

INCLUSION OR SELF-CONTAINED READING:  
WHERE DO LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS LEARN BETTER?

THESIS

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By

Kristin Lynne McAdoo

State University of New York

College at Brockport

Brockport, New York

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**SUBMITTED BY:**

Kristin L. McAdoo 8/24/99  
date

**APPROVED BY:**

Deane Z. Rigg 8/29/99  
Thesis Advisor date

Arthur E. Smith 8/30/99  
Second Faculty Reader date

Scott D. Robinson 9/1/99  
Director, Graduate Studies date

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine in which type of classroom learning disabled students are more successful at learning to read. Some school districts believe that total inclusion is better for special education children's learning, while others believe that reading should be taught to students classified as learning disabled in self-contained classrooms.

The subjects involved in this study were twelve sixth grade learning disabled students in a rural Orleans County school district. These twelve students included all sixth grade learning disabled students enrolled in the district for the duration of the study. Six students, along with thirteen non-classified students, participated in the inclusion reading class taught by one regular education teacher and one special education teacher. Six other students were taught in the self-contained reading class by the same special education teacher. According to achievement test scores listed on the students' Individualized Education Plans, students in both classes had comparable ability levels.

The  $t$  test of repeated measures was used to compare the self-contained reading class to the inclusion reading class on both the Degrees of Reading Power test and the Bader Informal Reading Inventory Graded Word List. The mean growth was compared for each class on each assessment. Using a 95% confidence level and a critical  $t$  of 2.571, there was no statistically significant difference between the two classes on either test. The null hypothesis failed to be rejected.

These results show that learning disabled students are successful at learning to read in either type of class. Both groups showed acceptable growth in one school year, yet there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups.

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## CHAPTER I

### Statement of the Problem

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine in which type of classroom learning disabled students are more successful at learning to read. Some school districts believe that total inclusion is better for special education children's learning, while others believe that reading should be taught to students classified as learning disabled in self-contained classrooms.

#### Need for the Study

The debate over inclusion has been argued for many years. Numerous studies have been conducted to determine the social effects inclusion has on students (Brucker, 1994; Daniel & King, 1998; and Vaughn & Klingner, 1998). While this social impact is important to students, the academic impact is equally important, although not often addressed. It is necessary to determine in which type of classroom learning disabled students learn better.

## Definitions of Terms

The following are the definitions of the terms as they are used in this study.

Inclusion – special education students are taught in a regular classroom with a special education teacher and regular education teacher team teaching. Planning, teaching, and evaluating are done together, and the teachers do not distinguish between learning disabled and regular education students.

Self-contained – students classified by the Committee on Special Education as learning disabled are taught in a classroom by a special education teacher.

Learning disabled students – those students who have been classified as such by the school district's Committee on Special Education in accordance with the definition of the State of New York.

## Limitations

Each teacher has his or her own interpretation of what inclusion is and should be. This is also true of each individual school district. This study involves only one district and only three teachers in that district. Other teachers and districts, with different models of inclusion may demonstrate different results.

Due to the size of the district, only a small number of students was able to be involved in the study.

During the study, a policy regarding the administration of the Degrees of Reading Power test was changed. In previous years, the test was read to learning disabled students. In 1999, the policy was changed, and students were forced to read the test to themselves. Thus, the results did not show true growth, but the test administration and growth shown was consistent between the two classes.

### Summary

The debate over whether learning disabled students learn better in self-contained or inclusion classrooms has been addressed on numerous occasions. Research on this subject has shown varied results. The students' needs and successes must be the focus of the placement decision. Further research may help districts decide which placement is most appropriate for each of their learning disabled students.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of the Literature

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine in which type of classroom learning disabled students are more successful at learning to read. Some school districts believe that total inclusion is better for special education children's learning, while others believe that reading should be taught to students classified as learning disabled in self-contained classrooms.

