Is Inclusion Effective?

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Is Inclusion Effective?

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Most school districts today are inclusive schools, which means students with mild to moderate disabilities are participating in general education curriculum. Recent studies have shown varying results as to whether this type of program is successful for these students. A survey was conducted in a small rural school district and seems to support the current research indicating the correlation between the training received and the willingness of teachers to educate students that have disabilities.
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Introduction

There is a large debate over the success of inclusion of special education students in regular education classrooms. Multiple studies have been conducted to assess whether the outcomes of such a program can show benefits for all of those involved. The studies seemed to have many different results, depending on the different aspects of each situation studied. In the conclusion of the research, one can state that success for special education students in a regular education environment can be attained depending on the level of needs of each individual student and the supports given to all people participating in the efforts. These students have been able to achieve gains in many areas. Such areas include social skills and peer interactions, reading and language development, and positive attitudes and self-esteem. However, there are many factors necessary to make this type of program succeed. If these are not all intact, it may be detrimental to the achievement of the student.

Teacher's attitudes are the primary factor that can cause inclusion to fail. Surveys conducted have shown that many teachers feel that they are not qualified to effectively teach students with special needs, do not have the adequate training, cannot handle the levels of behaviors, cannot individualize instruction adequately, are resistant to collaboration with other professionals, and do not have the administrative support. This is a huge barrier in the success of this type of program. It has also been stated that for students whose levels of disabilities are more severe cognitively or behaviorally, the smaller, more specialized type of instruction produced more gains. For future research in this area, it is important to judge the success of these students when there are all of the supports intact throughout all of the grade levels.
Is Inclusion Effective?

Literature Review

In the history of special education, placement of the student with special needs has been an ever-changing issue of debate. With the change of times, has come the change of trends, and many of these trends have come with controversy.

The current issue is that of inclusion, or as Murphy (1996) describes it, "...the total integration of all students who have special needs – particularly those with disabilities - into the age-appropriate, regular education classrooms of their community schools, regardless of the nature or degree of the needs involved. Special education and support services are provided within the regular education environment – nearly always within the regular education classroom itself" (p. 471-472).

Supporters of inclusive education feel that there are many benefits to this type of placement. Research has shown that students included in general education classes improve in academic, social, and emotional functioning.

There are also many people who oppose inclusion. Many feel that there are not many positive results when special education students are immersed in the regular classroom, and in addition, it has negative affects. Opponents have expressed questions of whether it is beneficial for all students, regardless of disability and severity, to be included. They also found that there were negative attitudes of teachers, parents, and peers towards an inclusive program.

This purpose of this review is to explore the concept of inclusion and weigh the benefits and drawbacks. I will explore the history of research in this area in order to form an educated opinion on the topic.
The Inclusion Movement

In order to fully understand the idea of inclusion, it is important to take a look at the history of special education and how it became what it is today. The major breakthrough in special education began with the passing of Public Law (PL) 94-142, also known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975. This law “guaranteed individualized ‘special education’ for every student who is identified as mentally retarded, learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, speech impaired, hard of hearing or deaf, visually handicapped, deaf-blind, orthopedically impaired, other health impaired, or multihandicapped” (Murphy, 1996, p. 470). This law mandated that these students be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) which is most suitable to meet their needs. This refers to a continuum of services ranging from regular education to home-schooling.

When deciding which level of the continuum is most appropriate for a student, it is important to look at many factors. These factors may include the student’s disability, severity of the disability, age, cognitive levels, emotional and behavioral issues, and the resources provided for the student through the school district or community. After taking these aspects into consideration, one must then consider whether inclusion is the right placement for the student.

Definition of Terms

There are many interpretations of the word inclusion. Often you will find the words used synonymously with integration or mainstreaming. Often these words may have distinct meanings. According to Rafferty, Piscitelli, and Boettcher (2003), integration is a broad definition that refers to mixing students with and without
disabilities. Rafferty et al. also state that mainstreaming is the process of placing students in regular education classes for only part of the day. These classes may be those in which the student is able to function equal to their non-disabled peers, such as physical education or music. For the purpose of this paper, all terms identified will be synonymous and be interpreted as students participating in the general education curriculum for a majority of the day, with the instructional supports necessary to achieve success.

Students with disabilities encompass a wide range of categories and levels of severity. The studies involved have researched students who cover the whole spectrum, from mild learning disabilities to multiply physically and mentally handicapped. This is important to keep in mind throughout the reading because it is often difficult to compare success or failures when the playing field is not level.

