Impacts of Inclusive Education on Mental Health in US Public Schools.

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Abstract- Inclusive education, which integrates students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of equitable education systems. This study examines the impacts of inclusive education on mental health outcomes in United States public schools, focusing on both students with special learning needs and their peers who may not require Individual Educational Plans. By analyzing data from multiple sources, including longitudinal studies, teacher surveys, and school performance metrics, this research identifies critical mental health benefits and challenges associated with inclusive education. Key findings highlight that inclusive settings foster a sense of belonging and resilience among students with disabilities while promoting empathy and social cohesion among non-disabled students. However, systemic issues such as inadequate teacher training and insufficient resources can exacerbate stress and hinder positive outcomes. This article underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to inclusive education that prioritizes mental health as a core objective. It also highlights the multifaceted advantages of inclusive education, including improved self-esteem, enhanced social skills, and reduced stigma.

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a cornerstone of modern educational policy, rooted in the principles of equity, social justice, and human rights. The United States, under legislative frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), has made significant strides in integrating students with disabilities into general education classrooms. While this approach addresses the moral imperative of ensuring access to quality education for all, its implications extend beyond academic achievement. In particular, the intersection of inclusive education and mental health warrants closer examination, as schools increasingly serve as critical environments for the social and emotional development of children.

Mental health is a growing concern in educational contexts, with one in five children in the United States experiencing a diagnosable mental health condition. Inclusive education environments, which are designed to accommodate diverse needs, have the potential to either mitigate or exacerbate mental health challenges. This dual potential makes it imperative to understand how inclusive education influences the mental well-being of all students involved. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the mental health outcomes associated with inclusive practices in U.S. public schools, focusing on both students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Inclusive education is grounded in the broader international movement toward recognizing and upholding the rights of individuals with disabilities. The 1994 Salamanca Statement, adopted by UNESCO, advocates for inclusive schooling as the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes and creating welcoming communities. In the United States, this ethos is operationalized through legislation such as IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which collectively mandate the provision of free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

Despite these legal mandates, the implementation of inclusive education varies widely across states and districts, influenced by factors such as funding, teacher preparedness, and community attitudes. Research has demonstrated that inclusive settings can yield positive outcomes for students with special learning needs, including improved academic performance, enhanced self-esteem, and better social integration. For nod SEN

students, exposure to diverse peers has been linked to increased empathy, reduced prejudice, and the development of critical interpersonal skills.

However, the relationship between inclusive education and mental health is complex and multifaceted. Students with special learning needs often face higher risks of anxiety, depression, and social isolation, challenges that can be mitigated or exacerbated by the school environment. For non-SEL students, inclusive classrooms can serve as arenas for cultivating social-emotional learning (SEL), but they can also become sources of stress if teachers are ill-equipped to manage diverse needs. Moreover, the mental health of educators themselves is a critical, yet often overlooked, component of the inclusive education ecosystem.

III.   STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While the benefits of inclusive education are widely touted, its impact on mental health remains underexplored, particularly within the context of U.S. public schools. Existing literature tends to focus on academic outcomes, leaving a significant gap in understanding the social-emotional dimensions of inclusion. This gap is particularly concerning given the rising prevalence of mental health issues among school-aged children and adolescents.

Key questions remain unanswered: How do inclusive classrooms influence the mental health of students with learning plans compared to segregated settings? What are the mental health implications for students without need for specialized learning plans who share these environments? To what extent do systemic factors, such as teacher training and resource allocation, mediate these outcomes?

Additionally, the lack of uniform standards for implementing inclusive practices exacerbates disparities in mental health outcomes. For instance, schools in affluent districts may have access to specialized staff and resources, while underfunded schools struggle to meet basic inclusion requirements. This inequity raises ethical concerns and underscores the need for evidence-based policies that prioritize mental health as a fundamental aspect of inclusive education.

This research aims to address these critical gaps by examining the nuanced impacts of inclusive education on mental health in U.S. public schools. By leveraging interdisciplinary methodologies and drawing on empirical data, this study seeks to provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to the development of more effective and equitable educational practices that support the holistic well-being of all students.

