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Student Inclusion in the Least Restrictive Environment

Jennifer Grossman

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

Abstract

This school improvement project explores student inclusion in the general education environment. Inclusion is an important topic in schools and is important to discuss. Inclusion is defined and explained. This school improvement project will explore the problem, leadership assistance, differentiated instruction, and implementation of inclusion in the least restrictive environment. Inclusion is imperative to student success in the inclusive environment. An analysis of inclusion suggests students with varying abilities be included in as much of the general education environment in order to succeed in social and academic domains. Results of inclusion in the general education environment indicate that students with varying abilities develop life skills when presented the opportunity to learn alongside peers in the least restrictive environment.

Keywords: principal, inclusion, special education, leadership, least restrictive environment, implementation, parental rights, inclusive practices, intervention, students with varying abilities, inclusive education, collaboration, differentiated instruction, general education teaches, special education teacher, research-based practices

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Student Inclusion in the Least Restrictive Environment

Inclusion and accessibility has been a concern for many years. Children often enter the school environment with many different abilities. Often times the different abilities are overlooked and students are placed in environments where administration and teachers feel they should be. Students with disabilities may have blindness, speech impairments, autism, Down syndrome, Dyslexia, and other impairments. Educators can help support the wide range of disabilities that students struggle with that are found in our classrooms.

The problem is that many students with different abilities are not always included in the general education setting. The majority of children with disabilities are enrolled in special schools in a segregated environment (Hameed, Manzoor, & Minhas, 2020). Children with disabilities should be included with their peers as much as possible. This allows all students to adapt to many variations of assistance. It also allows students without disabilities to see how students with varying abilities can be successful. Schools with these students can provide the students with the additional support that they require (Inge, Bijstra, De Castro, et al., 2019). The educators and administration in schools must be trained to help support the students with varying abilities. It is important for educators to realize what inclusion is and how to help support students who have varying abilities. The sooner the problem is tackled, the sooner we can help support these students in general education settings.

The purpose of this school improvement project is to review inclusion and how school leadership can support their staff in the inclusion process. The aim is to look at how all administration and educators can implement differentiation and inclusion in the general education setting. The hope is that the knowledge gained from reading many articles, this will help improve teaching, learning, and collaboration. Integration and inclusion refer to

participation of people with disabilities in activities with nondisabled individuals (Carson, 2015). Researchers have documented how principals are critical to creating effective inclusive schools (DeMatthews, 2021). Educators are the key to inclusion and can help support children with differentiation across all settings.

This school improvement project will examine different disabilities and support from administration to help support educators and students to experience success across all settings. The following questions will be addressed in this paper: 1.) What are some different types of disabilities? 2.) What is inclusion and what does it look like? 3.) How can principals support the educators with inclusion? 4.) What is collaboration and what does it look like? 5.) How can inclusion help students gain more knowledge to be successful in all settings? 6.) How can educators best support students in the inclusive setting?

Peer-reviewed research for this school improvement project was found online through Northwestern College Orange City, Iowa DeWitt Library, primarily through the ProQuest search tool. The research reviewed was not limited to any specific geographic location. The research was intended to find literature that addresses the problem of support for teachers to include all children in the general education setting, while addressing the potential outcome of inclusion and accessibility. The articles utilized in this paper are from the last ten years. Some articles focus on administration and how to support teachers with the inclusion process. Some of the articles focus on specific disabilities such as Down Syndrome and Autism. Other articles include information about meeting the diverse needs of students, access and equity in schools, and the least restrictive environment. Studies involving co-teaching, differentiation, and administrative support were all peer-reviewed. Over twenty sources were carefully and chosen based on relevance and support given to the present study.

When educators know what inclusion is and how to support students in the inclusive setting, they are more equipped to support the students. With the appropriate education and training for administration and educators, all schools can be successful in making school accessible and inclusive for all students. Inclusive environments lead to academic and social success for students with and without disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act states “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, must be educated with children who are not disabled”, (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2023). The implementation takes time and will be discussed throughout this school improvement project.

This school improvement project goes into detail about inclusion of all students and how administrators and teachers can help support differentiation for all students. It not only affects students with disabilities, but it affects those students without disabilities in the inclusive setting. Each section has its own subheading and is outlined in the following order: Problem, Educator Roles, Administrative Support, Implementation, Discussion, Future Research, and Conclusion. At the end of the paper, you will find numerous research articles that have been cited within this school improvement project.

Review of the Literature

Students with varying abilities have a right to be within inclusive settings. There are many benefits of having inclusive classrooms, including, reduced stigma surrounding students with disabilities, creating respectful relationships between all students within the inclusive setting, and teaching all students how to act positively with peers. To create an inclusive setting, teachers must have collaboration and communication with parents, administrators, and other teachers. Teachers use differentiated instruction with the students and teach to their specific

needs. Parents play an important role in the process, as they can give insight on interests and how to best support their child.

Examining Students with Varying Abilities

Students often come to school with varying abilities. These abilities affect how the students perform while in the classroom setting. Students may have dyslexia, autism, ADHD, ADD, Down syndrome, visual impairments, speech impairments, physical impairments, among other disabilities. Teachers have an important role when assessing students and determining what supports they need. By assessing the needs of each individual student, teachers are able to incorporate supports in the general education setting. Francisco, Hartman, & Wang (2020) define special education as instruction that is designed specifically to respond to the learning needs of an individual with disabilities, regardless of the environment. They define inclusion as providing instruction to all students, including those with severe disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive educational services, with supplementary aids and support services as needed, in age appropriate general education classes (p. 1). Likewise, Carson (2015) defines integration and inclusion as the participation of people with disabilities in activities with nondisabled individuals (p. 1398). DiStefano, Sathwani, & Wheeler (2020), explain that intellectual disability (ID) is a childhood onset diagnosis and is characterized by deficits in general mental capacity, as well as conceptual, social, and practical skills that are necessary for carrying out daily activities. Individuals experience significantly below average intellectual functioning as a diagnostic criteria.

