

---

## Special Issue

# Side Effects of Inclusion: The Unforeseen Impact of Including Students with Learning Disabilities

## Introduction

A few years ago, when we both taught at Kent State University, we conducted a series of workshops on inclusion for a local school district. Near the end of the school year, without any administrators present, we met with the inclusive teachers with whom we had been working to celebrate accomplishments, elicit summative feedback, and make plans for the coming year. As the discussion opened up, one teacher raised her hand and asked us, very seriously, *Can you do something about my class? Something has to change.* When we asked what she meant, she explained that she had volunteered to be the school's inclusion teacher at her grade level because she considered herself to be a good teacher with successful experience working with struggling learners, and because she thought it was the right thing to do. She had anticipated inclusion involving a few students with mild disabilities (at the time, this school district included only students with mild disabilities, the vast majority of whom were students with learning disabilities) who would present new instructional and classroom management challenges; but she had not bargained for the class that she found herself in front of throughout the school year.

For practical reasons, district administrators had designed their inclusion program so that only one teacher per grade level at each school served as an inclusion teacher. This allowed the special education teacher, for example, to co-plan and co-teach with only one general education teacher per grade level. So, each inclusive class was attended by all students with learning disabilities at that grade, approximately 10 children. District administrators also decided that it would be prescient to obviate the need for students who *might* be referred and identified for special education during the school year to change classes if, in fact, they were identified later in the school year. Accordingly, the remainder of each inclusion class was comprised of the 15 or so non-disabled students with the most problematic behavior and lowest academic performance — those who administrators believed were most likely to soon be identified as having disabilities and need to be placed in an inclusion class. The well intentioned teachers who had volunteered to teach the inclusion classes had expected a few students with learning disabilities in their classes, not 10 students with learning disabilities and 15 of the most difficult to teach non-disabled students. They were completely exhausted and exasperated after almost a year of teaching what they described as, *really, a huge special education class taught by someone without special education training.* The current inclusion teachers said that there was no way that they could do this for another year yet felt it would be unfair to ask any of their colleagues to teach in such classes.

After relaying the concerns of the teachers to district administrators, who did alter how they constituted inclusion classes, the two of us had a conversation about how fascinated we were with the discussion and about how neither of us, who had both researched and worked with teachers in inclusive settings extensively, had ever thought about this type of classroom arrangement occurring. This issue reminded us of taking medicine. Although we take a specific medication for its intended effect on a symptom of concern (e.g., runny nose), we often experience effects that go beyond the desired effect (e.g., drowsiness). It seemed to us that this was what was happening in this school. Inclusionary practices had been implemented for the intended effects of increasing the academic skills, social skills, and acceptance of children with disabilities. However, the unintended side effect of creating homogeneous classes resulted in extremely frustrated inclusion

teachers. *I bet there are tons of stories like this, about inclusion affecting teachers in ways that we or they had never considered, we thought.*

We decided to explore this issue further by conducting a focus group of general education teachers. As we met to plan and organize the research, we discussed how inclusion had undoubtedly also affected special education teachers in ways that they did not expect, and that we should think about including them in the focus group. As we considered this possibility, we quickly realized that, in addition to teachers, virtually everyone involved with schools and educating students with learning disabilities has likely been affected by the inclusion of students with learning disabilities: principals, school psychologists, parents, teacher educators, higher education faculty, and even the students with learning disabilities themselves. Thus, the special issue was conceived. We wanted to investigate not just how the inclusion of students with learning disabilities had affected different groups of stakeholders, but also how they perceived inclusion affecting the students with and without learning disabilities with whom they worked or interacted in unanticipated ways. Therefore, we asked authors to pose three guiding questions to their group of stakeholders in a focus group interview:

1. How has the inclusion of students with learning disabilities changed your [professional] life in ways that you did not expect?
2. In your personal experiences, how has the inclusion of students with learning disabilities changed their lives in ways that you did not expect?
3. In your personal experiences, how has the inclusion of students with learning disabilities changed the lives of other students in ways that you did not expect?

Authors were free to alter these guiding questions as needed to fit their interview participants (e.g., parents of students with learning disabilities were also asked how the inclusion of their children with learning disabilities affected non-disabled siblings). Although not every group affected by the inclusion of students with learning disabilities was the focus of an article in this special issue (e.g., paraprofessionals), we are pleased that we were able to include articles reporting the perspectives of those who we consider the primary stakeholders related to the inclusion of students with learning disabilities (i.e., general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, school psychologists, parents, students, teacher educators, and higher education faculty). We are also pleased that the focus group interviews were conducted in a wide variety of locations: Hawaii, Ohio, Virginia, British Columbia, California, and Florida.

The articles contained in this special issue present a number of perspectives regarding the inclusion of students with learning disabilities—some positive, some negative. Indeed, in every article, both positive and negative experiences were discussed. Indicative of the complex nature of inclusion, the same individuals often expressed both negative and positive viewpoints regarding different aspects of including students with learning disabilities. The perspectives offered in the articles overlap in ways that, we believe, tell an interesting story about how individuals have been affected by the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in ways that have not received a great deal of attention in the professional literature. We asked authors not to invite a group of interviewees who were known to have similar, strong feelings about inclusion. However, despite authors' efforts to recruit a non-biased sample, it is important to bear in mind that the results should not be generalized to larger populations.

We thank the authors who did the real work presented in this issue. Amelia, Amy, Barry, Cara, Cecily, Cynthia, Dina, Hazel, Jill, Jean, Kara, Karen, Kristine, Lily, Lysandra, Mary, Michelle, Phil, Richard, Susan, Tricia, and Wendy, thank you for your hard work and earnest scholarship. We also thank the Co-editors of *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Janet Lerner and Frank Kline, for their guidance and support throughout the process. Lynne Cannon, Managing Editor for the journal, also deserves our gratitude; without her, this or other issues of the journal would never

find their way to press. Finally, on behalf of our authors, we thank the participants in this collection of studies for their willingness to sit down and share their perspectives, experiences, and insights with us.

Bryan G. Cook  
Melody Tankersley  
Guest Editors