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The Pros and Cons of Inclusion for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the Mainstream Classroom

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THE PROS AND CONS OF INCLUSION FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD) IN THE MAINSTREAM CLASSROOM

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Abstract

General education placement are believed to offer innumerable benefits for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), however, decisions about including students with ASD remain controversial. This Thesis highlights the benefits and challenges of including students with ASD in the mainstream setting. Inclusion represents the belief or philosophy that students with disabilities should be integrated into the regular education classroom with the relevant support to enable them to succeed. ASD is a very complicated disability; there are various levels of ability a student with ASD may have and there are also many types of this disorder. There are several effective strategies that may be used with students with ASD that can be helpful to all students in the classroom. When implemented properly, inclusion can have many benefits for all students and teachers involved in the process.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Definition of Autism (ASD)

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, (DSM-V) defined Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a "complex developmental disorder that can cause problems with thinking, feeling, language and the ability to relate to others. It is a neurological disorder, which means it affects the functioning of the brain" (DSM-V, 2013).

Janzen (1996) indicated that the effects of autism and the severity of symptoms are different in each person. For the most part, difficulties lie in the individual's ability to use language to interact and communicate with others, understand and relate in typical ways to people, events, and objects in the environment, respond to sensory stimuli, and learn and think like typically developing children. The effects of autism on learning and functioning can range from mild to severe and can cause confusion, frustration, and anxiety, expressed in a variety of ways. Such reactions include social withdrawal, repetitive behaviors, and in certain cases aggressive and/or self-injurious behaviors (Janzen, 1996).

The learning and thinking styles exhibited by people with autism are unique just as the individual and they are often predictable. DSM-V defines the broad range of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD) and specifically, the essential features of Autistic Disorder. The impaired development in social interaction and communication of individuals with Autistic Disorder is marked and sustained. They demonstrate restricted, repetitive, and stereotypical patterns of behavior, interests, and activities.

Manifestations of the disorder vary greatly depending upon the age and developmental level of the individual. Consequently, the impairment must manifest by delays or abnormal

functioning in at least one of the following areas prior to age three: social interaction, language, or symbolic or imaginative play (DSM-V, 2013).

One in 68 U.S. children has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a 30% increase from one in 88 in 2012, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2014). This estimate was based on the CDC's evaluation of health and educational records of all 8-year-old children in 11 states: Alabama, Wisconsin, Colorado, Missouri, Georgia, Arkansas, Arizona, Maryland, North Carolina, Utah and New Jersey. Clearly, this report is an indication of how prevalent ASD has become.

The incidence of autism ranged from a low of 1 in 175 children in Alabama to a high of 1 in 45 in New Jersey, according to the CDC (2014) Children with autism continue to be overwhelmingly male. The report estimates one in 42 boys has autism, 4.5 times as many as girls recorded to be one in 189. White children are more likely to be identified as having ASD than are black or Hispanic children (CDC, 2014)

Educating students with autism brings in its trail varied challenges to the teaching and other staff members charged with providing an appropriate education. Today, many of these students are being educated in their neighborhood schools, where students with ASD warrant varying degrees of assistance and intervention to address communication, behavior, social, and academic needs. Autism has been recognized as a category of disability by the federal government since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 and amended in 1997 and again in 2004. Learners with disabilities are therefore entitled to receive “free and appropriate public education.”

History of Autism

At a Glance:

"1943 Leo Kanner publishes "Autistic Disturbance of Affective Contact" describing 11 socially isolated children who share an obsessive desire for sameness.

1950s-1960s - Autism widely regarded as a form of "childhood schizophrenia." Psychoanalysts blame emotionally cold mothering.

1970s - Autism understood as a biological disorder of brain development.

1980 - DSM-III distinguishes autism from childhood schizophrenia.

1987 - DSM-III-R lays out a checklist of criteria for diagnosing autism.

1994-2000 - DSM-IV and DSM-IV-TR expand definition of autism and include Asperger syndrome.

2013 - DSM-5 folds all subcategories into one umbrella diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). It is defined by two categories: impaired social communication and/or interaction and restricted and/or repetitive behaviors" (New England Journal of Medicine, 2013, pp. 1-2).

Autism is a mental condition that is present from early childhood, typified by difficulty in communicating, forming relationships with other people and usage of language and conceptual thoughts. The term "Autism" was initially used by Eugen Bleuler a Swiss psychiatric in 1943 Bleuler contributed a great deal to the understanding of mental illness such as schizophrenia (Church, 2009).

