

Advancing Inclusion: A Systematic Overview of Special Education in the United States

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Abstract:

Special education in the United States has undergone significant evolution, shaped by legal mandates, pedagogical advancements, and societal shifts. This paper explores the current landscape of special education through a systematic review of relevant literature, focusing on the legal foundations, instructional strategies, inclusion practices, and recent challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the distinction between IEPs and 504 Plans, and the ongoing debate over inclusion versus segregation are discussed in depth. Emerging tools like Social Stories and differentiated instruction, as well as parental experiences during home-based learning, are examined. The findings underscore the importance of a rights-based, inclusive, and adaptable educational framework for all learners with disabilities in the United States.

Keywords: Special Education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Inclusive Education, Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Educational Equity

Introduction:

Special education in the United States is grounded in the democratic values of equity, access, and justice. Historically, children with disabilities were often excluded from formal education or institutionalized without adequate support. This began to change significantly with the enactment of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) in 1975, which established the right of every child to receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Streett, 2004). IDEA not only redefined the rights of students with disabilities but also catalyzed a transformation in the way public schools approached inclusion and special education services (Yell, 2015; Winzer, 1993).

Over time, the U.S. education system has evolved from segregated models to more inclusive frameworks. The transition from institutionalization to mainstreaming and, eventually, to full inclusion has influenced both educational policy and instructional practice. Teachers are now encouraged to adopt differentiated instruction strategies to accommodate diverse learners in general education settings (Connolly, Patterson, & Ritter, 2009). As Mackey (2014) and Hyunjeong et al. (2014) emphasize, educators' attitudes and preparedness significantly impact the success of inclusive classrooms, with cross-cultural studies revealing differences in belief systems and implementation strategies across countries.

Yet, the inclusive model presents ongoing pedagogical challenges. Many teachers express uncertainty or lack the training to support students with complex learning needs effectively. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the fragility of special education systems. During school closures, services were often interrupted, raising legal and ethical questions about access and equity (Gavin, 2020). Parents of children with special educational needs reported increased stress and lack of support as they were suddenly tasked with implementing educational programs at home (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020).

Despite these disruptions, innovative tools and strategies have emerged to bridge the gap between home and school. For example, social stories—visual and narrative tools that help children with autism understand social situations—have become increasingly relevant during times of change and uncertainty (Gray, 2015). Similarly, home-based skill-building resources focusing on daily living skills have empowered families to support independence in children with autism spectrum disorder (Hayek & McIntyre, 2019). These approaches underscore the importance of flexible, family-centered practices in special education.

This paper explores the historical development, legal foundations, and instructional practices shaping special education in the United States. It evaluates the impact of inclusive education, the role of differentiated instruction, and the effects of crisis events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. By analyzing parent experiences, teacher perspectives, and adaptive tools, this study highlights both persistent barriers and promising practices, offering insights for future reforms and more equitable service delivery.

Literature Review

Historical and Legal Foundations

Special education in the United States has undergone significant transformation over the past century, shaped by evolving legal frameworks, pedagogical paradigms, and shifting societal values. Rooted in democratic ideals of equity and justice, the special education system strives to provide meaningful educational opportunities for students with disabilities. The development of this system reflects an ongoing effort to dismantle exclusionary practices and ensure that all children, regardless of ability, have access to a free and appropriate public education.

The legal foundations of special education in the United States are anchored in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), originally passed in 1975 and reauthorized multiple times, most notably in 2004. IDEA defines a "child with a disability" under Section 300.8 as a student with one of several specified impairments that adversely affect educational performance, requiring specially designed instruction to meet their unique needs ("Sec. 300.8 Child with a Disability," n.d.). The statute guarantees key rights such as Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and placement in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), aiming to prevent the isolation and marginalization of students with disabilities (Streett, 2004; Yell, 2015).

Complementing IDEA is Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits discrimination based on disability in programs receiving federal funding. While IDEA offers an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for qualifying students, Section 504 provides accommodations through a 504 Plan for students who do not meet IDEA eligibility but still require support ("What is the Difference Between an IEP and a 504 Plan?", 2015). This legal duality ensures broader protection, although differences in scope and implementation have led to ongoing debates regarding equity and access.

