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Moving Toward an Inclusive Education System: Lessons from the U.S. and Their Potential Application in the Czech Republic and Other Central and Eastern European Countries

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Abstract: In this article, we present the historical and current developments of inclusive education (IE) in the U.S. in the context of recent changes toward a more inclusive approach to education (IE) in the Czech Republic. We highlight the lessons learned with respect to the implementation of IE practices in U.S. schools as a means to uphold the right to education for all. Research findings of the impact of IE on the academic and social outcomes of children and youth with disabilities, from other diverse backgrounds and for students without disabilities are summarized. The goal of this article is to inspire educators and scholars in the Czech Republic and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe to utilize the presented information on IE research and implementation practices in their local educational contexts, taking into account both the local context and current needs.

Keywords: inclusive education, Czech Republic, Central and Eastern Europe

Kroky k inkluzivnímu vzdělávacímu systému: Poučení z USA a možnosti jejich uplatnění v České republice a dalších zemích střední a východní Evropy

Abstrakt: V tomto článku se budeme zabývat historickým a aktuálním vývojem inkluzivního vzdělávání (IV) v USA v souvislosti s nedávnými změnami k zlepšení inkluzivního přístupu ke vzdělání v České republice. Zdůrazňujeme poučení ze zavedení přístupů k inkluzivnímu vzdělání v amerických školách jako prostředku k podpoření práva na vzdělání pro všechny. Výzkumné poznatky o vlivu IV na akademický a sociální vývoj dětí a mládeže s postižením, z různorodých sociálních prostředí, i pro studenty bez postižení jsou zde shrnuty. Cílem tohoto článku je inspirovat pedagogy a akademiky v České republice a dalších zemích střední a východní Evropy k tomu, aby využili prezentované informace o výzkumných a implementačních přístupech inkluze ve svých místních kontextech vzdělání, obzvláště s přihlédnutím k místním aktuálním potřebám.

Klíčová slova: inkluzivní vzdělávání, Česká republika, střední a východní Evropa

1 Introduction

Countries in Central and Eastern Europe are currently experiencing dramatic changes in the way they educate children and youth with disabilities and from other diverse backgrounds. The influence of international legislation (e.g. the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, [CRPD, 2009](#)) and related litigation, actions of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as the changes in the attitudes of the general population due to globalization have put pressure on deinstitutionalization and the promotion of inclusion in both national and local education and social welfare systems. For many of the countries in the region, this means shedding the old model of disability, handicap and “otherness” known as defectology ([Vygotsky, 1993](#)) in favor of social and academic models of inclusion ([Florian & Becirevic, 2011](#)). As a result of these complex sets of socio-political factors, countries in the region have enacted policies and are beginning to implement inclusive approaches to education with the goal of shifting societal and educational attitudes, resources, strategies and supports for children and youth with disabilities and from other diverse backgrounds (e.g. Roma) away from special schools and other segregated settings to general education schools and classrooms.

In the Czech Republic (C.R.), the shift in policy and practices currently taking place has been motivated by multiple forces. Change within educational and human services systems is occurring due to both international legislation (e.g., C.R. ratification of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, [CRPD, 2009](#)) and litigation (e.g., the decision of the European Court of Human Rights that acknowledges that the C.R. has violated the CRPD by failing to provide fair educational opportunities to Roma children in the case of D.H. and others vs. Czech Republic in 2007) ([Devroye, 2009](#)). Despite numerous opposing voices, these international forces had a significant impact on the signing of the new Czech Decree on inclusive education (IE) in 2016 ([Sirovátka, 2016](#)), as well as on the Education Strategy 2020 with its key goal of reducing education inequality in the country. The content and directives of these documents have prompted much-needed dialogue at the government, university and public school levels with respect to both operational definitions of inclusive education (IE) and inclusion and also to implementation of effective inclusive approaches and programs.

To aid in the planning and development of inclusive education practices in the C.R. and other countries in the region, this paper first addresses the context of IE from its historical underpinnings in the U.S. It then outlines the critical and universal components of IE; it further reviews the social and academic impact of IE on children and youth with and without disabilities. The focus of the paper is on providing information related to building the infrastructure needed for the implementation of IE with a high degree of fidelity.

