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Benefits and Disadvantages of Inclusion in an Elementary School Setting

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A Literature Review Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Abstract

Students who receive special education services must be educated in the least restrictive setting. Inclusion in the general education classroom for students with special needs has become a controversial topic among educators and parents. The purpose of this literature review is to determine the benefits and disadvantages of an inclusive educational placement for elementary students with significant special needs. After an examination of the literature on inclusion, data will be shared to determine the possible benefits and disadvantages of a fully inclusive placement for students with significant special needs. The literature review will also provide an analysis of the research on inclusion and factors to consider when implementing an inclusive placement.

Benefits and Disadvantages of Inclusion in an Elementary School Setting

Within the hallways of public schools across the United States, a diverse population of children with varying needs and abilities can be found. These children present a wide spectrum of skill sets; however, the goal of the school system is to effectively meet the needs of all of the children and provide an appropriate and beneficial education for each child that passes through the door. Within the diverse population of public schools, there are children who are highly gifted, as well as children who have significant and severe special needs that require a multi-sensory approach to learning. There is an on-going debate among experts in the field where these children with the most significant needs should receive their education. The dispute between inclusion and more restrictive settings has become a controversial topic, as parents and other educational stakeholders lobby for equality for students with special needs (Harrower, 1999; Stein, 1994). Some people believe that inclusion within a general education classroom for the majority of the school day is a right that should be granted to all students, regardless of their ability level (Dixon, 2005).

On the other side of the debate, some professionals argue that a more restrictive environment, such as a special education classroom, might be the most appropriate placement for students with significant needs (Zigmond, 2003). One fact that cannot be disputed is that children with special needs will always be present in public schools and decisions regarding placement will always be a factor for educational teams to consider. According to the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (2017), in 2014 the number of students ages 6-21 with disabilities in the United States reached 5.94 million. With the growing number of students with special needs in our schools, the push for inclusion continues to grow. Therefore, it is vital

that all members of educational teams understand the possible benefits and disadvantages to an inclusive placement.

Public schools have made much progress in the area of inclusion over the last 40 years. Thanks to previous court cases and legislation, institutionalism has given way to more inclusive classrooms for students with significant special needs (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001). The question remains, however, whether the inclusive classroom is the most beneficial for all students with special needs, especially those students with the highest needs. This literature review seeks to investigate the benefits and disadvantages of an inclusive placement for students with significant and severe special needs in the elementary school setting. While the inclusive classroom offers access to the general education curriculum, proponents of pull-out programs argue that students with significant special needs benefit more from the smaller class sizes and direct interventions that are typically found within special education classrooms (Zigmond, 2003). There is also much debate and ambiguity regarding the possible social and academic benefits for students with significant special needs who are educated in an inclusive classroom. This literature review examines the history of special education, seeks to define the inclusion model and the critical components that are needed for a successful inclusive classroom, and disseminates the documented benefits and possible disadvantages of inclusion.

Review of the Literature

The pendulum of change has shifted from complete segregation of students with disabilities, to fully inclusive educational settings, where all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, are placed in the general education classroom. Determining the educational placement of students who qualify for special education and related services is a critical step in the process of developing an individualized educational plan that will help students make

successful progress in school (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). It can be a challenging task for educational stakeholders to determine the appropriate placement for a child with special needs. The civil rights movement, monumental court cases, and previous legislation have all played a major role in shaping the field of special education and defining the current process of determining programming and educational placement for students with disabilities (Katsiyannis et al., 2001). As a result, special education is now a multi-faceted program that offers a continuum of placement options, including the general education classroom (Katsiyannis et al., 2004). The research suggests that there are both advantages and disadvantages to a full inclusion placement for children with cognitive and multiple disabilities. Teachers, parents, and administrators must make placement decisions based on each child's unique needs. In order for the inclusion service delivery model to have a successful impact, educational teams must have adequate training, as well as a thorough understanding of the supports that will be necessary for the child in the general education classroom (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori & Algozzine, 2012).

The History of Special Education

Special education in the United States has been shaped by the civil rights movement, the passage of public laws, and landmark court cases that have become the cornerstones of the current special education system (Daniel, 1997; Harrower, 1999). Segregation and institutionalization of people with special needs were common practices prior to 1975. In the early 1970s, more than 1.75 million students with disabilities were denied a public education (Katsiyannis et al., 2001). The civil rights movement was instrumental in helping parents of children with significant needs realize that their children deserved a public education. In the 1954 court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the United States Supreme Court handed down

a ruling that prohibited public schools from segregating students by race (Harrower, 1999; Katsiyannis et al., 2001). After the *Brown* ruling, which cited equal opportunities for all people based on the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution, advocates for students with special needs claimed that public schools could no longer deny students with disabilities a public education (Katsiyannis et al., 2001). *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972) and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972) were two additional landmark court cases that helped lay the ground work for future laws that would help students with disabilities receive equal educational rights (Daniel, 1997; Zigmond, 2003). The *PARC* and *Mills* court cases were essential in establishing the right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive setting for children with significant special needs. Once court cases regarding educational placement began to occur, legislation regarding the education of children with special needs began to materialize.

