



**NeMTSS**  
FRAMEWORK



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## **NeMTSS Research Brief**

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### **The Evidence for Inclusive Education: An NeMTSS Research Brief**

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CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILIES & SCHOOLS**

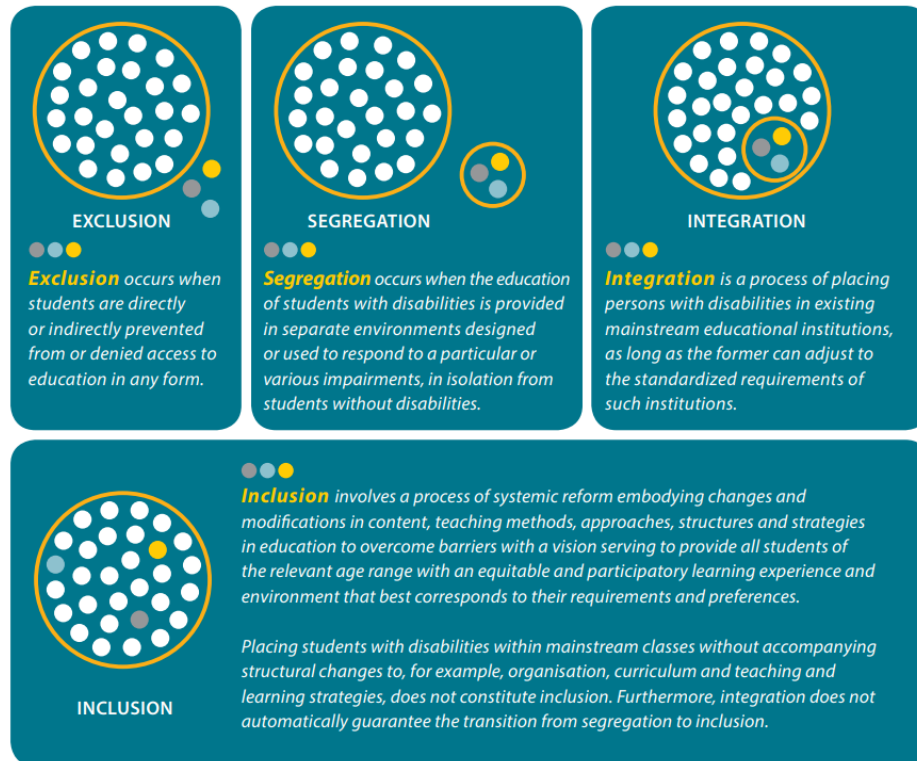
# The Evidence for Inclusive Education: An NeMTSS Research Brief

## Key Points:

- Inclusive education refers to the practice of including every student in the general education classroom and extracurricular activities.
- The 1973 Rehabilitation Act, 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), and the 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasize the need for inclusive education. Specifically, they affirm the right of students with disabilities to have a right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.
- Children with disabilities benefit from an inclusive education. Specifically, research has documented positive impacts in the domains of reading, math, and social-emotional learning.
- The research examining the effects of inclusion on children without disabilities is mixed. Very few studies have reported slightly negative effects. The overwhelming majority of studies spanning the last few decades have reported positive to neutral effects of inclusion for students without disabilities.
- There is a significant relationship between educator self-efficacy and attitudes toward inclusive education. Training, support, and resources provided to educators have also been found to be related to educators' self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes toward inclusion.

## An Overview of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education refers to the practice of including every student in the general education classroom and extracurricular activities (The IRIS Center, 2023; UNICEF, n.d.). It involves providing learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded, like those with disabilities, or speakers of minority languages (UNICEF, n.d.). Inclusive systems value the unique contributions students of all backgrounds bring to the classroom and allow diverse groups to grow alongside each other, with mutual benefit in mind (UNICEF, n.d.) Inclusive schools are places where all students have access to and can participate in the general education environment, given the appropriate supports. Inclusion differs from other forms of educational participation like exclusion, segregation, and integration in one major way: the structural supports and modifications provided to ensure students have the access to participate in their educational environment (See Figure 1).



Source: Heir et al., (2016) and United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities General Comment No. 4  
<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CRPD/GC/RighttoEducation/CRPD-C-GC-4.doc>

### History of Inclusive Education in Law and Policy

In 1994, The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Conference on Special Needs Education issued a consensus report on the education of students with disabilities (Hehir, 2016). The resulting Salamanca Statement affirmed the need for welcoming, non-discriminatory, and inclusive education for all students, regardless of their ability status. The statement called for governments to promote, plan, finance, and monitor inclusive education programs within their education systems (UNESCO, 2009). The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) has been identified as the international breakthrough for inclusive education (Nilholm, 2023), as it sparked a global movement toward inclusive education and offered guidelines for action at the national, regional, and international levels. Since the Salamanca Statement, countries around the world have established and refined their own guidelines and systems of implementation.

