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## Front Matter and Introduction

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# **Inclusive Classrooms: From Access to Engagement**

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*Valentine Burr*

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**Prioritizing Opportunities For Interpersonal And Intrapersonal  
Development For Children With Physical Disabilities In Inclusive  
Classrooms**

*Daniel Atkins*



# Inclusive Classrooms: From Access to Engagement

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# Introduction

*Valentine Burr*

In the late 1990s I taught at one of the first full-inclusion public high schools in New York City. It was a small innovative school trying to hold its own against the increasingly entrenched grip of high-stakes testing. We were fully inclusive in the sense that we avoided tracking, and students with and without disabilities participated in all of their content-area classes together. Two of us made up the special education “team,” and while the school was far from perfect and struggled with the growing pains of a new institution, my partner and I were given wide space to experiment.

Through trial and error we patched together a system balanced between working with teachers and working with students. We consulted and planned with the general education teachers and, when we could convince them, occasionally cotaught. We “pushed in” to support students in their classes and “pulled out” to provide more targeted support individually or in small groups. Given the pervasive literacy struggles faced by the majority of the students in the school, our work often extended beyond students with [Individualized Education Plans](#) (IEPs); need—not labels—drove our work. We even taught a few self-contained sections, one for students with the most intense literacy needs and another for students who needed support in developing study and organizational skills.

We could focus on the needs and capabilities of our students and make fluid decisions either to work with them individually, in small groups, or in their classes, or to work directly with their content-area teachers to best support the students’ access to the general education curriculum. Inclusion in this context was a mind-set, not a structure. It was imperfect and messy, but creative and responsive.

## Current Trends

My experience was part of a national trend toward inclusive schools and classrooms, which began to take off in the 1980s with the regular education initiative (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). Over time the underlying structures of inclusion have continued to evolve. The focus of [Inclusive Classrooms: From Access to Engagement](#) is the history of that evolution as well as an examination of one of its current iterations, the cotaught classroom, in which a general and a special educator share teaching responsibilities for a group of children with and without disabilities.[1]

In many ways, the expansion of inclusion classrooms is a step toward fulfilling the promises of both the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA) and the disability rights movement to ensure access, equity, and full citizenship for children with disabilities. At the same time, the field of special education continues to wrestle with definitions of disability rooted in a medical framework as well as social constructivist definitions of disability informed by legacies of the disability rights movement; and the fields of disabilities studies and, more recently, disability studies in education (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008).

The paradox of special education is that it seeks services, supports, and equitable access through a system that labels children and by extension separates them, often in ways that perpetuate systemic biases based on race, culture, class, and ableist assumptions about normative abilities (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Hehir, 2002). The fields of disability studies and disability studies in education have had an increasingly significant impact on special education and on the evolution of inclusion.

One major shift has been rooting the “problem” in the environment rather than the individual. In the early days of inclusion, students had to be deemed “ready” to be placed in a general education setting. Today, the discourse is increasingly about the ways in which educational environments can be “disabling.” Universal design for learning has been one important framework focused on accessible learning environments and experiences rather than on learner deficits (Rose, Meyer & Hitchcock, 2005).

The writers in this issue of Occasional Papers advocate for models of inclusion that support children’s capabilities and challenge systemic inequities based on ableism and cultural biases. They examine the complex and changing nature of collaboration between general and special educators in inclusion settings. Underlying these essays, though not always explicitly stated, is recognition that the fields of special education and disability studies can deepen and inform each other.

Our writers both acknowledge the power of labels and disability-specific knowledge and also critically examine how social, historical, and environmental forces impact children’s and families’ experiences. Despite exemplary models in many states and districts, there are regions and schools across the nation where inclusion continues to be fraught with challenges; these essays point toward successes and suggest ways forward.

## **History**

The evolution of cotaught inclusion classrooms is linked to the history of special education as well as to more recent legislation such as No Child Left Behind (Friend et al., 2010). It is estimated that prior to the mid-1970s, one million students with disabilities were excluded from publicly funded education, and perhaps four times as many were educated in public schools without access to services and supports needed to ensure their full participation (Katzman, Gandhi, Harbour, & LaRock, 2005).

