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Greg O'Connor
St. John Fisher College

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Self Contained Classrooms in Today's Schools

Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the characteristics and effectiveness of self contained classrooms in today's schools. This paper talks about what is involved in a self contained classroom, the least restrictive environment, opportunities for inclusion, benefits of inclusion, and the social implications on students in a self contained classroom. Following the review is a research study that describes the environment, strategies, and to what extent students in self-contained classrooms are involved in different settings.

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Self Contained Classrooms in Today's Schools

By

Greg O'Connor

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Dr. Susan M. Schultz

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St. John Fisher College

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Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the characteristics and effectiveness of self contained classrooms in today's schools. This paper talks about what is involved in a self contained classroom, the least restrictive environment, opportunities for inclusion, benefits of inclusion, and the social implications on students in a self contained classroom. Following the review is a research study that describes the environment, strategies, and to what extent students in self-contained classrooms are involved in different settings.

Self Contained Classrooms in Today's Schools

This literature review was completed to gain a better understanding of self contained classrooms in special education. Articles were chosen to help understand what a self contained classroom is made up of, the trend in population of self contained classrooms, the discrimination of students with disabilities, and the social affects of students.

In 1975, Congress passed Public Law 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act), which is now known as IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). Within IDEA every student is required to have the opportunity to complete their schooling in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The IDEA states:

> that placement of students with disabilities in special classes, separate schools and other
>
> removal from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or
>
> severity of the disability is such that, even with the use of supplementary aids and
>
> services, education cannot be satisfactorily achieved (IDEA).

Students who are in self-contained schools are more limited to academic opportunities and social integration. According to Lobdell and Van Ness (1963), a student in a self contained classroom will be removed from the general education setting for all subjects, comprised of small groups working with a special education teacher. A self contained classroom could also be on the other end of the spectrum in which students are working with an enrichment teacher. Although a self-contained classroom consists of students who share similar academic or social needs, these students could be at different grade levels working on different concepts.

Students in a self-contained school have the potential of being removed from the school district they live in and placed in a school that includes only self-contained classrooms (p. 212). The Department of Education's Annual Report to Congress does show a declining number of

student who are in a self contained setting in New York State. The 1992 – 1993 school year reported that thirty-seven and a half percent of students were in the regular education classroom less that sixty percent of the time and just under eight percent of students attended a public separate facility. In the 1997 – 1998 school year, just under thirty-five percent of the students were in the regular education classroom less than sixty percent of the time and four and a half percent of students were in the public separate facility. The most recent report of 2005 that covers the 2003-2004 school year states that twenty-seven percent of students in New York are in the regular education classroom less than sixty percent of the time and just under three percent of students are in a public separate facility. This supports that since the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94.142) in 1975, students with disabilities have been guaranteed a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, yet nearly 30 years after the passage of IDEA, many students with disabilities remain in educational settings separate from their non-disabled peers. Although IDEA has been extremely successful in:

> giving students with disabilities access to public education, the large number of students, located in more, rather than less, restrictive placements has led some to characterize LRE as a loophole that contributed to two largely separate and unequal education systems: general education and special education (Ferri & Conner, 2005, p. 455).

Ableism

Schools often focus on what is right making sure students receive a fair education without any judgment from teachers, viewing all students the same despite cognitive, physical, or social differences. Ableism directly affects students with disabilities and it also directly affects the viewpoint of teachers in relation to the differences students have. According to Smith. Foley & Chaney, (2008):

Ableism is a form of discrimination or prejudice against individuals with physical, mental, or developmental disabilities that is characterized by the belief that these individuals need to be fixed or cannot function as full members of society (p 303).

This definition supports the exclusion of students in schools and promotes that fact that students need to be changed if they are a little different than what the norm presents. Expectations are lowered of what students with disabilities can achieve with ableism in mind. Schools and society would like to think that students are all treated the same but researchers believe the ableism takes place in schools. Storey (2007) states that, "although schools often advocate multiculturalism and acceptance of differences, disability and ableism are overlooked in this advocacy" (p. 56).

