

# Chapter 1

## An Overview of Inclusive Education in the United States

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Being a country of diversity, the United States has had a long tradition of research and practices in special education in the form of inclusion. Since passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975, now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, a free appropriate public education has been available to all children with disabilities. However, inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms has taken decades to be considered appropriate practice. Controversies, research, and legislation have shaped a collaborative relationship between general and special education. A wide range of political, epistemological, and institutional factors have facilitated a more child-centered public education. This chapter presents an overview of current issues and practices in the inclusion of students with disabilities in the U.S. The topics include: historical background; public laws that led to successful inclusion; categories and prevalence, and identification strategies; and inclusion practices for students with mild-to-moderate and selective significant disabilities for providing them equal and appropriate educational experiences in the mainstream classrooms.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In today's schools students with disabilities who receive special education services are typically included in general education classrooms with

their typically developing peers. Special education is not a place, but rather a set of instructional services. Further, *inclusion* is not just a place or a classroom setting either; it is a philosophy of education that integrates children with disabilities into educational settings in which meaningful learning occurs (Osgood, 2005). Inclusion means that all

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students, regardless of disability are included in the school community as valued members of the school. As valued members of the school, students with disabilities actively participate in the academic and extra-curricular activities of the school community; and they are given the instructional and behavioral support to succeed (McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling, 2009). Specifically, students with disabilities have access to the same educational opportunities as their peers. Unlike the dated practice of mainstreaming, in an inclusive classroom students are participating members of the general education classroom and do not belong to any other separate, specialized environment based on the characteristics of their disability (Halvorsen & Neary, 2009).

The period between 1900 and the 1970's is typically referred to as the *isolation phase*. Children with disabilities were segregated from their non-disabled peers for centuries. In the first half of the twentieth century, when the free public compulsory education began nationwide, students with moderate to severe disabilities were often denied the opportunity to receive equal treatment in the classrooms with their peers. Throughout the twentieth century educators, parents and activists have called for more equitable, *normal* treatment of these students.

Landmark legislation and litigation, significant political events, and the courageous advocacy of parents, teachers and educators shaped the *integration phase* of services for students with disabilities. The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 made special education mandatory in the United States. Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was actually the first protection of American students with disabilities against discriminatory treatment by public education agencies (Wong, 1993). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 was modified several times to strengthen the protection of students with disabilities. It was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

(IDEA) in 1990 and reauthorized in 1997 and, again, in 2004. During this time the identification of integration of children with disabilities into mainstream life were paramount.

The current *inclusion phase* in special education was ushered in with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 reauthorization. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) incorporates most of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements for students with disabilities. It emphasizes school accountability ensuring that students with disabilities have access to the regular classroom and are successful with the regular education curriculum. Together, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) entitle all students to be included in the general education classroom to the greatest extent possible. Performance goals and indicators for students with disabilities were established to ensure expected outcomes. Schools are accountable for making sure students with disabilities achieve expected standards and that these students be included in district- and state-wide assessments (Hope, 2009; Gartland & Strosnider, 2004; Kleinert, Kennedy, & Kearns, 1999).

The term *inclusion* is not mentioned in any U.S. educational legislation, however. It is a practice that originated by special educators, disability activists, and the parents of children with disabilities. Inclusive practices are a merger between policy activism (Will, 1986), poor academic outcomes for children with disabilities in the late 1980's (Osgood, 2005) and more recent federal legislation. For decades, the central debate in the disability community focused on who should be considered disabled, how disability should be assessed and measured, and who should bear the responsibility for planning and providing an appropriate education for students considered disabled. Even, now in the twenty first century, controversies remain about the effectiveness of special education and appropriate use of inclusive practices.

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