Until the late 1950s state courts upheld legislation that allowed school officials to exclude students who were deemed “uneducable” or disruptive to the learning of others (Yell, Rodgers, & Lodge Rodgers, 1998). In many states parents were denied the right to due process and the ability to challenge decisions made by local school officials. In response to these conditions, in the 1930s and 1940s parents began to form groups to advocate for the rights of their children. By the 1950s organizations such as the National Association for Retarded Citizens began to appear and became powerful lobbying and advocacy voices. Fueled by the legislative successes of the civil rights movement, parents of children with disabilities brought the first lawsuits against states and boards of education.

The plaintiffs in *Brown v. Board of Education* argued for and won equal protection under the law as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. The courts found that when a state provides public education to any of its citizenry, it must provide that service equally to all of its citizenry. Notably, protections against segregation were extended to a “class”—in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the class of African American children. Citing *Brown*, parents began to file lawsuits, arguing that children with disabilities were a class that had been systemically denied equal access to the public education system (Yell et al., 1998).

Two early and pivotal cases, both from 1972, were the *Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens v. Pennsylvania (PARC)* and *Mills v. the Board of Education of the District of Columbia (Mills)*. *PARC* found that students with intellectual disabilities (then called mental retardation) were capable of receiving benefit from schooling and could not be denied access to a publicly funded education. This set the precedent for a “free and appropriate education” that is a central tenet of current federal law. *Mills* likewise found both that children with disabilities could not be excluded from public schooling and that parents had the right to due process regarding assessment and placement decisions (Zettel & Ballard, 1982, as cited in Yell et al., 1998).

While these cases focused on access and placement, other cases—notably *Diana v. The State Board of Education* (1970) and *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972)—challenged biased assessment procedures and established children’s right to linguistically and culturally appropriate evaluations; like *PARC* and *Mills*, these decisions subsequently informed federal legislation. The continuing overrepresentation of children of color in special education suggests, however, that these issues are far from resolved.

As parents were fighting for access and rights in schools, the disability rights movement, forged by people with disabilities, was fighting for equity in the public and private spheres. The movement worked to raise public consciousness at the state and national levels about these issues. By 1974 most states had passed some form of legislation guaranteeing children with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate education. It was becoming increasingly clear, however, that federal legislation was needed to safeguard all children. In 1975 Congress passed the [Education for All Handicapped Children Act](#) (EAHCA, or (PL) 94–142), renamed the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA) in 1990.

Central to IDEA is the right to a [free and appropriate education](#) (FAPE). FAPE is based on the principle of “zero-reject,” according to which no child can be excluded from public school. In addition, IDEA states that children have the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment. This is, essentially a mandate for inclusion: the first setting to be considered for a child with a disability should be the general education classroom of their local public school, with added supports and services as needed. If this setting cannot appropriately meet the needs of a child, then more restrictive settings can be considered. However, while inclusion is mandated, the definition of “appropriate” remains undefined and continues to be the source of significant litigation as well as one of the reasons that such a wide range of models for inclusion have existed over the years.

## **Inclusion: What Came Before**

In the opening essay of this volume, [Inclusion: What Came Before](#), Judith Lesch's firsthand account of her teaching experiences from the late 1970s through the mid-1990s takes us on a journey through the evolving approaches to inclusion. Hers is a nuanced look at the "promises, contradictions, and complexities of educating children with disabilities in...the 'least restrictive environment.'" She points out that while labeling is the first step toward accessing hard-fought-for services, particularly for children with high-incidence disabilities (such as learning and emotional disabilities), it can also be of "questionable validity" and lead to stigma.

Lesch advocates for models of inclusion based on need rather than labels, yet recognizes that labels have helped to drive much-needed research, such as the studies leading to the vast strides that have been made during the past decade in understanding children with autism spectrum disorders. She reflects on the power of inclusion to realize "ideals of social justice and equality for all children," to create a more inclusive society, and to extend teaching methods. Yet she brings a critical eye to inclusive practices, recognizing the need children with disabilities may have for a peer group and the uniqueness of children's and families' changing needs over time.

