

# A Fourth Generation of Inclusive Education: A Commentary

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## Abstract

Special education as an organized, legislatively mandated entity is roughly 50 years old in many parts of the world. Most schools around the world continue to struggle to provide inclusive education for students with disabilities, sharing common barriers and experiencing their own unique barriers. This commentary discusses international initiatives that have focused on inclusive education and proposes a fourth generation of inclusive practices that align with worldwide changes in the education system.

## Keywords

inclusion, special education, whole-school interventions, access to the general curriculum

Special education (or, as used in a few of the papers in this special issue, special needs education) as an organized, legislatively mandated entity is roughly 50 years old in many parts of the world, acknowledging that so-called “ungraded” classrooms emerged in the earliest decade of the 20th century and that there were efforts to educate children with disabilities throughout the 20th century. Still, most countries did not have legislative support that guaranteed that students with disabilities were provided, as it is worded in the U.S. federal special education law, a free appropriate public education. The rise of special education for students with disabilities was the result of, among numerous factors, the actions of parents and parent-initiated lawsuits, the rising disability rights and independent living movements, and by changing understandings of disability.

I entered the field of special education as an undergraduate in 1978 and as a public school special educator in 1980, so my career has spanned much of that history. And, for the entire time that I have been in the field, there have been conversations, arguments, and initiatives focused on educating students with disabilities in general education. Beginning with the mainstreaming movement in the 1970s and 1980s, to the Regular Education Initiative in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the integration movement in the 1990s, and into the access to the general education movement and the inclusion movements in the 1990s and onward, schools have struggled to find ways to educate children with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.

As I began to become familiar with the special education systems and practices in countries outside my own, I became aware that there were two seemingly contradictory truths about the international special education system: First, we

are all dealing with basically the same problems in our efforts to include students; and, second, because of cultural, societal, economic, and a myriad of other factors, we are all dealing with fundamentally different problems in our efforts to include students with disabilities. I think the papers in this special issue very effectively document both truths. Any person involved in the special education system in any country will recognize some of the same problems and barriers (and successes, I should add) in each of the countries highlighted in this issue and, as I did, they will learn something unique about such efforts in each respective country.

That, internationally, we share common problems and have a common understanding of the goal is due in large measure to two U.N. initiatives that some readers of *Remedial and Special Education* in the United States may not recognize. The first, the *Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and a Framework for Action* was a result of the World Conference on Special Needs Education sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that was held in Salamanca, Spain, in June of 1994. The Salamanca Declaration (which can be seen in its entirety at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000098427>) emphasized the importance of inclusive education for all children. Among the resulting resolutions adopted at the World Congress were:

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- The reaffirmation of the signature countries' commitments to Education for All, recognizing the necessity and urgency of providing education for children, youth, and adults with special educational needs within the regular education system.
- The beliefs that every child has a fundamental right to education and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning; that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs; that education systems should be designed and educational programs implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs; and that children with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting these needs; that regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all.

Among other actions, the Salamanca Declaration called on governments to:

- Give the highest policy and budgetary priority to improve their education systems to enable them to include all children regardless of individual differences or difficulties.
- Adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise.
- Develop demonstration projects and encourage exchanges with countries having experience with inclusive schools.

The Salamanca Declaration was a significant driver for inclusive education across the world. The second major United Nations effort to influence the inclusive education movement was the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in December 2006. Article 24 of the CRPD, which focuses on Education, was a further catalyst for many countries to adopt policies and practices of inclusive education. Article 24 stated that:

In realizing this right (e.g., the right of all children with disabilities to education), States Parties shall ensure that:

- Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability.

- Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality, and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.
- Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided.
- Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education.
- Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion (as cited in Wehmeyer & Patton, 2017, pp. 342–343).