#### Background

The passing of Public Law 94-142, the Individuals with Disabilities Act, brought the topic of inclusion into the educational spotlight. This law states that whenever appropriate, handicapped children are educated in classes with non-handicapped children. Congress views the regular classroom as the optimal setting, but acknowledged that multiple environments must be used to offer instruction to meet individual needs (Crockett & Kauffman, 1998). Formerly called the Regular Education Initiative, inclusion of learning disabled students is still a topic of controversy today.

Learning disabled children are labeled as such because there is a discrepancy between the child's potential and his or her academic achievement. Five percent of American students are learning disabled, which make up one-half



of all students receiving special education services (Kolstad, 1997). Of all special education students, one-third are in inclusion classes, one-third are in pull-out or resource classes, and one-third are in more restrictive placements (Author unknown, 1997). A problem still exists, however, as the most recent studies released show the graduation rate of special education students is 57%, while students without disabilities are at a 76% graduation rate (Lipsky & Gartner, 1998). This is an alarming statistic considering the amount of time and money spent on special education students.

The cost of educating special education students is two and two-thirds times that of regular education students. Inclusion programs rearrange how the money is spent, but do not decrease the costs (Kolstad, 1997). State and federal funding for special education programs total \$20 billion each year (Daniel & King, 1998). Even this large amount of money cannot compensate for students' academic deficits.

Learning disabled students often have reading deficits. Specific difficulties may persist throughout school careers because reading comprehension requirements are increased as students progress into middle and high school (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997). Research has shown positive and negative aspects of both inclusion and self-contained classes. There is not one clear answer as to which benefits students more.

## Benefits of Inclusion Classes

Responsible inclusion incorporated voluntary teacher participation, team teaching, time allowed for collaboration and planning between the regular education and special education teachers, student needs coming first, and availability of adequate resources (Banerji & Dailey, 1995; Brown, 1997, Klinger, 1998; Vaughn & Schumm, 1995,). Certain instructional techniques have been proven to work in inclusion classes. These include the use of cooperative groups, peer and multi-aged tutoring, paraprofessionals, and technology (Bruckner, 1994). Professional development workshops are key components to its success. Regular and special education teachers must be taught to work together and then be given the time to do so.

With more than one teacher involved in classes, students can all receive more professional help (Brown, 1997). A special education teacher in Virginia said, "Typically when we make modification, we make these modifications for the learning disabled students, with them in mind, but for everyone at the same time.... You know, it helps everyone" (Baker & Zigmond, 1995). Non-disabled students are able to learn the strengths of their disabled peers, and learning disabled students can gain a better self-concept by becoming a part of the whole group. In a study by Banajeri and Dailey (1995), learning disabled students in grades 2-5 made academic and affective gains at a rate comparable to normally achieving students in their inclusion classes.

Students who participate in inclusion classes also gain abilities that will help in the future. Learning disabled students must learn to understand their strengths and weaknesses and ask for assistance, which will increase their chances for success in post-secondary education (Durlak & Rose, 1994). Advocates claim that when learning disabled students are held to the same expectations as other students, their academic achievement is enhanced (Daniel & King, 1998). These skills will help not only in college, but also in career and adult life situations.

#### Drawbacks to Self-Contained Classes

According to Brown (1997), students waste valuable teaching time when traveling to self-contained classes. Self-contained classes have fewer positive role models, and discussions are almost non-existent because of speech and language deficits (Vann, 1997). Unfortunately, non-disabled students are not accepting and direct negative comments toward learning disabled students, and learning disabled students are often ignored and excluded from activities (Hepler, 1994). Student potential is limited when labels are applied (Daniel & King, 1998). They only perform as well as their labels say they should be able to perform. Self-contained classes are considered more restrictive than resource rooms or regular classrooms and are considered less appropriate for learning disabled students (Kolstad, 1997). The effect of these classes on students' self-concepts has also been questioned.

Although self-concepts of learning disabled students are not seriously affected by self-contained classes themselves, the self-concept of girls is more vulnerable to placement than boys (Beltempo & Achille, 1990). It also should be considered that learning disabled students' self-concepts have suffered through repeated failures in regular classrooms before they were identified. To move a child to a self-contained classroom could increase one's self-image in school (Beltempo & Achille, 1990). On the contrary, Daniel and King (1998) found students placed in an inclusion classroom to have lower self-esteem than those students in self-contained classes.