Legislation. As a result of the efforts of advocacy groups and the outcomes of court cases such as *PARC* and *Mills*, Congress took action and passed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975 (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). The EAHCA was enacted to ensure that students with disabilities would have access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) that would meet their individual needs (Daniel, 1997). By outlining a set of guidelines for educating children with special needs, the EAHCA sought to make an appropriate education within the least restrictive environment more attainable for all children. The EAHCA required that students with special needs received special education and related services that were provided at public expense, met the standards of the state education agency, were appropriate, and were provided in accordance with the Individual Education Plan (IEP) written for each student (Katsiyannis et al., 2001). In 1990, the EAHCA was renamed to the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Daniel, 1997). There are six major principles outlined in the IDEA, including zero reject, protection in evaluation, free and appropriate public education, least restrictive environment, procedural safeguards, and parent participation (Harrower, 1999; Katsiyannis et al., 2001). The main purpose of the IDEA is to protect the educational rights of students with disabilities and their parents and ensure that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Daniel, 1997). The concept of LRE has proved to be one of the most controversial and frequently litigated principles of IDEA.

Least Restrictive Environment

Once a child has qualified for special education and related services, an Individual Education Plan (IEP) must be written for the child. The IEP team consists of a general education teacher, special education teacher, administrators, related service providers, and the parents or guardian of the child. The IEP team is tasked with developing an appropriate educational program for the student, based on the child's unique needs. This individualized program consists of identification of the student's strengths and weaknesses, annual goals and a description of how those goals will be monitored, and consideration of special factors (Gilmour, 2019; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). IEP teams must not determine educational placement prior to discussing the programming needs and supports of individual students. Only after the IEP team has developed a child's annual IEP programming, can they consider an educational placement for the child.

Definition of least restrictive environment. When IEP teams are discussing placement options, they must be mindful of the least restrictive environment. In order to qualify for federal funding, states must make certain that they are educating students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (Daniel, 1997). The LRE mandate states that children with disabilities

must be educated with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate in the general education classroom (Daniel, 1997; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). The LRE mandate also stipulates that if the general education setting is not appropriate for a student with a disability, then the child may be placed in a more restrictive setting (Daniel, 1997; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). By rolling out the aforementioned LRE mandates, the IDEA implies that all children have the right to be educated with non-disabled peers; however, the IDEA does not require a fully inclusive, general education placement for all children with disabilities. Instead, the IDEA requires that IEP teams consider a continuum of alternative placements (Stein, 1994; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). The IDEA allows local IEP teams the control to make individual decisions regarding placement based on the unique needs of each student. IEP meetings are held on an annual basis and the LRE for a child may change at each IEP meeting. IEP teams also have the power to amend the IEP during the school year if a change of educational placement is in the best interest of the child.

Continuum of placements. The IDEA requires that a continuum of alternative placements be made available to local education agencies so that the IEP teams can ensure that students with disabilities are placed in an appropriate, least restrictive educational setting (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). By providing a continuum of educational placements, policy makers allowed room for educational teams to make individual placement decisions based on the exclusive needs of each student. One placement may not be best suited for all students, especially those students with significant special needs. The continuum of alternative placements includes the general education classroom, resource room, self-contained classroom, special schools, home instruction, and hospital and/or institution (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). It should be noted that the IEP team cannot make placement decisions based on the student's

disability category or severity of disability, availability of educational or related services, availability of space, or administrative convenience (Stein, 1994; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). For example, all students who qualify for special education services under the category of cognitive impairment, must not automatically be placed in a self-contained special education classroom based off of their disability category. The IEP team must make placement decisions on an individual, case-by-case basis.

Court cases involving LRE. Educational placements for students with disabilities have been frequently litigated in the court system. As a result of the *Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education* (1989) case, the court developed a two-pronged standard to determine if an LRE placement is appropriate for a given student (Daniel, 1997). When ruling on LRE placements, the courts must consider if education in the general education classroom can be successfully attained through the use of supplemental aids and services and if the school is proposing a setting other than the general education classroom, whether or not the school has integrated the student to the maximum extent appropriate (Daniel, 1997; Katsiyannis et al., 2001). The *Daniel* court case, along with *Hartmann v. Loudoun County Board of Education* (1997) affirmed that a general education placement is not appropriate if the student with disabilities is not benefitting from that placement, if any minimal benefits would be significantly outweighed by the benefits that could be achieved in a more restrictive setting, and/or if the child extensively disrupts the other students (Katsiyannis et al., 2001). These court cases make it clear that placement in the general education classroom is not always the most appropriate placement for a child with a disability. IEP teams may determine that a more restrictive setting will provide more benefits to certain children. Each LRE placement decision needs to be carefully considered based on the individual student and what he or she needs to be successful.

Disability Categories

After a student has gone through the special education evaluation process, the multi-disciplinary team comes together to determine if the child qualifies for special education services. If the child does qualify for special education, the team must decide on the disability category that best describes the child. The IDEA recognizes and defines 13 different disability categories, including autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment including blindness (Center for Parent Information, 2017). The IEP team must not base a placement decision solely on a student's disability category; each student's unique programming needs must be considered prior to a placement decision (Yell & Katsiyannis; 2004). For example, autism is a spectrum disorder and it affects each child to a different degree; therefore, placing all students with autism in a special education classroom together for the majority of the school day would not be appropriate.

