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The Effects of Inclusion and Positive Reinforcement Within the Classroom

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**Abstract**

The concepts of inclusion and positive reinforcement in classrooms has been prevalent within many schools for a number of years, both practices slowly becoming more universal as research is released. Separate, these practices have significant positive effects on students, and when they are treated as a duo inclusion and positive reinforcement have tangible results on both students with and without disabilities. Several studies and interviews were conducted in pursuit of the significance of each practice, with one study in particular linking the two to provide for a successful, positive general education classroom environment. The research found indicates that both practices of inclusion and positive reinforcement are indeed evidence based, as opposed to solely being practice or experience based.

**Introduction**

Although inclusion has an overall definition of placing students with disabilities in general education classes, the concept itself incorporates so much more. For a school community to be fully inclusive, the needs of both the children with disabilities and without disabilities need to be met (“Together we learn better,” 2015). Within the field of education, inclusive strategies allow a school’s resources to be maximized due to the increased availability of both the staff and the materials for the students (“Together we learn better,” 2015). Without having separated classrooms, more teachers allows for more assistance that can be distributed to students that need it. Since the teachers will be teaching a diverse group of students with different learning abilities, they will need to use a variety of teaching approaches (Rosen, 2008). This will allow children of all abilities to experience multiple ways of learning.

There is countless research on the benefits that inclusion brings to children with disabilities. These advantages are prominent within academic observations as well as in social circumstances. Some of the positive academic attributes that inclusion provides are increased expectations for the students to meet achievement in individualized education plan (IEP) goals, having access to the general curriculum, having higher expectations, and having peer role models for academic skills (“Benefits of inclusive education,” n.d.). From a social standpoint, inclusion gives students with disabilities many more opportunities than they would have in a segregated special education classroom (“Benefits of inclusive education,” n.d.). Friendships are more easily developed and maintained when students with disabilities are in inclusive classrooms where they can have models of how to behave in social interactions. Since they will have more access to

social interactions, they are able to practice the skills they have been observing in a friendly, safe environment (“Benefits of inclusive education,” n.d.). Students interacting successfully with peers in the classroom is a critical first step for them to be able to interact successfully with people in the real world.

Inclusion in schools benefits not only students with disabilities, but it benefits students without disabilities as well, both academically and socially. It’s been observed that students without disabilities in an inclusive classroom have greater opportunities to learn concepts due to them needing to help other students learn the curriculum, in turn allowing these students to have greater academic outcomes (“Benefits of inclusive education,” n.d.). A common understanding of academics is that a student knows 90% of what they learn by teaching someone else the same material; inclusive classrooms provide non-disabled students with opportunities to teach others every day.

Socially, students without disabilities greatly benefit from being around those with disabilities. They learn from an early age the meanings of diversity and individual differences. These understandings makes them more appreciative, more accepting of difference, and encourages them to have respect for all types of people (“Benefits of inclusive education,” n.d.). Building these friendships and peer relationships prepares all students for the diverse society that is in the “real world,” and ideally they will help to make the society an inclusive one.

One tool that teachers use to help foster academic achievement and self-esteem in students with learning disabilities is positive reinforcement. Historically, teachers used punishment over positive reinforcement. However, in recent years, there has been a shift and

educators are seeing the benefits to using positive reinforcement in the classroom. Unfortunately, some teachers see positive reinforcement as rewarding a student for doing something they should be doing anyway, but they do not realize the positive effects that it can have on a student.

Positive reinforcement can only be labeled as such is if the reinforcement increases the likelihood of the behavior occurring again (“Positive reinforcement,” n.d.). Many teachers tend to lean towards using punishment because it is faster, typically easier, and usually ends the “bad” behavior in a more timely fashion. Punishment, however, does not always have the outcome that is intended when it’s distributed. In some instances, punishment has the opposite effect, making children rebellious (“Positive reinforcement in the classroom,” 2015). Instead, using positive reinforcement can motivate a child to make that “good behavior” a habit. Positive reinforcement can be a bit more of a challenge for teachers to use because what is reinforcing to a certain person may not be reinforcing to someone else. By watching and observing what students like and what they gravitate towards during their own free time, a teacher can more accurately determine which reward will motivate which student (“Positive reinforcement,” n.d.). When each student gets a specified type of positive reinforcement, the reward is more effective in getting a child to repeat the good behavior.

