

# Inclusive Special Education: What Do We Mean and What Do We Want?

Remedial and Special Education

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## Abstract

The United States will soon recognize the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Considering the past 50 years in special education, we organized this special issue of *Remedial and Special Education* focused on inclusive education of students with disabilities in international contexts. Just as a broad array of educators in the US have grappled with improving how the education system might most effectively include students with disabilities, educational leaders in various countries across the globe have been addressing the same question: How can we design inclusive education for students with disabilities that effectively meets their needs? The manuscripts included in this special issue represent five countries—India, Japan, Norway, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea. Each paper presents background on the inclusion of students with disabilities within the focus country and highlights recent advances in and proposes next steps for policy, practice, and research. Collectively, we hope the issue expands readers' thinking about what special education could be, encourages our community to set specific goals for our next 'milestone anniversary,' and ignites conversations about the specific steps we need to accomplish our goals.

## Keywords

inclusion, special education, legal/policy issues

The United States will soon recognize the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA; U.S. Congress, 1975)—reauthorized as the current Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; U.S. Congress, 2004). Discussions around how to best include individuals with disabilities in schools and society have long been part of family and community decision making. However, 1975 marked a significant threshold when legislation recognized that individuals with disabilities had rights that provided them with an appropriate public education.

1975 can be marked as the birthyear of the current model of special education in the United States—one in which individuals with disabilities were included in public education. For context, this same year saw the Watergate affair strain the US model of democracy, Gates and Allen cleverly combine “microcomputer” and “software” to create a world changing company, and Currey and Sarandon push cultural norms and launch a cult classic. Oh. And, this year also gave us Pop Rocks—a candy that is still exciting kids all these years later.

Fifty. That's a big one. While *SNL*'s Sally O'Malley may have been unafraid to hide her age with her kicks and stretches, for many of us, half a century represents a major

life milestone that commonly prompts soul-searching, reflection, and an occasional mid-life crisis.

In a recent Atlantic piece titled *How to Be Your Best Despite the Passing Years*, Arthur C. Brooks (2024) suggests that instead of fretting over these milestones, we should be “looking ahead with hope and setting specific, positive goals.” He recommends reflecting on how you envision your life at the next milestone and then creating a small number of positive, intrinsic goals and thinking about practical ways to attain them.

Perhaps Brooks's advice is apropos for those of us in the field of special education in the United States as we look forward to the future of educating and including individuals with disabilities. What have we gotten right? Where did we miss the mark? Who can we learn from? How do we

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improve? Answers to these questions may serve as guidance for the next reauthorization of IDEA which is expected in the next few years.

Considering the past 50 years in special education, we organized this special issue of *Remedial and Special Education* focused on inclusive education of students with disabilities in international contexts. Just as a broad array of educators in the United States have grappled with improving how the education system might most effectively include students with disabilities, educational leaders in various countries across the globe have been addressing the same question: How can we design inclusive education for students with disabilities that effectively meets their needs? Each education system sits within a specific context that is influenced by culture, ideology, politics, economics, and religion. Thus, each country's approach to educating students with disabilities varies across multiple important dimensions. We believe it is from this variability that we may learn from one another.

Many countries, spurred on by the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD; United Nations, 2006) and broader social desires to enhance societal inclusion of people with disabilities, have devoted substantial effort to the design, implementation, and improvement of their countries' education systems—often guided by legislation—so that students with disabilities would benefit from an inclusive education. With technological advances and greater global connectedness, we have greater access to understand the specifics, nuances, and lessons learned as inclusion for individuals with disabilities is embraced as an international challenge. This special issue offers an opportunity for us to reflect as a global community with the aim of ensuring students with disabilities have access to high quality, effective, inclusive special education.

The manuscripts included in this special issue represent five countries—India, Japan, Norway, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea. Each paper presents background on the inclusion of students with disabilities within the focus country and highlights recent advances in and proposes next steps for policy, practice, and research. We are grateful to the authors for their important contributions. These papers are followed by commentaries from two respected leaders in the field of special education—Drs. Doug Fuchs and Michael Wehmeyer—who offer two unique reflections on the state of inclusive special education. Collectively, we hope the issue expands readers' thinking about what special education could be, encourages our community to set specific goals for our next “milestone anniversary,” and ignites conversations about the specific steps we need to accomplish our goals.

If you agree that this is a good time to reflect and set future goals for special education, we believe there are at

least three questions to consider as you engage with the included papers.

## What Do We Mean by “Inclusive Special Education”?

One challenge in any major undertaking is agreeing upon definitions of key terms. It is difficult to imagine accomplishing the common goals of “inclusive special education” when individuals involved do not share an understanding of the definition of “inclusion.” This challenge was apparent when special education in the United States was still in its teens, with Fuchs and Fuchs (1994) identifying the fact that “*inclusion* means different things to people who wish different things from it” (p. 299). Some believe that *full inclusion*—whereby all students with disabilities are placed in general education settings all of the time—is the only acceptable (perhaps ethical) approach to special education. Others believe that *inclusion* is based on whether students are integrated in general education settings in ways that optimize their academic and behavioral outcomes. Thus, for these individuals, inclusion is more nuanced and specific to individual students. Few dispute that the primary goal of inclusion is that students with disabilities are to be educated alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. The critical issue debated is whether this means that students with disabilities are placed in general education classes even if their academic and social needs are inadequately met. Given individual student needs, there may be good reasons for some students to spend some time in settings outside of the general education classroom.

