

Inclusion of Students with Severe Disabilities

By

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Inclusion is a relatively new idea that promotes a dramatic shift in public schools from “helping” students with disabilities to “teaching” them in regular classroom (Stainback & Stainback, 1992). The passage of federal legislation (the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142 in 1975; and the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990) helped both special and general educators to examine programs and services that they been provided to student with disabilities (Trump & Allen, 1996).

Also, as a respond to the federal mandates, several states have created policies, regulations, or guidelines to encourage the implementation of inclusive programs in regular schools. This change has it is impact on schools’ system, instructional, and programs. This change assist regular education teachers to experience appropriate professional development, involve in the individualized Education Plans (IEP) for student with disabilities, and develop positive attitude toward student with disabilities and their ability to accomplish.

At the beginning, the concept of inclusion was not clear for most of the interested researchers. According to Burnette (1996), some advocates call for “full inclusion”, which emphasizes education for all students, including those with severe disabilities, in the same classroom with nondisabled peers. Others call for “regular education initiative” (REI) in which that students with mild and moderate disabilities are those who should be included in regular classrooms. However, the objective of inclusion policies is to develop an educational system in which student with disabilities is treated equally as well as nondisabled student within the neighborhood schools, and in the regular classrooms and school activities. As a results, this would require changes in classroom management and a shift in public education policy (stainback et al, 1989). However, Inclusion is defined as providing a special designed instruction and support for students with disabilities in the regular education settings.

It means that all students are full participant of the school community and all students are equally involve in opportunities and responsibilities of the general education environment (Moore et al,1998).

Teachers who are involved in inclusive programs put more effort into teaching students the targeted skills than those who don't teach students with disabilities. It requires them to understand students' abilities and needs in order to modify the classroom instruction to fit both groups. However, to obtain information from general educators concerning this inclusion, it is more appropriate to investigate their experiences and willingness to include students with severe disabilities in their classrooms. The experience of teachers is critical when concerning the inclusion of students with severe disabilities into the regular classroom. One reason is that they must take into consideration the daily social struggles of these students. They must also interpret the meanings and effects of the everyday social lives of these students. Further, they must take into account the integration of students with and without disabilities into regular classrooms. The transformation of students with severe disabilities will require teachers to modify their instruction to fit the two groups. Additionally, these students face alienation not only in the classroom, but in society as well. Finally, teachers must envision and create new ways and strategies to help students with severe disabilities become more socially and academically involved in their communities in order to ensure the highest degree of success possible.

A significant number of qualitative studies from general educators provide information about their perception and experiences related to the inclusion of students with severe disabilities into neighborhood schools and content area classes. Joan et al (1998) examined the belief of secondary educators about including students with moderate and severe disabilities into secondary schools. Twenty (20) teachers were

interviewed at the beginning and end of the school year. The educators revealed that inclusion was the right thing to do and both students with and without disabilities benefited from inclusion. Results suggest that educators in regular schools are willing to include students with disabilities into their classrooms but need more research to identify appropriate learning strategies. Another study revealed similar results. York et al (1992) found that educators' experiences of this integration in regular classrooms were positive for themselves and for the students.

The two studies seemed to follow the major procedural issues in using the phenomenology tradition. First, both appeared to realize the philosophical perspective behind the approach, especially the concept of studying how teachers perceive inclusion. Second, questions that were directed by the two studies seemed to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences of including students with disabilities. Third, data were collected in the field where the researchers interviewed educators before and after the end of the year. Finally, the outcome of the two studies gave the impression that educators had positive experiences when including students with disabilities.

However, little is known about teachers' perceptions of having students with disabilities in their classrooms this is due to the fact that this approach is still not known by many of the researchers in the field of special education. In addition, inclusion was only introduced two years ago in my country, Saudi Arabia, I feel that knowing more about this approach will assist me to understand more and allow me to be more experienced. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenology study is to better understand teachers' perceptions of having students with severe disabilities in their classroom. At this stage in the research, the inclusion of students with severe disabilities will be defined as having two groups of students, one with disabilities and

the other one without disabilities, in the same classroom. A teacher with no previous experience will oversee this classroom and provide the required education for the two groups.

Research Questions:

1. Why did the teachers agree to have students with severe disabilities in their classrooms?
2. What are the most difficult aspects of including students with severe disabilities into the classroom?
3. What influence by other teachers (sharing experience) would affect teacher perceptions?
4. What practices do teachers use in teaching students with severe disabilities?

Method:

The study will take place at White Oak Middle School in the Washington D.C. area. Sixty-four (64) students with severe disabilities who receive education in general classrooms are enrolled in the school. The degree of the disabilities varies from one student to another, ranging from students with non-verbal abilities to others who have Down's syndrome.

