THE VALIDITY OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

A Paper

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Introduction

With the recent changes in public education laws and policies, the inclusion of students with special needs in the general education classroom has become a prevalent issue in education. There are numerous studies that have researched the pros and cons of inclusion, the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of inclusion, and the differences between inclusion and mainstreaming. This study began as a means of exploring the validity of retaining full inclusion that currently exists in the elementary school at which I am employed. The school district is building a new intermediate school and may eliminate the inclusion classrooms in favor of a pullout program for the students with disabilities. Currently, the fourth and fifth grade teachers utilize an inclusion classroom model and believe it to be the least restrictive and best learning environment for students with disabilities and the teachers in those classrooms do not wish to revert back to a pull-out model.

Pull-out programs remove students struggling to learn out of their general education classrooms and educate them in separate classrooms away from their nondisabled peers. Often, the education they receive in the pullout classroom is remedial in nature. This model may work well for younger students or students with severe disabilities needing to learn basic skills but it is not necessarily the most effective way to teach students with mild to moderate cognitive and learning disabilities. The teachers participating in co-teaching in our district’s inclusion classrooms believe that the students with disabilities benefit from being educated along with their nondisabled peers in the general education curriculum in both an academic and social nature. It is for these reasons that the teachers believe their school district should retain full inclusion in the
new intermediate building. The intent of this study is to examine the data from a review of the literature and apply the information learned to ascertain whether or not my tenet about the effectiveness of full inclusion is legitimate.

Review of the Literature

There is an abundance of literature on inclusion. Inclusion has become a topic of heated debate over the past decade or two due to changes in education law and policy at the federal and state levels. The term “inclusion,” when applied to education, refers to the education of students with disabilities in the general education classroom with their nondisabled peers (Burnstein, Sears, Wilcoxen, Cabello, & Spagna, 2004). After reviewing a number of articles about inclusion, three schools of thought have emerged about inclusion – those who support inclusion for reasons of social justice, those who are opposed to inclusion, and those who believe inclusion can be successful if it is done correctly.

Pro-inclusion school of thought

The first school of thought supports the inclusion of children with disabilities in the general education classroom with their nondisabled peers for a number of reasons but mainly for moral principles. Many proponents of inclusion believe that inclusive classrooms are important tools to teach all students about the harmful effects of exclusion in society (Sapon-Shevin, 2003). Indeed, some supporters argue that inclusive education produces an educational setting void of discriminatory attitudes while creating a welcoming environment that provides an opportunity to learn for all students involved (Lindsay, 2003). Peer acceptance is also considered to be one of the primary outcomes of the school experience and a number of advocates argue positive peer acceptance is
imperative to the quality of life for students with disabilities (Cook & Semmel, 1999). Furthermore, a number of advocates for students with less severe disabilities believe special education programs for these students should be eliminated and replaced by full inclusion (Mamlin, 1999). While many advocate for the full-inclusion of students with autism into the general education classroom, mainly for the social and academic benefits rather than for cognitive purposes, the preliminary data is inconclusive as to whether inclusion is successful for these children and indicates further study needs to occur (Coffey & Obringer, 2004). Indeed, not much evidence in this school of thought exists in the literature as to whether inclusion as a moral right is successful – the research just states that inclusive education is the morally right thing to do for students with disabilities.

**Opposition to inclusion**

The second school of thought – those that believe that inclusive education does not work – also contradicts the first school of thought because some of the research done suggests that many of students who are supposed to benefit from the socialization involved in inclusion are not faring well and, in reality, are experiencing negative social outcomes (Vaughn, Elbaum, Schumm & Hughes, 1998). Several of the studies conducted concluding that inclusion is ineffective as a social equalizer researched settings where there was little or no support from special education teachers or paraprofessionals in the classroom for the students identified with learning disabilities. Researchers also found that the students with more severe disabilities were often accepted more positively than their less learning disabled peers as well as boys with LD (Learning Disability) were often more accepted than were girls with LD (Vaughn, Elbaum,
Schumm & Hughes, 1998). These researchers, therefore, concluded that inclusion is ineffective based on the negative social outcomes experienced by the students in the inclusive classroom studied.