Another criteria is a deficit in impairments of daily living skills. A number of designations and disability definitions may be found in national laws (Banerjee, et al., 2016). The study conducted by Banerjee, et al. (2016) uncovered parents often play a major role in the

amount of time that students spend in classes with their non-disabled peers (p.8). They reference parents and the entire Individual Education Plan (IEP) team participating in all facets of the child's school experience. By law, parents have a right to refuse or rebuttal any decisions that are made. Students with varying abilities have the IEP, which protects them from certain circumstances. It is a plan that is developed by the team and ensures that the child has an identified disability and is attending a school where he or she receives specialized instruction at his or her level.

In contrast to ID, there are emotional disorders or disabilities (ED). In the study completed by Gable, Tonelson, Sheth, et al. (2012), 1588 general education teachers and 1472 special education teachers participated in a two-part survey to uncover how many teachers had adequate knowledge and training to support inclusion of students with ED. The survey focused on items addressing evidence-based practices drawn from literature in the area of ED. The results of the survey revealed that both groups of teachers indicated that they were not prepared to implement any other classroom level practice (p. 508). Future directions of training for teachers would be necessary for teachers to feel comfortable teaching students with ED in inclusive settings.

Rattaz, Munir, Michelon, et al. (2019) completed a qualitative six-year study with 328 autistic children in France. The parents of the children also answered questions about schooling for their children. The cohort was set-up in order to identify patterns in outcome trajectories for a large sample of children and adolescents with autism, to examine determinants of these outcome trajectories at the different follow-up stages, and to constitute an open French database on autism that promotes collaboration in translational studies. Data was collected by licensed psychologists from the multidisciplinary clinical assessments using standardized tools at

baseline. Parents were asked to fill online e-questionnaires investigating current school, placement attributes and services, and child behaviors. An ABC checklist was completed to measure challenging behaviors across four domains. A Likert scale ranging from, 0 – not a problem at all to 4 – more severe problems, was used to measure each question. Rattaz, Munir, Michelon, et al. (2019) revealed schools were not adapted in addressing inclusion of the more challenging children with autism. Teachers often had inadequate behavior training in managing students with autism. Anxiety was more prevalent in autistic students who were in specialized rooms compared to students in inclusive settings. Future research involves the role of professionals and the type of supports that promote inclusion.

Similarly, in the study by Ohajunwa (2014), thirty-five respondents from three faculties at the University of Cape Town participated in a mixed-methods research that took roughly fifteen months to complete. The staff was given a questionnaire that identified their beliefs on the inclusion of students with disabilities in their classrooms. The data was gathered in three phases. The first stage was a look into the mission statement, strategic goals, and handbooks for the university. The second phase consists of a survey questionnaire that was developed and sent to all staff to complete. The third phase was a forty-five minute in-depth interview where the respondents could openly and freely express their views on the topic. The study revealed low levels of disability inclusion and that disability is not viewed as an issue of social justice and transformation overall (Ohajunwa, 2014).

Ohajunwa (2014) noted with the lack of systemic support, knowledge and skills were identified as a challenge to policy implementation. Gable, Tonelson, Sheth, et al. (2012) explained “classroom practices such as curricular modifications, cooperative learning, peer-assisted and peer-mediated intervention, conflict, resolution, social skills taught as part of the

classroom curriculum, anger management, behavior support/management plan, pre-correction, and group-oriented contingency management can positively impact the academic as well as nonacademic performance of students with varying abilities”, (p. 507). With proper supports and leadership in place, staff would feel more comfortable implementing strategies to include students with varying abilities in inclusive settings. The support would be there throughout the school year and would consist of regularly scheduled meetings. The meetings would occur between administration and staff working with students who have varying abilities. It is important to review plans because literature changes and we must make the best-educated decisions based on the latest research.

Leadership Assistance for Teachers

Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, et al. (2016) conducted a one day qualitative study with fifty-eight parents from five elementary schools and one middle school. The purpose of the study was to understand perceptions of parents who have children with and without disabilities. Their research question focused on factors that parents perceive as facilitating trusting family-professional partnerships in schools recognized for inclusive practices. Families were interviewed to gain their perspective on trusting family partnerships. Two focus groups were formed and a facilitator interviewed each group while another facilitator took notes and monitored. They used a qualitative software program to analyze the data. Five themes emerged from the data: 1. School culture of inclusion, 2. Positive administrative leadership, 3. Attributes of positive partnerships, 4. Opportunities for family involvement, and 5. Positive outcomes for all students. Parents felt like a community with the school and shared values and goals. They consistently noted the importance of the principal’s leadership. Principals are the highest rank at the school and they are the ones that the teachers confide in when they have questions or

concerns. The principals should be executing plans for teachers to follow and regularly following up on the plans.

In contrast, DeMatthews (2021) completed a one-year qualitative study in Texas with two principals and six teachers. The study focused on interviewing principals and observing to gain insight on inclusion in their school district. The teachers were observed four times over the course of one school year. The study concluded four leadership practices: 1. Creating a culture of change-oriented collaboration, 2. Planning and evaluating, 3. Building capacity, and 4. Developing/revising plans. The principals felt that these practices would enable inclusion to begin, despite challenges and the chaotic nature of schools (DeMatthews, 2021). Three additional themes emerged from the study: 1. Collaborative inquiry, 2. Information flow, and 3. Crises/distractions/fatigue. The principals in this study have already implemented inclusive practices. Oskarsdottir, Donnelly, Turner-Cmuchal, et al. (2020) found that school leaders need to set a strategic vision and attend to both human and organizational development. The vision should be clearly communicated to all staff. Oskarsdottir, Donnelly, Turner-Cmuchal, et al. (2020) explains “the real task for school leaders who pursue organizational change is to create conditions that reinforce and reward high-quality teaching and learning that positively affects and improves achievement of all learners”. They did not note any future research, however, future research could include current situations in the United States and interviews or surveys of teachers, principals, and students. Kozleski, Stepaniuk, & Proffitt (2020) confirms the contribution to reproduction of these systems through special education leadership. Special education leaders and general education peers can frame transformative change through a systemic lens (Kozleski, Stepaniuk, & Proffitt, 2020).

