Reflecting on the Impact of Inclusion in Regard to Student Self-Esteem

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REFLECTING ON THE IMPACT OF INCLUSION IN REGARD TO STUDENT SELF-ESTEEM

Introduction

Educating students with disabilities is an ever changing process. The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) which was reauthorized in 1997, was put in place to improve the education of students with disabilities. Included in this legislation is the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) rule. IDEA adopted the LRE rule for many reasons including providing students with disabilities the opportunity to associate with students without disabilities. According to IDEA’s LRE policy, school districts are required to educate students with disabilities in regular classrooms with their nondisabled peers.

Choosing the LRE for students is an important part creating an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Although this legislation does not specifically mention inclusion and no legal definition of inclusion exists, LRE is generally accepted to mean that students with disabilities are included in the regular classroom. The LRE for students with learning disabilities has become the very same classroom as their regular education peers and separate placements are no longer considered appropriate.

Supporters of inclusion cite its many advantages. Students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers are said to benefit from inclusive education in a variety of ways. With the move toward inclusion, many issues require further discussion and many questions need to be answered. The purpose of this research is to look at the affect inclusion has on student self-esteem. How do inclusive classrooms impact the self-esteem of all students in the classroom?
Review of Literature

*What is self-esteem?*

The way in which a person perceives or views himself, either positively or negatively, is considered self-esteem (Hodgson, Hoover, Kumpf, & Williams, 2002). Self-esteem is also described as feeling good about yourself (Pierangelo, 2004). Self-esteem is a self-imposed, self-fulfilling prophecy that strongly influences one’s sense of mental well-being (Neill & Stork, 2003).

People express self-esteem in the way that they behave (Pierangelo, 2004). If a person feels good about himself, they have a high self-esteem. Self-esteem is the knowledge that a person can be capable in any situation (Hodgson et al, 2002).

Varied degrees of self-esteem are exhibited by both children and adults (Pierangelo, 2004). Self-esteem increases with maturity and evolves as people mature (Hodgson et al, 2002). Everyone feels more confident on some days than on others. A pattern of low self-esteem can be a cause for concern (Pierangelo, 2004).

Success is considered to be an important element in the growth of a positive self-image. A positive self-esteem occurs when children experience positive feelings or satisfaction associated with being connected, unique, and powerful. A sense of feeling connected means feeling good about relating to the people, places and things that are important in life and having these relationships approved and respected by others. Uniqueness occurs when a child acknowledges and respects the personal characteristics that make him or her special and different, with a sense of approval and respect from others. A child uses the skills, resources, and opportunities that they have in order to
influence circumstances in their own life in important ways. This makes the child feel a sense of power, which is also important to a positive self-esteem (Pierangelo, 2004).

Children with a high self-esteem believe that whatever happens to them is a direct result of their own behavior or actions. They feel a sense of power over their environment. Children with high self-esteem will:

- Positively influence other’s opinions or behaviors
- Communicate feelings and emotions
- Behave independently
- Positively approach new situations
- Tolerate high levels of frustration
- Assume responsibility
- Keep situations in proper perspective
- Communicate positive feelings about themselves
- Try new situations without major resistance (Pierangelo, 2004).

Children with low self-esteem feel that whatever happens to them is the result of fate, luck or chance. Children with low self-esteem will:

- Use self-derogatory statements
- Tolerate low levels of frustration
- Easily become defensive
- Depend on the judgment of others instead of making their own decisions
- Resist new situations and experiences
- Blame others for failure and problems
- Have little feeling of power or control
• Avoid tensions creating situations

• Be unwilling to listen to reason (Pierangelo, 2004).

Self-esteem is closely linked to self worth, self-concept and self-efficacy. The terms are often used interchangeably (Hodgson et al, 2002).

How does self-esteem develop?

Self-esteem, the positive or negative manner in which a person evaluates himself or herself, is developed by self-image, or how a person sees himself or herself. People also have images or expectations of how they want to be, or their ideal-self, as well as the perceived expectations others have for us. These three perceptions combine to form self-esteem (Page & Page, 2003).

The development of certain life skills encourages emotional well-being. Self-esteem has been identified as an important factor in the development of emotional well-being. In fact, a positive self-esteem is one of the most important requirements of a fulfilling life (Page & Page, 2003).

