino, and others) compared to their peers.

NCLB (2001) is a modification, or revision, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) established in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson. ESEA allowed the federal government to assist school districts to “cover the cost of educating disadvantaged students” (Klein, 2015). The revision made by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) holds schools accountable for the academic achievement of all students including students with disabilities, learning disorders, English Language Learners, students receiving special education, as well as socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Through NCLB (2001), each state was able to define,

in their own terms, what academic standards and assessments to implement and how to use the accompanying data sets (ESEA, 1965; NCLB, 2001). The focus of NCLB (2001) was to get all students to a level of “proficiency” in Reading and Math by the 2013-2014 school year. Current Reading and Math levels were obtained through the results of standardized testing in these subjects once a year, beginning in third grade to eighth grade, and only once between tenth and twelfth grade (Klein, 2015).

With the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), it became mandatory for states to set an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which serves to “determine if schools are successfully educating their students” (*Education Week*, 2011). This AYP is assessed through the performance of students on standardized assessments, and if the state’s standards are not met, there are consequences for the schools. For instance, if a school fails to meet the achievement standards for two years or more, the parents have a choice to remove their child, or children, to a new school within that district. If a school fails to meet these standards for three years in a row, that school is instructed to provide free tutoring services. If a school misses these standard benchmarks for more than three years, there are severe consequences; the state can either close the school, recreate the entity as a charter school, or some other tactic might be put in place (Klein, 2015). Through NCLB, schools have an incentive to keep raising the achievement standards; otherwise, they lose federal funding through Title I. Title I “provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards” (U.S. Department of Education 2018, *Title I, Part A Program*).

One interesting aspect of No Child Left Behind Act (2001) is that the law makes it mandatory for schools to hire highly-qualified educators. A highly-qualified teacher must have at least a “bachelor’s degree in the subject they are teaching and state certification” (Klein, 2015). Highly-qualified paraprofessionals working within a school must have received at least an associate degree or be able to demonstrate their knowledge through an evaluation process (Klein, 2015). Some may argue that this puts a constraint on schools and who they can hire. Schools that are already struggling to fulfill positions may find it harder to find qualified candidates.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) is an amendment to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975). IDEA (2004) works to protect individuals with disabilities from birth through the age of twenty-one while guaranteeing Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), including all accommodations and services necessary, to those who qualify (U.S. Department of Education, *About IDEA*). Under IDEA (2004), if a child over the age of three is suspected of having a disability that could potentially affect their ability to learn, then an evaluation process could lead to the creation of an Individualized Education Program, or IEP. An IEP is designed with “specific actions and steps through which educational providers, parents and the student themselves may reach the child’s stated goals” (U.S. Department of Education, *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, 2018). It is a way to ensure that the student is meeting some form of academic achievement and that it is done in the least restrictive environment.

Funding for the provisions mandated by IDEA (2004) are provided by federal grants. School districts are required to adhere to certain guidelines set up through IDEA (2004). Some guidelines state that children who qualify for IDEA (2004) and related services must be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), meaning that they are placed in a general classroom

setting for as much of the day as possible. The opinions, concerns, and thoughts of the parents, as well as the child, must also be considered when determining LRE. Finally, parents “have the right under IDEA to challenge their child’s treatment (due process)” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2018), if they feel their child’s IEP is not appropriate. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s website about IDEA, roughly “6.9 million children with disabilities” have been able to receive a public education since the law was established in 1975. The site also states that nearly 62% of disabled children are educated in a general classroom setting for at least 80% of the school day.

These laws have been instrumental in laying the foundations for the inclusive education movement. To summarize this section, the ADA (1990) is set up to protect individuals with disabilities in all public places, as well as in educational settings. This act supports other laws designed to care for and provide equal opportunities for those who need them. Section 504 (1973) is designed to provide Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to those who qualify. The aim is to ensure that additional aids and services are available in schools. If a school or program qualifies for Section 504, they are expected to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities in order to receive federal funding. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) law sought to diminish the achievement gap by holding schools accountable for the academic progress of all students, including students with disabilities. States were allowed to establish and define their own standards by which students would be tested on an annual basis. This law also made it mandatory to hire highly-qualified teachers. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) protects individuals with disabilities while guaranteeing Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), as well as accommodations and any necessary services to ensure that students are educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for most of the day. These

laws create the framework for inclusion, but what is inclusive education, and how can it be defined?