According to Yell, Rogers, and Rogers (1998), the trajectory of special education law reflects a "long, strange trip," from the era of institutionalization to one of federal protections and mandated services. Winzer (1993, 2009) further traces this evolution, noting the shift from exclusion to integration and, more recently, to inclusion. Initially, students with disabilities were often segregated or denied education altogether. The recognition of their rights through court decisions and legislation marked a turning point in public education history (Lanear & Frattura, 2007; Mostert & Crockett, 2000). These legal developments provided the scaffolding for systemic change, grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which affirms the right to education for all individuals (United Nations, 1948).

From Integration to Inclusion

The distinction between integration and inclusion is central to understanding the current state of special education. Integration refers to placing students with disabilities in general education settings without necessarily modifying curriculum or instruction.

Inclusion, by contrast, involves full participation in the learning process through individualized support and accommodations (Rodriguez & Gil, 2014). This shift has profound implications for teacher preparation, school design, and educational outcomes.

Lipsky and Gartner (1999) assert that inclusive education is not merely a pedagogical approach but a moral imperative in a democratic society. They argue that segregated systems reinforce social inequalities, while inclusion fosters mutual understanding and respect. The National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (1995) similarly emphasizes the importance of systemic support for inclusive practices, such as collaborative teaching, flexible curricula, and ongoing professional development.

However, the path to inclusion has not been linear or uncontested. Fagan (1999) critiques the uneven implementation of inclusive practices, noting that ideological support often outpaces practical readiness. Teachers may lack the training or resources to effectively accommodate diverse learners in general education classrooms. Reddy (1999) echoes this concern, highlighting the need for reform initiatives that go beyond policy declarations to address classroom realities.

Pedagogical and Conceptual Debates

At the heart of special education lies the question: what makes special education "special"? Cook and Schirmer (2003) explore this in their analysis of instructional differentiation and individualized planning. They argue that special education's value lies not simply in placement, but in the nature of instruction tailored to the learner's unique profile. This perspective aligns with the emphasis in IDEA on specialized instruction rather than generic accommodations.

Despite the legal and theoretical advancements, significant challenges remain in reconciling inclusive ideals with practical implementation. According to Dixon, Vogel, and Tarbox (2012), the integration of functional behavior analysis and applied behavior analysis (ABA) into educational practices represents an evidence-based approach to supporting students with developmental disabilities, especially autism. Such methodologies provide teachers with

concrete strategies to address challenging behaviors and promote skill acquisition. However, their use also raises ethical and cultural questions, particularly around consent and the definition of “normal” behavior in diverse classrooms.

Moreover, the tension between individualization and standardization persists. Mostert and Crockett (2000) caution against losing sight of the historical context that shaped the current system, urging educators and policymakers to reclaim the original intent of special education—to provide justice, not just compliance. Winzer (2009) similarly calls for a nuanced understanding of inclusion that avoids both rigid segregation and tokenistic integration.

Inclusion, Reform, and Future Directions

Efforts to reform special education continue to be shaped by historical insights and evolving societal expectations. As Yell (2015) notes, the legal history of special education reveals a pattern of progress tempered by resistance, requiring constant vigilance to protect and advance students’ rights. Rodriguez and Gil (2014) argue that successful inclusion depends not only on laws but on attitudes, training, and systemic collaboration across educational stakeholders.

There is also growing recognition of the importance of intersectionality in special education. Lane and Frattura (2007) argue for “effective histories” that include the voices of marginalized communities, such as students of color with disabilities who face compounded barriers. This perspective challenges the field to go beyond legal mandates and consider the socio-cultural realities of students’ lives. As such, future reforms must embrace inclusive education as both a legal necessity and a social responsibility.

A recurring theme in the literature is the call for inclusive education to become a standard practice rather than an exception. This means reimagining school structures, curriculum design, and teacher roles to align with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Although not addressed directly in the referenced literature, the conceptual threads suggest a move toward systems that anticipate and plan for diversity from the outset, rather than retrofitting accommodations.

