



# The Unintended Consequences of the Full Inclusion Movement

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## Abstract

The full inclusion movement (FIM) has unintended consequences for children with disabilities when the meaning of inclusion primarily focuses on place, not appropriateness of instruction. The roots of the FIM are long, and it is now a world-wide phenomenon emphasizing place of instruction rather than appropriateness and effectiveness of instruction. It has also been part of attempts to reform education for children with disabilities. Inclusive special education balances considerations of placement and instruction and is an alternative way forward that does not deny any student the right to appropriate education.

**Keywords:** Inclusion; Disappearance; Diversity; Intention; Special education

## Introduction

An article published by Fuchs and Fuchs [1] nearly three decades ago was prescient in its depiction of a full inclusion movement (FIM) that recognizes no exceptions to placement of individuals with disabilities in regular (or general) classrooms. It blurred the distinction between general and special education [2]. The FIM became a common, delusional fad for the education of those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and other disabling conditions [3,4]. It has become a world-wide phenomenon promoted by the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) and other international bodies, such as the World Bank [5] and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [6-9].

We believe those advocating for the FIM do not have nefarious (i.e., wicked, immoral, or perverse) motives. Like most people, they want the best education for all children and youth with disabilities. They simply have been convinced that such education can be provided for literally all children in a common environment. Their wishes have lost connections to the realities of including each and every child in the same classroom [4,10,11].

## Meanings of Inclusion

The word "inclusion" may be defined to mean different things [12]. The two primary educational definitions focus on place and instruction; the location of the student's body (place) or the student's activity in response to a teacher's request (instruction). Of course, inclusion may apply to both place and instruction, but in all cases, one takes precedence—is chronologically the first decision or is considered more important than the other. Special education should, in the opinion of some, put instruction first, making it more important than place or physical location of the student's body [13,14]. At the same time, others think that placement should be the prime consideration, that place is more important than instruction in defining inclusion, and essentially that any and all instruction can be delivered in a regular or general classroom.

The word "inclusion" is usually used to indicate where the student's body is located. If the student is taught in the regular or general education classroom along with unidentified peers,

then he or she is considered “included.” If the student is taught elsewhere-in a special class or school-then the student is considered “segregated.” The term “segregated” is typically used to designate unjustifiable separation. In the case of separate education of students with disabilities, the term “segregated” is used, instead of other more accurate terms such as “dedicated,” to indicate its undesirability on the part of the speaker or writer [15]. “Segregated is used in descriptions of special education, but other educational programs that do not include all students and are taught in special places (e.g., band, sports) are not called “segregated.”

“Segregated” is a term associated with discriminatory treatment, usually of students differing from most in ways that do not justify their separation (e.g., skin color or heritage). In the case of pull-out settings, the term confuses the reasons for separation under the erroneous assumption that diversity of ability and disability is like other diversities and should be treated the same. But in the case of students with disabilities, children are not removed from their regular classes for special instruction based on their color or heritage [10,16]. The “race model” thinking deserves more attention when race, as a socially constructed category, intersects disabilities, but it cannot be a ubiquitous model for all cases of disabilities world-wide [17].

Thus, the term “full inclusion” in the present context refers to the idea that disability should be treated the same as other diversities, that the general education environment can be made appropriate for all students, and that no special placements should be allowed for any student with disabilities, as proposed by Slee [18,19] and SWIFT Schools [20]. Foxx & Mulick [21] describe how the FIM and other fads involving treatment of individuals with IDD and other disabilities deny them their right to effective, science-based instruction.

### Historical Roots of Inclusion without Alternative Placement

The movement toward inclusion has not been sudden. Rather, it is a culmination of the movement toward a “new normal” for special education foreseen by advocates of the FIM [22]. Within a relatively short time after the enactment in 1975 of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, since 1990 called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA; [23]), calls for merging special and general education were published [24]. Special education was wrongly compared to racial segregation by Stainback & Stainback [25] and said by some to be an unwarranted part of general education [26].

The continuum of alternative placements has been attacked for a long time [27] and has been said to be part of the original sin of EAHCA/IDEA in the United States [28]. The FIM is particularly important because it has become worldwide and threatens the rights of all students with IDD to an important educational right.

### The FIM and Education Reform

The assertions and claims of those advocating full inclusion are disconnected from the harsh and complex realities of teaching and from careful, analytical thinking about disabilities and all of their implications for education [10,29-32]. The most radical reforms suggest that special education is not needed at all [18]. Proponents also envision a world in which specific disabilities become nameless. They are depicted as differences of little or no consequence for the place of children’s education [33,34].

A prominent position in the inclusion discourse is that differentiation between disabled and non-disabled people has become obsolete. Such a distinction is viewed as incompatible with the inclusive concern, and any group assignment should be avoided [35]. Accordingly, disability should only be part of a broadly defined heterogeneity that can hardly be narrowed down. It appears “only as an aspect of an infinite human diversity and fades into it; it dissolves, so to speak, in the ‘normality of diversity’” [36]. The FIM is built on the idea that, when it comes to education, we cannot or should not admit that there are at least two groups—e.g., those who have disabilities that interfere with their learning and those who do not, which is not necessarily the same groups for all school subjects (e.g., reading, mathematics, science). For this reason, every Individual Education Program (IEP) is required to be created for a specific student, taking into account that individual’s unique combination of strengths, needs, interests, and preferences. It is essential that the IEP is tailored to the individual student’s learning needs, and is not a generic, one-size-fits-all plan [37]. The IEP recognizes central tendencies in statistical distributions of knowledge and ability (e.g., mean and median) and deviation from such “norms” [38].