Factors and influences on the development of self-esteem include relationships, personal decision making, academic proficiency, accomplishment, recognition and personal values. These elements help compare individuals to a universally accepted standard. Self-esteem can be increased or decreased based on life events and the resiliency of the individual. The development of self-esteem is also influenced by family members, as well as educators and peers (Hodgson, et al, 2002).

Self-fulfilling prophecies or expectations about future behavior and performance originate in labels and self-image. Expectations can lead students to form negative or positive self-fulfilling prophecies. Children who are labeled as “dumb” are likely to live
up to that expectation, just as children labeled “bright” are likely to prove that prophecy correct. Teachers label new students and develop expectations before each school year even begins. Teachers develop their opinions through conversations with other teachers, administrators, students or parents. Students may also be labeled by the reputations of their siblings (Page & Page, 2003).

Self-esteem is sometimes described as an individual’s judgment of his or her self-worth. It is possible that a person’s self-esteem might change in response to a major life event, such as being diagnosed with a learning disability (MacMaster, Donovan & MacIntyre, 2002).

Failures can be viewed as a learning experience or a self-punishment, dependent upon self-esteem. A high self-esteem allows students to look at failures with a proper perspective (Pierangelo, 2004). Low self-esteem is often associated with emotional, behavioral, and academic problems in school aged children. A number of studies suggest that there is an increased risk of low self-esteem in children with learning disabilities (MacMaster, Donovan & MacIntyre, 2002).

Academic competence is the way individuals perceive themselves in academic and intellectual pursuits. This can include school performance, interest and desire to excel at academic activities, and the values attached to achievement (Hodgson, et al, 2002). Some studies suggest that there does not seem to be a link between achievement and self-esteem because high achievers, as well as low achievers, may experience a low sense of self-esteem (Cigman, 2004).

Self-identity and esteem are created as a result of developing a sense of belonging and acceptance within a group (Cigman, 2004). Peer popularity is affected by student

Peer popularity seems to have a great impact on student self-esteem, for students in both regular education and resource placements. Students in noninclusive placements feel less peer popularity (Hodgson, et al, 2002).

Setting realistic goals is a crucial component in the development of a positive self-esteem. When children set unrealistic goals or fall short, they feel like failures. When this cycle is repeated, children begin to set even more unrealistic goals. As a result, children eventually become unwilling to take chances or make changes. The fewer chances children take, the less likely they are to experience successes (Pierangelo, 2004).

**How can self-esteem be measured?**

Observational, self-reporting and third party data can be used to document self-esteem (Carpenter, Bloom and Boat, 1999). There are several standardized scales that evaluate self-esteem. Harter’s What I am Like scale and Heyman’s Self-Perception of a Learning Disability (SPLD) both address concerns about self-esteem (Cosden Elliott, Nobel & Kelemen, 1999).

The Self-Esteem Index, a self-report instrument, consists of 80 items that are designed to elicit school-aged children’s perceptions of their personal behaviors and characteristics. Self-esteem is measured at home and within the family unit; as related to academics; in social situations and relationships; and individual feelings of well-being. (Daniel & King, 1997).
The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventories consist of short statements that are to be answered “like me” or “unlike me.” The inventories measure attitudes toward the self in social, academic, and personal contexts. The Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventories measure self-esteem in five areas. Yes-no responses can be written or given orally (Mercer & Mercer, 2001).

In the classroom, teachers do not attempt to measure student self-esteem. They do not look at their students and say that one has more self-esteem than another. Teachers generally realize that a low sense of self-worth is a barrier to learning. Students articulate this feeling with statements such as “I’m stupid” or “I’m dumb.” When adequate self-esteem is present, students will display attributes such as cheerfulness, optimism and resilience (Cigman, 2004). An appearance of high self-esteem sometimes covers low self-esteem (Carpenter, Bloom and Boat, 1999).

*What is the relationship between self-esteem and learning?*

Self-esteem plays a vital role in education. Teachers should be prepared to guide students in developing essential life skills. Acquiring a sense of emotional well-being will help students to be better equipped to deal with life’s challenges (Page & Page, 2003).