Brown vs. Board of Education in Topeka Kansas was the beginning of racially inclusive schools which shows that schools are advocating for multicultural acceptance, however, students with disabilities are in the spot light with their individual differences highlighted. Students with Emotional Disturbance are often placed into one classroom with a handful of other students who are diagnosed with the disability of Emotional Disturbance, therefore highlighting this disability creating an atmosphere which lacks multidimensional students. Ferri & Conner (1995) believe:

The practice of legally dividing students in schools according to racial difference was being challenged, dividing students according to disability gained greater acceptance. In comparison to public rhetoric abhorring racial segregation, exclusion based on disability is often seen as warranted (p 455).

Students of a defined race and students diagnosed with a disability should be seen as indifferent as it is still a division of students segregating based on a specific quality. What students say or what they do or how they act may be viewed as abnormal. Society has long presented the norm of how people should behave, or what they should say, or even what they should look like.

According to Hehir (2005) society has accepted that it is alright to think "it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled children rather than only with other disabled students" (p. 15). These students are getting categorized into their own irregular group where "individuals with disabilities are commonly viewed as being abnormal rather than as members of a distinct minority community" (Smith. Foley & Chaney, 2008, p 305). So instead of focusing on what the students can do, teachers are focusing on what the students cannot do. Hehir (2005) continued by stating that "educational and developmental services provided to disabled children focus inordinately on the characteristics of their disability to the exclusion of all else" (p. 16).

Mainstreaming and Inclusion

Mainstreaming and inclusion of students incorporates the participation of students with disabilities in a regular education classroom. It is "the education of mildly handicapped children in the regular education classroom. It is a concept that is compatible with the least restrictive environment provision of P.L. 94-142, requiring that all handicapped children be educated with their normal peers whenever possible" (Stephens, Blackhurst, & Magliocca, 1998, p.1). One type of inclusion consists of a student's home classroom as a self-contained classroom where the student is pulled out of the classroom to go to a regular education class for particular subjects. Another model would have students in a regular education classroom who get pulled out by the special education teacher for small group instruction for particular subjects. Some inclusion classrooms may consist of the special education student staying in the general education classroom the whole day with complete push-in special area teachers throughout the day. This type of classroom is a major benefit where students with disabilities are not segregated from normal school activities according to Lewis and Doorlag (1995). Not only will students with

disabilities benefit from this setting, but general education students will also profit from the extra

support that would be included in the classroom. Promoters of inclusive classrooms advocate that

inclusion is a philosophy that benefits all students in the general classroom (Salend & Duhaney,

1999). There would be more staff in the classroom all supporting the inclusion model which will

in essence assist all students even those who often struggle but do not qualify for special services

(Palmer, et al., 2001). Students in a self-contained classroom could be attending a school in a

town and district outside of their own. This involves kids interacting throughout the day with a

different group of kids who live within their neighborhood. Parents would prefer their child to be

a respected member of the neighborhood community which starts with being accepted and

included in the school community (Yssel, et al., 2007). This could also be daunting on parents as

they would have to drive a longer distance to their child's placement. Palmer et al. (2001)

explains that parents would prefer inclusion to avoid distance and encourage a closer connection

with the student's team of teachers.

Social Implications

The complete package in an educational setting provides not only academic skills, but

social skills as well. Although not part of the academic curriculum, researchers support the fact

that social development is essential to child development. Considering children spend at least

thirty hours a week in the classroom, social development should be part of each classroom.

However, Smyth (1992) states that, "Teachers face the daily challenge of implementing

educational strategies suitable for both enhancing student motivation to participate and

developing appropriate classroom behaviors" (p. 354). Baker & Donelly (2001) mention that it is

unfortunate that there is a lack of emphasis on early social development during the elementary

years (p. 75) and that academic goals are often valued more than social goals, even though they

concluded that social interaction among people may be the most important ingredient in education (p. 76). It is important to have positive peer relationships throughout the school day and Smyth states, "to be successful at school students need to be able to access the opportunity for social learning structures made available by the school" (p. 354). He continues to mention that this can be problematic for disadvantaged students because of their "limited opportunity structure" (p. 357). When thinking about the least restrictive environment, it is hard to think that students in a self contained classroom are receiving efficient social benefits. Self contained classrooms can have a negative social impact on students as Wiener (2004) states:

> The peer status of children with LD declines over the course of a school year; that is, many children with LD who have average social status at the beginning of the school year are seen as neglected or rejected by the end of the school year which is particularly high in studies of children in contained special education (p 22).