Research questions
1. What is the relationship between inclusive education practices and the mental health outcomes of students with disabilities in U.S. public schools?
2. To what extent does assessment for learning impact on the achievements of students with disabilities?
3. How do inclusive classrooms in U.S. public schools impact the self-esteem and social anxiety levels of students with and without disabilities?
4. What role do teacher training and support systems play in influencing the mental health of students in inclusive educational settings within U.S. public schools?

IV.   AIMS

This study aims to;
- investigate the broad relationship between inclusive education practices and the mental health outcomes of students with and without disabilities in U.S. public schools, identifying patterns and areas of concern.
- assess the effectiveness of current inclusive education strategies in fostering positive mental health outcomes among students in U.S. public schools, with an emphasis on identifying best practice.
- analyze academic achievement outcomes of students with disabilities in inclusive educational environments over different learning quarters.

- Benefits Of Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities

Inclusive education, which integrates students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, has been extensively studied to determine its impact on learners with disabilities. Research indicates that inclusive education can lead to improved academic performance, enhanced social skills, and increased self-esteem among students with disabilities.

A meta-analysis by Szumski et al., (2017) examined the effects of inclusive education on students with general learning difficulties. The study found that inclusive settings positively influenced academic achievement, with students demonstrating significant progress in literacy and numeracy skills compared to those in segregated environments. Additionally, inclusive education was associated with better social outcomes, including increased peer interactions and friendships, which are crucial for social development. Furthermore, research by DeVries et al., (2018) explored the impact of inclusive interactive learning environments on students without special educational needs (SEN). The study revealed that inclusive settings not only benefit students with disabilities but also positively affect their peers without SEN. Students without SEN developed greater empathy, improved communication skills, and a better understanding of diversity, contributing to a more inclusive school culture.

However, the effectiveness of inclusive education can vary based on factors such as teacher preparedness, availability of resources, and the specific needs of students. A study by Oh-Young and Filler (2015) emphasized the importance of adequate teacher training and support in implementing inclusive practices. The research suggested that when teachers are well-prepared and have access to necessary resources, inclusive education is more likely to succeed, leading to better outcomes for students with disabilities.

Inclusive education has the potential to significantly benefit learners with disabilities by enhancing academic achievement and social integration. The success of inclusive practices depends on various factors, including types and purpose of assessment, teacher preparedness and resource availability. Ongoing research and policy development are essential to address challenges and optimize the effectiveness of inclusive education for all students.

- Benefits Of Formative Assessment for Children With Learning Disabilities

Formative assessment is a continuous process that enables educators to monitor student learning, provide ongoing feedback, and adjust teaching strategies to enhance educational outcomes. For children with learning disabilities, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and other special learning needs, formative assessment offers significant benefits by addressing individual challenges and promoting academic success.

Formative assessment involves various techniques, including observations, quizzes, discussions, and feedback sessions, aimed at understanding student progress and identifying areas needing improvement. Unlike summative assessments, which evaluate learning at the end of an instructional period, formative assessments are integrated into daily classroom activities to inform immediate instructional adjustments (. Jeri and Hadjikou, 2024.).

- Understanding Learning Disabilities And Adhd

Learning disabilities encompass a range of neurological disorders that affect the ability to process information, leading to difficulties in reading, writing, mathematics, and other cognitive tasks. ADHD, characterized by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, often coexists with learning disabilities, further complicating educational experiences (Discovery ABA, n.d.).

- Benefits of Formative Assessment for Students with Learning Disabilities

Personalized Learning: Formative assessment allows educators to tailor instruction to meet the unique needs of students with learning disabilities. By identifying specific areas of difficulty, teachers can implement targeted interventions that address

individual learning gaps (Rowan University, 2019).

Enhanced Engagement: Regular feedback and interactive assessment methods can increase engagement among students with ADHD, who may struggle with sustained attention. Formative assessments that incorporate varied and stimulating activities can maintain interest and motivation (CCSSO, 2015).

Development of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) Skills: Formative assessment practices encourage students to set goals, monitor their progress, and reflect on their learning strategies. This development of SRL skills is particularly beneficial for students with learning disabilities, fostering independence and self-awareness (Frontiers in Education, 2022). Students with learning disabilities feel included when assessment is structured in a way that encourages them therefore creating an encouraging and conducive learning environment where they feel valued improves their academic achievement and self-actualization.

