

# Unintended Lessons: What Typically Developing Students Learn from the Inclusion and Exclusion of Students Who Receive Special Education Services

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Carol Hines

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## Introduction

One of the hallmarks of the public education system in the United States is its diversity. While in other countries, students are segregated in academic and vocational tracks, in the US students commonly attend the schools in their neighborhood with other students from the neighborhood. In 1954, the Supreme Court struck down the idea of *separate but equal* in *Brown v. The Board of Education* and mandated that schools be desegregated. In 1975, Public Law 92-142 mandated the free appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with disabilities. Subsequent legislation (IDEA-1997, IDEA-2004) has specified that students with disabilities are to be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE means that, to the maximum extent appropriate, school districts must educate students with disabilities in the regular classroom with appropriate aids and supports, along with their nondisabled peers in the school they would attend if they were not disabled. The first placement that must be considered is the general education classroom alongside typically developing peers. It is only if this placement is deemed to be ineffective that segregation is to be considered.

Demographic studies suggest that most students with disabilities are receiving at least 80% of their education in general education classrooms. However, there are still many districts that interpret LRE in a broader sense, and routinely segregate students with disabilities. Disability activists such as Gallagher (2006), Naraian (2017), Valle & Connor (2010), Danforth & Gabel (2006), Kliever (2014), and Gabel & Connor (2014) have argued for broadening the policy of including students with special education needs in the same classroom as their typically developing peers: a philosophy known as inclusion. While these scholars agree that inclusion is a good idea, the term *inclusion* can be defined in many different ways.

When PL 94-142 was first enacted, having students with disabilities in their neighborhood school was considered inclusion, even if they were segregated into a separate class. Currently, students with disabilities can be placed in general education classrooms, but may spend their day working with an instructional assistant on a separate curriculum and have little interaction with their peers. For example, while the general education students work on multiplying fractions, the student with

disabilities works in the back of the room with an assistant placing four plastic counting bears on a large numeral 4. Other students may be placed in general education classrooms, but receive a majority of their services in a *pull out* model, meaning that they are absent from the classrooms for a part of the day. Finally, some schools define inclusion as having students with disabilities attend assemblies and non-academic subjects with their typically developing peers. Debates continue to rage about whether students who receive special education services are better placed in full inclusion or in a separate placement. Many also question whether having special education students in the general education classroom helps or harms the progress of the typically developing students (Cosier, 2014; Brantlinger, 2006; Gallagher, 2006; Rice, 2006). My purpose in this paper is not to recount or weigh in on those debates, but rather to pose the question of how typically developing students' views on society may differ depending upon their experience with inclusive or segregated special education placements.

I borrow the concept of unintended consequences from the study of social policies that indicate that solving one problem can cause unanticipated other problems. In his seminal work, Robert Merton (1936) refers to "purposive social action" (p. 894). As it relates to this topic, the purposive social action is the mandating of public education for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. I propose that the purpose of this social action was to move us toward a society that is more inclusive of people with disabilities. I question whether, in our move toward inclusion, we are actually teaching some of our typically developing students that people with disability are not includable?

I will begin by describing two different educational settings with which I am familiar. In the first setting, students with disabilities received their special education services in a separate classroom called a special day class (SDC). In the second scenario, students with disabilities receive their special education services in a classroom with their typically developing peers. I will go on to describe the theoretical foundations for each of these placement models, and finally examine the unintended lessons that could emerge in these two settings. Finally, I explore the ways these unintended lessons might change the students' view of society outside of the school setting.

### Two Scenarios

Allow me to begin by explaining my connection to the following two settings. I was a teacher at Jefferson Elementary school for six years. The classroom I describe is my own. I became familiar with Crafton Elementary in multiple visits in my role as a university clinical practice supervisor for a student teacher. The notable difference in approach in these two settings prompted my questions on this topic.

The first setting described is Jefferson Elementary School, which is in a residential neighborhood in a mid-sized city in the Southwestern United States. It serves 850 students in Kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Built on the site of what was originally a walnut grove, it serves a low income community. 83% of its student qualify for free or reduced lunch.

In addition to the general education classes offered at Jefferson, the school also has four special day classes (SDCs). These special education classes are located in the elementary school, but much of the oversight for these classes comes from the district Program Specialist. These classes contain *only* students who have disabilities. Two of these special day classes serve students with moderate to severe disabilities. It is the primary classroom for grades Kindergarten through third grade that is the setting for this scenario. Students in this classroom may require significant support in the areas of mobility, communication, skills for daily living, and academics. Their education is usually focused on helping them to function in the most independent way possible given the extent of their disabilities. The expectations are that these students will not receive a high school diploma, but a certificate of completion. There is also the expectation that these students will continue to need significant support in their adult years.