This shows that students with learning disabilities (LD) are having social problems with peers in their classroom and it only worsens when students with LD are in a contained special education program. Appropriate social situations provided to students in the classroom will lead to more successful students as Katz & Galbraith (2006) states that social interaction among children is crucial to the development of life-long communicative skills that will assist in their ability to comply with societal expectations and be accepted as a valued member of society (p. 12)

Conclusion

This paper started off by talking about the characteristic of self contained classrooms. It then went into the theory of ableism within our schools which directly effects placement of students. It defined mainstreaming and inclusion with provides opportunities for students with disability in general education classrooms and the benefits of these types of programs. Finally it

finished talking about the social implications special education has on students. Throughout this research, I often asked myself to what extent is the effectiveness of self contained classrooms? Are schools providing the least restrictive environment for students or are they focusing on the disability of students and placing them in a classroom that might not be beneficial to that student? For further research I have conducted a study on students in self contained classroom. I asked teachers about their academic and social goals and gathered some information to try to conclude what makes an effective self contained classroom.

METHODOLOGY

Researcher Stance

Having taught in both a general education setting and a special education self-contained classroom, I have become more aware of the differences of the social and academic development of the students in each of these settings. It is just as important for the social development of a student as it is the academic development. As teachers, I feel we have a responsibility to provide the best scenario for each child to grow in each of these facets. Within the general education setting, the variety of students is more apparent in relation to the academic level of each child, the emotional state of each child, and the maturity level of each child. In this setting, there could also be students requiring services for diagnosed disabilities. The ability to provide learning situations from students with quite unique qualities allows each student to learn from one another understanding the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Not only that, but it allows students to observe how to react to different situations as each student will react differently. Within a self-contained setting, students are typically in a classroom with a few students who are all similar to their own social and academic needs. In this scenario, it could pose difficulties for the classroom teacher to provide ample opportunities to teach real life

character education and appropriate social situations. While teaching summer school in a self-contained classroom, I have observed the "trickle down" effect inappropriate behavior has on the classroom. I had a classroom of emotionally disturbed students and when one started acting out because something wasn't going the way he/she wanted, others would start to push the buttons of that student or start acting out as well because I fell they thought it was the appropriate way to react to the situation.

I chose to use surveys to collect data on my research because I felt this format would allow me to collect information from several teachers in the self-contained classroom. I was able to provide a survey to gather information in regards to the characteristics of each classroom, strengths/weaknesses of students, strategies used from teacher in regards to behavior, and challenges within the classroom.

Data Collection and Participants

The research was conducted at an elementary special education school within a small rural district. This is a school which provides services for students from a variety of surrounding school districts in which students may have up to an hour long bus ride. This location was chosen because it was a school in which I had previously been employed as an aide and as a teacher during summer school. It was also chosen because this school is made up of self contained classrooms in a 6:1:1 or 8:1:1 setting. Once a participant had finished a survey there was an envelope in the main office the participant could place the survey in to ensure confidentiality. After three weeks, I removed the envelope from the office and I had collected eight surveys.

The participants include eight teachers in grades four through eight who responded anonymously to a survey. Each of these teachers teaches in a self-contained classroom. Surveys were distributed at the school to every teacher from kindergarten through eighth grade. The eight

teachers were those who chose to respond. The survey consisted of one straight forward question

and nine open ended questions. The participants were informed that their responses would

remain anonymous.

Findings

What grade level do you teach? Could you please describe the population of the classroom?

Grade	Class Aides	Teacher Assistant	1:1 Aides	Total adults	Total students	Characteristics
4-6	1		2	4	7	Mental retardation
6	1		2	4	6	Emotionally Handicapped
8	1		3	5	7	Emotionally Handicapped, Learning disabled
8	1		1	3	5	Passive aggressive, defiant, immature
7	1	1	1	4	7	Learning and behavioral challenges
5	1		2	4	5	Other health impaired, emotionally disturbed
4	1	1 -shared	1- shared	3/4	6	
7	1		1	3	6	Emotionally disturbed, Learning disabled

What are your student's strengths and what are some weaknesses of your students.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Hands on activities, tactile activities	Emerging readers, language impaired, lack social skills, explosive behaviors, aggressive
Science and history, love to read	Do not like to write
Very social with each other	Behind in reading comprehension, behind in math skills
Willingness to learn, adaptability	Frustration/tolerance towards self/others
Humor, generosity, leadership	Anger management, problem solving, accepting personal responsibility
Can be polite, tries to use their words, enjoys Physical Education	Work avoidance, manipulative, aggressive, behavior problems, hit, push, punch
Want to make friends, caring, compassionate, like being part of a community like classroom jobs	Social skills, language skills, most academic areas are 1-3 years behind
Most are willing to learn	

What type of behavior plan do you have and how to students respond to this?

