

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS: Good for Kids

Reconsidering Our Definition of Inclusion and Redefining Its Outcomes for All Children

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Inclusive school practices—those that individualize instruction and support to meet the needs of all children—exemplify the very best in education. Inclusive schools benefit children both developmentally and socially by embracing the notion that all children will learn. Inclusive schools are those in which:

> . . . Everyone belongs, is accepted, supports, and is supported by his or her peers and other members of the school community in the course of having his or her educational needs met (Stainback & Stainback, 1990, p. 3).

Webster's New Unabridged Universal Dictionary (1994) defines inclusion as "the act of including," i.e., "to contain, embrace, or comprise, as a whole does parts." The Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (1993) defines inclusion as ". . . a value [that] supports the right of all children regardless of their diverse abilities to participate actively in natural settings in their community." Allen and Schwartz (2001) state:

> Inclusion is not a set of strategies or a placement issue. Inclusion is about belonging to a community—a group of friends, a school community, or a neighborhood (p. 4).

Notably absent from these definitions is any mention of children with disabilities or special education. Therefore, it is important to remember that inclusion is not a special education issue—it is an issue about the effective education of all children.

Why is it important to reconsider our definition of inclusion? First, the way teachers, parents, administrators, and other consumers define inclusion affects its

implementation. In some school districts, inclusion is viewed as a privilege—a type of placement that must be earned by children with disabilities. Other school districts adhere more closely to the Oberti ruling, which states, “Inclusion is a right, not a privilege for a select few” (Oberti v. Borough of Clementon School District, 1993). The process of inclusion—that is, what it looks like at the classroom level for students, teachers, and parents—is most likely very different in districts with these different philosophies.

Another reason for examining the definition of inclusion is to involve more stakeholders in the discussion. Although inclusion is a common topic among special educators and parents of children with disabilities, it is less likely to be discussed by general education teachers; likewise, many parents of children without disabilities do not even recognize the term “inclusion” as relevant to their children’s education. For inclusion to achieve its potential, discussions about inclusive school practices must take place among entire schools, districts, and communities. The planning, implementation, and evaluation of inclusive school practices must also become inclusive, involving all members of the school community.

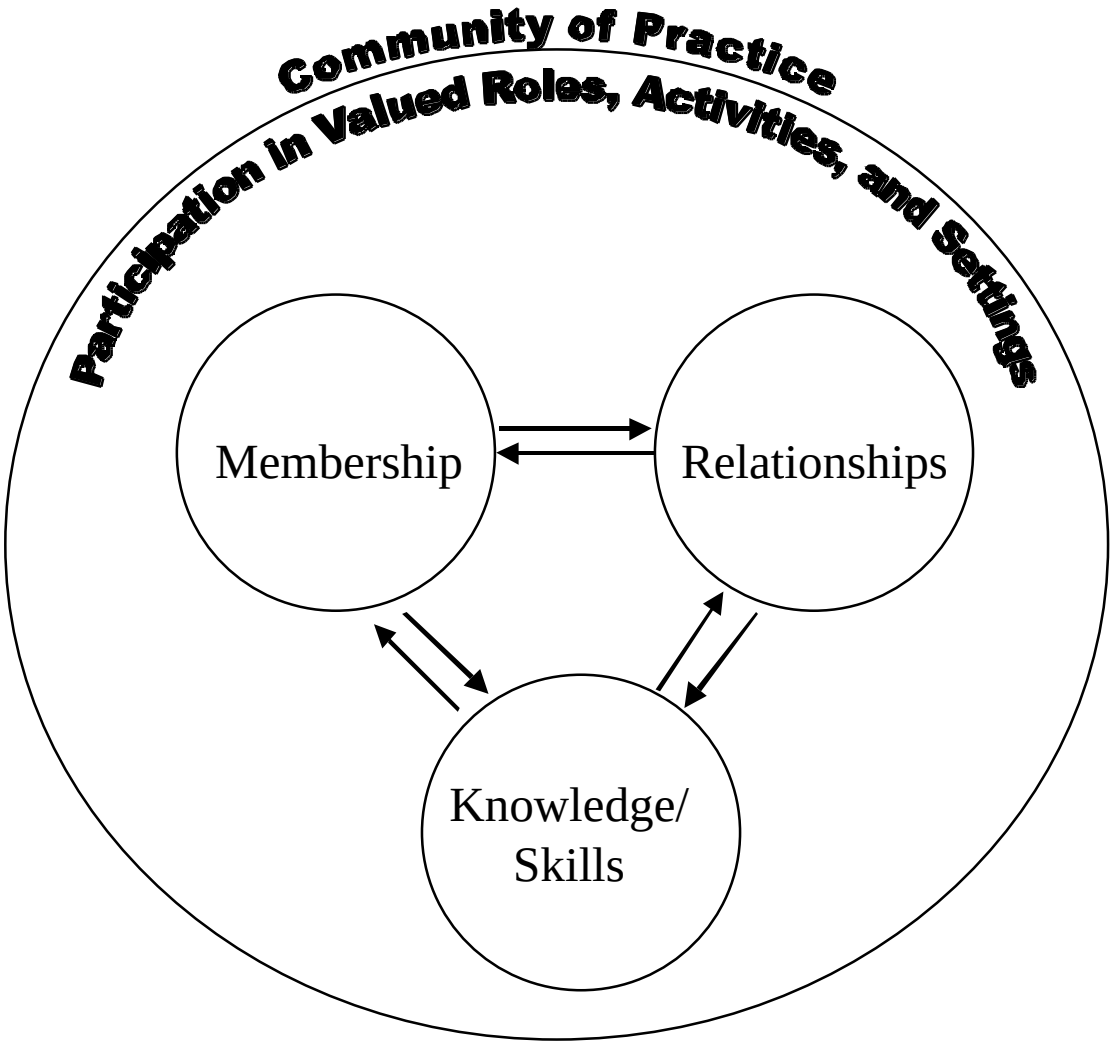
One component of inclusive school practices that requires special attention is student outcomes. The discussion of outcomes is especially important as we strive to broaden our constituency to involve general education teachers and typically developing students. General education and special education have always differed on how they discuss student outcomes. In special education, the discussion and measurement of outcomes has been focused at the level of individual students, while the achievement of general education students is most often described as the number of students meeting a specified curricular goal. Many educators, parents, and policymakers are dissatisfied with