Although punishment appears to be effective for most students, students that have chronic behavioral issues feel as though they are constantly being reprimanded. This can affect their self esteem, in turn possibly affecting their academic standpoint (“Positive reinforcement,” n.d.). Alternatively, positive reinforcement is a method in which no child can have too much of. With positive reinforcement, the “good” actions that students complete are encouraged to be

repeated, with a goal of invoking a habit of the behavior. Positive reinforcement positively affects a student's self esteem because it shows the student what their strengths are, which allows them to capitalize on these strong suits ("Positive reinforcement in the classroom," 2015). While negative actions should not be overlooked, neither should positive actions. Encouragement of these positive actions can have long-standing effects for students, which is the main goal of positive reinforcement.

### **Analysis of Inclusion**

A special education teacher in the Tyngsborough Public School system, Tayla Makevich, was interviewed on the topic of inclusion because of the position she holds at the school. Ms. Makevich feels that it is of high importance to not shelter her students, although she realizes that her and her students can end up segregated and cut off easily. She wants her students to experience the "typical student experience," which Ms. Makevich notes that although her students will get there [to the typical experience] in a different way than other kids their age, they will still get there.

Ms. Makevich realizes that having her students be around their peers is a way for them to learn crucial social skills and social cues, as well as prepare them for the real world. She also loves being able to have the opportunity to work with typical students, and uses her time with them to help explain the importance of setting boundaries and effective communication skills. Her goal is for her special education students to not only be accepted in the real world, but also to be understood, included, and respected. Ms. Makevich acknowledges in her interview that she has noticed the world becoming a more inclusive place, and looks forward to the future.

As of 2012, 59% of students that are classified as having disabilities spend 80% or more of their school days in a general education classroom (Mackey, 2014). There are federal legislations, such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act put in place in 1975 and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 that assist in pushing the concept of access to a challenging academic curriculum for all: something that inclusion can provide (Shogren, et al., 2015). It was that 1975 piece of legislation that “guaranteed all children access to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE), regardless of the nature or severity of their disability” (Shogren, et al., 2015). From this date on, students with a range of disabilities were encouraged into public schools, thus promoting the placement of these students into general education classrooms (Shogren, et al., 2015). A program titled “Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation” (SWIFT) received funding from the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Special Education Programs to “provide technical assistance to K-8th grade schools implementing academic and behavioral supports” which make it possible for students, those with and without disabilities, to learn in public schools alongside their grade-level peers (Kurth, Lyon & Shogren, 2015).

There is ample research on inclusive settings providing the opportunity to learn skills in academics, communication, social situations, and self determination (Shogren, et al., 2015). In a study conducted by Kurth et al. (2015), eighteen K-8 students that each had severe disabilities were taken to be observed from six schools that had been previously recognized for their inclusive practices. The observation records were organized around seven themes that these schools used to support the students with severe disabilities: (a) the teaching arrangement (who



was providing instruction), (b) the type of engagement the student demonstrated during the activity, (c) the types of general classroom supports that were available, (d) the types of student supports that were provided, (e) the type of work or activity the student was performing, (f) the interactions the student had with others, and (g) the choices provided for the student (Kurth et al., 2015). The researchers sought to respond to the research question “what practices support inclusion of students with severe disabilities in the learning and social activities of inclusive schools?” (Kurth et al., 2015). An appreciative inquiry approach was taken while designing and analyzing this study in which the researchers were exploring different practices to determine which were right, useful, and successful (Kurth et al., 2015).

