

IS INCLUSION THE ANSWER?

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A Thesis Presented to

The Faculty of Humboldt State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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July 2020

Abstract

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Inclusion is the method by which many school districts meet the requirement of educating students with disabilities in the “least restrictive environment”. While it is an established practice, supported by the educational community and most families alike, there is a gap in the literature regarding how students feel about being in inclusion classes. In order to learn more about the student experience, five students with special education needs from a rural high school were interviewed about their involvement in inclusion. Students were asked about whether they felt included, if they socialized with peers from the inclusion class, and if they would enroll in another inclusion class. All five interviewees reported positive experiences with the inclusion class. All five stated they felt included, all five socialized with peers from the class, and all five reported they would enroll in an inclusion class again.

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Introduction

Many notable figures in history have stated, in one way or another, that a society's greatest resource is its children. To that end, children are required to attend school from somewhere around the age of 5, up until they are at least age 16, and in some states, even older. This rule applies to all children, regardless of ability. While it was not always that way, the 2004 federal statute Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, states that states must provide free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for children with disabilities (<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statuteregulations/>). The provision of "least restrictive environment" implies that children with disabilities should be educated with peers who do not receive special education services as often as possible. The most common method of implementing this provision is through inclusion education, where students with disabilities are educated alongside their typically-developing peers in a general education classroom. Studies have shown that students with disabilities educated in inclusive classrooms perform better on academic tasks, and that higher achievement rate also extends to students without disabilities educated in inclusion classrooms (Katz et al, 2002). Overall, school administrators and teachers view inclusion education positively (<https://www.specialeducationguide.com/pre-k-12/inclusion/>). A majority of parents of students both with and without disabilities agree their students' needs are best met in a classroom of intellectually diverse learners. So how do students feel about inclusion?

This is where we see the largest gap in the research on inclusive education. There have been some studies on student attitudes towards peers with disabilities, but those have focused primarily on elementary-aged students. For many teenagers, attending school is as much a social activity as it is an academic one. With my research, I wanted to know more about the experiences of high school students with disabilities, and what impact, if any, inclusive education has had on their lives. It is important to consider the experiences of these students because inclusion is the foundation upon which contemporary special education is built. If this model is effective academically, but not socially or emotionally, can it really be said that this is the most efficient way to deliver education?

My study was conducted by interviewing five high school students from a rural community who are identified as having special education needs. Each student was asked open-ended questions about their experience with inclusion classes, and asked directly about socializing with other students in the class, both at school and outside school. What I found was that while students sometimes prefer to be in smaller classes and work on less-demanding academic tasks, all interviewees professed to having social interactions with peers that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to interact with. Of the five interviewees, four stated they engaged in social interactions with said peers both during and outside school, suggesting that these interactions were not merely of convenience and proximity, but of a deeper, more reciprocal nature.

In the United States during the 2018-2019 school year, more than 7 million K-12 students received special education services, or about 14% of the student population. If our children are our most valuable resource, we need to consider and implement the most effective educational models, those which nurture a love of learning as well as empathy and understanding in our society.

Literature Review

Introduction

There are two main models for educating students with disabilities, segregated special education classrooms and inclusive education. The segregated special education classroom model is exactly like it sounds where students are educated separately from their typically-developing peers, occasionally joining said peers for elective activities. Conversely, inclusive education keeps students with disabilities in classes with their peers, by providing differentiated instruction to the whole group. There are advantages and disadvantages to both models. However, the most important advantage to inclusive education is the increase in social interaction with peers (Frederickson, Sunsmuir, Lang & Monsen, 2004). This interaction provides opportunities for students of all abilities to form friendships, as well as promoting awareness and acceptance of the diversity of our learners.

This literature review will briefly explore the history of special education, specifically the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), compare the two models of segregated vs. inclusive education, demonstrate the ways in which inclusion education benefits students academically and socially, discuss the value of stakeholder buy-in, and examine methods of delivering inclusive education.