the current status of defining outcomes. While all agree that accountability in education is important, reaching consensus on what constitutes important and meaningful outcomes is difficult. While it may be relatively easy to measure traditional academic and developmental domains, these domains ignore the affective and interpersonal skills that are important in educating an informed citizenry (Parker, 1997). What is needed is a format for describing and evaluating the benefits that all children achieve by participating in inclusive schools. In this paper, we describe the outcomes, achieved by students in inclusive schools in terms of membership, relationships, and knowledge/skills development.

Defining Outcomes for All Children

Schwartz and her colleagues attempted to address the need to define important outcomes for children participating in inclusive education through a five-year, federally funded longitudinal investigation of children with severe disabilities in inclusive settings (Schwartz, Staub, Gallucci, & Peck, 1995). The primary objective of that project was to find a way to describe the important outcomes that all children achieved in inclusive settings. The many hours devoted to observing children in classrooms, talking to teachers and parents, and interviewing typically developing peers resulted in the development of a framework that has proved to be a useful way to describe such observed outcomes. The framework consists of three inter-related domains: membership, relationships, and knowledge/skills (Schwartz, 2000) (see Figure 1). The intervention and learning that takes place in these domains is set in a context of valued activities and routines, with an emphasis placed on active participation in meaningful, culturally relevant, interesting settings. This framework is particularly helpful because it captures the outcomes that are

meaningful to educators and parents while at the same time describing what children are learning and doing in a holistic manner, without the constraints imposed by traditional developmental and educational domains. What has been most rewarding about this framework is that the domains apply equally to children with and without disabilities, and have been used by both general and special education teachers.



Further, this model suggests that each of the outcome domains (membership, relationships, and knowledge/skills) is affected by the others in a bi-directional manner. While the concept of changes in knowledge/skills affecting relationships and membership is a fairly traditional one, the model also suggests that changes in relationships affect

changes in knowledge/skills and membership and that changes in membership affect knowledge/skills and relationships. These last two inter-dependencies have received little thought or attention in our professional literature. This imbalance of professional attention is evident when one compares the amount of literature devoted to teaching children knowledge/skills as opposed to teaching children about membership or relationships. In addition to understanding these bi-directional influences, understanding the framework depends on understanding what is meant by "membership," "relationships," and "knowledge/skills," each of which is discussed below.

Membership

Looking back at the three definitions of inclusion, we see that each of them emphasizes belonging to a group, and participating in settings with others, i.e. membership. Membership refers to how the child is accepted into and participates in groups, as well as the child's sense of belonging to the social fabric of the group. Membership can be achieved through participation in either formal (e.g., circle time) or informal (e.g., playing on the playground) activities. Direct measures of membership are still in the developmental stages (Garfinkle & Schwartz, 1998); however, membership can be informally assessed by looking for any accommodations that are made to facilitate a child's participation in classroom activities (e.g., changes in the rules of a playground game to give a child with a disability an extra turn) and overt symbols of membership (e.g., a cubby or mailbox in a classroom). Membership can also be measured by observing teacher-designed groups in the classroom (e.g., literacy groups, snack groups); student-designed groups in and out of the classroom (e.g., play groups, student-initiated project groups); activities in which the entire class participates as one group (e.g., class

meetings); activities in which the entire school participates as one group (e.g., assemblies); and outside-of-school activities (e.g., Scouts, sports teams, activities at churches/synagogues).

Children without disabilities can easily help children with disabilities become welcome members of classrooms and other groups often without adult assistance. Many parents of typically developing children attending inclusive early childhood programs realize early on that their children do not even know that there are children who are "different" in their classrooms. We have heard children tell their parents that one of their classmates talks with his or her hands (i.e., uses sign language) or talks with pictures (i.e., Picture Exchange Communication System) but have never heard a child say that a classmate has a developmental delay. Children do, however, understand when others are not treated in a fair manner. For example, Schnorr (1990) asked first graders without disabilities about a boy with Down syndrome who spent part of the day in their classroom. They were quick to point out that he was not a true member of their class because he did not have a mailbox, was allowed to color while they had to work, and did not have an envelope to receive valentines during their party on February 14. Clearly, these six year olds were aware of the signs of membership and had suggestions for their teacher about what could be done to help Peter participate more fully.

