

## **What Social Benefits Come from Inclusion in schools?**

**Gary Bunch**

1. Social benefits may be thought of as fitting into three areas; the included student and family; the typical children; the community. All that I say below is based on research into the effects of inclusion and on the experiences of included students, typical students, families, teachers, school administrators.

**Included student:**

The included student becomes part of the larger community of learners. This connects the student to the other children in her/his community. The self-esteem of the student strengthens. The ability of the student to understand the larger community increases and her/his membership in that community becomes more of a reality. The student has typical models for her/his behaviour, both in the personal sense and in academic and social senses. Social learning increases significantly. Academic learning strengthens, though not as much as social learning. The student becomes acquainted with a larger circle of peers. Acquaintantships and friendships develop in many instances.

**Typical student:**

Typical students obtain a more complete view of what "community" means. They are better able to place themselves within the full range of their communities. This leads to stronger self-knowledge in terms of abilities and needs. The informal learning of students is increased. Much of this is on the affective side, the side of appreciating a wider range of people, of understanding what disability means, of developing a sense of joint responsibility for all. There also is increase in self-esteem.

**The Community:**

Communities become more complete. There are fewer people placed outside the mainstream of daily life. Families participate more in community events and activities. There is less a feeling of shame. There is a shift for some people from a medical understanding of disability to a social justice understanding.

1. What sorts of skills, social or otherwise, do disabled and typical children develop from inclusion?

Much of the response to this question is in the response above.

In addition, learners with disabilities develop understanding of the regular Curriculum, the curriculum from which typical students learn. One of the problems of special education and segregated placements is the use of special curricula. These curricula often tend not to be based on what other children learn. They focus on splinter skills, an approach within the medical model where attempts are made to "fix" the child in terms of specified deficits. "Life skills" is often a topic. This means, for example, learning how to cross a street, learning the basic of cooking, having a "store" set up in a classroom and using monopoly money to purchase empty tins of food. Such things, under the inclusive model, are better learned at home in the context of daily life.

For typical children, there is the learning of responsibility for their fellow learners. If one never meets these learners, how does a sense of shared responsibility for all develop. This aspect of Civics is not learned from never meeting people who are considered “different”.

2. What are the downsides of inclusion?

There are really few downsides to inclusion as such if it is well-done. In my experience school systems which are based on an inclusive model operate much like any other school system. Nothing is every perfect. There are daily ups and downs. Some teachers are stronger teachers than others. There are challenges to inclusive practice however. In general, our school systems are not structured for inclusion. This is no surprise as we have structured our schools for able bodied learners and not for those who use wheelchairs, brailers, or such. Our teacher education programs teach for the special education model and not for the inclusive approach. Our administrators are accustomed to administering under the model where one system exists for typical students and another for those with challenges. All this relates to “change”. Typically we resist change. We do not like it. We need to do things differently.

In addition to the challenge of change for schools and those who work within them, some parents are concerned about inclusion. These parents fall into two groups. One is some parents of learners with challenges. The other is the parents of the typical learners. First this latter group. Many parents of typical learners fear that having students with challenges in regular classroom will “water down” the education of their typical children. They fear that the cognitive content of teaching will not be what it has been and that their children’s learning will be impacted negatively. They fear that the behaviour of “those” children will rub off on their typical children. In most cases, when inclusion is well-managed, the fears of these parents disappear. In fact, they begin to see the advantages of inclusion noted above and then want inclusion, or they are neutral in their response to inclusion, neither for it or against it. The second set of parents has a different concern. Remember that this group includes only some parents of learners with challenges. These parents are concerned that gains found in special education settings will not be found in typical classrooms. They believe that the smaller numbers in special settings are better for their children. They believe that their children need special instructional approaches. They argue for continuation of special education for their children. My experience is that this group of parents primarily are parents of students labelled as having learning disability or students labelled as gifted. They believe the education their children need cannot be delivered in regular classroom settings.

