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Inclusion isn't always the answer: Effects of alternate learning environments for elementary students with disabilities

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Inclusion isn't always the answer: Effects of alternate learning environments for elementary students with disabilities

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Northwestern College

An Action Research Project Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Education

Abstract

When it comes to writing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), the least restrictive environment (LRE) is described as the general education classroom. However for some students, especially those who struggle socially, emotionally, and behaviorally, the general education environment is the most restrictive. This research aims to answer the question of whether inclusion should be the goal for all students or if an alternate learning environment would lead to improved social emotional health of students with special needs. Through quantitative data collection and a descriptive research design, the researcher challenges the idea that inclusive practice is best practice. Findings suggest that although there is no statistical correlation between time spent in general education and frequency of behavior problems in students with disabilities, data indicates that students who spend the most time in special education classrooms display fewer problem behaviors. It is also found that there is uncertainty among staff members regarding the implementation of inclusion, especially pertaining to students with high needs. While this research provides insightful information, further research is needed to fully understand the social emotional impact of inclusion on students with disabilities.

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Inclusion Isn't Always the Answer

The idea of inclusion began over forty years ago with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirement that all children be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Since then, schools worldwide pushed for the inclusion of all students. But the focus of special education should be to meet the individual needs of all students rather than attempting to find one model that fits all needs. With the current state of education, it seems impossible to educate all students in the same setting and expect all students to succeed.

For the purposes of this research, inclusion is the term used to describe “mainstream inclusion” or educating all students in the general education classroom. Alternately, integration means physically placing a student in the general education classroom. Inclusion is the feeling of being included in the classroom environment. Because IDEA does not directly use the term “inclusion” in its language, it is believed that the majority of schools are practicing integration, not universal inclusion. Existing research shows a lack in clarity of the definition of social inclusion (Koller et al., 2017) and differences in the perceived understandings of LRE (Wilson et al., 2020). The lack of clear language in IDEA regarding LRE has led to many conflicts among school districts as well as multiple court cases (Alquraini, 2011). It is believed that the language of IDEA can also affect the wellbeing of some students when inappropriately placed in the LRE.

Although there is literature to support the ambiguity of inclusion, little research has been done on the negative effects of inclusion or on how special education classrooms, or alternate learning environments, can lead to more positive outcomes for students with moderate to severe disabilities. However, there is research to support the idea that mainstream education does not meet the needs of all students and can lead to negative experiences such as bullying, anxiety, and feelings of being unwanted (Goodall, 2018). There are also a number of studies that indicate

students with learning disabilities (LD) struggle academically in the general education classroom (Chmiliar, 2009). In summary, research questions the appropriateness of placing certain students in general education (Banerjee, 2017). Through action research, this study provides a quantitative analysis of staff perspectives and student behavior regarding the physical learning environment. Data was collected through online self-paced surveys with staff members as well as with student behavior monitoring documentation. It is hypothesized that some students with disabilities experience problems with their social emotional wellbeing when included in the general education classroom and therefore should be considered for an alternate learning environment. For that reason, this research aims to answer the question: Can an alternate learning environment support the social emotional needs of elementary students with disabilities and improve behavior better than inclusive, or integrative, classrooms?

Review of Literature

For the purposes of this paper, twenty research studies were found using Northwestern College of Iowa's scholarly library. All studies contain information pertinent to the research topic of inclusion and the social emotional wellbeing of students with disabilities. The research analyzed for this study includes both literature reviews and action research.

Definition of Inclusion

Many researchers agree that there is uncertainty in the universal definition of inclusion (Alquraini, 2011; Goodall, 2018; Koller et al., 2017; Krischler et al., 2019; Selvaraj, 2016). One study that aligns with this thought is by Koller et al. (2017). In the study, researchers conducted a synthesis of research about social inclusion by evaluating both qualitative and quantitative studies. (Koller et al., 2017). The results of the study reveal that at the time, "no research has specifically addressed how educators define social inclusion for children with disabilities" (Koller et al., 2017). The definition of social inclusion, or lack thereof, is problematic because it remains "broad and elusive" (Koller et al., 2017). Without the research to back it up, social inclusion remains to be perceived by individual educators.

