

FULL INCLUSION

Authored by
mohammad looti

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FULL INCLUSION

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Special Education; Educational Psychology; Disability Studies

1. Core Definition

Full inclusion, in the context of special education, refers to the practice of educating students with disabilities entirely within the general education classroom alongside their non-disabled peers for the full duration of the school day. This model mandates that all specialized support services, supplementary aids, and related accommodations necessary for the student's success must be delivered directly within the regular classroom environment, often located at the student's neighborhood or home school. Unlike older models that utilized "pull-out" services or separated resource rooms, full inclusion emphasizes the student's complete immersion into the regular educational setting as a fundamental right and a necessary prerequisite for optimal social and academic growth. The defining feature of this approach is the absolute minimization--or complete elimination--of time spent outside the general education classroom, regardless of the severity of the student's disability.

The philosophy underlying **full inclusion** posits that segregation, even for brief periods or in specialized rooms, inherently limits a student's opportunities for social modeling and developing essential life skills crucial for later integration into community life. Proponents argue that the general education environment represents the "least restrictive environment" (LRE) in its purest form, thereby fulfilling the spirit, if not always the letter, of major disability legislation. This integration is not merely physical proximity; rather, it demands meaningful participation in the curriculum, adapting teaching methodologies, materials, and expectations to ensure that the student receives a free appropriate public education (FAPE) while maximizing interaction with their typical peers. This framework necessitates comprehensive collaboration between general education teachers, special education providers, therapists, and administrative staff to restructure the learning environment rather than forcing the student to adapt unilaterally to a rigid system.

Operationally, the implementation of **full inclusion** relies heavily on the provision of intensive in-class supports, which may include the use of co-teaching models (where a general education teacher and a special education teacher jointly plan and instruct), the deployment of paraprofessionals or educational assistants, and the sophisticated use of assistive technology tailored to individual student needs. Furthermore, successful inclusion requires significant adjustments to the curriculum through methods such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and highly individualized differentiated instruction, ensuring that the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals are addressed seamlessly within the context of general academic standards. The commitment to the home school environment is also critical, reinforcing the student's sense of belonging and community membership, thereby promoting community inclusion as a broader

outcome of educational practice.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The movement toward **full inclusion** emerged from a significant paradigm shift in disability rights philosophy that gained momentum in the latter half of the 20th century. Historically, students with significant disabilities were often excluded entirely from public education or placed in segregated, often institutional, settings. The early advocacy efforts focused first on securing access to education--a process termed normalization and deinstitutionalization. Key philosophical frameworks, particularly the normalization principle articulated by Bengt Nirje and later refined by Wolf Wolfensberger, advocated for making available to people with disabilities patterns and conditions of everyday life which are as close as possible to the norms and patterns of the mainstream society. This set the stage for dismantling segregated educational structures.

The legal impetus for inclusion began with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975 (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)). This legislation enshrined the mandate of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), stipulating that students with disabilities must be educated alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate, and that removal from the general classroom should only occur when the nature or severity of the disability prevents education in the regular classroom with supplementary aids and services. While IDEA formally established LRE as a continuum of placements, advocates for **full inclusion** interpreted LRE as a mandate that requires the general education classroom be the default and preferred setting for all students, arguing that the burden of proof should always rest on the justification for removal, rather than the justification for placement.

The transition from the concept of "mainstreaming" (which typically involved integrating students only for non-academic activities or pulling them out for specialized instruction) to "inclusion" (which implies membership and participation) marked a critical evolution. By the 1980s and 1990s, proponents began campaigning for "full inclusion," arguing that anything less than 100% placement was discriminatory and failed to adequately prepare students for life in an integrated society. This movement was strongly supported by organizations advocating for individuals with severe disabilities, who contended that even these students benefited profoundly from the social context and typical behavioral models available in the general education setting, pushing schools to develop creative, in-class solutions rather than relying on separate classrooms.

3. Legislative and Philosophical Foundations

The legislative grounding for **full inclusion** rests primarily within the framework of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States, alongside complementary federal civil rights legislation such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities

Act (ADA). IDEA requires the provision of a **FAPE** and mandates that placement decisions must adhere to the LRE principle. While IDEA defines LRE as a continuum ranging from general education to highly restrictive residential settings, inclusion advocates assert that the legislative preference for the general education classroom, coupled with the stipulation that schools must provide necessary supplementary aids and services, effectively makes the general classroom the ideal LRE for nearly all students.

Philosophically, the movement is deeply rooted in social justice and civil rights principles, viewing exclusion from the general educational experience as a violation of fundamental rights and an institutionalized form of discrimination. The core belief is that disability is a natural part of the human experience and that diverse learning needs should be accommodated through systemic adjustments rather than by isolating individuals. This perspective rejects the "medical model" of disability, which focuses on 'fixing' the individual, and embraces the **social model**, which emphasizes removing societal and structural barriers to participation. Consequently, the focus shifts from whether a student is "ready" for the regular classroom to whether the regular classroom is adequately prepared and supported to educate all students.