## What is Inclusive Education?

It is safe to assume that most people have experienced being left out, left behind, or altogether excluded. Being excluded can cause feelings of anger, hurt, frustration, as well as loneliness and even a feeling of worthlessness. Being included, on the other hand, can have positive effects—feelings of empowerment, pride, confidence, and a sense of acceptance. Inclusive education, at its core, is about belonging: “Inclusive education was built on the foundation that all people have the basic human right to belong” (Causton & Tracy-Bronson, 2015, p. 16). The philosophy of inclusive education, however, goes far beyond simply wanting to belong.

Although the concept of inclusive education has developed into a worldwide movement, a universal definition is lacking. Educational inclusion is more than a system of strategies put in place by a school or district; it is a philosophy or belief system based on ethics, morals, and social justice for everyone. Essentially, inclusive education means students of all abilities and learning needs are educated together in general education classrooms, in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), “regardless of any challenges they may have” (McManis, 2017, para. 2). With inclusive education, there is no segregation or separation of students based on their disability status.

In the book *The Educator’s Handbook for Inclusive School Practices*, Causton and Tracy-Bronson (2015) quote Norman Kunc’s (1992) definition of inclusive education as follows:

[It is] The valuing of diversity within the human community. When inclusive education is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children have to become ‘normal’ in order to contribute to the world... We begin to look beyond typical ways of becoming valued members of the community, and in doing so, begin

to realize the achievable goal of providing all children with an authentic sense of belonging. (p. 17)

For inclusion to be successful and make an impact, all teachers, educators, and everyone within the school community must have the belief that all children are deserving and capable of receiving an education: “The school and classroom operate on the premise that students with disabilities are as fundamentally competent as students without disabilities” (McManis, 2017, para. 3). The inclusive classroom environment should be one that is welcoming, encouraging, and stimulating by providing opportunities for students to be academically-challenged in a way that is tailored for individual student’s specific needs. In other words, inclusion is not about dependency, but rather creating ways for all students to engage, interact, and build meaningful relationships with their peers. Although there is not a single definition for inclusive education, these prominent scholars have helped shape and form ideas of what inclusive education is and how it should be turned into a reality. As we see through the eye of these scholars the struggle of bringing inclusion into the classroom was and is a challenge, this parallels another movement in history—the segregation and integration of people of color.

### **From Segregation to Integration and Inclusion**

To fully understand and appreciate the inclusive education movement, one must also look at the parallels of segregation and separatism that persisted in the United States for hundreds of years. When looking at the history of racial segregation, for example, and then considering how people with disabilities have historically been separated from society, the similarities become glaringly apparent.

In the late 1800s, Jim Crow Laws were enacted in the United States, creating a further divide between Whites and People of Color. The exclusion that stemmed from these laws



permeated every aspect of the lives of Black people, dictating where they could shop, walk, eat, drink, where they could sit on public transportation, and what schools they could attend. These laws “represented a formal, codified system of racial apartheid that dominated the American South for three quarters of a century” (Jim Crow Laws, PBS.org).

The term “separate but equal” had come to define this part of American history. It began with a legal case in which a man named Homer Plessy refused to remove himself from the “whites only” seating on a train in 1892. The case made its way to the Supreme Court in 1896, which ruled against Plessy; the court stated that if Blacks had equal public facilities, the separation was constitutional. For the next six decades, racial segregation dominated life in America. It wasn’t until the 1950s, when the Civil Rights movement began, that American society slowly started shifting toward challenging segregation and advocating for change. In the field of education, this change came about with a major case that would be come to be known as *Brown v. Board of Education*.

*Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) was a significant Supreme Court case that helped pave the way for integration in schools. *Brown v. Board* consists of five individual cases: “*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, *Briggs v. Elliot*, *Davis v. Board of Education of Prince Edward County (VA.)*, *Bolling v. Sharpe*, and *Gebhart v. Ethel*” (United States Courts, *History- Brown v. Board of Education Re-Enactment*). In May of 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional due to the 14th Amendment. In his own words, Chief Justice Earl Warren stated, “We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. . .” (United States Courts, *History- Brown v. Board of Education Re-Enactment*). In many ways, this became the heart of the inclusive education

movement, that no one should be separated, that all children, regardless of their race and abilities, deserve an opportunity to have an education.

