RUNNING HEAD: Inclusion: Academic Vs. Social Success

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School. This word has a special meaning for everyone that hears it. It evokes a certain nostalgia, of one's experience and memories of not only their education, but their childhood as well. School is a part of growing up, an experience with the goal of shaping someone into a functional, successful, and educated human being in society. For students who have intellectual and other types of disabilities, school can be a very different type of experience than for students who do not have these disabilities. Socially and psychologically, a young child in elementary school just wants to "fit in" and be liked by their peers. There are many stigmas present both inside and outside the classroom for students that require Special Education. Learning disabled students are often singled out, pulled out of class, and considered as less intellectually capable than their non-disabled peers. Just because someone's brain works differently, does not mean that they are not capable of the same level of success as others. To prevent and alter the historical trend of holding intellectually disabled students back a grade, the idea of inclusion in education was born. Inclusion policy is an educational program designed to effectively include special education students in the general education classroom as much as possible, rather than separate them in other rooms or even other schools entirely (Daniels, 2018). Although some believe that inclusion is the best method for the combined social and academic success of Special Education students, their academic success is not dependent on inclusion, while their social success can be fostered by inclusion policy.

Inclusion: Social vs Academic Success

Researchers have discussed the difficulty in actually defining "inclusion" in one, widely acceptable definition and understanding (Kershner, 2016). There are four common definitions of the understanding of inclusion: "the physical placement of children with identified disabilities or in need of special support in general education classrooms; meeting the social/academic needs of

these identified pupils; meeting the needs of all pupils; and the creation of school and classroom communities which are participatory, equitable and valuing of diversity." These definitional differences indicate differences in beliefs about the intended goals of schools and their inclusion policies. This also begs the question, who should decide exactly what type of inclusion is desirable and should be practiced in schools? (Kershner, 2016).

Kershner (2016) explains that in order to foster pedagogical innovation in relation to the development of inclusive schools, professional dialogue must take place and must be encouraged at the same time. The only way inclusion policy can be successful is if it is promoted through dialogue that challenges teachers' thinking and fosters the introduction and implementation of new practices. Collaboration and shared visions among educators not only stimulate inclusion, but also work to make students feel that they belong, and further enhances their sense of community as a school.

13% of the total student population in the American educational system are classified as having a disability, and those are only the ones that are documented (Story, 2018). This number has been growing and growing each year, and within the various categories of eligibility for special education services, 35% of students have specific, diagnosed learning disabilities (Story, 2018). Vega (2018) discusses in their case study, "Perceptions of Special Education Teachers on Full Inclusion Debate," that inclusion in general education is scientifically proven to improve socialization among Special Education students. This is because, when learning disabled students are placed among their peers without learning disabilities it promotes a better sense of community, involvement, and social awareness. Not only does a learning-disabled student feel isolated by their disability or label, but they also may feel "different" or the "odd one out" in the

classroom. Constantly pulling them out and separating them from the general education environment causes a severe disconnect socially from their class.

The idea that special education services should be handled in a separate environment has been an enforced idea in the past until inclusion policy came along. Kirby (2017) explains that in order to create true inclusion the way it was intended to be, there needs to be a change in the way students eligible for special education are identified among their classmates. In the past, students were often labeled as their disabilities and often identified based on these disabilities from their teachers and peers. Labels are what cause negative stigmas and poor self-image among children, especially those with intellectual disabilities. The expectations teachers have for students can also be affected by these stigmas and labels. Kirby (2017) says that in order for true inclusion to exist, these labels need to disappear. If these labels did not exist, then a student exists in the classroom the same as any other student, and has equal opportunity to be just as successful as their peers. Stigmas disappear once students can see their peers as equals, especially within the classroom.

Each and every learning-disabled student thrives in their own custom set of conditions in a school environment. "It is necessary to provide appropriate conditions for individuals in terms of social, personal, and educational needs in the education that individual differences are taken into account" (Orakci, 2016). This framework suggests that special education students will not always thrive by being taken out of the general education environment. Instead, they can and may actually learn better in general education classes, which could be a less restricting environment for them, perhaps on either a full-time or part-time schedule. Not only does inclusion help students with disabilities in general education classrooms, it also promotes and welcomes diversity in the classroom as well. General education students can benefit from having

their learning-disabled peers in the classroom as well. Understanding that different people learn differently, and that other classmates have different ways of understanding and different skills that make them successful, is what promotes diversity and acceptance. At a young age, children will realize that not everyone is the same, not everyone wants to do the same activity, not everyone is good at what they are good at, and not everyone learns the same way—and this is okay! Inclusive education promotes diversity and acceptance and builds that at a young age, only to grow further from there. With the policy of inclusion, educational practices in the general education classroom must be appropriate to meet the needs of all students for the overall benefit of every single one (Orakci, 2016).