History of Special Education

Historically, students with disabilities have been kept separate from their typically-developing peers. It wasn't until the 1950s that many students with disabilities were provided with any education at all (All Star Staff, 2018). Multiple court cases are what shaped special education law and policy, and helped sway opinions about the education of students with disabilities. While intending to eliminate racial segregation, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 was the first court case that guaranteed equal rights for all students, and started to change the way the public thought of segregating typically-developing students from their disabled peers (Friend & Bursuck, 2006). In 1972, the U.S. District Court of Eastern Pennsylvania ruled in favor of the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children, ordering that the state must provide a free public education for all students. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 required schools to provide accommodations for disabled students. The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) of 1975 finally guaranteed the rights of all students to a free and appropriate public education (All Star Staff, 2018). This began the era of the

“least restrictive environment” for students with disabilities. The EHA of 1975 was renewed over the years, and in 1990, its name was changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). In 1997, language guaranteeing equal access and equal treatment of students with disabilities was added to IDEA (Brown, 2007). Under section 612(a)(5) of IDEA, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, must be educated with children who are not disabled (Vaughn, Elbaum & Boardman, 2001). The term for this in the language of the law is “least restrictive environment.” The clear intent of IDEA is to include students with disabilities in classrooms with their age-level peers. However, many schools remain in the segregated-style model of special education, where students with disabilities are educated separate from their peers (Pavri & Luftig, 2000).

Segregation Model

The segregation model of delivering education to student with disabilities can also be described as exclusion, i.e. exclusion from mainstream education (Dixon 2005). While the teachers in this model of education are highly skilled at delivering specialized instruction, and the class sizes are usually smaller than 15 students, the students are deprived of interacting with typically-developing peers. Due to the smaller class size, education specialists are generally able to provide more individualized instruction to students. Some proponents of this model of education also put forth that there is less pressure on students with disabilities in segregated classrooms to “keep up” with typical

peers (Bauer, 1994). There are fewer opportunities for bullying, and due to the smaller class size, the teacher would be able to intervene sooner than in a typical, larger class. Bauer also cited the financial cost of a segregated classroom being far less than that of an integrated classroom.

Inclusion Model

There are both academic and social advantages to the inclusion model of education. For students with disabilities, the opportunity to interact with peers without disabilities has an academic advantage (Katz & Mirenda, 2002). Students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms have a greater academic achievement rate than students in segregated special education classes (Wang, 1985). One study found that over a two year period, 47% of students with disabilities improved their mathematics abilities, compared with just 38% of their peers in segregated classrooms (Waldron et al. 2001). This same study also found that students without disabilities in those same inclusive classes improved their math abilities as well, more so than typically-developing students in classes without disabled peers. Interestingly, in a study by Helmstetter, Curry, Brennan and Sampson-Saul (1998), it was determined that in inclusive classrooms there is a higher percentage of instructional time spent on academics than in self-contained classrooms. Additionally, one study found that 58% of time spent in a segregated classroom was classified as non-academic, compared with 35% in inclusive education classrooms (McDonnell et al. 2000). It could be argued that students with special education needs should have more, not less, instructional time. Looking long-

term, studies have shown that students with learning disabilities educated in inclusion classrooms more effectively close the gap in achievement typically noted from elementary to secondary grades, as opposed to students with learning disabilities educated in secluded special education classrooms (Tremblay, 2013).

The social advantages of inclusion education have been well-documented since the early 1990s (Staub, Schwartz, Gallucci, & Peck, 1994). Students educated within inclusive classrooms have higher rates of acceptance of others different from themselves and form friendships with one another, regardless of ability (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). When comparing student attitudes towards peers with disabilities, Bunch and Valeo interviewed thirty-one elementary and secondary grade students in schools with self-contained special education classrooms, and twenty-one students from schools that were fully inclusive. Students attending schools where peers with disabilities were segregated had a much less accepting attitude towards said peers. Fewer friendships between typical students and students with disabilities were reported at the elementary level, and none at the secondary level. There was a greater incidence of teasing and bullying of students with disabilities at the segregated schools, and typical students reported only a 50% likelihood of intervening in an instance of bullying of a student with disabilities. Conversely, students attending full-inclusion schools reported more friendships, less tolerance of abusive behavior towards students with disabilities, and the feeling of responsibility to support peers with disabilities in the classroom (Bunch & Valeo, 2004).

In a study of friendships between typically-developing students and students with disabilities, Staub et al. (1994) examined the intricacies of four different relationships.