DeMatthews, Billingsley, McLeskey, et al. (2020) conducted an exploratory approach to review U.S. policy related and empirical literature on school leadership for effective inclusive schools. They analyzed common themes centered on leadership practice, organizational and social conditions, and challenges. The research identified effective leadership practices that support inclusive education in the United States and provides a critical discussion of how the findings relate to international research and practice. Future research could include more schools and schools from outside the United States.

Leadership is a large factor in building relationships and student success in school. The leadership team should be researching and looking at what activities and supports can be implemented for students with varying abilities. Lane, Semon, Catania, et al. (2019) explain how schools have shifted away from the one-day training workshops and going toward the job-embedded professional development days. These days “enhance teachers’ knowledge of how to engage in specific pedagogical skills and how to teach specific kinds of content to learners”, (p. 76). Ongoing training for teachers is a necessity for differentiated activities and supports. With proper training and guidance, teachers will feel more confident in their teaching. Differentiated activities and supports vary between students because of the varying abilities that students possess.

Differentiation Activities and Supports for Students with Diverse Needs

Faragher & Clarke (2020) conducted a one-year qualitative study in Australia. Two groups of teachers and their teams, along with twelve schools and fifteen students were involved. An initial full-day workshop was held at the beginning of the school year in each location. Teaching teams were provided guidance and documentation to conduct a one-to-one assessment interview with the students. The interview was conducted at the beginning and end of the school

year. A cycle of school observations followed by a full-day workshop was undertaken twice over the year. The interviewer completed a written or audio reflection and collated the notes and photographs to maximize the validity of the records. The reflections were the basis for the development of themes focusing on challenges the teachers faced (Faragher & Clarke, 2020). Results indicate teachers were strong in advocacy for including students with Down syndrome in all lessons, with adjustments. The benefits were observed several times. Reese, Richards-Tutor, Hansuvadha, et al. (2018) explain how teachers must have a strong pedagogical and content knowledge.

Nota, Ginevra, & Soresi (2019) conducted a ten-week mixed-methods study with one hundred fifty-two fourth grade students. Two researchers in psychology of disability observed students. Each student was observed for a total of three hundred thirty minutes. They used the “school inclusion facilitation” coding system, which is a ten didactic units intervention. This analyzed social behaviors adopted and received by each student with intellectual disabilities. Participants from the class were asked to nominate classmates that they would be most likely to invite to parties or functions. Students were randomly assigned to an experimental group or a control group. Positive and negative behaviors were examined in natural class settings. Attention was given to disability as a further variable that characterizes differences between individuals (Nota, Ginevra, & Soresi, 2019). The research found students with intellectual disabilities in classrooms that were assigned to the experimental group received more positive sociometric nominations and social behaviors than peers with intellectual disabilities of the control group (Nota, Ginevra, & Soresi, 2019). Nota, Ginevra, & Soresi (2019) noted future research should include six and twelve month follow-ups. Another factor that could be considered is the gender of students making the nominations.

Similarly, Vivanti, Dissanayake, Duncan, et al. (2019) conducted a one-year mixed-methods pilot randomized control trial (RTI) of receiving a manualized early intervention (EI) program with forty-four preschoolers. The specific model that was used was a group-based adaptation of the Early Start Denver Model (EDSM), which is a manualized evidence-based EI involving a set of teaching procedures and a curriculum designed to address the needs of preschoolers with autism. Trained early childhood teachers and allied health staff delivered the autism-specific EI program. The children's individual learning objectives were targeted through daily routines and group activities with a staff to child ratio of 1:4. Baseline assessments were administered to start the study. The preschoolers were then randomized before the start of the school year and did not spend any time in the classroom prior to entering the study. On any given day, up to ten children with autism attended the autism-specific classroom. This included children with autism that were in the study and children with autism that were not in the study. Results concluded that teaching quality in the classroom was classified as "good" in inclusive and specialized settings. Children in each setting increased frequency of vocalizations, social interactions, and imitation scores with no differences between the two settings.

Goddard & Kim (2018) conducted a qualitative three-month study with ninety-five elementary schools and included 1,623 teachers and 4,167 students. Data from the first year of a large scale, longitudinal randomized control trial designed to evaluate the effects of a leadership-training program. Demographic and achievement data was collected from a state accountability data system. It also included a survey with data that contained collaboration, differentiated instruction, and teacher efficacy scales. The surveys were collected during regularly scheduled staff meetings. A multilevel structural equation model (MSEM) was used to analyze the data (Goddard & Kim, 2018). Results indicate positive, statistically significant connections between

teacher collaboration and teachers' reports that they differentiated instruction between differentiated instruction and teacher efficacy. Future research suggests teacher observations, instead of just surveys. Finding out what works for differentiated instruction would allow teachers to properly prepare to deliver the lessons. Collaboration between the general education teacher and special education teacher should be on a regular basis.

With individually specialized activities and supports, children with varying abilities can succeed in an inclusive setting. Students learn so much when they are around peers. Their socialization starts to take off and they love to interact with peers. All of the education should be provided in the least restrictive environment possible. Student inclusion plays a role in how the students communicate and can interact with others who do not have varying abilities.

Special Education Student Inclusion in the Least Restrictive Environment

Inclusion reflects a model where children with developmental, emotional, and physical disabilities are offered the opportunity to spend as much time as possible in the general education environment when supported with methods of special education instruction embedded within the context of general education (Rattaz, Munir, Michelon, et al., 2019). The methods include appropriate supports and services that accommodate individual learning needs. The thought of inclusion being built on a legacy of segregation and institutionalization of children is now supported through a series of acts that contain rights for children (Rattaz, Munir, Michelon, et al., 2019). Children with autism are increasingly included in regular education settings, however little is known about how placement decisions are made. Similarly, Williams, Ernst, & Rossi (2018) validate students with disabilities inclusiveness in science, technology, and engineering (STEM) continues to rise.