On the other hand, when discussing the academic benefits for students, Vega (2018) states that there is quite little research that can prove that inclusion in general education is what is best for the academic success of students with severe learning disabilities. As far as socialization goes, inclusion is a great method to foster friendships and a sense of community in the classroom. However, academic achievement for learning disabled students is a responsibility of both general and special educators, and there is no scientific research to claim that inclusion is the best method for academic success. Some special education students really need to be pulled out of the general education classroom in order to focus on a test, reading assignment, or math problem. Outside of the general education classroom is the place that best suits them for academic success. Therefore, inclusion is just not a catch-all policy.

Vega (2018) supports that "for all special education students, there must be the option of appropriate settings that range from full inclusion to specialized environments." This, unfortunately, is dependent on the financial status of school districts. Some are able to afford copious amounts of resources to provide students, while others struggle to provide the bare

minimum. For special education, this means that some schools are able to offer specialists, resource rooms, and one-on-one assistance, while others are forced to lump all students into the general education classroom with no special assistance. For some special education students, the general education classroom might be where they thrive the most, however, for others that location could be the resource room, or one on one with a specialist. Special education students who are not able to benefit from the accommodations and modifications of inclusion will most likely do very poorly academically, have to switch schools to somewhere they can get the assistance they need, or will struggle to get by where they are. The best teachers want the best for their students, however, when schools lack resources and funding, they can only do their absolute best to accommodate to every student—but it is a trying task (Vega, 2018).

Socialization and Psychological Development

As children are growing and developing, when they enter school, they already have an existing set of values and self-concept (Weatherley, 1973). The socialization process that occurs in school can be influenced by teachers, other students, curricula, and the policies and procedures at their school. The overall social impact of the school on an individual student depends on the interactions between their personal characteristics and social interactions (Weatherley, 1973). The development of a child's personality is significantly impacted by their interactions with their age peers. Developing relationships with other people is how one develops who they are in relation to others. Peer groups are those that are at a similar point in life as you, however, your developing personalities as well as life situations and circumstances may be very different. Children will interact with their peers who have different home lives, nationalities, religions, traditions, social classes, different interests, and more. As children socialize with their

classmates, they learn to work with, cooperate with, and compete with other students, especially

those with other beliefs and opinions (Weatherley, 1973).

Similar to the social benefits of inclusion, various psychological factors are important to

consider as well in relation to student success. There are several psychologically relevant ideas

relating to emotions, mental state, feelings and self-concept ideals, when discussing the

educational experiences of children (Kershner, 2016). For example, emotions in reference to

feeling safe, feelings of belonging, feeling excluded, feeling as though one is in the wrong place,

and their need to feel safe and secure, all have a place in the classroom. Not only is a teacher

responsible for the educational needs of their students, but they are also responsible for meeting

the psychological needs of children as well. The classroom is a place of academic, cognitive, and

social development, and the environment in which this occurs is significant to their outcome for

each and every student. If the environment in which a student is placed in school is negative and

harsh, it will not fulfill their psychological needs which will stunt their social growth, as well as

their academic morale. Researchers connect children's feelings of belonging with their need to

become independent learners. Children do not want to stand out, instead, they need to feel like

they belong, in order to begin participating and actively and effectively learning (Kershner,

2016). When students feel that they belong, they are comfortable and safe in that environment,

and trust their teacher as well as their peers. This leads students to develop a positive self-image,

and to be more likely to participate, take chances, and learn and grow as an individual.

Inclusion policy means that students, both learning-disabled and non-learning-disabled

will undoubtedly have many interactions in the classroom together. As this socialization process

occurs, a common interaction pattern for children is the inclination to form groups or cliques

based on mutual interest and attraction. Children will cling to those around them whom they can

relate to, have fun with, or someone they want to be like. As children form friendships, small groups of friends also form. As a friend group forms, "group norms" are created and accepted by the members. These are shared understandings that relate to behavior and attitudes between group members and towards those who are not in the group. This is a vital part of socialization that students endure in the classroom. Throughout this process of social development, a child is heavily influenced by the relationships and group norms that have been created with their peers, and often develop certain values that they now uphold.

For students in special education, this socialization process is vital and extremely beneficial when they are in the general education classroom. When they are pulled out, or separated from their age peers, they miss out on this entire socialization opportunity. This will stunt their social skills, personality development, lower their self-esteem, and isolate them from their general education peers. This is why inclusion is so beneficial to the socialization of special education students.