Similar findings were presented in a later study by Krischler et al. (2019). Researchers asked 370 participants to write their definition of inclusion. The responses varied, but all lend to the idea that inclusion is not clearly defined or universally understood (Krischler et al., 2019). The majority of non-teaching participants and pre-service teachers understood inclusion according to the "placement definition" (Krischler et al., 2019). This means they see inclusion simply as the placement of students with disabilities. Most in-service teachers characterized inclusion under the "general individualized definition" meaning inclusion should meet the social

and academic needs of students with disabilities (Krischler et al., 2019). Krischler indicates that the inconsistent definitions of inclusion lead to inconsistent implementation in schools.

In addition, the study by Selvaraj (2016) reviewed policy documents and educational reports to determine the cause of confusion and the reason behind why full inclusion has been a difficult feat. According to the findings, constraints in funding are one aspect that have led to difficulty in implementation of inclusive practices and an overall difficulty in the “universal understanding of inclusive education” (Selvaraj, 2016). Comparable to Krischler’s (2019) research, Selvaraj also sees differences in implementation of inclusion among schools.

While the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that schools educate students with disabilities in the general education setting to the maximum extent appropriate, it fails to recognize that the general education setting is not appropriate for all students (Alquraini, 2011). In other words, IDEA deems the general education classroom as the least restrictive environment (LRE). But the lack of information on determining LRE has “led to an increase in the number of LRE court cases” (Alquraini, 2011). Alquraini (2011) believes legislators should reconsider the language of LRE, making it more accessible to school districts throughout the country. It can be hypothesized that if the language of LRE was more universally understood, school districts would have a better understanding of determining appropriate placements for students with disabilities and ultimately find themselves in fewer legal battles.

Education professionals are not the only ones confused about the definition of inclusion. In contrast to the other studies mentioned, Craig Goodall (2018) conducted his research with twelve autistic student participants. The student participants were asked about aspects of their education they would like to improve and what appropriate education and inclusion mean to

them (Goodall, 2018). These students had spent time in both mainstream classrooms as well as either an alternative learning program or home schooling. The students admitted to not fully understanding the term “inclusion” as it relates to mainstream integration. As one student stated, “if the support isn’t there in mainstream then it will never be inclusion...it can’t be inclusion...you can’t belong or be included if the help isn’t there” (Goodall, 2018). Findings suggest there are gaps between inclusion rhetoric and the student’s lived realities in mainstream classrooms (Goodall, 2018). It can be inferred that if asked, the students would not define inclusion based on Kruschler’s “placement definition” (2019). More simply stated, you cannot be included if you do not feel included.

Barriers of Inclusion

Multiple studies have produced findings that explain barriers to implementing universal inclusion (Goodall, 2018; Wagner et al., 2006; Koller et al., 2017; Chmilier, 2009; Ahsan & Sharma, 2018; Toye et al., 2018). One barrier is student variables such as identified disabilities and level of support needed. In the study by Craig Goodall (2018) exploring autistic students’ perspectives of inclusion, it was identified that some students with autism who were placed in mainstream classrooms felt isolated and unwanted. As stated by Goodall, autism often equals behavior outbursts (2018). It is implied that peers and staff interacting with students with autism might treat them differently or maintain different expectations. If students do not feel included, inclusion is not working.

In an earlier study focusing on students with emotional disturbances (ED), Wagner et al. (2006) surveyed seventy-one student participants. The participants were asked about their perspectives on school programs for students with ED. This research states that grouping all students in the same classroom can interfere both academically and socially (2006). It was also

mentioned that general education teachers find students with ED to be “among the least desirable” to have in class (Wagner et al., 2006). Similar to Goodall’s research, this study indicates that the attitudes of teachers may cause feelings of being unwanted in students with disabilities. While the identified disability of a child should not be a variable in whether that child participates in an inclusive classroom, research shows that it is.

