

## **Hearing the Voices of the Teachers**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the perceptions of both regular education and special education secondary teachers regarding the inclusion into the general education classroom of students who are labeled as being moderate to severely mentally disabled. With only one exception, all teachers expressed different success stories about inclusion. Additionally, all teachers who participated in this study felt supported by the special education department in their inclusion efforts, but several voiced displeasure at the administration's handling of inclusion.*

**Keywords:** Inclusion, Teacher Perception, Social Justice, Democracy

### **Introduction**

John Dewey (1897) wrote of a society that educated all of its citizens to the absolute best of their abilities. He spoke of meeting the needs of all students by meeting the students where their abilities, talents, and capacities intersected to move forward from that point. At no time did Dewey mention that all students should be treated equally – he simply believed in the idea that all members of a society were to be valued for the gifts and talents that they brought into the collective. Although Dewey was not addressing special needs students specifically, his intent that all citizens should be educated to the best of their personal abilities is evident.

Too often in our society the idea of democracy is deemed congruent with equality. According to Dewey's Pedagogical Creed, the child must be taken into account first. This differs from the current law that puts the placement of the child ahead of the child's needs (CASE, 1992). Originally, the term Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) was specific to the child. According to Douvanis and Hulsey (2002), LRE was not defined by Public Law 94-142. At that time, when trying to decide what would be the best placement for a student, the questions asked in Admissions, Review, and Dismissal Meetings (ARD) were variations of "Where would Johnny's needs best be served?" Today, the term LRE is synonymous with the general education classroom. Instead of first considering Johnny's best placement, the ARD committee is expected to explore how Johnny could make it (i.e., not succeed, be happy, or show improvement) but make it in the general education classroom with little to no thought given to how Johnny would thrive. Duovanis and Hulsey (2002) explain that "inclusion contemplates the placement of students with disabilities in the regular classroom with nondisabled students as a right and implies that the right is an absolute" (p. 1).

### **Rationale for Current Study**

Academics are often discussing the merits of inclusion for all children; however, if there is to be a true evaluation of inclusion, it is a matter for teachers to discuss. They are on the front lines of education, not just as an academic or as an administrator. It is the teachers who are working in the inclusive environments, and it is the teachers who ultimately make or break these programs.

### **Design/Method and Purpose of Study**

This study employed a qualitative case study research design using an interview method protocol as the instrumentation for data collection. The purpose was to examine the beliefs and perceptions of regular and special education teachers about the inclusion of moderately to severely mentally disabled students into the general education classroom.

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The research questions that guided this study were:

1. Do the teachers perceive that there are academic benefits to inclusion?
2. Do the teachers perceive that there are there social benefits to inclusion?
3. Do the teachers perceive that there are harmful academic implications to inclusion?
4. Do the teachers perceive that there are harmful social implications to inclusion?

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were 12 middle school teachers from the same school. There were three special education teachers and nine general education teachers. All of the teachers had taught at least four years with some teaching as many as 30 years. Additionally, all participants had taught special education students previously, either in an inclusive or exclusive setting.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

This study employed the use of interviews for the research instrumentation. There were two semi-structured interviews for all participants. Only one follow-up interview was necessary for clarification. The school selected for this study had been using inclusion for five years with 92% of the school's student population being served in the general education classroom.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this study was conducted through an open coding system to search for themes within the responses. As the transcripts of the interviews were read, themes within the responses of the participants began to emerge. Through these thematic threads within the responses, an open coding of the transcripts was employed to gather additional information from the responses of the participants.

### **Results**

#### **Inclusion Successes**

When the teachers were asked to describe their successes in inclusion, the answers were similar. With one exception, all teachers stated that they had experienced success with inclusion. One teacher explained:

I don't have any success stories to tell because I think it's harder. My one inclusion class has 16 in there, 8 of them are inclusion. So, half of the class is inclusion, and that's – that—that excused everything for those kids. . . your planning tends to head towards them, your tests start to head towards them and you feel like, okay, I'm pulling them along, and those other kids are dragging their feet.