### **The History of Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education has been defined, and therefor limited by different historical periods. Due to these ever-changing ideas, those who were identified as disabled have had their identity and rights grow and change over the years as society's views of them matured. Osgood (2005) writes that people with perceived disabilities have been shut away or cloistered from society since roughly the fourth century A.D. Under the guise of "protecting" these individuals, it appears as though these institutions— some considered hospices or hospitals—had little concern for their patients' comfort or education. By the 1500s in Europe, mainly in France and Spain, people began value teaching those who were deaf: "The development of sign language and the published successes of pioneers in deaf education challenged prevailing beliefs about the hopelessness of disability, opening a sense of possibility that would lead to similar efforts on behalf of the blind and the mentally disabled" (Osgood, 2005, p.18). Although this was a step in the right direction during this era, individuals with disabilities were still ostracized by society and were more often than not, segregated from the public.

Since the earliest days of America, there were similar practices of excluding people with disabilities, both physical and intellectual, from society. In the colonial period, (from roughly the 1500s to the early to mid-1700s), most families with a member with a perceived disability usually kept this person at home, away from the public; alternatively, a family member with a perceived disability was sent to an institution of some sort. Institutional facilities during this time were often a dismal place where the basic human needs of the patients were not a consideration, or many times, were downright ignored. According to Osgood (2005), "shackling, isolation, and

accepted medical practices such as bloodletting and natural ‘cures’” (p. 20) were common treatments for individuals placed in these institutions. Unfortunately for many, these facilities were the only options available for people with disabilities. With the help of some influential Americans, dominant views toward the disabled were challenged and people in the United States started to look to Europe’s example of including some people with disabilities.

One American man, who looked to Europe for ways of educating the deaf, was Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. Inspired after working with a deaf and mute nine-year-old named Alice Cogswell, Gallaudet traveled to Europe to study new teaching practices developed for deaf and non-speaking individuals. After running into issues with the schools in Scotland and England, Gallaudet then “met a French Catholic priest, Abbot Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard, head of the Royal Institution for Deaf-Mutes in Paris” (Gifford, 2016). After studying in Paris, Gallaudet and Sicard came to America and began to raise money to start their own school. The school, which was established in 1817, was named the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons and was “the nation’s first institution for the deaf” (Osgood, 2005, p. 20). The establishment of this institution was a major step in recognizing that people with disabilities, especially those who are deaf, are capable and deserving of an education.

Another American man who took inspiration from Europe regarding the education of the blind, deaf, and intellectually disabled was Samuel Gridley Howe. During his lifetime, Howe held incredibly progressive views and was a leader in bringing public awareness to the topic of special education. In 1831, Samuel Gridley Howe was hired as the director for the New England Institution for the Education of the Blind (later renamed the Perkins School for the Blind), which “was the first institution of its kind in the country” (Trent, 2019, para. 3.). Howe traveled to

Europe to familiarize himself with practices and teaching strategies for the blind, and with this knowledge, upon his return to America, Howe “spearheaded the organization of the Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind” (Osgood, 2005, p. 20). In 1848, Howe helped establish Massachusetts’ first “Asylum for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Youth” (Osgood, 2005, p. 20).

Howe and his colleagues became widely known after educating a blind and deaf child, Laura Bridgman. Through their instruction, she was able to “receive and express communication” (Trent, para. 3, 2019). Howe even traveled with his students, giving lectures and demonstrations of his pupil’s educational abilities and, because of this, some states began to create their own schools for the blind and deaf. In a speech given in 1853, speaking of the students in the institutions Howe helped establish, he is quoted as saying, “...the pupils have as much right to the benefits as such as ordinary children in the common schools” (Osgood, 2005, p. 21). Gallaudet and Howe, among others, confronted the popular notion at the time that people with disabilities are inferior; they challenged public perception of the disabled and through their selfless and tireless work, helped bring public awareness to the fact that people with disabilities are absolutely capable of receiving an education and that education for everyone is a fundamental human right.

Throughout the remaining years of the late 1800s, these institutional facilities saw a gradual increase in popularity, but unfortunately, as time moved on, the respect, compassion, and ideals of Gallaudet, Howe, and other progressive leaders in special education diminished and instead negative connotations and attitudes became the dominate perspective again (Osgood, 2005). By the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public opinion of the disabled community was extremely misguided and filled with antipathy:

In the world of mental disability, that meant continued segregation and isolation from the mainstream; for the deaf community, it meant continuous and intensive efforts to meld that community into the mainstream and the abandonment of a unique deaf culture. In both cases, it meant calls for the eventual elimination of the condition through potent mechanisms of social control. (Osgood, 2005, p. 22)

Reverting to the negative connotations of the past did little to advance the disabled community. In fact, it most likely set back the integration and acceptance of disabled individuals into mainstream society for many generations.