Additional research by Koller, Pouesard, and Rummens agrees that the “type of disability plays a role in how children experience the quality of their social inclusion” (Koller et al., 2017). The researchers conducted a literature review containing fifty-four studies with children aged three to nineteen (Koller et al., 2017). It is suggested that students with emotional, behavioral, or multiple disabilities experience increased difficulty than those with other disabilities. Koller et al. reports that quality of inclusion is directly associated with a student’s mental abilities (2017). In short, higher mental capabilities lead to higher quality inclusive practices.

A second barrier of inclusion, along with student variables, that has been identified is peer support and collaboration. Wilson et al. (2020) studied seventy-eight participants, all of which were either physical education (PE) teachers or adaptive physical education (APE) teachers. APE teachers support students who have IEP goals surrounding adaptive behavior needs or another behavioral disability. Participants were asked about their knowledge of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and their decision-making abilities related to LRE. It was found that the understandings of LRE were significantly different among teacher groups and that PE teachers felt less involved than APE teachers regarding decision-making (Wilson et al., 2020). It can be assumed that APE teachers are more involved because of their familiarity with student IEP supports and that PE teachers are not privy to the same level of understanding. If these

teacher groups had better peer support and collaboration in place, their understandings of LRE would likely be more similar.

The research of Wagner et al. (2006), as previously mentioned, also suggests a need for more collaboration among school personnel. Researchers of this study are of the belief that separate settings often better address the needs of students with ED than a fully inclusive setting (2006). But that idea also leads to an increase in the need for collaboration among staff that work with those students. Students with ED require a variety of supports and services to help them be successful. Stated in the findings of the aforementioned study, there is a “need for authentic and effective collaboration between the mental health and special education communities” (Wagner et al., 2006).

A third barrier to effective inclusion is administrative support. The research of Chmilier (2009) reports student, teacher, and parent perspectives based on interview-style case studies. Teachers shared complaints about their workload and the need for more administrative support (Chmilier, 2009). The teachers believe that with appropriate resources and support, their levels of confidence in teaching inclusive practices would grow (Chmilier, 2009). Administrative support can come in many forms, one option being the presentation of staff training and professional development. It can be hypothesized that teachers would feel more supported with inclusion if they felt encouraged to further their learning on the subject.

Therefore, the fourth and final barrier to implementing inclusion is staff training. The research of Ahsan and Sharma (2018) surrounding pre-service teacher's attitudes about inclusion. Their study, which includes 1,623 pre-service teachers, suggests teachers are poorly prepared to implement inclusion in their classrooms and that “urgent reform” is needed to better prepare instructional staff (Ahsan & Sharma, 2018). It was identified that the level of training

was a predictor in the pre-service teacher's attitudes towards inclusion. Therefore, if the teachers were provided with the appropriate training and professional development, they would feel more comfortable implementing inclusive practices.

Contrary to the previous study mentioned, researchers Toye et al. (2018) believe staff members need a different type of training to enhance attitudes about inclusion. The study focuses specifically on the inclusion of students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and how teachers feel about supporting said students. It was reported that ADHD is not well understood by educators and that teachers have negative attitudes about ADHD as a label (2018). Through an Attitudes about ADHD scale and ADHD stigma questionnaire, researchers summarized that educational psychologists had more knowledge of ADHD than classroom teachers and should therefore design and deliver training for school staff (2018). It can be assumed that if staff members had increased knowledge of ADHD, they would feel more confident educating students with this common diagnosis alongside others in the general education classroom.

Social Emotional Wellbeing for Students with Disabilities

Through an extensive review of literature, various studies were found to link poor mental health to students with disabilities (Goodall, 2018; Schoop-Kasteler & Muller, 2019; Elmore & Lasgaard, 2017; Rose et al., 2016; Cavioni et al., 2017). The research of Craig Goodall (2018) reports on a collection of student perspectives regarding inclusion. Students offered insight as to how they feel about mainstream inclusion and how it affects their mental health. As reported by Goodall (2018), existing research finds that the inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) leads to increased stress, bullying, isolation, and anxiety. It was found that

twelve students shared negative experiences with inclusion, all mentioning similar feelings of bullying and anxiety (Goodall, 2018).