In a study conducted by Williams, Ernst, & Rossi (2018), full and part-time STEM teachers and special education teachers in public school settings participated in a qualitative study. The investigation centered around credentials of STEM teachers compared to credentials of special education teachers. A thirteen-question survey was administered and consisted of certifications that the teacher has. Only a small percentage of teachers had cross credentialing in order to support inclusiveness in the least restrictive environment (Williams, Ernst, & Rossi, 2018). No areas were identified as future research, however a study could be completed to assess what additional training each teacher would need in order to support students in the least restrictive environment. Vega, Lavigne, & Abou-Elias (2021) indicate inclusive classroom environments enhances psychological safety among students. Students who perceive their environment as psychologically safe can promote knowledge sharing, learning behavior, positive attitudes, and performance. All adults in the classroom can help promote the safety.

In a hypothetical case study conducted by Watt, Therrien, & Kaldenberg (2014) a sixth-grader attended the school since he was in second grade. He has always had difficulty focusing and having outbursts. He loves science, however when he got to fourth-grade, his reading started to decline because of missed class time due to multiple behaviors. His brother assures him that in middle school it will get better because he will not have a textbook and he can formulate his own questions. Watt, Therrien, & Kaldenberg (2014) emphasize science instruction has not been a focus for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). The general lack of focus on science instruction for students with EBD was evident in a recent meta-analysis that found only eleven studies on classroom science instruction for students with EBD published over the last 30 years (Therrien, Taylor, Watt, & Kaldenberg, 2014). A research study was conducted utilizing eleven articles that focus on inclusion criteria for students with EBD. While additional

research is needed, students with EBD may benefit from inquiry approaches provided the methods are implemented with enough structure to ensure student engagement (Therrien, Taylor, Watt, & Kaldenberg, 2014). The findings of this meta-analysis identified the use of inquiry-based or hands-on instruction in science to have moderate effects for students with EBD. In addition, the study revealed large effects of using peer assisted learning within the science classroom to enhance the knowledge and retention of science content among students with EBD. Changing the science format and the use of monitoring will enable teachers to implement interventions within the inclusive setting.

Similarly, Therrien, Taylor, Hosp, et al. (2011) conducted a study utilizing twelve studies ranging from 1980 to 2010. Students with learning disabilities (LD) perform significantly lower than their nondisabled peers. The meta-analysis evaluates the effectiveness of instructional strategies in science for students with LD. Twelve studies were examined, summarized, and grouped according to the type of strategy implemented. Findings align with past reviews of inquiry-based instruction for students with special needs, indicating that students with LD need structure within an inquiry science approach in order to be successful. Additionally, results suggest that mnemonic instruction is highly effective at increasing learning-disabled students' acquisition and retention of science facts. Overall results from the analysis indicate that classroom based science instruction is effective at increasing students with LD achievement on immediately administered science assessments that are closely aligned to the intervention provided (Therrien, Taylor, Hosp, et al., 2011).

School Profile

School Characteristics

Carroll Community School District (CCSD) is a public school district in Carroll, Iowa. It serves approximately 1,700 students populating kindergarten through twelfth grade (CCSD, 2023). The district also operates a four-year old preschool for roughly two hundred students in two different locations in the community. The district has two elementary buildings, one middle school building, one high school building, and an alternative school (R.O.A.R. high). There are approximately 114 certified teachers on staff in all buildings. Out of the 114 certified teachers, there are roughly fourteen special education teachers across all of the buildings. Students attend school at CCSD from Carroll and smaller surrounding towns, such as Arcadia, Breda, Dedham, Glidden, Halbur, Lidderdale, Templeton, and Willey, among the rural areas of the surrounding towns.

Student Characteristics

As stated above, CCSD serves approximately 1,900 students across the five buildings. CCSD has a 98% graduation rate with a 96% attendance rate. Roughly 90% of students attend some form of post secondary learning (CCSD, 2023). Students at CCSD are comprised of Caucasians, African Americans, and Hispanics. Minority enrollment is at 12%, with the majority being Hispanic and African American following closely behind (Public School Review, 2022). CCSD has roughly 2% of students who are of two or more races (Public School Review, 2022). Roughly 98% of students at CCSD graduate (CCSD, 2023).

Community Characteristics

Carroll community houses roughly 10,300 individuals (United States Census Bureau, 2022). The smaller surrounding towns house anywhere from 100-600 individuals. Carroll is comprised of multiple races and ethnicities, including Caucasian, African American, Asian,

Hispanic, and Pacific Islander. Carroll has two school districts, including one public school and one private school. Carroll is also the home of one of the many sites for Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC).

Carroll offers many recreational activities. The town has an outdoor aquatic center, Merchants Stadium (pioneer collegiate baseball league), bowling alley, theatre, skate park, tennis courts, an indoor recreation center, two golf courses, thirteen city parks, public ball fields, hiking and biking trails, and a state park with a lake (Carroll Chamber of Commerce, 2023). Carroll also offers a library with many amenities. There are approximately one hundred retail outlet stores in downtown Carroll. The town has a local newspaper and roughly five radio stations between public and catholic radio. There is a wide range of churches available for individuals to attend mass.

School Mission & Vision

Carroll Community School District has high expectations for each student. The school district offers a wide variety of classes and some are in conjunction with DMACC. High school courses can be taken at DMACC and count as dual credit toward high school and college courses. Carroll Community School District's mission is to "inspire learning and excellence for all" (CCSD, 2023). The vision statement is to "inspire excellence in learning to prepare all students for success" (CCSD, 2023). Carroll Community School District's core values are teaching, inclusivity, growth, excellence, respect, and safety. The first letter of each core value stands for TIGERS, the school district's mascot. While there is no specific goal for inclusion in the general education setting, the goal for social and emotional learning is that "all PK-12 students will become knowledgeable, responsible, caring, and contributing members of society through evidence-based social and emotional learning" (CCSD, 2023).

