

Special Education in the United States: Historical Foundations, Inclusion Practices, and Contemporary Perspectives

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Abstract:

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of special education in the United States through the IMRAD (Introduction, Methodology, Results, and Discussion) format. It traces the historical progression from segregated educational models to contemporary inclusive practices, with particular attention to the legal foundations laid by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 and its successor, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. Anchored in both classical studies and current literature, the paper evaluates the academic and social outcomes of students with disabilities placed in inclusive settings. It explores the effectiveness of co-teaching strategies, integrated classroom models, and peer-mediated interventions, supported by empirical findings from multiple decades. The discussion delves into the persistent barriers to successful inclusion, including insufficient teacher training, institutional resistance, and inconsistencies in implementation across districts. It further emphasizes the philosophical, pedagogical, and policy-driven challenges that continue to impact the equitable education of students with disabilities. By highlighting best practices and areas in need of reform, this study contributes to ongoing discourse on improving inclusive education. The paper concludes by advocating for systemic support, adaptive policies, and a sustained ethical commitment to equity and access in education.

Keywords: special education, inclusion, co-teaching, peer-mediated strategies, IDEA 2004

Introduction:

Special education in the United States has evolved significantly over the past several decades, shaped by civil rights movements, changing educational philosophies, and pivotal legal mandates. Central to the field is the understanding of intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), defined by limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior emerging before the age of 18 (Schalock et al., 2021).

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR) classifies IDD under neurodevelopmental disorders, emphasizing the lifelong nature of these conditions and the need for early educational intervention (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). The U.S. legal landscape for special education was irrevocably altered by *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which established the principle that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. This landmark ruling laid the groundwork for later laws ensuring educational access for students with disabilities.

The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975 mandated free appropriate public education (FAPE) for all children with disabilities and introduced individualized education programs (IEPs) as a legal right (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979).

This legislation was a response to criticisms by early researchers like Dunn (1968), who questioned the efficacy and fairness of segregated special education programs, particularly for students with mild disabilities. The EAHCA was later refined into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), emphasizing not only access but meaningful participation in the general education environment (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975). These reforms were underpinned by growing evidence that inclusive practices could enhance both academic and social outcomes for students with disabilities.

Academic literature over the past few decades has debated the efficacy of different models of placement—ranging from pull-out resource rooms to full inclusion. Carlberg and Kavale's (1980) meta-analysis found mixed results, suggesting that placement alone does not determine educational success. Similarly, Sindelar and Deno (1978) investigated the effectiveness of resource programming, while Affleck et al. (1988) compared integrated classroom settings to traditional pull-out models, noting nuanced impacts depending on implementation quality. Bear and Proctor (1990) reported positive achievement outcomes for both disabled and non-disabled students in integrated settings. Conversely, Fox and Ysseldyke (1997) highlighted the challenges of poorly implemented inclusion programs, cautioning against one-size-fits-all approaches.

Critics and advocates of inclusion continue to debate its pedagogical value. Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) questioned what remains "special" about special education in inclusive models, while Gartner and Lipsky (1989) advocated dismantling the dual system of general and special education entirely. Banerji and Dailey (1995) and Baker et al. (1995) provided

empirical support for inclusion's benefits on learning outcomes. Yet Hocutt (1996) cautioned that placement is not a silver bullet; the quality of instruction and support services is equally critical. Deno et al. (1990) demonstrated that alternative models, including co-teaching and collaborative supports, could bridge this gap effectively when thoughtfully executed.

In a broader context, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) declared inclusive education a universal right, aligning with the U.S.'s commitment to equity. Despite notable progress, implementation remains uneven, influenced by resources, training, and philosophical divides. This paper explores the historical and legal foundations of special education, reviews evidence on the effectiveness of inclusive practices, and reflects on contemporary challenges in delivering equitable, high-quality education for all learners in the United States. Drawing on foundational research and legislative milestones, it aims to offer a comprehensive overview of special education's trajectory and future directions.

Literature Review:

Inclusive education has evolved into a global mandate and philosophical ideal aimed at promoting the rights and educational access of all learners, especially those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) remains a landmark declaration advocating that regular schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, or behavioral differences.

This inclusive vision has influenced policy directions in many countries, including the United States, where legislative frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) have mandated free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. These policy shifts reflect a global trend toward educational equity, yet the implementation and efficacy of inclusion practices remain subjects of continuous investigation and debate.