Although the median is a useful measure of central tendency and is the midpoint of a data set (with half of the measure being higher and half being lower), a median does not provide any information about the outliers. Neither does a mean or arithmetic average. Means and medians may provide useful information, but they tell us nothing about the hard realities of variation around them [39]. For certain phenomena, such as disabilities, the averages may convey little information, and even a measure of variance may not be particularly meaningful [38,40]. We fool ourselves and others by subscribing to educational fads, such as the FIM. This can make us vulnerable to what Taleb [40,41] calls “Black Swans”-phenomena hidden in the huge variability of negatively skewed distributions of learning achievements with long tails (e.g., intellectual disabilities, EBD) or “fat tails” (left and right tails of skewed statistical distributions). This is certainly the case for autism spectrum disorder (ASD), where there is tremendous variance or variability. Epistemologically speaking, there is great variability in the lack of knowledge of persons with ASD (which can also involve IDD) [40].

Over the last 30 years, educational culture has become increasingly accommodating of ignorance, failure to learn, and the unpredictable maladaptive behavior of students. The general trend has been wariness of unfair discrimination, which works as a waiver of the struggle for the elimination of learning gaps in cognitive disabilities. Thus, a person-related special educational need becomes the focus. For the same reason, special education is accused of labeling and intolerably discriminating against children with disabilities. How far such a condemnation can go is evidenced by the following quote: the “language of special educational needs [is] just as discriminatory [...] as sexist and racist language” [42]. 42, p.173 that “The time will come when the highest courts will condemn exclusionary diagnostic practices with reference to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as degradation contrary to human rights” ((43, p. 37)).

Such statements target any useful educational distinction for teaching, special services, and welfare. In this respect, it is only consistent for schools to dispense with all labeling and categorization and to engage in a “radical disengagement from the special educational system of special needs” [44].

The underlying goal is a kind of namelessness in which people with disabilities and their learning needs “disappear” in the context of inclusion [34,45], Kauffman et al., in press). Kuhlmann [45] noted that when a disability is made unrecognizable, then it follows that if: ... making a distinction ... is equated with a morally reprehensible social practice-the humiliation and exclusion of persons, [then it is] practically impossible to speak of disabled people as concrete persons with certain characteristics at all without exposing oneself to the suspicion of wanting to devalue them.” (p. 41).

The realization of the highest potential of disabled children, a declared goal of the CRPD, supposed to give up the use of an important tool-specific expertise and clear language that names what the disability really is (Kauffman et al., in press). A ban on naming and identification of special learning and behavioral needs helps neither teachers nor children. As envisioned by the full inclusion proponents cited above, special education becomes impossible [46]. The dissolution of disability categories and the attempts to dissolve disabilities into other forms of diversity have worrisome downsides. Logic that is indifferent to the realities of teaching children who have a disabling learning condition trivializes disabilities and has potentially harmful consequences. Special education cannot effectively be replaced based on abstract or imaginative reasoning or wishful thinking that ignores the realities of teaching and learning [9].

### Inclusive Special Education

We are not opposed to bodily inclusion when it is appropriate, but the FIM becomes self-defeating when bodily inclusion becomes

the primary objective of special education [48-50]. Hornby [51,52] has described how inclusion and special education can be compatible by integrating the ideals of inclusion (e.g., age-peer interaction, socialization) with the specially designed instruction and technology of special education (i.e., systematic, explicit instruction; [53]), thereby creating inclusive special education. Gordon-Gould & Hornby [31] have described how inclusion taken to the extreme-assuming that location is the priority and that presence in the regular or general education classroom is always necessary for inclusion-has brought the education of children with disabilities to a crossroads at which it must be decided which is more important, location or instruction. Adopting a more balanced model, such as inclusive special education, could provide a constructive way forward.

The idea that disability can be undone just by a change in cultural attitudes, and without specialized interventions, has been around for a long time. And so has the wish that it would become an insignificant, marginal phenomenon if only it were culturally acceptable. If children were fully included in regular school settings, so the argument goes, then we would have “social justice.” This assumes that external barriers to location are the decisive factors in achieving social justice. For example, Schöler [53] suggested that Disability is no longer present if, in connection with pedagogical reforms, the kindergarten/school is changed in such a way that even children with impairments are not excluded in their normal environment and are given the opportunity there to find an accepted social role even with reduced ability. [54 p.110]

It is correct that every child has a right to be recognized and accepted as a person. Whether the child is disabled or not should be irrelevant to such recognition. This is one of the pillars of inclusive special education, which focuses on providing appropriate education for children with disabilities regardless of placement. IDD need not deny a child that recognition, nor does a special place for learning necessarily deny it. But recognition is not a replacement for appropriate teaching [55-60].

The fact that recognition is an integral part of inclusive special education does not lead to the conclusion that all students should be placed in the same learning environment due to an exaggerated fear of classification or discrimination. Special educational categories must be maintained to provide adequate support in the least restrictive environment along a continuum of placements. All children have a right to be taught in an environment that offers them optimum opportunities to learn the knowledge and skills they need to navigate their world. Unfortunately, one unintended consequence of the FIM is denying some children that right [23,61].

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