In order to determine the level of success of inclusion programs, there were many areas that needed to be researched. It was important to consider the many aspects that are involved in educational placement, as well as special education. Researchers also felt it was important to measure student achievement in many areas as a measure of success. Factors considered in the studies were student's skills in overall academics, reading, language development, social skills, and behavior. The attitudes and perceptions toward inclusion were also considered from the viewpoint of special education students, general education students, teachers, parents, and administrators. The quality of Individualized Education Programs (IEP) was reviewed, as well as the resources and strategies used to educate these students with disabilities. All of these aspects are very important in
determining the effectiveness of whether inclusion is successful for a particular student, classroom, or school.

Studies were conducted in a variety of settings which ranged from preschool to twelfth grade. The classrooms were either already including students with disabilities or only including these students for the purpose of the study. The classrooms were located in both urban and rural areas scattered throughout the country.

The Results

After a careful analysis of samples of research conducted, there were differing opinions of the successes of inclusion. Benefits included areas such as social skills, academics, self-concept, and language development. Drawbacks include behavior, dependence on adults, resources, funding, and also social and academic skills.

Benefits of Inclusion of Students with Special Needs

In a study conducted by Shinn, Powell-Smith, Good and Baker (1997), 23 elementary students were studied to report the success of a pull-out trial period reading program (p.59). Therefore, these students were participating in the general education classroom for this one class per day. The trial period lasted up to 12 weeks for most students. Both special education and general education students were assessed before and at the conclusion of the study. Shinn et al. found that “...reintegrated students made reliable improvements and reduced their skill discrepancies from their general education counterparts” (p. 72).

Research was conducted in the area of social relationships of students with severe disabilities at an intermediate level (Kennedy, Shukla, and Fryxell, 1997, p.31). These students were divided into two groups, one of which was a special education placement,
and the other, a full-time general education classroom. The results were based on three categories: social interactions and social contacts, social support behavior, and friendship networks and relationship durability. Kennedy et al. found the following:

Students supported in general education classrooms (a) interact more frequently with peers without disabilities, (b) have more social contacts with peers without disabilities across a greater range of activities and settings, (c) receive and provide higher levels of social support behaviors, (d) have larger friendship networks composed primarily of peers without disabilities, and (e) have more durable relationships with peers without disabilities (p. 43).

The social skills of students within cooperative groups were examined by Pomplun in 1997. He measured the performance, amounts of participation, and type of cooperative behavior of 5th grade students during state science assessments. For students with varying ranges of disabilities involved in cooperative groups, he found that most functioned like groups that contained all general education students.

Rafferty, Piscitelli, and Boettcher (2003) conducted a study in order to measure the progress in language development and social competence among preschoolers. They studied 96 students in both inclusive and segregated classes. Rafferty et al. found that the inclusive students received comparable, if not higher scores on their posttests in the areas of language development and social skills (p. 475).

Students' attitudes toward participating in regular education was something also considered by many authors. Often times one's attitude toward an inclusion program affects how successful the program will be. The special education student's opinion is
taken into great consideration, as well as the opinion of the regular education students, teachers, parents, and administrators.

Hansen and Boody (1998) focused on the perception of the classroom environment for both mainstreamed and regular education students. They based their study on nine subscales which include involvement, affiliation, teacher relationship, task orientation, competition, order and organization, rule clarity, teacher control, and innovation. The results found that mainstreamed students viewed their classrooms as positively as the regular education students did.

The teachers involved also have a great effect on the success or failure of an inclusive program. Surveys conducted found that many teachers have a positive attitude towards teaching special education students and the positive effects that come from it. Janney, Snell, Beers, and Raynes (1995) found that teachers interviewed stated that the benefits of inclusion outweigh the negative aspect of time and energy spent. They reported an increased independence in students, improved functional skills, and an increased alertness and interest in the environment for students with moderate to severe disabilities. For students with mild disabilities Janney et al. reported social benefits such as "age-appropriate behaviors and tastes, developing friendships, ‘being a part’ of the school and classroom community, and increased self-esteem" (p. 431).

Seery, Davis, and Johnson (2000) talked to both teachers and parents in a preschool program about the benefits of inclusion. Some questions asked were in regard to what the future hopes and goals were of the student with special needs and whether there were any concerns about the inclusion program. The study found that both parents
and professionals in that program felt in agreement of the benefits for the children and had less concerns toward the end of the school year.