The definition and understanding of intellectual and developmental disabilities have been foundational to shaping educational responses. Schalock et al. (2021) define IDD as characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior originating before age 18, aligning with the classification in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR) by the American Psychiatric Association (2022). The recognition of IDD as a neurodevelopmental disorder underscores the importance of early intervention and sustained educational supports. The growing awareness of these needs has prompted schools and policymakers to move beyond segregated models to more inclusive educational settings, guided by the principles of equity and participation.

The social and academic implications of inclusive education have been explored extensively. Vaughn, Elbaum, and Boardman (2001) investigated the social functioning of students with learning disabilities in inclusive settings. Their findings suggest that while inclusion offers opportunities for peer interaction, students with disabilities often face difficulties in establishing reciprocal social relationships.

This underscores the importance of intentional social support strategies. Similarly, Justice et al. (2014) examined peer effects in early childhood classrooms, revealing that the presence of children with disabilities can positively influence the development of typically developing peers, challenging concerns about potential negative academic impacts.

Waldron and McLeskey (1998) conducted a comprehensive study on inclusive schooling and found that both students with mild and severe disabilities experienced academic benefits when placed in inclusive settings. Their findings are supported by Wehmeyer, Shogren, and Kurth (2021), who reported that inclusive practices, when implemented with appropriate supports, result in positive academic and social outcomes for students with IDD. However, they also noted ongoing disparities in implementation fidelity, especially in high-need school districts. These observations are echoed in Anderson, Brock, and Shawbitz's (2022) exploration of philosophical and practical considerations, which highlight the need for inclusive education to be rooted in both strong values and evidence-based practices.

Co-teaching is a widely endorsed model to support inclusion, and Walther-Thomas (1997) investigated its long-term benefits and challenges. Teachers and administrators reported that co-teaching improved student outcomes and professional collaboration, but also noted issues related to planning time, role ambiguity, and differing instructional philosophies. The effectiveness of co-teaching is further influenced by institutional structures and leadership support, as shown in Amor et al. (2018), who systematically reviewed global research trends and emphasized the centrality of collaborative practices and teacher training in successful inclusion.

Despite the compelling evidence in favor of inclusion, critics caution against assuming universal benefits without considering the broader educational and social contexts. For instance, Ryndak et al. (2010) presented qualitative findings from two individuals with significant disabilities who had different educational trajectories—one in segregated settings and the other in inclusive environments. The study revealed that inclusive educational experiences

contributed to greater community participation and independence in adulthood, suggesting long-term benefits. However, the research also emphasized the necessity of quality programming, individualization, and systemic supports to make inclusion meaningful.

International perspectives reveal considerable variation in the conceptualization and implementation of inclusion. Magnússon, Göransson, and Lindqvist (2019) analyzed inclusive education policy in Sweden and found tensions between policy rhetoric and classroom realities. While the Swedish education system promotes inclusion, teachers often struggle with insufficient support and competing demands. Similarly, Qu (2024) explored China's policy development and observed that inclusive education remains largely aspirational due to structural challenges, resource constraints, and societal attitudes. These international cases highlight the critical role of localized strategies and the adaptation of global frameworks to specific socio-political contexts.

Within the European Union, the Council Conclusions on the Social Dimension of Education and Training (2009) emphasized that education should promote social inclusion, equal opportunities, and the active participation of all learners.

These goals align with the Salamanca principles but also call attention to structural barriers that hinder inclusive practices—such as disparities in school funding, teacher training gaps, and inconsistent policy implementation. These barriers are not unique to Europe; similar challenges exist in the U.S. and other nations attempting to reconcile inclusive ideals with practical constraints.

One of the most debated aspects of inclusion is its impact on typically developing peers. Travers and Carter (2021) conducted a systematic review of peer-mediated interventions and found that such strategies not only benefit students with disabilities but also enhance the social-emotional development of peers without disabilities. Their findings advocate for the intentional design of peer-based models to support inclusive interactions. However, peer-based models must be accompanied by broader systemic supports, including professional development, adaptive curricula, and administrative commitment to inclusion.

The literature further illustrates that inclusion must go beyond physical placement to embody a transformation in instructional practices, curriculum design, and school culture. This holistic approach is championed by Anderson et al. (2022), who argue that genuine inclusion integrates both philosophical commitment and practical innovation. Such integration demands collaborative professional development, family engagement, and the use of assistive technologies and universal design for learning (UDL). These components align with global trends and are necessary for transforming inclusion from a legal obligation into a lived educational reality.