2 History of Inclusive Education in the United States

The history and geography of the United States (U.S.) and the Czech Republic (C.R.) might be very different, but the need to find effective ways of including students with disabilities and from other diverse backgrounds in regular education follows the same basic principles of the right of education for all. Inclusive education in the U.S. has a grassroots history. It began with the education rights movement in the 1950s, gained traction through the civil rights movement in the 1960s and continued with the parent advocacy and disability rights movements for children and youth of color and with disabilities in the 1980s. Advocates and self-advocates representing these groups successfully lobbied for federal legislation with the resulting passage of the Education for Handicapped Children Act ([1975](#)) and its successor, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ([IDEA, 2004](#)) most recently amended in 2004. This legislation mandates a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all children, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or ability ([Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996](#)). Although arguments have persisted for years with respect to a precise operational definition of “appropriate” and the term is interpreted inconsistently across different states in the U.S., this

legislation paved the way for students with disabilities in the U.S. to gain access to general education classrooms.

Initial interpretation of the FAPE clause in P.L. 94-142 rarely focused on the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings. Instead, understanding of the term “appropriate” focused on implementation of a second mandate associated with the Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act and later IDEA: education in the least restrictive environment principle (LRE). The LRE principle refers to the legislative mandate that stipulates that although full inclusion is not required for all students, children with disabilities need to be educated in settings that are as minimally restrictive as possible and resemble the general education environment to the greatest extent possible – as long as their educational needs can be met. In addition, this aspect of the legislation stipulated that removal of a student from a general education setting could only occur when absolutely necessary, taking into consideration its academic and non-academic (i.e. social) benefit to the student, the cost of instruction, impact on the classroom and prior services ([Sacramento City School District v. Rachel H, 1994](#)).

Within various state legislatures in the U.S., the terms inclusion, integration, and mainstreaming are often confused due to differing views with respect to the goals of and philosophy underlying inclusion. Mainstreaming and integration typically refers to the physical placement of students with disabilities in general education classes for a portion of the school day without due consideration of providing the supports necessary optimally to facilitate learning. The home base of mainstreamed students most often remains a special education program. In a truly inclusive school, however, a student’s home base is the general education classroom with the necessary social and instructional supports provided to facilitate optimal educational outcomes. Minimal services (e.g. speech therapy or occupational therapy) are provided outside of the general classroom and needed supports are brought to the student rather than the student being brought to the supports. This indirect service model features special education staff working collaboratively in a consultative mode with general education teachers, the latter responsible for providing the majority of instruction and support.

Due to the decentralized nature of education in the U.S. and the wide variety of definitions and perspectives on inclusion, for many years general educators received little or no preparation to effectively address the needs of these children with disabilities and other learning needs in the regular education context. Instead, such students were viewed as the primary responsibility of special education staff. This resulted in a situation in which the physical integration of students with disabilities in schools was mistakenly viewed as “inclusion” and viewed as sufficient to meet federal guidelines in the U.S. ([Mittler, 2000](#); [Opretti & Belalcazar, 2008](#)). In this context, children and youth with disabilities were physically integrated into general education classrooms and worked alongside their non-disabled peers, but all too often were not provided with the necessary supports to make adequate progress academically and/or socially. As [Mittler \(2000\)](#) suggests, the terms integration and inclusion (though often used interchangeably) are quite different and result, quantitatively and qualitatively, in dissimilar outcomes.

Over the course of the past 25 years, at least partially as a result of the Regular Education Initiative (REI), greater emphasis has been placed on preparing general education teachers for including children with disabilities in their classrooms and ending the exclusivity of the special education system ([Stainback & Stainback, 1984](#)). In the early 2000s, an additional push for including students with disabilities in regular education occurred in conjunction with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act ([NCLB, 2001](#)). This federal legislation mandated that all students, regardless of their disability, have access to the general education curriculum, be taught according to the general or alternate education standards (depending on the level of their disability) and have their educational progress assessed through the use of regular or alternate standardized assessments. In late 2015, the NCLB legislation was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act ([ESSA, 2015](#)). The ESSA focuses on increasing the accountability of U.S. states with respect to the education of students from traditionally underserved populations and/or attending low-performing schools.

In response to federal educational legislation, the effective advocacy of self-advocates and parent groups and much litigation in both state and federal courts, a variety of approaches and programs have been developed to promote IE in U.S. public schools. These approaches have been developed and implemented in spite of considerable disagreement among educators, parent groups and persons with disabilities themselves about the most appropriate operational definitions of inclusion and inclusive education.