#### Drawbacks to Inclusion Classes

It is unfortunate that most inclusion teachers do not take the needs of their learning disabled students into account when planning or teaching their lessons (Kolstad, 1997). Many teachers have never received any special education training. As regular education teachers, they do not know how to teach learning disabled students. They use special education teachers as human resources (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995). Special education teachers not only become consultant teachers and team players, but are also responsible for teaching lower-level students without IEPs who are in the inclusion classes (Baker & Zigmond, 1995). Students functioning at average and above-average levels in inclusion classes are often ignored (Daniel & King, 1998). Higher achieving students could

become bored in the inclusion classroom. Caseloads become so large that best special education practices become impossible (Sindelar, 1995).

Taylor (1996) and Daniel & King (1998) state that special education programs were originally developed as a result of general education's failure to meet the needs of special education students. Concern for the group was greater than concern for the individual students and their needs (Baker & Zigmond, 1995). In order to be successful, many learning disabled students need alternative instructional environments, teaching strategies, or materials that can't be provided within the context of a regular classroom (Learning Disabilities Association, 1993). Placement must be based on an evaluation of each student's individual needs to prevent failure (Council for Learning Disabilities, 1993).

A positive correlation exists today when comparing grade failure and dropout rates with the amount of time spent in the regular education classroom (Taylor, 1996). The study also explained that students receiving the most intense special education classes were most likely to finish school and make higher grades. The dropout rate of self-contained students was near the national average, but those with the least intensive services had a dropout rate of almost three times the national average.

#### Benefits of Self-Contained Classes

According to Kolstad (1997), special education teachers in a self-contained school raised one student's reading level by seven grade levels in only

three years. Regular teachers had previously been able to increase her reading level by only five grade levels in nine years. Special education class sizes were smaller and allowed for individual attention and improved learning. These classes were preferred by special education students.

Two studies that polled student opinion about placement (Klingner, 1998 and Vaughn & Klingner, 1998) both found that students prefer self-contained classes to inclusion classes. Further explanations are discussed in “student opinions”.

### Teacher Opinions

Teacher support and positive attitudes have a great impact on the success of inclusion classrooms. Many (83%) believe that universities should prepare teachers for inclusion (D’Alonzo, 1996). Class size, current curriculum, planning time, and quality education for all are seen by teachers as problematic (Bruneau-Balderrama, 1997 and Vaughn & Schumm, 1993). Teachers who have taken a greater number of special education classes tend to have a more positive attitude toward inclusion, while those teachers who are more experienced in the classroom tend to take on a more hostile attitude toward inclusion (Jobe, 1996 & Soodak, 1998). This could be explained because more experienced teachers most likely had fewer required special education classes in college, and many teachers do not

feel that they have the knowledge or skills needed to teach students with learning disabilities (Bruneau-Balderrama, 1997 and Vaughn & Schumm, 1995).

People tend to be resistant to the unknown factor involved in changes such as inclusion. Many teachers believe that necessary adaptations are desirable, but not possible (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995), while many more feel that inclusion is forced on teachers (Bruneau-Balderrama, 1997). Additional training and planning time is necessary for successful, responsible inclusion. Personality, teaching philosophy, and classroom management styles should be discussed, especially if team teaching is to occur (Bruneau-Balderrama, 1997). If schools do not address the human factor involved in inclusion, they can not be successful.

### Student Opinions

When polled by Klinger (1998), students in grades two through seven stated that pullout was their model of choice, but they also felt that inclusion met their academic and social needs. Of thirty-two students who had all participated in both inclusion and pullout classes, eighteen preferred the pullout model. They stated reasons including fewer kids allowing for more individualized help, easier work, and fewer distractions than a regular classroom. Nine of the students preferred inclusion. They stated that they were able to get enough help, did not miss anything, received help from classmates, and two teachers were able to help

more than one. Five students did not have a preference. The consensus was that pullout was preferable for learning, but inclusion was better for making friends.