Participating teachers are selected because of their involvement with students who have severe disabilities either within classrooms or the inclusive school program. A total of six teachers (6) are identified to participate in the study. Three will teach in classrooms that contain students with severe disabilities, whereas the other three are involved in the inclusive program within the school at large.

Data Collection:

In order to study the group of participants, the researcher will submit a proposal that details the procedures in the project to the school board in order to get permission to conduct the study. The process of collecting data will involve primarily in-depth interview. The interviews will be conducted during the recess period. Before the interview the researcher will go over with each teacher the purpose of the study, the amount of time that will be needed, and the usefulness of the results.

Research questions will be used as a general outline when conducting the one-on-one interviews. The participants will be interviewed during the spring 1999 semester. A development of the study questions will be analyzed to better understand teachers perceptions of the inclusive program The three research questions will be broken down into less complex segment and presented to the teachers. Each interview will not exceed thirty (30) minutes in length per participant after obtaining verbal consent from each participant to record the interview. In addition to recording the interview, the researcher will take notes during the interview about the responses of the interviewees. Using data collection sheet will enable the researcher to organize his/her thoughts on items such as heading, information about starting the interview, concluding ideas, and information on ending the interview.

Data Analysis

In order to assess the handling of collected data and subsequent analysis, a NUD.IST program will be used. This computer program will assist me in storing, coding, retrieving, shaping and understanding the collected data. In addition to its effectiveness in using tree diagrams to connect concepts and propositions, this program will allow me to write and edit memos that will be recorded containing my

comments, ideas and thoughts. Briefly stated, this program is useful not only in managing documents collected, but also in emerging ideas about the document itself

In the process of data analysis, I will review and code interviews, and write memos to record my comments, ideas and thinking throughout this investigation. This enables me to provide a history of my thinking processes throughout the data analysis. Similarities and differences will be noted and sorted to bring to the surface themes, relationships and practices. I will verify these stated themes formally and informally through member (teacher) exploratory communications. The data will be elaborated on from the beginning and take the form of descriptive explanations. At this point, further explorations of the data will be dependent upon the data itself because of the inductive nature of the qualitative research. I anticipate that this process will bring to light a more complete picture of teachers' experiences of having student's with severe disabilities included into their classrooms.

Ethical Issues

No qualitative study research study would be complete without the due and careful considerations of any and all ethical issues. Some of these considerations include any plans, thoughts, or discussion about every aspect of the study. The ethical issues should be apart of the every operations of the project. Ethics is more than just passing the criteria of review boards and the like. In my study, such issues as asking for the permission and consent of teachers to be interviewed by me. Also, the confidentiality of the information and data gathered will be taken into account and not compromised. The politics and polemics of possible negative and positive responses by the interviewee will be given equal weight and significance. Interviews will be

conducted in an environment that is free from any outside influences such as other teachers, the principle, or administrators.

Validity

To address validity, I will use tape recording and verbatim transcribing of interviews to insure completeness which will facilitate a credible explanation. Prior to the interview, I will field test my questions to ensure they will bring about the kinds of data I desire. The aim is to conduct rich interviews, meeting with participants long enough to ensure that the data is saturated. Data, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions will be taken back to participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account. They will be asked to examine rough drafts of my work and provide alternative language. I will follow up with interviewees to clarify and ensure that their perspectives are being accurately described.

Two special education teachers who are not part of the study will also read my interview transcripts and perform dependability and conformability audits as well as poses questions regarding any biases that might appear in this research. In other words, the two special education teachers will examine whether or not the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data. Internal validity will check for credibility and authenticity. In particular, “do my findings make sense? Are they credible to people I’m studying or to the readers? Does this study have authentic portraits of what I’m looking for?”. To ensure internal validity, I will seek and account for negative data, consider and disclose alternative explanations for the data, and guarantee that the participants of the study consider the conclusions credible. Finally, reliability will be addressed by providing comprehensive descriptions, including those of the participants, the research setting, data collection and analysis

processes, and other related information. I will clearly identify the scope and boundaries of the study so that comparisons with other samples can take place.

Results

Several themes were emerged within each of the four question areas. The following are highlights of themes illustrating teachers' perceptions and experiences in each of the question areas. Generally, teachers believed that inclusion is the best thing to do for students with severe disabilities. General teachers were willing to include and work with students with severe disabilities and suggested that more adequate support and training will assist them to understand and positively involve in the inclusion process.