A primary reason for these differing views of inclusion appears to stem from the disparate goals of advocates representing students with high-incidence disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities) compared with low-incidence disabilities (e.g., intellectual disabilities; see Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994, for a review). However, it is apparent that each definition leads to different goals and different metrics by which success is evaluated. Across the five countries featured in this special issue (and in the United States), vague definitions and unclear outcomes have contributed to inefficiencies, confusions, and delayed progress.

Moving forward will require some level of agreement on the goals of inclusive education for students with disabilities. Perhaps the most essential set of questions revolves around whether “place”—where students are educated—matters more than whether students' educational and behavioral goals are optimally served. Do outcomes matter more? Which outcomes—academic and social goals during school? Post-secondary outcomes related to independence, employment, and life satisfaction? Does it depend on the type of disability a student has? Does it depend on what the individual student and their family members want?

## What Makes Special Education Special?

Zigmond and Kloo (2011) highlighted 10 major ways that general and special education are different from one another and they argued that these two systems should remain different from one another to best serve students with disabilities. Notably, the authors concluded that this different approach to education is exactly what advocates and parents fought for and won through IDEA—unlike other civil rights legislation, the goal was not to be provided the same as everyone else, it was to get something that was individualized and effective. What makes this approach to education special, according to Zigmond (2001), “is, first and foremost, instruction focused on individual need. It is carefully planned. It is intensive, urgent, relentless, and goal-directed. It is empirically supported practice, drawn from research” (p. 73). And, recent work presents promising data on the effectiveness of special education (O’Hagan & Stiefel, 2024).

Many hope that general education can do all of this—or, at least that all of this can be done in a general education classroom with special education supports. However, we believe this assertion does not align with the reasons that special education was created in the first place. As Craparo (2003) stated, “Forcing all children into one classroom is just as problematic as forcing all students into separate classrooms” (p. 524). Within the U.S. system of providing education to students with disabilities is the essential notion of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), considered a key tenet of special education. The term, embedded in IDEA, requires that students with disabilities be educated with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible. However, another important component of U.S. special education is the continuum of alternative placements (see Kauffman et al., 2023). The idea here is that not all needs can be adequately or efficiently addressed in the general education classroom for every student. We do not go to a general practitioner for all of our health needs. If we have a complicated or elevated medical need, we seek out specialists who have received additional training and have additional expertise. Why should this be different in our education system? Do we really think it is possible for one placement to meet the diversity of needs that students with disabilities have?

## How Do We Prioritize the “Individuals” in IDEA?

In the United States, education has been a cornerstone of America society since our founding (Craparo, 2003). However, our education system largely excluded or did not identify students with disabilities until 1975. We have made incredible progress in terms of educating students with disabilities in public schools. However, we do have

improvements that need to be made. One path forward is to more deeply engage individuals with disabilities and their family members in research, policy, and practice. Shogren (2023) issued a call to action to ensure that individuals with disabilities (specifically, intellectual disabilities in her piece) are given access to the process of research, not only the product. As we move into the next half century, we should extend this focus and ensure that the desires, goals, and voices of individuals with disabilities, their family members, and their educators are more deeply integrated into our special education system. In the end, it is not the government policies that determine how special education is implemented in individual schools and classrooms. It is the educators and the families. The heart of special education is that the individual student is what matters—their educational and behavioral attainments are the markers for our success.

Given the recurring themes regarding the influence of cultural differences, bias, and other factors that influence decision making about inclusive supports across the articles included in this special issue, it is important to acknowledge the complexities of supporting individuals in systems that are shaped by systemic bias. This raises important questions. How do you center the individual when systems are not designed to think about prioritizing individuals with disabilities? What is the role of the system in changing conditions to ensure valued outcomes can be attained? How can we improve our system to ensure that students and family members do not, as too many currently do, feel as if they are an afterthought? What tools can we provide to family members and educators to enhance the role of students and families?

Seeking answers to these questions will provide guidance. However, individuals with disabilities, family members, educators, legislators, and researchers will need to build consensus on where we want our special education system to go in the next 50 years if we are to achieve the original intent of the 1975 plan for special education.

As we are well into our grand experiment in the United States, the words of one of our founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin, seem to fit . . . “I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined.” Yes. It is difficult. Yes. Progress is slower than we would like. Yet, we remain optimistic that together as a global community we can craft an education system and a society that is inclusive, that honors individuals with disabilities, and that helps each individual student achieve positive post-secondary outcomes.

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