Behavior plan	Student response
Smile behavior system, recorded when compliant, show positive behavior, check mark for non-compliance, simple plan due to low functioning students	Like the plan, simple and easy to comprehend, visual, always available, can see how day is going, smiles earn reward at the end of the day, checks lose free time
Life space interview, structure, consistency, patience, much talk with cause and effect, redirection is used often	Works well with trust established and tricks to get students talking about concerns, must have relationship with students
Respect all, if there is a problem talk to counselor staff member or go for walk	Excellent
Proximity, directive statements, planned ignoring, earn points in academic times (answering questions)	Most do well, like earning points instead of losing them
Building community, class council meetings, opportunities for generosity and leadership (special jobs), belief in students' capacity for success/high expectations	Well, belief is contagious, as a significant adult begins to believe in a student, the student begins to believe in himself and take new risks as a learner
Contract – one student, behavior note – one student, class chart – behaviors and at the end of week ice cream party	All depends on their arrival, sometimes "red flag", some days good, other days not, structure routine consistency is the key
Each student has individual behavior plan, includes sensory breaks, relocations, isolation from other students, taking breaks, tally system, most important to encourage positive behaviors, students earn stickers, 5 stickers means extra free time, quiet music corner	Most of the time they respond well
Consistency, clear expectation, students have choices good or bad but must accept consequences	Early in the year students resist the plan, benefit from consistency

What teaching strategies work well in your classroom?

Hands on activities, hurdle help to help with confidence in abilities, role playing, constant repetition, re-teaching, positive and tangible reinforcement
Hands on, use of smart board
Visual, auditory, independent or small group work
Planned ignoring, red flagging (catching disruptive behaviors early and redirecting), classroom sharing, brainstorming
Setting expectations behavioral and academic, direct, explicit instruction, teaching to learning styles needs and interests of students, time ownership and response for literacy learning, offering opportunities for generosity and leadership teaching what they need to learn
Structure routine and consistency, class council meeting with students, expectations for every student, visuals, hands on, simplify academic material if needed
Differentiate, my students' abilities ranges from k-4 in all areas, must modify how work is completed and the type of assistance provided. Multiple model use music action computer smart board
Consistency, clear expectations

What challenges do you face in your classroom?

Daily challenge of meeting individual needs, dealing with disruptive aggressive behaviors, adapting academic materials to keep their interests but still meeting low level functioning abilities
Defiance, instigation of peers, students not caring, students not internally choosing to change negative behaviors to positive behaviors without external consequence
Bullying, disrespect
Worst is inconsistencies from other staff, you place ideas and rules in place and are constantly being tested by staff as well as kids
Students accepting personal responsibility for their part in a difficulty, handling frustration with challenging interpersonal or academic situations, problem solving safely well and consistently
Meeting individual needs academically, behaviors can interfere with student progress
Keeping this in perspective and recognizing what I have control over. A lot of students have difficult home situations. It is important to realize that you can't judge their families. It is also very difficult to meet the unique needs of each child while balancing the need to work through the curriculum
The vast levels of ability to learn, the variety of behaviors, some read and comprehend at grade level others at 3rd grade level

What are some short-term goals you have in place for your students?

To be socially appropriate, follow a daily schedule, learn functional reading writing and math skills
Cooperative community relationships 80% everyday, playing games without incident, receive instruction without verbal attacks
Get them through 8th grade, prepare for high school
Set their own goals empowering engaging and motivating, solve problems in the classroom using strategies taught modeled and practiced, deal with difficulties in an honest responsible and dignified way, open to new learning in all things
I had to modify the 5th grade curriculum in social studies and science, homework 1 page a night, individual math instruction
Our students have academic, physical, emotional, and social goals, because of their disabilities many are behind in math and ELA. In addition to emotional disabilities many also have language speech and physical needs
Honor roll

What are some long-term goals you have in place for your students?