Students with mild disabilities, such as learning disabilities are more often placed in the general education classroom for the greater part of the school day. However, data indicates that students with severe disabilities are more frequently placed in a self-contained special education classroom for the majority of the school day (Kleinert et al., 2015). Based on data from the 2007-08 school year, 57% of students ages 6 through 21 who received special education services were placed in the general education classroom for at least 80% of their school day (Kleinert et al., 2015). The research further indicates that only 15% of all students with disabilities were placed in a self-contained classroom (Kleinert et al., 2015). However, when the data is further disseminated, 49% of students with intellectual disabilities, 45% of students with multiple

disabilities, and 37% of students with autism were served outside of the general education classroom (Kleinert et al., 2015). These findings reveal that students with severe disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and autism are more frequently placed in a more restrictive setting. Students with more severe special needs often require intensive interventions, accommodations, and modifications, which might be difficult to implement in the general education classroom, especially if special education teachers have large caseloads and minimal support staff. In a study conducted by Kleinert et al., (2015) the educational placement of over 39,000 students with significant disabilities in 15 different states was examined. The researchers determined that 93% of the students participating in the study were served in a self-contained classroom or a more restrictive setting, such as a separate school or hospital (Kleinert et al., 2015). According to the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services annual report (2017) during the 2014-15 school year, 49.7% of students who qualify for special education services in the area of intellectual impairments spent less than 40% of the school day in the general education classroom (Office of Special Education, 2017).

Since the data indicates that students with intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and autism are least likely to be placed in the general education classroom, it is important to have a working understanding about these substantial disability categories. Students with intellectual disabilities have significant limitations with intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviors and the disability manifests prior to the age of 18 (Center for Parent Information, 2017). Students with multiple disabilities have been diagnosed with simultaneous impairments, such as intellectual disability and an orthopedic impairment, which results in significant educational needs (Center for Parent Information, 2017). Finally, students with autism have been diagnosed with a developmental disability that adversely affects communication, social interactions, and

educational performance (Center for Parent Information, 2017). Since students who receive special education services under these three disability categories generally have significant needs, it will require a detailed and coordinated inclusion plan implemented by supportive and informed teachers and administrations and consistent communication between all educational stakeholders to ensure that an inclusive placement results in success.

The Inclusion Model

Inclusion, integration, and mainstreaming are all terms that describe including children with disabilities in regular classrooms (Stein, 1994). Inclusion can be defined as a service delivery model that strives to ensure student success by providing special education services and supports to students with special needs in the general education classroom (Brice & Miller, 2000). An inclusive classroom is an integrated setting where all children learn together, no children are specifically labeled as students with special needs, and all students use the same curriculum to make educational gains (Brice & Miller, 2000). In an inclusive classroom setting, all students are accepted as equals, regardless of their unique abilities or disabilities (Dixon, 2005). It is important to note that inclusion does not involve placing students with special needs in a regular education classroom without the necessary supports. A student who has qualified for special education services may need support in the general education classroom, which could consist of the assistance of a paraprofessional, modifications to the curriculum, or push-in support from therapists or special education teachers (Dixon, 2005). Data from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (2017) reveals that in the 2014-15 school year, 62.7% of students, ages 6-21, who received special education services were educated in the general education classroom for at least 80% of the school day. This indicates an increase in inclusive placements from the 2006 school year, when 55.2% of students with special needs were

placed in the general education classroom (Office of Special Education, 2017). With the inclusion model on the rise within schools, it is important for educational stakeholders to understand the components needed to implement an effective inclusion program.

Critical factors of inclusion. For inclusion to be truly successful, careful planning needs to take place between all of the educational stakeholders involved in the process (Obiakor et al., 2012). An inclusive experience will not be beneficial for anyone if a child with special needs is simply dumped in the general education classroom when the general education teacher has no training and the necessary supports are not provided to the child in need. Monsen, Ewing, and Kwoka (2014) conducted a study on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. In the study, 95 male and female elementary teachers with varying years of teaching experience, completed a questionnaire that inquired about their feelings on different aspects of inclusion (Monsen et al., 2014). Results of the study revealed that teachers who felt that they had inadequate support with inclusion were less likely to have a positive attitude about including students with special needs in their classroom (Monsen et al., 2014). Teacher attitudes play a huge role in creating a culture of inclusion; therefore, it is imperative that staff feel prepared and supported during the implementation of inclusion. Teacher training, administrative support, collaboration, and training for paraprofessionals must all be in place before an inclusive environment will flourish.

Teacher attitudes and training. One of the biggest factors that must be considered when preparing for an inclusive classroom is the attitude of the general education teachers, as well as training for the general education teachers. Research indicates that general education teachers often do not feel that they have adequate skills or training to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Gilmour, 2019; Monsen et al., 2014). Teacher attitudes regarding inclusion are complex and are affected by numerous factors, including teacher attributes, self-efficacy, student

disability categories, and school-based conditions (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999). Results of a study conducted by Monsen et al. (2014), revealed that younger teachers had significantly higher positive attitudes about including students with special needs in their classrooms, as opposed to teachers with more teaching experience. The results of this study indicate that experienced teachers may require more direct and intensive training to feel confident with adopting inclusive practices in their classrooms. In the same study, teachers expressed the most apprehension about including students with behavior disorders and multiple disabilities in their general education classrooms (Monsen et al., 2014). In another research study conducted by DeSimone, Maldonado, and Rodriguez (2013), teacher respondents reported more comfort with including students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom. However, over one-fourth of the teacher participants shared their belief that the general education classroom might not be appropriate for students with severe disabilities (DeSimone et al., 2013). One way to improve teacher attitudes about inclusion for all students with special needs is to provide adequate training and support for general education teachers. Ideally, this training should be proactive and provided prior to placing a student with special needs in the general education classroom.

Before implementing an inclusion service delivery model, general education teachers must receive training on best practices for including all students in a common classroom (Brice & Miller, 2000). Brice and Miller (2000), have suggested that schools create an inclusion plan that clearly defines the level of inclusion, as well as the level of support that the student will need to be successful in the general education classroom. General education teachers, along with special education teachers, administrators, and parents, should contribute to the development of a thorough inclusion plan for each child with special needs. The inclusion plan should also specify

who is responsible for providing what type of instruction during the school day and when that instruction will occur, and the plan should also specify what type of training will be needed for paraprofessionals who will be involved in the child's inclusion plan (Brice & Miller, 2000).