Within the U.S., those most supportive of IE view it as a fundamental set of values and practices intended to ensure an effective and meaningful education for *all* students regardless of their educational needs. However, as [Giangreco \(2011, 2003\)](#) has noted, inclusive education in the U.S. has continued to be a source of considerable controversy. This has occurred both because of unsubstantiated fears based on opinion rather than an understanding of the results of research undertaken in the area and also (as a result) because of anxiety among educators about the process of change needed within the educational system in order for effective implement the fundamental principles and supports associated with a truly inclusive approach to education. In spite of federal mandates, there remains much disagreement about what inclusion entails, for which groups of students IE is applicable and what are the most effective practices to support inclusion – not only during the school years, but throughout a person’s life.

3 What is Inclusive Education?

Prior to discussing practices intended to support the inclusion of children and youth from diverse groups, it is necessary to more fully explore operational definitions of IE. First and foremost, inclusion and IE are philosophies based on a value system that aims to maximize the full participation of all persons in society and education by minimizing exclusionary and discriminatory practices ([Booth, 2005](#)). Viewed in this light, IE is not limited to the inclusion of persons with disabilities, but rather, focuses on the inclusion of *all* students regardless of race, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, language, socioeconomic status or any other aspect of identity that might be perceived by others as “different.”

The definition and practice of inclusive education varies significantly not only between cultures and educational systems but also *within* cultures and educational systems ([Dyson, 1999](#)). In the U.S., for instance, inclusive classrooms and schools in one state may look quite different than those in others. What one educator views as an inclusive educational context may be seen by another as quite restrictive. Even within a more limited system (e.g., within a school district or even a school), the interpretation of an inclusive educational environment may be quite different. This is most often a by-product of there currently being no universal definition of inclusion ([Booth, Ainscow, & Dyson, 2006](#)).

Giangreco and colleagues ([Giangreco, 2011; 2003; Giangreco & Suter, 2015](#)) have provided what we believe is one of the most comprehensive conceptualizations of IE that has been applied across multi-cultural contexts. The following, according to Giangreco and colleagues, are seven basic characteristics of truly IE environments:

1. *All students* are fully welcomed and provided with appropriate, individualized supports in the schools they would be attending if they did not have disabilities;
2. Children receive their education in classes in which the proportion of students with and without disabilities is proportional to the local incidence of disability (in the U.S. this amounts to approximately 10%–12% of children within a school or classroom);
3. Students receive their education with peers of the same age and in the same groupings, as do children without disabilities;
4. Children and youth of all levels of ability are provided with appropriate supports and accommodations so that they can actively take part in meaningful and shared educational

- experiences as part of heterogeneous groups with established learning outcomes which are unique to the abilities of each student;
5. The education of children with disabilities takes place in settings frequented by people without disabilities (e.g., regular education classrooms; inclusive work settings);
 6. The focus of education is on the attainment of a set of individualized outcomes meaningful and culturally appropriate to both the student and his or her family that strike a balance between the academic and social; and
 7. Students experience environments with these characteristics on an ongoing basis.

4 Current State of Inclusive Education in the U.S.

As IE has gained a foothold in the U.S., attitudes regarding the viability of the approach have improved, but it has yet to gain universal acceptance among teachers, educational administrators and a surprisingly large number of parents, especially when one considers the support (or lack thereof) for full as opposed to partial inclusion. Full inclusion, as defined by advocates of the approach, entails the situation in which students receive all educational services within the general education classroom, including their special education and related services, so that they are not removed from that environment. Partial inclusion, on the other hand, exists when students spend the majority of the day in regular education settings, but are removed when necessary, so that they can receive needed special education services.