Other researchers reason that there is considerable opposition to inclusion because educators are unsure of how to do inclusive education – what is the proper ratio of disabled versus nondisabled students, how services are to be delivered and who is responsible for service delivery (Taylor & Justen, 1996). Numerous general education teachers often feel overwhelmed with their workload already and, when approached about inclusion, believe inclusion to be a daunting task to say the least (Conrad & Whitaker, 1997). Various educators understand inclusion to mean students with disabilities are placed in the general education classroom with general education teachers who receive little or no support or training to handle such diverse learning styles and abilities (Hewitt, 1999). This interpretation of inclusion may be a result from the fact that many of the administrators requiring teachers to implement inclusion often do not provide enough or adequate in-service training for the teachers (Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2000).

A number of researchers made an effort to define what the term “inclusion” meant and how it evolved. There are many different interpretations as to what inclusion is but it is generally defined as the full integration of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The concept of including children with disabilities in the general education classroom stems from the term “least restrictive environment”, or LRE, as defined in Public Law 94-142. Some supporters of inclusion believe that P.L. 94-142 mandates inclusion (Wigle & Wilcox, 1996). A number of court cases, including
Roncker v. Walter (1983), Mavis v. Sobol (1994), and Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District (1994), support the concept of including students in the general education classroom to the maximum extent it is appropriate (Conrad & Whitaker, 1997). As a result of the changes in the law, an increasing number of school districts are moving to some form of inclusive education.

Along with the sometimes negative perception of inclusion among educators, there is a general perception by a number of parents who have students in an inclusive setting that inclusion is ineffective. Interestingly, the parents of students with disabilities are more likely to oppose inclusive education than those persons having no children or those having students without disabilities (Gottlieb & Leyser, 1996). Many parents of students with special needs felt that their student was not receiving the extra assistance required for the child to be successful in the general education curriculum. Some teachers and parents felt including students with disabilities in the general education classroom short-changes the students without disabilities because so much time and energy is focused on helping the students with special needs (Gottlieb & Leyser, 1996). A study examining the perceptions of special education students toward their inclusive classrooms concluded that even the students with special needs perceived their inclusion experiences either favorably or unfavorably depending on the learning outcomes. Those that felt they were in an environment safe for learning and that the learning activities were worthwhile felt inclusion was a positive program. Students with disabilities who felt disassociated with the class or those who felt the class lacked structure and organization reported inclusion to be a negative experience (Hansen & Boody, 1998).
Inclusion can be successful

The third school of thought that emerged from the review of the literature about inclusion is that inclusion is only successful and effective if it is done correctly.

Many education professionals see inclusion as a teaming effort between the general education and special education teachers. This can occur in two different forms - a consultative setting or a co-teaching setting. A consultative or, collaborative, setting is where the students with disabilities are placed in a general education classroom with their nondisabled peers. The special education teacher meets and collaborates with the general education teacher to provide the necessary accommodations and modifications within the classroom. The special education teacher monitors the students with special needs and may help in the classroom as needed – perhaps as often as daily but mainly on a weekly basis. Ultimately, in this setting, the general education teacher is primarily responsible for the education of the students with disabilities (Taylor & Justen, 1996).

The major difference between the collaborative (or consultative) method and the teaming, or co-teaching, method is that the general education teacher and the special education teacher are together in the classroom for either a large part of or the whole day on a daily basis. Both teachers are responsible for the planning and teaching of the students with disabilities as a team. Currently, the main approach to inclusion involves the teaming method, thus giving equal responsibility for the planning and implementation of education to both teachers (Taylor & Justen, 1996).

Many articles evaluating the effectiveness of co-teaching emphasis that planning is the key to successful teaming as a means of inclusion. Probably the crucial component to initiating effective co-teaching is identifying the team players. Encountering teachers
who can teach with someone else is a huge challenge because teachers often see
themselves as autonomous entities. Finding two (or more) individuals to completely
share the planning and implementation of successful team teaching also requires
administrators to support and lead the co-teaching team as they are the instructional
leaders of the school (Walther-Thomas & Bryant, 1996). Administrators need to ensure
that team teachers have the time and resources and put forth the effort in order to make
inclusion successful (Gable & Arllen, 1997).