A person who learns without emotional impediments can be considered an effective learner. They get what they are supposed to get from education and because of this should be considered to have adequate self-esteem (Cigman, 2004).

Teachers may help to raise low self-esteem in students by providing encouragement, acceptance, and the acquisition of knowledge (Cigman, 2004). Teachers have an immense impact on the development of the emotional well-being of their
students. Emotional well-being can be defined as one’s ability to feel comfortable with himself, relate to other people, cope with disappointments and stress, solve problems, celebrate successes, and make decisions. Emotional well-being leads to healthy development and youth with emotional well-being are more likely to be successful in life. Youth with emotional well-being are able to make responsible decisions, set and achieve goals, solve problems, cope with disappointments and stress, and effectively communicate feelings (Page & Page, 2003).

What impact do learning disabilities have on student self-esteem?

The study of a child’s self-esteem is an important aspect for understanding how special education affects as a child’s ability to achieve (Hodgson, et al, 2002). Even so, there is little research regarding the psychological consequences of being diagnosed with a learning disability (MacMaster, Donovan & McIntyre, 2002).

Children who receive special education services may often have a lower self-esteem than children who do not receive these services. Since children with learning disabilities often feel inadequate to compete academically with their nondisabled peers, having to attend “special classes” may negatively contribute to their already low self-esteem (Hodgson, et al, 2002). To be labeled as having a learning disability is potentially stigmatizing. Labeling is a factor in poor self-concept in children with learning disabilities (MacMaster, Donovan & MacIntyre, 2002).

How children view their learning disabilities also affects their self-esteem. Children with higher self-esteem view their learning disabilities more positively. Regardless of their actual achievement, children with positive perceptions of their academic skills have a higher self-esteem. Students with positive perceptions of their
academic skills have better attitudes towards school and higher self-esteem (Cosden, et al, 1999). Students with learning disabilities tend to have low academic self-concepts, while beliefs about themselves in other areas tend to be more positive (Ellis, 1998).

Students with learning disabilities believe that academic skills are important to their self-esteem and they do not diminish the importance of academic performance. Learning disabled students with high self-esteem rate academic competence as important, even though they rate their own academic skills as weak (Cosden, et al, 1999).

Students commonly equate grades with their own personal value. A grade of A means you are a good person who is highly valued by others and an F grade means you are a bad person who is not valued. All students need more meaningful feedback other than just being shown grades on quizzes and tests (Ellis, 1998).

Sometimes being diagnosed with a learning disability might actually increase a child’s self-esteem. Some students welcome diagnosis and labeling, especially after having endured a struggle and much unhappiness. They experience psychological relief upon diagnosis if their condition is explained to them in terms that they understand (MacMaster, Donovan & MacIntyre, 2002).

Special education students are more likely than ever to be taught with their peers and are increasingly identified as disabled at a younger age (D’Alonzo, Giordano & VanLeeuwen, 1997). Children with learning disabilities should be identified early, before negative self perceptions begin to develop and students begin to see themselves as stupid or failing (Page & Page, 2003).

When a child is diagnosed as having a learning disability, others may treat the child differently which may contribute to damage of the child’s self-esteem. Children
with learning disabilities tend to be perceived negatively by both teachers and peers. This may lead to problems in social interaction and cause children to feel socially rejected because they find themselves in a less desirable social position (MacMaster, Donovan & MacIntyre, 2002).

Parents and teachers of students with learning disabilities sometimes attempt to shelter students from pain and embarrassment by failing to explain the nature of their disability. Sometimes students are not included in the development of their IEPs. Without accurate information about themselves, students are left to form self-conclusions based on communications from others. As a result, students sometimes perceive that they are lazy, stupid or dumb (Ellis, 1998).

Little is known about the ways in which children view their disabilities, although how students perceive themselves in general has been studied. Studies indicate that students with learning disabilities are most likely to differ from students without learning disabilities in how they perceive scholastic competence. Some studies also suggest that students with learning disabilities have lower self-esteem than their peers without disabilities (Cosden, et al, 1999).