Although many schools in the U.S. make the claim that they are inclusive, a closer look often indicates that this is only partially true. Estimates provided by the [National Center for Education Statistics \(2016\)](#) indicate that in 2014, 95% of 6 to 21-year-old students with disabilities were served in regular schools; 3% in separate schools for students with disabilities; 1% placed in regular private schools by their parents; and less than 1% served in residential facilities, receiving homebound instruction, education within a hospital or correctional facility. Focusing on students attending typical public schools, approximately 61% spent 80% or more of their time in regular classroom environments. These statistics, however, vary tremendously by state, disability type and intensity of support. Compared to students with specific learning disabilities (64.7%) or who experienced speech and language impairments (86.9%), significantly fewer students with intellectual disabilities (16.5%) spent the large majority of their school day in a general education classroom setting. The reader is reminded that these statistics solely reflect the physical integration aspect of inclusive education. They fail to take into consideration the degree to which students with disabilities are *academically or instructionally included* and able effectively to access their school's curriculum at an age and grade appropriate level as well as *socially and psychologically included* in their school and classroom, i.e. considered by their peers to be members of the social group, as well as included and welcomed within their communities.

These uneven results are due to a number of factors. One of the most critical of these is that inclusion, be it full or partial, is not mandated in the U.S. Instead, the principle of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) serves as a legal guideline for free and appropriate public education (FAPE) of students with disabilities alongside their typically developing peers to the maximum extent possible with access to the general education curriculum ([IDEA, 2004](#)). The LRE, however, has been criticized over the years; the most scathing critique was offered by [Taylor \(1982; 2004\)](#) who suggests that in practical terms, the LRE principle has been represented in terms of a continuum of services ranging from the *most* to *least* restrictive alternative. Taylor, and many persons who support full inclusion, argue that the LRE principle: (1) *legitimizes restrictive environments* in that it implies that there are circumstances under which the most restrictive environment would be appropriate; as long as services are provided according to the LRE principle, he argues that some children, typically those with intensive special education needs, will end up in restrictive environments; (2) *confuses segregation and integration with intensity of services*; (3) includes the implicit assumption that *people with disabilities*

must earn the right to be educated within inclusive settings; (4) supports the primacy of professional versus family and student decision making; (5) sanctions infringements of the rights and liberties of persons from diverse groups, including those with disabilities; (6) implies that people must *move as they develop and change*; and (7) directs attention to the *physical settings* in which children receive their education, rather than focusing on the extent to which they receive the services and supports they need to be meaningfully included in the school and community. Truly inclusive education reaches far beyond these basic principles of physical integration to ensure meaningful inclusion at social, psychological and academic/instructional levels to foster the improvement in student social and academic outcomes.

Implementation of IE is a multi-step process that requires comprehensive planning at a systems level. This includes assessment of whether a school, school district or other system possesses the infrastructure necessary for successful implementation, and the active involvement of teachers, students, parents and the broader community in the planning, implementation and evaluation process ([Brock, Biggs, Carter, Cattetey, & Raley, 2016](#); [Srivastava, Boer, & Pijl, 2015](#)). All too often, however, this planning process is shortchanged at the local level. This is especially true when the push for IE originates at higher levels of government from individuals who have not had the opportunity to understand the local context. Adequate infrastructure improves access to education for all children. Given negative cultural practices and poverty in many countries, however, infrastructure improvements alone are necessary, but not sufficient to improve access, equity, and inclusion of marginalized groups including children with disabilities ([Raynor, Sumra, & Unterhalter, 2007](#)). Having adequate resources to provide supports necessary for success for children with additional educational needs does not in itself guarantee successful inclusion in the educational or societal context. One must also consider community attitudes, values and culture. As [Polat \(2011\)](#) suggests, these can be as much or more of a barrier to the successful implementation of inclusive practices as a lack of basic educational resources.

5 What Does the Research on Inclusive Education Tell Us?

Since the initial passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act ([1975](#)), a plethora of research has been undertaken that has focused on: the impact of IE on the *academic outcomes* of students with and without disabilities, the levels of *social and psychological inclusion* experienced by children with disabilities and the attitudes towards diversity on the part of their non-disabled peers. Research efforts have also focused on a number of variables that serve as a challenge to the effective implementation of IE programs including teacher, parent and peer attitudes regarding the inclusion of diverse groups, as the impact of teacher and community attitudes and resources.