In 2017, my colleague Jim Patton and I edited the three-volume *Praeger International Handbook of Special Education*. We used the CRPD to provide a template for authors from 74 countries, municipalities, or provinces/states to describe their public and private general and special education systems. After reading all the entries, we concluded that in every country, the entry author(s) had articulated an understanding of the right of children with disabilities to a free and compulsory primary education. That is not an insignificant statement. Essentially it is true that across the globe governments and schools recognize the critical importance of educating children with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.

In most nations covered in these volumes, this extended into secondary education, although not for all. It was also clear that most of these nations were still working to meet aspects of the CRPD's stipulations. There were, however, many examples of how countries have provided access to an inclusive, quality, and free primary and secondary education on an equal basis with other students; how reasonable accommodations and supports within general education had been provided; and how to maximize academic and social development of students with disabilities.

I think the same holds true for the papers in this special issue. What was also clear from these papers and the entries in the *Praeger International Handbook of Special Education* was that the challenges to solving the problems to include all students identified were complex. For many nations, economic difficulties and poverty are significant barriers to educating all children, much less providing inclusive education for children with disabilities. The World Health Organization's (WHO) first World Report on Disability (World Health Organization, 2011) estimated that there were 93 million children under 15 years of age living with disabilities across the globe, with 13 million of these children living with more extensive impairments to functioning. A 2015 UNESCO report titled "Education for All 2000-2015" estimated that 90% of children with disabilities in the developing world do not have access to school. The WHO and UNESCO reports

showed that, among children with disabilities who have a lack of or inadequate access to education, a disproportionate percentage are girls and young women.

The papers in this special issue also illustrate the simple truth that culture and society matter when implementing inclusive education. These papers, and the entries in the *Praeger International Handbook of Special Education*, showed that there are creative, culturally-appropriate, and societally-valued ways to implement inclusive education. They also illustrate the barriers to doing so, from economic and financial to attitudinal and systemic. One of the things that we all have learned over the past 50 years is that it is substantially more difficult to dismantle existing systems than to build new ones. Despite the mainstreaming, REI, integration, and inclusive education movements in the United States, for example, we still have fundamentally the same two-tiered separate system that was in place with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed in 1975. The most recent report to Congress on the implementation of IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2022) found that 66% of all children with disabilities ages 5 through 21 spent 80% or more of their day in regular class settings. That is up from about 47% in the 2000 to 2001 school year, so that is worth celebrating. It is worse for some students, however. The same report indicated that only 17.9% of children with intellectual disability ages 5 through 21 spent 80% or more of their day in regular class settings. In the 1992 version of the same report, 7.11% of students with (what is now referred to as) intellectual disability ages 5 through 21 spent 80% or more of their day in regular class settings (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). Over a 30-year period, that is a change of only 10%. My experiences have been, and several of the papers in this special issue mention that supporting students with the most extensive support needs in general education settings remains a challenge around the world.

One of the truths recognized across the world over the past two decades was that by focusing only on “where” children with disabilities were educated, we were addressing only part of the problem. Thus, efforts in Universal Design for Learning, Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports, Response to Intervention, and schoolwide adaptations were focused on ensuring that students had access to the general education curriculum. Such access is best gained, of course, in the general education classroom. Furthermore, I think it is noteworthy that the general idea of “inclusiveness” is now embedded in efforts to promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB).

Several of the authors of the papers in this issue mentioned that the lack of an agreed-upon definition of inclusion has limited progress. That is an issue that has been around for as long as efforts to promote inclusion have been around, but in my opinion, the prongs of diversity, equity, and belonging speak to what is meant by inclusion.

So, how do we move forward? First, it is important not to minimize the significant barriers raised by poverty, classism, racism, ableism, sexism, and other societal and systemic injustices to the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education. The work of including students with disabilities in general education must necessarily be part of the work to address all these barriers. And time has taught us that this cannot just be the work of special educators. When it is, general educators, administrators, and others perceive it as a special education problem and not an education problem.