General education teachers need very specific training in order to successfully implement an inclusion plan and ensure that students with special needs are benefitting from their placement in the regular education classroom.

Types of training for general education teachers. Inclusion for students with special needs involves more than just the students' physical presence in the general education classroom. The IDEA states that IEPs must list all the supplementary aids and services that the child needs to be successful within the LRE (Lee et al., 2009). Supplementary aids and services could be curriculum modifications and adaptations, changes to the physical environment of the classroom, access to assistive technology, and the support of a paraprofessional (Lee et al., 2009). General education teachers need training on how to provide some of these supplementary services. Training for general education teachers must encompass strategies on differentiated instruction and how to keep students with special needs engaged in classroom activities by modifying the instructional activities and adapting the educational content, as needed (Harrower, 1999). Allowing students with special needs the opportunity to choose how they demonstrate their knowledge on a given topic is one instructional adaptation that could be easily implemented by the teacher in a general education classroom. The special education teacher should assist with providing the needed modifications, but general education teachers will feel more empowered if they have a better understanding of how to modify classroom work for the students in their classroom.

Another effective strategy that general education teachers need training on is referred to as priming, which consists of pre-teaching academic content that may be challenging, prior to teaching the content to the whole class (Harrower, 1999). General education teachers must also be aware of testing modifications such as extended time to take tests and supplementary aids, such as access to a calculator or a word prediction app that assists students as they are typing. General education teachers also should have training on how to utilize peers to ensure academic and social progress for students with special needs (Harrower, 1999). Teachers need to understand how to effectively incorporate cooperative learning groups, which include students with special needs. Explicit peer training addressing the topics of age appropriateness, proper methods of offering assistance, and general expectations of including students with special needs as equal members of the classroom need to be included in professional development trainings for general education teachers so that they can create an inclusive culture within their classroom (Harrower, 1999). Jackson, Ryndak, and Billingsley (2000) asked experts in the field of moderate to severe disabilities to identify useful practices in inclusive education. According to the results of the survey, promotion of inclusive values needs to be explicitly taught by the classroom teacher (Jackson et al., 2000). It would be beneficial for general education teachers to receive training and tips on how to cultivate a culture of acceptance and community within their classrooms. The teacher will set the tone of classroom and the students will model their behavior according to how the teacher acts towards students with special needs.

Collaboration and communication. As well as a clearly defined inclusion plan and teacher training on specific strategies, general education teachers need time to collaborate with special education teachers. Support from administration is a critical factor for inclusion to be successful within a school. Brice and Miller (2000), maintain that administrators must be held

accountable for providing general and special education teachers with the time needed to collaborate and communicate regarding the educational programming of students with special needs. A lack of time for collaboration between general and special education teachers is frequently blamed for the failure of inclusion; therefore, administrators must set aside time for educators to meet, discuss, and plan interventions for students with special needs who are placed in the general education classroom (Brice & Miller, 2000; Harrower, 1999). Effective inclusion classrooms are built on a team approach and partnership between all teachers and collaboration between general and special education teachers is essential for students to thrive in an inclusive classroom (DeSimone, 2013; Obiakor et al., 2012). Many schools are implementing the practice of co-teaching, which allows the general and special education teachers to work closely together to provide instruction to a group of students.

Co-teaching. Co-teaching between the general education and special education teacher provides numerous opportunities for collaboration and communication in the inclusive classroom. Co-teaching can be defined as “the partnering of a general education teacher and a special education teacher or another specialist for the purpose of jointly delivering instruction to a diverse group of students, including those with disabilities or other special needs” (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). According to Hang and Rabren (2009), the four major components of co-teaching include the involvement of two certified teachers, both teachers participate in the instructional delivery of the academic content, the group of students includes both children with disabilities and children without disabilities, and the instruction takes place in one classroom. Co-teaching can take the shape of five different models in the general education classroom. In the one teach, one assist model, one teacher provides the whole-group instruction to all students, while the other teacher aids students who need additional help

(Obiakor et al., 2012). The station teaching model involves dividing the students in a classroom into three groups. Each teacher works with one group, while the third group of students works independently (Obiakor et al., 2012). When teachers engage in parallel teaching both teachers work together to write the lesson plan. Students in the classroom are split into two groups and each educator teaches the same lesson to one of the smaller groups of students (Obiakor et al., 2012). The co-teaching strategy of alternative teaching allows for one of the teachers to pre-teach or re-teach academic content to a small group of students who require more support (Obiakor et al., 2012). Finally, the team-teaching approach involves both teachers taking an active part in planning and teaching the same lesson to the entire group of children in the classroom (Obiakor et al., 2012). In a study by Hang & Rabren (2009), 45 co-teachers completed a perceptions survey. The results of the survey indicated that the co-teachers agreed that the students with special needs within the co-taught class increased their self-confidence and academic skills (Hang & Rabren, 2009). The teachers in the survey also agreed that the students with special needs had appropriate supports in the co-taught classroom and they exhibited fewer behavior problems in the co-taught classroom (Hang & Rabren, 2009). Co-teaching also provides value to all the learners in the general education classroom, since all of the students benefit from access to a second teacher (Walsh & Jones, 2004). Co-teaching has proven to be an effective way to increase the collaboration between general and special education teachers. However, due to high caseloads that require special education teachers to work with numerous children in multiple grade levels, paraprofessionals are often called on to provide support to students with special needs in the general education classroom.