Rose et al. (2016) included over 1,000 student participants in a study about predictors of bullying. Researchers surveyed the students and found that students with disabilities are disproportionately represented in bully-victim relationships (Rose et al., 2016). They also note that youth with disabilities have higher levels of depression and hostility and lower self-esteem (Rose et al., 2016). The research of Rose et al. aligns with that of Goodall as it addresses the increased tendency of bullying in students with disabilities. It can also be summarized that the direct relationship between bullying and negative psychosocial outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and stress, should encourage schools to incorporate mental health supports for youth with disabilities (Rose et al., 2016).

Furthering the importance of mental health supports is the challenge of peer relationships among students with disabilities. Schoop-Kasteler and Muller (2009) conducted a systematic review of thirty-six studies regarding peer relationships in special needs classrooms. Their research highlights the connection between social networks and social and academic performance (Schoop-Kasteler & Muller, 2009). Research identifies that “students tend to select peers that are similar to themselves in terms of behaviors and attitudes” (Schoop-Kasteler & Muller, 2009). It is also mentioned that students with intellectual disabilities (ID) are less well accepted and have fewer friends than their typically developing peers (Schoop-Kasteler & Muller, 2009). While this study was focused on peer relationships among students in special education classrooms, it lends to the idea that friendships and maintaining positive social interactions can be difficult for students with disabilities in an inclusive setting.

Similarly, Elmore and Lasgaard (2017) report that young males with ADHD in special school programs have more difficulty making friends than boys in mainstream schools. The researchers studied twenty-five students with ADHD and almost two hundred without to determine whether degrees of loneliness are elevated in adolescent males with ADHD (Elmore & Lasgaard, 2017). Loneliness is said to be associated with mental health problems and that social support from peers is important among young males (Elmore & Lasgaard, 2017). There was no significant linear relationship found between loneliness among students in special schools versus mainstream schools, but it was found that the adolescent males struggled making friends. If social support is deemed important, difficulty making friends could negatively impact the mental health of young males with ADHD. This may be exacerbated by inclusion in the general education classroom.

Social emotional learning programs, as mentioned in the research of Cavioni et al. (2017), are one way to address mental health problems in students with disabilities. According to the researchers, students with LD are more prone to behavior problems and those problems may exacerbate over time if not addressed (Cavioni et al., 2017). Findings of the Cavioni et al.'s (2017) literature review explain that there are numerous studies reporting on the positive impact of social-emotional learning (SEL) to decrease aggressive, anti-social, and conduct behaviors. It is also stated that SEL instruction may require targeted, out of class interventions which is assumed to mean they may take place in special education classrooms (Cavioni et al., 2017).

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive research design was used to measure elementary school staff members' thoughts about inclusion. This information is pertinent to the research question as the learning environment created by staff members directly affects student social emotional well-being. One study states, "teachers tend to show more negative attitudes towards including children with high support needs" (Ahsan & Sharma, 2018). In an earlier study, when asked about teaching students with emotional disorders, teachers stated that "such students are among the least desirable to have in general education classrooms" (Wagner et al., 2006). For this study, data from staff participants regarding their attitudes towards inclusion was collected digitally over a two-week period. Quantitative data was collected via a survey on Google Forms.

Another data collection method includes student's daily behavior documentation, otherwise known as behavior monitoring sheets. For the purposes of this study, the behavior monitoring sheets were used to compare student behavior in both general education and special education learning environments. Quantitative data was collected via the behavior monitoring sheets.

Variables of this study include identifying information of participants such as age, sex, ethnicity, and job title. Other variables include the participants' mental health or their mood for the day of data collection as well as the setting in which staff completed the survey. The staff survey was completed through Google Forms which allows for various testing settings and the influence of outside factors. Other data collection occurred across multiple settings at an urban elementary school in Des Moines, Iowa.