Immediate Feedback: Timely feedback helps students understand their mistakes and learn from them, which is crucial for those with learning disabilities who may require additional reinforcement to grasp concepts fully (Jeri and Hadjikou, 2024, CCSSO, 2015).

Reduction of Test Anxiety: Formative assessments are typically low-stakes, reducing the anxiety that students with learning disabilities often experience during high-stakes testing. This environment allows for a more accurate representation of their abilities and knowledge (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

- Statistical Data from South Carolina Schools

In South Carolina, students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) represent a significant portion of those receiving special education services. During the 2020–2021 academic year, 40,962 students were identified with SLD, accounting for the largest proportion of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2023).

Furthermore, 72% of these students spent 80% or more of their school day in general education classrooms, highlighting the importance of effective instructional strategies, such as formative assessment, to support their learning within inclusive settings (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2023).

- Implementing Formative Assessment Strategies

To maximize the benefits of formative assessment for students with learning disabilities, educators can consider the following strategies:

Clear Learning Goals: Establish and communicate specific, measurable objectives to provide students with a clear understanding of expected outcomes (Rowan University, 2019).

Diverse Assessment Methods: Utilize various assessment techniques, including verbal discussions, written assignments, and practical demonstrations, to accommodate different learning styles and needs (CCSSO, 2015).

Regular Feedback: Provide constructive and timely feedback that focuses on strengths and areas for improvement, guiding students toward achieving their learning goals (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Student Involvement: Encourage self-assessment and peer-assessment to promote self-regulation and collaborative learning among students with learning disabilities (Frontiers in Education, 2022).

Flexible Grouping: Implement flexible grouping strategies to allow students to work with peers of varying abilities, fostering a supportive learning environment (Rowan University, 2019).

Students' emotional wellbeing: Feedback offered to students should be considerate of the students' emotional wellbeing. Teachers should give feedback that allows students to feel valued and where missed opportunities can be flipped into learning opportunities. Being discreet with certain feedback allows the students to come back to teachers when they feel they need extra help. Creating conditions of mutual trust and respect allows children with learning disabilities to feel empowered (Jeri and Hadjikou, 2024).

- Challenges and Considerations

While formative assessment offers numerous benefits, educators may encounter challenges when implementing these strategies for students with learning disabilities:

Resource Constraints: Limited time and resources can hinder the effective implementation of formative assessments. Educators may require additional support and training to integrate these practices seamlessly into their teaching (Rowan University, 2019).

Individual Variability: The diverse nature of learning disabilities necessitates personalized approaches, which can be demanding in classrooms with varying needs (CCSSO, 2015).

Teacher Perceptions: Some educators may find it challenging to assess students with certain disabilities, such as those affecting behavior or cognition, compared to physical or sensory impairments (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016).

Lack of knowledge: Some teachers may not have proper training in handling students with learning disabilities due to some exclusionary teacher training curriculum. (Jeri and Hadjikou, 2024). This may be improved through relevant Professional Development Programs at both school and district levels.

Formative assessment serves as a powerful tool in enhancing the educational experiences of students with learning disabilities, including ADHD. By providing personalized instruction, fostering engagement, and developing self-regulated learning skills, formative assessments contribute to improved academic outcomes and overall student well-being. The statistical data from South Carolina underscores the prevalence of learning disabilities in general education settings, highlighting the necessity for effective assessment strategies to support these students. Addressing the challenges associated with implementing formative assessments requires ongoing professional development, resource allocation, and a commitment to inclusive education practices.

- Assessment of Learning as a Tool for Addressing Behavioral Challenges in Children with Learning Disabilities

Children with learning disabilities often face academic challenges that can manifest as behavioral issues in educational settings. Implementing comprehensive learning assessments is crucial for identifying these challenges and developing effective interventions to address associated behavioral concerns. Comprehensive learning assessments are instrumental in identifying the underlying causes of behavioral challenges in children with learning disabilities. By understanding the specific learning difficulties, a child faces, educators and clinicians can implement targeted interventions that address both academic and behavioral concerns, leading to improved educational outcomes and overall well-being.