When students are being served in resource rooms or other pullout programs, they are identified by others and can identify themselves as being different. They are not able to compare themselves academically to a universal standard and their academic self-esteem may be negatively impacted (Hodgson, et al, 2002).

Students should feel that they have the ability to have an effect on their own lives. They should have opportunities to make choices and decisions regarding some aspects of their education (Carpenter, Bloom and Boat, 1999). Allowing students to make decisions
that affect their lives leads to an enhanced sense of self-esteem. Students feel some sense of control over what happens to them. Whenever possible, students should be given the chance to repeat their successes. Any opportunity to repeat a success can inflate the self-esteem (Pierangelo, 2004). Students with learning disabilities must frequently make decisions and have choices in the classroom. When student confidence grows, students will take on more difficult problems (Ellis, 1998).

Teachers of students with disabilities should help students to understand that almost everyone has difficulty learning something. Some students experience difficulty learning to read, some students have trouble writing, some students find sports challenging, and others are frustrated in art class. In the classroom, teachers should find activities that will allow a student with learning disabilities to use his or her strong points (Page & Page, 2003).

Flaws and deficiencies are part of what make children individuals (Neill & Stork, 2003). Forming an accurate sense of who they are is important to student development of self-esteem. Students need to develop a “true picture” of who they are. Students can be taught to realize all of the influences on the development of their self-esteem. Once students are able to recognize all of these influences on the development of their self-esteem, it will be easier for them to evaluate the accuracy of their own self-opinion (Cosden, et al, 1999).

Adults with learning disabilities are more likely to be successful when there is a greater understanding of their disability. They seek assistance when needed and build on their strengths. It could thus be expected that children who understand their disabilities
would seek help and find activities at which they be successful without assistance (Cosden, et al, 1999).

Adolescents with learning disabilities tend to be very reactive in their approach to tasks and situations. They react to situations as they occur rather than anticipating what might happen and planning ahead of time. The more reactive people are, the less their sense of personal control (Ellis, 1998).

Children with disabilities rely on their families to advocate for them. The support of adults in the child’s life greatly impacts the choices and decisions that the child makes. Without such assistance, the child is left to make decisions that could reap serious negative consequences and thus affect the child’s self-esteem (Hodgson et al, 2002). Students with disabilities need to be taught to advocate for themselves. This enhances self-esteem (Ellis, 1998).

As a result of intervention, students should have an increased level of self-esteem, or at least the same level of self-esteem. Student self-esteem should not be lowered as a result of intervention. Students should feel positive about their self-worth and their significance to others. Interventions should produce higher levels of both self-determination and individual empowerment. Students should have an increased sense of achievement and independence (Carpenter, Bloom and Boat, 1999).

Having a learning disability presents a risk to the self-esteem just like perceptions of physical appearance and athletic ability. Studies have revealed much variation in self-esteem among students with learning disabilities as well as students without disabilities (Cosden, et al, 1999).

*How do inclusive classrooms impact the self-esteem of all students in the classroom?*
Rationale for inclusion

It is no longer considered appropriate to send students with disabilities to separate classrooms, away from same age peers without disabilities. Serving students with disabilities in regular education classrooms has become the alternative to separate placement, but it requires changes to the delivery of services (Carpenter & Keys, 1998).

Collaboration between regular and special educators has become a growing practice in recent years due to legislation that emphasizes the need to allow more students with disabilities to participate in varying degrees in the regular education curriculum. To more effectively meet student needs, delivery of services has been restructured and co-teaching between regular and special education teachers has increased (Arguelles, Hughes & Schumm, 2000)

IDEA mandates the education of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. Least restrictive environment means that students with disabilities are placed in regular education classes and have special education services brought to them rather than have the students brought to the services (Hamill & Dever, 1998).

Special education law specifies that students with disabilities have the right to start in the regular education classroom. Alternative placement should be based on the needs of the individual student. Educators should be able to justify why a less restrictive environment is neither possible nor appropriate (Block, 1999).

