

Middle School Education: Examining the Effectiveness of an Inclusion Program

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Chapter I

Introduction

According to Sharpe (2005), “as late as the middle 1970s, an estimated one million kids with disabilities didn’t even attend school... (and) for children who did attend, special education generally meant placement in special classes or possibly special schools”. Since that time, special education services changed with the passage of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its current amendments (US Department of Education, 2004). The Individual with Disabilities Education Act states its commitment to the following:

- Having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general education
- Strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home
- Coordinating this title with other local, educational service agency, state, and Federal school improvement efforts
- Providing appropriate special education and related services, and aids and supports in the regular classroom, to such children whenever appropriate
- Supporting high-quality, intensive pre-service preparation and professional development for all personnel who work with children with disabilities
- Providing incentives for whole-school approaches, scientifically based early reading programs, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and early intervening services to reduce the need to label children as disabled in order to address the learning and behavioral needs of such children

- Focusing resources on teaching and learning while decreasing the amount of paperwork and requirements that do not assist in improving educational results
- Supporting the development and use of technology, including assistive technology devices and assistive technology services, to maximize accessibility for children with disabilities

Since 1975 and PL94-142 (the first version of what evolved into the Individual with Disabilities Education Act), this landmark legislation has worked to move children with disabilities from segregated classrooms to general education classrooms (US Department of Education, 2004). Additional revisions to IDEA implemented since 2004 are listed as follows (US Department of Education, 2010):

- IEPs for children with disabilities who transfer from one public agency to another within the same school year
- Allowing IEP Team participants to be excused from attending IEP team meetings
- Specifying when other agency representatives that are responsible for providing or paying for transition services must be invited to IEP team meetings
- Parental consent for initial evaluations and reevaluations for determining eligibility for Part B services
- Timelines for conducting the initial evaluation for determining whether the child qualifies as a child with a disability under Part B of the IDEA and what the educational needs of the child are

Statement of the Problem

This study will aim to explore the effectiveness of the inclusion program on middle school students with disabilities. Particularly, this study will try to address the following problems:

1. Is there a significant difference in academic performance between the students in the inclusion program and the students in the contained classes?
2. What are the common and unique problems that arise among the students in both the inclusion and the contained classes?
3. What are the common and unique problems that arise among the teachers in both the inclusion and the contained classes?

It is hoped that by comparing academic records such as report cards of students and investigating the problems that they encounter in school as well as those of the teachers', insights can be generated as to whether inclusion programs do have a positive effect on middle school students with disabilities. Through this study, educators and school administrators can draw ideas and insights on how to improve the program and how it is going to be implemented on the schools.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

Although some research has been conducted in the implementation of inclusion programs in schools, there is not enough objective evidence to measure whether or not the children with disabilities are truly getting the help that they need and deserve. For example, in one research study, educators within schools were surveyed as to whether or not they felt that inclusion practices were successful within their schools (Idol, 2006). The results of this study were positive in that the teachers verified that they believed that the inclusion programs for the

children with disabilities were flourishing. However, it is possible that subjective teacher surveys are not the most objective means of evaluating the effectiveness of inclusion programs in schools. When teachers were asked to evaluate their own performance and their jobs that are dependent on their performance, the possibility of survey bias increases. Asking for information in surveys that may intimidate or jeopardize a person lays the groundwork for survey bias (Fink, 2009). There is obviously conflicting and lacking evidence surrounding the topic of inclusion of students with disabilities into the regular classroom, and more research is needed to better understand what is actually occurring in schools today.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of the inclusion program on students with disabilities. By determining and comparing academic performance between students in the inclusion program and those that are not, this study may be able to open new doors in improving the inclusion program. This study aimed to identify whether it would be beneficial for students with disabilities to be included in the general education classes as well for the teachers that teach them.