Training for support staff. In addition to intentional and intensive training for general education teachers, paraprofessionals who will be tasked with providing support to students with

special needs in the inclusive classroom must also receive adequate training and professional development (Lee, Soukup, Little, & Wehmeyer, 2009; DeSimone et al., 2013; Idol, 2006).

When students with special needs are placed in the general education classroom with paraprofessionals who are untrained, serious pitfalls may occur. These negative effects for students with special needs include decreased interactions with the general education teacher and peers, over-dependence on adults, limited opportunities to practice self-control and self-management skills, and fewer chances to receive high quality instruction from the general education teacher (Harrower, 1999). In order to avoid these hazards, it is imperative that support staff receive specific and thorough training to ensure that they are constantly working to fade prompts and promote independence (Harrower, 1999). Inclusion will not work if children with special needs are in a corner of the general education classroom, working on a separate activity with a paraprofessional. Paraprofessionals must be given the tools to support students in the classroom, while allowing the general education teacher to take ownership of the child's learning. Once school districts have laid the groundwork for inclusive educational placements to work, the IEP team members must make a case-by-case determination on which students with special needs would benefit from placement in the general education classroom. The IEP team must consider the benefits and possible disadvantages of an inclusive placement for each child.

Benefits of Inclusion

Within the field of education, there remains a debate regarding the effectiveness of inclusion, especially for students with more significant special needs. Proponents of inclusion for students with severe special needs maintain that there are numerous benefits for everyone who participates in an inclusive classroom, including both children with and without disabilities. When IEP teams are considering inclusion for a student with special needs, they must take into

account the possible social and academic benefits for the individual child. Advocates of full inclusion point out that such a placement provides students with disabilities numerous opportunities to interact with peers who do not have disabilities (Stein, 1994). Other educators argue that inclusion is the best educational placement option because it grants students with disabilities access to the grade-level general education curriculum, which students might not have in a more restrictive setting (Gilmour, 2019). Research has also indicated that inclusion has a positive effect on children without disabilities (Harrower, 1999). Each member of the IEP team, including teachers, parents, therapists, and administrators, must have a solid understanding of the possible benefits of inclusion so that they can make an appropriate education placement decision for each individual student with special needs.

Social benefits of inclusion. Students with significant special needs, such as autism, cognitive impairments and multiple disabilities, often have deficits in the areas of adaptive behavior and social skills. Some educators argue that the acquisition of social skills is just as important as the acquisition of academic skills for students with severe special needs (Harrower, 1999). One of the benefits of inclusion is that the general education classroom provides many opportunities for students with special needs to learn social skills by observing and interacting with children without disabilities (Dixon, 2005). When general education teachers implement teaching strategies such as cooperative learning and small group instruction, students with special needs are given the opportunity to interact with their peers and observe and develop appropriate social skills in a natural setting (Lee et al., 2009). If placed in a self-contained special education classroom, children with special needs would not have as many opportunities to observe and learn important social skills from their peers in the general education classroom. Research indicates that children in inclusive settings make greater advances in the areas of

independence and social skills, as opposed to students placed in self-contained classrooms (Kleinert et al., 2015). Fisher and Meyer (2002) conducted a study comparing the social competence of students with severe needs in an inclusive classroom and a self-contained classroom. The results of the two-year study revealed that students with severe needs in the inclusive classroom made more gains in social and adaptive behavior than those students educated in the self-contained classroom (Fisher & Meyer, 2002).

Proponents for inclusion also emphasize that special education services typically provided in a separate environment, can be provided in the general education classroom which minimizes the social stigma sometimes associated with leaving the classroom to receive services (Dixon, 2005; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999). Dixon (2005) gives an example of how occupational therapists can provide services to children who need assistance with their fine motor skills in the natural environment of the general education classroom when the rest of the class is working on handwriting instead of pulling the student out of the classroom to work on handwriting in the therapy room. When children receive special education services in the general education classroom instead of leaving the classroom, there is less of a stigma involved for children with special needs (Dixon, 2005). Advocates of full inclusion also point out that the inclusive classroom provides an environment that facilitates friendships between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers (Daniel & King, 1997). Furthermore, children with special needs will grow up to become adults in mainstream society, and the inclusive classroom is one of the first environments that can help prepare these children for life beyond the classroom. The inclusive classroom also provides social benefits for students without disabilities. Research indicates that students without disabilities who have been part of an inclusive classroom have an overall positive view of inclusion (Salend & Garrick Duhaney,

1999). Increased tolerance, enhanced sensitivity to other people, and the opportunity to befriend individuals with special needs are cited as positive benefits of inclusion for students without disabilities (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999). There are also moral benefits to inclusion. The philosophy of inclusion embraces diversity, and it encourages all people to respect one another's differences (Daniel & King, 1997; Dixon, 2005). The hope is that by participating in an inclusive and diverse classroom, students will come to the realization that all people, regardless of their cognitive ability, share commonalities; therefore, people must accept one another and embrace both their similarities and their differences (DeSimone et al., 2013).