For too long, our focus in including students has been too narrow. I have written previously about three generations of inclusive practices. In the first generation, covering the mainstreaming, REI, and integration movement, the focus was on getting students with disabilities physically into classrooms with their non-disabled peers. The system when I entered the classroom as a student teacher in 1979 was decidedly segregated. I do not recall any efforts at that time to include students with disabilities in general education settings. I also do not remember seeing any students with disabilities in any of my classrooms when I was in high school from 1973 to 1976. My experiences were not unique, I believe.

I would also note that the special education system as it was implemented in the United States was a segregated, separate system not because there was an evidence base that showed that this was the most effective means of providing special education services, but simply because we, as a nation, had always segregated people with disabilities and we had no other model to emulate. It is true that by 1975, when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed in the United States, there was more of an emphasis on community-based systems of supports, but even those were still mainly segregated. In the field of intellectual disability, where I have spent my career, the census (e.g., total population) of people with intellectual disability who resided in state-run institutions did not even peak until 1979, and the then-nascent community-based services system focused on moving people from institutions to group homes, the latter of which were in many ways just smaller institutions. The special education system in 1975 was set up with self-contained classes and separate campuses because that was just how we had always done it.

Once some students were receiving their education within regular education settings with their non-disabled peers, there was a need to figure out how to teach those students in those inclusive settings. That second generation of inclusive practices developed and refined the practices that are widely used today. These practices include differentiated instruction, co-teaching, universal design for learning, collaborative teaming, scaffolding, direct or explicit instruction, chunking, graphic organizers, and so forth. Our knowledge of many of these strategies from

research is limited, but all-in-all, this generation of inclusive practices got the field focused on what I think was intended in IDEA, which has always defined “special education” as “specially designed instruction.” The second generation of inclusion focused on just that . . . specially designed instruction.

With a focus on promoting access to the general education curriculum emerging as part of school reform initiatives in the late 1990s, efforts to include students shifted from how and where students with disabilities were educated, but to the “what” of educating students, introducing a third generation of inclusive practices. The third generation focused on what students were taught, curriculum mastery, and emphasized that all students should be involved with and progress in a challenging curriculum receiving high-quality instruction. I think the emphasis of the third generation of inclusive practices was best captured in the 2017 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County* ([https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/16pdf/15-827\\_0pm1.pdf](https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/16pdf/15-827_0pm1.pdf)) that every child can and should receive an appropriately ambitious education that considers each child’s potential for growth.

However, over the past two decades, there have been changes in general education that necessitate a fourth generation of inclusive practices, and this is a good time to make a general statement about progress in inclusion. That is, incrementalism—which refers to the process of creating change through small, discrete steps as opposed to large jumps—as a policy and practice to achieve inclusive education—has failed (Wehmeyer & Kurth, 2021). Efforts to implement inclusive education have almost overwhelmingly been incremental: the implementation of a pilot program here, adjusting the language in existing laws there, and so forth. The Salamanca Declaration and Article 24 of the CRPD are not equivocal about what needs to happen . . . we need to provide quality, inclusive education for all children. The timing to make dramatic and lasting changes is good in that the field of education itself is undergoing significant changes. This opens the door for people seeking to implement inclusive education around the world to go beyond incrementalism and attempt to create systems that support all learners to be successful.

Jenny Kurth and I (Wehmeyer & Kurth, 2021) identified several characteristics of fourth-generation inclusive education that can provide a direction for future efforts.

- Inclusive education must be strengths-based. Despite a general agreement that children with disabilities can and should be educated in general education settings, far too many people engaged in education around the world continue to view disability within a deficit model. That viewpoint is what most of our systems were modeled on and it leads to low expectations and segregation. Inclusive education in the 21st century

must embrace strengths-based approaches that are derived from social and social-ecological models of disability that presume capacity and ability and that shift the focus of education from building programs based upon the students’ type of disability or level of impairment to identifying supports that enable all students to be successful. We must listen to leaders in the disability rights and advocacy movement and begin to build systems based on a thorough understanding of what each student does well, what that student is passionate about and values, and what is meaningful to that student.