Academic Outcomes

Over 25 years of research on the outcomes of students with and without disabilities at both the elementary and secondary levels suggests neither adverse nor positive academic impact of IE ([Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004](#); [Farrell, 2000](#); [Hunt, Staub, Alwell, & Goetz, 1994](#); [Lindsay, 2007](#); [Markussen, 2004](#); [Myklebust, 2002](#); [Obrusnikova, Valkova, & Block, 2003](#); [Rankin et al., 1999](#); [Rea, McLaughlan, & Walther-Thomas, 2002](#)). Such research has included measures of gains in academic attainment over a wide range of curricular areas, including math, literacy, science and physical education. A large number of studies (e.g., [Farrell, Dyson, Polat, Hutcheson, & Gallannaugh, 2007](#)) indicate no relationship between academic achievement and inclusion at the district level for students without disabilities and a small relationship at the school level between academic achievement and inclusion. Two studies suggest that when students without disabilities are educated alongside peers with disabilities, they slightly outperform those in non-inclusive settings in math & literacy ([Saint-Laurent et al., 1998](#)). In a longitudinal study, [Peetsma, Vergeer, Roeleveld and Karsten \(2001\)](#) found that while there were no initial differences in the academic progress of students with and without mild disabilities even after

two years, by the four-year mark students educated in inclusive settings had made significantly greater academic progress than their matched pairs in special schools. These results appear to hold for studies undertaken in the U.S as well as in other developed countries. [Szumski and Karwowski \(2014\)](#), for example, studied the impact of inclusive education in Poland on almost 900 students with mild intellectual disability. Students from integrative and mainstream schools achieved significantly higher scores on a school-based assessment of academic achievement than pupils from special schools.

Several older reviews of inclusive education undertaken in the 1980s (e.g. [Madden & Slavin, 1983](#)) and 1990s (e.g. [Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1994](#); [Hegarty, 1993](#); [Sebba & Sachdev, 1997](#)) corroborate the findings cited above. [Baker, Wang and Walberg \(1994\)](#) reviewed several meta-analyses of the impact of IE and found positive but generally small effect sizes, the highest being for academic achievement. In a meta-analysis focused on the impact of IE conducted by Howes and colleagues ([Howes, Farrell, Kaplan, & Moss, 2003](#)), 93% of studies on the impact of inclusive education at the elementary level indicated neutral or positive outcomes. A somewhat higher proportion of outcomes (30%) in secondary education suggested a negative impact of placing students with disabilities in general education classes. However, [Carter and Hughes \(2006\)](#) and [Copeland et al. \(2002, 2004\)](#) found that students without disabilities in this older group benefited from inclusion, developing more positive attitudes toward students with disabilities.

Although the impact of IE on the academic achievement of children with mild disabilities has been thoroughly investigated, this is not the case for children with intellectual disabilities (ID), especially those with more substantial support needs ([Bouck, 2007](#); [Freeman & Alkin, 2000](#); [Hunt & McDonnell, 2009](#)). Of nine studies undertaken prior to 2000, [Freeman and Alkin \(2000\)](#) found no significant difference between the academic achievement of students with ID educated with segregated and inclusive classrooms. The authors did observe, however, that the greater the amount of time spent in an inclusive classroom, the more positive the results. [Laws, Byrne and Buckley \(2000\)](#) found that on the other hand children with ID in general education classrooms achieved significantly higher scores in vocabulary and grammar comprehension as well as a greater percentage in developed reading skills. More recently, [Dessemontet, Bless and Morin \(2012\)](#) found that included children with ID made slightly more progress in literacy skills than children attending special schools. No differences were found between the progress of the two groups in mathematics or adaptive behavior.

As numerous authors suggest, for students with the most significant support needs, there are skills beyond the academic (i.e., adaptive skills) that play a crucial role in maximizing life-long inclusion and independence ([Dixon, 2007](#); [Kozma, Mansell, & Beadle-Brown, 2009](#)). Some educators who have not supported the implementation of IE have questioned the capacity of the system effectively to teach these skills if a student spends a majority of classroom time in academically-focused regular education settings. [Saint-Laurent et al. \(1998\)](#) and [Hardiman, Guerin and Fitzsimons \(2009\)](#), who studied children with moderate ID, as well as [Cole and Meyer \(1991\)](#) (who focused on students with severe ID) found no significant differences in the development of adaptive behavior skills of children included in general education classrooms and those attending special classes. [Fischer and Meyer \(2002\)](#) found that a similar group of children with ID and intensive support needs educated in general education settings made significantly larger gains in the development of their adaptive behavior skills than their peers who spent the majority of the day in special classrooms. Working with students with Down syndrome, [Buckley, Bird, Sacks and Archer \(2006\)](#) found no differences in adaptive behavior or socialization between students educated primarily in general versus special education environments, with the former achieving significantly higher scores on measures of communication and functional academic skills than their counterparts attending special classes and schools.