To select the schools that would have students chosen from them, these schools later being referred to as Knowledge Development Sites, or KDS, a systematic nomination was put forth. In addition to the nominations, there were screening processes that consisted of surveys, interviews, and site visits. Through these levels of analyzation, the 37 nominated potential schools were pooled down to the six schools the researchers would be using for this study (Kurth et al., 2015).

In order to determine which students would be observed, each KDS’ administrators chose four students that would be eligible for the study based on the following criteria: students (a) with severe disabilities (in which were defined specifically), (b) who had diverse personal characteristics and support needs, (c) who represented the range of inclusive services and supports provided by the school, and (d) who were experiencing success in the general education classroom with the inclusive practices implemented at the school (Kurth et al., 2015). Since the

study was done on an observation standpoint, qualitative methods were used to analyze the data. The researchers circled their findings back to the seven themes that were introduced in the beginning, analyzing their compilations within the line of teaching arrangements, engagement, classroom supports, student supports, activities, interactions, and choice(s) (Kurth et al., 2015).

Within the study, students not only received a variety of teacher combinations as their instructors, but they also learned in an assortment of group settings. These groups ranged anywhere from individual groups where the students would receive one on one learning, to large groups with six or more students. The KDS observed used a variety of junctions for who was teaching, but in all it was observed that co-teaching seemed to work best, especially if it was a combination of a general education teacher and a special education teacher working together (Kurth et al., 2015).

In terms of engagement, the observers categorized their findings in one of four labels; engaging: actively, passively, not engaged, or not possible to be engaged. The researchers could determine different engagement examples that fell under each of their categories, however the classifications they noted the most were active engagement and passively engaged; they noted that these are typical in many classrooms (Kurth et al., 2015). The observers also noticed that the students that were at times not engaged exhibited the same disengaged behaviors as students without disabilities- suggesting that this demeanor is not unique to students with disabilities, but rather students as a whole (Kurth et al., 2015).

In terms of classroom observations, there were a range of supports available to the students. One of the main ascertainments taken from watching the interactions between adult and

child in the classroom was that the teachers supported all students, regardless on if they had a disability or not. Within the classroom special and general education teachers could be found dissertating their notes and teaching styles to gain new perceptions about their pedagogies. These discussions included systems of teaching, procedures, and adjustments to the presentation of material. Researchers concluded that inclusion practices are much more likely to be successful when there is harmony within the classroom (Kurth et al., 2015).

Adjoining to classroom supports provided for children with disabilities are student supports. The KDS “provided student supports that addressed unique learning or participation needs including behavior, communication, physical, and sensory supports” (Kurth et al., 2015). Some of these support tools include fidget items, iPads with speech-generating software, and specialized stools. Having these particular means of functioning available allow most students with disabilities to stay and operate in a general education classroom, as opposed to needing to be separated from their grade-level peers.

In any given day of observing a classroom, countless activities occur. Some activities are able to be completed independently by a student with disabilities, some activities may need scaffolding, and some activities may require an element of differentiation. An activity is noted as adapted if “the assignment or task was adjusted for the student, including changes to the quality, quantity, or materials” (Kurth et al., 2015). Overall, in one way or another the students with disabilities were able to be included in some form on the activities that the rest of the general education class was working on.

Another theme that the researchers focused on during their observations was interactions. The interactions they were interested in were in non-instructional manners, looking at interactions both with peers and with adults. While some interactions, especially with adults, were facilitated, spontaneous interactions also occurred frequently. The large amount of the peer interactions were non-verbal interactions, such as playing together, working on work together, or hugging. The peer interactions also consisted largely of helper-helpee scenarios, in which the student without disabilities would assist the student with disabilities in a variety of tasks. It is these interactions that allow the benefits of inclusion to influence social skills as well as academic abilities (Kurth et al., 2015).