Special educators should not only be concerned with the educational gains of their students, but also with quality-of-life issues. Students need to develop desirable qualities for life such as feeling good about themselves, being in control of their own destinies, and being happy (Carpenter, Bloom and Boat, 1999).
A growing number of students are being served by special education and more access to the general curriculum is being called for (Hines, 2001). Parents feel that staying in regular education classes to receive special education services helps their children to have a better self-esteem. There is no embarrassment about going to special education classes. There children don’t feel different from the rest of the students (Gerber and Popp, 1999). Still, few studies have investigated the feelings of students about being present in regular classrooms (Ritter, Michel & Irby, 1999).

*What is inclusion?*

Inclusion involves moving all specialists into general education classrooms with the students so that all services will be available to all children— not just those labeled disabled (D’Alonzo, Giordano & VanLeeuwen, 1997).

The rationale for inclusion has never been based on research findings, just on principle. Proponents of inclusion often compare it to racial integration (Hines, 2001).

With the implementation of inclusion, social growth includes changes in behavior, self-esteem, peer relationships, and mutual respect (Federico, Herrold & Venn, 2000).

Historically it has been the responsibility of educators to teach academics, but the classroom environments that teachers create may ultimately have more impact on the lives of their students than the academics. Academics cannot be ignored, just as the affective dimension of education cannot be ignored. Factors such as motivation and self-esteem are just as important as academics in the classroom (Ellis, 1998). The quality of any educational program may be determined through a focus on student outcomes (Ritter, Michel & Irby, 1999).
A student’s performance in school can be affected by negative self-perceptions. Teachers are able to promote the growth of positive self-esteem in classrooms where students feel capable, competent, and accepted (Page & Page, 2003). Teachers should work hard at ensuring that all students, regardless of ability, feel as if they belong and are valuable contributing members of the class. Teachers should identify the unique talents, experiences, or knowledge that each individual student possesses so that they can be recognized (Ellis, 1998).

**Benefits of inclusion for special education students**

Special education programs were originally created in response to laws and as a result separate services kept students with disabilities separated from their regular education peers. Poor self-esteem as a result of placement in special education classes was the result of students’ feelings of being different (Ritter, Michel & Irby, 1999).

Staying in the regular classroom with properly trained teachers who raise academic expectations and then provide the support needed to be successful increases student self-confidence. Students are put on the same level as everyone else and this builds self-esteem. Students are able to be special without feeling different (Ritter, Michel & Irby, 1999). In an inclusive classroom it should become clear that everyone is both teacher and learner (Federico, Herrold & Venn, 2000).

All students learn to value themselves as unique individuals in inclusive environments (Hines, 2001). Students will have a greater sense of belonging when they know their voices will be heard and when their ideas are considered. In-depth explorations reveal that students need a sense of social and emotional security. This
sense of security has a large impact on future adult success far more than their knowledge in academic areas (Ellis, 1998).

Students tend to be more concerned with the social aspects of school than with instruction or curriculum. When asked to describe important features of meaningful schools, “having fun” and hanging out with friends” are typical student responses (Ellis, 1998). Successful implementation of inclusion promotes classroom friendships. In the past, students with disabilities have been viewed as the least-popular or most-rejected students (Morris, 2000).

During childhood and adolescence, peer relationships play an important role in development. Strengthening peer networks of students with disabilities can lead to increased inclusive opportunities. This leads to increased peer sensitivity to the needs of classmates with disabilities and supportive relationships between these students (Carpenter, Bloom and Boat, 1999).

Within the regular classroom, students with disabilities are provided with more opportunities to form friendships with nondisabled peers. Inclusionary classrooms have been proven to be more effective in helping students with disabilities achieve both academically and socially. The negative effects associated with exclusion, such as lower self-esteem, less confidence and lack of motivation are avoided (Block, 1999).

Sometimes it is difficult for students with disabilities to establish and maintain relationships with their peers. Low self-esteem may be a barrier to seeking peer support. Students may sometimes have limited opportunities to interact with peers because they spend a significant portion of the school day in a resource setting (Carpenter, Bloom and Boat, 1999). Some studies indicate that inclusion may cause labeling to increase.
Students with disabilities may be viewed solely on their disability, which will negatively influence their popularity with peers (Hodgson, et al, 2002).

Viewing students in positive ways and maintaining favorable expectations of them play an integral role in the enhancement of self-esteem. Inclusive environments that are characterized by a considerate, understanding and tolerant teachers and sensitive peers could also enhance the self-esteem of students (Daniel & King, 1997).