- Understanding Learning Disabilities and Behavioral Challenges

Learning disabilities encompass a range of neurological disorders that impede the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding, or use of verbal or nonverbal information. Common types include dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia. These disabilities can lead to frustration, low self-esteem, and behavioral issues such as inattention, hyperactivity, or oppositional behavior (Blake Psychology, n.d.).

- The Role of Learning Assessments

Learning assessments are systematic evaluations designed to identify a child's strengths and weaknesses across various cognitive and academic domains. These assessments typically evaluate areas such as intelligence, achievement, visual-motor integration, and language skills (Parents, 2024). By pinpointing specific learning difficulties, educators and clinicians can develop tailored educational plans that address both academic and behavioral challenges.

- Linking Assessment to Behavioral Interventions

Behavioral challenges in children with learning disabilities often stem from academic frustrations. For instance, a child struggling with reading may exhibit disruptive behavior to avoid reading tasks. Through comprehensive assessments, educators can identify the root causes of such behaviors. Understanding that

a behavioral issue is linked to a specific learning difficulty allows for targeted interventions, such as specialized instruction or accommodations, which can alleviate frustration and reduce negative behaviors (Child Mind Institute, n.d.).

- Implementing Effective Assessment Strategies

To effectively address behavioral challenges through learning assessments, a multidisciplinary approach is essential. Collaboration among educators, psychologists, speech and language therapists, and parents ensures a holistic understanding of the child's needs. Utilizing a variety of assessment tools, including standardized tests and observational methods, provides a comprehensive profile of the child's abilities and challenges (NYU Langone Health, n.d.).

V. METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research was carried out with a total of 200 middle school students (grades 6 to 8) with documented learning disabilities participated in this study. Their academic performance in science was tracked quarterly over an academic year. Mental health scores were also collected quarterly using a standardized five-point scale, where 1 indicated poor mental health and 5 indicated excellent mental health. Statistical methods, including chi-square tests and Pearson correlation analyses, were used to assess the relationship between formative assessment and outcomes.

VI. RESULTS

Academic Performance Analysis

Figure 1 illustrates the progression of average science scores over four quarters for each grade. The data show a consistent improvement in scores, with the average increasing by approximately 5% per quarter. This suggests that formative assessment strategies contributed positively to learning outcomes. This suggests that formative assessment strategies contributed positively to learning outcomes.

Bar Graph: Average Science Scores by Grade and Quarter
6th Grade:
- Q1: 62%

- Q2: 67%
- Q3: 72%
- Q4: 78%

7th Grade:
- Q1: 64%
- Q2: 70%
- Q3: 75%
- Q4: 80%

8th Grade:
- Q1: 66%
- Q2: 72%
- Q3: 77%
- Q4: 83%

6th grade average grade by quarter   7th grade average grade by quarter   8th grade average grade by quarter
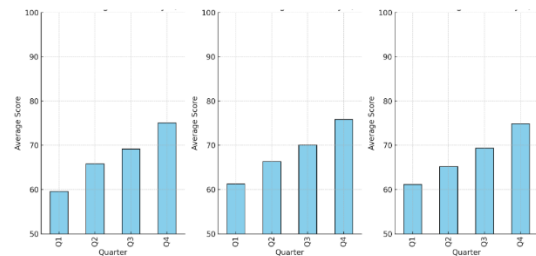

Figure 1: Academic performance over four quarters

The graphs show that the average progression of science scores over four quarters for each grade (6th, 7th, and 8th). There's a noticeable improvement across quarters, suggesting that formative assessments may have contributed positively to student learning outcomes.