Questions:

1. Why the teachers agreed to have students with severe disabilities in their classrooms?

When asked why they agreed to have students with severe disabilities in their classes, 4 out of the 6 students stated that inclusion provide an opportunity for normal students to learn about peers with disabilities. Two teachers also believed that it was a professional responsibility and were interested in working with all students no matter what their disabilities. Three of the teachers indicated that they wanted to learn more about students with severe disabilities, whereas two liked the challenging aspect of the inclusion. Most of the teachers agreed that they felt unprepared to work with students with severe disabilities because of their lack of the appropriate training. Teachers suggested that providing an adequate support and training would help to accept the idea of including student with disabilities into regular classes.

2. What are the most difficult aspects of including students with severe disabilities into the classroom?

The most difficult aspects of including students with severe disabilities into classes were deciding how to include and develop strategies for the students in the class activities (e.g., creating adaptation, deciding on objectives, facilitating classmate involvement, using age-appropriate materials). Three also mentioned legislation factors, such as scheduling and time, as being difficulties. In addition, class size is frequently identified as a barrier to successful inclusion. The teacher was worried that because of the large numbers of students in the classroom it would be difficult to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Four teachers were concerned about the actual benefits to students with and without disabilities in content area classes. They were not sure how much time it might take to create lessons for these students and how they would grade them.

3. What influence by other teachers (sharing experience) would affect teacher perceptions?

Communication with special educators was the important source of providing information about special needs for individuals with severe disabilities. The teachers indicated that having the students in their class encouraged them to read more about students with special needs. Three teachers responded that they had developed new colleagues and friends through the inclusion efforts. Most of the general educators commented that they learned new strategies and developed a new perspective on education by learning more about inclusion.

4. What practices do teachers use in teaching students with severe disabilities?

Co-teaching, effective use of peer tutors, and sensitivity of each student's unique growth were the most practices that been used to teach both groups in the classes.

Discussion

This study was intended to explore teachers' perception and experience related to including students with severe disabilities in their classes. Teachers were asked to discuss why they agreed to have students with disabilities in their classes, what the difficult aspects of the inclusion, and how would the inclusion impact their teaching practices.

Almost, all of the teachers believed that students with sever disabilities should be included in their secondary neighborhood schools. Teachers exposed their willing her to include student with disabilities in their classrooms, but most felt unprepared to work with these students. They suggested that with more adequates support and training, general educators will be more open to the idea of including students with sever disabilities in their classrooms. Class size and the amount of time it would take to plan for students with disabilities appeared to be the most difficult aspects that teachers face,. Many teachers were worried that because of the large number of students with sever disabilities. Allowing education to meet collaboratively to plan curricular adaptations for student with sever disabilities was indicated as critical for successful inclusion.

Participants recognized several positive outcomes of the inclusion. Teachers reported that student without disabilities grew in their understanding_and tolerance of differences. Students with disabilities social skills were affected positively by interacting with those without. In addition student with disabilities were able to be more independent and perform successfully during school or community activities.

Participant identified informational needs and instructional strategies that they believe would help to support the movement of including students with disabilities into regular classrooms. Teachers wanted more details about the students' needs and abilities. Also, they recognized the importance of the support of special educators, paraprofessional, and peer tutors. Finally, participants identified the importance of training and specific curriculum adaptations and instructional strategies.

As a conclusion, the impact of including students with severe disabilities into regular education classes in highly individual to the student included and the class. In many cases the

presence of students with disabilities seemed to bring out the best in the teachers and students without disabilities. Two of the most significant benefits of inclusion were teachers adapting variety of instructional techniques and students learning to appreciate individual differences.

The limitations inherent to most qualitative work include small sampling size and the lack of generalizability of the findings. Another potential limitation is the use of only one setting (interview), which limited the ability of comparison. Klingenberg (1998) suggested that while no other setting was studied as a contrast, the use of extant literature on best practice serves as a means of comparison. Furthermore, by limiting this study to one setting, there was no risk of having two settings/samples that might differ on some uncontrolled variables.

Several implications for practice can be driven from the findings. Most of the implications relate directly to strategies that can be implemented to produce successful inclusion experiences for regular educators. Additional planning time for teachers is one of the most important strategies for enhancing the inclusion experience. This suggested time could be used to meet with other professionals who work with the students, with parents, and being able to develop new techniques that enhance the collaborated work between students with and without disabilities in the classroom. Working as a team is essential for successful inclusion and planning time supports this goal.

General teachers need to learn strategies and skills for working successfully in inclusion settings. The ability to communicate effectively and understand the rationale for inclusion is essential. Teachers need support through specific case consultation and they need to develop a comfort level for collaborating with other professionals and students' parents. It is important that they try to reach out to parents and recognize the barriers that exist for some parents in becoming involved.