



DISES Professional Learning Gallery

Inclusion 101

Research Brief

Anna Hart, M.A.

Sudha Krishnan Ed.D.

Rebecca Reimers, Ed.D.

Aleksandra Markovic, Ph.D.

The inclusion of learners with diverse needs provides the opportunity to access the general education classroom and curriculum in the same manner as students without special needs. Although inclusion is a global initiative, many countries differ in their definitions and implementations of inclusive practices (Dignath et al., 2022). Despite these differences, inclusive education aims to enhance learning and social outcomes for a diverse range of students (Görel et al., 2023). However, placing students in the general education environment does not equate to inclusive education.

Inclusion is more than just placing learners with diverse needs in the general education classroom. Essentially, political policies reflect, and many educators report, the desire to promote the principles of welcoming diversity within the general education classroom by employing inclusive practices (Kaczorowski & Kline, 2021; Saloviita, 2020; Somma & Bennett, 2020). These attitudes are evidenced in the evolution of public policy and professional practices. However, a change in teacher practices and an increase in truly inclusive practices require a shift in teachers' beliefs and training to embrace inclusive education fully. This shift requires a change in both systemic models and professional mindset to create environments where diversity is embraced (Shields & Hesbol, 2020). Frameworks such as co-teaching and Universal Design for Learning may aid in the equitable inclusion of all students in the general education classroom.

Definition of Terms

Co-teaching. Co-teaching is the co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing of students by two professionals in a single classroom (Murawski, 2003). The benefits of co-teaching for students may stem from social interaction and learning. Vygotsky theorized that cognitive development is influenced by social interactions and zones of proximal development (ZPD) (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2005). Co-teaching is an instructional method and an independent variable categorically represented in the current research.

Disability. The definition of disability encompasses various meanings, depending on the context. Disability can be defined through the lens of a medical, social, charity, or human rights model. The World Health Organization recognizes that disability is a complex, dynamic, and multifaceted concept that is interpreted in relation to the environment. Disability can be defined as the interaction between an individual's health condition and their environment (World Health Organization, 2020).

Inclusion. The inclusion of learners with diverse needs provides the opportunity to access the general education classroom and curriculum in the same manner as students without special needs (Görel et al., 2023). Inclusive education ensures equal opportunities, participation, and achievement for all learners, regardless of their diversity or special educational needs (Kavkler, Košak Babuder, & Magajna, 2015). Inclusion supports better learning and social outcomes across a diverse group of students (Görel et al., 2023). However, placing students in the general education environment does not equate to inclusive education. Teacher training in inclusionary practices is essential to appropriately and effectively including learners with diverse needs in the general education classroom.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Universal Design for Learning is an educational framework that supports accommodating learning diversity within the general education classroom. UDL has three components for learning: multiple means of engagement, representation, and action, and expression (CAST, 2022). Bruner (1976) posited that children learn through active engagement with new knowledge, which is then integrated into their previously learned constructs. Additionally, students benefit from multiple modes of representation: auditory, visual, and kinesthetic (Bruner, 1976). These theoretical concepts are embedded in the UDL framework.

Inclusion Barriers and Challenges

Researchers have identified several barriers to inclusion. These barriers include attitudinal, structural/policy, instructional, resource, cultural, linguistic, and family engagement barriers. Attitudinal barriers, like negative beliefs about disability and low expectations, make it harder to include all students in learning. When educators and classmates think of learners with diverse needs as less capable, it can lead to unfair treatment and fewer opportunities (Sullivan et al., 2015). Even when schools have inclusive intentions and policies, if teachers don't believe in them or don't feel confident, learners with diverse needs do not get the support they need (Hollings, 2021). Some teachers may resist trying new approaches or worry about failing, especially if they haven't had enough training or support. Without understanding inclusive practices such as UDL or co-teaching, teachers may continue using outdated methods that exclude learners with diverse needs (Hills et al., 2022).

School policies in different countries can make it hard to include all students, especially when they separate learners with diverse needs, stick to rigid schedules, or don't give teachers time to work together. These problems often stem from broader policies that fail to support inclusive education. For example, in Kenya, schools struggle to include learners with diverse needs because they lack proper support, resources, and clear guidelines (Ireru et al., 2020). In China, strict rules about teacher evaluations, entrance exams, and hiring practices also make it difficult to fully include all students (Qu, 2022). A key problem is that many learners with diverse needs are taught using materials that do not match their grade level, which keeps them separated from their peers and limits their opportunities. Similar challenges are also seen in countries like the United States and parts of Europe, where special education systems sometimes operate in isolation from general education, leading to reduced collaboration and limited access to inclusive instructional practices (Florian & Spratt, 2013).