By the 1900s, public school systems in the United States were beginning to rise in densely-populated urban areas. Many of these early public schools enrolled increasing numbers of children with disabilities, behavior issues, or an inability to progress academically with their peers. Many people believed that the answer to this problem was sending these children to separate facilities altogether, so that the “capable” students would have more of a direct interaction with the teacher (Osgood, 2005). Therefore, in order to cope with the influx of students with disabilities, schools started segregating any students, whom it was believed, slowed instruction in the classrooms. The dominant thought and belief at this time, in regards to special education, was that this separation was not only expected, but “advocated by the vast majority of school professionals and researchers, who relied on two fundamental arguments: that segregation was necessary for efficient classroom and school operation, and that separate programs for disabled children was in their best educational and psychological interests” (Osgood, 2005, p. 23). This misguided belief was largely unchallenged by most during this time, especially those involved in the management of schools.

In response to segregating students who were deemed “unfit” for the general education classroom, specialized schools for students were established throughout the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s. For example, Boston created a school for Deaf-Mutes in 1869, which was “the first public day school for deaf children in the United States” (Osgood, 2005, p. 26). In the same year in Providence, Rhode Island, a school for “children with mental retardation” was opened and other states followed suit; “Springfield, Massachusetts; Boston; Philadelphia; New York; Chicago; Baltimore; Detroit; and Los Angeles” (Osgood, 2005, p. 26) were some of the cities creating these specialized schools. It was also during this time that other schools were being created for numerous other disability categories, but children with disabilities were still separated from general education classrooms. There were schools that were conducted outside (typically reserved for frequently ill children); other schools were created to meet the needs of individuals with speech delays/disorders, for children with hearing or vision disabilities, for students with behavior issues, and even for children for whom English is not their native language (Osgood, 2005). Many people argued in favor of these segregated educational settings, attempting to highlight the benefits of such a practice. These restrictive views were almost the exact opposite of the ideals, beliefs, and research that make up the inclusion movement today, but as time progressed and the twentieth century wore on, the practice of separating and segregating individuals with disabilities was still the main strategy for special education. For example, there were not the laws and legislation to protect these individuals and guarantee their right to an equal opportunity education. Unfortunately, these students were getting the very least of what public schools could offer.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, most states were still in the practice of segregating students, but a select few, such as Massachusetts, began to recognize that having a

disability is not necessarily a valid reason for exclusion (Osgood, 2005). Then, when the Great Depression began in America in 1929 through the 1930s, special education (including training for teachers, funding for special classes, resources, etc.) was a lesser priority than general education. Despite this undervaluing of special education, special education programs persisted.

Elise H. Martens, a progressive leader in the field of special education, published her study on the status of special education in regard to state laws in the 1940s. She believed that education for the “exceptional child” was “his birthright.” Marten (1941) also believed in making America strong through the education of remarkable children: “An education for exceptional children, adjusted to their needs and capacities is an absolutely necessary correlate to an education, for *all* children that shall make America strong” (p. 36). In one article, she urged all those involved in the school systems to look at their own educational practices and to reflect and change (if necessary) in order to accommodate children with exceptional learning abilities. Through legislation, states were becoming more responsible for the education of children with disabilities. It was because of her efforts in this area that special education was slowly being noticed in the national discussion of public education.

Over the next decade, the special education debate continued. The National Society for the Study of Education published *The Education of Exceptional Children* (1950), which was comprised of research and personal beliefs from leading figures in the field; it was meant to assist teachers, educators, school administrators, and even parents of exceptional children in how best to help students in specialized classes adapt to life in regular classrooms (Osgood, 2005). This publication recognized that all children are unique and therefore their educational needs will also be individualized and distinct. At the time this document was published (1950), there were

an estimated four million children in need of special educational instruction, and the authors stated that,

The goals of education for them are the same as those for all children. The difference lies in the means or techniques by which those goals can be realized and in the way in which they find expression in the individual's life. (Osgood, 2005, p. 41)

The conversation around this subject was starting to become nationally recognized in the 1950s. The debate was now focused on segregation versus inclusion and which was most beneficial to exceptional children. This critical debate was heavily divided; there were strong proponents on each side. Those who argued against inclusion believed that there were benefits to segregation and claimed that if a child was placed in a general classroom setting and was not able to keep up academically, the placement would not benefit the child. Harley Wooden is quoted as saying that such a situation “may lead to disastrous educational retardation and emotional and social maladjustment” (Osgood, 2005, p. 50) Those opposed to inclusion reasoned that simply placing a child in a general education classroom was no guarantee of success— for the individual, or for the class as a whole, and that placing such a child in a “normal” classroom may lead to further exclusion and mockery. The thought process behind this stance was that including students with disabilities was not a true indicator of inclusion, and that having separate educational facilities was in the best interest for students with disabilities.