Researchers in the United States started the usage of the term "Autism" to describe children with unusual emotional and or social behavior. Likewise in 1943, to describe and

classify the apparent withdrawal and apathetic behavior, Dr. Leo Kanner at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University also began using "Autism." "Extreme aloofness" and "total indifference" are two phrases Kanner used to describe autism (Church, 2009, p. 524).

Parish (2008) noted that the causes of ASD is not known. Various theories have suggested issues such as: "cold parenting", "refrigerator mothers", childhood vaccinations and genetic predisposition. The cause or cure is not generally accepted. Parish (2008) further added that ASD has completely baffled quiet a significant number of the most successful and intelligent medical and educational minds for over fifty years. On his part, Hoffman (2009) defined ASD as a neurodevelopmental disorder "characterized by dysfunction in three core areas of early childhood development, namely social interaction; communication and language skills; and behavior" which is usually evident by the time the child is three years old (Hoffman, 2009, p. 36).

Engagement in repetitive, stereotyped behaviors or movements, restricted interests or obsessions, resistance to change, and abnormal responses to sensory stimulation are common characteristics of individuals with autism . Autism affects various aspects of a child's cognitive and social development, and individuals with ASD often have unusual ways of thinking, learning, paying attention, and reacting to sensations (Parish 2008). Likewise, Hoffman (2009) stated that people with ASD often found verbal and nonverbal communication challenging. The integration, processing of outside information, development, prolonging of social relationships, and natural participation in unfamiliar environments often pose a challenge for individuals with ASD (Hoffman, 2009). When planning interventions for children with autism, Mazurik-Charles and Stefanou (2010) mentioned that aspects involving impairments in social interaction needed a great deal of attention. Based on this information, children with autism who are educated in fully

inclusive classrooms may require both social interaction interventions and behavioral interventions in order to effectively learn and relate to their classmates (Mazurik-Charles & Stefanou, 2010).

Autism spectrum disorders are part of the larger umbrella concept of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). It consists of Asperger's Syndrome, Rett's Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Hamilton (2000) noted that autism spectrum is incredibly broad: "Unlike other diseases, which can be diagnosed by their physiological symptoms and medical testing, autism is determined by how closely the child's condition fits certain criteria" (Hamilton, 2000, p. 40). Children classified with ASD vary significantly, and each case is noticeably unique. Symptoms, age of onset, areas of need, and treatment options all differ when considering ASD. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), "Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three that adversely affects educational performance… The term does not apply if a child's educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has a serious emotional disturbance (IDEA, 1997).

Implications of ASD

From the research, ASD students are affected in many environments and it impacts them in schools. The Inclusion Notebook (2007) speaks to the implications it has on students in the school environment in terms of "socially, communication, and limiting interests and preferences" (Inclusion Notebook, 2007, p. 2).

Importance of Research

It is important to continue developing new strategies to help students with ASD be more successful in their school life. By improving instructional methods, strategies and interventions, it will help develop ASD students with their skill set.

Thesis Question

Based on this researcher's interest in this topic the following questions will be addressed: What are the pros and cons of inclusion of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the mainstream classroom? Also, what are the pros and cons for general education students with ASD students in their classes?

Therefore, in Chapter II this researcher will present findings to address the thesis questions.

Definition of Terms

ASD - Autism Spectrum Disorders

IEP - Individual Education Program written for students with a diagnosed disability

Mainstream/Regular Education - General Education classes offered by school which includes both learners with disabilities and without

Inclusion - Term used to describe learners with disabilities included in the general education classroom

LRE - Least Restrictive Environment means learners with disabilities are maintained in the general education classroom

FAPE - Free and Appropriate Public Education

IDEA - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Resources and Keywords Related to ASD

Empirical studies and research articles for this thesis were accessed from various academic sources namely: Educator's reference Complete, Expanded Academic ASAP, Education Journals, ERIC, and Academic Search Complete, with dates ranging from 1993 to 2017. This list was narrowed by only reviewing published articles from peer-reviewed journals that concentrated on autism spectrum disorder among students, least restrictive environment, inclusion, mainstreaming. Key words used in searches included: "Special Education," "ASD," "why is inclusion controversial," "what is the least restrictive environment," "benefits of inclusion for students with ASD," "benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities," "benefits of inclusion for regular education students."

Introduction of ASD

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V, 2013, (299.00) (F84.0))* defines a person with autism as having:

> A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive, see text):
>
> 1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
>
> 2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication;

abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.