The final theme explored by the researchers was that of choice. This theme was significantly less observed than any of the other seven themes that were outlined by the study. Giving all students, especially students with disabilities, is an important piece to allowing a student to feel included in a general classroom- these choices could be related to academics, behavior, objects, and free time activities, for examples (Kurth et al., 2015). Providing opportunities for choices to be made puts the decision making in the students' hands, even for minor choices such as what toy to play with during free time. This process grants a sense of independence and control in the students' lives (Kurth et al., 2015).

Another study conducted by Assistant Professor at the University of Hartford Megan Mackey used purposive sampling to select a sixth grade science teacher, a seventh grade social studies teacher, and an eighth grade math teacher for her study on middle school inclusion (2014). Mackey used qualitative forms of research such as interviews, observations and

document analysis to reach conclusions on the three teachers, all of whom were chosen due to their exemplified work in executing inclusion (Mackey, 2014). The study worked to answer the research question of how three middle school general education teachers include students with disabilities in their classrooms. Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist theory states that a person's knowledge is constructed by the interactions and social influences someone experiences in their environment. Mackey writes that when this view is applied to teaching, "a person learns, develops, and grows as a teacher through interactions with students in his/her classroom" (2014).

The three teachers used a variety of strategies based on different knowledge they had on the subject of inclusion. The teachers used what they had learned in their graduate work, what they've learned throughout their own experience and what they personally believed worked best-utilizing both evidence based and opinion based practices (Mackey, 2014). Some of the evidence based strategies that the teachers used included visuals, graphic organizers, multi-modal presentations and peer support, to name a few. All three of the teachers in the study did not feel as though the knowledge they had obtained in their undergraduate programs had allowed them to meet the needs of the students in their classroom that had disabilities. What did help prepare the teachers, however, was access to the students' Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Having this information about their students allowed them to plan ahead, as well as think about lessons in a more thorough manner so that they could prepare their lessons in ways that everyone could understand (Mackey, 2014). One of the teachers specifically pointed out that she found all of her students, especially the students with disabilities, were benefitting from a reliable, predictable lesson structure.

Mackey acknowledges that teachers are put to the test of making the mandated curriculum they are given not only interesting, but accessible to all the students within the general education classroom. She writes “With this in mind, teachers should design their lessons to include a mixture of instructional strategies so that mastery of curriculum content is available by all learners” (Mackey, 2014).

A study done by Shogren et. al. (2015) examined the experiences of students with and without disabilities within an inclusive setting. The researchers focused on the students’ perceptions of the culture of their school as well as their perception of inclusion by holding interviews with similar questions on these topics with students with and without disabilities. Overall, the students as a whole told the interviewer that they had a sense of belonging at their school, and felt that it was highly positive. One student without a disability described his student body saying “we have a variety of nice, different learners, and we’re unique and all creative, determined, and responsible” (Shogren et al., 2015). Students that did have disabilities were consistent in mentioning the patience that their teachers had with them, and how important that was. The teachers that were able to balance high expectations, support, and kindness made the students with disabilities feel the most engaged in their school life (Shogren et al., 2015).

### **Analysis of Positive Reinforcement**

Within these inclusive settings, some students with disabilities need individualized reinforcement to be successful. The Check-In Check-Out (CICO) strategy is a collaborative, research based practice that is implemented in general education classrooms to target specific behavioral goals and expectations (Evan & Weiss, n.d.). To have success with CICO,

communication and collaboration between the general education and special education teachers is vital. Within the classroom, individual students are given daily progress report cards. These cards can be tailored based on characteristics such as a student's age, level, and specific challenges or goals (Evan & Weiss, n.d.). Based on the outcome of the daily report card, tangible reinforcers can be distributed- providing the attainment of behavior goals.

Implementing the Check-In Check-Out strategy depends heavily on joint forces of the special education and general education teachers. Prior to the implementation the educators would meet to discuss and plan how CICO would be carried out based on their students specifically. CICO is a proactive approach, as daily student check ins would occur to review progress and offer positive reinforcement. The proactive component also applies to the teachers meeting with each other, as the educators have to "determine if goals have been met, if they should be revised, or if new ones should be added" (Evan & Weiss, n.d.).

