Overview of the Side Effects of Including Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

In this article, we summarize **the** findings from eight separate focus group studies, conducted with various stakeholders --_special education teachers, genera! education teachers, administrators school psychology, students with learning disabilities, parents of students with learning disabilities, teacher educators and education faculty members, regarding the unintended side effects of including students with learning disabilities. We identified four themes that cut across the studies' findings: unexpected benefits of inclusion for students with learning disabilities, unexpected benefits of inclusion for focus group participants, unexpected detriments of inclusion for students with learning disabilities, and unexpected detriments of inclusion group participants These themes and their implications for policy and practice are discussed.

We first became intrigued with the notion of inclusion having unintended consequences while working with local schools and teachers to implement the inclusion of students with learning and other mild disabilities. In one school district, to maximize efficiency (e.g.. reduce the number of classes which the special education teacher must visit) and to avert the need for at-risk students to change classes if and when they were identified for special education, inclusive classes were composed of all the students at the school with mild disabilities at a particular grade level and the nondisabled students who exhibited the lowest academic achievement and most problematic behavior (Cook & Tankersley, 2007). This classroom arrangement, and the instructional and management problems that ensued throughout the school year, caused some of the most talented and experienced general education teachers in the district, who had volunteered to teach these initial *inclusive* classes, considerable stress — to the point that some were reconsidering their career paths. This discussion lit the proverbial light bulb for us—we'd read about, studied, and worked in inclusive educational environments for many years, but we never imagined this type of outcome. We began to think about the many ways that inclusion or any other major reform movement for that matter, impacts a variety of stakeholders in ways that are not initially that are not initially considered but are nonetheless consequential.

The phenomenon of side effects in the field of medicine and pharmacology provides a useful metaphor for thinking about the unintended impact of inclusion. Side effects from medication are ubiquitous (e.g., Julien, 2005). That is, virtually every medication powerful enough to meaningfully impact on one's physiological and/or psychological functioning also affects other aspects of the body's functioning in unintended ways. For example, Brynes (2004) noted

> *The antidepressant drug, amitripyline, can help depression (by acting on serotonin receptors), can also lower blood pressure (by affecting norepincephrine* receptors), *cause blurred vision, dry mouth and constipation (by blocking acetyvlchoine receptors) and produce sleepiness and weight gain (by binding to*

histamine receptors).

Like drugs introduced to the body, inclusion is not a trivial change for schools. Separate special education classes represent approximately a century of educational practice and policy that evolved as a programtic response by teachers and administrators to the instructional and management problems presented by students with disabilities (e.g.. Kauffman, Mock, Tankersley. & Landrum, in press), Including students with learning disabilities clearly does affect these students' outcomes and the perspectives of teachers toward inclusion. It is not surprising, then, that a good deal of empirical literature **is** devoted to these topics (see Manset & Semmel, 1997; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996 for reviews of this literature). But, given the profundity of the changes wrought by inclusion in schools, is it reasonable to expect that the impact of including students with learning disabilities is limited to (a academic, social, and affective outcomes of these students, and (b) the attitudes of their inclusive teachers?

Similar to the human body consisting of an intricate arrangement of an intricate arrangement of inter-related systems, the education of students with learning disabilities involves multiple stakeholders interacting with and affecting each other in a variety of complex ways. Comparable to side effects caused by medication, a significant change to one aspect of the functioning of an educational system, include for example, is bound to have unexpected effects throughout the system. Thus, although the laudable effects of researchers have provided a great deal of information about the anticipated effects of include on students with learning and other disabilities and the attitudes of general education teachers toward inclusion, we know little about whether and how (a) other stakeholders (e.g., administrators, parents of children with learning disabilities, school psychologists, special education teachers, teacher-educators, higher education faculty members) are affected by inclusion and (b) how students with learning disabilities and general education teachers are affected in unexpected ways.

> *Side effects may be rare or common, serious or merely annoying. A medicine with frequent mild side effects may be tolerated by the majority of people and be regarded as relatively safe. On the other hand if a medicine has a less common but more serious side effect it can mean that the medicine should only be used when there is no alternative, and then with close monitoring. These considerations require doctors to assess the risk of side effects versus the expected benefit of any medication. In a life-threatening disease, even serious side effects may be worth the risk; but for a mild, transient illness, little risk or even discomfort should be tolerate.* (Brynes, 2004)

Just as determining the side effects of a medication is a necessary step in approving a medication for widespread use, educators should (a) gauge the common side effects of educational reforms like inclusion and (b) base decisions about implementing the reform on weighing the risks posed by the side effects against the benefits provided. A complete evaluation of inclusion should, then, in addition to determining if inclusion works for students with disabilities in anticipated ways (e.g., academic, social, and affective outcomes), examine the unintended side effects of this influential reform. This special issue represents an attempt to take an initial look at the side effects of inclusion on those involved with the education of students with learning disabilities.