Academic benefits of inclusion. In addition to social values, the literature indicates that inclusion can offer academic benefits to children with significant special needs. One of the primary advantages of inclusion is that it provides students with special needs access to the general education curriculum, which they would not necessarily have in a self-contained classroom (Kleinert et al., 2015). According to Brice and Miller (2000), one of the main goals of inclusion is to reduce the use of separate curriculums. Proponents of inclusion contend that when children with special needs are placed in the general education classroom, they are held to higher academic expectations (Daniel, 1997). Advocates of inclusion have acknowledged that it is unrealistic to expect that all children with severe special needs will master the grade-level standards in the same timeframe and manner as other children; however, they maintain that it should be possible to adapt the regular education curriculum so that students with a variety of cognitive abilities will glean some benefit from the academic content presented in the general education classroom (Dixon, 2005). Kleinert et al., (2015) conducted a research study which surveyed over 39,000 students across 15 states, who have significant needs and qualified to take the alternate assessment. The study revealed a positive correlation between reading and math

skills and students with significant cognitive disabilities who were educated in an inclusive classroom (Kleinert et al., 2015). The same research project also indicated that students with severe cognitive needs made more significant gains in the area of expressive language when placed in an inclusive classroom (Kleinert et al., 2015). Inclusion in the general education classroom has yielded positive social and academic gains for some students with severe needs; however, the discussion over whether it is the best placement for all children with special needs continues to be debated within schools.

Disadvantages of Inclusion

Since the IDEA does not mandate an inclusive educational placement for all children with significant special needs, the LRE can be a controversial piece of the IEP process. While some people favor inclusion for all students, others argue that the general education classroom may not be appropriate for all students, especially those with significant disabilities.

Disadvantages of inclusion can include compromising rigorous interventions in exchange for exposure to grade-level academic content that is too challenging, minimal academic gains, and a lack of training and support for general education teachers. It has also been suggested that the social interactions between students with and without disabilities are more assistive than reciprocal in nature and that social interactions decrease throughout the school year (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999). It is important to understand each of the drawbacks that are associated with inclusion so that educational placement decisions can be made with confidence.

Academic disadvantages. Although inclusion provides students with severe disabilities the opportunity to access the general education curriculum, it can be argued that this exposure comes at the cost of intensive, research-based interventions that the special education teacher could best provide in a separate setting. In reference to students with significant disabilities,

Zigmond (2003) maintains that “special education in a pull-out setting, with its emphasis on empirically validated practices and its use of data-based decision making to tailor instruction to the individual students’ needs might be better for teaching these students” (p. 197). Pull-out special education programs generally offer smaller teacher-student ratios and flexibility with curriculum and pacing of instruction, which might not be available in the general education classroom (Zigmond, 2003). Students with significant special needs may struggle to keep up with the fast-paced curriculum in general education classroom; however, in a special education classroom the teacher can cover material at a slower pace to ensure optimal understanding (Daniel, 1997). For students who need instruction in basic academic skills because they are significantly behind their grade level, special education pull-out programs may offer more benefits than the general education classroom (Zigmond, 2003). An important distinction in the inclusion controversy involves exposure to content and actual academic progress. Gilmour (2019) warns against equating the educational placement of a student with actual student progress. Although students with significant needs are being exposed to the general education curriculum, “achievement data suggest that they are not actually learning the curriculum” (Gilmour, 2019, p. 26). The literature on the academic benefits of inclusion for students with severe needs is varied. Although some studies indicate that students make academic gains in the inclusive classroom, other research reveals that students with significant special needs make more progress in a traditional, pull-out program (Salend & Duhaney, 1999).

Another disadvantage of inclusion occurs when schools and IEP teams do not have a clear vision and plan on how to implement inclusion. If a student is merely placed in the general education classroom, but he or she is not actively engaged in classroom activities, it could be argued that that placement is not appropriate for that child (Brice & Miller, 2000). In a study

conducted by Lee et al., (2009), students with mild cognitive impairments were observed to be engaged with a task linked to a general education standard during 87% of intervals; however, students with severe cognitive disabilities in the inclusive classroom were engaged with a grade-level standard during only 55% of intervals. When students are simply placed in an inclusive classroom but are not given the needed supports and modifications, students were not found to be making any progress on the skills outlined in their IEPs (Harrower, 1999). School districts and administrators need to equip general and special educators with the tools that they need to ensure that students can be fully engaged and included in the general education classroom, instead of simply being physically present in the classroom. These critical tools include professional development for teachers and support staff, a sufficient number of support staff, and adequate time for communication between the general and special education teacher.

Lack of teacher training. The literature regarding inclusion presents a lack of teacher preparation and training as a major barrier to inclusion. If general education teachers are not given the professional development that they need in order to teach and include students with special needs within their classrooms, inclusion will never be successful or beneficial for anyone (Lee et al., 2009; Obiakor et al., 2012). Harrower (1999) claims that two major roadblocks to inclusion are a lack of teacher training and a lack of models of successful inclusion programs. General education teachers who are already overwhelmed by the increasing demands of teaching a larger number of students may become frustrated when asked to further differentiate their instruction to include modifications for students with significant special needs (Monsen, Ewing, & Kwoka, 2014). A study conducted by Idol (2006), which evaluated the special education programs of four different elementary schools, indicated that only 42% of teachers felt skilled enough to provide instructional modifications for students with special needs. This finding

indicates that teachers need further training to feel comfortable with making modifications and adaptations for students with severe needs who are placed in the general education classroom.

Analysis

Educational placement decisions for students with special needs are an inevitable factor that must be considered during the IEP process. The IDEA mandates that students with special needs are educated alongside their peers in the general education classroom to the full extent that is appropriate (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). However, the general education setting may not be the most appropriate setting for each student who receives special education services; therefore, the IDEA also requires that IEP teams consider a continuum of educational placement options for each child who qualifies for special education services. The continuum of alternate placement ranges from the general education classroom to more restrictive settings, such as a self-contained special education classroom (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). During the IEP process, the team members must make a determination about the most appropriate educational placement for the child in question. Many schools are supporting fully inclusive placements for children with special needs.