In the United States, students with disabilities have been protected from non-discrimination in federally funded institutions since the inception of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. Subsequent updates to the laws governing education later established in the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), which became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997, ensured that students with disabilities have a lawfully protected right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Before the right to a non-discriminatory education was established, many children were denied access to education and opportunities to learn. In 1970, U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities, and many states had laws excluding certain students, including

children who were hearing-impaired, blind, emotionally disturbed, or had an intellectual disability (United States Department of Education, 2023).

### Recent Developments in Inclusive Education

Since the passage of the EHA, which later became known as the IDEA, much progress has been made toward meeting national goals for developing and implementing effective programs and services for early intervention, special education, and related services. For example, the U.S. has progressed from excluding approximately 1.8 million children with disabilities from public schools prior to the implementation of the EHA to providing more than 7.5 million children with disabilities with special education and related services designed to meet their individual needs in the 2020-21 school year (United States Department of Education, 2023).

In 2020-21, more than 66% of children with disabilities were in general education classrooms 80% or more of their school day, and early intervention services were provided to more than 363,000 infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families (United States Department of Education, 2023). Other accomplishments directly attributable to the IDEA include educating more children in their neighborhood schools, rather than in separate schools and institutions, and contributing to improvements in the rate of high school graduation, post-secondary school enrollment, and post-school employment for youth with disabilities who have benefited from the IDEA (United States Department of Education, 2023).

In recent years, scholars and practitioners alike have increasingly emphasized the need for continued research on and improvement in inclusive education practices (Florian, 2019). For example, the need for scholars and practitioners to establish a universally accepted definition of inclusive education (Florian, 2019; Krischler et al., 2019) and the need to consider how US classrooms can be inclusive students from marginalized and minoritized backgrounds have been popular topics in education literature (Florian, 2019).

### The Impact of Inclusive Education on Students with Disabilities

There is strong evidence that students with disabilities benefit from inclusive education. The notion that inclusive education benefits students with disabilities is affirmed by both recent research and research conducted in the last several decades. A number of literature reviews have indicated that students with disabilities who were educated in general education classes academically outperformed their peers who had been educated in segregated settings (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Katz & Mirenda, 2002; Heir et al. 2016). Multiple studies have also asserted the positive impact inclusive education has on the achievement of students with disabilities (Dessemontet & Bless, 2013; de Bruin, 2019; Dessemontetet al, (2012; Baer et al., 2011). Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest that an inclusive education plays a role in predicting the participation of students with disabilities in postsecondary education, career and technical education, and work study programs (Baer et al., 2011).

On a more subject-specific level, research has indicated that inclusive education has positive impacts on the reading, math, and social-emotional learning skills of students with disabilities. For example, Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski and Epstein (2005) followed 512 students with disabilities from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school from 2000 to 2006. Their studies indicated that students with disabilities who took more classes in general education settings had better reading comprehension and a higher level of math skills performance on tests when compared to segregated students. Positive impacts of inclusive education on reading fluency (Blackorby et al., 2007), vocabulary and grammar (Laws et al.,

2010), overall reading performance (Daniel & King, 1997) and math skills (Schnepel, 2022) have also been documented in the literature.

Inclusive education has also been linked to positive social and emotional development and benefits for students with disabilities. These social and emotional benefits can include developing social skills and positive peer relationships, which have important contributions to student learning and psychological development (Heir, 2016). Evidence from several studies suggested that students with disabilities often struggle to develop peer relationships and receive social acceptance from their peers (Bossaert, Boer, Frostad, Pijl, & Petry, 2015; Schwab, 2015; Taheri & Minnes, 2016). Some researchers have found that, for students with disabilities, inclusive education can have a positive impact on social competence (Fisher & Meyer, 2016), social skills (Banda et al., 2010; Puckett et al., 2017), and peer interactions and relationships (Ogelman & Seçer, 2012).

## The Impact of Inclusive Education on Students without Disabilities

The findings regarding the impact of inclusive education on students without disabilities are mixed. Generally, researchers have found that being educated in an inclusive classroom can yield either neutral or positive effects for students without disabilities (Ghandi, 2007; Kalambouka et al., 2007; Dessmonet & Bless, 2013). One literature review drawing from 26 research studies conducted in the United States, Australia, and Ireland found that the vast majority of study findings on inclusive education outcomes indicated that students without disabilities either experienced no effects (58% of studies) or experienced positive effects (23% of studies) on their academic development as a result of being educated alongside peers with disabilities. Only three of the studies included in that review reported negative impacts of inclusive education on elementary school students without disabilities, specifically, the results indicated negative effects on social and academic domains. However, the studies that reported negative effects were conducted prior to 1998 and had several limitations in their methodology. At the secondary school level, generally positive to neutral effects were identified by Kalambouka et al. (2007). Only two studies reported slightly negative effects of inclusion on the academic outcomes of students without disabilities. However, limitations in the methods used to conduct these studies were identified. Overall, the results from the extensive literature review conducted by Kalambouka et al. (2007) suggest that inclusive education is unlikely to have negative impacts on students without disabilities.