3. What sort of long-term changes are seen?

I refer you to my article which I have attached. It was published in Disability and Society in early 2004 or 2005.

In general, inclusion is too new to have a firm grasp on long term effect.

The term was first used by a group in Toronto in 1989 in the way it is now used in education. There has not been enough time to see what the long-term results are for students who began their education in inclusive settings and completed their education there. It is only now that significant numbers of such students are graduating from secondary school. There has been enough time for us to begin to see the effect on students in schools. The attached article reports on how students in inclusive schools worked with their peers with disabilities as compared to students in schools which retained special education settings. You also may wish to look up the UNESCO Salamanca Statement on the web to see the long-term benefits seen for inclusion by organizations at the level of the United Nations.

#### 4. The cost question.

Is inclusion more costly than special education? This is a question often asked. Of course, it is not a question of what is the better approach to education for all learners. But it is an important question.

It is true that there can be extra costs associated with inclusion. For instance, if a school is not accessible for wheelchairs because all its entrances use stairs, then there will be need to have a ramp built. There may be a need to widen toilet entrances. For already existing school buildings, these costs can be significant. The group of learners you mention, those with cerebral palsy, often need such accommodations.

Such accommodations are not needed in every school, but only in those with students needing them. That means that the cost will be spread over time. The need applies only to those with physical challenges that necessitate a wheelchair. The wheelchair is not an additional expense. The student will need one wherever she or he is. Such changes can be made when a school building is having other renovations undertaken. It cost less to put in ramps or widen doors if other work is being done at the same time. And, of course, accessibility can be built into new schools at little additional cost, if any.

Inclusion also has off-setting financial advantages. Few speak of these when using the cost argument to resist inclusion. For instance, special education relies on considerable bussing of students from their homes to schools with special education facilities. Inclusion does not need anything near the same amount of bussing as all students attend nearby schools.

The cost argument has more than one side to it.

I can say that I work with a school system in Hamilton, Ontario, not far from Toronto. The school system in Hamilton is inclusive. In fact, it is the first entire school system to move to inclusion. The Hamilton school system exists on the same budget (amended for size by the government) as any other school system. Every student, no matter what type of disability is involved or what the degree of disability is, is included in the school down the street. There are no part-time special classes. There are no full-time special classes. There are no special schools. Every student is in the regular classroom. The quality of education is the same as in other school systems. The teachers did not need special training.

If one system finds inclusion no more expensive, what does this say about the cost argument? I fear that newspapers like to create controversy. It is not in their interest, often, to present balanced analyses.

With regard to the second half of your question, that regarding the relationship of the physical aspect and inclusion, I offer the following view. Yes, the physical aspect of a school is important. All students must be able to use all spaces that any students use (This is not an argument for co-ed washrooms). If students cannot get together in the routine spaces of a school, that will have negative impact on socialization. Classrooms need to be arranged to permit space for wheelchairs, as do cafeterias, etc.

*Closing Points*

An extra point I would like to make is that pretty well every school "integrates" some students. The only change necessary to "include" those students would be an attitudinal one. This, to me, is the only real change needed to move to inclusion. It is our attitudes that maintain the special education system when we now know that it is second-best for learners with disabilities. Many in society continue to believe that people with disabilities are too different to be full members of our communities. This is particularly apparent in schools where segregated services are the norm.

The issue of academic achievement also is a barrier to inclusion. Obviously, some students cannot achieve at the same levels as typical students. Education has used this reality as a primary defence for continued segregation. Inclusion says that we should all be permitted to achieve at our own levels and be included. We used to use this argument to deny education in community schools to those of a different colour and to women whose role in life was seen as homemakers and not as learners in the same sense as men. Those of a different colour were considered to be sub-normal in intelligence. Women were seen as unable to think at high levels. If forced to, they would "swoon" and fall to the ground. Is there a common thread to resistance of people who are different in these examples?