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Inclusive Classrooms and Autistic Kids

Autism is known as Autism Spectrum Disorder and is defined as being a pervasive developmental delay. It is a mental condition that affects communication and interactions between the individual with autism and others. Symptoms appear in early childhood and are persistent throughout the individual's life, especially without treatment. Autism is commonly referred to as a spectrum disorder meaning that the degree of impairment can vary widely between persons (Anagnostou and Taylor). Where one person might be socially awkward, another might be so severely affected by autism that they are utterly dependent on others for their entire life. An inclusive classroom is one in which special education or autistic students are educated with their peers. It is all about looking at the ways our schools, classrooms, curriculum, and lessons are designed by teachers so that all children can participate in educational activities and learn. The general education teacher in an inclusive classroom will ensure that the students have reasonable accommodations and will re-teach as necessary. They will also help adapt materials to ensure the students understand the material and concepts that are being taught. This is usually done with a Special Education teacher who oversees and advocates for the autistic students. The inclusive educational approach must be made common for the reason that it offers great learning and intervention opportunities to autistic kids and their neurotypical peers and promote a sense of community alongside eradicating the short-comings of self-contained classrooms.

Inclusion is an educational approach, or it can also be declared as a philosophy that allows for an equal educational opportunity to all, resulting in equal social and academic accomplishments. The whole idea of inclusive education is based on the notion that all learners must be given equal learning opportunities, and they hold the right to be educated together. Such a setting can be done in age-appropriate schools where every student can take advantage of getting an education in mainstream schools. The inclusive environment allows parents and teachers to work collaboratively and to utilize the most appropriate resources to cater to the requirements of all the students. Before the h Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), children with autism or any disabilities were not allowed to attend public schools. Rather an educational approach that relied heavily on self-contained classrooms was adopted where they were taught a special curriculum in a separate setting. By the time this type of education was felt inadequate, and the need for appropriate education, especially in the least restrictive environment, was pragmatic. Inclusive classrooms for kids with ASD have the right to get an education in the least restrictive environment, and such a setting is essential to offer the same learning opportunities to all.

The inclusion of autistic kids in the classroom offers learning opportunities not only to them but also to their peers. They all learn life lessons pertaining to tolerance and acceptance to students without disabilities and without. This improves the social, behavioral, and academic skills of all children involved. Exposure to inclusion at a very early age of a child's life can enhance their skills to interact with others who are different than them and help teach them to accept others for who they are. They are able to identify different ways to deal with kids with disabilities, not only in the classroom but in social situations. They are able to develop a strong sense of self and acquire skills to help their autistic peers resulting in a boost to their self-esteem. They also adjust with the new learning and communication techniques that promote positive behaviors and a sense of collegiality across the classroom and school (Chandler‐Olcott and Kluth).

ASD students can practice skills with neuro-typical kids and can observe them and learn how to act and what's socially appropriate from watching their behavior. The ASD student is immersed in the world that will always be different than he is, but the expectations and demands of that world will always be there and may get more difficult to learn how to conform to as the student ages. In other words, a kid with ASD will have to learn how to conform to the world because it's rare that every situation in the world will conform to him. The sooner he is shown and taught what is expected of him, the easier it may be for him to adapt to the world around him. That said, being ASD in a classroom full of NTs can be very demanding, confusing, and stressful when no accommodations are being made to assist with the disability.

Children with autism, if placed in general education, are greatly benefited from the time they spend with neuro-typical kids. A wide number of researchers are in favor of including autistic kids in general classrooms, and they consider an inclusive classroom to be the perfect location for implementation of various behavioral and social interaction interventions. This is caused by the fact that an inclusive classroom offers an opportunity to interact with peers in a normal location. For most of the students, the general education classrooms are the least restrictive environment, and hence, school settings are proven to be perfect locations for such interventions. Studies prove that employing intervention strategies for students with autism, were helpful as they had the opportunity to interact with peers socially (Vander, Lindsay). One of the most imperative factors that determine the overall effectiveness of an intervention is authenticity, and inclusive classrooms allow a big room of generalization in true situations.