The commitment to the **home school** placement is another critical philosophical component. Full inclusion asserts that students should attend the same schools they would attend if they did not have a disability, ensuring they are educated within their own community. This maintains social networks crucial for development, facilitates easier parental involvement, and reinforces the idea that all children belong to the local school community. IEP teams, in making placement decisions under the full inclusion model, must demonstrate that they have exhausted all possible in-class supports and adaptations before considering any temporary or partial removal, thus placing the educational obligation squarely on the general system to accommodate the student fully.

4. Key Characteristics and Implementation Models

Successful implementation of **full inclusion** depends on several key operational characteristics that differentiate it from mere physical placement. Firstly, it requires the establishment of collaborative teaching environments, most notably through co-teaching models. In co-teaching, the general education teacher (who possesses content expertise) and the special education teacher (who possesses expertise in instructional adaptation and specific student needs) share responsibility for planning, delivery, and assessment of instruction for all students in the classroom. This shared responsibility ensures that the specialized curriculum adaptations required by the IEP are naturally woven into the general classroom activities, preventing the student with disabilities from experiencing a disjointed educational experience.

Secondly, **full inclusion** necessitates comprehensive support systems provided in a non-stigmatizing manner. This includes the strategic deployment of supplementary aids and services

such as assistive technology (e.g., text-to-speech software, communication devices), modifications to physical classroom layouts, and academic accommodations (e.g., extended time, alternative assessments). Crucially, the support staff, including paraprofessionals, are trained to facilitate independence and social interaction, rather than serving as barriers or isolating the student. The goal is to fade unnecessary support as the student gains skills, ensuring that the student's presence in the classroom is meaningful and promotes authentic engagement with both peers and content.

A third essential characteristic is a flexible, adapted curriculum facilitated by practices like **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**. UDL is a proactive framework that guides the design of educational environments and products so that they are inherently accessible to the widest range of students, eliminating the need for retrofitting accommodations after instruction has begun. This includes providing multiple means of representation (how content is presented), multiple means of action and expression (how students demonstrate learning), and multiple means of engagement (how students are motivated). By integrating UDL, general educators can address the diversity of learning needs present in an inclusive classroom, ensuring that students with disabilities access the curriculum alongside their peers without excessive reliance on separate, isolated materials.

5. Distinctions from Related Concepts (Mainstreaming vs. Inclusion)

It is vital to distinguish **full inclusion** from older, less integrated models such as mainstreaming and even partial inclusion. **Mainstreaming**, which gained popularity following the initial implementation of EAHCA in the 1970s, focused on preparing students with disabilities in segregated settings (like resource rooms or self-contained classes) and then integrating them into the general education environment only when they were deemed "ready" to benefit. Typically, this integration was limited to non-academic subjects (e.g., art, music, physical education) or brief periods of academic instruction. The fundamental difference is that mainstreaming views the special education setting as the student's primary placement, requiring the student to earn the right to enter the general classroom.

In contrast, **inclusion** (even in its partial form) views the general education classroom as the student's primary placement and right, and focuses on bringing the necessary services and supports to the student. However, **partial inclusion** still utilizes a continuum of services, allowing for students to spend a portion of their day--perhaps 10% to 50%--outside the general classroom for specialized instruction in academic areas where their needs are deemed too intensive for in-class support alone. This often results in a "push-in/pull-out" hybrid model. While an improvement over mainstreaming, partial inclusion still interrupts the student's sense of belonging and community, and the frequent transitions can sometimes limit overall instructional time.

Full inclusion eliminates the pull-out model entirely. The core definitional constraint is that the

student must receive all instruction, supports, and related services within the general education classroom for the entire school day, barring only rare, medically necessary exceptions. This model is based on the belief that removing a child, even briefly, contradicts the LRE principle and diminishes the social benefits of peer interaction. Therefore, any specialized service, whether it be speech therapy, occupational therapy, or intensive reading intervention, must be delivered either through the co-teaching partnership or via individualized service provision that occurs discreetly within the general classroom setting, ensuring the student remains a full, integrated member of the class community at all times.

6. Pedagogical Implications and Curricular Adaptation

The successful operation of a **full inclusion** environment places significant pedagogical demands on educators, requiring a departure from traditional, standardized teaching methods. General educators must transition from a model focused on delivering content uniformly to a model centered on facilitating diverse learning through flexible instruction. This shift is operationalized through rigorous professional development focused on implementing frameworks like **Differentiated Instruction**, which involves modifying content (what the student learns), process (how the student learns), and product (how the student demonstrates learning) based on individual readiness, interest, and learning profiles. In a fully inclusive setting, differentiation is not an occasional strategy but the default mode of instructional delivery.