The age range of the students was from 5 to 12 years. The researchers found similarities between the friendships in the areas of mutual benefit and the amount of opportunity in the classroom for social interactions. The non-disabled students often helped their disabled friends both academically and socially. The non-disabled students were supported and praised for their positive friendships and were considered “leaders” in their classrooms. As noted in the Bunch and Valeo study (2004), the key was the chance to interact and get to know one another. When there are more opportunities for students to work together on classroom projects, they become more likely to choose to spend time together outside of the classroom (Chamberlain, Kasari, Rotheram-Fuller, 2007). Many parents of students with disabilities feel strongly that inclusion provides the best opportunities for their children to see examples of appropriate behavior, as well as experience appropriate academic challenges (Hooks, 2001). Educating students in the inclusive classes is demonstrably good for all students, disabled or otherwise.

A large part of a child’s educational experience is social. Most students equate success at school with having friends (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). In Sandstrom and Dunn’s 2014 study, they demonstrated that students who have more interactions with classmates are happier and feel more acceptance and belonging. If students with disabilities continue to be secluded and isolated from their peers, they will not have the opportunities to develop relationships with typically-developing peers. The repercussions of this isolation are lower rates of high school graduation than typically-developing peers, and lower rates of employment (Willis, 1994). Further, when students with certain disabilities, like behavioral and emotional disturbances, are placed in classrooms with the

same students year after year, from elementary grades up into high school, the negative and antisocial behaviors are only reinforced, and opportunities for learning new behaviors are lost (Reganick, 1995). Keeping students with disabilities separate from their peers for the sake of ability grouping denies them the opportunity of belonging (Morgan 2015). In Vaughn et al.'s 1994 study, it was determined that educating students with learning disabilities in classrooms separate from their peers led to negative self-concepts in said students. Additionally, when students were moved from traditional resource room classes to inclusive classes, those students reported positive changes in their self-concepts, as measured by survey responses. The same students with learning disabilities being educated in inclusive classrooms were also found to have the largest increase in reciprocal friendship, measured from fall to spring of the same school year, an increase from 26% to 53% between seasons. The evidence clearly demonstrates that schooling children together increases the opportunities for social interactions and friendships. Segregating disabled students from their non-disabled peers only serves to arrest social development, decrease their sense of belonging, and increase feelings of isolation (Blazer, 2017).

Administrator, Teacher, and Parent Perspectives

The opinions of educational leaders, teachers, and parents have a tremendous effect on the success and quality of inclusion education (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Administrator perspectives have an important impact on the success of inclusive practices at a school (Harkin, 2012). When a principal or superintendent leads by focusing on the

positive components of inclusion, the faculty and staff of a school feel greater confidence in their ability to meet the diverse needs of their learners. In research from Elisabeth Persson, it was found that “educational leadership was crucial” (Persson 2013). She did a study outlining the positive change in a Swedish compulsory school that went from a near-bottom ranking in 2007 to a top position in 2010, using inclusive education practices. The headmaster of the school was given the responsibility to meet the goal of having all students being approved in all subjects by 2010. No extra resources or funding were allocated to the school - the goal was met through inclusive practices, redistribution of teaching staff and research-based teaching methods.

The best predictors of positive outcomes in an inclusion classroom are teacher experience and teacher attitudes towards inclusion. There are differences between general education teachers, and special education teachers, in their perceptions of inclusion and inclusive practices. In Fuchs’ 2009 qualitative study, five general education teachers were interviewed, using both group interviews and individual interviews. Through these interviews, the researcher identified three primary obstacles to successful implementation of inclusive practices: inadequate administrative oversight and support, lack of training in working with disabled students, and insufficient support and collaboration with special education staff. The administrative support these teachers were looking for was in regard to class sizes and shared planning time with special education staff. Having a class of 28-30 students is greater than the recommended class size of 22, and adding four or more students with disabilities to the class overwhelms an already overworked instructor. Teachers in this study also shared that they felt they had

