

# [Are inclusive classrooms more beneficial to academic success?](https://assignbuster.com/are-inclusive-classrooms-more-beneficial-to-academic-success/)

Winner’s Circle Center is a special education, or what is referred to as a pullout program setting for children and teens with behavioral or developmental disabilities (or both) that emphasizes high student-teacher ratios, supportive services, and alternative educational environments to assist clients in successful academic achievement and development of social skills. Current thinking in most mainstream and public-school settings tend towards an inclusive classroom model, where such students are, for the majority of time, included in mainstream classes, sometimes with direct support and assistance. Both of these approaches have their advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages of the pull-out programs are that each student gets more individualized attention. Students in the pull-out programs are working with other students that are on the same level academically, which makes it easier to structure lessons in a way that will help each student learn the material. In a traditional pull out program setting “ the technical expertise required to work with students with mild disabilities is assumed to reside with the special education teacher, within the separate class.” (Manset, 1997, p. 10) indicating that the students are getting help from teachers that are specially trained to work with children with mild disabilities, supporting the theory that being segregated from mainstream classes is more beneficial to the students’ academic success. An added benefit is the opportunity for students to spend time with others who are on a similar level academically and with whom they may have more things in common (Mursky, 2011, p. 1).  Teachers in pull out programs are also able to make various changes to the normal curriculum which allows for creative methods to assist students in grasping concepts and applying them, as well as allowing time and attention to work on the social skills aspects. The freedom to stretch the boundaries of standard curriculum makes room for specialists who are not certified teachers to assist in the development of curriculum and delivery methods (Renzulli, 1987, p. 248). Such departures from standard curriculum also creates space for “ development of individual interests, opportunities to explore various approaches to learning and thinking styles.” (Renzulli, 1987, p. 248).

Advantages of inclusion programs are that students are not removed from their classrooms and do not miss as much instruction. There is also a great opportunity for

“ collaboration, in the form of planning meetings and committees.” (Manset, 1997, p. 11) which increases the awareness and develops skills and experience of teachers. Another benefit of push in programs is that the specially trained teachers come to the classroom, which not only boosts teacher-to-student ratios but also gives students with mild disabilities the opportunity to work with a specially trained teacher. Push in environments also provide students a different opportunity for the development of social skills, which can be a positive but can also be challenging for some. Some inclusive classroom models give students a feeling of responsibility by giving students an instructional role.

This paper will examine whether the inclusive classroom model provides better academic outcomes for children with intellectual disabilities than pull out program settings, specifically regarding the student’s ability to keep up academically with their peers and to absorb, understand and apply material. We will review studies dealing with academic achievement in pull out and push in programs and compare the results regarding academic progress. Our expectation is that special education settings, with typically smaller class sizes and opportunity for more individualized academic support, will prove to yield better academic progress on the part of children diagnosed with intellectual disabilities than inclusive, mainstream classroom settings.

Study 1

First, I took a look at the experiment done by Stoutjesdijk and colleagues which focused on children of an average age of 9 years old who manifested significant ADHD behaviors. The study’s goal was to highlight the differences in both academic and behavioral progress between the children in a pull-out environment and those in an inclusive education setting (Stoutjesdijk, 2013, p. 21).  The Stoutjesdijk study noted that the findings of this study may be impacted by the participant population, as academic underachievement and trouble with social interaction are common amongst children with this diagnosis, and often persists into adolescence (p. 21). This exploratory study put forth two hypotheses. One was that progress would be expected from children in both educational settings, but that those in a pull out program setting would show better outcomes; the other was that teaching strategies would have greater emphasis in pull out programs, primarily because of lower teacher-student ratios (Stoutjesdijk, 2013, p. 22).

Method.

The study included 64 children, from third to fifth grade; the majority of the children where in fourth grade. They were selected by random sample of 7 out of 16 special schools and 2 out of 4 educational services at mainstream schools (Stoutjesdijk, 2013, p. 22), excluding residential pull out environments. These children represented two groups, one group of 38 children who attended a separate educational facility for special education and another group of 26 children who were fully integrated in regular classrooms where they received special educational support. Analysis showed that there were no significant differences in the background variables of the two groups and the gender distribution of both groups was statistically similar. Stoutjesdijk notes that the study did not include participants with conduct disorders or comorbid ODD. Additionally, the study notes that there were no significant differences in classroom materials or curriculum, nor in additional support provided beyond academic support.

As with most pull out programs, children in special schools had fewer students in each class, a more structured daily program, and fewer stimuli. The trade-off is that students in these classrooms had little opportunity to interact with typically developing peers during school (Stoutjesdijk, 2013, p. 24).

Measures.