Ruijs and Peetsma (2009) reached a similar conclusion in their literature review examining evidence from six studies that examined the academic effects of inclusive education on typically developing students. Most studies indicated positive or neutral effects, and only one study (Rogers and Thiery, 2003) reported negative findings. However, Ruijs and Peetsma (2009) raised concerns about the research methods used by Rogers and Thiery (2003), which may have impacted the negative findings reported.

Similarly, in a meta-analysis conducted by Szumski et al. (2017) that examined 47 studies, mostly positive and neutral effects of inclusive education were found on students without disabilities. More specifically, the researchers found a small but statistically significant effect size for the academic achievement of students without disabilities ( $d = 0.12$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). Additionally, the researchers found that in classrooms with students with mild disabilities, positive effects were found, whereas neutral effects were present in classrooms with students with severe disabilities. Further, the researchers found that small but statistically significant positive effects were localized at the elementary education level – that is, the studies focusing on secondary education yielded neutral effects only. Overall, the results of Szumski et al. (2017) further support the notion that inclusive education is likely to have neutral to positive effects for students without disabilities.

A more recent literature review conducted by Kart and Kart (2020) came to similar conclusions. The researchers concluded that overall, evidence from the literature in the last several decades suggests mostly positive or neutral effects of inclusion on the academic achievement of typically developing students at the preschool or elementary school stages, whereas neutral or slightly negative effects are suggested for the secondary school level. When examining the social effects of inclusive education, the researchers concluded that students without disabilities mostly benefited from being in inclusive classrooms with students with disabilities. Reduction of hostility, prejudice, discrimination, increasing acceptance, understanding, and tolerance of individual differences were some of the findings of the social effects of inclusion on students without disabilities. Further, Kart and Kart (2020) found that peer acceptance and friendship rates were higher in inclusive classes than traditional general education classes, and students without disabilities had more favorable attitudes toward students with disabilities in most of the studies reviewed.

Taken together, the evidence from various meta-analyses conducted over the last few decades suggests that overall, inclusive education generally has positive to neutral effects on students without disabilities. Further, the evidence from the meta-analyses reviewed in this brief suggests that inclusive education at the elementary school level is unlikely to result in negative effects. In the few studies where secondary school students were the focus, slightly negative findings were more often present, which may suggest that challenges with successful inclusion in secondary schools may exist (Kart & Kart, 2020).

## Implications and Considerations for Practitioners

Evidence from the literature on inclusive education generally asserts that inclusive classrooms can have positive effects on all students (Kart & Kart, 2020). However, challenges to providing effective inclusive education exist. Several considerations for schools and teachers working with students with disabilities have been discussed in research in recent years. For example, topics such as teacher attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs, as well as training, support, and resources have been salient topics in the literature. Several studies suggest that generally, teachers support the concept of inclusive education (Chiner & Cardona, 2013; Heir, 2016) however, teachers' beliefs about their ability to teach in inclusive classrooms (Chiner & Cardona, 2013), lack of specific training in inclusive practices (Woolfson & Brady, 2009; Blackorby et al., 2004) and lack of resources (i.e., technical support and personnel; Woolfson & Brady, 2009; Blackorby et al., 2004) have been cited as challenges inclusive classrooms.

Several recent publications have highlighted the importance of fostering positive educator attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs toward inclusive education and providing adequate training on inclusive teaching. For example, in a study conducted by Krischler et al. (2019) teachers with more in-depth understanding of inclusive education reported more positive attitudes and felt better prepared to implement inclusive practices. Further, a meta-analysis conducted by Yada et al. (2022) examined 41 individual studies and found a strong association between educator self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes toward inclusive education. In other words, educators who felt capable of teaching in inclusive classrooms tended to have more positive beliefs toward inclusive education.

It is important to note that educator self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes toward inclusion may be impacted by training, perceived support, and resource access. For example, a study conducted by Saloviita (2020) found that teachers who reported feeling confident in their support at school and access to resources, such as an in-classroom teaching assistant, had more positive attitudes towards inclusion than teachers who reported lower levels of support and access to resources. Similarly, a meta-analysis conducted by Tristani & Bassett-Gunter (2020) examining 27 different studies found that teachers participating in training interventions

reported positive outcomes and showed improvements in the areas of attitudes/perceptions, knowledge, and strategies/skill development regarding inclusive education and students with disabilities.

Overall, the findings reported by recent publications suggest that bolstering educator's self-efficacy beliefs and attitudes toward inclusive education may be beneficial in strengthening the quality of inclusive classrooms. Additionally, schools and practitioners alike may benefit from examining the availability of specialized training, in-school support, and resources (e.g., co-teachers, teaching assistants) in schools, given the empirical evidence suggesting that educator attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs may be impacted by those factors. Lastly, schools and practitioners may consider evaluating the current state of inclusion in their schools to help identify areas of strength and need for support. Tools such as The Inclusive Education Checklist (Villa & Thousand, 2021), or resources from the Inclusive Education Initiative, Inclusive Schools Network, or the National Center for Learning Disabilities websites exist to help schools and practitioners assess their practices and learn about new developments and trends in inclusive education.

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