On the other side of the argument, those who supported and advocated for inclusion, had a drastically different perspective. Supporters of inclusion were concerned not only for the child's educational progress, but also for their social development. Being placed in a special, separate classroom was essentially putting a label on the child in which stigmatization and



further isolation would certainly follow. One major supporter of inclusion was Howard Lane who said, “segregation gives any human being a skewed culture. The handicapped needs special understanding rather than special classes” (Osgood, 2005, p. 44). This is one reason why people argued in favor of inclusive classrooms and also advocated for training for teachers to be prepared to assist students with different needs and abilities. As the 1960s approached, the debate surrounding special education shifted from one of whether there should be separate classrooms and curriculums, to a discussion of ethics, morals, and the legality of continuing the practice of segregated educational facilities for students with disabilities (Osgood, 2005).

The 1960s saw much progress in the way of special education. John F. Kennedy and his administration were instrumental in bringing public awareness to this issue, and encouraging the federal government to create and fund programs for the education of children with disabilities. A strong supporter of education, Kennedy “made intellectual disabilities a priority for his new administration” (*John. F. Kennedy and people with intellectual disabilities*). In October of 1961, President Kennedy established a panel to address the subject of intellectual disability and consider steps the governmental bodies could take to fund programs and services to assist those individuals who needed special education. Within a year, this panel presented Kennedy with, “more than 100 recommendations for a comprehensive federal approach to intellectual disabilities and urged him to ‘think and plan boldly’” (*John. F. Kennedy and people with intellectual disabilities*). A central focus for this panel was to move away from institutional care and instead move towards a more inclusive way of taking care of people with disabilities. By this time, institutions for disabled people became overpopulated because “physicians and other professionals felt more comfortable in recommending institutionalization, even as conditions become much more crowded and unhealthy” (Osgood, 2005, p. 67). It became clear that

something must be done to bring these individuals (especially children) out of such horrid conditions and integrate them into general society.

Several factors during the 1960s resulted in an increased placement of students into special education settings. The laws and legislations passed in the previous decades called for a better understanding of disabilities, as well as methods for identifying and assisting children with disabilities. Then, further research led to "...more sophisticated procedures and instruments for diagnosing and classifying disabling conditions among children" (Osgood, 2005, p. 74). This meant that children who would have been historically identified as having a disability and unable to participate in the general education system, were now viewed as needing support to meet the same standards of the general population. Furthermore, the term *learning disability* was first introduced in 1963 and had a significant impact on identifying children with different needs. The term *learning disability* "...was used to indicate a syndrome associated with a wide range of mild to moderate disabling conditions and kinds of poor performance among school children" (Osgood, 2005, p. 71). The introduction of this term helped to clarify the differences among disability categories, highlighting the fundamental need for special education for students across these categories. All these factors "solidified the necessity of an expansive special education empire" (Osgood, 2008, p. 104), but not everyone shared these views.

Lloyd Dunn was not a supporter of special education in a segregated setting. He was aware that many minority children (including children of color, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and students learning English as a second language) "had been erroneously identified as disabled and then shoveled off to segregated, euphemistically labeled 'special education' settings" (Osgood, 2005, p. 81), which was anything but beneficial to the students' academic achievement or socioemotional development and overall well-being. Dunn

felt that being characterized as needing special education was to have a stigmatizing and demoralizing label. According to Dunn, the ineffective identification process, "...has resulted in digging the educational grave of many racially, and/or economically disadvantaged children" (Osgood, 2005, p. 82). What he did support was enabling all children to have educational and social opportunities that would allow them to thrive. Dunn's work inspired others to examine and restructure their thinking and practices regarding the identification, labeling, and placement of students with disabilities.

Two concepts emerged in the 1970s that led to greater support for inclusion in public schools— *deinstitutionalization* and *normalization*. Institutions housing disabled individuals were found to have unsafe, horrid, and inhumane living environments. In response, "the federal government began subsidizing local communities to establish smaller, less isolated residential settings for former residents of institutions" (Osgood, 2005, p. 94). Originating in Europe in the previous decade, the notion of *normalization* was spread in America by Wolf Wolfensberger, an avid supporter of the disabled community. The goal of normalization is to provide an environment that allows for someone with disabilities to have as normal and independent a life as possible. Wolfensberger's work, along with that of Gunnar Dybwad and the International League of Societies for the Mentally Handicapped, brought the idea "of normalization and integration to the forefront of the debate in special education" (Osgood, 2005, p. 96); their promotion of normalization became a common theme for the supporters of the inclusive education movement during this time. The emergence of these two ideas, along with the establishment of Public Law 94-142 (Education for all Handicapped Children Act) in 1975, helped ensure the right to a public education for every child, including those with disabilities.