Background/Justification

Research has indicated that students who are pulled from general education classes and taught in a separate setting do not benefit from the instruction of content area teachers (Nevin, Thousand, & Villa, 2004). Since the mandates for inclusion have been implemented, there has been a push for two teachers to be placed in the general education classroom. Traditionally, teachers have worked in isolation, meaning one teacher to a classroom, but as children with disabilities entered the public school systems in the '70s, they were taught in separate classrooms. Gradually, these students have moved into the regular education classroom.

Kohler-Evans reported that special education teachers are often frustrated because they feel homeless. They do so because their classrooms have been taken from them, and they have been thrown into a classroom with a veteran language arts, math, history, or science teacher who knows what to teach and how best to teach in his/her content area (2006). The result of this kind of partnership usually leads to a disaster for the special education teacher as well as the veteran teacher (Kohler-Evans, 2006). It is essential that content area teachers and special education teachers are encouraged to learn from one another so that a true development of an inclusive classroom is formed. Successful integration of children with disabilities with other children demands successful integration of special education teachers and content teachers. This ensures that all students and teachers are receiving the support and respect that they need and deserve.

According to IDEA, inclusion interventions are determined based on the unique needs of each child and are formally documented within an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (US Department of Education, 2006). Javorsky and Zentall (2007) emphasized the need for the professional development of teachers in order to improve the learning outcomes of their students. This professional development contributes to the ways in which teachers are both supported in helping their students the best way possible.

Cooner, Lehmann, and Tochtermann (2005) call attention to the fact that teachers who participate in professional development are better equipped to deal with a diverse range of students in the most effective ways. Campus-based programs are able to bolster the professionalism of teachers on-site at the schools where they work. Bosma, Lynch, Munk, Rouse, and Van Laarhoven (2007) are convinced that professional development is necessary for teachers who participate in student-inclusion initiatives due to the fact that there are increasingly more demands and higher expectations being placed on educators.

Chapter II

Literature Review

It is essential to conduct comprehensive research on the current levels of inclusion at various schools across the United States. By studying what has already been learned about children with disabilities and their experiences in school, one is able to draw conclusions about the level and effectiveness of inclusion of these children in the regular classroom. It is important to gather as much detailed information as possible in order to know which direction is best for the focus of further research. The following literature review is an attempt to collect and organize what is already known about children with disabilities and their current experience regarding regular classroom inclusion and Individualized Education Programs (IEP).

Many studies on inclusion reveal the various factors that contribute to the problems with inclusion programs throughout the United States. Milsom (2006) suggested “that students and teachers possess somewhat negative attitudes towards students with disabilities or that they view individuals with disabilities as different from and inferior to individuals without disabilities” (p. 12). Milsom also asserted “that teachers and students without disabilities prefer to interact with other students like themselves; this affects the classroom environment and student’s ability to be in a nonrestrictive environment” (p. 16).

Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was implemented, many districts have worked on creating successful inclusion programs. Titone (2005) stated that:

For almost a decade, a major barrier to successful inclusion has been reported in the research literature, that is, the lack of effective preparation for both general education and special education teachers. In spite of the lack of preparation, regular education and special education teachers have to educate students with disabilities even though they

may have a lack of knowledge on how to educate students with disabilities, which contributes to hindering the learning of students with disabilities. (p. 28)

Research such as this suggests that there are problems with trying to include children with disabilities in the general classroom setting and that these problems stem from the lack of educators being successfully trained and supported in inclusion efforts.

The idea of inclusive schooling branched out from a social desire to be inclusive of people with disabilities in mainstream society in general. The principle of normalization was first championed in Scandinavia and then in the United States in the 1970s, and the goal was to make life for people with disabilities as culturally normative as possible (Graf & Jimenez, 2008). The trend was a shift from ignorance and fear of people with disabilities to gradual enlightenment and increased acceptance and understanding. This progress has moved from the social sphere to the educational sphere through the Education for Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which is continuously being amended until the present day, with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (Graf & Jimenez, 2008). There has been a gradual movement to dissolve the dualism of general education and special education, increasing collaboration and communication between these two spheres.