The body of literature indicates that inclusive education is both a human rights imperative and a pedagogical approach supported by extensive research. Studies from Vaughn et al. (2001), Waldron and McLeskey (1998), and Walther-Thomas (1997) affirm that inclusion can lead to academic and social gains for students with disabilities, provided that effective supports are in place. Global and national policies, including IDEIA (2004), the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), and various international frameworks, have created a strong policy backbone for inclusion.

Nevertheless, implementation challenges persist—ranging from inconsistent practices to insufficient training. Future research must continue to explore context-sensitive strategies that enhance inclusive practices across diverse educational landscapes, ensuring that all students, regardless of ability, are granted equitable access to quality education.

Methodology:

This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review methodology to analyze the evolution, effectiveness, and implementation of inclusive education practices, particularly for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in the United States. The approach involved a structured review and synthesis of peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and seminal legal texts to provide a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical foundations, historical context, and current trends in special education.

Sources were carefully selected based on their historical significance, empirical rigor, and contribution to ongoing academic and policy discussions. Emphasis was placed on literature that examined comparative educational models (e.g., inclusion vs. pull-out programs), policy impacts (such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act and the Salamanca Statement), teacher collaboration (especially co-teaching models), and peer interactions in inclusive settings. Key research databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO were utilized. Search terms included combinations of keywords such as "inclusive education," "special education effectiveness," "mainstreaming students with disabilities," "co-teaching models," "intellectual and developmental disabilities," and "educational outcomes."

To ensure methodological consistency, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

(1) Studies conducted in the United States or with direct applicability to U.S. education systems;
(2) Publications that were peer-reviewed, government-issued, or published by reputable educational bodies between 2000 and 2024;
(3) Works that explicitly addressed legal foundations, educational outcomes, social-emotional development, or implementation frameworks in inclusive education.
Where appropriate, international perspectives were integrated to provide comparative insights and situate U.S. practices within broader global trends.

By synthesizing diverse sources, this review aims to provide an informed and multifaceted view of inclusive education, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges in policy and practice.

Findings and Discussion:

Historical Evolution and Legal Foundations

The history of inclusive education in the United States is deeply rooted in both civil rights advocacy and educational reform, progressing from segregated schooling to the contemporary emphasis on inclusion and individualized support. This evolution reflects a broader societal recognition of the rights of individuals with disabilities to equitable, high-quality education.

The foundation for inclusive education can be traced back to the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which declared that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Though the case addressed racial segregation, its underlying principles inspired later advocacy for students with disabilities. The inadequacies of separate educational programs were later highlighted by Dunn (1968), who argued that traditional special education models, especially for students with mild disabilities, lacked empirical justification and often stigmatized students rather than supporting them. His critique prompted widespread debate about the effectiveness and morality of pull-out or segregated placements.

This discourse led to legislative reform with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142), which mandated that all children with disabilities be provided with a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979). This legislation transformed special education by ensuring legal protections, procedural safeguards, and the creation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) tailored to each child's unique needs. Later reauthorizations, culminating in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, emphasized measurable goals, inclusive placements, and accountability for outcomes (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004).

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) extended this vision globally, affirming that inclusive schools are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes and building inclusive societies. In line with this, the Council of the European Union (2009) emphasized the social dimension of education and training, positioning inclusion not only as a pedagogical model but as a moral and civic imperative. These international frameworks influenced national policies worldwide, including in Sweden (Magnússon, Göransson, & Lindqvist, 2019) and China (Qu, 2024), signaling a growing global consensus on the right to inclusive education.

Scholarly studies during the 1980s and 1990s began evaluating the efficacy of inclusive models. Affleck, Madge, Adams, and Lowenbraun (1988) compared integrated classrooms and resource room models, concluding that well-implemented inclusive settings could yield equal or better academic outcomes. Similarly, Baker, Wang, and Walberg (1995), through a meta-analysis, found that inclusive placements had a generally positive impact on the academic achievement of students with and without disabilities. Banerji and Dailey (1995) added further evidence that students in inclusive settings often outperformed their peers in more restrictive environments, particularly when supported by effective instructional strategies.