The literature reveals a robust and evolving conversation around the foundations, goals, and challenges of special education in the United States. From its legal roots in IDEA to contemporary debates around inclusion and instructional practices, the field continues to grapple with how best to serve students with disabilities in a way that is equitable, meaningful, and just.

While legal mandates have laid essential groundwork, the effectiveness of special education ultimately depends on how these policies are enacted in daily classroom life. As educators, scholars, and policymakers look ahead, the challenge remains to honor the field’s complex history while forging a more inclusive and responsive educational future for all learners.

Methodology:

This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review to examine the evolution and current landscape of special education in the United States. This method was chosen to allow for a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, themes, and gaps within the field. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, legal texts, and official government publications to ensure both academic rigor and practical relevance.

The selection process followed clear inclusion criteria: (1) the material had to directly pertain to U.S. special education policy, law, or instructional practice; (2) the publication date had to fall between 1995 and 2023, a period marked by significant legislative and pedagogical changes; and (3) sources had to come from reputable scholarly journals or recognized government institutions. Databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were utilized, alongside authoritative websites such as IDEA.ed.gov and the U.S. Department of Education. Keywords including “special education,” “IDEA,” “inclusion,” “504 Plan,” and “disability law” were used to guide the search process.

After collecting and reviewing the literature, content analysis was employed to categorize recurring themes and insights. Four primary thematic domains emerged: (1) the historical and legal foundations of special education; (2) inclusive education and differentiated instructional practices; (3) the lived experiences of parents and students; and (4) emerging challenges, especially those amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. These themes were used to organize and synthesize findings across multiple sources.

Findings and Discussion:

Legal and Historical Context

The legal and historical development of special education in the United States is deeply intertwined with the broader civil rights movement and international human rights advocacy. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) laid a foundational principle—that all individuals, including those with disabilities, have the right to education.

In the United States, this principle began to take legal form with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, later renamed and reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This legislation marked a transformative moment in American educational policy by mandating a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for children with disabilities (Streett, 2004).

Under IDEA, the definition of a "child with a disability" includes individuals with a wide range of physical, intellectual, emotional, and developmental conditions (Sec. 300.8, n.d.). The law requires that each eligible student receive an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a tailored plan outlining goals, accommodations, and services based on their unique needs.

In contrast, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 offers protections for individuals with disabilities in public institutions, including schools, but does not mandate the creation of an IEP. Instead, Section 504 provides for reasonable accommodations to ensure non-discrimination in access to education ("What is the difference between an IEP and a 504 plan?", 2015).

Historically, however, the rights of students with disabilities were not always protected. As Winzer (1993) and Yell, Rogers, and Rogers (1998) emphasize, children with disabilities were often excluded from mainstream schools, relegated to segregated institutions, or denied access to education altogether. The prevailing belief was that such students could not benefit from public education, and schools bore no legal obligation to serve them. Yell (2015) and Reddy (1999) trace the shift from exclusion to inclusion through a series of legal precedents, culminating in the realization that access to quality education is a fundamental right, not a privilege.

The historical evolution from isolation to integration and, more recently, to inclusive education reflects broader changes in public attitudes and educational philosophy. Rodriguez and Gil (2014) describe this transformation as moving from a deficit-based model—focusing on what students with disabilities lack—to a strengths-based model that emphasizes capacity, inclusion, and support. The concept of "mainstreaming," prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, initially involved placing students with disabilities into general education classrooms without fully adapting instruction or providing adequate support. Over time, the shift toward inclusive education has come to mean more than just physical placement; it involves rethinking pedagogical practices, school culture, and teacher preparation to embrace diversity.

Mostert and Crockett (2000) argue that to build effective and equitable practices in special education, we must reclaim and critically reflect on its complex history. A historical understanding can guide current and future decisions, helping educators avoid repeating past mistakes, such as overly rigid tracking, marginalization, or underfunding of support services. They emphasize that much of special education's history has been driven not only by legislation but also by advocacy from parents, professionals, and civil rights activists.