Instructional barriers occur when teachers lack training in teaching in inclusive ways. This includes not knowing how to use UDL, depending on the same teaching method for all students, or not using tools like assistive technology and classroom accommodations. Although UDL is a helpful framework that provides all students with more ways to learn and demonstrate their knowledge, teachers may not utilize it because they have not received adequate training in UDL from their schools (Bernacki et al., 2021). When teachers receive UDL training, they become more confident in planning lessons that cater to all students (Rusconi & Squillaci, 2023). Using the same teaching style for everyone can leave many students behind. If tools like speech-to-text, audio books, or visual supports aren't used properly, learners with diverse needs may not get the access they need to participate and learn.

Resource limitations, such as insufficient funding, shortages of adaptive materials, and high caseloads for special educators, severely hinder inclusive practice. Schools in various countries with inadequate staffing and materials lack the capacity to accommodate diverse learning needs, making it difficult to provide personalized instruction or offer mental-behavioral support (Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024; Sivvala et al., 2021). Underfunded schools may not be able to hire qualified support staff for learners with diverse needs, and special education teachers frequently manage unreasonably high caseloads, leaving little time for collaboration or individualized planning. They may also lack or have limited access to augmentative communication devices or classroom adaptations, further restricting inclusive opportunities.

Cultural beliefs and misunderstandings about disabilities can make it harder for students from different backgrounds to feel included. If the school environment does not reflect diverse cultures or if tests are written in ways that don't match students' primary languages, students may feel left out or be unfairly assessed. Some families may also view disability differently, which can lead to students not joining in school programs. When schools fail to provide effective translation services or employ confusing special education terminology, families who don't speak English fluently may struggle to understand what's happening or how to support their child. Although research on this topic is limited, it shows that culture and language differences can increase exclusion in schools (Sider et al., 2024).

Families are often not included as equal partners in their child's education. Many parents find the language used in special education confusing and full of jargon. Schools may not take the time to understand family values or cultural backgrounds, especially for immigrant or minority families, which can lead to mistrust and make families less likely to get involved. Some parents may also worry about sharing information due to their immigration status. Research indicates that schools must establish trust with families and involve them more meaningfully in special education (Paccaud et al., 2021).

Importance of Inclusion

Educators and school administrators are urged to develop frameworks that inclusively benefit all learners. U.S. and international laws and initiatives require the inclusion of all learners in the general education classroom with access to the general education teacher and curriculum (ESSA, 2015, UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science, 1994). Students with and without special needs benefit from fully inclusive educational environments (Agran et al., 2020; Berry, 2021; King-Sears et al., 2021; Lochner et al., 2019). Additionally, students educated in segregated environments are not only excluded from the benefits of inclusion, but a segregated environment can also result in learners with diverse needs receiving less education than their non disabled peers. A review of the literature by Wehmeyer et al. (2021) revealed that students in segregated settings receive instruction characterized by limited academic rigor, student passivity, and an environment where adults are often preoccupied with tasks other than teaching.

Evidence-based Strategies to Support Inclusion

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an educational framework that provides support to accommodate learning diversity within the general education classroom. UDL has three components for learning: multiple means of engagement, representation and action, and expression (CAST, 2022). The UDL framework presents pillars, guidelines, and checkpoints that promote flexibility in lesson planning, execution, and assessment to meet learner variability best (Craig et al., 2022). In this way, UDL places the focus on student accessibility to learning through educational practices rather than on the strengths or limitations of the student (Lambert et al., 2021). It is through assessing how teaching engages and is understood by the learner—and how it allows the learner to express knowledge—that UDL shifts the focus from barriers within the learner to obstacles within the environment and curriculum.

Co-teaching, team teaching, teaming, and collaborative teaching are some of the names given to the practice of two teachers delivering content to a classroom of students. Co-teaching is defined as common instruction provided by two professionals in a shared space to a population of learners with diverse needs (Cook & Friend, 1995). Moreover, according to Lochner et al.(2019), truly effective co-teachers plan, teach, and evaluate student progress together. Two professionals sharing a space and [a](#) group of students allow for the unique collaboration of both professionals to better cater to the increased diversity within the general education classroom. This requires that teachers collaborate to create a structure that effectively utilizes each teacher's

expertise to educate a diverse population of students (Bauler & Kang, 2020). A co-teaching framework aims to increase inclusionary practices to accommodate a range of student skill levels in general education classrooms today.

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