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Keeping the Special in Special Education

Introduction:

The field of education is constantly undergoing change; from curriculum expectations to standardized testing, modern education is highly dependent on expanding research and knowledge. Special education has especially progressed recently, particularly in regard to a new trend known as mainstreaming. Current research provided by The National Center for Special Education Research claims that mainstreaming is the newest and most efficient method of learning for all students with disabilities. While there are many positives of mainstreaming, including both academic and social components, the implementation of this program within schools is quite vague and flawed. The plethora of drawbacks of mainstreaming outweigh its benefits, creating a need for a new system in the field of special education. Since such a broad range of disabilities exist, individualized differentiation is necessary. By analyzing the different perspectives of all parties involved, including the child with the disabilities, the teacher, the parent, and the other students within the classroom, along with the history of special education laws, a more efficient method of instruction for special education students is possible. The objective of this research is to analyze the current system in place and present possible changes for enhancement.

Research Questions:

Is mainstreaming the best solution for educating students with special needs?

What are other, more efficient options for implementing mainstreaming in classrooms?

How do teachers, parents and students perceive mainstreaming? Are these opinions in line with the special education laws in place?

History of Special Education:

As the most recent law recognized in the special education field, The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) is the standard to which previous laws and the future for special education are held. Prior to the passing of IDEA in 1975, The Rehabilitation Act (TRA) of 1973, specifically Section 504, was responsible for protecting the rights of students with disabilities in public school settings. Section 504 addresses the requirement that all public schools, including charter and magnet schools, must forbid discrimination based upon disabilities (Lhamon, 2016). The passage of TRA paved the route for a brighter future for students with disabilities; not only did it enable these specific students to be given equal educational opportunities, but it also provided them the freedom to participate in extra-curricular activities and sports, that would be of great assistance to their social development (Lhamon, 2016). In order for a school district to meet the requirements for funding, aid and special services for handicapped children, their student body must adhere to the strict definition of disability under this federal law. According to Section 504, a disability is comprised of three parts that are exclusive of one another: a person who has a physical or mental impairment that limits major life activities, has a record of their disability and is regarded or labeled as having such impairment (Lhamon, 2016).

Although Section 504 acknowledges the standard of a free and appropriate education (FAPE), it does not require individualized education programs (IEP), providing inadequate care for the broad spectrum of disabilities (Lhamon, 2016). The Parent and Educator Resource Guide to Section 504 also discusses the requirement of school districts to perform an evaluation of the child with special needs in a timely manner (Lhamon, 2016). This means that if the school has

any reasonable cause or is aware of a student's disability, they must provide the family with a no-cost evaluation that can further require medical assessment if necessary (Lhamon, 2016). Section 504 does not state a specific process of evaluation but does require appropriate and timely testing be done (Lhamon, 2016).

While Section 504 of TRA provided the nation with a vague guideline of protection for students with disabilities, the legislation for special education was greatly enhanced in 1975 by the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EHA). Also referred to as PL 94-142, this law furthered the advancements provided by TRA and placed all the research on special education into action. While TRA was more of a vague guideline that provided educators and parents with a statement that their children/students would be provided equal education, EHA exerted specific processes, restrictions and programs that would enforce the law and actually create a more efficient and safe learning environment for children with disabilities. EHA was renamed The Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1990, further amending legislation and creating a plan for the future of special education (Duncan, 2010). Prior to the passing of IDEA, the fate of students with disabilities was "narrow and dim," (Duncan, 2010). The basic needs of disabled children were taken into consideration, including shelter, clothing and food, and were prioritized over educational rights (Duncan, 2010). Certain states were still discriminatory towards students with disabilities, mostly concerning the deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed and the mentally retarded (Duncan, 2010). The lack of educational resources provided to these students at home and at school greatly hindered their academic and social performances (Duncan, 2010).