Vaughn and Klingner (1998) found similar results in a study of third to eighth grade students. A majority of students preferred pullout classes for part of the day, while remaining in classes for the remainder of the day. In the resource room, students stated that work was easier, and students could get more help while avoiding embarrassment. They agreed that the inclusion room was better for making friends, and the special education teacher was very valuable in the regular education classroom even though most students didn't know she was the special education teacher!

In another study, Vaughn & Schumm (1993) surveyed elementary, middle, and high school students to find their feelings on regular education teachers making adaptations. Students at all age levels preferred teachers who made modifications to those who did not. They discovered that even elementary students have definite opinions about their education, and should be involved in decision-making regarding their education.

### Summary

There is no definite answer whether inclusion or self-contained classes are more appropriate for learning disabled students. Placement of these children should be determined individually and based on unique needs, not a one-size-fits-



all policy (Author unknown, 1997; Klinger, 1998; & Learning Disabilities Association, 1993). Full inclusion is unrealistic, and completely self-contained classes are inappropriate. A combination of both seems to be an appropriate alternative (Vann, 1997) until a definite conclusion is reached.

## CHAPTER III

### Design of the Study

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine in which type of classroom learning disabled students are more successful at learning to read. Some school districts believe that total inclusion is better for special education children's learning, while others believe that reading should be taught to students classified as learning disabled in self-contained classrooms.

#### Null Hypothesis

There is no statistically significant difference in reading growth between inclusion and self-contained learning disabled students as measured by the Degrees of Reading Power test and the Bader Informal Reading Inventory Graded Word Lists.

#### Methodology

#### Subjects

The subjects involved in this study were twelve sixth grade learning disabled students in a rural Orleans County school district. These twelve students

included all sixth grade learning disabled students enrolled in the district for the duration of the study. Six students, along with thirteen non-classified students, participated in the inclusion reading class taught by one regular education teacher and one special education teacher. Six other students were taught in the self-contained reading class by the same special education teacher. According to Weschler Individualized Achievement Test scores listed on the students' Individualized Education Plans, students in both classes had comparable ability levels.

All twelve learning disabled students were taught in inclusion classrooms for the remainder of the day. They were all placed in regular sixth grade homerooms and traveled to their different subject classes with these homeroom classes. Students were placed in their homerooms randomly by computer. Six learning disabled students were placed on each team, with one teacher insisting on pullout reading and the other insisting on inclusion reading and team teaching.

### Instruments

Two assessments were used to make comparisons between the inclusion reading class and the self-contained reading class. The Bader Informal Reading Inventory's Graded Word List was given in early September and late April. Scores were recorded as grade equivalents. The Degrees of Reading Power test (DRP) is given each spring by the school district. This test is comprised of 70

questions in cloze passages. Scores from the spring 1998 administration were used as baseline and compared with the scores from the spring of 1999. Sixth graders were given level G-6 of the DRP. It should be noted that due to a change in policy, the test was read to the students in the spring of 1998, but was not read to the students in 1999. Scores, therefore, do not represent a true measurement of growth, but only a record of growth for comparison purposes.

### Procedures

Students were given individual Bader Informal Reading Inventory Graded Word List pretests in late September. This assessment was given by the special education teacher involved with both classes. DRP scores from 1998 were recorded from student reading folders. These data were recorded for use as baseline for comparison in the spring.

Students were taught in their respective reading classes all year. No comparisons were made between the two groups during the year. Six students had been placed in a self-contained reading class, and six were taught in an inclusion reading class. Both classes had the same special education teacher working with them, so the same teaching styles were used in both classes. Both classes also utilized the same curriculum, consistently participated in the same reading programs and incentive programs, and had forty-minute reading classes. Every effort was made to keep the classes as similar as possible. The inclusion

class, however, had true team teaching each day with the regular education and special education teachers.

Assessments were again administered to determine levels at the end of the year. The Bader IRI Graded Word List was given in late April, and the DRP was administered district-wide in early June. As before, tests were administered by the special education teacher.