However, almost all of the teachers commented on the social aspects of inclusion for the inclusion students with one of the teacher's comments beautifully summed up the social aspects of inclusion, "You see successes, but I don't know if it's the type of successes that the academic world is expecting them to be . . . they are given the opportunity to feel normal."

#### **Supports and Current State of Inclusion**

In this school, inclusion is meticulously handled. All of the inclusion students are placed on a particular team. These students then follow a similar schedule where they stay with their inclusion teacher when moving from class to class throughout the day. The only time these students are not served by an inclusion teacher is outside of academics (i.e., electives and physical education).

When asked about supports that were put into place for the teachers, several of the teachers alluded to the way they used inclusion in their school. While almost all of the teachers were very positive about the support from the special education department, they seemed to feel that administration did very little to support inclusion, "The crux of it from an administrative standpoint is, we have provided you an extra body in the room, now teach."

#### **Perceived Effective Aspects of Inclusion**

Without exception, the teachers agreed that there were some effective aspects of inclusion for both the special needs students and the general education students.

Several of the teachers touched on the idea of socialization for the special needs students as evidenced by the following comments: “I think it’s really positive they get to be around a bunch of their peers”, “They know these kids and try to make them feel like they’re part of the larger school community”, “they’re not singled out like they were when I was growing up”, and “I think the socialization is good for them.” Two of the teachers also touched on the academic benefits of inclusion by stressing the rigor that is expected, “It’s raising the bar a notch and then raising it another notch... encouraging them to be stronger academically.”

Several of the teachers also stressed the positive outcomes of inclusion for the general education students. Almost all of the teachers touched on the aspects of humanity, community and leadership. “One of the most amazing things I have seen with inclusion is that the support that a lot of our kids generally have for some of these kids.”

### **Perceived Harmful Aspects of Inclusion**

The question, “What aspects of the inclusion of students who are moderately to severely mentally disabled to you believe are detrimental for the special needs student and the general education student?” seemed to bring out some anxiety from the teachers. All of the teachers stated that there were detriments to the general education students but only about half of them mentioned detriments to the special needs students.

**Self-image.** One of the teachers discussed that negative self-image the occurred for the special needs students:

Sometimes you’ll get them [special needs students] and they feed off of each other . . . in such a way that it is not good. They constantly say, “we’re all dummies” and I find myself spending half of my time reassuring them that they are not dumb and that they can do this. . . . but they tend to hide behind that.

One of the elective teachers discussed her fear that their self-image might be hurt at times but also stated, “I don’t think that they realize or grasp that they are holding the class back so hopefully they don’t have any upset or guilt or any kind of negative associated with that.” Two of the teachers expressed that the special needs students often felt frustrated because they were not “really capable of doing it.”

**Number of students.** However, almost all of the teachers commented on the fact that there were too many inclusion students in the classrooms. Several of the teachers made comments such as: “You cannot have a large number of inclusion [students] in a classroom and be successful”, “I have between eight and ten children who desperately have their own needs”, and “I have ten inclusion kids in my class out of twenty and it’s more like a resource class.” The teachers seemed very frustrated with the percentage of special needs students in their inclusion classes.

**Harmful implications.** When discussing the academic detriments, the teachers all contributed similar thoughts: “The inclusion class can never go as fast or get as much of the extra application as the regular class.” Along with the academic difficulties that the teachers noted, several of them cited the difficulties of classroom time schedule and a district imposed curriculum that did not account for inclusion. One of the teachers explained “It’s a cookie-cutter curriculum and doesn’t take into consideration learning styles or ability or anything else.” This seemed to be more of a frustration for the teachers and had less to do with inclusion than it did with administration.

**Meeting Needs.** A truly inclusive pedagogy embraces all children within the classroom and meets all of their unique and individual needs (Beck, 1994). Considering that the teachers all discussed the difficulties of inclusion and the detriments to the special needs and general education students. The answers to the next questions were somewhat surprising. With only one exception, all teachers stated that they were able to meet all of the needs of the students in their classrooms.