In an attempt to shelter students with learning disabilities from failure, some teachers provide them with unchallenging tasks that require minimal effort. Enrolling students with low academic self-concepts in uninteresting classes that have been dummed down maybe be debilitating to students. Success at easy tasks or assignments that are not meaningful does not increase academic self-esteem and is likely to produce the opposite. Prolonged exposure to this type of environment teaches students to expect little of themselves and causes others to expect little of them as well (Ellis, 1998).

With inclusion, learned helplessness seems to die off. Students don’t want their assignments shortened and don’t want modifications (Ritter, Michel & Irby, 1999). Students also eventually learn to let go of their fears of failure and learning crutches are needed far less often (Federico, Herrold & Venn, 2000).

Educational processes have traditionally encouraged competition among students rather than encouraging cooperation. For many students, especially students with disabilities, this competition produces significant anxiety and may be an obstacle to learning. Cooperative learning experiences encourage interdependence among students and provide students with the opportunity to evaluate their own performances. This
approach is an alternative to individualized and competitive teaching. It is also more effective in promoting positive student self-esteem (Carpenter, Bloom and Boat, 1999).

Cooperative learning plays an important role in the development of self-esteem. This ability to contribute to their own success, as well as contributing to the success of others, and the sense of belonging that occurs are important to self-esteem (Carpenter, Bloom and Boat, 1999).

Although cooperative learning has often been represented as an important aspect of inclusion, sometimes students with disabilities are made to believe that they are liabilities to cooperatives learning teams because of their limitations. Students are made to feel both academically incapable and socially rejected. This has a great negative impact on their self-esteem. In cooperative learning situations, students need to be able to feel free to express their understanding about what they are learning without fear of ridicule from their peers (Ellis, 1998).

General education teachers report that their attitudes about inclusion changed as they witnessed incidents that benefited both learners with disabilities and those without disabilities in their classrooms. With the implementation of inclusion, teachers must be convinced that inclusion will be supported in a fashion that will allow them to meet the needs of both students with disabilities and those without disabilities. Teachers do not agree whether inclusion would result in the elimination of labeling of students with disabilities nor did they agree that barriers would be eliminated. They also felt that even in inclusive classrooms there would still be problems with self-esteem for students with disabilities (D’Alonzo, Giordano & VanLeeuwen, 1997).

Benefits of inclusion for regular education students
Parents of students without disabilities believe that inclusion enables children to gain an understanding of diversity among students. Parents of students with learning disabilities feel that inclusion has a positive impact on their children and helps to foster positive self-esteem (Gerber & Popp, 1999). Through placement in an inclusive classroom, students avoid low self-esteem that can result from placement in a special education setting (Hines, 2001).

Arguments supporting inclusion generally center on the perceived academic and social benefits for students with disabilities. Academic achievement is enhanced when students with disabilities are pushed to work to higher standards. These higher standards are necessary because special education students are less likely to graduate from high school than their nondisabled peers. Students taught in inclusive classrooms are thought to benefit from having models of appropriate social behavior more readily available in the regular education classroom (Daniel & King, 1997).

There are many other perceived benefits to inclusion. Recent research has supported the benefits of inclusion not only to students with disabilities, but also to nondisabled students and regular education teaching staff. Benefits for students with disabilities include a more stimulating environment, opportunities to make new friends, greater acceptance by peers, and opportunities to share new experiences. Students without disabilities benefit by becoming more accepting of individual differences and more comfortable with students with disabilities. They acquire leadership roles and become more helpful in general. Inclusion is thought to improve the self-esteem of all students (Block, 1999).
In inclusive classrooms, students with special needs are observed to pay more attention to their schoolwork and to their physical appearance. They have improved attendance at school and participate more in classroom and extracurricular activities than ever before. Students in inclusive classrooms begin to believe in themselves and begin to want to achieve (Morris, 2000).

With the implementations of inclusion, schools are able to provide social as well as instructional support. Improved confidence results in improved self-esteem because students perceive that everyone is equal in a regular education classroom where everyone has the same expectations (Ritter, Michel & Irby, 1999). Inclusion offers the advantage of having an extra teacher to help all students with development of their skills; leads to greater acceptance of students with disabilities; helps students to understand that students with disabilities are not always easily identified; and promotes better understanding of the similarities among students with and without disabilities (Hines, 2001).

