Inclusion or Separation?

Education can help foster an understanding of diversity, a crucial skill needed in our society in order to develop interpersonal relationships and learn how to cooperate with others in a civil manner. In analyzing a typical public school setting, classes often represent a diverse group of students. This diversity, among many other factors, can be manifested through race, religion, and ethnicity. However, learning differences, an aspect of diversity that is frequently overlooked, can also contribute to a diverse environment and thus greatly affect the outcome of a student’s education. According to the Learning Disabilities Association of America, approximately four to six percent of all students in our nation’s public schools have learning disabilities. Perhaps the most debated issue surrounding learning disabilities involves the differences in success rates for learning disabled students in inclusion programs as opposed to self-contained programs. Inclusion proponents argue that learning disabled students incorporated in a normal academic environment display increased levels of improvement academically and socially, and positively influence the non-learning disabled students in the classroom. In contrast, advocates for self-contained programs believe that learning disabled students are more successful if taught in a separate, individualized setting. As a sister of three learning disabled brothers, a daughter of a learning disabled tutor, and a student myself, my own personal experiences have greatly influenced my outlook on the debate. While both inclusion and self-contained programs should be available for all students, ultimately, the placement of learning disabled students should be decided on an individualized, case specific basis.

In order to determine where learning disabled students’ schooling should occur and in what manner, one must first understand the meaning of this term, or the lack thereof, and the implications behind it. For instance, if a student finds a subject challenging, should he or she be
labeled “learning disabled”? Similarly, if a child refuses to read a book, should he or she be identified as having “learning disabilities”? The federal definition of the phrase learning disabilities includes “perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia” (Thomas). However, since this broad definition could include a wide range of people, educators often have difficulty accepting it.

In an attempt to fashion an alternative definition, Donald Hammill and Stephen C. Larsen, president of PRO-ED inc. in Texas and professor at the University of Texas respectively, and Dr. James Leigh and Dr. Gaye McNutt, past president for the council of learning disabilities and a resource teacher at a district school in Texas respectively, constructed a new definition of the phrase in question. In an article titled A New Definition of Learning Disabilities, Hammill, Leigh, McNutt, and Larsen propose that the term learning disabilities refers to a “heterogeneous group of disorders” that are “intrinsic to the individual” and thought to be the result of some dysfunction in the nervous system (Hammill 109). While this is merely part of their new definition, it specifically employs the word “heterogeneous” to express that the causes are different, and consequently, the manifestations can vary greatly (Hammill 109).

For the purpose of this argument, I will focus on two types of learning disabilities: perceptual handicaps and dyslexia. A person with perceptual handicaps may have difficulty differentiating between visual and auditory information in addition to finding processing and organizing information a challenge. The Odyssey School in Baltimore, Maryland, a school which aims to educate children who are diagnosed with dyslexia or other language based learning differences defines dyslexia as “a kind of mind - often productive and gifted - that learns differently. People with dyslexia may have difficulty reading, spelling, understanding language, and expressing themselves clearly in speaking or in writing” (Odyssey). Many professionals are
still not satisfied with these definitions. Some argue that as long as the learning disabled can be helped and treated, there is no need to define the term. However, while defining the term might at first seem trivial and superfluous, it is in fact crucial in not only regulating placement, but also in determining who should and should not receive accommodations.

Inclusion advocates suggest that students with perceptually noticeable learning disabilities benefit greatly from their engagement in social interaction, primarily facilitated in an inclusive classroom setting. Judith Wiener, a professor in the Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology at the University of Toronto, conducts research on the social and emotional aspects of children and adolescents with learning disabilities. In her studies, Wiener observes an explicit difference between the social behavior of learning disabled children in self-contained classes and in inclusive classes. According to Wiener, “children in Self-Contained Special Education Classes reported a reduced level of companionship with their best friends at school, and a higher level of conflict in their relationships than children in Inclusion Programs” (103-104). Additionally, the teachers of the special education classes described their students as “more deficient in social skills” and experiencing “higher levels of loneliness, social dissatisfaction…and depression” (Wiener 104). Wiener’s study is extremely pertinent because it sheds insight on the personal emotions of learning disabled students, a facet not normally considered in this type of research.

