The Inclusion Revolution

Julia Nicole Cruz

St. Mary's University

ED7312

Dr. Willson

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Loud noises, an overcrowded gym, and a forceful voice can cause an overwhelming sensation in the mind of a student with special needs. According to a friend who was an Instructional Assistant (IA) for an Alternative Learning Environment (ALE) classroom at a middle school, this is how an autistic student might feel in a Physical Education (P.E.) classroom. She worked with these students who had a separate homeroom class where they were taught reading and math. They joined their schoolmates for Art, P.E, Science, and Computer courses. My friend observed that, while in P.E, even though the three male students under her charge were present in the middle of the overcrowded gym when attendance was taken, they were not given much opportunity to participate in the activities for the day. The class would be divided amongst four different courts to do dribbling drills and the three male ALE students would be escorted by their IA's to the basketball courts. However, at the courts, they would be asked to wait on the side and would not be given a basketball. According to my friend, the students were not shown the same instruction, modified or not, from their coaches. This continued for months and throughout the whole year.

On the other hand, my friend, Chelsea who is a higher-functioning autistic student, in comparison to her fellow autistic peers, loved spending time with her classmates in and out of school. She looked forward to learning and growing with her peers and it started when her well-meaning teachers saw a bright child with an intellectual disability. When Chelsea first started school, she was placed in a self-contained classroom because of her lack of communication skills and her academic and social delays. Chelsea loved her teachers, yet she did not have access to the general education curriculum and her parents felt left out from the community. Her parents wanted to attend the fundraisers, plays and school functions yet with Chelsea not having much

interaction with her peers; they felt as they did not belong at the events. Chelsea was not able to make academic progress or meaningful connections as her peers had very limited verbal and social skills as well. It was not until she was moved to an inclusion classroom that she was able to have the same opportunities as the general education students had. In education, inclusion refers to a policy where all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, are a part of the school community (Walsh, 2018). Getting Chelsea moved to an inclusion classroom was tough as her school team (her special education teacher, behaviorist, school psychologist, occupational therapist, speech therapist, school principal, and program specialist) told her parents they were making a mistake; a child with disabilities such as Chelsea will not make it in a general education classroom. However, her parents were persistent since they were knowledgeable about and believed in the inclusion classroom. Over the years, advocates have pushed for more inclusion for students with disabilities as it provides time for teacher planning, adequate support and communication with parents. Chelsea's teachers continued to put time into their teams to create an effective and developmentally appropriate curriculum. All it took was a change in mindset and a willing team to assist her in meeting her needs. In this paper, I will be addressing the advantages and disadvantages of including students with special needs in the general education classroom and a recommendation for implementing inclusion in a school.

Review of Literature

Including students with disabilities in a general education classroom has lately become a heated debate. Things have changed throughout the years and due to the increased number of children with special needs and with disabilities, there was a need for better education and training of these children. Inclusive education is one of the solutions for including these children

in the educational process (Djuicin, 2019). This is not an easy task to accomplish, but with proper support from parents and teachers, it will not fail.

Parents can have a key role in the demanding and dynamic process of inclusion that begins with their decision to place their child in a mainstream setting (Sharma, J., & Trory, H., 2018). Parents are integral partners when it comes to the development of a more inclusive educational environment. They share the decision-making and consequence responsibility with the educators. Since parents promote significant changes in early childhood education and affect both the process of transformation and standards of practice, it is essential to determine the perceptions of parents towards inclusion and what governs them (Sharma, J., & Trory, H., 2018). The support of parents is vital to the children with disabilities in the educational experience as it ensures that their child will not only participate but also benefit.

Many see the benefits that the students with more significant disabilities like Autism or a learning disability (LD) have being in an inclusive classroom with their nondisabled peers. According to Sweeden, "The benefits of an inclusive experience are obvious: sharing important life experiences with peers; learning important skills, like how to budget for the gift shop on a field trip and how to avoid the busiest time at the cafeteria during lunch; getting opportunities to be recognized for your contributions; and—maybe most important—having fun (2009, p.3)." For example, Sweeden (2018) said, "Most years, my daughter's classroom seating is arranged so students can work together, rather than having all desks face the teacher. She has been offered multiple ways to demonstrate what she knows: posters, skits, written essays and papers; art work, PowerPoints and audio or video tapes of an interview (p. 6)." Offering a range of options for projects or activities establishes peer support as well as relationships (Sweden, 2018). According to Sharma and Trory (2018), it has been shown that with sufficient support and resources,

typically developing students can achieve better academic results in an inclusive class as compared to non-inclusive classroom settings (pg. 880).