Student Performance

Data for this School Improvement project is based on the elementary level data. The reason for elementary data is because elementary looks a little different in regards to classes and inclusiveness. Students in Kindergarten through fourth grade take Formative Reading Assessment System for Teachers (FAST) tests for reading. These tests are completed in the fall, winter, and spring of each year. According to winter 2023 FAST scores of students who possess IEP's are proficient on the assessment ranging from 27% to 60% proficient. The average percent of Kindergarten through fourth grade (IEP students) winter 2023 FAST data was 40%. Students who do not possess IEP's were proficient on the assessment ranging from 57% to 88% proficient. The average percent of Kindergarten through fourth grade (non-IEP students) winter 2023 FAST data was 74%.

Kindergarten winter 2023 FAST data reveals 70% students are proficient. That percent jumps up by ten to 80% for first grade. Second grade scores drop back down to 67%. Third grade winter FAST data reveals 72% of students are proficient. Fourth grade possesses the lowest score with an average winter FAST score of 59% (CCSD, 2023). Many circumstances come into play with the assessments. One grade level may have more IEP students than another grade level. When students are going to school sleep deprived and hungry, they are less likely to do as well on the assessments.

Students start taking the Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP) assessment in third grade and take that assessment yearly until they reach twelfth grade. Students start taking the science ISASP test in fifth grade. According to spring 2022 data, the percentage of students proficient in English Language Arts (ELA) (3rd grade) at CCSD is 52%. The state average for third grade is 55%. The percentage of students proficient in ELA (4th

grade) at CCSD is 60%. The state average for fourth grade is 62%. Spring 2022 ISASP data reveals that students in third grade who are proficient in math are at a 44%, while the state average is at 52%. Data from spring of 2022 reveals that students in fourth grade who are proficient in math are at a 61%, while the state average is at 55% (carroll.k12.ia.us).

Students also take the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment. They start taking this assessment in first grade. Data from winter of 2023 (reading) reveals that all grades from first to fourth dropped at least 4%. First grade had the largest decrease in their reading NWEA MAP assessment. They decreased by 11%, going from 63% in fall of 2022 to 52% proficient in the winter of 2023. Second grade decreased their reading NWEA MAP assessment by 4%, going from 53% in the fall of 2022 to 49% in the winter of 2023. Third grade decreased theirs by 5% going from 48% in the fall of 2022 to 43% in the winter of 2023. Fourth grade was the second largest drop with a 10% drop in reading NWEA MAP assessment scores. Their class went from an average of 52% proficient in the fall of 2022 to 42% in the winter of 2023 (CCSD, 2023).

Math NWEA MAP assessments were a little better in regards to percent dropped. Third grade dropped by 2%, going from 55% proficient in the fall of 2022 to 53% in the winter of 2023. First grade had the largest drop from 68% in fall of 2022 to 52% in spring of 2023. Second grade math NWEA MAP assessment scores dropped by 10%, going from 51% in the fall of 2022 to 41% in the winter of 2023. Fourth grade was closely behind third grade and had a drop of 8% on the math NWEA MAP assessment. They dropped from 44% in the fall of 2022 to 36% in the winter of 2023 (CCSD, 2023).

The reading and math scores indicate students at CCSD have higher math scores than reading. Reading has become a subject that is focused on more than any other subject. The

students spend roughly 125 minutes on reading, writing, and phonics during the school day. They spend roughly 60 to 75 minutes on math during the school day. The hopes are to raise reading scores on assessments with them spending more time on reading activities.

Parent Involvement

Parents are encouraged to be involved in as much as their child's education as possible. Communication between home and school is completed by sending home weekly letters and emails. Teachers also visit with parents and ask if they would like to go into the school and assist in any way. This could be by helping students read passages, hanging up bulletin boarders, reading to students, etc. They are encouraged to attend open house in August and attend conferences twice per year. Parents are also involved in all individual education plan (IEP) meetings. Their involvement is crucial to the success of the students. They are also encouraged to visit the classrooms to see what is happening at CCSD and to help promote school and parent communication. CCSD has a parent lead coordinator for each elementary grade level. They are in charge of volunteers for grades and grade level celebrations.

CCSD started the School Improvement Advisory Committee (SIAC). They make decisions based on the best interest of students and are aligned with the district's mission, vision, and beliefs (CCSD, 2023). This committee meets throughout the school year and addresses the following areas: 1.) major educational needs, 2.) student learning goals, 3.) curriculum, assessment, and instruction, 4.) long range and annual goals the address reading, mathematics, and science achievement, 5.) bullying and harassment prevention goals, programs, and training, and 6.) other issues that relate to school improvement (CCSD). The committee is a cross-section of the community and reflects diversity in ethnic groups, gender, disability status, age, local businesses, agencies, and parents.

Current Student Learning Goals

Carroll Community School District has the goal of all PK-12 students to feel safe and connected to school (CCSD). All PK-12 students will also achieve at high levels (proficient or beyond) in reading prepared for success beyond high school. All PK-12 students will achieve at high levels (proficient or beyond) in mathematics for success beyond high school. All PK-12 students will achieve at high levels (proficient or beyond) in science prepared for success beyond high school. The district's goal is to have all students be prepared for success (proficient or beyond in all academic areas) as all students enter the collegiate world or workforce.

Curriculum, Instructional, and Assessment Strategies

CCSD is working on their curriculum to make sure it is aligned so that students receive the best possible instruction without interruptions. Assessment practices are discussed during daily Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings between grade levels. The elementary buildings have time during the day to meet and plan for instruction and assessment. Teachers attend the meetings while their students are at specials. Each grade level has roughly thirty to forty minutes to meet for their meetings while the students are at specials. Each grade level has a specific time slot to meet.

Each grade level meets as a team and they discuss what they will be working on as a grade level and when they will start each unit. They compare ideas between everyone and see what instructional materials everyone has. Sometimes they use their own instructional materials and other times they decide to use someone else's instructional materials. They find that a colleague might have something that will engage students more in instruction. They also discuss assessments and when those will be administered. They try to stay as close to the same schedule

as possible so that the students are not too far ahead or behind each classroom. Special education teachers also meet as a team. They primarily discuss each student and how they are progressing on their goals. They offer ideas to each other if a student seems to be struggling with a particular subject.