Overall, research suggests that, when provided with proper supports, children with both mild and more significant disabilities do as well academically – if not better – in inclusive classrooms as in segregated settings. Multiple investigations have also established that when appropriate resources are available to support these students in the general education environment, their presence has no significant negative impact on the academic achievement of their peers without disabilities.

Social and Psychological Outcomes

As [Giangreco \(2003\)](#) suggests, true inclusion reflects balanced approach to education in which children are not only physically and academically included, but also able to experience inclusion in the social and psychological sense. Social and psychological inclusion refer to the extent to which students with disabilities experience a sense of belonging in and out of the classroom during the school day and beyond. It also reflects a situation in which all students, including students with disabilities, are considered to be full members of the school community and entitled to equal access to social and academic opportunities ([Keys, McMahon, & Viola, 2014](#)). It is closely tied to practices that support students with disabilities developing the personal capacities associated with the development and maintenance of positive social relationships and the provision of opportunities to connect with peers without disabilities on the basis of mutual choice.

Some research has found that inclusive instructional environments promote *reciprocal friendships* within the classroom for students with disabilities ([Vaughn, Elbaum, & Schumm, 1996](#)) and have a positive impact on the self-concept of students with special needs. Children and youth with disabilities served within inclusive classrooms have been found to have more interactions and social contacts with peers than those educated in other environments ([Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997](#)), and rate the general education classroom environment socially as high if not higher than their general education peers ([Hansen & Boody, 1998](#)). [Wiener and Tardiff \(2004\)](#) in a Canadian study found that on a wide variety of social outcomes (which included measures of friendship, loneliness, self-perceptions and social skills), comparisons between students educated in inclusive versus non-inclusive settings favored the more inclusive approach. [McMahon, Keys, Berardi, Crouch and Coker \(2016\)](#) examined the degree to which schools serving a high percentage of African-American and Latino-American students were supporting the social aspects of IE and the links between teacher-reported inclusion practices and student- and school-reported social outcomes. Findings supported the benefits of IE practices, in that students in schools effectively implementing this approach through ensuring that all extracurricular activities were accessible experienced greater social opportunities, participated more frequently in school activities and experienced a greater sense of school belonging. These students also performed at higher levels academically.

A number of studies report no significant social differences (i.e., no adverse impact) of students of various ages educated within inclusive as opposed to segregated settings. [Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl and Petry \(2015\)](#) reported no differences between companionship and support of the reciprocated friendships of youth with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), students with motor and/or sensory disabilities and their typically developing friends. A meta-analysis of the self-concept of students with SLD found no overall relationship between self-concept and instructional setting for four out of five comparisons, which suggests that students fared no better or worse in terms of self-concept in inclusive as opposed to separate classrooms.

Research results suggest that the social and psychological impact of IE is mediated by a number of variables, including type of disability and student age. [Bakker, Denessen, Bosman, Krijger and Bouts \(2007\)](#) for example, found that in Dutch elementary schools students with general learning disabilities were more often rejected and had a lower self-image than students with specific learning disabilities, and that this held mainly for girls and students with general learning disabilities in general education classes. [De Verdier \(2016\)](#) found that many students with vision loss who were included in general education classes, in spite of the implementation of multiple interventions designed to enhance their social inclusion, were more likely than their non-disabled peers to experience loneliness and report other psychosocial problems. Other research suggests that students with disabilities experience greater social isolation in inclusive settings ([Fraught, Balleweg, Crow, & Van den Pol, 1983](#); [Peterson, 1982](#); [Sale & Carey, 1995](#)). Students with special needs in inclusive settings are also typically rated lower on socio-metric scales than their peers. Students likely to be eligible for special education services but not yet "labeled" rated even lower than students already classified ([Sale & Carey, 1995](#)). At the secondary level, research suggests *physical inclusion* may occur, but *very little social integration*

(i.e. social inclusion). This appears to be especially true for students with intellectual disability ([Doré, Dion, Wagner, & Brunet, 2002](#)).