Alan Gartner and Dorothy Kerzner Lipsky, esteemed authors of many books and journals on the topic of learning disabilities, present the results of multiple studies in favor of inclusion in a National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion 1995 bulletin. Both Gartner and Lipsky clearly deduce from the research that “clear patterns indicate improved outcomes as a result of integrated placements” (2). These outcomes generally reveal improvements in social
relations and the development of enhanced self-esteem. The research from both of these sources clearly affirms that an inclusive setting augments the social development of learning disabled students.

In addition to social improvements, inclusion advocates maintain that research also provides evidence for academic advancement. Ken Willrodt and Shirley Claybrook, in conducting a study of the *Effects of Inclusion on Academic Outcomes*, demonstrated that generally, either “there [are] no statistical differences in standardized test scores” of students in inclusion programs compared with students in separate programs, or that students in inclusion programs display enhanced academic performance compared to students in separate programs (Willrodt 15). Interaction with people who do not have learning disabilities can improve a learning disabled student’s academic performance. Dr. Mirenda, a professor in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology and Special Education at the University of British Columbia, and Jennifer Katz, a faculty member of the Education Department at the University of Manitoba, conclude that by intermingling with other students, the learning disabled students were able to acquire basic communication tools and improve their motor abilities. These positive results were then translated into better academic performance because of an increase in overall function. Katz and Mirenda cite a study in which “students with disabilities in mainstreamed classrooms made greater overall academic gains then did their peers with similar disabilities in segregated classrooms” (15). These are just a few of the completed studies that show a slight improvement in academic achievement for students in inclusion programs.

The purpose of education involves more than conventional curriculum teaching. Dr. Mirenda, a professor in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology and Special Education at the University of British Columbia, and Jennifer Katz, a faculty member of the
Education Department at the University of Manitoba, claim that in addition to academic instruction, education entails development of the whole child and cultivation of “knowledge necessary for successful integration into society” (14). By being incorporated in a typical class, learning disabled students obtain an opportunity similar to experiences they will encounter in the world beyond their education. Sheltering a student in an atypical environment can cause a false perception of the world outside of those surroundings. In contrast, when learning disabled students confront the challenges of interacting with people unlike themselves, tackle more difficult learning pursuits, and engage in higher intellectual reasoning and critical thinking, they attain not only an improved academic repertoire, but also a heightened sense of the world around them. Deborah Peel, an advisor for the Disability Right Commission’s Built Environment Reference Group, and Paula Posas, a postgraduate researcher at the University of Liverpool, confirm this assertion in their journal article. Peel and Posas agree that “this real world experience offer[s] a plethora of new interactions and learning insights for all those involved.” The essence of their argument revolves around the fact that people with different backgrounds must learn to live in a diverse world, surrounded by people with different abilities, qualities, and goals than themselves. I agree that being in a diverse community can help foster heightened sensitivities because my college experience thus far confirms that I am experiencing a glimpse of society within a fairly small radius. This opportunity allows me to interact with people who are different than me, and consequently broadens my perspective of the world. Similar to my diverse college experience, learning disabled students benefit from inclusion because of their keen understanding of the world around them.

Two of my older brothers were tested and identified as having learning disabilities at very young ages. From an outsider’s perspective, however, my brothers seemed to have a simple time
rising to the top of their classes and excelling at most of their academic pursuits. Despite their eventual success, school was not always academically straightforward. As my eldest brother completed preschool, the school he attended suggested that he not return for kindergarten the following year. The principal had already “written him off” as a student who would struggle immensely throughout his schooling and ultimately never really attain a valuable profession. Now, as a Harvard medical resident looking back on his school career, he confesses that while academics often posed challenges for him, his immersion into a conventional academic environment provided him with the social interaction necessary for understanding his fellow colleagues and experience for succeeding in the diverse workforce.