the majority of responsibility in lesson planning for the students, and making accommodations for the students with disabilities. Teachers additionally felt that there were nearly no opportunities to receive professional development in the area of inclusive practices, and were expected to simply “learn on the job.” The negative feelings teachers may have in regard to inclusion can have a direct effect on teacher behavior, and student outcomes (Pudlas, 2004). In another study, fourteen teachers from a high-performing middle school in the United States were interviewed about their opinions and experiences with inclusive practices (Morgan, 2015). Nine of the fourteen interviewed were special education teachers. Two of those nine special education teachers had surprising responses to some of the researcher’s queries. When asked about the appropriateness of having students with disabilities included in the general education classroom, two of the special education teachers reported that it was inappropriate for the students to be in the inclusion class, as “their needs were not able to be met in that class” (Morgan, 2015, p. 65). Both teachers also shared that inclusion was only good for students if it benefitted the larger group, and if the students with disabilities were “capable.” When asked about expectations for students with disabilities in inclusion classes, the special education teachers’ overall response was that they tried to have equal expectations of their students, but that “special education students are just different” (Morgan, 2015, p. 68). These kinds of responses from teachers do not fall in line with the expected attitude of open-mindedness one would hope teachers would hold. The author of this study concluded that lack of exposure to inclusive classrooms during their own middle and high school careers contributed to these teachers’ limiting attitudes towards inclusive practices

(Morgan, 2015). However, these attitudes were limited to the special education teachers, and were not replicated in the responses from the general education teachers. Further study would be warranted in this area, as the researcher in this study was unable to clearly determine the rationale behind such statements.

Burke and Sutherland's 2004 study examined the opinions of preservice teachers and currently practicing teachers on inclusion education. Their study found that most preservice teachers had a positive regard for inclusion, and believed that it was the best way to educate students with disabilities. In addition, the more positive experiences teachers have teaching students with disabilities, the more positive their attitudes toward inclusion (Nguyen & Hughes, 2012). Countering that was the result that currently practicing teachers had a less favorable opinion of inclusion, and believed teacher preparation program had not adequately prepared them for teaching students with disabilities (Persson, 2013). The need for adequate teacher training is exemplified here, as teachers' attitude can significantly affect the success of students with disabilities in inclusion classes. Unfortunately, many teacher preparation programs offer very little in the way of training prospective teachers to work with students with disabilities (Mader, 2017). There is often only one class on educating students with disabilities during the program of a prospective teacher's course of studies. More exposure and training yields higher rates of confidence in teachers working with disabled students. There is also significant concern among teachers that inclusion classes are being mandated by administrators as a money-saving measure (Thompkins & Deloney 1995). When students with disabilities can be educated in the general education setting, it is far less

expensive. However, when done properly, co-taught inclusion classrooms are often as expensive as a regular classroom.

In a study conducted by Nguyen and Hughes in 2012, 30 parents of preschool children in an inclusive Head Start program were surveyed on their opinions of the social/emotional development of their children and the impact being in an inclusive classroom had on their children. Ten of the participants were parents of a child with a disability. Of the 30 parents, all agreed that they were satisfied with their child's emotional development in the program. In that same vein, 29 of the 30 parents, or 97%, agreed that their child's emotional development had been nurtured, and all 30 agreed that their child's social needs were best met in an inclusive classroom (Nguyen & Hughes, 2012). Further, 26 of the respondents, or 87%, agreed that all children benefited socially from having students with disabilities in their child's class. In another study, researchers did a phone survey of parents of children with disabilities. They found that 56% of those surveyed felt that mainstreaming, or inclusive classrooms, helped their students learn better (Johnson & Duffett, 2002). Parents also reported overwhelmingly that they felt inclusion was imperative for their children to learn appropriate social skills and for other children to learn about children with disabilities. A small percentage of respondents reported that they preferred their child to be educated in a segregated, or self-contained, special education classroom, with the primary reason being that they wanted their child to be with peers at similar academic levels.

This positive opinion of inclusive practices in schooling has evolved quite a bit. In a 1997 study, Daniel and King found that parents of students in inclusion classes were

more likely to report instances of behavior problems affecting the learning of their children. The authors of the study attributed the perceived behavior problems as resulting from less attention being paid to classroom management, and suggested that

“Educators who deal with inclusive education should recognize that viewing students in essentially positive ways and maintaining favorable expectations of them could play an integral role in the enhancement of self-esteem. Accordingly, inclusive environments that are characterized by a considerate, understanding, tolerant teacher and a cohort of sensitive peers could enhance the self-esteem of students (p. 74)”

Information regarding the opinions and attitudes of the most important players in inclusive education, students, is limited. However, Paul Kudlus conducted a study in 2004 of students in public and Christian schools in British Columbia, Canada. Included were students receiving some type of special education interventions, as well as students who did not receive any special education services. A total of 86 students were surveyed: 63 public school students, and 23 Christian school students. 44 of the 86 surveyed received some special education intervention, or about 51%. The intent of the study was to measure the degree to which students felt accepted by the school community. Kudlus (2004) found that when asked about social acceptance by peers, those students with exceptional needs responded less positively than students without exceptional needs, leading the author to conclude that the goal for inclusive education was not being adequately met.