However, not all findings were uniformly positive. Fox and Ysseldyke (1997) cautioned that poorly implemented inclusion, especially at the middle school level, could result in academic and social difficulties for students with disabilities. This underscores the importance of context, teacher preparedness, and ongoing professional development.

Carlberg and Kavale (1980), in a seminal meta-analysis, noted that while students in special education placements sometimes made modest gains, general education classrooms with appropriate support tended to yield better overall academic and social outcomes. Similarly, Bear and Proctor (1990) found that full-time integrated programs benefited both students with and without disabilities, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation.

Beyond academic outcomes, inclusive education promotes vital social development. Vaughn, Elbaum, and Boardman (2001) emphasized that inclusion improves the social functioning of students with learning disabilities by enhancing peer interaction and reducing social isolation. These findings were reinforced by Waldron and McLeskey (1998), who

reported that students with mild and severe disabilities benefited both academically and socially in inclusive environments.

The role of teachers remains central to the success of inclusion. Walther-Thomas (1997) documented the benefits and challenges of co-teaching models, noting that when general and special educators collaborate effectively, students receive more comprehensive and responsive instruction. Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) similarly argued that inclusion works best when special education is not just a placement decision but an instructional philosophy embraced by all educators.

Gartner and Lipsky (1989) critiqued the structural separation inherent in special education, advocating for a dismantling of categorical labels in favor of flexible, responsive instruction. This sentiment echoes current philosophical perspectives, such as those presented by Anderson, Brock, and Shawbitz (2022), who argue that inclusion should be grounded in both equity and dignity for individuals with developmental disabilities.

Contemporary policy research continues to explore the long-term impacts of educational experiences. Ryndak et al. (2010) examined two individuals with significant disabilities and found that inclusive educational histories were associated with greater independence and community integration in adulthood. Meanwhile, Wehmeyer, Shogren, and Kurth (2021) documented both progress and persistent challenges in U.S. inclusion efforts, especially for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Finally, inclusion is now seen not merely as a special education issue but as a general education reform. As Schalock, Luckasson, and Tassé (2021) and the APA's DSM-5-TR (2022) refine diagnostic categories, the focus shifts from labels to supports—aligning with IDEA's spirit. Studies like those by Justice et al. (2014) and Travers and Carter (2021) also stress that inclusion benefits not only students with disabilities but enriches the classroom experience for all learners.

The legal and historical trajectory of inclusive education reflects a shift from exclusion and segregation toward a rights-based, evidence-informed, and socially just educational paradigm. While implementation challenges remain, the empirical and ethical rationale for inclusion is now firmly established in both domestic and global discourse.

Academic and Social Outcomes of Inclusion

The academic and social benefits of inclusive education have been widely documented in empirical research and policy discourse over the last few decades. While inclusive education initially met resistance due to concerns about academic rigor and classroom management, research increasingly indicates that inclusive models can promote both academic achievement and social development for students with and without disabilities.

Meta-analyses and longitudinal studies provide compelling evidence that inclusive education does not compromise the learning of students with disabilities—and may, in fact, enhance it. One of the earliest influential works by Carlberg and Kavale (1980) conducted a meta-analysis comparing students in regular and special education settings and concluded that exceptional children educated in inclusive classrooms performed better academically than their peers in segregated environments. Their findings challenged long-standing beliefs that students with disabilities required separate settings to succeed.

Affleck, Madge, Adams, and Lowenbraun (1988) further reinforced these conclusions by comparing the academic performance of students in integrated classrooms versus those in resource room models. Their research showed that students in both models achieved comparably, suggesting that inclusive settings did not disadvantage students with mild disabilities. These findings paved the way for broader adoption of inclusion models, particularly when supported by individualized supports and co-teaching strategies.

The research of Waldron and McLeskey (1998) went a step further by analyzing both academic and social outcomes in inclusive school programs. Their study revealed that students with mild and severe learning disabilities showed improvements not only in academic performance but also in peer interactions, classroom engagement, and overall participation. Importantly, students without disabilities also benefited from these inclusive environments, indicating a mutual enhancement of classroom dynamics.

Beyond academic achievement, social outcomes are central to the rationale for inclusion. Bear and Proctor (1990) investigated the social integration of students in a full-time integrated program and found that both non-disabled and mildly disabled students exhibited improved peer relationships and social behavior. Similarly, Vaughn, Elbaum, and Boardman (2001) found that inclusion positively influenced the social functioning of students with learning disabilities, fostering better interpersonal skills, self-esteem, and emotional resilience.