Fagan (1999) presents inclusion as an ongoing evolutionary process with an uncertain trajectory. While legal mandates such as IDEA provide a framework for inclusion, their implementation varies widely across school districts, and challenges remain. These include disparities in funding, teacher training, and community acceptance. Fagan also cautions against viewing inclusion as a panacea; without systemic reform and sustained commitment, inclusion can become superficial, leading to tokenism rather than genuine participation.

The legal framework provided by IDEA has also influenced the development of specialized educational tools and instructional approaches. One such development is functional behavior analysis (FBA), which plays a critical role in addressing behavioral challenges in students with disabilities. As Dixon, Vogel, and Tarbox (2012) explain, FBA and its application through Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) stem from a long tradition of research into the functions of behavior.

These tools are often embedded within IEPs to help educators better understand and support students with autism and other developmental disorders. These methods represent the growing intersection of psychological science and education, offering data-driven strategies to improve student outcomes.

Yell (2015) underscores that although laws like IDEA and Section 504 are firmly in place, their real-world impact depends on interpretation, enforcement, and the professional knowledge of educators and school leaders. Furthermore, as Yell, Rogers, and Rogers (1998) point out, the history of special education has been marked by constant tension between legal mandates and educational practice. Despite progress, many students with disabilities still face systemic barriers to meaningful inclusion, including limited access to advanced coursework, extracurricular activities, and technology-enhanced learning environments.

Reddy (1999) adds that school reform efforts must integrate inclusion more holistically rather than treat it as an isolated initiative. Inclusion must be built into the architecture of school improvement plans, teacher training programs, curriculum design, and classroom management systems. Successful models of inclusion are those that not only accommodate differences but celebrate and respond to them with innovative, flexible teaching methods.

The journey of special education—from marginalization to a more inclusive model—is far from complete. As Mostert and Crockett (2000) highlight, history provides both a warning and a guidepost. The future of special education lies in continued advocacy, professional development, and the integration of evidence-based practices such as ABA and differentiated instruction. By recognizing where the field has come from and understanding the legal and philosophical underpinnings of inclusion, educators and policymakers can make informed decisions that promote equity and academic success for all learners.

Inclusive Practices and Differentiated Instruction

Inclusive education—the practice of educating students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers in the same classroom—has become a guiding principle in contemporary U.S. education. This movement toward inclusion is rooted in democratic ideals, advocating for equity, access, and social justice. Lipsky and Gartner (1999) argue that inclusive education is not just a pedagogical strategy but a moral imperative in a democratic society, emphasizing that all students deserve the opportunity to learn and participate together. Inclusion promotes shared responsibility, mutual respect, and recognition of diverse learner needs, challenging traditional notions of separate, segregated education.

However, the successful implementation of inclusion depends heavily on differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction refers to the intentional modification of content, process, product, and learning environment to accommodate the varying readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of students (Connolly et al., 2009). Without such pedagogical flexibility, inclusive classrooms risk becoming places of passive assimilation rather than active participation.

Mackey (2014) conducted a study on middle school general education teachers and found that educators use a range of strategies to support inclusion, such as flexible grouping, modified assignments, scaffolded instruction, and collaborative teaching models. Teachers who regularly practice co-teaching with special education staff reported greater success in maintaining inclusive classrooms. These approaches promote both academic growth and social-emotional development for students with disabilities. Similarly, Connolly et al. (2009) highlight how restructuring the classroom environment through co-planning and data-informed instructional decision-making supports the diverse needs of students with individualized education programs (IEPs).

Despite its benefits, inclusion faces numerous challenges, including inadequate teacher preparation, insufficient classroom support, and lack of administrative guidance. Cross-cultural research by Hyunjeong et al. (2014) compared teachers in the U.S. and South Korea and found that while U.S. educators were generally more supportive of inclusive practices, both groups cited similar barriers, such as limited resources, large class sizes, and the need for additional professional development. These findings point to the global nature of the struggle for inclusive education and underscore the need for systemic reform, including policies that ensure ongoing teacher training and funding for support personnel.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the gaps in inclusive education. According to Gavin (2020), the shift to online learning created significant challenges for delivering special education services, raising legal and ethical questions about the enforcement of IDEA during remote instruction. Greenway and Eaton-Thomas (2020) documented the experiences of parents homeschooling children with special needs during the pandemic, highlighting increased parental stress and concerns about regression in academic and social skills. These findings emphasize the importance of individualized supports and responsive instructional design, especially during times of crisis.