A piece of growing evidence supports the idea that is educating kids with ASD in inclusive settings and involving their neurotypical peers in the educational programs, throughout the "educational span" that is from preschoolers to postsecondary (Blazer). A lot of evidence also supports the efficacy of the programs in inclusive settings, such as Learning Experiences and Alternative Program (LEAP). This program also emphasizes on teaching peers on how to mediate with autistic kids. Since autism is a developmental delay, autistic kids must be taken into consideration. That is why IDEA mandated that kids diagnosed with ASD must be put in the inclusive settings, wherever possible. Teachers must have to adhere to the procedures and practices to ensure the successful inclusion of autistic kids in the normal educational settings. They may utilize individualized education plans to adhere to stipulations.

The social skills of both autistic and non-autistic kids are enhanced in an inclusive classroom. An inclusive classroom helps develop individual strengths. These classrooms often work on personal goals while contributing their knowledge and experiences with the other children in the classroom environment. The philosophy of respect is fostered when the kids with and without disabilities are together (Rotheram‐Fuller et al.). It is an opportunity for both types of kids to accept individual differences. It also reduces the impact of bullying and aggravation. Children can develop friendships with a wide variety of kids, and all are respected for their distinguished abilities and needs. Peer tutoring is often seen in an inclusive classroom. This allows students to help one another so that they can learn and participate in many meaningful ways. Besides assistance from their teachers, help from children their age produces optimal results. Inclusive classrooms create a typical life for autistic kids. They have friends, are accepted by their friends, and lead regular lives. On the other hand, it enhances the ability of children without disabilities to treat everyone equally and offers an opportunity to learn that everyone is equal.

It is observed by researchers that including kids with autism in a general classroom also helps their typical peers in several ways. Some of these benefits include, conceptions of literacy expand, valuing multiple ways of participating in class, and instructional planning is aimed at outcomes (Chandler‐Olcott and Kluth). Students have many opportunities to diversify their learning skills and abilities, experience the power of sign learning, and account for new learning technologies that autistic children may need to help them with life outside and inside the classroom. Inclusive classrooms are characterized by multiple ways of class participation and allow teachers to make modifications in the typical teaching techniques. Teachers act as facilitators and are constantly questioning students in these classrooms. This enables them to achieve context-specific results and allows students to have a sense of ownership.

Inclusive classrooms promote an equal opportunity to develop academic and educational skills to autistic kids. Each and every child gets equal rights and amenity to study a topic of his/her interest with no bias in the name of socio-economic class, physical or intellectual disability by ensuring appropriate alternate modes of accessing educational material are in place which can assist them in learning. Inclusive education starts with providing accessible school premises, to providing alternate modes of textbooks (Braille, epub, etc) for print disabled, allowing students to answer in formats other than writing (for people with locomotive disability) and evaluating people with intellectual disability on an individual scale of improvement vs the traditional marks and grades. As the student grows up, ensuring that they have equal access and when needed, positive discrimination to study a topic of their interest to excel in life.

The characteristics of inclusive learning environments are beneficial for both the kids with and without disabilities. In an inclusive classroom, no child is labeled, although the principal and special needs team knows about the child's needs and will do everything to cater to them quietly. Furthermore, the class teacher in such setting is also aware of the disabilities of all children in her or her classroom and ensures fairness. There is absolutely no stigma anywhere, not in the children, teachers, or support staff. No differential treatment, mostly because of the all-encompassing love, is shown by the adults (Nilholm and Alm). There is no pedestal for the teachers; they are just helpers and facilitators, all on a first-name basis. Children are free and even encouraged to go to teachers with any problem they may be facing, and teachers help as best as possible. One can actually feel the love, warmth, and happiness. It is pure joy to watch children with and without disabilities playing happily, compensating for and completing each other.

Inclusive classroom enhances learning abilities of autistic kids in many ways. Autism is also known as 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' for a reason - the range of severity of the condition is very wide and is manifested in many different ways. No two children with autism are alike, and though they may share traits typical of autism, they are still different. Having autism does not guarantee that they are going to be a savant, nor does it mean that they will have a low IQ. This means that autistic kids can excel in their studies. Therefore, teachers use differentiated teaching, as a rule, whether there are children with special needs or not. If and when required, the special needs child gets remedial help. Sometimes, children come in just for special education sessions and gradually, when appropriate, they are integrated with a suitable class. There are only exams that are modified for the child and no stressful learning. Children develop a joy for learning and progress according to their own pace. Schools also put a lot of emphasis on art, music, any and all extracurricular activities, and much more. Inclusive classrooms are generally non-formal, and everyone is extremely proud to have been part of such schools and districts that play a vibrant role in building such a compassionate society. Students with autism are able to obtain a great deal as learners by taking part in inclusive classrooms.