Conversely, in a previously mentioned study by Elisabeth Persson in 2013, she found that Swedish students surveyed “could not see any logic in the division of students

into different groups” (p. 1208). Additionally, Persson concluded that students perceived that the behavior and attitudes of the adults in charge of education limited participation for all students.

Best Practices for Inclusion

The single most important factor in successful inclusion is the degree to which collaboration between teachers, both general education and special education, and service providers occurs. Effective collaboration pools the talents of educators, providing for a more beneficial atmosphere of learning for all students (Patterson, 2008). It also increases the level of success within the classroom, by providing expert instruction to all students, many of whom may not be identified as disabled (Rainforth 1996). Inclusion cannot be achieved by simply placing a student with disabilities into a general education classroom. There must be support in place, such as differentiation of curriculum, multiple modes of assessment, and collaboration between the general education teacher, the special education teacher, and other support professionals that provide interventions for the students, like occupational therapists and speech-language pathologists.

Co-teaching is a model often used in inclusion classrooms. There are different models of this partnership between teachers, but usually it involves a general education teacher and a special education teacher, paired together to share the responsibilities of planning, instructing, and assessing students (Trites, 2017). There are multiple advantages to co-teaching, including increased independence of students with disabilities, higher standards for all students, and greater opportunities for collaboration between

professionals (Trites, 2017). These influences result in a higher than average rate of students meeting their IEP goals, likely in part due to the smaller teacher-to-student ratio in a co-taught class. Additionally, students in co-taught classrooms are instructed by one teacher who is an expert on their specific grade-level or content-level standards, and one teacher who is an expert at accommodating and differentiating for their needs. The undeniable result is that all students will have a greater grasp of the material being taught, as well as having the experience of learning in a classroom of diverse learners. There are different models of co-teaching, the most common being: one teach-one observe; station teaching; parallel teaching; alternative teaching; teaming; and one teach, one assist (Friend & Cook 2012). In one teach/one observe, one teacher delivers instruction while the other is able to observe students. This is very useful for collecting data while students receive instruction. Best practice is for each of the co-teachers to sometimes take the primary teaching role in the class while the other observes (Friend Bursuck, 2006). In station teaching, the lesson content is divided between the two co-teachers. The students are also divided into groups. Each teacher instructs a group of students on their unique content area, then the groups switch places, and the teacher teaches the same lesson to the next group. For parallel teaching, the students are divided into two groups and each teacher instructs a group on the same area of content. It allows teachers to instruct smaller groups, and each teacher can present their lesson in the way that best suits their learners. These groups are chosen specifically to have equal numbers of students with special education needs within each. In alternative teaching, students that need more specialized instruction are taught in a small group by one teacher, while the larger group

is taught by the other teacher. Team teaching, sometimes referred to as "tag-teaming," is where both teachers are teaching at the same time, sharing the presentation of information and instruction to students. Leadership of the classroom is shared equally (Friend & Bursuck, 2006). Finally, one teaching while one assists is demonstrated by one teacher delivering the instruction to students, while the other circulates around the room, assisting students without disrupting instruction (Friend & Cook, 2012). This method of co-teaching, while useful, is recommended against regular use, as it can lead to students seeing the "assisting" teacher as more of an aide, rather than a teacher. A review of the literature shows that there is no one "most effective" model of co-teaching, and that teachers will have to determine the model that best suits their teaching styles and comfort levels. However, parallel teaching and, despite its drawbacks, one teach-one assist are the most commonly implemented models in the secondary setting (Friend & Bursuck, 2009).