### Summary

Twelve learning disabled students from a rural Orleans County school district participated in this comparison between a self-contained reading class and an inclusion reading class. The Bader Informal Reading Inventory Graded Word List and the Degrees of Reading Power test, level G-6, were used to measure growth over an eight month period.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings and Interpretations of Data

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine in which type of classroom learning disabled students are more successful at learning to read. Some school districts believe that total inclusion is better for special education children's learning, while others believe that reading should be taught to students classified as learning disabled in self-contained classrooms.

#### Null Hypothesis

There is no significant difference in reading growth between inclusion and self-contained learning disabled students as measured by the Degrees of Reading Power test and the Bader Informal Reading Inventory Graded Word Lists.

#### Analysis of Data

The  $t$  test of repeated measures was used to compare the self-contained reading class to the inclusion reading class on both the Degrees of Reading Power test and the Bader Informal Reading Inventory Graded Word Lists. The mean

growth was compared for each class on each test. Using a 95% confidence level, the critical  $t$  was  $\pm 2.571$ .

The DRP test  $t$  score was 0, which shows no statistically significant difference, and the null hypothesis fails to be rejected (see Table 1). There is also no statistically significant difference for the Bader Graded Word Lists. The  $t$  score is 1.28, which is also less than the critical  $t$  of  $\pm 2.571$  (see Table 2). Again, the null hypothesis fails to be rejected.

Table 1

t test of Differences Between the Two Mean Scores of the DRP test

	df	X	s.d.	$t$
self-contained class	5	3.3	7.29	
inclusion class	5	3.3	3.98	0

crit  $t = \pm 2.571$  ;  $p < .05$

Table 2

t test of Differences Between the Two Mean Scores of the Bader Word Lists

	df	X	s.d.	t
self-contained class	5	1.2	.69	
inclusion class	5	1.0	.55	1.28

crit  $t = \pm 2.571$  ;  $p < .05$

Summary

A  $t$  test of repeated measures was used to compare test results for the inclusion and self-contained reading classes on the Bader Graded Words Lists and the DPR test. Using a 95% confidence level and a critical  $t$  of  $\pm 2.571$ , there was no statistically significant difference between the two classes on either test. Because the null hypothesis failed to be rejected, students did not learn better in the self-contained or inclusion reading class. Students were successful and made comparable gains in both classes.



## CHAPTER V

### Conclusions and Implications

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine in which type of classroom learning disabled students are more successful at learning to read. Some school districts believe that total inclusion is better for special education children's learning, while others believe that reading should be taught to students classified as learning disabled in self-contained classrooms.

#### Conclusions

The results of this study showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the student growth made in a self-contained reading class and growth made in an inclusion reading class. Both classrooms were successful. Students in both classes made acceptable advancements over the school year.

Since academic achievement between the two classes was comparable, other factors must be looked at in order to decide which is best for learning disabled children. Socialization factors, student preference, individual student needs, and teacher preference could be examined for their influence on student success.

I believe that a combination of the two models would be best for students. They could be taught in an inclusion class when possible, but pulled out for small group instruction when more difficult concepts are taught. It would be better for students to work in smaller groups if they may not understand and may have questions that could be embarrassing to ask in front of non-learning disabled peers. Learning disabled students have stated that they prefer to learn difficult material outside of the regular classroom to avoid embarrassment (Vaughn & Klingner, 1998).

Students who may need alternative materials, testing, or learning environments could also avoid embarrassment if self-contained classes are used part of the time. The ages of the students may influence their self-concepts and feelings about their disabilities. This should also be taken into account when decisions regarding inclusion and self-contained classes are made.

Teacher preference could influence student success (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995). Teachers who feel more comfortable team teaching may have more successful students in inclusion classes. On the other hand, teachers who prefer that learning disabled students be pulled out may have more successful students in that model. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on the case, teacher expectations may be recognized by the students and influence their success (Sindelar, 1995).

Schools have been debating the issue of inclusion for many years. Each district must find the most successful model for their students, and support both students and teachers in that model as much as possible. Student success should be the most important factor in any decision.