Furthermore, the adoption of the aforementioned **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** principles is fundamentally non-negotiable in full inclusion settings. UDL moves differentiation upstream, ensuring that curricular materials, assessments, and learning activities are designed from the outset with inherent flexibility to address the wide spectrum of cognitive, physical, and sensory needs present in the classroom. For example, rather than providing one reading assignment, a UDL approach offers the same information through text, audio recording, and visual media, allowing students with varying literacy or auditory processing abilities to access the core concepts independently. This proactive design minimizes the need for burdensome individual accommodations after the fact, benefiting all learners, not just those with identified disabilities.

Curricular adaptation within **full inclusion** also involves careful consideration of the student's functional skills and IEP goals. For students with severe intellectual or developmental disabilities, the curriculum may need significant modification (such as utilizing a parallel or alternative curriculum focused on functional life skills) while still maintaining physical presence and social participation in the general classroom activities. Co-teachers must skillfully balance the need to teach grade-level standards to the majority of students while providing individualized, meaningful instruction to students whose goals focus on communication, self-care, or vocational preparation. This requires meticulous, co-planned lessons where specialized instruction is embedded seamlessly into the context of the general curriculum, often utilizing peer supports and

collaborative learning groups to foster social competence.

7. Significance and Impact on Educational Outcomes

The implementation of **full inclusion** has demonstrated significant positive impacts on educational outcomes, both for students with disabilities and for their non-disabled peers. For students with disabilities, research consistently suggests that placement in general education settings, when accompanied by appropriate supports, leads to improved academic performance, particularly in literacy and mathematics, compared to similar students placed in segregated settings. Beyond academics, the immersive environment provides invaluable opportunities for social development, enabling students to observe and practice typical social behaviors, communication skills, and appropriate peer interactions, which are essential for post-school success and independent living.

The longitudinal impact of **full inclusion** is particularly notable in promoting positive adult outcomes. Students who spend more time in general education classrooms are more likely to pursue post-secondary education, secure competitive employment, and participate actively in community life after graduation. This success is often attributed to the high expectations, rich language environment, and challenging academic content inherent in the general curriculum, which are often diluted or absent in segregated settings. Inclusion ensures that students are exposed to the full range of opportunities available in their school, minimizing the likelihood of being overlooked for extracurricular activities or social roles simply due to their disability classification.

Furthermore, **full inclusion** benefits non-disabled peers by fostering an environment of acceptance, empathy, and understanding of human diversity. Interaction with peers who have disabilities helps typical students develop critical social-emotional skills, reduces prejudice, and enhances their capacity for collaboration and supportive behavior. Teachers in inclusive settings report that the necessity of adapting instruction to meet diverse needs often improves their overall pedagogical practice, leading to better outcomes for all students, as UDL strategies designed for disabled learners often improve comprehension and engagement for the entire class. The normalization of diversity within the classroom prepares all students for participation in an increasingly diverse workforce and global community.

8. Debates, Criticisms, and Implementation Challenges

Despite its strong philosophical and legal underpinnings, **full inclusion** remains a subject of intense professional debate and faces significant implementation challenges. One primary criticism centers on the lack of resources and preparation required to successfully implement the model, particularly in underfunded public school districts. Critics argue that placing students with complex needs into general education classrooms without providing sufficient training for general education teachers, adequate specialized staff (such as co-teachers or therapists), or necessary assistive

technology results in "dumping" rather than true inclusion. This practice often leads to poor outcomes for the student with disabilities, who may not receive the intensive specialized instruction they require, and increased stress and workload for the general education teacher.

A second major concern involves students with severe or profound cognitive and behavioral needs. Opponents of the **full inclusion** model argue that for a small population of students, the general classroom environment may genuinely constitute a highly restrictive environment rather than the least restrictive one. For instance, students requiring constant one-on-one medical support, highly specialized therapeutic intervention, or those whose behaviors pose a significant safety risk to themselves or others, may require environments specifically designed to manage these needs, such as specialized labs or self-contained therapeutic classrooms, arguing that the intensity of specialized service cannot always be discreetly or effectively delivered within the general classroom structure without fundamentally disrupting the learning of 25 or more typical peers.

Finally, the debate often touches upon the fidelity of instruction and the potential for a "watering down" of the curriculum. Critics worry that in a fully inclusive setting, general education teachers may spend disproportionate time focusing on the needs of students with disabilities, or conversely, that the pressure to cover standardized content may lead to the neglect of individualized IEP goals. Ensuring that the academic rigor is maintained for all students while simultaneously providing intensive, individualized support is an ongoing tension point that requires continuous, high-quality professional development, adequate staffing ratios, and a strong administrative commitment to prioritizing inclusive practices over segregated efficiency models. The success of **full inclusion** ultimately hinges on treating services as portable and universal, rather than setting up separate, specialized systems.

Further Reading

[Inclusion \(education\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\) - Official Site](#)

[Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\) Guidelines](#)

[Least Restrictive Environment \(LRE\) Concepts and Legal Framework](#)