Successful co-teaching involves shared planning time, and agreements regarding co-instruction and co-assessment. Friend & Bursuck (2006) found that teachers who volunteered to participate in co-teaching assignments were more successful and reported more satisfaction with the arrangement than teachers who were assigned to co-teaching. Parity is also key to success. Importantly, both teachers in the arrangement have equal responsibility for all the students in the class. Both teachers must feel that their contributions to the arrangement are valued and respected (Dixon, 2005).

Conclusion

This literature review is a summation of the benefits, both academic and social, of inclusive practices in education. Beginning with the history of special education and the laws that shaped it, students with exceptional needs benefit greatly from the sea change in public opinion that disability rights were, and are, civil rights. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act made it federal law that students with disabilities be educated alongside their peers, in the least restrictive environment, to the maximum extent possible. This means that students should only be placed in segregated special education classrooms when their disabilities are so severe that supplementary aids and services are not enough to provide them with an appropriate education. To that end, students are not to be simply placed into a general education classroom. Inclusion is not simply a matter of location, but a mindset of incorporating all students, regardless of abilities, into the classroom and accompanying culture.

This review examined the two main models of special education delivery: inclusion and segregation. The advantages of both models were reviewed, demonstrating that the benefits of inclusive practices far outweigh any drawbacks to the method. While academic achievement is critical to the success of our students, the social aspect of school is undeniably important. Students come to school to learn not only what we teach explicitly in classrooms, but to learn how to interact with other people. They learn how to be friends, and what it feels like to belong to a group. The value of acceptance, belonging and friendship cannot be overstated. Studies have shown that educating

students with disabilities in the same classroom as typically-developing students provides more opportunities for friendships to form between those students. The students learn from one another, and learn to accept and embrace the diversity within the classroom. Differences are not merely tolerated, but accepted as the norm.

Stakeholder perspectives were investigated. Opinions of administrators, teachers and parents have evolved considerably over the last 25 years. While educational leaders and parents have come to see the efficacy, both academically and emotionally, of inclusive practices, teacher attitudes toward the practice still depend greatly on the amount of training and education they have received, as well as their experiences in education. In order for inclusive practices to be fully implemented in a classroom, several factors must be present. Both special education and subject-matter teachers must have time to plan and collaborate on lessons, classroom norms, and assessment modalities. Both teachers should be provided with professional development in the areas of collaborative teaching and inclusive practices. There must also be shared responsibility for the students, and not one teacher with responsibility of the “regular” students, and one teacher with the responsibility of the students with disabilities.

Finally, best practices in inclusive education were assessed and presented, backed by professional practice and application. The industry-wide models of co-teaching were presented and explained, with examples of appropriate use for each. There is a lapse in the literature in terms of student perspectives on inclusion vs. segregated education, specifically students who have experienced both methods of instruction. Towards that,

this study is a mixed methods assessment of the experiences and outcomes of students who have received education in inclusive settings, and/or segregated settings.

Methods

Methodology

In order to learn about student social experiences in inclusion classes, semi-structured interviews with five students were conducted. Interviews were chosen as the means to obtain information, because it allowed for the flexibility to ask follow-up questions and engage deeply about the topic.

Participants

The students interviewed were selected based on a purposeful sample of high school students in Northern Humboldt Union High School District enrolled in special education and inclusion classes within NHUHSD. The population of this school district is approximately 1500 students, 40% of which is considered socioeconomically disadvantaged. The district is 67% white, 14% Hispanic, and 5% Native American. Students with disabilities make up more than 17% of the school population. The students selected for inclusion classes had higher academic ability than other SPED students, which made them eligible to participate in inclusion classes, which typically require greater intellectual ability. Of the five, there were three male and two female. The qualifying conditions of the interviewees ranged from visual and spatial processing disorders, to autism, to emotional disturbance.

Instrument

The interview questions were locally developed based on the extant literature, and were specific to the topic of special education student social experiences in inclusion classes. The interview schedule was checked for face validity by two faculty experts in the field. Interviewees were first asked for their experiences and feelings about their special education classes, then asked for their feelings/experiences in their inclusion classes. Interviewees were then asked directly about their feelings of social inclusion in inclusion classes. Finally, interviewees were asked to describe the socializing they do with peers from their inclusion classes, and whether or not they would enroll in another inclusion class.