Team teachers must also look at their role as a teacher differently than they have
in the past. They must be creative, have good listening and interpersonal skills, and be
willing to share the responsibility and power in the classroom (Villa & Thousand, 2003).
Teachers must be willing to devote the time needed to research effective inclusion
practices and also be willing to attend seminars and university classes that teach different
methods of instruction and provide a variety of strategies to address the needs of the
diversity of learners they will encounter (Stoddard & Hewitt, 1996). The commitment
necessary for the implementation of the co-teaching method of inclusion is significant if
it is to be an effective form of inclusion. But when the participants involved (teachers,
administrators, parents, and other service providers and caregivers) make a commitment
to deliver well-planned, responsible inclusion, it can work for all students involved
(Aiello & Bullock, 1999).

In order for the students with disabilities to be successful in the inclusion
classroom, several researchers believe certain criteria must be met. Students with
disabilities should have equal access to the curriculum and the curriculum should be
relevant to all students in the class (Wigle & Wilcox, 1996). Appropriate
accommodations and modifications and differentiation of instruction can address the various skill and ability levels of the students in the class. There should be active, meaningful participation of all students – including those with disabilities. This means that planned learning activities must allow for students with disabilities to have equal opportunity to participate (Voltz, Brazil, & Ford, 2001). Students having greater opportunities to respond translate into more task-oriented behavior and highly correlate with student achievement (Wigle & Wilcox, 1996). Ultimately, there must be a classroom climate that facilitates collaboration and positive interactions between the students with disabilities and their peers who are nondisabled in order for inclusion to be effective.

*Evaluating inclusion programs*

In order to determine if inclusion works, there must be a measurement tool in place to evaluate the success or failure of the program. One way of measuring success is to assess the progress of each student with special needs based on their individual intervention plan, or IEP (Individual Education Program), to determine if they have mastered the goals outlined in the plan. However, teachers must change their strategies when developing the IEPs of students in inclusive settings – from looking at just the students’ needs to including decisions based also on curriculum and instruction (Gable & Arllen, 1997). However, using this form of evaluation alone does not address the progress of students without disabilities.

Another form of measuring the effectiveness of co-teaching is to develop a formative and summative evaluation based on the goals and objectives of the co-teaching program using a number of qualitative and quantitative measures (Wischnowski, Salmon,
& Eaton, 2004). This may be the most thorough method of evaluating the effectiveness of the co-teaching program but it is much more time-consuming than other methods – indeed, it may take several months to several years to evaluate using this method.

A third method that may be utilized to evaluate the effectiveness of an inclusion or co-teaching program is to analyze achievement test score data. Many school districts use this form of data solely to evaluate student academic achievement. The major drawback of using this method without other data is that it is not an accurate reflection of what individuals with disabilities can actually do because it doesn’t take into consideration the specific needs and abilities of these students. Standardized testing also focuses on a very limited amount of factual information that is often unrelated to the curriculum. Using standardized test scores along with authentic performance-based assessments may supply a more accurate picture of the efficacy of inclusion instructional programs (Salend, 2000).

Summary of Research

There is a wealth of research on inclusion – what it is, who benefits (or does not benefit) from inclusive education, and whether or not it is an effective method of educating students with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to take the research studied about the effectiveness of inclusion, draw a conclusion, and apply the information to my own inclusion situation. First, there were a number of articles and research studies examined for this study – quite a few more than were used and cited in this study. Of those used and cited, the general consensus among the authors is that inclusion – in the form of co-teaching – is an effective method of teaching students with disabilities alongside their peers without disabilities as long as a number of factors are in place.
Those factors include: teaming suitable teachers together, proper and sufficient training of the teachers involved, collaborative planning and teaching by the co-teachers, administrative support and leadership, equal opportunities for all students to actively participate in learning activities, and repeated and frequent evaluation of the progress of all students in order to assess the effectiveness of the inclusion program.

