

# The Importance of Mainstreaming and Inclusion in Special Education

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## The Issue

Special education inclusion and mainstreaming in the general education classroom have both been a long and controversial debate. Often, special needs children are placed in separate classrooms than their non-special needs peers. According to the US National Center for Education Statistics, more than 60% of special education students spend a minimum of 80% of their school day in the general education classroom (*The Role of Special Education Teachers in Promoting an Inclusive Classroom*, 2020). Mainstreaming and inclusion can often be seen being used interchangeably, however there are some differences. Mainstreaming can be referred to placing a student in the general education classroom with the assumption that the student could do the same assignments as the other students (Orr, 2017).



Teacher working with both special and general education students

Mainstreaming doesn't always mean spending the entirety of the school day in the general education classroom. It could mean learning specific subjects or skills in the classroom, while learning the others in the separate classroom. Inclusion can be referred to as putting a student with a disability in the general education classroom, while also giving them modified assignments and extra help from a special education professional (Orr, 2017). According to an educator resource blog, Resilient Educator, inclusion brings special education to students in the general classroom rather than bringing the student to the services, such as in a special needs classroom (The Editorial Team, 2020). Although special education students may need extra help or accommodations, they still hold the ability to learn. While having a separate classroom may seem like a good idea on paper, inclusion into the mainstream classroom is the best option.

## Opposing Perspectives

The inclusion and mainstreaming of special needs students in the general education classroom affects many individuals, causing the formation of varied opinions. Parents of the general education students are one group who holds opinions. Some ask, “Is mainstreaming special needs kids a good idea if it prevents the other kids from learning?” (Grieco, 2021). While others ask, “It’s too bad the other children are the ones who lose out when special-needs kids are mainstreamed. This story is all well and good, but it means that this woman’s child got way more than the other children did in terms of support and attention” (Grieco, 2021). These are common misconceptions when it comes to mainstreaming and inclusion. Many general education parents believe that mainstreaming special education students will take attention and support away from their own children. Teachers are another group that hold strong opinions, as they are the ones who facilitate the integrated classroom. These forums mirror opinions that teachers have as well. “And what were the 20-something other kids in the room doing when the teacher was spending most of her time attending to your special-needs child?” (Grieco, 2021) was another opinion posted.



Integration in the classroom

Inclusion and mainstreaming often scares teachers away, as it sounds like a big change with many new jobs to do. It may sound overwhelming, however, once a proper plan is in place, it can work seamlessly. As the popular saying goes, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” This saying stands true when talking about inclusion and mainstreaming. It takes time to get used to the new classroom dynamic, lesson plans, and teamwork between school professionals. Special education in the general education can work, however, it takes time and patience from all parties involved.

## Practical Approaches

As inclusion and mainstreaming can be a complex adjustment, there are specific things that need to be put in place to ensure everyone is getting the most out of the experience. Not all general education teachers have experience with or knowledge of special education, so it is important that they communicate with special education teachers to help them understand the accommodations needed (*The Role of Special Education Teachers in Promoting an Inclusive Classroom*, 2020). Accommodations are extremely important, as special education students may need extra help or modifications in some areas. According to an example from Ferguson (2019), if a child has trouble with writing, she might be allowed to answer test questions verbally. Accommodations allow the special education student to get the same education as the general education student. Modifications are also used in the classroom.



General and special education students working with teacher

This refers to “a change in what a student is expected to learn and demonstrate” (Ferguson 2019). An example of this would be if the special education student was given a simpler version of a textbook compared to their general education classmates. To ensure that students who need accommodations and/or modifications get the help they need, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are used. These explain the student’s challenges and needs and are protected by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Belsky, 2021). Although inclusion and mainstreaming takes time to adjust properly, it does have positive effects. By putting special education students in the general education, friendships can be made. This develops social skills that special education students might not be able to develop easily. On the other hand, inclusion also helps the general education students. It can teach students to be more tolerant of differences and builds self-esteem that comes with new friendships (Understood Team, 2021).

## Applicable Theory

An applicable theory that can be applied to this issue is social constructionism. This theory explains that “characteristics typically thought to be immutable and solely biological—such as gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality—are products of human definition and interpretation shaped by cultural and historical contexts” (Kang et al., 2017, p. 35). For example, this theory would contribute to people thinking that pink is for girls and blue is for boys. When talking about special education, society perceives these students in a specific way. Special education students are often perceived as loud, dependent on others, and unable to learn. Individuals with disabilities can live independent and productive lives. According to Tonya Scherf, executive director of The Arc of Lucas County, a company that provides support to families with special education children, stated that “People with developmental disabilities are typically very good employees as they like structure and are good at following rules” (Remaklus, 2016). These individuals tend to like repetition, as “routine creates a safe and secure environment in which life is predictable” (Spectrum, 2018). Once a skill they are good at is found, these individuals can thrive in that work area, while maintaining a balanced routine to stabilize stress. Society often perceives special education students as incapable of being independent and learning, however, that is a myth.



Teacher working with students in an integrated classroom

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