Instruction at Carroll Community School District is a topic that is always discussed. Each teacher feels like they do not have enough time in the day to teach when you add in recess, lunch, specials, and other special activities. At the elementary level all special education instruction is completed in the special education classroom. The exception to this is third and fourth grades, where some of the students are pullout instruction and pushin instruction. The students are not as low as other students, but still need some guidance are taught by the special education teacher in the general education classroom. They sit in a small group as the general education teacher is teaching and they complete the work with modifications.

Professional Development

Professional Development (PD) is delivered once per month for a full day on Mondays. The goal for Professional Development is to provide effective communication and collaboration for teachers to deliver instruction to students. Professional Development ranges in topics from assessment, curriculum, social and emotional learning, among other topics. The special education team meets on a few of the Professional Development days to discuss how to use the new IEP system. A new system called Achieve was adopted by the state of Iowa and it houses all IEP's across the state. Trainings were held to provide special education teachers the knowledge how to utilize the system and where important things are located at.

Needs Assessment

What is the Problem?

Inclusion has been a topic that has been around for years. It started in 1965 with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and has been altered over the years to better accommodate students. The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act was primarily to provide free and reduced lunch and help low-income families. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was introduced in 1975. This law was to support individual needs for those students who have varying abilities and protect their rights (IDEA, 2023). The name changed in 1990 to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

The IDEA law was revised in 2004. IDEA (2023) reports significant changes being made since the first introduction of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Nearly 1.8 million special education children were excluded from public schools and now public schools provide individualized education to more than 7.5 million special education children (IDEA, 2023). The law changes are necessary so that students with diverse needs are provided the same opportunities as peers who do not have diverse needs. IDEA (2023) explains “revised regulations help ensure that states meaningfully identify local educational agency (LEA’s) with significant disproportionality and that states assist LEA’s in ensuring that children with disabilities are provided necessary services in the least restrictive environment.

Inclusion is an important factor for all students to learn in the same environment. It supports welcoming students and supports the diverse needs of each individual student. The goal for this School Improvement Plan is to allow special education teachers to work closely with general education teachers to support individual needs for inclusion in the least restrictive environment. The purpose of inclusion is to assist students with varying abilities to develop academic and social abilities and to develop shared responsibilities in assisting students within

the inclusive setting. Banerjee, Sundeen, Hutchinson, et al. (2017) explain providing students with multiple disabilities access to free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment has been an ongoing challenge for years. Carson (2015) explains integration and inclusion refers to participation of students with disabilities with nondisabled students. CCSD implements various supports to include all students in inclusive settings. Supports range from adapted gym class for students with diverse needs, special education small group instruction in the general education environment, among other supports.

Students will achieve greater positive interactions among peers while they are in the least restrictive environment. When students are able to work together with peers, it promotes more communication between all students. The students want to engage in positive interactions between peers. Working toward the goal of inclusion in the least restrictive environment will assist students with the communication skills needed to be successful in life. Teachers can help with increasing communication and academic affairs while in the inclusive setting. When teachers are properly trained and provided guidance from administration, they feel less stressed and can be more effective teachers.

Students will also achieve greater academic success while they are in an inclusive setting. Collaboration between the special education teacher and general education teacher is a necessity. Goddard & Kim (2018) reference schools where teachers report greater use of differentiated instruction; team collaboration and culture were higher. Administration is there to facilitate productive communication and collaboration. It is all about finding the resources to assist students with daily tasks while in the least restrictive environment. Providing proper supports will enable students to achieve greater success in the least restrictive environment. The responsibility of finding resources lies on the special education teacher.

Data Analysis

How Do We Know?

Students with varying abilities are being incorporated into the classrooms more. The special education laws continue to change and that makes it easier for students with varying abilities to be included with general education peers. Elementary report cards suggest that a student is not expected to be able to master all of the benchmarks early in the grading window. Students are given time to learn content and support proficiency before being graded (CCSD, 2023). CCSD elementary buildings have adopted a new report card that addresses what students know and can do in relation to grade level expectations. Students with varying abilities are no exception to the report cards. The only students who may not be graded on the report cards are those who take the state alternate assessments. The data (Table 1) examines the report card and how students are assessed.

Table 1

Proficiency Report Card

4.0	Complex content – a performance beyond what is expected for grade level content
3.5	In addition to 3.0 performance, partial success with 4.0
3.0	Target Content – the level of learning required for all students at the specific grade level
2.5	No major errors or omissions regarding 2.0 content and partial success with 3.0 content
2.0	Simple knowledge – basic knowledge or skill necessary for mastering the target

	content
1.5	Partial success with 2.0 content and major errors or omissions regarding 3.0 content
1.0	With help, partial success with 2.0 and 3.0 content
0.5	With help, partial success with 2.0 content but not with 3.0 content
0	Even with help, no understanding of grade level standards

CCSD is committed to providing the best educational experience for all students, regardless of their abilities (CCSD, 2023). A few questions come to mind when examining data. “What does the data tell you?” is the first question that should be answered. The data from the elementary buildings at CCSD tells us that students who are on IEP’s have lower assessment scores compared to those who are not on an IEP. The reading data (Table 2) shows how many students who have an IEP and do not have an IEP are proficient in reading.

Table 2

CCSD Percent of Students Proficient in Fast Reading Data

	No IEP	IEP
Kindergarten	75%	27%
1 st Grade	82%	60%
2 nd Grade	71%	33%
3 rd Grade	76%	53%
4 th Grade	64%	27%

School Strengths

Another question that should be answered is “what areas of strength are apparent?”. CCSD boasts a 98% graduation rate with a 96% attendance rate, (CCSD, 2023). This includes students with and without varying abilities. Roughly 89% of the CCSD graduates go onto some form of post secondary learning, (CCSD, 2023). According to CCSD ISASP reading data, third grade is just under state percentage of proficiency on the ISASP test. The state average for the ISASP reading test proficiency is 55%, while CCSD proficiency is 52%, (CCSD, 2023). The older the students get, the percentages start to rise above the state average on the ISASP reading assessment. Fifth grade ISASP reading is a 69%, while the state average for the reading ISASP assessment is 60% (CCSD, 2023).