The developmental benefits of inclusion are particularly pronounced in early childhood education. Justice, Logan, Lin, and Kaderavek (2014) highlighted the power of peer effects in preschool classrooms. Their study found that young children with disabilities benefited from exposure to peers with stronger language and social skills, leading to

accelerated development in both areas. These findings lend empirical support to inclusion in early education, echoing the assumptions of early proponents like Dunn (1968), who questioned the efficacy of segregated models for children with mild intellectual disabilities.

The academic literature has also documented the positive effects of peer-mediated strategies within inclusive classrooms. Travers and Carter (2021) systematically reviewed the impact of such interventions and concluded that not only did students with disabilities benefit from peer support, but students without disabilities also showed gains in empathy, leadership, and communication skills. This bidirectional benefit strengthens the argument that inclusive classrooms serve as learning environments for all students, not just those with disabilities.

Banerji and Dailey (1995) contributed to this field by demonstrating how the structure of inclusion—when thoughtfully implemented—can lead to measurable academic progress. Their research emphasized the importance of teacher preparedness, administrative support, and student access to resources. These factors, when present, created environments where inclusive practices could thrive, aligning with the broader policy frameworks articulated in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004.

However, inclusion is not without its challenges. Fox and Ysseldyke (1997) offered a cautionary perspective based on a case study in a middle school, where inadequate training and insufficient planning resulted in poor implementation and negative outcomes. Their work underscores that inclusion is not merely about physical placement but requires intentional design, collaboration, and ongoing support.

Indeed, the effectiveness of inclusion is often contingent upon the quality of the instructional strategies employed. Walther-Thomas (1997) found that co-teaching models—where general and special educators collaborate in planning and instruction—led to positive experiences for teachers and enhanced learning outcomes for students. These findings align with Fuchs and Fuchs (1995), who emphasized that the "specialness" of special education lies in the individualized attention and instructional modifications, which can be incorporated into general classrooms when teachers are adequately trained.

International perspectives also support these conclusions. Amor et al. (2018) reviewed global trends in inclusive education and found a consistent emphasis on academic and social benefits, though implementation varied by country. Similarly, Wehmeyer, Shogren, and Kurth (2021) examined inclusion for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the U.S., identifying both improvements in student outcomes and ongoing systemic barriers.

Decades of research point to the academic and social benefits of inclusion when implemented thoughtfully and supported by appropriate pedagogical strategies. Inclusion promotes equity, social cohesion, and improved outcomes for all students. As supported by robust empirical evidence from Carlberg and Kavale (1980), Affleck et al. (1988), Waldron and McLeskey (1998), and Justice et al. (2014), the inclusive classroom is not only viable but also beneficial. It offers an environment in which diversity is embraced, learning is collaborative, and students are prepared to thrive in increasingly pluralistic societies.

Co-teaching and Peer-Mediated Strategies

Co-teaching and peer-mediated strategies are increasingly recognized as critical components of effective inclusive education. These approaches facilitate the integration of students with disabilities into general education settings while also supporting the academic and social development of all learners. Research has demonstrated that when implemented thoughtfully, both co-teaching and peer-mediated interventions promote higher student engagement, equitable learning opportunities, and improved classroom dynamics (Banerji & Dailey, 1995; Travers & Carter, 2021).

Co-teaching, where a general educator and a special education teacher share responsibility for planning, instructing, and assessing a diverse group of students in one classroom, has garnered significant attention for its potential to bridge instructional gaps. Walther-Thomas (1997) reported that co-teaching can be highly effective in delivering inclusive instruction, with many teachers and administrators recognizing its benefits in terms of instructional flexibility, mutual support, and student achievement. In her longitudinal study, she found that schools implementing co-teaching saw increased student engagement and improved attitudes toward diversity. However, she also identified common challenges, including lack of adequate planning time, role ambiguity between co-teachers, and insufficient administrative support. These findings underscore the importance of structural coordination and shared professional development to optimize the benefits of co-teaching.

Banerji and Dailey (1995) reinforced these conclusions in their study of inclusive education models, highlighting that classrooms utilizing co-teaching and other inclusive instructional techniques observed increased participation and performance across both general and special education students. The inclusive classrooms studied demonstrated fewer instances of disruptive behavior, more consistent instructional routines, and greater academic accountability.