Public Law 94-142, otherwise known as the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (1975), provided support to children who were “excluded entirely,” or had “limited access to the education system” (U.S. Department of Education, *Thirty-five years of progress in educating children with disabilities through IDEA*, 2010). The language used in this document assured that every child had access to a “free and appropriate public education, due process, nondiscriminatory assessment, and an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for every child. It also stipulated that as much as possible educational services should be provided in the least restrictive environment” (Keogh, 2007, p. 67). The stipulation of the Least Restrictive Environment had a significant impact on exceptional<sup>1</sup> student’s educational needs; classroom instruction became more individualized as students with disabilities were included in general education classrooms for most of the day. However, if separate special services or classes were needed, they were provided, as long as it was beneficial to the student. The law states that those who qualify should be educated alongside of their non-disabled peers,

and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability<sup>1</sup> is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (McLeskey, 2012).

The advancements in the laws during this period greatly extended the rights of disabled students and pushed forward the ideals of inclusion. Knowing the history of the inclusion movement is important for understanding where it is today, and the immense potential it has to help students in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Experts and educational researchers began using the term *exceptional* when referring to students with disabilities while focusing on the supports and services needed for these individuals.

## **Inclusion Today**

After discussing the laws that laid the foundation for the inclusive education movement—the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) — as well as outlining the important and significant moments in its history, it is necessary to discuss what inclusion looks like in today’s schools.

Inclusive education is more than policies put in place that govern how a school is run; it is a philosophy, a belief system that at its core is about “accepting, understanding, and attending to student differences and diversity” (McManis, 2017, para. 4). With an increasing number of students with diverse backgrounds and learning needs in general education classrooms, how can educators meet the demands of such a diverse student population? What does a classroom inclusive of all learners look like?

Inclusion is not just having differently-abled students present in the general classroom; teachers, paraprofessionals, and special educators collaborate to create a welcoming environment that “meets the needs of all learners” (Causton and Tracy-Bronson, 2015, p. 7). Together, educators develop an educational plan for students with varying learning abilities in order to ensure all students meet their goals and are successful in the general education classroom. Many inclusive classroom teachers use an approach called Universal Design for Learning, or UDL. The UDL framework, “advocates having learning options and accommodations already in place instead of waiting until students or educator needs arise” (Karten, 2015, p. 106). In other words, teachers proactively plan for diverse learners. This can be done by gathering information about each student, such as “reviewing their academic records; examining their work; surveying them (and others who know them) about their interests and activities; noting the learning conditions

that affect their engagement and motivation; and analyzing their performance on classroom-based and standardized assessments” (Salend & Whittaker, 2017, p. 60). With UDL, teachers come to know and understand their students and their educational needs.

A huge component of Universal Design for Learning is lesson planning. The objective for lesson plans using a UDL framework is to raise students up using their instructional level, and not to push them too hard that they hit their frustration level (Karten, 2015). With this structure, teachers design activities with differentiated instruction through representation, action and expression, and engagement. Representation means that modifications can be made to educational material to meet the learning needs of children who need the information presented in a different way. For example, material can be presented through a variety of ways such as pictures, videos, or providing books in braille, or in audiobook format. Action and expression is associated with how a student responds to the lesson to demonstrate what they have learned. This could mean that instead of writing a traditional essay to show that they have read a particular book, a student could be allowed to make a video (or another presentation format) to demonstrate knowledge of the content. Engagement refers to how students are motivated to participate in the course of learning, “more specifically, teachers need to implement different classroom strategies that empower their learners and draw them into the learning by providing choices, reducing anxiety, and rewarding effort” (Baldiris Navarro et. al., 2016, p. 18). With these three powerful and effective strategies, teachers can help build the scaffolding students in inclusive classroom settings need to succeed.