Participants

Participants for this research study include elementary school staff that work directly with students. Staff members include general education teachers, special education teachers, and interventionists and support staff. Administrators were not included in this study as they do not interact with these students daily in the same way teaching staff does. At the beginning of the data collection process, twenty-five certified elementary school staff members were contacted to participate. These staff members come from three elementary school buildings: two urban, one suburban. Of the twenty-five targeted individuals, twelve staff members agreed to participate.

Students did not directly participate in this study; however, their behavior was used for data collection. The researcher collected data from eight students who spend time in both general education and special education settings. The students attend the same urban elementary school in Iowa and are currently in grades three through five.

Materials

There are two measurement instruments for this study. Staff participants completed a forty-question survey that was adapted from the *Survey of Teacher Attitude Regarding Inclusive Education* by Evangeline Kern (2006). Kern created this survey for the purposes of her research and it was reviewed by expert psychologists to establish face validity. The survey consisted of four multiple choice questions related to personal identifiers along with thirty-six Likert scale questions. Staff were instructed to rate their response on the 4-point Likert scale; SD (strongly disagree), D (disagree), A (agree), or SA (strongly agree).

The staff surveys are reliable because the results of the survey would not change if staff members were to answer the same questions under similar testing conditions. The survey has

face validity as it measures what it is intended to measure. The results of the survey provide the information the researcher was looking for, which is staff attitudes regarding the inclusion of students in special education.

Along with the staff survey, student behavior monitoring sheets were used. They were already in place for all students assigned to the researcher. The behavior monitoring sheets were created to document behavior data and record progress on the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). They are used daily, with permission granted by parents or guardians at the IEP meeting. All monitoring sheets measure frequency of problem behaviors. Staff members mark the fifteen-minute interval box if the student displays an identified problem behavior during that time frame.

Behavior monitoring sheets were proven reliable through test-retest reliability. This measurement tool provides consistent results across time, meaning the behavior monitoring sheets remain the same for each student each day and result in consistent findings. It can be estimated that the behavior monitoring sheets have face validity as they measure what they are intended to measure. The frequency of a student's problem behaviors allows the researcher to determine exactly what behavior occurred and what fifteen-minute time frame it occurred in, which in turn allows for conclusions about whether problem behaviors occurred more frequently in general education or special education classrooms.

Research Procedures

Each staff member was provided with an informed consent document stating the purpose of the study, the confidentiality agreement, participation was voluntary, and signature was required to participate. After obtaining a signature, the survey for this study was distributed to

each of the twelve staff members via a link to Google Forms. Participants were given a two-week window to complete the survey between the months of September and October 2021. They were able to complete it at any point during those two weeks. It was anticipated that twelve staff members (100%) would complete and return the survey to the researcher. At the end of the two weeks, all twelve participants had completed the survey and the researcher was able to begin analyzing results.

Plan for Analysis

This study consisted of descriptive analysis using identified subdomains and a statistical test. The forty-question staff survey is comprised of four subdomains identified as barriers or criticisms of inclusion in the literature review. The subdomains, as mentioned in Kern's research, include Student Variables, Peer Support and Collaboration, Administrative Support, and Training (2006). These subdomains were not subjected to statistical analysis, but instead analyzed independently by the researcher. Staff responses in each subdomain are presented in the data findings.

A correlational test was chosen to analyze the behavior monitoring sheets. Data was inputted into Excel and organized by student to observe a correlation between percentage of time spent in general education and percentage of day displaying problem behaviors. Quantitative data collected includes the mean, percentage, and frequency of problem behaviors.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research study was granted by Northwestern College of Iowa. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study and granted permission for the researcher to conduct surveys with willing participants. Informed consent was obtained from

each participant. This document informed participants of the purpose of the research, method of data collection, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and explicit written consent.