To date, IDEA has accomplished a variety of advancements within the field of special education. One of their top achieved goals includes their impeccable rates of receiving high-quality, early interventions for students with special needs (Duncan, 2010). Evaluating children

earlier has opened a plethora of doors, especially preparing children to enter school at an appropriate age. By recognizing disabilities in children at the infant, toddler and preschool ages, parents and educators are able to make more efficient use of resources and maintain a handle on the child's learning abilities prior to entering Kindergarten (Duncan, 2010). By doing so, the need for future educational services for these children has dramatically decreased (Duncan, 2010). In addition, IDEA has also impacted the learning environment in which special education students learn. Through usage of the least restrictive learning environment (LRE), special needs students are now able to access the general education curriculum through mainstreaming (Duncan, 2010). Mainstreaming is defined as the practice of placing students with special education services in a general education classroom during specific time periods based on their skills, replacing the traditional use of the self-contained classroom that provided more one-on-one attention and a smaller teacher to student ratio. Rather than limiting their exposure to a general education classroom and general education students, mainstreaming allows students with disabilities to reap benefits of the wide variety of academic and social tools seen in a classroom (Duncan, 2010). The creation of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) has furthered these achievements by ensuring that each disabled student receive culturally relevant and diverse instruction in an inclusive setting (Duncan, 2010). The partnering of federal, state and local agencies to provide funding for school reform and the commitment to ensuring inclusive classrooms has greatly aided in the implementation of mainstreaming nationwide (Duncan, 2010). Federal grants and investments are given to public school districts in order to ensure the usage of scientifically based practices and allow access to the most recent research and necessary materials (Duncan, 2010). With government assistance, states are able to implement such programs and make progress towards developing effective teaching for special needs students.

Not only does IDEA account for the present learning of the individual, but it also prepares them for the future, high school, post-secondary programs and career options (Duncan, 2010).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, IDEA is the “primary catalyst for progress in the special education field,” (Duncan, 2010).

While IDEA has made substantial progress over the course of special education history, a single and consistent method of implementation of mainstreaming nationwide has not been adopted. Laws and ideas to create such an environment have been created, but unfortunately have not been followed through from state to state. Without this consistency, the future of special education cannot flourish until full acceptance is accomplished.

Weighing the Benefits and Drawbacks of Mainstreaming:

In order to properly assess mainstreaming, it is significant to acknowledge the many opportunities it does make available to disabled students. The issue with mainstreaming is not the ideology behind its intentions, but the way in which it is followed through with and implemented within the nation’s classrooms. According to the American Autism Association, the three main arguments associated with mainstreaming are in regard to equal education, social impacts, and diversity (Gibbons, 2016).

Under IDEA, equal education encompasses the same curriculum and academic opportunities for all students (Gibbons, 2016). Learning in an integrated classroom environment provides students with disabilities tools to succeed in the future and be recognized as equals in comparison to their peers (Gibbons, 2016). At the same time, students with disabilities are more likely to struggle to keep up with curriculum, causing frustration and disruptive behavior (Gibbons, 2016). This can alter the learning process for other students as well, posing a threat to their academic flourishing. Teachers are often not properly qualified to handle the behavior of

students with disabilities since they are not certified within this content area; while all teachers must learn and adapt to the diverse population within their classroom, they may not be familiar with instruction on how to deal with certain, more severe disabilities (Gibbons, 2016). The educator is unable to provide individual attention for the student with disabilities, since he/she must focus on the other students as well. If the educator does provide too much emphasis on that one student, this once again hinders the learning of others in the classroom.

One of the main purposes of mainstreaming special education students is due to the vast social impacts it has on the child. Rather than subjecting the student to a restricted classroom solely interacting with a few teachers and other students with disabilities, mainstreaming allows for much improved social skills (Gibbons, 2016). Integrated classrooms indirectly teach special needs students acceptable behaviors and social cues as modeled by their peers (Gibbons, 2016). They even have the potential to form relationships with peers of the same age group, in addition to paving the road to acceptance among their classmates inside and outside of the classroom (Gibbons, 2016). While this sounds ideal, the chances of this Utopian classroom forming are highly unlikely. Misunderstandings, cases of bullying and embarrassment are behaviors that are more likely to occur within an integrated classroom (Gibbons, 2016). Depending on the age of the students, they may not fully comprehend the student's disability and why he/she is receiving more attention than the rest of the class (Gibbons, 2016). "Typical" children will continue interacting and advancing their social development through communication with peers, isolating the individual with disabilities. As a growing child, this mistreatment can be detrimental to the student's self-esteem and identity development. In fact, students with disabilities are twice as likely to be bullied in comparison to their non-disabled peers (National Bullying Prevention Center, 2006). Although laws, such as IDEA, protect against the harassment of special needs

students, bullying in a mainstream classroom is inevitable (National Bullying Prevention Center, 2006). Bullying decreases self-esteem, along with hindering the student's ability to learn under these conditions (National Bullying Prevention Center, 2006).