In a special day class, the reading curriculum teaches letter sound associations as is common in other primary classrooms, but this classroom curriculum also focuses on sight words. The aim is to have students learn 500 functional words that will help them to live more independent lives in adulthood. The curriculum is modified according to each student's capacity. Some may be working on tracing the first letter in their first name, and others might be constructing sentences or paragraphs. Math may be placing four counting bears on an enlarged number four as mentioned above, or it may involve double digit addition or subtraction with regrouping. The whole class lessons are built around literature, seasonal topics, and general literacy and math skills. The small group work is ability based, and each group does activities that are specific to their level of performance. Some students in the class may attend to personal needs independently, but others may require more assistance with activities of daily living such as eating and toileting.

The setting of the classroom is on the edge of the campus, and the classroom has its own restroom that contains adaptive toilets and a lift table for students who require diapering. This restroom is kept locked so that the adaptive equipment will not be tampered with by unsupervised students.

Interaction between the special day class students and the general education students happens during a joint recess time. The students in the special day class have an extra layer of supervision with the instructional assistants shadowing the students for protection and redirection. The students who use wheelchairs and walkers are generally accompanied by instructional assistants.

During the breakfast and lunch meal, the students eat in the cafeteria, but at a separate table with support as needed from the instructional assistants. The SDC students participate in most assemblies, usually sitting at the edge of the rows of children so that the wheelchairs can be readily moved in and out of the multi-purpose room.

At the beginning and end of the day, most of the SDC students arrive by bus. They are the only students at the school who receive bussing. The bus drops off and picks up at the door to the

cafeteria, which is about 100 feet from the front gate of the school through which all other student enter and exit. The two students who live close enough to walk to school also enter through the cafeteria doors.

In the second elementary setting observed, a different approach is used. Crafton Elementary School is located in a small farming community in rural Midwestern United States. It serves 282 students in pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. 33% of the student qualify for free or reduced lunch and 91% of the student population is Caucasian.

Over the last decade or so, the Crafton school district has become more intentional in implementing its goal of full inclusion for students with disabilities. Oversight for these students happens at the site level with the elementary principal overseeing the program. At Crafton Elementary School, there are three special educators; one serves kindergarten and first grade, one serves second and third grade, and one serves third, fourth, and fifth grade. There are no separate settings for students with disabilities, and each student receives services in a general education classroom. Many of the lessons in these general education classrooms are co-taught with a general education and special education teacher. The teachers at each grade level are provided one hour of co-planning time per week during the school day. During this time, the co-teachers determine learning targets and plan lessons.

For observers in the Crafton classrooms, it is not always evident which students are receiving special education services. The students are intermingled with their typically developing peers in various groups. As is true at Jefferson Elementary, differentiation of instruction is evident in many of the lessons, but this differentiation happens across the entire classroom population, not only for the students who qualify for special education services. The differentiation may be leveled assignments, different levels of scaffolding, extra time to complete tasks, small group reviews, and additional practice.

Because of the rural nature of the community and the resulting lack of specialized personnel, the approach to special education is quite different at Crafton as compared to Jefferson. In a large district with a variety of specialized settings, the task is to find the correct setting for students who qualify for special education services. In Crafton, each student is assessed to determine his/her educational needs, and then decisions are made about how best to provide for those needs in a general education classroom.

In one Crafton kindergarten classroom, six of the fifteen students qualify for special education services, with an additional student receiving speech and language services. For the majority of the day, all of the students are in the classroom, although any of the students may be occasionally removed from the classroom for individual assessments. Some lessons are presented *on the carpet* in a whole group setting, and these lessons are commonly followed by small group instruction at three separate tables. Each of the groups is of mixed ability, and the teacher or assistant assigned to each

table helps all of the students at that table. Because of common planning time, each of the adults in the room is aware of students' current levels and academic goals. Another structural note is the opportunity for student choice time built into the daily schedule. Following a whole group lesson, students are allowed to pick from a menu of five options that include read to self, read with a friend, writing, and computer games. Students who require additional practice or re-teaching often have their needs met in short one-to-one sessions.

### Theoretical Frameworks

These two scenarios grow out of different theoretical frameworks. The scene at Jefferson Elementary can best be understood when viewed through the medical model as a theoretical lens. Before 1974, when PL 94-142 guaranteed education for students with disabilities, the professionals assisting children with disabilities were located within medical and therapeutic settings. Early special education was a natural extension of this history. Valle and Connor (2011) describe the ways in which the medical model aligns with traditional public special education. For the sake of clarity, the following description includes the medical terminology in parentheses after each component. The student (patient) presents with education issues (symptoms). The school psychologist (*scientific expert*) performs an assessment (examination) in order to determine a possible disability (diagnosis). An education plan is written (prescription) and the individualized instruction in special education (course of treatment) is begun in order to remediate (cure) the student (patient). Annual IEP meetings (follow-up appointment) determine whether the placement (treatment) is working.

Operating in a medical model leads naturally to the segregated placement at Jefferson. The assumption is that the students with disabilities need different services than students without disabilities. The professionals who educate (treat) them have a different set of skills than those who educate the typically developing students. There is also a built-in assumption that the students in special education should stay in that placement until they are cured and can operate at the same level as their typically developing peers. Some of the isolation may even come from the practice of keeping *sick* individuals away from the healthy to prevent contamination.