Findings

The staff survey consisted of forty questions, all pertaining to the idea of inclusion. The questions were broken up into four subdomains: Student Variables, Peer Support and Collaboration, Administrative Support, and Training. The first four questions collected staff demographics including age range, sex, ethnicity, and job title. This information is important for the study as it provides insight as to who the participants are and how their background might affect their survey responses. There is a range of ages in participants, with a slight majority being over forty (54.6%). All participants identify as female and are white. While general education, special education, and interventionists/support staff participated, most staff members hold the title of interventionist or support staff. This means they support specific student needs such as academic delays, speech and language delays, occupational/physical therapy, and advanced learners. A summary of staff demographics, including a percentage breakdown, can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

<u>Age Range</u>	
20-30	27.30%
31-40	18.20%
41-50	18.20%
51-60+	36.40%
<u>Sex</u>	
Male	0%
Female	100%
Other Identifier	0%
<u>Ethnicity</u>	
White Caucasian	100%
<u>Job Title</u>	
General Education Teacher	18.20%

Special Education Teacher	36.40%
Interventionist/Support Staff	45.50%

Data Analysis

Results of the staff survey were analyzed by subdomain. Each subdomain represents a barrier to inclusion as identified within the literature review. Student Variables made up fourteen questions on the survey. Data shows that there is some inconsistency among staff members regarding beliefs about student variables, as seen in Table 2. But most staff members (63.6%) believe students who have more severe and profound disabilities, or are two or more years below grade level, should be in special education classes. Additionally, the majority of participants (63.6%) disagree that students who are physically aggressive towards others can be maintained in general education classrooms. A large percentage of staff (36.4%) also disagree that inclusion should always be the goal for students with moderate to severe disabilities. It is summarized that higher levels of need result in more negative attitudes towards inclusion.

Table 2

Student Variables

Question	Response			
	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
All efforts should be made to educate students who have an IEP in the general education classroom.	0%	9.10%	54.50%	36.40%
Students who are diagnosed with an intellectual disability should be in special education classes.	9.10%	45.50%	45.50%	0%
Students who are verbally aggressive towards others can be maintained in general education classrooms.	9.10%	36.40%	45.50%	9.10%
Students who are 2 or more years below grade level should be in special education classes.	0%	36.40%	63.60%	0%

Students who are diagnosed as Autistic should be in special education classes.	9.10%	54.50%	36.40%	0%
Special education teachers should teach students who hold an IEP.	0%	18.20%	63.60%	18.20%
General education teachers should not be responsible for teaching children with special needs.	54.50%	45.50%	0%	0%
I should only be responsible for teaching students who are not identified as having special needs.	72.70%	27.30%	0%	0%
Students who are physically aggressive towards others can be maintained in general education classrooms.	18.20%	63.60%	9.10%	9.10%
All students who have an IEP for any reason should receive their education in special education classrooms.	81.80%	18.20%	0%	0%
Students who display speech and language difficulties should be in special education classes.	27.30%	63.60%	9.10%	0%
Students who are identified as depressed but do not display overt disruptive behavior should be in general education classes.	0%	9.10%	72.70%	18.20%
Inclusion should always be the goal for students with mild to moderate disabilities.	0%	18.20%	45.50%	36.40%
Inclusion should always be the goal for students with moderate to severe disabilities.	18.20%	36.40%	45.50%	0%

Peer Support and Collaboration, shown in Table 3, made up seven survey questions. Staff participants displayed overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards peer support and collaboration. This can be seen when 90% of participants strongly agreed that both general education and special education teachers should teach students with an IEP. The positivity is also proven with a large majority of staff (81.8%) strongly agreeing that they feel comfortable working collaboratively with special education teachers when students with an IEP are in their classroom.

Table 3

Peer Support and Collaboration

Question	Response
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	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
My colleagues are willing to help me with issues which may arise when I have students with an IEP in my classroom.	0%	9.10%	36.40%	54.50%
Collaborative teaching of children with special needs can be effective particularly when students with an IEP are placed in a general education classroom.	0%	0%	45.50%	54.50%
I feel comfortable working collaboratively with special education teachers when students with an IEP are in my classroom.	0%	0%	18.20%	81.80%
I welcome collaborative teaching when I have a student with an IEP in my classroom.	0%	0%	18.20%	81.80%
Both general education and special education teachers should teach students with an IEP.	0%	0%	9.10%	90.00%
I like being the only teacher in the classroom.	30%	40%	30%	0%
I feel comfortable approaching my colleagues for help when I teach students with special needs.	0%	9.10%	36.40%	54.50%

