

The Academy for Precision Learning is committed to supporting students of all abilities to be successful and active members of their community. We believe that the practice of inclusive education is critical to promoting optimal learning, development, and self-esteem of all learners; research clearly shows that inclusive educational practices benefit not only children with disabilities, but also has positive outcomes for their typically-developing peers. Your continued support of APL helps us in developing and furthering inclusive educational practices, and, in turn, promoting acceptance, tolerance, and community. In this special article, APL Advisory Board member Dr. Cassie Martin provides a brief overview of the importance of inclusive education.

In the last 50 years, the rights of people with disabilities in the U.S. have received a great deal of attention. Court cases (e.g., Brown vs. The Board of Education) and federal legislation (e.g., the Civil Rights Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) have emphasized that the practice of segregation, the idea of “separate but equal”, is not an acceptable approach to education for any child in this country. For students with disabilities, these rights have been advocated for and discussed under the auspices of inclusion, or inclusive education.

Inclusion is a practice in which schools commit to meet the needs of all students in a school, regardless of ability, language, behavior, or ethnicity. More recently, the law has specified that all students must have access to the general education curriculum. This includes access to educational settings where children without disabilities participate, as well as access to the educational content, instructional and non-instructional activities, and materials that are used in these classrooms. In order to promote this practice, an individual education plan must be in place to address how students with disabilities will be involved in the general education curriculum.

While many continue to understand inclusion as simply a placement issue, where a student with a disability is placed in a general education classroom, there are more recent movements to understand inclusion as a service delivery model that meets a student’s individual academic, behavioral, and social needs within the context of their school community. Inclusive practices include what we teach our students, where they learn, and our expectations for their educational outcomes. Inclusion is more than a collection of special education services; it is a paradigmatic shift that ensures that students with disabilities and their families are active and participating members of their school communities.

Professionals continue to struggle to conceptualize and define high quality inclusion. A major obstacle to implementing high quality inclusion is the fact that inclusion reform has been identified as a special education issue, when, in fact, it is an issue that involves all students, all teachers, and all citizens.

The road to creating and conceptualizing inclusive practices continues to be a rocky one. Currently, instead of providing services based on the needs of students as described by IDEA and the Civil Rights Act, many school districts offer pre-specified

special programs where students are placed regardless of their needs. This practice often results in the proverbial problem of a 'square peg in a round hole'. Moreover, these "special" special education programs are often isolated from the rest of the school community, with no opportunities for interactions between special education and general education. Even though there is research to support the efficacy of inclusion and access to the general education curriculum, many schools continue to struggle to provide these services.

The research shows that there are clear benefits to students accessing the general curriculum. We know that students are more engaged when in general education classrooms. Research clearly indicates that students benefit more from receiving instruction when they are in general education contexts and their instruction focuses on both general education curriculum and functional activities within those contexts.

There are some basic tenets that apply to the learning of all students. The same tenets needs also to be applied to students who qualify for special education services:

1. Students with disabilities are students first. Students have a broad range of strengths and needs and it is the job of our schools to support diverse learners.
2. All students have a basic right to an education. Standards-based reform has made a commitment that all learners achieve. We need to extend the same high expectations to students who qualify for special education services.
3. Content and Context matter. Where a student learns and what they learn has a major impact on feelings of community, the quality of education, and feelings of membership and self worth. Students and their families value inclusion, high-quality instruction, and access to the core curriculum. These areas do not need to happen in isolation.
4. Students need to perceive themselves as learners, which makes it imperative for teachers to address content, high expectations, and accountability measures.
5. All school personnel need to know how to offer modifications, diverse instructional strategies, and collect data so all students can participate in and demonstrate progress in the general education content standards and in integrated learning environments.

Access to general education and inclusive learning for all students can have a great impact on quality of life for individuals with and without disabilities. General education practices require students to come together in common locations and form a community of learners who support each other's progress. The diversity of students in this learning community enables students to explore perspectives that differ from their own, to develop an understanding of different cultures, and to form meaningful relationships. These practices contribute to a connected society, individual feelings of self worth, and justice for all human beings.

I anxiously wait for the day when we acknowledge segregation as the outlier and inclusive practices as the norm. We will all benefit so much.

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Dr. Cassie Martin is on the APL Advisory Board. Dr. Martin is a specialist in the areas of education policy, strategies to support students in accessing the general curriculum, and the use of functional approaches to challenging behavior. Dr. Martin has a broad range of experiences that include partnering with schools and school districts to identify resources and organizational structures that facilitate and support community, membership, and quality educational opportunities for all students.