Comparing and Contrasting Themes across Studies

We conceptualized this special issue as one that included the perceptions and experiences of people who interact in different ways with included students. We asked researchers who have experience and expertise with different stakeholders who may have been personally or professionally affected by the inclusion of students with learning disabilities to assemble focus groups for the purpose of investigating the issue of side effects systematically. We asked the researchers to engage in the same research strategy — focus group interview technique — to elicit responses to three broad guiding questions (note that some authors altered these questions to correspond with the nature of their focus group):

1. How has the inclusion of students with learning disabilities changed your (professional/personal) 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?

Contributors to this special issue conducted focus groups with special education teachers (Tankersley, Niesz, Cook, & Woods, 2007), general education teachers (Ornelles, Cook, & Jenkins, 2007), administrators (Crockett, Myers, Griffin, & Hollandsworth, 2007), school psychologists (Cowan, McGoey, & Quallich, 2007), students with learning disabilities (Leafstedt, Richards, LaMonte, & Cassidy, 2007), parents of students with learning disabilities (Dyson, 2007), teacher educators (Griffin, Jones, & Kilgore, 2007), and higher education faculty members (Cook, Hennessey, Cook, & Rumrill, 2007).

Our review of the findings of the eight focus group interviews suggested that many who are involved in the inclusion of students with learning disabilities share similar perspectives on the unanticipated side effects of this policy initiative. Our purpose with this article is to summarize the themes across each of the focus group studies that investigated the unintended side effects of inclusion for students with learning disabilities. We have organized our summary in relation to two general categories of themes that emerged from each focus group: benefits and concerns of inclusion of students with learning disabilities.

Benefits of Inclusion

Although the extent to which inclusion has benefited students with and without learning disabilities and the professionals who work with them was discussed and the specific benefits noted by participants differed, all focus groups did mention unexpected benefits relating to the inclusion of students with learning disabilities. It may be important to keep in mind that several focus groups reported less discussion of and reduced specificity related to benefits of inclusion when compared to talk about challenges. In fact, Dyson (2007) reported that she had to prompt families to discuss positive outcomes and both Tankersley et al. (2007) and Cowan et al. (2007) pointed out that special education teachers and school psychologists, respectively, spent less

time discussing topics related to themes associated with benefits and developed them less thoroughly than they did themes that caused them concern. The unexpected benefits of including students with learning disabilities can be grouped into two categories: benefits for students with learning disabilities and benefits for others.

Benefits for students with learning disabilities. In considering the findings of each of the focus groups, there seemed to be a shared sense that many students with learning disabilities have benefited in specific ways from inclusionary practices. Several members of the special education teachers', general education teachers', and administrators' focus groups reported they did not anticipate that many students with learning disabilities would have experienced such academic growth in inclusion classrooms and they tended to attribute this growth to increased exposure to general curriculum and higher expectations. *They needed more spark, and they re getting more, they re getting that spark by intermingling with the regular ed students,* stated a special education teacher(Tankersley et al., 2007). In fact, many participants voiced surprise at the extent included students with learning disabilities demonstrated academic skill, effort, and success as they were challenged in inclusion classrooms. For example, one administrator shared. *I was fascinated by how lie was able to deal with adversity and his disability and still score so high* (Crockett et al.. 2007). Similarly, a member of the general education teachers group stated, *I've seen a lot, even in my class, that I didn't expect, a lot of inclusion kids to actual try to work* (Ornelles et al., 2007). Perhaps most poignantly, a special education teacher became teary as she discussed her students' increased achievement, stating, *I'm embarrassed that I was so surprised, you know, I knew these students' skills had improved; I'm embarrassed by how much they improved* (Tankersley et al., 2007).

In addition to increased academic achievement, members from several focus groups commented on the increased social acceptance students with learning disabilities seemed to enjoy in inclusion programs. Special education teachers, general education teachers, parents of students with learning disabilities, administrators, school psychologists, and teacher educators focus groups recognized the social benefits of inclusion for many students with learning disabilities—benefits that positively impacted others, as well. As one parent commented, *I enjoy taking my son to school and I am surprised that I enjoy it because when he walks into the classroom he's accepted, and if he's accepted, then our family is accepted into the school* (Dyson, 2007).