Administrative Support, making up only six survey questions, reveals more inconsistencies in staff beliefs. Table 4 shows that many participants (36.4%) disagree when asked if they feel encouraged by administrators to attend conferences and workshops on teaching students with special needs. Staff members are split in their opinions regarding feeling supported by administrators when faced with challenges presented by students with behavioral difficulties, but a slight majority (45.5%) ‘disagree’ when asked if they feel supported by administrators when faced with challenges presented by students with learning disabilities. It is estimated that more positive feelings of administrative support would lead to fewer concerns regarding students with disabilities and in turn, a better learning experience for those students.

Table 4

Administrative Support

Question	Response
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	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
I am encouraged by my administrators to attend conferences/workshops on teaching students with special needs.	18.20%	36.40%	27.30%	18.20%
I can approach my administrators with concerns I hold regarding teaching students who have special needs.	0%	18.20%	36.40%	45.50%
I feel supported by my administrators when faced with challenges presented by students with behavioral difficulties in my classroom.	9.10%	36.40%	36.40%	18.20%
My administrators provide me with sufficient support when I have students with an IEP in my classroom.	9.10%	27.30%	54.50%	9.10%
I am provided with sufficient materials in order to make appropriate accommodations for students with special needs.	18.20%	45.40%	27.30%	9.10%
I feel supported by my administrators when faced with challenges presented by students with learning difficulties in my classroom.	0%	45.50%	36.40%	18.20%

The final subdomain, titled ‘Training’, makes up nine survey questions. Inconsistency continues through this subdomain with responses spread across the scale. With varying educational backgrounds based on job title, staff levels of training are also varied. Though it is clear in Table 5 that their educational background has not prepared them to effectively teach students with speech impairments (81.9% strongly disagree/disagree). It is assumed that Speech Language Pathologists, making up a very small percentage of staff in this survey, are the only participants who are prepared to teach said students. Along with that, the majority of staff members, making up over 60%, either agree (36.4%) or strongly agree (27.3%) that they need more training to appropriately teach students with behavioral problems.

Table 5

Training

Question	Response			
	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>

My educational background has prepared me to effectively teach students with cognitive delays and deficits.	18.20%	27.30%	27.30%	27.30%
I need more training in order to appropriately teach students with an IEP for learning disabilities.	36.40%	9.10%	27.30%	27.30%
My educational background has prepared me to effectively teach students with behavioral difficulties.	18.20%	36.40%	27.30%	18.20%
My educational background has prepared me to teach students with special needs.	0%	45.50%	27.30%	27.30%
My district provides me with sufficient training opportunities in order for me to appropriately teach students with disabilities.	27.30%	36.40%	27.30%	9.10%
My educational background has prepared me to effectively teach students who are more than a year below grade level.	0%	36.40%	36.40%	27.30%
My educational background has prepared me to effectively teach students who are 2 or more years below level.	36.40%	9.10%	27.30%	27.30%
My educational background has prepared me to effectively teach students with speech impairments.	36.40%	45.50%	9.10%	9.10%
I need more training in order to appropriately teach students with an IEP for behavioral problems.	0%	36.40%	36.40%	27.30%

To analyze the behavior monitoring sheets, data was input into Excel and subjected to a correlational test. The correlation (r) was determined using Excel Data Analysis. Perfect correlation is either -1 for negative correlation or 1 for positive correlation. The data for this study resulted in a correlation of .53 (r = .53). The result of the “R” test suggests no significant relationship between the percentage of time spent in general education and the frequency of problem behaviors. To reach statistical significance, the p value must be less than or equal to .05. This was done using the R score of .53 and the total number of students (n = 7). It was determined that the p value is .22 (p = .22) and is therefore not significant at p > .05. While there is no statistical significance in this data set, it can be observed in Table 6 that students who spend less time in general education display fewer problem behaviors than those that spend much of their day in general education.