Process

Due to the Covid 19-related shelter-in-place directive at that time, live interviews were conducted via Google Hangouts and the number of interviews were reduced. As the interviewees were all minors, parents were emailed pdf's of the informed consent and assent documents ahead of time. Interviews were pre-scheduled with each interviewee. At the time of the interview, each interviewee's parent appeared on camera and confirmed they understood the informed consent, and were verbally and on camera giving their consent to letting their child participate. The interviewee then stated, on camera, that they understood the assent document, and agreed to be interviewed.

Each interview took approximately 15 minutes. A semi-structured interview schedule was used with probes developed during the responses to explore as full a picture as possible of the special education students' experiences with general education students in their inclusion classrooms. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked and the interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed thematically.

Results

The results of the interviews were positive towards inclusion classes in general. All five interviewees stated they would enroll in an inclusion class again, if offered. Regarding whether they felt included in the class, all five students stated that they did. Responses included “I was just like any other kid in there”, “I probably answer more of the questions than most of the people in that class”, “all the kids in there are nice”, and “I do the same work as everyone else in there”. The primary question of this study, regarding whether students socialize with classmates from their inclusion classes, also yielded positive results. Each of the five interviewees reported socializing with their inclusion classmates during school. Of the five, four reported socializing with inclusion classmates outside of school. One of the responses included the quote “I wouldn’t’ve ever talked to them if I wasn’t in a class with them”.

The question (Q1) about how students felt about their special education class yielded mixed results. Four of the five interviewees noted that they felt “fine” or “good” about their special education classes. One stated that they did not “think they belonged in there”. When answering question one, each of the respondents also made a comment about the work in their special education classes. Two respondents stated the work was “too easy” or “easy”, one said the “work isn’t that hard”, and another stated it was “probably my strongest class”. One respondent stated that they “never feel like it’s too hard or too easy”.

Student feedback on Q2, where they were asked how they felt about their inclusion classes, also yielded a variety of responses. One student reported that their inclusion class “made me feel normal”. Another stated that it was “good that there’s more people in there”. However, the other three interviewees reported less positive feelings about their class. Two of the respondents stated that their inclusion classes were “too loud” and had “way too many people”. The third respondent stated that they had attempted to disenroll in the class, but had been denied.

When asked about whether they felt included in their inclusion class, in Q3, all students indicated that they did, stating they “answer more questions” than other students in the class, and they “just did what I was supposed to do”.

Q4 asked specifically about socializing with peers from their inclusion classes, as well as where the socializing took place, ie. at school or outside school. All five students indicated they socialized with peers from their inclusion classes, and four of the five reported socialization occurring both at school and outside school.

Q5 asked students whether they would enroll in an inclusion class in the future, given their prior experiences with that model. All five agreed that they would take a class that used the inclusion model of learning. There were a few qualifications, though. Specifically, one student only wanted to be in that kind of class if they knew other kids in the class. Another student would prefer the inclusion class “not be so loud”. One student stated they would like an inclusion class for a subject they needed extra help in, rather than a subject where they did not need support.

Discussion

The information provided by most of these students seemed to indicate that their special education classes were not challenging them academically. Could that be due to the higher academic ability of these students, having been recognized as being eligible to participate in inclusion classes, which typically require greater intellectual ability? Further research into this area would be useful to determine how to best serve students who are at this higher functioning level. Of the five students interviewed, three stated that the work was “too easy” or “easy”. Two of those three indicated that the “easy” academic work was one of the things they liked in the class. In a study by Padelia and Zigmond (1996), they surveyed 150 students in special education. The researchers found that 76% of the students liked their special education classroom, one of the reasons cited being “easy work”.

Another unexpected finding was the divide between students’ feelings about their inclusion classes. Two had positive feelings, three more negative. Two of the three students with negative feelings remarked that the classes were too noisy and had too many other students in them. Both of these students come from an SDC background, where typical class sizes rarely exceed 14. The student that requested to be disenrolled from the inclusion class also comes from an SDC background.

Each of the students interviewed reported feeling included in their inclusion classes, and stated that they would be willing to enroll in an inclusion class again. This includes the students that reported feeling like the inclusion classroom was too noisy, and

had too many students. These findings go along with a 1995 study conducted by Pugach and Wesson, where eighteen students were interviewed, 9 of whom were identified as having special education needs. These students reported that in their inclusion classes, they got along well together, stating “kids got nicer”, and that school was a “highly positive experience”.