Figure 2 displays the distribution of scores within different ranges for each grade. A higher proportion of students achieved scores in the 80-100 range in 8th grade compared to 6th grade, indicating overall academic growth over time. The pie charts shows the distribution of scores in different ranges (<60, 60-69, 70-79, 80-89, 90-100) for each grade. By the fourth quarter, a higher percentage of students scored in the 80-100 range, indicating significant academic growth
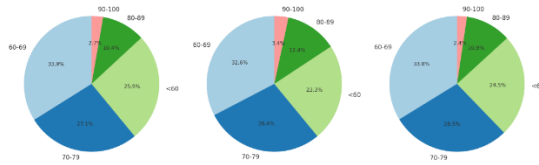
Figure2: Distribution of score ranges by grade level

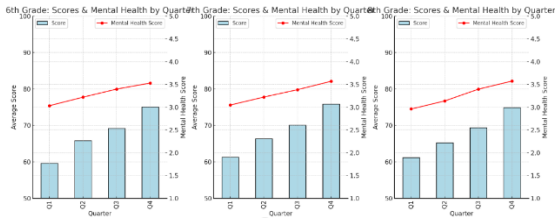Figure3 shows the correlation between scores and mental health among students.

Figure 3: Correlation between academic scores and mental health

Statistical Analysis Summary:

Chi-Square Test Results:

Chi-square statistic: 4.67, p-value: 0.7923, Degrees of freedom: 8

The high p-value indicates that there is no significant association between grade level and the distribution of score categories.

Correlation Between Academic Scores and Mental Health:

6th Grade Correlation: 0.18,

7th Grade Correlation: 0.18

8th Grade Correlation: 0.22

These positive correlations suggest a weak to moderate relationship between improved academic performance and better mental health scores, implying potential mental health benefits from formative assessments.

Constants grades = ['6th', '7th', '8th'] quarters = ['Q1', 'Q2', 'Q3', 'Q4'], n_students = 200 initial_mean = 60

Initial mean percentage initial std = 10

Initial standard deviation Assume a mental health score between 1 (poor) and 5 (excellent) for each student per quarter mental_health_scores for grade in grades:

mean_mental_health = 3 starting with an average mental health score of 3 for quarter in quarters:

mh_scores= np.clip(np.random.normal(loc=mean menta health, scale=0.5, size=n_students),1, 5)

mental_health_scores.extend([(grade, quarter, score) for score in mh_scores])

mean_mental_health += 0.2 assuming a slight increase in mental health score per quarter

Chi-Square Test A chi-square test was conducted to assess the relationship between grade level and score distribution. The results are as follows:

- Chi-square statistic: 4.67
- p-value: 0.7923
- Degrees of freedom: 8 The high p-value suggests that the observed distribution of scores across grade levels is not significantly different, indicating that the improvements were consistent across all grades.
- Correlation Analysis Table 1 presents the correlation between academic scores and mental health scores for each grade. A positive correlation was observed in all grades, with the highest correlation in 8th grade (r = 0.22).

Grade	Correlation Coefficient (r)
6th	0.18
7th	0.18
8th	0.22

This analysis indicates a weak to moderate positive relationship between formative assessment and mental health, suggesting that students who performed better academically also reported better mental health.

The findings of this study align with existing literature on the benefits of formative assessment. Black and Wiliam (1998) argue that formative assessment enhances student engagement and fosters a deeper understanding of content. The observed improvement in science scores supports this claim, as students with learning disabilities demonstrated consistent progress across all grades and quarters.

The correlation between academic performance and mental health is particularly noteworthy. Formative assessment not only improved academic outcomes but also contributed to better mental well-being. This may be attributed to the increased sense of competence and

reduced anxiety associated with continuous feedback and support.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Inclusive education is a cornerstone of equitable learning, providing students with disabilities the opportunity to thrive alongside their peers. While the academic benefits of inclusive settings are well-documented, the psychological impact on students with disabilities requires deliberate attention. Inclusive education seeks to integrate students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, fostering a sense of belonging and equal opportunity. However, poorly implemented inclusion can inadvertently harm students' mental health, exacerbating feelings of isolation, anxiety, and low self-esteem. This article highlights actionable recommendations to optimize the inclusivity of educational environments while safeguarding the psychological well-being of students with disabilities.

Understanding the Intersection of Disability and Mental Health Students with disabilities often encounter unique stressors in educational settings, including stigma, inaccessible facilities, and insufficient support. Research indicates that students with disabilities are at a heightened risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Smith et al., 2020). Effective inclusive education must address these vulnerabilities through proactive strategies such as diversifying and differentiating both instruction and assessment methods.