Table 6
Student Behavior Monitoring Sheets

Student	<i>% of day spent in general education</i>	<i># of intervals containing problem behaviors</i>
1	81	3
2	47	6
3	95	26
4	95	17
5	93	16
6	95	11
7	95	9
	<i>% of day spent in general education</i>	<i># of intervals containing problem behaviors</i>
% in general education	1	0.53
# intervals containing problem behaviors	0.53	1
	$r = .53$	
	$p = .22$	

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of inclusion on student's social emotional wellbeing. It was hypothesized that increased time in general education can have negative effects on students with disabilities. The researcher believed this would be observed through patterns of behavior in general education and special education, or alternate learning environment. Additionally, staff perspectives were examined to determine how their attitudes regarding inclusion might affect their instructional practices and in turn, affect student behavior. It is important to measure teacher attitudes regarding mainstream inclusion as they are the service providers teaching students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Their attitudes contribute to the success or failure of inclusive practices.

The results of this study suggest that no statistical correlation exists between time spent in general education and frequency of problem behaviors. The small sample of students (n=7) show no linear correlation, but it was observed that the two students who spend the most time in special education classrooms display the fewest number of problem behaviors. This may be due to increased feelings of comfortability and teacher support, along with deeper knowledge and experience from certified special education teachers as opposed to general education teachers. Students who spend more time in special education for behavior support are most likely also receiving more intensive SEL and social skills instruction. These observations align with the findings of researchers Goodall (2018) and Cavioni et al. (2017), as presented in the literature review.

Survey results suggest that overall, staff believe students with IEPs should be educated in the general education environment dependent on student variables such as identified disability and level of need. A large percentage of staff disagreed or strongly disagreed that inclusion should always be the goal for students with moderate to severe disabilities. This shows that students with high needs might benefit from an alternate learning environment. General education and support staff made up over sixty percent of the participants for this study. These positions do not come with the same educational training as special education teachers. However, they are often required to instruct students with IEPs. The majority of staff agreed or strongly agreed that they need more training to support students with behavioral needs. Survey results suggest a correlation between this study and the research of Wagner et al. (2006), Toye et al. (2018), and Ahsan and Sharma (2018).

Limitations and Future Research

A significant limitation of this study is the sample size. The survey was provided to twenty-five staff members. Of those targeted, only twelve completed the survey. The small sample size of staff participants is likely due to the nature of the researcher's role. The researcher is only in the seventh year of teaching and is currently serving as a new staff member at a new building. Because of the pandemic, all staff meetings have been virtual. Making connections with the masses posed a challenge and therefore, resulted in a small number of willing participants.

Additionally, staff participants did not represent a diverse population. All staff members lived and worked in a similar area, implying they received similar trainings and therefore hold similar attitudes. All surveyed staff identified as white women. Even though the student body within the elementary school is extremely diverse, the staff members are not.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of student surveys or interviews. Initially, the researcher planned to conduct short, in-person surveys with a small number of students. But the demographic of families attending the targeted elementary school are lacking tools such as internet and computer access. And similar to the virtual staff meetings, all contact with parents has been over the phone due to Covid-19 guidelines. Thus, the researcher failed to obtain informed consent to conduct said surveys with the students. Student survey results would have provided insight regarding student's attitudes of inclusion, feelings of respect, connectedness, and belonging in the general education classroom, and preference of class size.

Future research should include a large sample of staff and student surveys. Participants should include more gender and ethnic diversity. It is likely that a larger number of staff participants would yield more clear and concise attitudes of inclusion. It is also assumed that with a larger sample size of students would come a more statistically significant correlation between time spent in general education and frequency of problem behaviors.

Conclusion

Inclusion is and will continue to be a hot button topic in education. It is crucial that more research be done to investigate the true effects of inclusion on students with disabilities. While the general education classroom is the least restrictive environment for some students, it may be the most restrictive for others. All students should feel a sense of belonging and comfortability in their learning environment. But with the uncertainty in the language of IDEA and the researcher's assumption that many schools are practicing integration rather than full inclusion, an alternate learning environment might be considered for some students.

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