### Implications for Research

The results of this study leave a very important question unanswered: Where do learning disabled students learn best? According to these results, they learn well in both environments. Perhaps a question that needs to be answered is, “Can learning disabled students learn better?”

Research could be conducted on many different special education models in order to find successful learning disabled students. The success of students in different subject areas could be examined. Does student success in both models carry through every subject?

Another study could examine a model with a combination of inclusion and pullout classes. According to Vaughn and Schumm (1993), students have very definite opinions about their placement at a young age, and these opinions change through their school careers. Are students at different ages more successful in one model than another?

I would like to see a comparison of learning disabled students’ success between classes whose teachers volunteered to team teach in an inclusion setting

and those who were forced into inclusion. Unfortunately, a teacher's beliefs about special education students and placement may influence student success (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995). Also, comparisons among districts that provide continued inservice and those district that do not.

As an extension, several different student surveys would be interesting. Students have definite opinions on their placements and teacher roles. Perhaps a study giving students three placement choices: inclusion, self-contained, or a combination of the two would have different results from the past research containing only two choices. A survey of students regarding where they feel they are most successful academically would be interesting. A questionnaire about teachers would be intriguing because one study indicated that students did not know which teacher was the special education teacher (Vaughn & Klingner, 1998). It would be useful to know if the students who did not know which teacher was which were in successful team teaching arrangements.

A study could be conducted in relation to this to see if the same success applies to students in a tracking system. Are students who are grouped into lower-achieving, average, and higher-achieving groups as successful as those students who are heterogeneously grouped?

Although this research did not give us one definite answer, there are many additional research topics that could lead to more success for learning disabled

students. In all of the research, the most important consideration to remember is the student.

### Implications for Classrooms

The results of this study should have a great impact on classrooms. Both inclusion and pullout programs can be successful for learning disabled students. As stated in the review of the literature, any inclusion program attempted must be a responsible inclusion program. Student needs must be a priority, with teacher needs also a consideration. Support from the administration is key (Conrad & Whitaker, 1997). Providing an inclusion model, time to plan together, inservice training, matched teacher personalities (when possible), and similar classroom management styles are all ways that administrators can improve the chance for inclusion classroom success (Bruneau-Balderamma, 1997; Lipsky&Gartner, 1998; and Vaughn & Schumm, 1995).

Whenever possible, teachers should be chosen for teaching in inclusion classes on a voluntary basis. This may cut down on teachers feeling forced into inclusion, and reduce any negative feelings toward the inclusion (Vaughn & Schumm, 1995). All college students in teacher education programs should be required to take at least one introduction to special education or inclusion class as a certification requirement.

Exposure to special education in college is better than waiting until these students are sitting in your classroom.

Classrooms can all be improved if the focus of teachers is put on the students and the administrators offer teachers the support they need. The success of the students will improve if everyone is working together to help them achieve.

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## Appendix

## Student Results from the Degrees of Reading Power Test

### Self-Contained class

<u>Student</u>	<u>1998 score</u>	<u>1999 score</u>	<u>change</u>
A	32	29	-3
B	52	49	-3
C	43	55	+12
D	36	36	0
E	47	60	+13
F	37	38	+1

### Inclusion Class

<u>Student</u>	<u>1998 score</u>	<u>1999 score</u>	<u>change</u>
A	46	42	-4
B	49	56	+7
C	52	54	+2
D	60	64	+4
E	48	53	+5
F	41	47	+6

## Student Results from the Bader IRI Graded Word List

### Self-contained class

<u>Student</u>	<u>pretest</u>	<u>posttest</u>	<u>change</u>
A	2.0	3.5	+1.5
B	3.0	4.0	+1.0
C	4.0	6.5	+2.5
D	4.0	4.5	+0.5
E	4.5	5.5	+1.0
F	2.5	3.5	+1.0

### Inclusion class

<u>Student</u>	<u>pretest</u>	<u>posttest</u>	<u>change</u>
A	3.5	4.5	+1.0
B	4.5	5.5	+1.0
C	4.5	5.0	+0.5
D	4.0	6.0	+2.0
E	4.5	5.5	+1.0
F	3.5	4.0	+0.5