- Inclusive education must emphasize supports. As noted, historic models of special education have created programs to serve students with disabilities that were based upon the type, intensity, or severity of the students’ impairments or diagnosis. Strengths-based approaches to education emphasize individualized, personalized supports that account for student preferences, interests, and abilities. Supports are resources and strategies that enhance personal functioning (Thompson et al., 2009) and “promote the development, education, interests, and personal well-being of a person and that enhance individual functioning” (Luckasson et al., 2002, p. 151). Supports refer to anything that enables a person to function successfully, participate in society, pursue meaningful goals, and live self-determined lives. We spend an inordinate amount of time and money in education administering measures and assessments, often aimed at quantifying deficits and creating programs based upon those deficits. We have measures of support needs and models of planning for personalized education, and it is time we integrate them into education to spend as much time and money to identify supports that are based on student interests, abilities, and strengths and use that information to design a personalized education (Kern & Wehmeyer, 2021; Wehmeyer & Zhao, 2020).
- Inclusive education must be schoolwide. My colleague at the University of Kansas, Wayne Sailor, made a point on one of the projects that we were working together on in the early 2000s that has influenced my thinking since. Wayne observed that by placing the onus for inclusion primarily on teachers in individual classroom and using that as the focus for determining the success or failure of inclusion, we, as a system, missed the point that teachers, students, and classrooms are part of a larger system within a school, and that the focus for examining the impact of and promoting inclusive practices should be at the school level. In their 2005 article *Rethinking Inclusion: Schoolwide Applications*, published in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Wayne and his coauthor noted a



number of guiding principles and critical features of schoolwide models:

- General education guides all student learning.
- All school resources are configured to benefit all students.
- Schools address social development and citizenship forthrightly.
- Schools are democratically organized, data-driven, problem-solving systems.
- Schools have open boundaries in relation to their families and communities.
- Schools enjoy district support for understanding an extensive systems-change effort (Sailor & Roger, 2005, pp. 506–508).
- Inclusive education emphasizes personalized learning. Personalized learning is “an approach in which the instructional approach, outcomes, content, activities, pace, tools, and supports are customized for each individual learners’ needs” (Basham et al., 2015, p. 10). The National Center on Learning Disabilities (2018) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature in personalized learning and concluded that:

A theme that consistently emerged was that personalized learning requires students to make good choices about their learning, assert their needs and pursue their goals in order to be successful. These skill sets are vital for all learners, but they are especially important for students with disabilities. Yet these skills are not frequently taught to students, an omission that harms those who need these skills the most (p. 2).

My colleague, Yong Zhao (2018) forwarded four features of what he calls personalizable education as a means to refocus personalized learning on the student: agency, shared ownership, flexibility, and value creation. *Agency* refers to being an actor in one’s life, rather than being acted upon and is closely aligned with the notion of self-determination. *Shared ownership* empowers students to become co-designers of their education. *Flexibility* refers to a mindset that “believes in the value of change and that plans, no matter how carefully thought out, will always have unexpected disruptions and/or outcomes that require change” (Zhao, 2018, p. 64). It involves the creation of learning communities and environments that are “driven by learner’s curiosity, teach students to be problem designers, pose problems in which students can be actively involved, and structure schools where learning is about taking risks and a lifelong venture . . . in which adults believe children will exceed all expectations (Fullan et al., 2018, p. 14). Finally, *value creation* involves

“harnessing student skills pertaining to agency, the flexibility within education to innovate, and the communities built by shared ownership of schooling to ensure that what students create has meaning to them and to others and gives it purpose” (Wehmeyer & Kurth, 2021, p. 67).