Mainstreaming is an effort to further diversify classrooms; while students may differ in culture, background and/or religion, incorporating a range of disabilities will only contribute to this melting pot of learners. The key positive aspect of diversity in regard to mainstreaming is lessening the stigma associated with those who suffer from a disability (Gibbons, 2016). With time, it will almost become a societal norm that students with disabilities are part of a general education classroom; this will teach other students to be more accepting of their peers, even those with disabilities.

The Psychology of Mainstreaming: The Child's Point of View

When understanding and evaluating mainstreaming, the point of view that deserves priority over others is that of the child with disabilities. The individual, most of the time, knows what practices best suits their distinct needs and should have a voice in the education they receive. While the transition from childhood to adolescence is one of much confusion and identity formation, it is difficult for children with disabilities to establish their own identity due to the ambiguity of their education. In regard to mental health, children with disabilities possess the highest risks of developing anxiety and depression disorders in comparison to non-disabled children (Lumsdaine, 2016). With age, children with physical and learning disabilities become increasingly aware of their disability and begin to identify themselves as being disabled (Lumsdaine, 2016). Establishing this label greatly contributes to the child's fixed mindset, plummeting their self-esteem. It is challenging for these developing students to take on the extra burdens of their disability, resulting in their desire to be socially isolated and an outcast from

peers. A study conducted by Abertay University in Scotland explores this concept of the negative correlation between a disabled child and mental health. The School of Social and Health Sciences reported that those with disabilities are, “less happy, report lower levels of life satisfaction, are more anxious and feel less worthwhile,” (Lumsdaine, 2016). The psychological impact a disability can have on a child poses a great threat to their autonomy, social success and overall health. With all of this research in mind, how can a child who is enduring these hardships truly enjoy mainstreaming? Can mainstreaming ever be a positive experience despite the child’s gut feelings of loneliness and discrimination? As much as these students desire to be treated normally, the label and stigma surrounded by their disability is a barrier to their true happiness (Lumsdaine, 2016). The reactions of society constantly remind the child of his/her disability, truly taking a toll on their well-being. If the children who are being subjected to this method of teaching do not believe it is beneficial to their educational experience, it should not be present within their education.

Teacher’s Point of View:

Another crucial perspective that comes into play in regard to mainstreaming is the point of view of the educator. As the primary source of education for the disabled child, the success of the integration process is highly dependent on the strategies and techniques the teacher decides to implement. In order to determine a proper curriculum that will be fit for all students of a diverse classroom, the teacher must be flexible in his/her lesson plans, accounting for the child with the disability. Additional paperwork, extension of lessons and lesson backups are components of an integrated classroom that teachers must provide in order to ensure the best outcomes (Shaddock, 2007). With time being a challenge for teachers in general, this places an extra stressor on them by adding to their job responsibilities (Shaddock, 2007). Teachers feel as if they have insufficient

support in creating an adequate curriculum and wish administration could offer more of a helping hand in this aspect of their classroom (Shaddock, 2007).

In addition, most teachers believe that they are not properly trained to confidently teach special education students (Shaddock, 2007). The current education system in America offers a special and distinct certification for special education candidates, which is separate from a typical education degree. While teachers have taken only a few classes in college regarding exceptionalities, this will most likely not prepare them for the more severe disabilities that may be present within their classrooms. A study conducted in 2007 found that general education teachers, on average, have only taken 1.5 courses in special education, in comparison to special education teachers who are required to take about 11 classes (Mader, 2017). In order for mainstreaming to be more successful, teacher-preparation programs are in need of further advancement. Most teachers are open to having an inclusive classroom, but are hesitant to do so because of their lack of hands-on experience with special needs students (Mader, 2017). While colleges have begun to incorporate special education classes into the general education curriculum, they do not fully equip candidates for the many challenges that are associated with an inclusive classroom.

A further concern of teachers regarding mainstreaming is the potential for disruptive behavior within the classroom, possibly leading to a dangerous environment for all students. Teachers are worried that students who suffer from a behavioral disability can bring violent behaviors and weapons to a classroom setting; not only does this take time away from learning, but it places the lives of the children and the teacher in danger (Chander, 2016). On the other hand, research displays that special education teachers are more in favor of mainstreaming, probably due to these circumstances being within their area of expertise (Chander, 2016).