Observation of the interviewees would have been useful to assist in corroborating their reported social interactions with peers. Further research that includes both formal and informal observations would be recommended. Additionally, it would be of interest to interview students with special education needs who have not been enrolled in inclusion classes, in order to compare the rates of social interactions and reciprocal friendships between inclusion and non-inclusion students.

Conclusions

On the whole, the students interviewed had a positive experience with their inclusion classes. Not only did they have the opportunity to engage in grade-level academic work, but they had the opportunity to form social relationships with typically-developing grade-level peers. The social aspect of school cannot be over-emphasized. School is where most children form their friendships, where they get to practice social skills and motivations (Taylor & Townsend, 2016). It would be a disservice to students, both typically-developing and those with disabilities, to deprive them of the chance to learn with and from one another. Humans are social beings, and limiting opportunities for social interactions can cause serious decline in both psychological health and the ability to learn (Taylor & Townsend, 2016).

In this research, I endeavored to explore inclusion education: how it arose, what are its benefits and weaknesses, and what are its best practices. My goal was to learn more about students' experiences with inclusion, to enable administrators, teachers and families to consider that when implementing school policies and determining what works best for students. The students interviewed in this research overwhelmingly reported positive experiences in their inclusion classes, and would enroll in that model of classroom again. Their endorsement of this learning model speaks to its effectiveness not only in academics, but in social interactions, as well.

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Appendix A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

How do you feel about your special education classes?

If need to re-phrase, ask what, if anything, they like about their sped classes, and what, if anything, they don't like about their sped classes.

How do you feel about your inclusion classes?

If need to re-phrase, will follow above form.

Do you feel "included" in your inclusion classes? If so, how? If not, why?

How often do you socialize with classmates from your inclusion classes? If there are social interactions, are those occurring at school or outside school?

If available, would you enroll in another inclusion class? Why or why not?

Appendix B

Informed Consent

Parent/Legal Guardian

Is Inclusion the Answer?

My name is Jacqueline Hewins, and I am a special education teacher at McKinleyville High School. I am conducting this research study to learn more about student experiences in inclusion classes. If your child volunteers to participate, they will be asked to answer a few questions about how they feel about their inclusion classes. Your child's participation in this study will last approximately 30 minutes, which includes one 30-minute interview. The interview will be recorded.

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. Your child has the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time without penalty. There are no possible risks involved for participants. There are some benefits to this research, particularly that participants share their opinions of inclusion classes, which could inform future decisions to offer this type of class.

It is anticipated that study results will be shared with the public through presentations and/or publications. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with your child will remain confidential. Measures to insure your child's confidentiality are: use of pseudonyms; key to names and pseudonyms kept in a

separate, locked location. Raw data containing information that can be identified with your child will be destroyed after a period of 12 months after study completion. The de-identified data will also be destroyed after a period of 12 months after study completion.

This consent form will be maintained in a safe, locked location and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is completed.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please call me or email me at (707)572-7181 or jhewins@nohum.k12.ca.us. If you have any concerns with this study or questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at irb@humboldt.edu or (707)826-5165. You may also contact my advisor with any questions: Eric Van Duzer, Department Chair for School of Education at Humboldt State University, (707)826-3726, evv1@humboldt.edu.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to your child's participation, and that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue your child's participation at any time without any penalty.

Signature

Date

Appendix C

MINOR (AGES 14-17) ASSENT FORM**Assent is only obtained after the parent has consented.****Is Inclusion the Answer?**

My name is Jacqueline Hewins, and I am a special education teacher at McKinleyville High School, as well as a graduate student at Humboldt State University. The purpose of this research is to learn more about students' experiences in inclusion classes.

I am interested in learning how students feel about their inclusion classes. I would like you to answer a few questions about your class and your relationships with classmates.

This research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate at all, or you may stop participation at any time, even after you have decided to participate.

If you have any questions about what you'll be doing, or if you can't decide whether to do it or not, just ask me if there is anything you'd like me to explain.

If you want to participate, please sign your name on the line below. Your parent(s) have already allowed you to make your own decision whether or not to participate.

Signature

Date