Problem-Based learning is another effective teaching strategy for inclusive classrooms. According to Karten (2005), “Problem-based learning uses open-ended strategies that value student inquiry” (p. 111). With this method, students and teachers collaborate, provide

continuous dialogue about projects, and reflect on the entire process. Another similar technique is project-based learning “but differences may include the length of time devoted to the project and whether it is a hypothetical problem or a project related to a real-world authentic task or setting” (Karten, 2015, p. 111). The skills that can be strengthened through using these teaching methods include critical thinking, imagination and ingenuity, verbal communication skills, and becoming involved as a participating member of a team (Karten, 2015). Problem-Based, or Project-Based Learning is never about students working alone; instead, students and teachers work together to reach the desired goals.

While Universal Design for Learning and Problem-Based and Project-Based Learning methods are incredibly useful in creating inclusive classroom environments, there are numerous other ways in which to foster inclusivity in an educational setting. On a day-to-day basis, teachers can use a variety of practices such as whole group and small group instruction with “transition to flexible groupings” (McMannis, 2017, para. 15). Teachers can design the layout of the classroom to include a quiet study area, or on the other side of the spectrum, have places and opportunities for students to move about (i.e., having a word wall displaying common and hard-to-spell words that students can refer to when needed; word walls provide a way for students to get up and move, without disrupting their personal involvement in the learning process). The position of desks is another consideration in forming an inclusive classroom. Teachers can organize the layout of desks in a way that encourages student communication and cooperation. Some examples of how to incorporate inclusive practices into today’s classroom include: providing flexible seating options (e.g., wobbly/rocking chairs or stools, yoga/exercise balls, couches, bean bags, etc.), writing the daily schedule where everyone can view it, having a colorful classroom that displays students’ works without being overwhelming, and providing

noise-canceling headphones. These small but significant changes to the classroom space create a more effective learning environment for diverse learners and teachers alike.



### **The Inclusion Debate: The Risks and Benefits of Inclusive Education**

The dispute over the benefits and risks of inclusive education has been a long one, with critics wondering about the academic achievement of students without Special Educational Needs (SEN) who are taught alongside students with SEN, and supporters arguing the benefits for *all* involved in such a setting. Opposing arguments on this topic include the reasoning that “The admission of children with SEN rarely leads to changes in the organization of school, its curriculum, and teaching and learning strategies” (Szumski, et al., 2017, p. 35). Simply placing students with SEN into a general education classroom will rarely lead to academic achievement for these students, unless the proper structure and support from school administrators, educators, other professionals, and parents are in place. Educators must have assistance and cooperation for inclusion to work. According to Szumski and others (2017), “the lack of support from a special education co-teacher was identified as a factor that intensifies stress and occupational burnout” (p. 37) for classroom teachers. Making an inclusive classroom successful involves high levels of quality management, planning and preparation. Another reason some might be against inclusion is that they are skeptical about its effectiveness. Opponents of inclusive education state that “special education came about for a reason...Some children cannot learn by traditional teaching methods or through a standard curriculum. They need individualized instruction designed for their specific learning styles” (Dybvik, 2004, para. 17). For the most part, people who have doubts about inclusion are not questioning the integrity of it, but rather whether inclusion is an efficient practice to foster academic achievement for *all* students.

On the other side of the argument are the supporters of inclusive education. People who advocate for inclusion have a firm belief that diversity lies at the heart of humanity, and that every student should be given an opportunity to feel valued, that they belong to the school

community. Some recent studies have documented the effectiveness of inclusive schools; for example, Szumski and colleagues cited a study conducted by Rouse and Florian (2006), the results of which, “suggested that implementing inclusive practices on school level can lead to achievement improvement among all students” (Szumski, et al., 2017, p. 35). In this study, which measured the academic achievement among students from grades k-12 in the United States, Canada, and European countries, the researchers concluded that “...not only students with SEN may benefit from this form of education...but also that inclusive education may be beneficial for students without SEN” (Szumski, et al., 2017, p. 47). This finding will prove useful for parents who are skeptical of inclusive education settings and for the officials who are responsible for creating policies related to inclusive education.

Christie Blazer (2017) gathered information and summarized studies conducted on the “academic and social outcomes of inclusion on students with and without disabilities” (p. 1). Blazer cites a study completed by Cassandra M. Cole (2002) that found that Students With Disabilities (SWD) who were educated in an inclusive classroom made improvements in Math and Reading on the Basic Academic Skills Samples test compared to SWD who were “educated in self-contained special education classrooms” (Blazer, 2017, p. 3). Another important study that highlights the benefits of inclusive classrooms was conducted by Rea, McLaughlin, and Walther-Thomas in 2002; this study focused on two eighth-grade classes, one of which had students educated in an inclusive classroom, and the other group featured teachers using pullout instruction, where a special education teacher would take a small group outside of the general education classroom and give them individualized support. This group of researchers found that students in the fully inclusive classroom “received significantly higher course grades in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies than SWD in pullout programs” (Blazer, 2017, p.