Benefits for other stakeholders. In addition to students with learning disabilities benefiting from inclusion practices. results from the focus groups also identified ways in which many other stakeholders benefited from inclusion. From a standpoint of increased skills and new applications of their work, many focus group members discussed satisfaction in their roles associated with inclusion: special education teachers were excited to share their approaches for accommodating included students with learning disabilities with general education teachers. School psychologists enhanced their professional development surrounding placement decisions. General education teachers gained knowledge about special education practices. Perhaps most clearly, general education teachers, special education teachers, university faculty members, and teacher educators all discussed ways in which inclusion had changed their instructional practices. For example, several special education teachers were excited to be *teaching a*

class of 30 children, not just my small little group (Tankersley et al., 2007) and general education teachers recognized that their more specific and explicit instruction resulted directly in increased achievement of students with learning disabilities (Ornelles et al., 2007).

Some educators discussed the benefits of inclusion on their instructional practice in a broader sense. One teacher educator stated specifically that, "*inclusion has changed my view of how to work with teachers''* and motivated him to move from an expert model to a more problem-solving partnership (Griffin et al.,2007). Such changes in perspectives lead to direct changes in instructional practices for university faculty who had participated in a professional development institute regarding students with disabilities in higher education. These faculty members discussed their use of effective instructional techniques and noted that they applied them to nondisabled students, as well.

To the greatest extent possible I try to offer all the other students, if it makes sense in that context, the option far a similar accommodation noted one professor (Cook et al., 2007**).**

This notion that other students benefit from inclusion was highlighted across several focus groups. Administrators talked about how they *sell* inclusion to parents of nondisabled students by telling them, *your child can receive more one—on— one instruction* or *the special ed teacher is going to be special in the fact that she is going to teach to the learning style of all the children...* (Crockett et al., 2007). Students with learning disabilities, special education teachers, and general education teachers confirmed that promising more assistance to students without disabilities in inclusion classrooms is not just a marketing tool—general education students often did receive extra instructional support from special education teachers. As one general education teacher noted, special education teachers are *getting regular ed kids coming in after school, too* (Ornelles et al., 2007).

Concerns of Inclusion Practices

Certainly, the fact that students without learning disabilities had increasing access to and assistance from special education teachers could be viewed as a benefit to students without learning disabilities who were provided additional assistance and perhaps more explicit instruction from special education teachers in inclusion classrooms. But it is important to note that this same practice was identified as a significant concern for students with learning disabilities who saw their general education peers' work with special education teachers as an obstacle to access of services. As one student with learning disabilities illustrated, *When you're in a [co-taught] class and he* [the special education teacher] *won't you specifically, he'll help like everybody like in front* [of] *the whole class and sometimes you don't get it (L*eafstedt et al., 2007).

That students with learning disabilities are not having their educational needs met in inclusion environments was a theme echoed by many participants—in fact, this constituted a significant concern for most focus groups. Indeed, although all groups discussed benefits, most focus groups tended to spend the majority of their time discussing unanticipated side effects of inclusion that concerned them. In addition to concerns about not meeting the specific needs of students with learning disabilities,

many focus group participants also voiced dissatisfaction in their roles and with their responsibilities for the education (or parenting) of students with learning disabilities in inclusion settings.

Dissatisfaction with roles and responsibilities. Special education teachers and parents both strongly expressed a loss of identity as a result of inclusion. Special educators were frustrated because *we're not allowed to be what they* [students with learning disabilities] *need us to be* (Tankersley et al., 2007). That special education teachers felt powerless in their roles in inclusion classrooms was perhaps one of the most significant themes of their focus group, and it related directly to their dissatisfaction with their jobs. *You used to be the CEO and now they don 't let you sit at the conference table* (Tankersley et al,. 2007). The two issues of knowing that something needed to be done and not being *allowed* to do it seemed a powerful combination for special education teachers—one that made the side effects of inclusion both personal and defeating.

Likewise, but perhaps to an even greater extent, parents of children with learning disabilities seemed quite distressed and disheartened because they frequently had to fill roles associated with those of researcher or advocate or teacher. rather than spending their time being a parent As one parent poignantly said, *I just want to be the mom* (Dyson, 2007). But it appeared to he more than the addition of responsibilities that weighed heavily on the parents; to us. it seemed that the relentless nature of these multiple roles caused considerable stress and anxiety. One parent captured this sentiment well by stating, *How it* [inclusion] *has changed our life is how much stress has been brought into our family, having to advocate very strongly every single day* (Dyson. 2007).