CCSD math ISASP scores for proficiency out rank the state percentages. Fourth grade CCSD reading ISASP is 61%, while the state average is 55%, (CCSD, 2023). As students move onto middle school at CCSD, their scores continue to maintain above the state average for math ISASP assessments. Math is a little stronger of a subject for CCSD students. The data (Table 3) demonstrates CCSD math ISASP proficiency scores.

Table 3

CCSD Percent of Students Proficient on Math ISASP Assessments

Grade Level	CCSD	State
3 rd Grade	44%	52%
4 th Grade	61%	55%
5 th Grade	54%	50%

6 th Grade	55%	52%
7 th Grade	57%	56%
8 th Grade	65%	58%
9 th Grade	62%	49%
10 th Grade	68%	52%
11 th Grade	60%	49%

School Challenges or Weaknesses

“What areas of weaknesses should be addressed?” is another question that should be answered. As noted above, CCSD students struggle more with reading than math. CCSD focuses a lot of their time on reading instruction in the elementary buildings. They spend roughly two hours per day on reading instruction. The instruction includes, phonics, spelling, writing, vocabulary, and grammar. This is one area that CCSD is trying to enhance for students to succeed in the classroom. CCSD elementary buildings will be receiving a new reading curriculum in the fall of 2023.

Another weakness is the presence of students with varying needs in inclusive settings. One of our elementary buildings has some inclusive groups for reading and math, but a majority are pullout groups. This is a topic that has been heavily discussed over the past two years. It takes some time and some additional materials to effectively include students with varying abilities in the general education environment. There are some students who have behavior challenges and we are working through how to get them in the inclusive setting.

Assessment Needs

“What assessments would be necessary?” is the last question that should be answered. An assessment that could be completed is a student personal interest survey to gain knowledge of how students feel when they are in the inclusive setting versus being in a small group setting in the special education environment. This survey would be completed every trimester to see if student thoughts have changed. The survey would focus on teachers assisting students with individualized instruction to make the inclusive setting a more inviting environment. It would also focus on student interests and base instruction around interests to make the least restrictive environment more inviting.

Pre-tests could be administered to identify areas that need focused on for each individual student. This would help general education teachers and special education teachers collaborate together and work on individual needs for each student. Another assessment that could be administered is an exit ticket that consists of two to three questions to test the knowledge gained by each student in the classroom. These assessments would tell teachers if students understand the concept that was delivered. They would also allow the teachers to make necessary adjustments to instruction.

Students individualized needs should be taken into consideration when planning for instruction. Assessments should be conducted multiple times throughout the school year to see if instruction in the least restrictive environment is going well. Student progress monitoring scores will also assist teachers in planning for instruction. Changes can be and should be made when students do not seem to understand the content being taught. The students are the driver of the plan and the teachers are there to assist them with being successful in the least restrictive environment. There are steps the teachers should take to help students be successful in the least restrictive environment.

Action Plan

Steps to Solve the Problem

Inclusive classrooms are prevalent in many schools across the world. It is the responsibility of teachers to supply students with the best learning environment possible. The best learning environment is in an inclusive setting. Some students may need to be in a special education setting due to medical concerns or others concerns, but the majority of students who have varying needs should be in the inclusive setting. Students learn best from teachers who are knowledgeable in providing individual supports for each student. The plan should be well thought out and presented in a fashion that includes all teachers to allow for maximum support for students with varying abilities. The teachers start by attending trainings and receiving information on inclusion and how it is supported in the general education classroom. The information will be presented as trainings at the beginning of each school year and will be discussed at various professional development days throughout the school year.

The process should start with students who are receiving the minimal special education services. This will allow teachers the chance to experiment with inclusion and how it works. The table (Table 4) shows dates and the process for teachers to incorporate inclusion into the general education classroom. Once all professional development days are completed, teachers will bring knowledge that they learned to future professional development days. This will be discussed so that changes can be made if necessary. Teachers will start out with two days of professional development focusing on special education and supports to incorporate into the inclusive setting in the general education classroom. Each week teachers will provide instruction in the least restrictive environment and continue to build upon the instruction as the school year progresses.

Table 4*Professional Development Plan for Teachers*

Date:	Process:
August	General Education teachers and Special Education teachers attend two-day training on special needs for students with varying abilities. This includes planning, instruction, and assessments.
September 2023	Special Education teachers look at data and see which students are just below the grade-level benchmark for reading and math and integrate them into the general education classroom. Weekly meetings will be held to see how students are doing in the inclusive setting.
October 2023	Special Education teachers continue to look at data for reading and math and make necessary changes to instruction. Weekly meetings are held to see if the instruction is helping and if any changes need to be made.
November 2023	Special Education teachers meet with local AEA staff to gather additional resources to use in the inclusive setting. Weekly meetings will

	still be held to see how students are doing in the inclusive setting.
December 2023	Weekly meetings continue to be conducted and student progress continues to be the focus of the meetings.
January 2024	Weekly meetings are held to discuss student success in the inclusive setting. A comparison between students in the inclusive setting versus students in pullout groups will be conducted. Changes to instruction will be based on the comparison to accommodate more students being added to the inclusive setting.
February 2024	Special Education teachers add more students to the inclusive setting. The students added now are students who may be roughly 25% - 50% of students behind in grade-level benchmarks. Weekly meetings continue to be held to see how the instruction is working in the inclusive setting.
March 2024	Attend a one-day workshop to gather additional ideas on resources for the classroom and how to deliver specific instruction in the inclusive setting. Weekly meetings continue to

	be held to see how students are doing in the inclusive environment.
April 2024	Continue monitoring student success in the inclusive setting and make necessary changes to instruction or materials. Weekly meetings will be held to discuss progress of students who are included in the inclusive setting. A comparison of students in the inclusive setting versus students who are in pullout groups will be conducted.
May 2024	Plan and prepare for students to be incorporated next year. Teachers will also look at student data from this year and determine what changes need to be made for the following school year.