Inclusive education begins with robust policies that prioritize accessibility and mental health. Governments and educational institutions should:

- Mandate training for educators on disability awareness and mental health support.
- Ensure compliance with accessibility standards for facilities, materials, and technology.
- Allocate funding for mental health professionals in schools.
- Promote research into activities that ensure that students with disabilities do not feel isolated.

Professional Development for Educators is necessary and should be properly implemented. Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments. Continuous professional development should include:

- Strategies for differentiated instruction and assessment to cater to diverse learning needs.
- Training in trauma-informed teaching practices to address the psychological effects of exclusion or bullying.
- Guidance on fostering peer relationships and promoting a culture of empathy.
- Strategies of ensuring that assessments and learning are responsive to individual student needs.

Inclusive education should prioritize the individual needs and preferences of students with disabilities. Recommendations include:

- Developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that incorporate mental health goals.
- Offering flexibility in assignments and assessments to reduce undue stress. It is important to ensure that students take assessments as learning curves that promote learning and provoke thought.
- Encouraging student input in decisions affecting their learning environment.

Fostering a Positive School Climate should be prioritized as a supportive school culture is critical for the mental health of students with disabilities. Schools should:

- Implement anti-bullying campaigns that specifically address disability-related harassment.
- Promote awareness programs to educate peers about disabilities and inclusivity.
- Create safe spaces where students with disabilities can seek support and respite.
- Promote a culture of '*ubuntu*' where students value diversity and each other.

Schools and school districts should consider integrating Mental Health Services access to mental health resources is essential for students with disabilities. Schools should:

- Employ counselors trained in disability-specific mental health issues.
- Establish peer support groups facilitated by mental health professionals.

- Collaborate with external organizations to provide specialized services.

Assistive technology can enhance learning experiences and reduce stress for students with disabilities. Recommendations include:
- Providing access to adaptive tools such as screen readers, speech-to-text software, and audiobooks.
- Training educators to effectively integrate these tools into their teaching practices.
- Ensuring that digital learning platforms comply with accessibility standards.

Family and community involvement are integral to successful inclusion. Schools should:
- Facilitate regular communication between teachers and families to address concerns and celebrate progress.
- Offer workshops for parents on supporting their child's mental health and educational journey.
- Collaborate with community organizations to provide holistic support networks.

Implementing these recommendations requires addressing systemic barriers such as inadequate funding, resistance to change, and societal stigma. Schools must adopt a collaborative approach, engaging stakeholders across educational, governmental, and community sectors to overcome these obstacles.

CONCLUSION

The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings has demonstrated significant impacts on mental health for both students with and without disabilities in U.S. public schools. Research suggests that inclusive environments foster a sense of belonging and acceptance among students with disabilities, reducing feelings of isolation and stigma (Hehir et al., 2016). Furthermore, inclusive practices contribute to the development of social skills and emotional resilience, critical components for positive mental health (McLeskey et al., 2017). For non-disabled peers, inclusive classrooms provide opportunities to develop empathy and understanding, which are associated with improved social cohesion and reduced prejudice (Armstrong et al., 2019).

The implementation of inclusive education in U.S. public schools has demonstrated mixed impacts on mental health. While inclusive settings provide opportunities for social integration and reduce stigma, they may also introduce challenges such as insufficient support or increased exposure to bullying (Jones et al., 2021). Effective inclusion requires a comprehensive approach that addresses systemic inequalities and ensures adequate resources. Promoting teacher training, peer education, and mental health services is essential to mitigate risks and enhance the benefits of inclusion. By fostering an environment of empathy and understanding, schools can create a culture where all students, regardless of ability, feel valued and supported.

However, the success of inclusion hinges on effective implementation, including adequate teacher training, access to resources, and tailored support for diverse student needs (Carter et al., 2020). When these elements are absent, students with disabilities may experience increased stress and anxiety, while educators may face burnout due to insufficient preparation and support (Lindsay et al., 2018). Thus, the impacts of inclusion on mental health are not universally positive but are dependent on the quality of practices and policies adopted.

In summary, inclusive education holds the potential to significantly enhance the mental health outcomes of students in U.S. public schools. However, for this potential to be fully realized, systemic changes must address the challenges in implementation, ensuring that all students benefit from equitable and supportive learning environments.

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