- Inclusive education requires self-determined learning. Over the past few decades, promoting the self-determination of students with disabilities has become the best practice, worldwide, in the education of learners with disabilities. That this is the case for all students, disabled or not, would seem to have been validated by the fact that when the COVID pandemic forced schools to shut down in 2020, a great many students were unsuccessful in remote schooling because they lacked the skills to self-determine learning. Self-determination refers to self-caused action. Wehmeyer and Zhao (2020) identify self-determined education as incorporating these elements:
  - Teaching starts with the children’s passion and talent. Teachers create opportunities for individual students, help individual students pursue their interest and enhance their abilities, and help students identify and access resources from within and outside the school.
  - Teachers become masterful life coaches who help students identify and achieve personal learning goals, to inspire students to have high aspirations, to explore possibilities, to try out their ambitions, and to learn about their strengths and weaknesses.
  - Teachers work collaboratively in a community. They do not teach a group of students in isolated classrooms but work with individual students as consultants in areas in which they are experts and about which they are passionate.
  - Teachers are community organizers and project leaders. Self-determined learning does not mean students always learn alone. Instead, very often students learn through authentic projects that involve other students (p. 68).

## Conclusions

In our book *Inclusive Education in a Strengths-Based Era: Mapping the Future of the Field*, Jenny Kurth and I (Wehmeyer & Kurth, 2021) concluded that “inclusive education is not an idea whose time has come. It is an idea whose time came fifty years ago, but for which the field had no model for its implementation” (p. 69). In thinking about this statement, I now wonder if it fully communicated what we intended. Perhaps we should have stated that inclusive

education is an idea for which the field has had difficulty implementing at scale. We have a litany of practices derived from second- and third-generation inclusive practices, from differentiated instruction to co-teaching, that have been introduced, evaluated, and to more or lesser degrees, implemented to varying degrees of success.

I have come to believe that part of the problem is that although we do not state it as such, we continue to treat “inclusive education” as if it were a program to implement. I have tried to make the point in this commentary that we need to quit viewing inclusive education as a special education only initiative, but I think we need to go beyond just that. The questions we need to address are how to ensure that inclusive education settings are profitable—academically and socially—for *all* students and what practices can lead to inclusive education for all. As to the former, there is clear evidence that students with and without disabilities benefit socially and academically in high-quality inclusive settings (Wehmeyer & Kurth, 2021). And, really, the answer(s) to the second question—how do we do this?—must ensure positive benefits for all students, so by answering the second question we should also answer the first question.

Ultimately, inclusive education must be the goal for every student and not just students with disabilities. That is, I think, the crux of the fourth generation of inclusive practices . . . it is not a special education initiative but is just high-quality education for all students. I believe that the ideas presented by Yong Zhao (2018) around personalizable education provide a path to making this happen. For one, Zhao is not a special educator and his ideas around personalizable education pertain to general education students and, ultimately, all students (e.g., Wehmeyer & Zhao, 2020).

Zhao (2015) made the following recommendations with regard to educational excellence “for the new age” of education (p. 133):

- We must stop prescribing and imposing on children a narrow set of content through common curriculum standards and testing and begin personalizing education to support the development of unique, creative, and entrepreneurial talents.
- We must stop fixing solely the teaching force by selecting, training, and retaining better teacher candidates. This approach takes too long. We must start empowering children by liberating their potentials, capitalizing on their passion, and supporting their pursuits. We need to start giving the ownership of learning to the students.
- We must stop constraining children to learning opportunities present in their immediate physical environments by assigning them to classes and teachers and

start engaging them in learning opportunities that exist in the global community, beyond their class and school walls.

- We must stop forcing children to learn what adults think they may need and testing them to what degree they have mastered the required content and start allowing children the opportunity to engage in creating authentic products and learn what they are interested in, just in time, not just in case.
- We must stop benchmarking to measures of excellence in the past, such as international test scores, and start inventing the excellence of the future (Zhao, 2015, pp. 133–134).

I believe that the seismic changes in education across the globe provide an opportunity for the type of changes that need to occur to move efforts to include *all* children in high-quality education and that with elements from all four generations of inclusive practices that we do, indeed, know how to get this done. What is required is the will to do so. We should hold the standards of Article 24 of the CRPD not as an aspirational goal, but as what is baseline for every student, school, family, and district with regard to inclusive, high-quality education.

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