The Stoutjesdijk study notes that participant’s progress was evaluated during the first year by pre- and post-assessments on multiple measures designed to speak to behavioral function and academic achievement (p. 24). The subscales Hyperactive/Impulsive Behavior and Inattentive Behavior of the SEQ were used to measure the severity of ADHD symptoms. The Dutch version of the Teacher’s Report Form was used to find non-disorder-specific problem behavior as noted by teachers (Stoutjesdijk, 2013, p 24). Academic achievement was measured utilizing a battery of tests recommended by the Dutch Ministry of Education and concentrated on reading, spelling and math. These tests provide performance levels of students in terms of months of education, with ten months equal to one academic year (Stoutjesdijk, 2013, p. 24). Additionally, the Stoutjesdijk study notes that IQ scores were obtained from diagnostic reports in the school assessment files of the participants (p. 24).

Finally, teaching strategies employed were examined by school psychologists who utilized the Pedagogical Methods Questionnaire (PMQ), which consists of an inventory list used by respondents to indicate how teachers emphasize common teaching strategies used for children with ADHD in their classrooms (Stoutjesdijk, 2013, p. 25). The PMQ focused on four strategies for behavioral and emotional function. Three items on the PMQ provided insight into the level of support for participants in the area of academic achievement including use of concrete instructions, provision of individual instruction, and repetition of instructions and assignments (Stoutjesdijk, 2013, p. 25).

Results and Conclusion.

The study notes that the IBM SPSS Statistics 19 was utilized to conduct the statistical analyses. Stoutjesdijk finds that no significant effect of setting was found on any of the variables, indicating that both groups had comparable behavioral and academic needs and therefore valid comparisons could be made. The Stoutjesdijk study notes that while both groups were already lagging behind their peers academically at the beginning of the study and while both groups made significant academic process, neither made enough progress to catch up with their peers, and neither made significantly more or less academic process than the other (p. 27). So, the study did not bear out the anticipated results of a special education setting fostering better academic outcomes; however, it seems the results indicate steady and similar improvement in both participant groups.

Study 2

The second experiment reviewed was “ Effects of inclusion on the academic achievement and adaptive behavior of children with intellectual disabilities” done by Dessemontet and colleagues. The purpose of this study was to determine if children with intellectual disabilities who were part of fully inclusive mainstream classroom environments (with support) were able to make as much academic and behavioral progress as similar children in special education settings (Dessemontet et al, 2012, p. 579).

Method.

The final research sample was made up of 68 participants age seven to nine; diagnosed with ID (with an IQ between 40 and 75); and lived in their parent’s home. None were found to be on the autism spectrum. According to the article, no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups for  the controlled variables of socio-economic status; associated impairments; cognitive skills; literacy and math scores; or ABAS-II scores (Dessemontet et al, 2012, p. 582. The participants were divided into two equal groups. One group was fully included in general education classrooms in their neighborhood schools. The other group of participants were mixed into classrooms of five to eight students that were also diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, instructed by a special education teacher with the support of an assistant. The group educated in mainstream classrooms received approximately 4. 3 to 6. 3 hours of support from a special education teacher per week and 71% of them were provided with therapies such as speech therapy (Dessemontet et al, 2012, p. 583). Alternatively, 95% of the group in special education settings received therapies (mostly speech and psychomotor therapies) (Dessemontet et al, 2012, p. 583).   Each student was given a standardized academic achievement test individually, three times over two school years (Dessemontet et al, 2012, p. 581). The tests were conducted at the children’s schools by proctors who had been trained to administer the test, and focused on literacy and math skills. The ABAS-II form was sent to the teachers of the participants, who completed their portion and distributed the parent’s portions appropriately at the beginning and end of two school years (Dessemontet et al, 2012, p. 581). These forms were requested to be returned to the main author by each recipient in a postage paid envelope. A brief survey was also given to the parents of each participant to collect data on their profession and education level (Dessmontet el al. 2012, p. 583).

Measures.

An ANOVA for repeated measures was carried out on academic achievement and adaptive behavior (Dessmontet et al. 2012, p. 583) and the results utilized to compare the progress of the two groups of participants. When the assumption of sphericity was violated, degrees of freedom were corrected by using the Greenhous-Geisser correction (Dessemontet et al, 2012, p. 584).

Results and Discussion.

The results of the ANOVA concluded that although both groups significantly improved their math and literacy skills, there was statistically no difference in the progress made in math skills between the two groups; however, those in the mainstream classrooms did realize slightly better literacy scores than those in special education settings (Dessemontet et al, 2012, p. 584).  The ABAS-II scores from the ANOVAs indicated that teacher assessments revealed no differences between the two groups in terms of adaptive behavior – again, both groups seem to have significantly improved, by the results derived from both teachers and parents (Dessemontet et al, 2012, p. 584). However, it must be noted that the results may be affected by the lack of an unbiased source of information regarding children’s adaptive behavior rating (Dessemontet et al, 2012, p. 585).