Strategies to be Applied

There will be multiple strategies to implement inclusion for students with varying abilities. The first strategy will be a cooperative learning approach. While teachers are learning how to implement inclusivity, the students are learning how to engage in the inclusive environment versus the special education classroom. Cooperative learning will take place throughout the school year. When students are included in the inclusive setting, they are more prone to develop friendships and show their personal talents to peers. When students are in a

separate setting, they may not be around peers and are not able to make friendships as easy. Students like to communicate with each other and find interests; however, when they are not together they are not able to find those common interests. Cooperative learning helps build the relationships between students.

Another strategy to be applied is including students in voice and choice within the inclusive environment. When teachers make spaces for voice and choice in the classroom it gives students a sense of autonomy (Howard, Bingener, & Howard, 2021). It also allows students to develop a sense of ownership in their learning. They must have some input on the learning or the teachers will not have productive teaching. Howard, Bingener, & Howard (2021) explain “teachers should empower students by including them in decisions about what they learn and how” (n.p.).

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

How Will We Know the Plan Worked?

Inclusivity will take some time to be implemented. In order to see results, you will need to continuously monitor data. Data should be monitored each week and adjustments made as the students progress toward grade-level goals. The first year will be a lot of training for teachers in order to succeed with inclusivity. The second year will be more about adding in students who are further behind on grade-level standards. Adjustments to instruction and materials used for each student will be incorporated as the needs of the students change. Subsequent years will reveal how students are succeeding in the inclusive setting. This will assist administration and teachers in delivering and implementing inclusion strategies in the general education environment.

Resources to be Utilized

Trained staff from the local Area Education Agency (AEA) will lead trainings for teachers. Teachers will receive copies of research-based books that identify supports for the inclusive environment. The trained staff will assist in finding materials needed to support the teachers and student in the inclusive environment. Teachers will create their own binders for reference. The binders will have information from the trainings and any additional information found using the Internet or books.

Administrators will also lead trainings for teachers. They will be in charge of contacting the local AEA when there are additional questions or concerns. The administrators will assist in developing the professional development plan for teachers who will be implementing inclusive strategies. Teachers will collaborate with administrators and attend weekly regular meeting to discuss the intervention. Collaboration will be key in providing the resources and intervention for student inclusion in the least restrictive environment.

Responsibilities for Implementation

Before the intervention is started, the building administrator will search for research-based books and articles that discuss inclusion in the least restrictive environment. He or she will set up a calendar of dates throughout the school year for trainings. He or she will also maintain a log of weekly meetings and notes from the meetings. Teachers will give input on the intervention and discuss the successes of students. The special education teacher will be responsible for gathering data on each student with varying needs and generate a schedule to allow for student inclusion in the least restrictive environment. The team will verbally

collaborate throughout the entire school year and will use electronic means for communication, as needed.

All general education teachers will be responsible for assisting the special education teacher with materials in the inclusive environment. The special education teachers and general education teachers will collaborate daily and weekly to discuss if the students are being successful in the inclusive environment. The classroom paraprofessionals will assist in preparation of tasks to be delivered. They will also assist the special education teacher while she is instructing the students with varying needs. This will assist students in placing trust in multiple adults so they can receive the help they require.

Monitoring Success and Failure of Interventions

As discussed above, the teachers will collaborate weekly and discuss the success of the students. Data will be kept for each student and compared to previous weeks of data. This will allow for changes to be implemented. Detailed notes will be kept to refer back to. This will allow all staff to see what has worked and what has not worked. It will also allow staff to look at what changes have been made and what other changes could be implemented. This data will be looked at when the team meets weekly. Administration will assist in keeping a record of dates the team met and a record of items that work for the students in the least restrictive environment. If a trend is noticed in a particular area, the area will be discussed with the team members and adjustments made as necessary.

Barriers and Challenges That Could Impact Inclusion Success

As with all interventions, there are some barriers and challenges that could impact student success in the inclusive environment. One challenge is students who have physically aggressive

behaviors may not be able to stay in the inclusive environment all day. These students would be in the inclusive environment for as long as they can handle the classroom. Once the teachers and paraprofessionals notice behaviors start, the student would be removed and invited back in once their behaviors have subsided. The end goal is to have all students in the inclusive environment and have a safe environment for all students.

Another challenge could be finding time for all teachers who have students with varying abilities to attend weekly meetings. Teachers are busy and have a lot to accomplish. When they are asked to add one more thing to their day, it can potentially throw something off their plan. If teachers happen to be absent when items are discussed at the weekly meetings, it will be imperative that team members discuss inclusive implementation with them. Teachers can also end up with a lot on their plate and decide that they can no longer be a teacher. Teaching is a profession that is hurting for employees and we do not want to add additional stress to teachers.

Conclusion

This school improvement project is a multi-layered approach to executing an organized and effective implementation of student inclusion in the general education environment. This project utilized cooperative learning, peer interactions, inclusion strategies, and observations as a means to achieve the stated goal. The problem is that students with varying abilities are not always included in the inclusive setting. The goal that was presented was to find strategies to increase student inclusion in the least restrictive environment. Another area was concentrating on training for teachers to effectively deliver differentiated instruction in the least restrictive environment.

The results of this project will impact students at CCSD in a variety of ways. By having a clear and organized approach to inclusion in the least restrictive environment, the teachers will feel less stressed and will be able to focus on the best interests of the students. Administration is the front line to assisting teachers feel supported with differentiated instruction in the least restrictive environment. Teachers who collaborate and regularly communicate will have a better understanding of the process of inclusion and how it supports students with varying abilities. The support from administration and colleagues will empower teachers to make the best decisions for each individual student.

This will also allow students the opportunity to connect with peers. Students learn a lot from each other and when they are not always together, they are not learning together. “Globally, integrated school placements as well as inclusion as an education philosophy have emerged as influential trends in education over the past 30 years” (Haegele, 2019, p. 387). Shin, Ok, Kang, et al. (2019) validated the importance of and need for inclusive education. It is in the student’s best interests to have supportive teachers who can implement inclusion in the least restrictive environment. There is a lot of work to be examined, however, schools are closing the gap when it comes to inclusion of students with varying abilities.

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