Although there has been an increase in inclusion for students who have mild special needs, such as learning disabilities, students with more significant cognitive needs are often still placed in special education classrooms for a majority of the school day (Kleinert et al., 2015). Although many professionals are in favor of inclusive placements for children with significant disabilities, the research on the social and academic benefits for this student population is limited. Zigmond (2003) maintains that “where special education occurs is not a phenomenon that lends itself to precise investigation” (p. 196). Due to numerous variables, it is difficult to define a control group and make comparisons between students educated in the general

education classroom and the special education classroom. While there is some evidence to suggest that students make more social progress in inclusive classrooms, there is also research to suggest that the relationships formed between children with and without special needs is more assistive than reciprocal in nature (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999). Furthermore, the concept that an inclusive placement would benefit every child, goes against the very foundation of special education, which is grounded on making educational decisions based on individual student needs. Inclusion may benefit one child with significant needs, but it would be erroneous to make the generalization that full inclusion is best for all children with special needs.

When an inclusive placement is determined to be most appropriate for an individual child, the IEP team must take the necessary steps to make sure it is a beneficial experience for the student. The research very clearly states that components such as administrative support, training for general education teachers and paraprofessionals, as well as consistent communication and collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers must occur for inclusion to be successful (Brice and Miller, 2000). The practice of inclusion must also be clearly understood by all team members. Inclusion is more than simply inviting students with special needs to share the physical space of the general education classroom; inclusion consists of actively providing the specialized and individualized supports that a student needs to be successful in the general education classroom.

The research is conclusive that in order for inclusion to work, general education teachers, especially veteran teachers, need more professional development and training in this area (Brice & Miller, 2000; Monsen et al., 2011). Classroom teachers need an awareness of what specific modifications and accommodations students on IEPs need in order to be successful in the inclusive classroom. Teachers need training on how to modify and adapt the general education

curriculum so that students with special needs are able to actively participate in the classroom with their peers. The special education teacher and general education teacher must work together as a team to help students with special needs experience success in the general education classroom. Consistent communication and collaboration must occur between the general and special education teachers if inclusion is going to be effective (Obiakor et al., 2012). Paraprofessionals who are providing support to children with special needs in the general education classroom also need explicit training so that the children do not become overly dependent on the paraprofessional. In addition, a clearly defined inclusion plan should be written out for each student placed in an inclusive setting. The inclusion plan should specifically identify when the student will be in the general education classroom, what types of supports and modifications the student needs, and who is responsible for providing each of the accommodations and modifications (Brice & Miller, 2000).

Application

Educational placement decisions for students with special needs are a vital component of the IEP process. Each child is unique; therefore, one placement option does not work for all students. Since students with the most severe special needs are typically not placed in the general education classroom for a majority of the school day, data regarding the social and academic benefits for this population is not conclusive. As the pendulum of special education swings to a more inclusive service delivery, it is important to remember that a continuum of placement options must still be considered for each child (Gilmour, 2019). Inclusion can actually be an inappropriate placement for some students, especially if the school district has not taken the necessary steps to train the teachers and support staff who will be responsible for carrying out the inclusion plan.

As an elementary special education teacher, the information in this literature review can be directly applied to my professional practice. Throughout the school year, I participate in the IEP process for all of the students on my caseload. Most of the students I work with have severe cognitive impairments or multiple disabilities and they require significant modifications and accommodations to make academic gains. In the past, most of the students that I have worked with were pulled out of the general education classroom for a majority of the school day, to receive direct instruction in reading, writing, math, and social skills in the special education classroom. My students generally attend specials classes such as physical education, music, library, and computers with their general education class, and they are often in the general education classroom for Science and Social Studies classes as well as morning meetings and other social activities, such as dramatic play. Moving forward, I need to be more cognizant of other placement options, including inclusion, for the students on my caseload. I, along with the other members of the IEP team, need to carefully analyze where each student can make the most social and academic progress. In my current elementary school, most general education teachers are very welcoming when students with special needs are placed in their classroom; however, with some teachers there is still some hesitancy to truly take ownership of the students with significant special needs. Special education students are first and foremost general education students, and they need to be included in the social activities that take place in the general education classroom. I believe that further training should be given to all of the general education teachers in our district on how to make simple modifications and accommodations that make a huge difference in helping children with special needs be more engaged in the classroom (Smith, 2007). When teachers understand how to differentiate learning activities for students, they will be more inclined to include all students in the classroom activities. Since teacher

attitudes play a key role in the success of inclusion, pre-service teaching programs need to amplify their instruction on how to best teach children with more significant special needs.

College students who are majoring in elementary education should be required to take courses that highlight how to best include and teach children with a variety of special needs.

My role as a special educator requires me to be an advocate for the students entrusted to my care. When the IEP team determines that inclusion is the most appropriate educational placement for one of my students, I must take the necessary steps to ensure that it is a successful process. I will need to discuss the inclusion model with my administrative team to make sure that they will support the decision and provide time for adequate training and collaboration. It will also be my responsibility to communicate with the general education teacher and provide any needed training and support. I must explicitly describe what accommodations and modifications will be needed for the student to make progress in the general education classroom. In addition, I will need to be in constant communication with the general education teacher so that I can help create modified learning activities that are appropriate for the student. Most elementary schools do a good job of ensuring that grade level teams have shared planning time, however, special education teachers often find it difficult to find time to meet with general education teachers during the school day. I would like to see school districts take more action to ensure that special education teachers have time to communicate and collaborate with general education teachers, especially during the school day. This may require school districts to provide a substitute teacher or additional paraprofessional support so that the special education teacher has time during the school day to collaborate with other teachers.