Parallel to my oldest brother’s experiences, my middle brother also struggled early on in school. My parents purposely enrolled him in pre-k, a supplementary year of learning, so that he would be better prepared for kindergarten. Throughout middle school, high school, and college, he constantly advocated for himself in order to gain the proper accommodations he needed to perform on the same level as everyone else in his classes. He clearly manifests a success story of a dyslexic student, one who became valedictorian of his college class and a knowledgeable certified public accountant and certified valuation analyst. Both of my brothers remained in schools not specifically designated for learning disabled students. For two other dyslexic students, the situations could have been completely different. My brothers’ successes are just two examples of the positive effects of inclusion.

However, not all learning disabled students achieve success in an inclusive setting. Many of the students at The Odyssey School previously attended alternative schools, but the rapid academic pace, high social pressures, and/or lack of individualized tutoring thwarted their attempts to succeed. Odyssey, one of just two schools in Baltimore that specializes in teaching
dyslexic students, prides itself on its multisensory approach to teaching and skilled faculty who adapt the curriculum to tailor each individual student’s strengths and weaknesses. During my interview with Head of School, Marty Sweeney, she commented that “the beauty of having students with dyslexia in a separate setting is that there is great understanding, empathy, tolerance and encouragement on hand in every activity and lesson every day” (Sweeney). Generally, Odyssey students show gradual, yet immense improvement in all areas of education. Once the students feel that they have attained the proper skills necessary to succeed in a conventional school, they leave Odyssey and transfer to a mainstream school.

My mother currently tutors students at Odyssey in reading, writing, & typing. As opposed to an average public school class size of between 30 and 35 students, at Odyssey, the average class size is nine students. Additionally, each student receives fifty minutes of daily tutoring. These tutoring sessions usually involve one teacher paired with one to two students. The individualized tutoring not only supplements the learning that occurs in the slightly larger classroom, but also engages the students in an open, comfortable environment.

One of my mother’s students came to Odyssey feeling rejected and worthless. She had already attended two other schools, where she was ridiculed for her deficiencies in reading and writing, and was met with harsh criticism from fellow students and teachers alike. The young fourth grader came to Odyssey with a low self-esteem and walked with a gait of despair. At first, my mother found it quite difficult to engage her with a stimulating book or ask her to participate in a fluid conversation. After just one year of intensive, one-on-one tutoring, her phonological skills, comprehension, and fluency have greatly improved. In two more years, she will be able to leave Odyssey confidently, carrying with her newfound academic and organizational skills and
the ability to advocate for herself. This is just one example of a sentiment shared by many students at The Odyssey School.

Professionals who teach at schools such as Odyssey argue that educational practices currently implemented in most conventional schools are insufficient in catering to a learning disabled student. Janice Baker and Naomi Zigmond, authors of many publications in Sage: The Journal of Special Education, contend that fundamental changes should occur so that a school-wide reform effort, one that would attempt to integrate learning disabled students into a regular classroom, can take place. Studies conducted in kindergarten through fifth grade classes demonstrated that “fundamental changes in instruction are necessary for the regular education initiative to work” (Baker). Baker’s claim, however, rests upon the questionable assumption that these changes would definitely produce an increase in the success rate of learning disabled students. Teachers in a typical middle school classroom already have to manage approximately twelve to thirty-two students, depending on the type of school and class. These students’ academic abilities can range greatly, in addition to their behavioral and overall attitudes toward learning. Imagine that on top of this, the teacher would have to provide specialized attention to one individual student with major learning differences, thus distracting him or herself from teaching the rest of the students.

Randy Lee Comfort, an expert author on subjects relating to the unconventional child, suggests that if a teacher detects a child’s misunderstanding, then it would be beneficial for the teacher to “take the child aside” and discuss the issue at hand (Comfort 116). Although I agree with Randy Comfort that specialized attention is beneficial for that individual student, I cannot accept his overall appeal that this method would be successful in a traditional classroom setting.
This individualized attention would take away time from the rest of the class, consequently diminishing the learning experience for the remaining students.