Placement

Winner’s Circle Center Academy is a pullout program for students with intellectual disabilities that are unable to progress in mainstream schools due to academic and/or behavioral issues. Students come to the Center via referral from the county in which they reside, and participate in Internet-based approved curriculum to complete high school.  The program utilizes a non-traditional setting (classrooms are set in large rooms of a farm house) that promotes a relaxed environment with the goal of reducing stress that can lead to maladaptive behaviors. Currently there are sixteen students enrolled at in the program, aged 14 to 17. Three are three full time staff and three interns. Academic classes do not start until 11 a. m. and end at 2 p. m. each weekday; the shorter academic workdays have proven to be less of a challenge for students who struggle to maintain focus and are credited with more predictable attendance rates. Academic assignments are broken up into lessons, and students are generally given two hours to complete six lessons which works well for the majority of students. Staff and interns are available for one-on-one assistance and support throughout the academic day. I have observed that many of the clients show marked improvement in both academics and behavioral function over time.

For example, Matt (not his real name) enrolled in the Winner’s Circle Center Academy program after being expelled from public school for poor academic performance and physical altercations with classmates. Matt has oppositional defiant disorder, and was not attending classes or finishing his assignments. He was lagging far behind his peers in public school. Matt has been with the Academy for three months.  He is already showing marked improvement in both his behavior and academic achievement. When he first arrived, he had difficulty staying on task and completing lessons; after a few weeks he was completing all six lessons each day and frequently doing more then what was expected of him. He has also made efforts to be patient and avoid altercations with classmates and staff.

Jaxon (also not his real name) is another client who was also expelled from the public-school system, lagging far behind his peers academically. Jaxon is autistic and has great difficulty with focus, and staying on task through completion.  Jaxon has thrived upon the individualized support that Winner’s Circle Center provides. Although he needs support to complete schoolwork, his understanding and retention of the material have greatly improved, resulting in better grades.

Nate (not his real name), was expelled from public school for physical altercations. He exhibited serious maladaptive behavior, which caused him to fall significantly far behind in school. This is his first year at Winner’s Circle Center and both his grades and behavior have transformed. He is now one of the calmest and quietest students in the program; he has caught up with his peers academically, and his GPA is now over 3. 0. He frequently needs support, but he is always one of the first students to finish his work. He has had no serious behavior issues at Winner’s Circle Center.

The studies we have reviewed conclude that both mainstream, inclusive classroom settings (push in programs) and pull out programs based on special education environments produce similar positive progress academically for students diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, with neither having statistically significant advantages.

What could account for the success that Winner’s Circle Center has demonstrated with students who were failing in mainstream inclusive classrooms? To find this answer Winner’s Circle Center was compared to traditional pull out programs in public schools. While there are several similarities with the Center’s Academy program, there are also important differences that are key contributors to student academic success.

One of the key differences is the classroom – or lack thereof. A relaxed atmosphere, without the typical rigidity of a traditional classroom, may be a contributing factor to removing obstacles to academic success. Studies show that symptoms of opposition, defiance and aggression are often associated with ADHD (Stoutjesdijk, 2013, p. 21).  It is also well-known that children on the autism spectrum exhibit both intellectual and behavioral challenges. A calm environment, with predictable structure, that does not present the anxiety and pressure of a traditional classroom setting, seems to be a factor in fewer displays of maladaptive behavior that can hinder learning.

Traditional pull out programs give the “ opportunity for students to interact with others who have similar strengths and interests.” (Mursky, 2011, p. 1) This concept is based on the fact that students with the same or similar diagnoses, and level of academic progress are often put together in special education classrooms.  This of course simplifies lesson and activity planning and implementation. However, it is also true that the mixing of perspectives resulting from a non-traditional setting like Winner’s Circle can be beneficial to each student. Dessemontet, et al points out that adaptive skills and independence are also critical to the development of individuals with intellectual disabilities (Dessemontet et al, 2012, p. 580). Students in programs such as Winner’s Circle with both similarities and striking differences in behavior and academic levels learn from each other and create opportunities for social skill-building and development of adaptive behaviors which may not be present in a more traditional classroom where all students have more similarities than differences. Additionally, the mix of students with differing levels of need for assistance helps to create space for a smaller support staff to concentrate attention where and when it is needed.

Another major difference between traditional pullout programs and Winner’s Circle Center is the curriculum. In traditional pullout programs teachers have the ability to change the normal curriculum to assist their students which can be a benefit but also means that students may not be receiving the same level of instruction or demonstrating the same level of understanding and ability to apply knowledge as their peers. At Winner’s Circle Center the curriculum is set, students are all instructed to the same standard, and each student has set expectations for the school day. While the school day is shorter, there is a routine established that in itself provides predictability and structure which assists students in maintaining focus. Internet-based lessons provide more opportunity to spend school hours pinpointing areas or concepts which are challenging individual students, allowing staff to tailor one-on-one instruction to the needs of each student.

In conclusion, it is clear that there are several different models that can contribute to better academic outcomes for students diagnosed with intellectual disabilities; the key is in understanding the needs of each individual and ensuring that placement is matched to those needs in order to maximize academic progress and success.

## References

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