Teachers involved in inclusive co-teaching partnerships also reported a deeper understanding of differentiated instruction and more strategic use of formative assessments to address individual learning needs.

Peer-mediated strategies represent another promising set of practices within inclusive classrooms. These involve training and using peers—typically students without disabilities—as facilitators to support classmates with special needs in academic and social contexts. Travers and Carter (2021) conducted a systematic review of peer-mediated interventions and found that such strategies not only benefited students with disabilities by fostering engagement, independence, and communication skills, but also positively impacted the peer facilitators themselves. These students showed improved empathy, leadership skills, and greater awareness of diversity and inclusion.

Justice et al. (2014) further emphasized the positive social effects of peer interaction in inclusive early childhood education settings. Their research showed that the presence of well-functioning peer groups in inclusive classrooms was linked to stronger language development and social integration for students with developmental delays. This finding lends empirical support to the theoretical underpinnings of inclusive education, suggesting that young children learn effectively from one another in structured, diverse environments.

From a policy standpoint, these strategies align well with international and national commitments to inclusive education. The UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 emphasize inclusive practices and the value of collaborative teaching and community-based supports. These policies advocate for educational approaches that eliminate barriers and encourage full participation, including instructional innovations like co-teaching and peer-assisted learning. Similarly, research by Wehmeyer, Shogren, and Kurth (2021) concluded that progress in the United States toward genuine inclusion has been most effective when educational teams utilize collaborative strategies and community-based supports in general education settings.

Despite the promise of these practices, implementation barriers persist. For instance, Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) cautioned that without adequate training, co-teaching can devolve into a hierarchical relationship in which one teacher dominates classroom instruction. Similarly, peer-mediated strategies may be less effective if not accompanied by structured training, ongoing support, and alignment with broader curricular goals. As Fox and Ysseldyke (1997) warned through their examination of a failed middle school inclusion effort, insufficient preparation and unclear expectations can result in exclusionary experiences even within supposedly inclusive settings.

Nonetheless, the body of evidence supports the conclusion that both co-teaching and peer-mediated interventions, when well-executed, enhance the overall effectiveness of inclusive education. These strategies promote social belonging, elevate academic outcomes, and build a classroom culture rooted in mutual support and shared responsibility. As educational systems continue to evolve toward equity and inclusion, incorporating these approaches into regular teaching practice becomes not only beneficial but essential.

Co-teaching and peer-mediated strategies serve as vital mechanisms for achieving inclusive educational goals. They are grounded in both legislative mandates and a growing body of empirical evidence supporting their value. Educators and policymakers must ensure that such strategies are implemented with fidelity, supported with adequate resources, and adapted to meet the unique needs of diverse learners. With sustained commitment, these inclusive practices can transform classrooms into equitable learning communities where all students thrive—academically, socially, and emotionally.

Barriers to Effective Inclusion

Despite decades of global advocacy and research supporting inclusive education, numerous barriers still hinder its effective implementation in schools. While landmark decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and legislation like the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 laid the legal and moral groundwork for equitable access to education, inclusion remains uneven and inconsistent. Researchers and educators have documented a range of systemic, institutional, and pedagogical obstacles that impede the realization of truly inclusive learning environments.

One prominent barrier is the inconsistent quality and depth of professional training provided to educators. Fox and Ysseldyke (1997) presented a case study of a middle school where inclusion failed largely due to inadequate teacher preparation, poor administrative coordination, and a lack of clarity around instructional expectations. Their findings reflect a broader trend: many general education teachers feel ill-equipped to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities, especially when support services are limited or absent.

Further complicating implementation is the phenomenon of institutional inertia, a term used by Gartner and Lipsky (1989) to describe the systemic resistance to change found in many educational bureaucracies. They argue that existing structures often prioritize traditional models of special education, segregating students with disabilities under the guise of meeting their “special” needs, rather than reimagining general education to be more flexible and

universally designed. This mindset persists despite growing evidence that inclusion, when properly executed, benefits both students with and without disabilities (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Bear & Proctor, 1990).