With regard to the number of children with disabilities and demographic information, researchers note that there are a significant number of children with various mental, emotional, social, and physical disabilities. One out of every 12 children, or 8 per cent of all students, is faced with some kind of disability, which inhibits the learning process (Darling & Seligman, 2007). Native Americans and African Americans are more likely to suffer with a disability than European and Asian Americans (Darling & Seligman, 2007). Given this information, it is

essential to pay close attention to the students in every classroom, as it is likely that there will be several students who are already diagnosed with a learning disability or are at risk.

It has been demonstrated that a large percentage of children with disabilities are suffering from psychiatric disorders. As much as 36 percent of all children with disabilities are suffering from psychosocial issues and not physical ones (Emerson & Hatton, 2007). With over one thirds of all children with disabilities being mentally challenged, it is essential that teachers receive professional training on how to manage children with psychiatric disorders in the general classroom setting during the long span of the school day. Emphasis on correct care practices by teachers for children with psychiatric disorders and other children in the classroom is vital in the attempt to create holistic and inclusive classrooms. This also raises questions as to how non-inclusion has affected the mental health of children in general, possibly making the problem of children with disabilities worse.

Milsom (2006) asserted that there are still teachers and students who believe that children with disabilities are somewhat inferior to others and are not deserving of special attention and care. From this perspective, teachers and students prefer to be around people who are more like themselves and tend to avoid the ones who are different. For the child with disabilities, this kind of classroom environment is not conducive to success and restricts the **ability** to be included as a member of the educational group and to achieve high academic and social potential.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005), approximately half of all students who have learning disabilities are now being educated in the regular education classroom. Although these numbers suggest that the battle is nearly halfway won, there are still 50 percent of children with disabilities who are currently not included in the regular classroom environment. Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandated that all students, with few

exceptions, master the general education curriculum, participate in standardized assessments, and achieve passing levels of performance (US Department of Education, 2004), it has become more crucial to study the effectiveness of inclusion programs.

DeSimone and Parmar (2006) reported that the consequences of failure in the standardized tests have a significantly negative impact on the future academic career of students with disabilities. McClanahan (2009) reported that content area teachers found many of the students with disabilities struggling with reading. The resources with which subject area teachers were provided to aid these students were nonexistent, inadequate, or unproven to be effective in the classroom. Inclusion teachers were available to assist with the most difficult content for the student and the classroom teacher, but there were too few of these scenarios implemented because of budget constraints. It is important that children are aided to attain high achievement and to implement the best measures in ensuring that children with disabilities are integrated into the regular classroom while also receiving adequate academic support.

McClanahan (2009) asserted that some schools try to solve the problem of children with disabilities by sending students who struggle to a pullout setting to receive help. Even though this is better than nothing, this is not identified as the best solution. Students lose valuable instruction and learning time in traveling from the classroom to the pullout room and back, and resource room teachers and aids in the pullout room may not have a clear understanding of what is important for the student to master. Content area teachers should be knowledgeable in strategizing, which researchers have documented to be effective for students with disabilities in the general classroom setting (McClanahan, 2009).

It has been demonstrated that children with disabilities who are pulled out from general education classrooms to be taught by special education teachers are missing the professional

instruction of the content area teachers (Nevin et al., 2004). This also means that the children with disabilities who are taught in the general classroom by content area teachers may also be missing the unique professionalism of special education teachers. There has been a push to integrate the content area teachers with the special education teachers in the general classroom setting—two teachers together with specialized professional interests (Kohler-Evans, 2006). However, this system is also problematic in that the professional backgrounds are overly dissimilar. This situation calls for the need for content area and special education focuses to come closer together, with content area teachers becoming certified in special education and vice versa.

From an international perspective, it is interesting to note that there are various perspectives regarding children with disabilities and what it means to be inclusive. Some researchers suggest that the best method of including and assimilating children into the regular classroom setting is to not stigmatize children by calling them out or labeling them as different (Norwich, 2008). From this point of view, the best method of inclusion is to refrain from categorizing children and to simply try to help all of the children in the class attain academic, mental, emotional, and physical success at all times. With this kind of conceptual framework, the focus is truly the class as a whole, not placing special emphasis on one child over another.