### **Discussion**

In seeking to draw conclusions for this study, several factors should be noted. The first being that there seemed to be no consensus from the teachers about what students were moderately to severely mentally disabled. Although the questions that were asked remained constant, several of the teachers’ answers provided a varied understanding of students who were labeled moderately or severely mentally disabled. Some of the responses that were received to the question included: “those kids are all down in a special room”, “I have almost all those [emphasis original] kids as my inclusion students and “I am not sure if any of the students are mentally disabled.”

Another factor to note is that discussing the positive impacts of inclusion for the special needs students and the general education students, about a quarter of the teachers continued with a *but* response: “but, they don’t understand a lot of times, you need to repeat,” “but, sometimes it is just too challenging,” and “but it is a frustration sometimes for the higher performing kids,” thereby taking a positive statement about inclusion and placing a negative spin on it in the end.

### **Academic Benefits to Inclusion.**

Although it was not always blatantly stated, the teachers who participated in this study believed that there were academic benefits for the students who participated in the inclusion classrooms. An aspect that the teachers seemed to dance around, but never really specifically addressed were the academic benefits that the general education students get by helping the inclusion students. Several of them spoke of partnering students and having the general education students reteach the information to the inclusion students. However, none of them spoke to the idea that by reteaching this information, the students were more solidly cementing the information for themselves as well.

### **Social Benefits to Inclusion**

Without exception, all of the teachers believed that there were social benefits of inclusion. Although most of the teachers believed that these benefits were more for the special needs students, many recognized the benefits for the general education students as well. The teachers spoke of the aspects of citizenship and community for the special needs students, but few considered these aspects for the general education students. By including all students in the general education classroom, the special needs students become more empowered as well. By empowering all of the members of a school environment, all members of this environment will be able to build a relationship with the organization and will be dedicated to fulfilling the mission and vision of the school (Sergiovanni, 2001). This empowerment thus allows the school to flourish.

### **Harmful Academic Implications**

Most of the teachers noted that there were academic detriments to both the special needs students and the general education students. The overriding belief was that a disservice was done to the general education students with not enough attention being paid to their academic needs. One teacher who participated in the study stated:

I feel like a lot of times when you’ve got inclusion kids in a normal classroom, those kids are being cheated because we are not teaching a normal curriculum, which is what inclusion – that is what inclusion, as I was taught in college was supposed to be – we teach a normal curriculum and because we have the high kids and low kids, they’re going to meet in the middle where everyone learns. I found a lot of times my focus goes towards trying to make these kids achieve the minimum standards . . . and a lot of times my high end kids end of getting cheated . . .

Several of the teachers also addressed the concept of having to lower their academic standards to make sure that everyone was passing. One of the teachers also expressed that a disservice was done to the special needs students. She believed that they would receive a better education from teachers who were specially trained in working with special needs students. She also believed that special needs students would receive a better education if it was more “appropriate to their developmental and intellectual levels and abilities” where they could learn a skill and become more self-reliant on themselves. Following along these lines, one teacher also stated,

Making this easy for our special kiddos is not what this is about. This is not going to help that child as an adult. We have to say, we’re going to help you today and take care of you today . . . but our long term view is that we’re raising and gong to put an adult into the system and that adult needs to be able to function, and function well, in order to have a good life.

Her beliefs tend to follow along the lines of Ravitch and Viteritti (2001) who feel that one of the prime directives of the educational system is to make productive citizens of the students. Another teacher stated, “Academically, I can’t see that’s going to facilitate a lot for the inclusion child, but just a sense of community and community spirit. We are raising future citizens.” Another aspect of her concern seemed to be giving the students the future academic life skills that they would need to succeed not just to be a part of society but to actually be able to use once they left school. One of the reasons that special needs students have been excluded from the general education curriculum is so that they can access a more functional curriculum to meet their life long needs so that they may live independent lives after school (Bouck, 2004).

### **Harmful Social Implications**

Any aspects of inclusion being harmful to the students seemed to be met with apprehension by the teachers. The teachers seemed somewhat cautious when they were speaking of detriments, especially social detriments. Although they listed ideas such as frustration and exasperation, there really seemed to be no social detriments to inclusion. The contrary seemed to be the case when discussing social aspects of inclusion.