These factors are in place at my school. So I collected data regarding the pass/fail rate of our fourth graders on the statewide reading proficiency test over the past four school years to see if the students with disabilities in my co-teaching classroom achieved as high or higher than their counterparts (students with disabilities) in the general education classroom who receive assistance in the form of pull-out with a LD tutor.

The Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Total number of students taking test school wide/passage rate</th>
<th>Students with disabilities in a general education classroom / passage rate</th>
<th>Students with disabilities in the co-teaching classroom / passage rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>106 students/33% passage rate</td>
<td>12 students/0% passage rate</td>
<td>Co-teaching not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>92 students/62% passage rate</td>
<td>7 students/29% passage rate</td>
<td>14 students/29% passage rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td># students unavailable/63% overall passage rate (including scores of students on IEPs)</td>
<td>Data unavailable</td>
<td>Data unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>100 students/43% passage rate</td>
<td>6 students/17% passage rate</td>
<td>12 students/25% passage rate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

Examining the test scores shed little light on the effectiveness of co-teaching. With some of the data unavailable for the study, it left too little data from which to draw an accurate conclusion. As the research alluded to, long-term evaluation using a variety of qualitative and quantitative data would likely yield a more accurate answer to the question of the effectiveness of co-teaching at my school. If one were to examine the comments made by teachers, staff, students, and parents over the past four years, the overall acceptance of inclusion is positive in this particular situation. There have been several parents that have expressed displeasure or concern over their child’s participation in a co-teaching leaning environment (all three were parents of students with disabilities who felt their child would be single out for being less intelligent). Overall, though, the positive comments and feelings the teachers and many of the parents and students involved in co-teaching have expressed certainly give affirmation to what co-teaching can do.

Other factors of co-teaching that positively impact the classroom environment and the success of all the students involved include the use of a large variety of instructional methods and assessment tools. Co-teaching allows the teachers involved to try different forms of instruction they might not try if they were in a classroom by themselves with twenty-eight students. Examples of this include: more hands-on activities, such as making models of mathematical equations or science concepts, that require direct supervision, tiered lessons or differentiating instruction (determining what the basic information all students must know and offering two or three more levels of information for which students with higher abilities would be responsible for knowing), and acting
out the parts of books or an event in history to help teach that lesson. Indeed, co-teachers need to employ their creative skills in order to reach as many of their students as possible. Co-teaching permits each teacher the opportunity to teach subjects in which they have more knowledge, such as science or social studies, while coming together to teach the core subjects like reading, writing, and mathematics. Students also know they have a greater opportunity for assistance and reteaching with two teachers available all day.

As for assessment tools, teachers who teach alone often use paper and pencil assessments (tests, term papers, worksheets) to determine how well their students comprehended what they have been taught because it is relatively quick and easy. In a co-teaching climate, teachers can employ numerous tools to assess learning including giving oral exams instead of written ones, developing projects, maintaining portfolios, building models, and observing peer teaching (the teacher assigns a student to teach a concept to other students and observes how well the student that is teaching does). These performance-based assessments are much more authentic gauges of how well students with or without disabilities have grasped a concept. Students in the co-teaching classroom understand that they have a variety of ways they can demonstrate their knowledge without having to always write it down. This helps lessen the anxiety of those students that struggle with reading and writing tasks.

Therefore, despite the less than positive results from the data collection, the research helps to affirm that co-teaching, as a form of inclusion, is a worthwhile and effective method of teaching students with disabilities alongside their peers without disabilities.
References


Biographical Information

Donna Christman is currently a licensed Intervention Specialist in a fourth grade co-teaching classroom in a small, rural school district in central Ohio. She received her Bachelor of Arts Degree in History/Secondary Education from Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi in 1997 and is also licensed to teach history in grades 7-12. She is completing a Master of Education Degree in Curriculum and Instruction (Intervention Specialist – Mild/Moderate). She enjoys working with children with special needs because everyday is different from the last. Her family includes her husband, Tom, two black Labrador Retrievers (Katie and Maggie), and a cat named Mack. You may contact Donna at christman_d@treca.org.