At the end of Lesch's career as a special education teacher, a new model for inclusion—the cotaught classroom—was just becoming popular. In the 1980s and 1990s it had become increasingly clear that models of special education were producing dismal results for too many children. Graduation rates of children with special needs—and by extension, rates of entry into higher education and employment—remained low, despite the newly gained access to public schooling and the developing field of special education that was intended to meet children's specific learning needs (Friend et al., 2010; McLaughlin, 2010).

Educators increasingly turned their attention to ensuring access to the general education curriculum and to outcomes for children with disabilities. This focus on outcomes fit in with the increasingly hegemonic standards-based education movement and high-stakes testing agenda of the 1990s. These shifting priorities led to legislative changes. In 1997 IDEA was reauthorized to ensure that the majority of students with disabilities would participate in all district and statewide assessments (prior to this, many students with disabilities had been exempt from those assessments); in 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) similarly ensured that most students with disabilities would participate in such assessments, tying test scores to school funding and requiring states to disaggregate data for children with disabilities.

These changes in the legislation have played a major role in increasing the numbers of children with disabilities who have been given access to the general education curriculum, increasingly in cotaught classrooms (Friend et al., 2010; McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007). Herein lies another paradox: while the push for participation in assessments may be part of what is driving important changes in inclusive practice,

there is concern that the push toward standardization is incompatible with the principle of individualization at the core of IDEA (McLaughlin, 2010). Teachers in inclusion classrooms feel this struggle daily as they work to serve the increasingly diverse and complex needs of their students in the context of tighter controls over content, methods, and outcomes.

While teacher evaluation and compensation is increasingly tied to student test scores, little research has been done on the implications of using current value-added models to measure coteaching performance in inclusion classrooms, or even on the full implications of including more children with disabilities in standardized testing (McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007). Finally, although the number of cotaught classrooms has increased, little empirical data has been collected on their “success.” Many of the existing studies examine perceptions of coteaching rather than specific outcomes for students with and without disabilities (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; Friend et al., 2010). While these perceptions are for the most part favorable, more research is certainly needed.

Given the sustained growth of inclusion classrooms, educators must continue to examine and when appropriate challenge current practices and policies through research and advocacy. If driven by the needs, abilities, and rights of children rather than by the needs of a system focused on test scores, inclusion has the potential to realize one of the central goals of special education and the disability rights movement—that of social justice (Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006).

### **Doing the Civil Right Thing**

In [\*Doing the Civil Right Thing: Supporting Children with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms\*](#), David J. Connor and Kristen Goldmansour explore cotaught inclusion classrooms through the lens of the social justice narrative. They write about the parents who asserted “that it was their children’s civil right to be educated within a diverse classroom, one that truly mirrored the nation’s population.” They critique the alternative to inclusion as “segregation,” which results in “devaluation, a loss in cultural capital for individuals” and argue that cotaught classrooms can upend “artificial notions of ‘normalcy’ that have served to diminish and devalue ‘disabled’ children.”

In their examination of one exemplary cotaught classroom, they look at what works. Too often the discourse on inclusion is one of critique and problem identification. While the field needs to continually turn a self-critical eye on its work, an examination of successful practice opens possibilities rather than focusing on hurdles. Connor and Goldmansour look at the elements of successful collaboration and examine concrete practices that teachers employ to make curriculum accessible while meeting each child’s specific needs.

To realize this vision requires challenging traditional understandings of the relationship between general and special education. In the most intimate way, a cotaught classroom forces two often-separated worlds to come together. Just as this joining can impact the practice of partner teachers, it



has the potential to change practices in the larger field. Schools of education are just beginning to include support and training for coteaching across disciplines in their programs (Friend et al., 2010).

At Bank Street College there is a growing recognition of the ways in which our organizational structures as well as the historical tensions inherent to progressive and special education have impeded the sharing of expertise across the special and general education divide. To better mirror the realities of the field today, a small group of general and special education faculty piloted a new collaborative advisement model with graduate students in their fieldwork year. In another pilot program, general and special education faculty members partnered with Bank Street School for Children teachers to observe individual children and develop strategies to better support their progress in a general education setting. These are small steps, but ones that begin to suggest innovative ways to create dialogue and share expertise.