To support student independence within inclusive settings, educators often implement strategies rooted in applied behavior analysis (ABA) and functional skills development. Hayek and McIntyre (2019) provide practical tools for teaching daily living skills to students with autism, promoting independence and reducing reliance on adult support. Social stories, pioneered by Carol Gray (2015), are another commonly used technique in inclusive classrooms. These short, personalized narratives help students with autism understand social cues and navigate complex interactions, thus promoting more effective integration into the general education environment.

Moreover, inclusive education must be seen within the broader context of historical and legal developments. Winzer (2009) and Yell (2015) trace the evolution of special education from exclusion and isolation toward mainstreaming, integration, and now inclusion. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act provide the legal foundation for these inclusive practices. However, the laws alone are not

sufficient—educators must also possess a deep understanding of how to implement them in ways that promote genuine access and engagement (Streett, 2004; Cook & Schirmer, 2003).

Scholars such as Mostert and Crockett (2000) emphasize the importance of reclaiming the history of special education to inform more effective practices today. Recognizing the cyclical nature of reform and resistance allows educators and policymakers to understand how inclusion is not just a destination, but an ongoing process. Fagan (1999) similarly warns that the future of inclusion remains uncertain without sustained commitment to teacher preparation, evidence-based practices, and resource allocation.

Inclusive education, supported by differentiated instruction, represents a paradigm shift in teaching and learning. It calls on educators to recognize the value of every learner and to design instruction that honors and responds to diversity. While inclusion is deeply rooted in democratic and legal principles, its success ultimately depends on the daily decisions made by educators, administrators, and policymakers. Through commitment, collaboration, and ongoing professional development, inclusive education can fulfill its promise of equity and excellence for all learners.

Instructional Strategies and Behavioral Tools

Effective instructional strategies and behavioral tools are critical for supporting students with special educational needs, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). These tools not only enhance learning outcomes but also foster independence, social interaction, and emotional regulation. Among the most prominent approaches are Social Stories, structured routines, functional assessments, and applied behavior analysis, all of which are grounded in individualized, evidence-based practices that accommodate the unique needs of exceptional learners.

Social Stories, pioneered by Carol Gray (2015), are a widely used tool to support children with autism by teaching appropriate social behavior through brief, personalized narratives. These stories present social situations in a structured and predictable manner, helping students anticipate outcomes and make sense of complex social interactions. By improving comprehension and reducing anxiety, Social Stories have proven effective in teaching routines, transitions, peer interactions, and even emotional responses. Their visual and written format provides clarity and reassurance, particularly for learners who struggle with abstract thinking or unpredictable environments (Gray, 2015).

In parallel, daily living skills and independence-building strategies are central to special education. Hayek and McIntyre (2019) emphasize the importance of structured routines, visual schedules, and task analyses to support autonomy in students with ASD. Their Autism-at-a-Glance brief highlights interventions such as picture exchange systems and step-by-step visual cues for daily tasks like dressing, grooming, and navigating the classroom. These strategies not only enhance functional life skills but also increase students' confidence and participation in both academic and non-academic settings.

The individualized nature of special education instruction distinguishes it from general education. Cook and Schirmer (2003) assert that what makes special education "special" is its emphasis on tailored teaching methods, explicit skill instruction, specialized training for educators, and a focus on measurable, student-specific goals. Instruction is intentionally adapted to the learner's cognitive, behavioral, and social-emotional profiles, ensuring equitable access to content and meaningful participation in learning activities. This requires teachers to go beyond curriculum delivery and actively engage in diagnostic teaching, constant progress monitoring, and flexible instructional design.

In addressing behavioral challenges, functional assessment tools and applied behavior analysis (ABA) are widely recognized for their efficacy. According to Dixon, Vogel, and Tarbox (2012), functional analysis has evolved as a core component of behavior intervention for individuals with ASD and related disorders. ABA focuses on understanding the antecedents and consequences of behavior in order to develop strategies that encourage positive actions and reduce problematic ones. Through reinforcement schedules, task analysis, shaping, and chaining, ABA promotes skill acquisition and behavioral self-regulation. These techniques are especially effective when integrated into the classroom environment, where consistency and reinforcement can be embedded throughout the day.