In contrast, the scene at Crafton Elementary grows from a social model of disability. In this model, the disability is not located in the individual with the impairment, but is located in the social construction of disability (Valle & Connor, 2010; Ferri, 2006). The argument is that impairment is a natural and universal component of diversity, and it is only the social construction of disability that causes problems for the individuals with disabilities. When the teachers at Crafton are meeting the student with a disability, the question is not about how to fix the child, but how to fix the classroom or school to make it accessible to the child. Because the disability isn't located within the child, there is no question about whether (s)he belongs in a different or segregated placement.

Let me clearly state that the severity of the disabilities of the students in these two classrooms are different. The students at Jefferson with the *most* severe disabilities may or may not have their

educational needs met in a general education setting. However, there are several students at Jefferson who are at a similar developmental level as the students at Crafton. For these students, it is their respective districts' theoretical framework that places students in either inclusive or segregated settings.

### Unintended Lessons

Having described the two settings and given their theoretical foundations, I move now to what I fear are the unintended lessons we teach to typically developing students through our practices of in(ex)clusion.

#### Who gets to belong?

The first lesson I fear we teach is that only students who measure up to the *norm* get to belong. Students in elementary classrooms are capable of making their own observations about what is *normal* based on what they see around them. In the days before racial integration of schools, students, and other denizens of schools, had strong opinions about who got to belong in white schools. When *Brown v. Board of Education* changed the federal policies about racial integration, schools struggled with the paradigms they had created about who belonged and who didn't belong in schools.

If students are taught that individuals with disabilities don't get to belong in schools, they are likely to carry this lesson into their adult lives. The assumptions from childhood will carry over to who gets to belong in the workplace, in the club, in the community of faith, and even in the neighborhood.

#### Danger/Protection

Another lesson I contend we are teaching our students in segregated classrooms is that people with disabilities either pose a threat to, or need to be protected from, society. Separate placement for students with disabilities can send the message that they are dangerous and may cause harm or injury to students without disabilities. Students who learn this message are likely to be frightened or intimidated by the unknown. Conversely, typically developing students could assume that the reason for the separation is to protect the individuals with disabilities. The segregated students may be seen as fragile and vulnerable. They could be in danger from being with their typically developing peers. The separation may send the message that the disability is contagious, and that the separation is designed to prevent exposure and contamination. These messages will affect the way individuals engage with individuals with disabilities into adulthood. Students who have learned these unintended lessons are likely to stay away from people with disabilities because they fear they are dangerous, contagious, or because they fear they are fragile and likely to be injured.

## Ableism

The last unintended lesson we teach segregated students is that of ableism. Ableism is described as discrimination in favor of able-bodied people. If students grow up in segregated settings, they may learn the message that people who are able-bodied are more valuable than people who are disabled. In fact, students may carry this generalization one step further and hide any difficulties or areas where they need extra support so that no one will suspect them of being disabled. If students fear losing their status as typically developing, they will mask areas of difficulty and misunderstanding. This could limit their access to needed supports in learning. If they are not catching on to concepts as quickly as their peers, students may hide their needs because of the risk of being removed from the favored group.

## Conclusion

To review, the literature is full of examples of the advantages and drawbacks of the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. My purpose in this article is to explore the unintended lessons we may be teaching typically developing students about people with disabilities. The purposive goal of federal legislation was that people with disabilities would have equal access to educational opportunities and in turn, be more integrated into society in their adult life. But because the federal legislation has been interpreted along a wide continuum of inclusion, students with similar disabilities are placed differently depending upon the preconceptions of individual districts. My fear is that, in districts where students with disabilities are segregated, we are unintentionally strengthening and perpetuating biases. The damage happens in actual time, but the greater fear is that the patterns that we establish in childhood are carried into adulthood and affect the way our students view society. When we segregate in schools, we structure schemas of which people are unaware. These structures must be purposefully dismantled in order for the rights of people with disabilities to be realized. What if these schemas were never constructed to begin with? What if students with disabilities were and are expected to be part of all classroom communities? What if elementary school students learned that people with disabilities are not so very different, or dangerous, or vulnerable? What if learning diversity came to be valued, and the contributions of those with disabilities could be realized in a familiar and inclusive environment? Imagine how differently students who experienced inclusion would view who gets to belong, who is dangerous, who needs protection, and their own able-bodied privilege. The benefits are clear for the students with and without disabilities, and for society as a whole. Even though inclusion legislation is in place, districts are still needlessly segregating students. We must come to understand the unintended lessons such policies of segregation perpetuate.

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*Address Correspondence to:*

Carol Hines Ph.D.

Viterbo University, La Crosse, WI

Assistant Professor | College of Education, Engineering, Letters, and Sciences

Cross-Categorical Special Education Program Specialist

[cnhines@viterbo.edu](mailto:cnhines@viterbo.edu)