Parent's Point of View: Anne Ford

On October 24th, 2018, Sacred Heart University hosted an event titled, “A Parent’s Experience with Learning Disabilities,” featuring author and advocate, Anne Ford. This guest speaker event was sponsored by the Isabelle Farrington College of Education and WSHU Radio, discussing Ford’s experience raising a child with disabilities and her five novels on the topic. As the former chairman of the board for National Center for Learning Disabilities, Ford has a plethora of experience with issues in the special education field. Her daughter, Allegra, was diagnosed with severe learning disabilities at age 5; her disabilities were so drastic that one of her doctors recommended that Allegra be institutionalized in England. While special education was not as advanced in the 1970’s, Ford felt hopeless for Allegra’s future and academic opportunities. Allegra was denied from seven different Learning Disability (LD) schools, but was later accepted to Gateway School on the condition that she be reevaluated each school year. Allegra flourished academically at the Gateway School, despite her lack of relations with peers. She became highly interested in figure skating at the Ice Studio on Madison Avenue in New York City, a huge component to her boosted self-esteem and personality development. Ford stressed that this experience with ice skating changed Allegra’s life and she encouraged all parents to find their children’s passion in order to save their self-esteem. Eventually, Ford was forced to send Allegra to a boarding school in Cape Cod, Massachusetts in order for her to receive the best education possible during this time period.

As a parent, this experience was devastating for Ford. She did not have any experts to talk to and was embarrassed to share her problem with family members. Ford referred to her denial as her development of a “secret garden” in which she hid from the reality of her circumstances. Looking back on her experience, Ford identifies shame as her biggest mistake,

contributing to her passion for being an advocate today. She wishes to share her journey and inspire other parents to become advocates for their special needs children. Her key advice for parents is to be accepting, resilient and unconditionally loving towards their children in order to best foster their needs. Allegra is currently 46 years old and married with children; Ford emphasizes that there is always a light at the end of the tunnel and that hard work certainly pays off.

A large portion of Ford's discussion was based upon the educational system that enabled Allegra to succeed. She gives her utmost praise to the teachers in Allegra's life, acknowledging their patience, care and understanding of Allegra and her condition. Without them, Allegra would not be the wonderful woman she is today. Adequate teachers are the critical component in fostering the care of all students, especially those with special needs. While the technologies and research in the special education field were not as advanced during Allegra's childhood as they are now, Ford emphasizes the necessity to teach children with learning disabilities how to socialize. This not only assists the child in gaining societal acceptance, but helps the parents get through the stigma associated with their child.

Being a parent of a child with disabilities is an experience that is incomparable to that of a "normal" child. Ford's experience with the education of her daughter during the 1970's was one of turmoil and anxiety; during this time period, mainstreaming was not a viable option and there was much confusion in regard to handling special needs students. While some parents of special needs children today believe mainstreaming will benefit their child, a majority of other parents are not in agreement with this style. In addition, parents are also concerned about "overburdening" the teacher and a lack of acceptance from other students in the classroom (Bhargava, 2011). Parents of general education students often do not understand the needs of the

disabled; instead, they are more focused upon their child not receiving adequate time from instructors (Bhargava, 2011). They are also worried about their children emulating the inappropriate behaviors that may be displayed by the child with special needs (Bhargava, 2011). Parents of “typical” children often suggest separate classes for academics, but integration during other activities, such as physical education, art and music classes and lunch/recess (Bhargava, 2011).

Conclusion/Solution:

While the field of special education has made such progress, mainstreaming does not appear to be the best method possible. Considering the various points of view of the student, the teacher and the parent, it is clear that this system is not well-remarked. A transition that is essential to developing a new system is deciphering between the definitions and implementation of integration versus inclusion. These two distinct terms are often confused with one another, and recognizing the difference is a key step to keeping the special in special education. The issue with mainstreaming is the common misconception that classrooms should be integrated rather than inclusive. Inclusion refers to the promotion of a growth mind-set, rather than a fixed one, best meeting the individual needs of all learners (Harman, 2017). The main differences between an integrated and inclusive environment is highly dependent on the language used in the classroom by administration; while integration is solely focused on the child with special needs, inclusion includes the needs of *all* students, considering them fairly and equally (Harman, 2017). This method is beneficial for all students, accommodating curriculum for each child and individualizing instruction for all students. Inclusion requires support and guidance from professionals, specialists and other forms of formal support, rather than solely the expertise of a mainstream teacher; mainstreaming is a process of cooperation among all administration

members to ensure the most comfortable and effective learning environment for all learners. By approaching special education through the combination of brain power among professionals, catering to a diverse student body, including special education students, becomes a more feasible task.

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