3). The same study also revealed that there were higher rates of attendance among “SWD in inclusive classrooms” compared to students with disabilities in non-inclusive classrooms (Blazer, 2017, p. 4).

In addition to these positive findings related to academics, there is ample evidence showcasing the social benefits of an inclusive educational setting. By observing their nondisabled peers, students with disabilities can learn about social behaviors considered appropriate among their peer groups; students with disabilities may not otherwise have access to these experiences in a secluded or segregated setting. Blazer (2017) sums up several research studies (Fore et al., 2008; Henninger & Gupta, 2014; Lamport et al., 2012; Vianello & Lanfranchi, 2011; Shoger, 2006) pointing to the many benefits of inclusion:

SWD placed in inclusive classrooms: have more opportunities to learn and model socially acceptable, age-appropriate behavior, have an enhanced sense of belonging, maintain levels of self-esteem that are comparable to their nondisabled peers, demonstrate better communication skills, have some increased social interactions with classmates, are less likely to feel isolated from their peers, and are more likely to develop friendships with nondisabled students. (p. 6)

Considering the findings from these and numerous other studies, it is clear the benefits of inclusive education far outweigh the possible risks and concerns fostered by opponents of the inclusion movement. When the stigma around individuals with disabilities is removed in a classroom setting, we can see that students with disabilities are just as capable and deserving of an equal education as their nondisabled peers. By setting high expectations for all students, teachers can cultivate a welcoming, friendly, motivating, and encouraging environment in which all human diversity is valued and respected.

## Conclusion

At its core, inclusive education is about acknowledging, respecting, and valuing human diversity; it is an “educational principle” (Shyman, 2015, p. 351) as well as a belief system that is rooted in ethics and social justice. When the entire school community embraces inclusion and realizes that every child, regardless of having a disability or not, can be a “full participant in their classrooms” (McManis, 2017, para. 3), inclusion becomes a reality. Although the educational inclusion movement is continuously evolving, four significant laws played a major part in shaping what inclusive education is today.

Inclusive education has many important components and laws designed to protect and support people with disabilities and have thus altered the way society views these individuals. The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) prevents people with disabilities from being discriminated against as well as ensuring that these individuals have the same opportunities to lead a full and productive life. In regard to public schools, this law makes it possible to provide legitimate accommodations to a student with disabilities, so they have an opportunity to receive an equal education as their nondisabled classmates. Under Section 504 (1973), individuals with disabilities are protected from discrimination in any program or organization that receives federal money. Any qualified student, who has a disability that hinders a major life activity is eligible for accommodations to ensure a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) was designed to shorten the achievement gap and hold schools accountable for the academic improvement among all students. Through NCLB, schools are obligated to arrange for “accommodations and alternate assessments” (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2018) for students with disabilities. In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) students with disabilities have an Individualized

Educational Plan (IEP) “that defines the special education and related services needed by the student” (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2018). These laws laid the foundation for inclusion and have given students with disabilities an opportunity to have equal access to an appropriate education.

Looking through the lens of history, before these essential laws were established, people with disabilities were educated in separate spaces, if educated at all, and were mostly rejected or ignored by society at large. Unfortunately, in some cases, people with disabilities were looked upon as a hindrance rather than a human being. This may not have been the case with every individual with differing abilities, but it was certainly true for most people who did not have the support and empathy from those around them.

The parallels between the segregation of African-Americans and individuals with disabilities demonstrate similar problems with how society separated people based on a certain part of their identity. There are undeniable connections to the division, hardships, and struggles for their rightful place in society between these two historically marginalized groups. The fact that these groups of people have been excluded from society, yet they continually fight for equal rights is the essence of inclusion- that everyone should be a valued member of humanity. We all have something to give to the world.

Although the inclusive movement is still young, progress is made each day. If it were not for groundbreaking and revolutionary people fighting for the rights of others, such as Samuel Gridley Howe, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, Elise H. Martens, Madeleine Will, among so many other incredible advocates for the disabled community, inclusion might be drastically different than what it is currently. So the question becomes this— knowing the history of the inclusive education movement and its parallels to school segregation that lead to the Civil Rights

movement, how can we (as a society, as a nation) continue to justify this outdated and skewed practice of excluding individuals with different needs from public schools?

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