Research on inclusion concludes that benefits of inclusion far outweigh the difficulties that inclusion presents. For students with disabilities, inclusion facilitates more appropriate social behavior because of higher expectations in the regular education classroom; promotes levels of achievement higher than those achieved in self-contained classrooms; offers a wide circle of support, including support form classmates without disabilities; and improves the ability of students and teachers to adapt to different teaching and learning styles (Hines, 2001).

In regular education settings, students with disabilities demonstrated more social gains than those in noninclusive settings. Student with disabilities experienced greater social acceptance and more opportunities for interactions. High school students report
that their relationships with students with disabilities resulted in more positive attitudes, increased response to the needs of others, and increased appreciation for diversity. Students with disabilities are alone less often and show more social contact than when placed in special classes. Students with disabilities are helped to establish and maintain social networks and are more accepted by nondisabled peers (D’Alonzo, Giordano & VanLeeuwen, 1997).

In inclusive classrooms, adaptations are able to be made for all students who need them, not just students with disabilities (Hines, 2001). Students without disabilities have been reported to like the collaborative teaching model. Positive effects on grades and self-esteem are felt. Students with learning disabilities and other special needs feel that collaborative classrooms enabled them to get better grades and receive more teacher help (Gerber & Popp, 1999).

Students are able to receive more help in the collaborative classroom. Students report that there are more opportunities to ask questions, even when one teacher is talking. Teachers point out different ways to learn and do things. Students were helped to pay more attention and it was easier for teachers to take care of distracting students (Gerber & Popp, 1999).

Other benefits for both learning disabled and nondisabled students can be attributed in large part to teachers reaching all students in the classroom. In collaborative classrooms homework is reported to be checked more frequently and teachers are able to keep their students up-to-date (Gerber & Popp, 1999).

Parents of regular education students who were not eligible for special education services report that their children enjoy the extra help they receive in collaborative
classrooms and that it helps their self-esteem. They view the collaborative teaching model as quite effective (Gerber & Popp, 1999).

Existing research on inclusion has also documented multiple benefits for students. The amount of time engaged in learning is increased for students without disabilities. IEPs for disabled students have higher quality goals as a result of higher academic standards. Students with disabilities spend more time engaged in learning in general education classes than in special settings. The inclusion of students with disabilities is not associated with a decline in academic or behavioral performance of students without disabilities (D’Alonzo, Giordano & VanLeeuwen, 1997).

Determining the effectiveness of inclusion has been difficult. Inclusive programs vary greatly between school districts, in both definition and implementation (Hines, 2001). Opponents to inclusion cite research that shows negative effects of inclusion, citing low self-esteem of students with disabilities in the regular education setting and poor academic grades (Hines, 2001).

A negative theme that emerges from parents of students with disabilities is that sometimes students still do not fit into regular education classes because of their needs. Sometimes students were placed in classes that they could not handle (Gerber and Popp, 1999).

Summary

Student self-esteem is an important component of learning. Students who feel good about themselves are better learners. Having a positive self-esteem is even more vital for students with learning disabilities.
Special education will continue to evolve. Legislation will continue to mandate changes to the system. The LRE for most students will be in a regular education classroom with appropriate supports and services—a inclusion class. As students with disabilities are included in regular education classes, the implications of educating students in their least restrictive environment will be further discovered.

Current research leaves many questions about inclusion unanswered. More research studying the impacts of inclusion needs to be conducted. Does inclusion benefit student self-esteem? Perhaps the most powerful testament to the results of inclusion will be the voices of the students themselves.
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Biographical Information

The author is attempting to survive her fifth year of teaching and simultaneously complete her master’s degree. She is currently a Special Education teacher at a high school in rural Northern Ohio that is in the midst of implementing inclusion. In her spare time she is the single mother of two daughters who are very happy this research is completed so they will again be able to use their “family” computer. This is not the first time the author has studied the impact of learning disabilities on student self-esteem and it probably isn’t a final reflection on the topic.