General & Special Educators

As educators, teachers become certified in certain areas besides general education. A special educator has expertise and is a professional educator that works with special education students. A special educator manages the "Pushing in" and "Pulling out" assistance that students need. "Pushing in" is a term that means they bring their special education expertise into a general education classroom. "Pulling out" is a term that means learning-disabled students are pulled out of the general education classroom and worked with individually in a special education resource room. Special educators work every day balancing their students whether it is pushing into a general education classroom or pulling them out to their resource room. However, even with a seamless schedule, there is still a bit of a sense of interruption that occurs, whether it be for the

special education student them self, for the general educator, or the general education students in

class. When "pushing in" and "pulling out" is necessary, the general educator and special

educator's job is to make these transitions as smooth and seamless as possible for the overall

benefit of all students.

When special educators and general educators work together in the general education

classroom it is called "co-teaching." Co-teaching is when two licensed educators collaborate in a

classroom, and are both with equal responsibility for instruction. As co-teachers, the special

educator and the general educator, work together to intentionally plan on ways to achieve the

best results for every single child, while providing a supportive learning environment. Their

collaboration plays on their strengths as they work together to plan out and carry out instruction.

Both the special educator and the general educator each bring their own expertise and styles to

the classroom. While everyone is hard at work during the lesson in a co-taught classroom, it

shows students that everyone can succeed, and it really helps students towards reaching their

greatest potential. Psychologically and socially, this is a pure benefit of inclusion for all students

in the classroom.

What makes co-teaching successful in promoting an inclusive environment are evidence-

based practices. Of all that there is to consider in the instructional design and decision making of

both general and special educators, evidence-based practices are the resources they can utilize in

developing curriculum and choosing interventions that meet the needs of each and every one of

their students. General and special educators work to differentiate instructional decision-making

for each student. The UDL, or universal design for learning, is a tool that teachers can use to

reach each of their students and lead them to success. The UDL "expands content accessibility

by meeting the unique needs of students with varying backgrounds, styles, and abilities" (Kirby, 2017).

When students need to be removed from the general education environment, they will go to a special educator's classroom, the school's "resource room." A resource room is a smaller setting where students can be removed from distractions in the general education environment and work with special education professionals to meet their specific needs. The resource room proves its namesake as it can be filled with computers and headphones, a SMART board, a white board, small group tables, bouncy ball seats, a reading corner with beanbags, and tons of learning materials. The special educator is responsible for keeping track of all their students' work and lesson plans and keeping their resources organized for each one. Whenever they come into the room for their time, they should be ready to go with exactly what they need to accomplish with them.

When inside a resource room, students know that it is a place where it is okay to make a mistake. Everyone learns in their own way, and students are often rewarded for doing their personal best—stressing the fact that everyone's personal best is different. The goal is for students to know that they can feel comfortable and safe in a resource room and that their teachers are rooting for them always. The students also know their routine with the special educator so their time together is calm and students are always ready to learn. In this way, they provide a safe, inclusive, and culturally responsive learning environment that meets the needs of all their students. This correlates to the combined psychological and social benefits of inclusion in action.

Educated professionals work as special educators, and within that group lies several types of specialists to provide support to students in need. This includes but is certainly not limited to

speech and language support, counseling available with a school psychologist, school based

occupational therapists and physical therapists, as well as adaptive physical education. There are

also several specialists in different areas such as math and reading that work individually with

students to meet their needs. Often times, a special educator's students have IEP's, or

Individualized Education Programs. An IEP provides a student with goals, related services,

accommodations, and placement according to their qualification for special education. An IEP

must be developed and consulted to educationally benefit the student based on assessments.

There are also annual reviews, required periodic goal updates and other reviews and evaluations

that the special educator is responsible for. Annual and Triennial reviews assess for

effectiveness, progress, and re-evaluate the IEP.

There are a few different factors that are the most relevant to providing instruction for

individuals with exceptional needs. Depending on each student's individual needs, how to work

with them, where to best work with them and what materials to use when working with them are

the most important to consider. There is a decisive factor when determining what type of

instruction will meet students' needs the best. There is a spectrum that begins with struggling in

the general education environment and modifying tasks, and leads to an assigned IEP that has

certain goals and objectives and is a legally binding document. Rather than holding students

back, a special educator works specifically to scaffold their students and help them bridge the

gaps. This is why inclusion policy fosters success for students. The special educator works to

bridge the gap for learning-disabled students, so that they thrive in the environment best suited to

them. For many, this remains the general education environment, where they can grow socially

and academically as well.