As parents of students with learning disabilities discussed increased responsibilities with inclusion, so too did every professional focus group interviewed. Special education and general education teachers both indicated that they now had greater responsibility in planning and teaching. Teacher educators discussed the added responsibility to identify and recruit multiple professional schools that could serve as models of inclusion for pre—service teachers (Griffin et al.. 2007). Moreover, teacher educators often had to considerably revamp their programs and their teaching methods to more closely mirror the inclusive environments in which pre—service teachers were placed. As one teacher educator stated, ... *teacher educators did not walk the talk, even if they are in departments of special education* (Griffin et al., 2007). Higher education faculty members also noted that they had learn about, and assist their colleagues in becoming familiar with, new instructional strategies, such universal design for learning (Cook et al.. 2007).

Administrators and school psychologists also discussed increased responsibilities, especially in regard to providing direct services to teachers and parents. School psychologists reported finding themselves implementing interventions directly in general education classrooms (Cowan et al., 2007) and administrators reported all increased demand for their support as teachers changed roles and responsibilities as a consequence of inclusion (Crockett et al., 2007). Both groups also talked about their increased work with parents in helping them understand services associated with inclusion. It was interesting to note that members from these groups equated their roles in inclusive schools with that of community enforcement officers such as police officers or firefighters— positions that often require negotiation, enforcement, and

restoration.

Services not provided students with learning disabilities. Perhaps the most pervasive themes across the focus groups entailed concerns about the quality or availability of specialized services to meet the needs of included students with learning disabilities. Every group expressed concern at some level about what they- (or their colleagues) were doing and not doing in relation to the education of included students with learning disabilities. In fact, from our reading, no focus group seemed to express a sense of confidence in how they were performing in their inclusion roles and all seemed to question whether inclusion as a general practice was the best approach for all students with learning disabilities. Members of the administrator, special education teacher, parent, and student focus groups directly cast doubt upon the extent to which inclusion classrooms actually constituted the least restrictive environment for many students with learning disabilities. As one administrator stated, *sometimes there's inclusion that doesn't need to be there, that's inappropriate for the child and the child is just' doing time' in the classroom* (Crockett et al., 2007).

More specifically, members of the special education teacher focus group talked about the lack of differentiated instruction and students not being provided appropriate accommodations in their inclusion classrooms. *They* [general education teachers] *want this homework to come back the next day with all the penalties...and all the punishments.* (Tankersley et a!., 2007). Adding to this, special education teachers felt powerless to intervene *(I cannot do a thing to help* them) even though they believed they a) knew what should be done and (b) had the skills to implement the practices if I provided the opportunity. *And I couldn't be what those students needed* me *to be, you know, meet their needs* (Tankersley et al., 2007).

Parents seemed to be the most emotional voice in regard to services not being provided their children, reporting that most general education teachers did not know how to teach their children, accommodate learning disabilities, or manage behavior. One parent even suggested that his or her child's educational experience in inclusion classrooms was abusive because of these shortcomings. Indeed, several parents blamed inclusion for their children's lack of self-esteem, academic failure, and dislike of school. *We're consistently picking up the pieces of what the school system is doing to them* (Dyson, 2007).

Perhaps the clearest voice on this issue came from the students themselves, Students with learning disabilities talked about the ways they perceived special education to be *special.* They provided specific examples of differences in instructional practices, materials, and supports offered to them in inclusion and resource classrooms and expressed an unambiguous preference for the instruction offered by special education teachers in resource classrooms. For example, one student noted*, When you go to the RSP* [resource] *classroom, they'll just explain it more to you so that way you can understand it better, versus being in regular classes* (Leafstedt et al., 2007). Not only did students with learning disabilities report that they wanted more time working with special education teachers in pull-out programs, but members of the special education teachers and school psychologist focus groups also reported that students they worked with had also made similar requests. Although many themes were similar across the different focus groups, it is interesting to note that participants most intimately involved with students with learning disabilities seemed to have the most

intense concerns about the educational practices of inclusion. Parents, special education teachers and students with learning disabilities voiced very strong objections to a *one-size-fits all* approach to placement**.**

Although we conjecture that most of these participants held similar views before being involved in inclusion environments, and therefore may have anticipated problematic outcomes for included students with learning disabilities to some degree, they did not anticipate tile personal toll inclusion would take on them and how it left them feeling unfulfilled and unsuccessful as teachers, parents, and students. As the focus group members' roles became more global (less individualized toward specific students with learning disabilities) –administrators, teacher educators, higher education professionals --the topics were more focused on processes and guidelines. They did not anticipate the increased work to collaborate or to create and enforce policy and practice that would allow students with learning disabilities access to general education classrooms. General education teachers and school psychologists seemed to be situated in between these two assemblages of focus groups. Although they did not convey a deep sense of personal involvement --as did special education teachers, parents, and students with learning disabilities -- they did relay a more direct consequence of inclusion to their professional roles and responsibilities (e.g.. the need to learn new skills, increased duties, provision of services to students with learning disabilities) than did the remaining focus groups.