### **Conclusion**

In seeking to draw conclusions for this study, several factors should first be noted. First, it seemed that there was no standard of understanding about the term moderately to severely mentally disabled among the teachers who participated in the study. Even though all of the questions asked of all participants were identical, there was no consensus among the teachers about the students who were labeled as being moderately or severely mentally disabled. Several of the responses from the teachers identified this lack of consensus: “those kids are all down in a special room”, “I have almost all *those* [emphasis original] kids as my inclusion students”, and “I am not sure if any of the students are mentally disabled” being some of the responses that were received to the questions. A second factor that should be addressed is the overwhelming idea that even when teachers were saying something positive about the academic benefits of inclusion, in over a quarter of the responses, there was always a *but* response: “but, they don’t understand a lot of times, you need to repeat”, “but, sometimes it is just too challenging”, and “but it is a frustration sometimes for the higher performing kids” thereby taking a positive statement about inclusion and placing a negative spin on it in the end. This implies that where the respondents seemed to be having a favorable impression, there was often a *but* in that response negating the initial response.

From this study it was evident that many of the practices of the school may have played an intimate role in the creation of the perceived problems of inclusion. Some ideas that lead to this conclusion were:

1. There were too many inclusion students placed in each class for instruction to be effective. Often it was noted by teachers that up to 50% of the students in their inclusion classes were students with special needs.
2. Training is necessary for all teachers who serve special needs students in an inclusive setting. Many of the teachers felt that they were under qualified or unprepared to work with the students who required special needs and accommodations. Teachers and administrators need to have quality inservice training on working with differentiated instructional techniques for meeting the needs of all learners.
3. The curriculum must take into account inclusion and allow for some flexibility within its structure. Many of the teachers at this school spoke of using a scripted and dated curriculum that made it almost impossible to slow their teaching to meet the needs of all of their students. This also made reteaching very difficult due to time constraints imposed by the district required dated curriculum. School districts need to allow the teachers to teach their classes without the encumbrance of a “cookie cutter” curriculum. A large part of inclusion is the ability to meet the learners where they are and allow them to opportunity to grow.
4. Teachers must also be instructed in the ideology of a pedagogy of inclusion. Inclusion is not simply placing students with special needs into the general education classroom. An inclusive pedagogy embraces all children within the classroom and meets all of their unique and individual needs (Beck, 1994). The students with special needs were placed in the general education classroom but neither the administration nor all of the teachers appeared to embrace an inclusive pedagogy.
5. Both the special education teacher and the content teacher need to have responsibility for what occurs in the classroom. The content teachers need to be cognizant of differentiated instructional techniques and the special education teachers need to have a knowledge of the content area to be effective in instruction.

Duffy (2003) spoke of teachers possessing the qualities of love and compassion for their students. It was obvious that some of the questions asked of these teachers made them feel somewhat uncomfortable. Hopefully, this study will help to allow the voices of the teachers to be heard and end this pedagogy of silence. Overwhelmingly, the teachers all believed that all students were entitled to a quality education. However, many seemed to feel that everyone receiving the same education did not always equal everyone receiving a quality education. One of the teachers explained,

I've come to the realization, for example, there are kids in my class who will be great providers, good kids, good members of society, and nice people. I like them tremendously, but do you know what? There should be checks and balances . . . sometimes we don't make enough of saying "This is their strength and let's go with their strength." And sometimes we make too much of where they are lacking and try to force a square peg into a round hole. There's a fine line of trying to challenge and encourage them without dampening their spirit and what they could potentially be.

All of the teachers who participated in this study demonstrated a love and care for their students. All of them seemed to be passionate about education and the education of all of the students in their schools, and many of them felt that there may be a better way of doing this. By hearing the teachers' voices, this gives a firsthand account of the impacts of inclusion on all of the stakeholders, including the teachers. Although in this study, inclusion proved to have social benefits for the students, at times there maybe academic detriments to students who participate in the inclusion classrooms in a general education aspect. The implications for teachers then would be that they need to make sure that they are holding high expectations for all students and make sure that each student's needs are met.

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