Addressing specific needs in a large classroom might also cause frustration amongst children who learn in a conventional way. A special education consultant, Dr. Michael Farrell, works with universities, parents, schools, and students to assuage their concerns about the effects of learning disabilities. According to Farrell, in order for students with learning disabilities to be able to benefit from education, teachers must be willing to “adapt [the curriculum] to suit the children’s needs” (Farrell 60). Consequently, however, the non-learning disabled children will then be deprived of the normal curriculum. The Odyssey School admits that “students with dyslexia do not fit easily into traditional educational categories” and therefore would benefit from being immersed in an “individually structured academic program” (Odyssey). A second student and parent consultant, Gladys Burke, has worked tirelessly for the past fifteen years as an advocate for learning disabled students. Burke conducted a study which profiled six successful young adults who possess learning disabilities. From the results of her study, she proves that learning disabled students should receive sessions during their schooling that would make them more aware of their disabilities. These sessions, taught by professionals in the field, would be required courses for those with learning disabilities (Burke). Is it ethical to ask regular schools to provide the resources for these sessions? Is it appropriate for teachers to take away time from other classes in order to lead these sessions?

From the evidence provided, it is clear that there are advantages and disadvantages to both inclusion and self-contained education programs. However, as seen by the examples of learning disabled students in both settings, some succeed in one approach while others thrive in the other system. Therefore, professionals would be restricting a student’s possibilities were they
to make a blanket statement such as: “all learning disabled students should be placed in inclusion programs” or “all learning disabled students perform better in individualized settings.” As understood from the multiple definitions of learning disabilities, the phrase includes a wide variety of causes and manifestations. Thus, placement should be decided on a case by case basis. It is also crucial to recognize that the studies cited in this paper only represent small groups of people that represent specific demographics. Therefore, while they may make valid conclusions based on the people in their studies, they cannot make general inferences about the rest of the population. Lastly, being immersed in an inclusion program does not mean that these students cannot receive private, outside tutoring sessions. Likewise, students in self-contained programs still have opportunities to interact with non-learning disabled people through extracurricular activities. Accordingly, one should not argue for one type of learning without mentioning other factors that might be involved.

When considering a school for their children, parents must take into account many factors including private school vs. public school, tuition, location, academics, school size, class size, and extracurricular activities. The most crucial factors, however, should be where the child will be academically challenged within his or her range, socially accepted, and welcomed into an open and friendly environment which encourages questioning. Sweeney believes that “the best placement for individual children must be driven by their individual circumstances. Each case should be considered on its own with careful attention being placed on individual strengths and needs” (Sweeney). I agree that placement should be determined on an individual basis, a point that needs emphasizing since so many people argue in a general manner for inclusion or self-contained programs. In fact, parents should first consider their children’s needs, and subsequently place the children in the school that will best meet those needs.
Both inclusion and self-contained programs have their own advantages and disadvantages. If a student is placed in an inclusion program, he or she will benefit from conventional social settings, but might require outside tutoring sessions. If a student is enrolled in a self-contained system, he or she will surely receive much individual attention, but will lack experience for diverse situations that he or she might encounter later on in life. One major factor that should be considered when picking a school is the availability of accommodations. Since learning disabled students have learning differences, while accomplishing the same end goal, they may need to attain different means of achieving that goal. Dana Ortiz, a Title I teacher in Philadelphia explains that a learning disabled student may require the “use of a computer, reading aloud of directions, and extended time for tests/assignments” (Ortiz). To this day, my brothers must advocate for themselves in order to receive accommodations for such tests at the MCATs, GREs, and CPAs.

When parents enroll their children in schools, they essentially relinquish their abilities to protect their children, and place the great responsibility of education on the hands of the school administration. While some parents assume an active role in their children’s education, others merely sit back and trust that the combination of the school’s teaching and the student’s learning will accomplish this great task. Parents must realize the importance of their children’s schooling. They cannot simply drive them to school in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon. Instead, in order to provide the most optimal learning experience, parents should check on their children’s progress, encourage success with positive reinforcement, and take every opportunity to teach important lessons in the home. Ultimately, what is at stake here is the future success of America’s students. Without the strong base of a reliable, rigorous, and thorough education, students will not experience success in the workforce.
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