In order for this positive reinforcement strategy in inclusive classrooms to be prosperous, the special educators within a school system need to be "willing to share their expertise with general educators... and creatively facilitate the use of targeted and individualized strategies that promote positive behavior" (Evan & Weiss, n.d.). By doing this in union with the general education teacher, the team can provide their students, no matter their abilities, the support and reinforcement that allows for a successfully run inclusive classroom.

Tayla Makevich, the special educator from Tyngsborough Public Schools referenced previously, spoke about her use of positive reinforcement in an interview. She acknowledged that her students face daily challenges and problems, and because of this her classroom

“celebrates big”. Actions that appear little and that typical students may take for granted, such as putting on shoes correctly, saying hello to a teacher, and identifying the correct time are seen as major accomplishments to her students. Ms. Makevich says that in her class “we cheer, we reward, and we support each other in every way we can”.

Ms. Makevich is a tremendous supporter of positive reinforcement in her classroom, as well as praising students for their achievements. She knows that many students, especially her students, crave attention. Attention to some students with disabilities is seen as a reward, so she tries her best to ignore negative behavior (unless necessary to intervene) and acknowledge positive behavior.

Knowing that students can sense and feel negative energy, Ms. Makevich strives to facilitate an energized, uplifting environment in which her students can work in. One of her techniques is giving a student the ability to make their own decisions, with possible outcomes. For example, she would not force a student to complete or participate in an activity, but in refusing to work the student would miss out on an opportunity for the reward. An important attribute to Ms. Makevich’s strategy is that although she will either give a reward or not give a reward, she never will take away something that is earned. In essence, she’ll give rewards for success, but won’t take away for unwanted or unexpected behavior.

A study done by Hayes, Hindle and Withington (2007) conducted an 18-month research project within one large secondary school with an aim to both challenge and empower teachers to increase the number of positive, specific feedback statements they made to the students in their classroom, even if this involved modifying their standard pedagogical strategies. Research



has recovered strong evidence that “teachers are significant agents in children’s worlds and shape positive outcomes for young people” (Hayes et al., 2007). Arguably the most influential tool for students is verbal reinforcement. According to Hayes et al. (2007), researchers contribute the amount of positive feedback a child receives in the classroom as being a fundamental aspect to the effectiveness of behavioral interventions.

In motivating the teachers of the secondary school to add more positivity to their classroom regime, it was revealed that by making a small change and increasing positive feedback by only 0.2 statements per minute, students’ behaviors had a chance of being positively affected (Hayes et al., 2007). Once becoming more aware of the statements that they were making, many of the teachers realized that giving positive feedback was difficult to do when it had not been a part of their standard routine. The teachers agreed, however, that the most effective way to implement more positive feedback into their classroom naturally in the future was to practice in class- an action that will benefit both the teachers and the students (Hayes et al., 2007).

The researchers stated that some negative statements can be present in a classroom for guidance, however that positive statement counts should be significantly higher proportionately (Hayes et al., 2007). Due to this new awareness, the positive feedback statements that the teachers were making in their classes had a significant escalation- starting from a rate of 0.6 statements per minute to 0.9 statements per minute in just over a year. Alternatively, the negative feedback statements decreased a bit in the year, dropping from 0.9 statements per minute to 0.7 statements per minute- just by being aware of the positivity aspect in the classroom. The original

suggested target of positive statements per minute was 0.8, which the teachers had surpassed.

Overall, having the staff of this school made aware of the effects of positive reinforcement in the classroom and learning how to implement the strategy resulted in a more encouraging, confident attitude behind the teachers' education styles (Hayes et al., 2007).