Autistic children feel to be part of society as they are able to attend schools with their neighbors, siblings, and other relatives. They feel a part of the community. The typical peers develop a sense of compassion and acceptance of people who are different from them. Studies suggest that inclusive classrooms are a great opportunity for students with disabilities to develop high-level social skills, and are full of opportunities to engage them in daily routine activities that provoke good academic performance (Gupta et al.). The environment of higher expectations lead them to gain more confidence and built a strong sense of self, and these benefits are continuously observed when they are involved in general education classrooms. It is also said that the autistic students in inclusive classrooms model appropriate social behavior in comparison with the students of special education class, they are more polite, more responsible, and behave better. Thus, the closer they are to grade level in academics, the closer they should be in social skills that they can learn from their grade-level peers. In theory, the further they are away in academics, the further they will be away in social skills and will need all of their skills taught in the special education classroom. These students will also be the students needing more speech and language and occupational therapy.

Alternate to the inclusive classrooms is a self-contained classroom, comprised of students whose intellectual, emotional, or behavioral disabilities make it difficult for them to participate in the "regular" curriculum of the school they attend.  Students in self-contained classrooms are educated daily according to goals written in their Individualized Education Plan.  The plan is written collaboratively by parents, teachers, and administrators under ideal circumstances. Students' progress towards these goals is recorded in the same way students in "regular" classes are assessed. As students master their academic objectives, new ones are incorporated into their Individualized Education Plan. A number of studies have examined the impact of self-contained classrooms in contrast with the inclusive classroom for the children diagnosed with any disability of ASD. One such study on developmental gains of preschoolers in both the classroom settings unearths facts in favor of inclusion.

Holahan and fellow inspected the developmental outcomes linked with services in inclusive and self-contained preschool classrooms (Holahan, and Virginia). The impacts of inclusion were examined on 15 pairs of kids matched for sequential age, functional level, attendance schedules, and other related services. The results revealed that kids functioning at the lower and social and emotional levels performed equally well in both the classroom settings, inclusive and self-contained. Yet, the kids functioning at a higher emotional and social level performed exceptionally well in the inclusive settings than in the self-contained settings. This comparative study amid preschoolers reveals that inclusive classrooms can be a great opportunity for the kids with ASD for their development as compared to the self-contained classrooms.

However, a number of scholars and researchers advocate for the special educational settings for the kids diagnosed with ASD or any other disorder. These advocates are of the view that inclusive settings mere allow for exposure, that alone is not enough to teach kids with special needs. These juveniles are seeking specially designed learning opportunities, structured lessons, and a specially designed learning style, where needs of learners ought to be prioritized. Distinguished academic needs, accommodations for learning styles, and sensory and social issues should all be considered. These classrooms may cater to a specific disability, say Autism Support Classrooms. Community issues, distraction-free learning environments, specially designed curriculum, and absence of behavioral support are a few factors that call for the self-contained settings for autistic kids. However, a study examining the efficacy of self-contained classrooms reports that these characteristics were not widely present in the self-contained settings (Causton, Julie, et al). This implies that the self-contained setting is not fulfilling the aim of their existence.

To sum up the discussion, inclusive education gives way for children to perceive the world how it is, to learn how to live in a society with different types of people and, what is the most important, realize that the world is diverse. It not only offers countless learning opportunities to students with disabilities, which enables them to be an important part of society but also teaches compassion, empathy, and understanding to the students without disabilities. The class environment in inclusive classrooms offers a free learning environment for both types of students. However, it is worth mentioning that this is immensely dependent on the teacher, how they conduct the class. Though it is a time taking task for the teachers to differentiate lesson plans to the needs of different groups, the best benefit is obtained from a methodology that is also a very cost-effective approach.

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