In the past, before inclusion policy, the "easy solution" was to just hold students with exceptionalities back a grade. However, today, there are several special education professionals and countless resources that are used every single day in general education classrooms and resource rooms. Special educators continuously work to keep students at their age appropriate level and meet their learning needs to help bridge the gaps. They also work with students who have 504's. A 504 plan provides a student with accommodations, and there are no concrete requirements for the development or review of a 504. Where an IEP is for that specific school year or term, a 504 can carry on for years all the way through college. However, a 504 is much more informal and not a legally binding document like the IEP. Special educators must understand the importance of maintaining the standards of the IEP since they are legally obliged to make sure every aspect of it is carried out.

Teacher Efficacy

Although there are social benefits to inclusion programs, general educators are expressing apprehension to it because of their own self-efficacy concerns (Murphy, 2018). They are worried that they do not have the skills or tools to meet the learning needs of their learning-disabled students. General educators strive to provide fair instruction to all of their students when there are special education students in the mix. This is why the general education classroom is not always the best place for the academic success of special education students.

Federal laws such as IDEA and the No Child Left Behind Act, increased the amount of schools enacting inclusion programs (Daniels, 2018). This means that the needs of special education students are becoming more and more relevant in the general education classroom. Socially, special education students who interact and associate with their typical achieving peers build more solid relationships because of increased social skills due to inclusion policy. Daniels

(2018) also states that the improvement in social skills also results in the student building their self-confidence and self-esteem, and their overall development of positive thoughts.

A teacher's self-efficacy is a factor to consider along with the effectiveness of inclusion. Machado (2017) explains that a teacher's self-efficacy, or effectiveness, will heavily influence the type of environment that they foster in their classroom. Self-efficacy can be defined as, "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments," (Machado, 2017). "Teachers who have higher self-efficacy are more likely to create environments that enhance learning for all students, spend more time on instruction, and give more assistance to struggling students" (Machado, 2017). It also affects the type of instructional strategies they carry out. Not only has there been research on teacher self-efficacy in general, but there has also been research on specifically special education teachers versus general education teachers. The conclusion states that high levels of self-efficacy in both special educators and general educators are required in order to promote student success through inclusion (Machado, 2017). Therefore, the combined positive self-efficacy of special educators and general educators, is what best benefits special education students.

People that argue against inclusion will claim that special education students need to be taught by teachers who are specifically trained and educated in special education (Daniels, 2018). These are the teachers that are going to benefit them the most, not the general education teachers, since they are not trained with the specificity that special educators are. This specialized, individualized instruction is something that cannot occur in the general education classroom. Smaller, special class sizes, will promote specialized instruction.

Daniels (2018) explains that about 13% of students enrolled in public schools—which is around 6.4 million students—require specialized education. Of this entire population, several

students spend over 80% of their time in the general education environment. This increases the pressure on general educators to modify, adapt, and differentiate instruction to tailor to the specific needs of each student (Daniels, 2018). Positive attitudes among teachers had been proven by research to be critical in achieving the success of inclusive education. According to Daniels (2018), teacher self-efficacy has been directly related to the academic achievement of special education students.

Conclusion

There is quite a bit of research that focuses on improving teaching strategies for students with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, behavioral issues and more. However, there is very little coverage or mention on which specific environment is the most beneficial for the combined academic and social success of special education students (Story, 2018). The spectrum of learning disabilities is so vast, that there is no one perfect method or model for the academic and social success of the student. This is why proper accommodations and modifications are so vital to the success of students with learning disabilities. This is a perfect example of why inclusion in general education is not the ultimate answer. Every single student—learning disabled or not—is completely unique from another, which is why they each thrive in their own unique set of circumstances. Some students thrive in group settings, others thrive in pairs, and others thrive individually. For special education students, this remains the same. This is why inclusion is not all about 100% time in the general education classroom. Vega (2018) explains that rather than placing all special education students together in a separate room or class, the general education classroom and/or teacher may require some restructuring, organization, or training that can promote learning and academic success for special education students.

Each special education student is unique from another, therefore, there is no one way to treat or go about instructing a special education student. Academically, all learning-disabled students have different needs and there are different methods on how to meet those needs for each one, which is why inclusion is not always the answer. Special education requires an individualized approach and works to bridge the gap between them and their peers. The goal today is not to "hold a student back a grade" just because they have a learning disability or exceptionality; it is to work towards helping them maintain their grade level and bridge that learning gap between them and their classmates. Socially, when learning disabled students are placed among their peers without learning disabilities, it promotes a better sense of community, involvement, and social awareness throughout the general education environment. Special educators and general educators use their combined professional expertise every day to ensure the success of each and every one of their students. They work to provide and maintain a safe, responsive, and inclusive classroom environment, that benefits all students academically, while significantly benefitting all students socially.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my professors David Thomson and Jennifer Trudeau for their expertise and feedback throughout the semester as I developed my capstone paper. Thank you to Julia Gatto for peer-editing my paper's first draft and giving very useful feedback as well.

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