The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the importance of flexible instructional tools and support systems. Gavin (2020) discusses how special education services, though legally required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), were significantly disrupted during the pandemic. The lack of in-person interaction created barriers for service delivery, especially for students needing hands-on support, speech therapy, or behavior interventions. In response, educators and parents had to quickly adapt to virtual instruction, often without the proper tools or training to implement individualized education programs (IEPs) remotely.

Greenway and Eaton-Thomas (2020) explored parent experiences during the pandemic and found that many struggled to replicate structured learning environments at home. The absence of visual supports, routines, and professional guidance contributed to increased stress among families of children with disabilities. However, parents who had access to behavioral tools like visual schedules, task cards, and simplified instructional materials reported

more successful outcomes. These findings underscore the necessity of training not only for educators but also for caregivers, who play an instrumental role in implementing strategies consistently across contexts.

Moreover, the legal foundation for individualized instruction and behavioral intervention is well established in federal law. The IDEA (Streett, 2004) mandates that all students with disabilities are entitled to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. This includes the development of IEPs that outline specific instructional goals, accommodations, related services, and behavior support plans. Functional behavioral assessments (FBAs) are a key part of this process, identifying the causes of disruptive behavior and informing the development of effective interventions.

A deeper understanding of these tools reveals the interconnected nature of instructional and behavioral supports. For instance, the effectiveness of a Social Story may be enhanced when paired with ABA techniques such as positive reinforcement. Similarly, daily living skills instruction often involves breaking tasks into manageable steps and reinforcing progress along the way. The success of these strategies depends on careful planning, ongoing collaboration among educators and specialists, and a commitment to evidence-based practice.

Instructional strategies and behavioral tools are essential components of effective special education. By combining individualized instruction with targeted behavioral interventions, educators can create supportive environments where all students, especially those with autism and other disabilities, can thrive. Tools like Social Stories, structured routines, ABA, and functional assessments help bridge the gap between challenges and achievement, empowering students to develop academic skills, social competence, and personal independence. As the educational landscape continues to evolve—especially in the face of global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic—the need for adaptable, evidence-based strategies in special education remains more urgent than

Parental Involvement and the COVID-19 Disruption

Parental involvement has long been considered a cornerstone of effective special education, and this became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden shift to remote learning environments forced parents to assume greater responsibility for their children's daily educational activities, particularly for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). While collaboration between schools and families has always been encouraged under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Streett, 2004), the pandemic tested the practicality of this collaboration under crisis conditions.

Gavin (2020) raised critical concerns about whether IDEA's mandates could be fully implemented during the pandemic. The legal requirements for Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) became significantly more difficult to meet in virtual settings. The enforcement of these rights, including related services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral interventions, was inconsistent across districts. Some schools quickly adapted by providing teletherapy or virtual accommodations, while others struggled with inadequate infrastructure or unclear guidance.

Research by Greenway and Eaton-Thomas (2020) highlights the mixed experiences of parents who suddenly found themselves in the role of educators, therapists, and advocates. Some parents appreciated the opportunity to better understand their child's learning needs and pace, as home-based instruction allowed for greater flexibility. Others, however, found the lack of professional support overwhelming and the burden unsustainable. For many, this period exacerbated pre-existing inequities in education, particularly for families with limited digital access, language barriers, or lower socioeconomic status. The digital divide, already a major concern in education, became a critical obstacle to equitable learning opportunities.

The necessity for consistent communication between educators and families became a pressing concern during this period. Many parents reported feeling isolated or unsupported due to unclear communication or a complete absence of guidance from their child's school (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020). This underscores the importance of effective school-home collaboration not only during crises but also in everyday practice.