The lessons learned by making accommodations for students with disabilities to participate in educational and community activities may be among the most salient positive outcomes for typically developing students in inclusive schools. Staub and Peck (1995) identified five potential benefits of inclusion for students without disabilities that also facilitate membership:

1. Reduced fear of human differences, accompanied by increased comfort and awareness
2. Growth in social cognition
3. Improvements in self-concept
4. Development of personal principles
5. Warm and caring friendships

Relationships

Whereas the domain of membership refers to the interactions a child has with groups of peers, the area of relationships focuses attention on interactions with individual peers. Unlike traditional discussions of social interactions, where most typically the number of interactions and responses are counted, the goal of focusing on relationships is to evaluate a more complex interaction than can be described by focusing solely on initiations and responses. Thus, the domain of relationships refers to a broad range of behaviors and complex interpersonal interactions. A child may form relationships with peers in all the different environments in which he or she spends time. Further, relationships can be categorized as follows: play/companionship (e.g., children who choose to play together during free time), helper (e.g., a child who assists a peer), helpee (e.g., a child who receives help from a peer), peer (e.g., two children who may interact while walking next to each other during a transition and, but who may not choose to interact given a free-choice situation), and conflictual (e.g., children arguing over the rules of a game or over taking turns with a preferred material). We hypothesize that children with successful relationships have interactions with many children and that these interactions occur across the different categories of this domain.

The importance of developing social relationships during childhood is well documented in the literature (e.g., Hartup, 1996; Howes, 1988). Examples of the types of relationships that children with and without disabilities develop in inclusive classrooms are also easily available in the literature (e.g., Murray-Seegart, 1989; Peck, Donaldson & Pezzoli, 1990; Staub, 1998; Staub & Peck, 1995). Staub, Schwartz, Gallucci, and Peck (1994) describe four friendships between children with and without disabilities that developed in an inclusive elementary school. All four sets of friends displayed a range of relationships, that is, they were observed in episodes of play, helping one another, and having and resolving conflicts. What was extremely interesting to their teacher and parents, and to the researchers was the scope of the positive impact these relationships had on the children without disabilities. As one mother described her sixth grade son's relationship with a classmate with severe disabilities:

> Aaron's friendship with Cole is a caring, teaching relationship. I get the feeling that Aaron wants to let Cole experience the things he [Aaron] has experienced . . . He gets a lot of joy from being able to do that (Staub et al., 1994, pp. 318–319).

Parents and teachers report many positive outcomes for typically developing children in the domain of relationships, including the following:

1. More diverse social networks
2. Increased patience with and acceptance of people with and without disabilities
3. An increased willingness to help others and to accept help from others when necessary

Knowledge/Skills

Knowledge/skills is the most traditional of the three outcome domains and is the most familiar to school psychologists and special educators. It is also the easiest to quantify. As such, this domain requires less explanation than the previous two. We conceptualize the knowledge/skills domain to include social communication skills, academic skills, cognitive skills, motor skills, adaptive skills, etc. These are the traditional domains of schooling—the reading, writing, and arithmetic. Interestingly, however, this domain is currently under much scrutiny, as the current political trend is to call for more accountability in this area; however, there is little agreement about how to measure success or what it means to "succeed."

One of the most persistent myths about inclusion is that the presence of children with disabilities interferes with the academic achievement of typically developing children. There is absolutely no data to support this (Staub & Peck, 1995). In fact, parents, teachers, and students themselves report many ways in which students academic achievement benefits from inclusive school practices. For example here are four typical practices of inclusive schools that clearly benefit all children:

1. Accommodations and modifications made with children with disabilities in mind
2. The opportunity to participate in tutoring programs, either as tutors or tutees
3. Smaller class size
4. The presence of therapists (e.g., physical therapist) and learning specialists who help general education teachers individualize instruction

Conclusion

It is important to note that to be successful in school and society, children need to learn skills; however, while knowledge and skills are necessary for success, they are insufficient to constitute a complete set of desirable outcomes. When planning or evaluating a comprehensive educational program for all children, all three domains—membership, relationships, and knowledge/skills—must be considered. Together, these domains provide a holistic and community-based view of meaningful outcomes for children in inclusive schools and evaluating all children across these domains will help districts demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs. These good examples, of inclusion in practice will then help overcome barriers faced by many children, educators, and families and can help more children with and without disabilities have the opportunity to benefit from inclusive school practices.

The Washington State constitution declares that it is the *paramount duty* of the state to educate *all children.* This is one of the best definitions of inclusive education we have found. Our goal of inclusive education will only be realized when public schools across the country meet the needs of every student who enters their doors. When we hear school administrators and politicians declare that “all children can learn,” we applaud them, because that is the motto of an inclusive school: one where students learn from one another, help one another, and together become an interdependent community of lifelong learners.

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