For inclusion to be effective, I must provide ongoing support to the general education teacher throughout the school year. This support could come in the form of placing a

paraprofessional in the general education classroom. I will need to work with the general education teacher to create an inclusion plan that lists out specific duties of the general education teacher, special education teacher, and paraprofessional who will be involved in providing educational services to the child. In the past, I have provided informal training for the paraprofessionals in my classroom. Moving forward I would like our school district to offer more structured professional development for support staff. Since paraprofessionals spend the majority of their time working with children with special needs, it is imperative that they understand how to fade prompts so that students do not become overly dependent on adult support. In addition, I need to make a concerted effort to block off time in my schedule to push-in to the general education classroom to provide support to the students on my caseload who are placed in the general education classroom. Previously, I have never participated in a co-taught classroom, but co-teaching for a portion of the school day might be a future possibility if any of my students are placed in an inclusive classroom. When students are placed in the general education classroom, I must take detailed data on their academic and social progress. Data must also be taken when my students are working on skills in the special education classroom so that I can continuously monitor and compare student growth in both environments. I will share this data with the IEP team so that future educational placement decisions can be data-driven.

When implementing inclusion, teachers and administrators should start gradually. When considering a placement change for a student, the team could ease into the change by suggesting that the student be fully included for one or two classes instead of the entire school day to ensure that the student is successful in that environment. If the student is making progress and the IEP team agrees that further inclusion would benefit the child, the team can amend the IEP to add increased time in the general education classroom. If possible, IEP teams should seek out

established and effective inclusion programs and take the time to visit those inclusive classrooms. By observing inclusion in action, teachers and administrators will gain valuable insight as they endeavor to move forward with inclusion in their own district. A gradual shift to inclusion may take more time, but it is better to have a strong foundation for inclusion to grow. Schools who try to implement inclusion without taking the time to train teachers run the risk of hindering the progress of all students.

Moving forward, I would also like to find more practical ways to enhance the social relationships between students with and without disabilities. Throughout the school year, I would like to provide more structured information to the children without disabilities in the general education class. I believe that it is beneficial to directly talk to the children about the similarities and differences between all of the people in the room. For example, one of my students uses a communication device to talk. I can teach the children in the general education classroom that it is okay to talk to the child and ask him questions and even though he will not respond verbally, he will use his device to talk if given enough time. Children are naturally curious and if they are given an explanation as to why some children walk or talk differently, they will often accept the differences and focus on the similarities. Another way that I can enhance the social relationships between children with and without disabilities is to use peer tutoring and cooperative learning groups. When students work together in cooperative groups, I can structure or modify the activities so that students with special needs are actively engaged in the learning activity.

This literature review reveals that there is a need for further research on both the social and academic benefits of inclusion for children with severe special needs. More data is needed on this subject so that educational teams can make informed placement decisions. School

districts need to properly fund special education so that teachers have lower caseloads, which will allow for more opportunities for co-teaching. Teacher preparation programs need to amplify their efforts to ensure that all education majors have the tools to differentiate instruction so that all their future students, even those with significant special needs, will be engaged in learning. There are multiple pieces to the inclusion puzzle and educators must be willing to work together to create an inclusive culture.

Conclusion

Education is constantly evolving to meet the ever-changing needs of the diverse population of students who walk through the school doors each day. Teachers across the nation are striving to provide differentiated instruction to all of the students in their classrooms. Just over 40 years ago, children with significant special needs were often not included in public education classrooms. As a result of the civil rights movement, past litigation, and legislation, public schools are now required to provide a free and appropriate education for all students with special needs. Special education teachers, along with parents, administrators, service providers, and general education teachers must continue to work together as a team to determine the least restrictive educational placement for students who are on IEPs and receive special education services. For some students the LRE is the general education classroom, while for others the LRE may be the special education classroom or a more restrictive environment. The hallmark of special education is that it is highly individualized; therefore, one placement may not be the best fit for all students with special needs.

The philosophy of inclusion is gaining a lot of momentum in schools, as parents and other educators are continuing to advocate for equal educational opportunities for children with special needs. While inclusion is on the rise for children with mild special needs, there continues

to be some hesitancy to place children with severe special needs in the general education classroom for the majority of the school day. Further research on the social and academic benefits needs to be conducted so that teams can make informed decisions based off of best practices. IEP teams must consider the unique needs of each child to determine if the benefits of an inclusive placement in the general education classroom outweigh the benefits that could be attained in a smaller setting, such as the special education classroom. For some children, a more restrictive educational placement may be more appropriate; however, placement decisions are fluid and made on a yearly basis, so there is always an opportunity for more inclusive placements in the future. When an inclusive placement is deemed most appropriate for a particular child, the IEP team must work together to build and follow a solid inclusion plan that clearly articulates the daily supports that are needed for the child to make progress in the general education classroom.

All children, regardless of their ability level, deserve to be treated with dignity, respect, and kindness. The elementary school setting provides a great opportunity to teach all children about diversity and acceptance. Learning to treat one another with kindness and compassion is a valuable life lesson that has the potential to change society for the better. Inclusion, when implemented appropriately, can offer a worthwhile learning opportunity for all people involved in the experience. The final outcome of inclusion is to ensure that all children with different ability levels and talents are working and learning together.

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