A study conducted by Paul Burnett and Valerie Mandel (2010) looked into different types of praise and feedback from both teachers' and students' perspectives in primary classrooms. The researchers stated that teachers should put thought into when, how, and what variation of feedback that they give. The study stressed that "general, non-targeted praise was most commonly used... but is not effective because it is not linked to a specific behavior or targeted to the successful completion of a task" (Burnett & Mandel, 2010). In essence, to make the praise useful, praise that is being given should result in a positive effect on the student.

There were four types of feedback discussed in the study: general, non targeted praise, negative feedback, 'effort' feedback, and 'ability' feedback. The study revealed that different age levels prefer different forms of feedback. Younger students preferred to receive 'ability' feedback, while older students desired 'effort' feedback as opposed to the former. This difference in opinion with age may be attributed to the pressure of the feeling of failure, the pressure of which increases with age (Burnett & Mandel, 2010). It was found that "students provided with ability feedback and then a subsequent failure experience did not perform well after the failure, while those who received effort feedback did perform well following a failure experience" (Burnett & Mandel, 2010). It is common for students to crave ability feedback from teachers or other authority figures in order for them to establish a positive conception of

themselves. As a result, an educator must carefully choose their responses to a child's behaviors, achievements and failures to ensure they are addressing those subjects in a manner that will benefit their student (Burnett & Mandel, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

As a whole, there is ample research that validates inclusive practices are linked with improved developments for students with disabilities, the research also states that segregated school settings fall short on their promises of effective practices (Kurt et al., 2015). Integrated classrooms do not only have a positive effect on students with disabilities, but on the general education students and teachers as well. Students without disabilities feel more supported in inclusive settings, and feel more prepared for the inevitable experiences of people with disabilities that will occur in the real world (Kurt et al., 2015). The concept of inclusive education strives to give all students, no matter their abilities, an "opportunity to learn and participate in a class that provides challenges and occasions for success" (Mackey, 2014). These occurrences of success can be partly driven by the use of positive reinforcement in the classroom. Positive reinforcement as well as attentiveness to feedback allows for students to gain a better grasp of their own selves and additionally encourage desired behaviors (Burnett & Mandel, 2010). Kurt et al. (2015) makes the point that simply putting students in general education classrooms cannot guarantee positive outcomes for students with disabilities, however when combined with supports, reinforcement and proactivity, the results can be very significant. Both approaches of inclusion and positive reinforcement were found to be evidence based practices, and both can have positive effects on students with or without disabilities.

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## APA Checklist

- **Error:** Double spacing the entire paper, but neglecting to double space the reference sheet

**Example of this error:** Rittle-Johnson, B., Saylor, M. & Swyget, K. (2008). Learning from explaining: Does it matter if mom is listening? *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, *100*, 215-224. doi: 10.1016/j.jecp.2007.10.002

**Correct version:** Rittle-Johnson, B., Saylor, M. & Swyget, K. (2008). Learning from explaining: Does it matter if mom is listening? *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, *100*, 215-224. doi: 10.1016/j.jecp.2007.10.002

- **Error:** Not putting the page numbers in with a direct quote.

**Example of this error:** Harris (1989) notes, “Children can also imagine believing something that they know to be false”.

**Correct version:** Harris (1989) notes, “Children can also imagine believing something that they know to be false” (p. 77).

- **Error:** When using an electric source, not putting the paragraph number with a direct quote.

**Example of this error:** Harris (1989) notes, “Children can also imagine believing something that they know to be false”.

**Correct version:** Harris (1989) notes, “Children can also imagine believing something that they know to be false” (para. 5).

- **Error:** Making block quotes EXACTLY 40 words or more, not even 39!
- **Error:** Incorrectly citing a secondary source.
- **Example of this error:** Dunn, Kendrick, and MacNamee found that..
- **Correct version:** Dunn, Kendrick, and MacNamee (as cited in Harris, 1989) found that...
- **Error:** Using the same capitalization rules for a journal as for a book
- **Example of this error:** journal: *Child Development* book: *Child Development*
- **Correct version:** journal: *Child Development* book: *Child development*