### **Overcoming Barriers to Coteaching**

In [Overcoming Barriers to Coteaching](#), Seamus O'Connor, a high school special education teacher, shares a story of bridging a divide. He takes a clear and honest look at the evolution of his relationship with his coteaching partner, Carol. In doing so, he explores themes of equity, trust, and negotiated differences in building a collaborative classroom. The process he describes is not easy. He writes:

In addition to entailing the risk of relinquishing authority, good-faith coteaching involves opening up your every act in a classroom to observation and commentary by another professional, questioning your fundamental beliefs about teaching and schools, confronting sharp personality differences, and changing or scrapping potentially all of your usual classroom procedures.

But despite all the challenges, the work is transformative, deepening and extending both his and Carol's skills and—perhaps more importantly—their capacity to engage in reflective practice.

### **From Access to Interaction**

Finally, in [From Access to Interaction: Prioritizing Opportunities for Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Development for Children with Physical Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms](#), Daniel Atkins calls us to reflective practice. His seven-year-old son, Owen, is in a cotaught inclusive classroom in New York City. Atkins writes that access is merely an entry point, and that by viewing the adaptations educators make to allow Owen's physical participation in academic and social activities as the end point of successful inclusion, we accept ableist assumptions about the educational needs of children with disabilities.

Atkins's stories illustrate the way that such assumptions “become dysfunctional when the educational and developmental services provided to disabled children focus inordinately on the characteristics of their disability” (Hehir, 2002, p. 4). Atkins calls on educators to see beyond access to identify “core moments” for child-centered experiential learning in inclusion classrooms. He warns that “[t]he process of scaffolding the child's inclusion in the activities or interactions of the day can too often become

conflated or confused with the process of scaffolding the child’s physical ability to gain access to those activities or interactions.”

While Atkins writes specifically about physical access, this perspective holds for any kind of access we try to create in inclusion classrooms. Atkins acknowledges that to create opportunities that turn access into interaction, teachers must be deeply reflective about the social, emotional, and educational goals of their curriculum. Assuming competence on the part of every child, teachers must carefully and collaboratively “create rich opportunities” for all their students.

### **Persistent Problems and a Way Forward**

We have not yet achieved the goals of IDEA and the disability rights movement, nor have we fully realized a vision of the role and structure of inclusive education. While there has been progress, students with disabilities’ graduation and achievement rates continue to lag behind those of their typically developing peers (Blackorby et al., 2010; McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007).

While families have fought vigorously for their children’s right to be in inclusion classrooms, some families, if given the choice, continue to opt for self-contained settings. In some cases, this may be due to the lack of enough consistently high-quality public school inclusion classrooms<sup>[2]</sup> and in others to parents’ desires for small, specialized settings for their children. Parents with resources and knowledge are more likely to be able to get placements for their children in funded independent special education schools, which creates a two-tier system. Inequity also plays out in the continued overrepresentation of children of color in special education. Inclusion will never fulfill its promise of social justice without an ongoing critical examination of the broader social and political issues that lead to these inequities (Artiles et al., 2006). Finally, the standards movement, high-stakes testing, and value-added teacher accountability methods make children with disabilities as well as the general and special educators who teach them increasingly vulnerable.

The essays in this issue highlight examples of successful practice and point to directions for the future. While creating strong inclusion models that assume full participation for children with disabilities, we must understand the history of inclusive education and the ways in which the past impacts the present for ill and for good. Models of inclusion should be flexible and diverse enough to preserve a continuum of supports and also challenge the assumption that all children and families will benefit from the same approach. Central to strengthening inclusive practice is our continued need to transform the relationship between general and special education. Most important, we must see children as capable agents of their own growth and development and create opportunities not simply for their access to general education but for their rich engagement in learning.

[1] In New York City, for example, this process is referred to as both collaborative team teaching (CTT) and integrated coteaching (ICT).

[2] While this issue of *Occasional Papers* focuses on traditional public schools, charter schools have become an increasingly important factor in discussions of inclusion. Statistically, charters tend to vastly underserve children with disabilities; at the same time, some have been established with the mission to be fully inclusive schools. A fuller exploration is beyond the scope of this issue but essential to the larger public discourse.

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