The National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (1995) emphasized that systemic reform must include robust family engagement, along with co-teaching models and teacher professional development. In the context of the pandemic, these reforms were not just aspirational—they became necessary. Families were thrust into the center of educational delivery, and the inadequacy of support structures revealed significant gaps in inclusive education practices. For meaningful inclusion to be sustained, especially in emergency contexts, schools must proactively empower parents through training, resource-sharing, and consistent feedback mechanisms.

Moreover, the pandemic highlighted the critical role of individualized planning for students with disabilities. Connolly, Patterson, and Ritter (2009) advocate for the restructuring of classrooms to better facilitate differentiated instruction. While such approaches are possible in traditional settings, remote learning platforms often lack the flexibility to adapt

to diverse needs. This placed further pressure on parents to bridge the gap between generalized instruction and individualized learning goals.

Social Stories, a tool developed by Carol Gray (2015), became particularly useful during this time. These structured narratives were used by parents to help children understand new routines, such as mask-wearing, hand hygiene, or why they could not attend school. Such tools exemplify how behavioral strategies, when shared with families, can promote continuity in learning and behavior management across environments.

Additionally, Hayek and McIntyre (2019) emphasized the importance of supporting independence in daily living skills for students with autism. During remote learning, the responsibility for these skills shifted largely to families. Without school-based programs to support these goals, parents needed accessible resources and guidance. Again, this highlighted the uneven distribution of support, as not all parents had access to trained professionals or reliable information.

The pandemic also reignited discussions around inclusion and educational equity. Mackey (2014) and Hyunjeong et al. (2014) stressed the varied approaches to inclusive education across different contexts. While some general education teachers successfully implemented inclusive practices, others lacked training or resources, leading to inconsistent outcomes. These disparities were amplified during the pandemic, as teachers unfamiliar with differentiation or online adaptation were less equipped to meet the needs of students with disabilities, further burdening families.

Furthermore, the legal protections under IDEA and Section 504 were brought into question. As the University of Washington (2015) outlines, while both IEPs and 504 Plans guarantee accommodations, their implementation was often suspended or compromised during school closures. This lapse in legal and practical support challenged the notion of educational equity and left many parents feeling abandoned by the system meant to support their children.

The COVID-19 disruption served as both a stress test and a catalyst for reflection within the field of special education. It exposed the fragility of home-school partnerships, the variability in institutional responses, and the urgent need for proactive planning to support vulnerable learners during emergencies. Moving forward, educational stakeholders must integrate the lessons of the pandemic to strengthen family engagement, ensure equitable access to resources, and guarantee that the rights of students with disabilities are upheld in all learning environments.

Conclusion:

Special education in the United States continues to evolve at the critical intersection of law, pedagogy, and social equity. Grounded in the legal framework provided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the field has championed the rights of students with disabilities to receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). These foundational protections have paved the way for the development of inclusive practices, differentiated instruction, and individualized education plans that respond to the diverse needs of learners.

Despite these advancements, the field still faces significant and complex challenges. One persistent issue is the variation in educator preparedness. Many general education teachers report feeling underprepared to implement inclusive strategies or support students with disabilities effectively, highlighting the need for improved teacher training and ongoing professional development. Furthermore, systemic inequities—such as disparities in funding, access to specialist services, and technology—continue to hinder the realization of true educational equity, especially in underserved communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and magnified these vulnerabilities. As schools transitioned to remote learning, families were thrust into primary educational roles, revealing gaps in communication, accessibility, and consistent implementation of special education services. Although some families benefited from the flexibility of home-based learning, many struggled without adequate support, particularly in maintaining behavioral goals, therapy services, and structured routines. These disruptions underscored the urgent need for stronger home-school collaboration and crisis-resilient educational systems.

Nevertheless, the core values of special education—access, participation, and individualized support—remain vital guideposts for future growth. Reaffirming these principles requires not only a legal commitment but also a cultural shift toward embracing diversity, inclusion, and shared responsibility among educators, families, and policymakers. Inclusive education must not be treated as an add-on, but rather as a foundational practice that benefits all students.

As the field moves forward, there is a growing imperative to bridge research and practice, address persistent inequities, and ensure that every student—regardless of ability—has the opportunity to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. In doing so, special education can fulfill its mission of affirming the dignity, potential, and rights of every learner in a truly inclusive society.

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