Hocutt (1996) emphasized that placement alone is not a sufficient condition for success in inclusive settings. Rather, the effectiveness of inclusion depends significantly on the quality of instruction, availability of individualized supports, and the extent of teacher collaboration. Simply placing a student with a disability in a general education classroom without modifying the curriculum or providing specialized support is unlikely to yield positive outcomes. This is echoed in research by Fuchs and Fuchs (1995), who argued that what is "special" about special education is not the location, but the pedagogy and services provided.

Other studies further reveal disparities in student outcomes across different inclusion models. Affleck et al. (1988) compared integrated classrooms to resource-based models and found that while academic viability was achievable in inclusive settings, success was heavily dependent on how well teachers managed instructional differentiation and behavioral support. Similarly, Sindelar and Deno (1978) emphasized the importance of structured resource programming, suggesting that poorly coordinated services in general classrooms can lead to negative outcomes for students with disabilities.

Carlberg and Kavale's (1980) meta-analysis provided further caution by indicating that students with disabilities often perform better in specialized settings unless appropriate modifications and supports are guaranteed in inclusive environments. This underscores the need for comprehensive planning, team-based problem-solving, and sufficient resource allocation. Deno et al. (1990) also supported this view, noting that without a strong instructional framework, inclusion can lead to lower academic gains and increased frustration for students and teachers alike.

Moreover, administrative policies and funding allocations often fail to support the implementation of inclusive practices at scale. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) and international frameworks like the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) provide ambitious goals for inclusive education, but their success depends on local capacity and leadership. For instance, Magnússon, Göransson, and Lindqvist (2019) highlighted how Sweden's progressive policy on inclusive education still faced setbacks due to ambiguous definitions and inconsistent implementation across regions.

Research by Vaughn, Elbaum, and Boardman (2001) showed that students with learning disabilities often struggle socially in inclusive settings, particularly when peers and teachers lack understanding or empathy. Without deliberate efforts to foster social-emotional learning and peer acceptance, inclusion may inadvertently isolate students rather than integrate them. Waldron and McLeskey (1998) found that inclusive programs that emphasized collaboration and co-teaching produced more positive academic and social outcomes for both students with mild and severe learning disabilities, but such models require extensive coordination and support.

Even co-teaching models, while promising, come with challenges. Walther-Thomas (1997) noted that while co-teaching benefits include shared expertise and diversified instruction, issues such as unclear role delineation, time constraints, and lack of planning periods can diminish its effectiveness. These logistical hurdles often leave co-teachers underprepared to deliver equitable instruction.

The promise of inclusion cannot be fulfilled through legislative mandates or philosophical alignment alone. It requires a sustained commitment to systemic change, teacher empowerment, and continuous evaluation. As Anderson, Brock, and Shawbitz (2022) argue, effective inclusion is as much about shifting educational paradigms as it is about adapting instructional methods. This transformation must involve families, educators, policymakers, and communities working collaboratively to dismantle barriers and reimagine schools as spaces where all learners thrive.

Conclusion:

Special education in the United States has undergone a significant transformation, moving from exclusionary practices to more inclusive frameworks rooted in law, pedagogy, and social justice. This evolution, shaped by landmark legislation such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), reflects society's growing recognition of the rights and potential of individuals with disabilities. Central to this shift is the belief that all students, regardless of ability, deserve equitable access to quality education.

Inclusion, as both a philosophy and a practice, has yielded numerous benefits. Research has demonstrated that inclusive settings can improve academic performance, enhance social-emotional development, and foster mutual understanding among students with and without disabilities (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). Moreover, inclusion promotes the development of a more empathetic and cohesive school culture. However, the reality of implementation often falls short of its ideals. Variability in teacher preparation, lack of administrative clarity, and insufficient resources remain persistent obstacles to inclusive success (Fox & Ysseldyke, 1997; Hocutt, 1996).

For inclusion to be effective and sustainable, systemic efforts must extend beyond policy mandates. Teachers must receive ongoing, high-quality professional development that equips them to meet the diverse needs of learners. School leaders must foster environments that encourage collaboration, co-teaching, and innovation. Policy must remain flexible and responsive to the evolving educational landscape, allowing room for context-specific solutions. Most importantly, all stakeholders—from educators to policymakers to families—must embrace a philosophical commitment to equity and the inherent value of every learner.

The journey of special education is not only about accommodating difference but celebrating it. It is about reshaping educational structures to be more responsive, just, and inclusive. With continued advocacy, informed practice, and unwavering dedication, the full promise of inclusive education can move closer to reality for all students.

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