To prepare them to go into the real world with basic functioning skills
All have jobs, part time or otherwise
To have as many students return to district as possible
Improve social skills and maturity, improve/continue to improve learning and learning strategies
All of the same as short term goals, internalize learning towards greater responsibility independence and generalizing to other situations and locations
Not to be aggressive with staff and students, talk to a staff member about their problem – what is bothering them, get through curriculum – expose them
To progress a full year in math ELA, to be able to initiate and play with friends without arguing
Pass the NYS assessments, mostly to learn to make positive choices and that they can succeed with positive consistent effort

Are any of your students mainstreamed? If so, what benefits do you feel they experience from this? If not, do you think they would benefit from inclusion? Why or why not?

No to both, low functioning level and need for 1:1 assistance, would be too much of a distraction to others, all my students receive individualized instruction which would make it difficult for them to be involved in large group sessions
No to both, behaviors are too constant and too severe for regular classrooms of 15 – 25 students
3 of them are mainstreamed, I would like to send as many back to district as possible
Not at this time, I think some would benefit, for others it would be a detriment
Yes, they benefit from interacting with other age-peers working with larger groups generalizing newly learned strategies and having additional academic opportunities and challenges
My students are not mainstreamed, no my students will not benefit from inclusion, behaviors are too explosive, all of my students have been in the hospital for mental illness
No
Some mainstreamed, some are successful and some are not, if a students' plans/wants to return to district he/she must be successful in mainstream. Some students prefer and are successful because of the small class size and many support staff

Discussion

With the understanding of the environment of self-contained classrooms, this study coincides with the fact that I believe students with disabilities should be integrated into the general education classroom as much as possible. Several participants in the survey stated some of the weaknesses of the students in their classroom are the lack of social skills and that these students want to make friends. There were also some participants who undergo challenges such as the instigation of peers or bullying by peers. Short and long term goals by the same participants and some other participants involve some aspect of social behavior whether it is making sure the students are socially appropriate, preparation for the real world, gaining the control to move back to the student's home district, or dealing with difficulty in a cooperative community. These findings compliment research by Katz and Galbraith (2006) as they state that

social interaction among children is crucial to the development of life-long communicative skills that will assist in their ability to comply with societal expectations and be accepted as a valued member of society. If the goals of these teachers are to improve social behaviors and preparing the students for the real world than these students should be in a setting that will provide examples of what appropriate social behaviors are. I feel students modeling behavior for students are more effective than teachers modeling behavior for students. It is important for teachers to set the limits and maintain appropriate behavior, but ample opportunities for social situations and social education arise more often in general education setting where students can learn from both appropriate and at times inappropriate behaviors. Positive reinforcement for positive behavior is more effective than negative consequences when students misbehave. In my experiences, students respond to compliments. Not just the student who receives the compliment will smile, but the students in the same environment will perk up hoping for that same compliment. I feel a general education setting is more apt to have positive reinforcement where a self-contained classroom is focusing mainly on negative behaviors with consequences. Smyth (1992) states to be successful at school, students need to be able to access the opportunity for social learning structures made available by the school. This supports the fact that students need to be in an environment that would allow for plenty of social situations.

When the participants of this study were asked about mainstreaming, I was honestly surprised to read statements such as "no because it would be a detriment." To me expectations of what students can achieve are being overlooked and opportunities are limited with this mentality. These finding support Smith, Foley and Chaney (2008) who state that individuals with disabilities are commonly viewed as being abnormal, rather than as a member of a distinct

minority community. Participants responded that benefit to mainstreaming is that students are learning more about interaction amongst peers with new opportunities to learn.

This study only gives a small glimpse of what self contained schools are made up of as there were only a portion of surveys returned to me. It also limits the true behavior, characteristics, and abilities of the students in these classrooms. Participants were asked to describe the make-up of their classrooms; however the responses were brief with a few descriptive words. Future research involving multiple self-contained schools and even some inclusive classrooms would enhance the responses pulling from a larger pool and different perspectives. I also think personal observation of multiple classrooms would give a better sense of the realistic nature of different classrooms and students. Real behaviors of students, actions of teachers, and relationships of peers could be observed in person rather than through written responses in a survey.

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