In summary, one can conclude from previous studies that IE seems to allow children with a wide variety of disabilities to make either as much, or in some cases more, progress in their academic achievement than when they receive instruction within segregated educational settings. They also indicate that the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms does not have a negative impact and in some cases may have a positive impact on the academic outcomes of peers without disabilities. Findings with respect to the social outcomes associated with IE are more equivocal. Some suggest positive or neutral outcomes, while others indicate the potential for considerable social exclusion and in extreme cases harassment and bullying. Social outcomes appear closely associated with the type and level of disability as well as with student age; more positive outcomes were reported in studies at the elementary (i.e. K-5) level. However, interpretation of comparative studies focused on all outcomes associated with IE should be tempered as a result of their typically quasi-experimental nature and a wide variety of methodological weaknesses ([Foreman, 2009](#); [Lindsay, 2007](#); [Myklebust, 2007](#)).

6 Conclusions

The Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – IDEA) was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1975. Over the course of the 45 years that have elapsed since that time, educators in the U.S. have made significant progress towards creating a more inclusive educational system in which *all* children, including those with disabilities, are not just physically integrated into general education classrooms, but are able to experience both academic and social inclusion. Although many students with disabilities in the U.S. still do not experience what most would refer to as “full inclusion,” a large percentage spend the majority of their school time in general education settings.

The goal of this article was to provide context and background to inclusive education in the U.S. It would be tempting simply to simply recommend effective approaches that have been found to support inclusion to be adopted in other countries with a commitment to the implementation of inclusive education. We believe that such an approach, however, would be ill advised. Implementers need to take into consideration a number of factors the majority of which are heavily influenced by the specific ecosystem within which one is planning to put IE in to place.

As [Bronfenbrenner \(1981; 1994\)](#) and [Garbarino \(1992\)](#) suggest, factors at each level of the ecosystem (microsystem, mesosystem exosystem & macrosystem) both directly and indirectly have the potential to have an impact on both developmental and systems level outcomes. Macrosystem level factors, including the ideology surrounding disability, “otherness” and the local institutional norms must be considered if implementation of any program is to be successful. At the exosystem level, decisions made by politicians and those working in government agencies have the potential to have a salutogenic impact on implementation bringing in much needed resources or a pathogenic effect. Similarly, the manner in which the immediate behavioral environments (i.e. microsystems) in which children with diverse educational needs live (family, school, peer group, etc.) and the linkages between them (mesosystem level) must be considered. If the societal ideology is such that persons with disabilities and those from diverse backgrounds are de-humanized and as a result marginalized, it is unlikely that parents will perceive that there is any real degree of utility to them getting an education. In a similar fashion, poor communication and inadequate linkages between the school and family and quite quickly impeded the impact of even a well develop individualized education plan.

Successful inclusion of children and youth with disabilities as well as from other diverse backgrounds in school systems and society at large is more critical than ever, both in the U.S. and in C.R.

The Czech Republic is a recent adoptee of a national legislation on inclusive education. The new Czech Decree on inclusive education (IE) provides this country in the heart of Europe a real opportunity at a critical historic time to demonstrate to all children, their parents and the society around them that learning together in inclusive environments is not only the most fair and equitable way of understanding the world, but also a necessary step toward inclusion and appreciation of and respect for diversity in life after school. The Czech Republic has a strong history of education and special education in Jan Amos Komenský, Zdeněk Matějček and many others. As a country, the Czech Republic has inherited a specific set of approaches to and uses of education through its history include protecting its language and culture against foreign invasions as well as using education to manipulate people's views of their place in society. By adopting the philosophy of inclusive education and specific approaches to including students from all backgrounds and abilities in this process, the Czech Republic can become one of the lead examples of a progressive and embracing society it has always had the potential to be.

Each country either on its own or with supports therefore needs to chart its own path toward inclusion at both the societal level and with respect to the implementation of educational programs and practices supportive of inclusive education. Nonetheless, it is our hope that educators and scholars in the Czech Republic and other Central and European countries will find the approaches presented in this article interesting and promising enough to seek more information, and might further design their own projects to adapt the strategies to their own needs at this critical time – or be inspired to develop their own. Mutual exchanges of ideas, experiences and expertise are the hallmark of good scholarship. Let us work together to learn from each other, so that we produce the best outcomes possible for *all* children and youth, wherever we may be.

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