*Drawbacks of Inclusion of Students with Special Needs*

There are many skeptics of inclusive education. Opponents have expressed concern that there may not be enough gains for special education students. In fact, they feel that often times there can be negative results to including certain children in regular education classrooms. These people also feel that the attitudes of teachers, administrators and regular education students may hinder the success of this type of program.

Stainback, Stainback, East, and Sapon-Shevin (1994) have supported their idea that students that do not have opportunities to interact and associate with peers who have similar characteristics (disabilities) may be hindered in their development of a positive self-concept. Stainback et al. go on to suggest that this quality is essential in helping these students to become successful adults in society.

Data has also shown that students with disabilities in regular education classes may not be as engaged in classroom activities compared to a more restrictive environment (Logan, Bakeman, & Keefe, 1997). Logan studied 29 students with moderate to severe/profound disabilities and found that these students showed the highest levels of engaged behavior in 1:1 or small-group situations.

For inclusion to be successful, there need to be many resources in place. These resources may include pull-out programs, assistive technology, additional training for teachers, and the use of paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals are incorporated into the classroom to act as a support for academics, socialization, and physical needs according to the needs of the individual. Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997)
have found that the proximity of the instructional assistant may in fact hinder the development of the student. Giangreco et al. stated that some areas of hindrance may include:

(a) interference with ownership and responsibility by general educators, (b) separation from classmates, (c) dependence on adults, (d) impact on peer interactions, (e) limitations on receiving competent instruction, (f) loss of personal control, (g) loss of gender identity, and (h) interference with instruction of other students (p. 7).

It is also important to consider the actions and attitudes of the students without disabilities in the classroom. How they interact with and react to students with disabilities can be crucial in creating a positive classroom environment and increasing social skills. Griffith and Cooper (2002) have discovered that students without disabilities are more apt to interact more with other students without disabilities. This is especially true if the students have not had increasing exposure to students with disabilities. Griffith and Cooper suggest educating the regular education students to incorporate others into the classroom. This training may include things such as teaching of specific disabilities and how to create a nurturing environment for those who may feel isolated.

Many teachers may feel that they are not adequately prepared to provide effective instruction to students with disabilities in a regular education setting. Murphy (1996) reports that general education teachers feel that they do not have the extensive training that these students need and cannot provide specialized instruction. Kavale and Forness (2000) support this statement and add that these fears cause teachers to have a negative
attitude toward inclusion. They feel less willing to work with students whose disabilities required additional responsibilities, and may have less tolerance of students who cannot keep up. Rural teachers have reported generally negative experiences in inclusion and disagreed with the benefits of inclusion (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003). They also reported a lack of commitment on the school’s behalf and teacher’s unwillingness to collaborate.

McLeskey and Pacchiano (1994) indicate that although we are working hard to provide a least restrictive environment for all students, the number of students identified with disabilities also continues to grow. They question whether the schools are really making an effort toward inclusion, when many students are still receiving education through pull-out programs or special class.

Discussion

The studies described show a variety of aspects to the idea of inclusion. Within these individual situations, there have proven to be many benefits as well as drawbacks. In many areas the resources may be limited and people may feel unprepared to handle the special needs of students with disabilities. They argue that these students are not getting the specialized education that they deserve in the appropriate setting. In fact, students with certain types of disabilities may show some regression in inclusive situations. These disabilities may include behavioral disorders and severe/profound handicaps.

For students with mild disabilities, however, inclusion seems to have a different result. If the proper resources are in place these students can function in regular education classroom and show improvements in many areas such as academics, social skills, and self-concept. It is my opinion that given the proper resources and support, inclusive education can be successful for most students with special needs. I also believe
that it is up to the district and community of the schools to educate and prepare all of those involved to implement an inclusion program. The benefits for those involved far outweigh the drawbacks.

*What are the Gaps?*

Many of the studies discussed earlier do not cover the wide variety of situations that may occur in a school district. The first area of concern is areas of disabilities that were focused on. Many researchers looked at only one type of disability when judging the effectiveness of inclusion. It would make sense to conduct a study in a full inclusion school in which all students, regardless of disability, were considered. This goes along with the second area of concern. The settings of the classrooms under investigation were not varied. They were either located in an urban or rural district but often not both. Also, the classes were often limited to only one age group such as pre-school or middle school. The final concern is the levels of inclusion involved. It was stated that many of the classrooms were not inclusive before the investigations occurred, while others had been striving toward inclusion for some time. Some were given the supports and training needed to provide these services and others were not. Also, the levels of inclusion varied from study to study. Some students were only included for one class per day from anywhere from 12 weeks to a full school year.