All this sounds wonderful for the disabled community and yet it is simply a facade, a partial benefit that does not outweigh the bad to some people (McCarty, 2018). The "inclusion" many families have experienced has not been genuinely inclusive and they are opting for separate programs that they believe will be more welcoming (Sweeden, 2009). For example often times, according to Sweeden (2009), many parents of disabled students want them to attend separate proms or homecomings because they will feel valued instead of being on the outside (p. 3). Many schools are not really implementing inclusion the way it is defined- including the special needs students in with the general education students. These students feel unwelcomed and are not able to participate in the same school experiences as their non-disabled peers. Sweeden (2009) states, "I have visited schools that proudly proclaim they are fully inclusive when students with obvious disabilities are sitting apart from their classmates with an adult most of their day, are absent from after-school and extracurricular activities, and ride separate buses to and from school (p.3)." Although students are present at school, they feel that their presence does not matter (Sweeden, 2009).

Many inclusionists believe that all students with special needs should be integrated in the general education setting even though they may cause disruptions for other students (McCarty, 2018). However, according to McCarty (2018), "Full inclusion is not the best placement for all students. The general education classroom is typically not individualized" (p.8). One large disadvantage is that if a student is so disruptive that the teacher cannot teach, it is not good for the students in the general setting because they are not able to learn at the proper pace (McCarty, 2018). Many are concerned that depending on the severity of the disabilities of children can

preclude benefits of inclusion and some children are behaviorally disruptive and can cause harm

to others. Parents may also be anxious about their child developing inappropriate behavior in an

inclusive setting (Sharma & Trory, 2018). In my interview with my teacher friend, she stated:

>There were two students who received general education/inclusion time but their
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>placement on their Individualized Evaluation Plan (IEP) was primarily in ALE, as their
>
>disabilities were severe and they needed more of their academic time spent there. Their
>
>parents were not happy with not having social time and academic time in the regular
>
>general education classroom. Their parents always felt that they were being "excluded"
>
>when in reality our Admissions, Review and Dismissal (ARD) Committee was just trying
>
>to do what was best for the student and what they could handle. There were many
>
>possibilities that later as they grew and got used to being in school, they'd be able to have
>
>more general education classroom time, but at the time of the ARD they were where they
>
>needed to be even though parents disagreed. Several ARD's were held but they were
>
>always sided with the parents even though our staff and school could not provide them
>
>with what they wanted, which caused more problems down the road. (personal
>
>communication, July 15, 2020)

Teachers and parents of children in general education worry that full inclusion will lower

the standard of learning for the class and make it less of a priority than socializing (McCarty,

2018). According to Sharma and Trory (2018), teachers are inclined to spend more time on

students who have behavioral problems or those who work at a slower pace, thereby resulting in

the lowering of the general academic standards of education (p. 880). In my interview with my

teacher friend, she stated that the reality is that students are seen as the "same" but they still have

to be treated differently because of their accommodations. This causes many of the other

students to question and notice that a certain student sits with the teacher more often than others, or the other students notice that another student's class work is easier than theirs (Personal communication, July 15, 2020). She also stated that, "Even though inclusion classes exist, depending on the student's needs they are constantly being pulled out for special education services such as speech, dyslexia intervention, specialized time. Sometimes for more than one subject area. i.e., math & reading" (personal communication, July 15, 2020).

Including students in an authentic manner requires more than just interaction and communication amongst others but also intentional planning, teamwork and time in order to create interactive and hands-on lessons that allow the students to get the most of the activities (Sweeden, 2009). According to Walsh (2018), all students, especially students with disabilities, benefited from reliable, predictable lesson structure (p. 21). Walsh (2018) also stated, "As lesson sequences were predictable, observations revealed that a math teacher did the same basic lesson structure each day: warm-up activity, grading of homework, direct teacher-led instruction, and homework time. The math teacher also used wait time, discussions with individual students, and questioning along with color coding when using the overhead projector to assist in distinguishing steps." (p. 21). Walsh (2018) says, "The math teacher was confident that these strategies combined with her step-by-step verbalization and demonstration of the solving of the problems, used of numerous examples and practice problems, mnemonic devices, whiteboards, and visuals helped all students with disabilities achieve success in her classroom" (p. 21). When students are genuinely included, there are several benefits for both, the general and special needs students when the general and special education teachers work together to provide a full inclusion program (McCarty, 2006). In my interview with my teacher friend, she stated "Students are able

to a "normal" type day and see the same curriculum like other students" (personal

communication, July15, 2020).