Research Questions

The study will focus on examining the effectiveness of the inclusion program. The following are the research questions that need to be answered in the study:

1. Is there a significant difference in academic performance between the students in the inclusion program and the students in the contained classes?

2. What are the common and unique problems that arise among the students in both the inclusion and the contained classes?
3. What are the common and unique problems that arise among the teachers in both the inclusion and the contained classes?

Chapter III

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study includes a total 54 middle-school students with disabilities, 27 of which are in self-contained classrooms and 27 belong to the inclusion program of the present school year. The study also includes the participation of the teachers of the said classes. Purposive sampling will be used due to the limited number of participants for the study since there are only 27 students with disabilities who are enrolled in the inclusion program.

Instruments

The instruments that will be used in this study includes the report cards of the all the student participants of the study at the end of the semester. These will be used to determine the final average grade of the students. The grades are essential in computing for the difference between the scores to determine if the inclusion program has an effect on the participants.

In order to assess the problems that the participants experience in their respective conditions, the Mooney Problem Checklist will be used. This is a standard assessment tool that helps the students express their personal problems. This test was developed in the 1940s by Mooney and Gorden, and has three forms. One is for college students, one is for high school students, and the other one is for junior high school students. It is important to note that this is not a test. Its aim is to assess those possible problems a student has in the different aspects of his/her life. The assessment is answered by encircling the list of problems that is applicable to the student in various areas such as health, finance, social, personal psychological relations, home and faculties, adjustment to school work, and others (Singh, 1989).

Aside from collecting data from the student participants, the teachers assigned to the study conditions will also be assessed by answering a self-administered questionnaire, which explores the problems and challenges that they face in terms of instruction and class management in perspective of the student participants. The purpose of the survey is to collect data from a sample that has been selected to represent a population to which findings of the data analysis can be generalized (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2003).

A statistical tool will also be used to determine the significant difference between the grades of the students in the inclusion program and the students in the contained classes. Independent sample T-test will be used.

Validity and Reliability of the Research Instrument

As mentioned in the last section, the Mooney Problem Checklist is not a test. It is used for a variety of purposes to collect data. Thus, a single overall index of validity is meaningless. The face validity of the tool is therefore assumed to be a test response (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2008). The reliability of the checklist is established on the basis of reasoning. Test authors, however, have computed for an index in terms of reliability and have reported it to have a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.93 (Singh, 1989).

Procedures

Consent to conduct the study will be obtained from school authorities. This includes permission to access the participants' grades reflected in their report cards. Consent will also be solicited from the participants such as the students and the teachers concerned. They will also be informed that the data gathered will be treated with outmost confidentiality. The students in both conditions will be given a copy of the Mooney Problem Checklist. The facilitators of the study

will read aloud the instructions before the students are told to begin. As for the teachers, they will be given a self-administered questionnaire.

After the data has been collected, T-test for independent samples will be conducted on the grades of the students to determine a significant difference in the academic performance and to determine the effect of the inclusion program on students with disabilities. The results of the Mooney Problem Checklist will then be extracted in order to determine problems that the students have that may be related to the inclusion program of the school. The results of the self-administered questionnaire answered by the teachers will also be interpreted to assess that effect of the program on the teachers. Afterward, conclusions will be drawn, and recommendations will be presented.

Limitations

At the time this study is introduced, the researcher may be competing with newly introduced programs and training, which may divert the interest and attention of some of the research participants and possibly distort the results due to the influence of other variables. However, all efforts will be made to ensure that the inclusion transition and evaluation occur in a relatively disruption-free environment. Although the surveys will aim to place focus on objective measures, there is still the possibility of subjective influence and bias (Fink, 2009). It is important to cross-check survey answers as much as possible by verifying the information from other sources.

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