*Method*

*Introduction*

In order to discover the attitudes and training of general education teachers within an inclusive school, a survey was conducted. The purpose of the survey was to determine how teachers’ background, training, and support shape their views of teaching students
with disabilities. Do the teachers feel prepared for meeting the needs of special education students? Have college preparation courses given sufficient coverage of the issue? Are districts continuing with training to ensure that students' needs are met? According to the research, teachers had a higher success rate in inclusive situations if the answer to all of these questions is “yes.”

Data Collection

A survey was sent electronically to general education teachers throughout all grade levels in a small, rural school district. This district is an inclusive district and most students with disabilities are mainstreamed in general education classes with varying levels of support provided by a special education teacher. All teachers except special education teachers were asked to respond. Because of anonymity, it cannot be determined exactly which grade/subject respondents taught. The survey consisted of six short answer questions:

1. How do you feel about having students with disabilities in your classroom?
2. How much preparation was provided at the college level for teaching students with disabilities? If any, what?
3. Do you also have certifications in inclusive/special education?
4. How much preparation is provided by the school district for teaching students with disabilities?
5. Do you have the necessary resources, technology, and training to use this technology to teach students with disabilities? If so, what?
6. Do you feel that it is the responsibility of the special education teachers to educate the students with disabilities?
Ten surveys were returned within the time allocated in the form of e-mail or anonymous hard copy through district mail.

*Data analysis*

Completed surveys were collected and looked at two separate ways. First, the results were listed by question number, in order to see the various responses to each question and to determine if any one response is more common than another. Second, they were reviewed on an individual basis in order to view each individual's case and background to find out if level of training affected teachers' willingness to teach students with disabilities.

*Results and Discussion*

The first question asked about teachers feelings about having students with disabilities in their classroom. Eight out of 10 respondents indicated a positive feeling about teaching all children. Three of these teachers, however, did mention that it is fine, as long as there is the support of a special education teacher. Two other teachers mentioned positive feelings as long as these students aren't disturbing others or a behavior problem. Two teachers felt negatively about teaching students with disabilities, stating reasons such as "it takes more time" and "classroom numbers make it extremely difficult to give individual attention."

When asked how much college level preparation was given to these teachers, two stated none, four stated very little, and four stated that they were well prepared. Six of the respondents have no certifications in inclusive/special education, one has a Masters in Adaptive Physical Education, and two have special education K-12 certification.
All teachers who participated in the survey claimed that they have received little/no training provided by the school district. Two respondents stated that their training has consisted of support and guidance from special education teachers, while another two have attended one or two conferences given by the regional BOCES. All feel that there is adequate technology available within the district, such as FM systems, computers and software, and Alpha Smarts, however, they have not been trained or they learned what they know through special education staff.

The final question asked if special education teachers are responsible to educate students with disabilities. Eight out of ten stated clearly that all students are the responsibility of all teachers and the importance of working together. Two teachers, however, felt that special education teachers have more responsibility, especially with disruptive students.

When reviewing each individual survey, it was apparent that the teachers that had more college training or dual certifications that included special education were more willing and prepared to teach students with special needs in their classes.

Conclusion

Most school districts today are inclusive schools, which means students with mild to moderate disabilities are participating in general education curriculum. Recent studies have shown varying results as to whether this type of program is successful for these students. This survey conducted seems to support the current research indicating the correlation between the training received and the willingness of teachers to educate students that have disabilities.
Because inclusion/mainstreaming is so widespread, education majors of all subjects should have the appropriate coursework necessary to prepare them for the reality of having students with IEPs in their classroom. A general class or chapter on special education regulations and types of disabilities is not adequate for today's teaching experiences. College students need training on teaching and behavior strategies for all types of learners.

In the schools itself, it is also the responsibility of the district to educate and refresh all staff of current practices, technology and use, and policies. Thus this gives the teachers a feeling of confidence that they have the tools needed to successfully teach all students in their classroom.

Areas of Future Research

In the future there are many other items to consider when addressing the idea of whether inclusion is successful or not. As previously stated, I feel that it would be a more equal comparison to find two schools that are inclusive and have all of the appropriate supports needed to be successful at an equal level. One must be rural and one urban. For special education students of all grades, achievement and social skills will be addressed in the fall and then again in June. If the students showed progress and improvement in both of these areas, it would be a meaningful way to show that districts that strive for full inclusion could achieve success for all of their students.
References