In my interview with my teacher friend, she stated "In an inclusion classroom you have to

make sure that you and your co-teacher are creating rules and expectations that are

explicitly taught and modeled for all students. It is important to have a good behavior

management system in place which allows students positive incentives such as activities,

tangible items are even something as small as positive praise. Another strategy that is

important is modeling; using the "I do, we do, you do" model in everything you teach and not

skipping over the WE DO in that strategy is KEY to teaching students with disabilities. Having a

consistent and easy to follow routine in your classroom is a good way to help your students stay

organized while also allowing them to become more independent. I also like to have some of my

general education students be "helpers" -- I will assign my special education students

a "accountabilibuddy" and they will go to them if they need help so they are not solely relying on

teachers to assist them" (Personal communication, July 15, 2020).

Inclusion needs to be implemented in schools and below is my plan to do so. For my

plan, I will use the Professional Learning Community (PLC) framework. According to DuFour

and DuFour (2016), a PLC is described as "an ongoing process in which educators work

collaboratively in reoccurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better

results for the students they serve (p.10)." PLC's operate under the assumption that the key to

improved learning for students is a continuous job-embedded learning for educators (DuFour &

DuFour, 2016). The following table illustrates how a PLC's SMART goal will be met.

Table 1

Table of SMART Goal to Implement Inclusion in Schools

Team SMART Goal	Strategies/Action Steps	Who is Responsible	Target Date or Timeline	Evidence of Effectiveness
1. To be able to determine the need of inclusion.	1. Send out a survey	PLC team, Administration, Teachers	Before school starts	Number of surveys received back Previous year information
2. Develop a curriculum for inclusion	1. Research on curriculum for inclusion that other schools have done. 2. Invite special education specialist or inclusion specialist	PLC team, teachers	The PLC team will meet weekly to plan instruction strategies.	Anonymous surveys
3. To provide PD on inclusion to teachers.	1. Send teachers to observe or intern at inclusion classrooms. 2. Hire a professional to teach. 3. Develop strategies (rules and expectations, good behavior management system, modeling, routine, accountability partners)	PLC team, Teachers	Weekly	Student learning results Formative and summative assessments (modified version)

This PLC table and each of the strategies was created to help implement inclusion in schools based on research. The PLC team and teachers are responsible for each of the tasks. The strategies presented each have a timeline and ways to determine the effectiveness. To determine the effectiveness, some examples include the learning results of students and surveys. The first survey will go out in the beginning of the year to the parents asking questions such as: 1) Do you know the benefits of an inclusion classroom? 2) Do you think your child would benefit from this? This survey will assist in the decision making of implementing inclusive classrooms.

A benefit of an inclusion classroom is providing choices and opportunities that build self-esteem and independence for all students, as well as promote the message that everyone has a contribution to make (Sweeden, 2009). The second and third goal and strategy will foster the benefit of inclusion classrooms by providing a variety of information from professionals and strategies to benefit each individual need. Teachers will receive Professional Development (PD) and are expected to provide strategies through modified curriculum including: rules and expectations, good behavior management system, modeling, routine, accountability partners. For example, in order to have a good behavior management system you give students positive incentives such as activities, tangible items and praise. For the modeling strategy, using the "I do, we do, you do" model in all curriculum being taught and not skipping over the "we do" as it is key to teaching the disabled students. Then creating an easy and consistent routine to keep the students organized while also allowing independence. Following a sequence of predictable lessons along with step-by-step verbalization and modeling helps all students with special needs reach success (Walsh, 2018). Creating a buddy system, where a general education students pairs with a special student also known as an "accountabilibuddy". While this process may be difficult

and timely, teachers will be able to set their classroom up in a way that helps students with and without disabilities be successful.

Conclusion

The topic of inclusion may be a heated debate but I believe there are more advantages than disadvantages. One thing we can all come to an agreement on is that special needs students are unique. As educators, parents and people of the community, it is our job to work as a team to find a fit for each child that will teach them and enhance their uniqueness. McCarty (2006) states, "The ultimate goal of special education, as with all educational programs, is to assist students in becoming productive citizens. Regardless of their level of skill or whether they posses a disability, people cannot be productive if they are unable to function in the society and the workforce (p. 9)."

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