Conclusion

One of the more surprising aspects of medications is how two people taking the same medications can have such different experiences. One person may have severe or troublesome side effects that make the medicine intolerable, while another person finds that the medicine does only the good that it is intended to do (Brynes, 2004)

The side effects of medication thus appear to again be a useful analogy for thinking about the unexpected impact of inclusion reforms, which appear to vary considerably. Indeed, the overarching themes of the focus groups reported in this special issue contrast markedly with one another. Some participants passionately spoke about the unexpected benefits of inclusion for students with learning disabilities and for themselves, whereas others movingly told researchers of the unforeseen negative impact that inclusion had on students with learning disabilities and on their own personal and professional lives. Talking with special education teachers exposed us to inclusion's wide range of unexpected effects in a single focus group (Tankersley et al., 2007). Participants expressed their surprise, joy, and mortification about being proved wrong in their firmly held beliefs that their students with learning disabilities could not succeed in inclusive classes and on the proficiency tests through their tears; and related pleasure and pride regarding their new roles teaching high level academic content to large, inclusive classes. Yet these same teachers went on to discuss how inclusion had robbed them of their core professional identities and left many children with learning disabilities to languish in inclusive classrooms with inadequate support.

Most, although certainly not all, participants saw inclusion as affecting them, as well as students with learning disabilities, in primarily negative ways. The oftentimes negative side effects of inclusion for these different groups are important due to their

impact on the various stakeholders. For example, dissatisfaction with their roles in inclusive schools may exacerbate the shortage of special education teachers (see Billingsley & McLeskey. 2004). Yet they are also critical in that they indirectly affect the quality of education and life experienced by included students with learning disabilities. For instance, stressed and harried parents who do not feel that their children are receiving an appropriate education may be less likely to work closely with and support teachers.

Although it may be tempting to draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of inclusion from these findings. we simply cannot. First, it is important to recognize the significant limitations to this research. Although the focus group interviews reported in this special issue provide many insightful perspectives, the results should not be generalized. In other words, we cannot know whether the experiences and viewpoints of participants are unique or are widely shared. We did, however, find it striking that each focus group had a great deal to say about the unanticipated side effects of including students with learning disabilities. Although future research is needed to (a) validate the degree to which the side effects reported in these focus groups are pervasive and (b) investigate the existence of other side effects related to inclusion, it appears that inclusion does carry an array of important side effects for a variety of stakeholders.

As with medication, we believe that decisions regarding whether and how much students with learning disabilities included ought to he individualized. The position that any one-size-fits-all approach to education is inadequate for children and youth with learning disabilities is clearly not a new one (see National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. 1993). Traditionally, arguments for individualizing placement decision have been premised on the uncertain and varied main effects of inclusion. That is, because educators cannot he sure that inclusion will or will not produce the desired academic, social, and affective outcomes, educational teams have been urged to examine the individual needs and characteristics of students with learning disabilities, and their match with inclusive teachers' instructional style and resources, to assess the likelihood that inclusion will result in desired outcomes. We hope that the findings of the eight focus group interviews may begin to broaden the field's thinking regarding the variables at play in making placement decisions for students with learning disabilities and other disabilities. Given the consequential impact of inclusion on locus group participants, we recommend that when making placement decisions, education teams consider how inclusion has and is likely to impact (a) parents, special education teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and other stakeholders: and (b) general education teachers and students with learning disabilities in unanticipated ways. We do not mean to suggest that inclusive classrooms should not be considered as an option if parents, special education teachers, or principals simply feel that it is too difficult for them. Rather, these voices should he considered as one of many factors when determining inclusive policies and making placement decisions.

As Brynes (2004) indicated, *Many o/ us may have to keep going back to our doctors try a second or even a third medication before find one with the strongest therapeutic effect and the fewest side effects.* Similarly, schools and educational teams may have to try multiple inclusive arrangements to minimize negative side effects. Utilizing different approaches to providing special education in order to find one with the least

side effects and the greatest benefits, although certainly more time consuming and complex than opting for one inclusive model regardless of the effects, is consistent with the individualized approach that underlies and defines special education -- and, ultimately, appears most likely to bring about successful schools and educational outcomes for students with learning disabilities.

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