3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

Specify current severity:

Severity is based on social communication impairments and restricted repetitive patterns of behavior

B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):

1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypies, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).

2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns or verbal/nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat food every day).

3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interest).

4. Hyper- or hyperactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific

sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

Specify current severity:

Severity is based on social communication impairments and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior

C. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).

D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.

E. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.

ASD Defined Further

In the Inclusion Notebook (2007) Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is defined as:

1. Deficits in social interactions,
2. Deficits in communication,
3. Restricted repertoire of interests and behaviors (Inclusion Notebook, 2007, p. 2).

Students identified with ASD generally demonstrate these behaviors or characteristics and, therefore, may hinder their efforts in the general education classroom. The Inclusion Notebook (2007) article references Yell (2003) in regards to inclusion as it relates to No Child

Left Behind legislation. It speaks to changes in involving students with disabilities in the regular education classes. Since this time efforts by school have been to integrate students into regular classes (Inclusion Notebook, 2007).

The New England Journal of Medicine (2013) reported that Dr. Kanner didn't define autism but portrayed it in his 1943 paper where he described 11 children who were intelligent, preferred to be left alone and an "obsessive insistence on the preservation of sameness" (New England Journal of Medicine, 2013).

In the ASD population, it is very common to see a child exhibit sensitivity or reacting to sensory stimulation through taste, touch, smell, and hearing. A person with ASD may have a time delayed response to learning, or may be extremely good at other skills. One child could exhibit severe physical and cognitive impairments, another child could have amazing skills in science, art, math among others but may be lacking in their social skills (New England Journal of Medicine, 2013).

History of ASD Revisited

Writing in a website resource for parents (parents.com), Sole-Smith (2014) expressed that doctors have come a long way since 1908 when the word autism was first introduced. In 1908 the word was used to describe a small group of patients who were deemed to be schizophrenic and were mostly withdrawn and self-absorbed. In 1943, Leo Kanner published his paper describing eleven intelligent children who shared a profound preference for being alone and "obsessive insistence on persistent sameness" as suffering from a condition he termed "early infantile autism." A year after Kanner's revelation, Hans Asperger also described a milder form of autism now referred to as Asperger's Syndrome. Mostly, the cases he reported on were boys

who were highly intelligent but exhibit grave issues with social interactions as well as specific obsessive interests (Sole-Smith, 2014).

The New England Journal of Medicine (2013) reported that in the 1950's and 1960's autism was widely regarded as a form of schizophrenia that affected children and was blamed on emotionally cold parenting; parents not loving their children enough. Further study exposed the hollowness of the notion that cold parenting resulted in children being autistic.

The 1970's study of ASD brought in its trail an understanding that autism was caused by biological differences in brain development. From this period a clear separation was made from childhood schizophrenia (New England Journal of Medicine, 2013).

The DSM not only defines the condition; it makes it institutionally significant. Beginning in the 1980's school districts used DSM standards to determine whether children were eligible for special education services. Subsequent DSM editions to the initial publication looked broadly at diagnostic flexibility and expansion. The expansion of diagnostic criteria made definition of autism more diffuse. The DSM-III distinguished autism from childhood schizophrenia whereas the release of the DSM-IV included Asperger Syndrome to the autism spectrum. The DSM-V put together all subcategories under one set of diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. It is defined by two categories: impaired social communication and/or interaction and restricted and/or repetitive behaviors (New England Journal of Medicine, 2013).

ASD Summary

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V, 2013, (299.00) (F84.0))* indicated that ASD is a social and emotional disability that affects students in these areas. It also affects communication skills. In other words it is a social, emotional, and communication skill deficit disability which is on a spectrum of severity.

Inclusion Defined

Inclusion is the educating students with special needs, including those with autism, in the regular education classrooms for part or all the school day. According to federal regulations, children with special needs should be placed in the least restrictive environment. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) support inclusive practices by requiring that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children that are non-disabled (IDEA, 2001). Inclusion is meant to show that every student is a valuable member of the school community.

Researchers Nilholm and Goransson (2017) had in depth look into the definition of inclusion and showed that important factors that defines inclusion are "team teaching; administrative support; cooperation with parents; pupils and others; integration of regular and special education; and democratic decision-making". They described categorizing different meaning attached to the word inclusion. They believed that such a deep description is necessary to help educators to really understand the term inclusion. They considered "social/educational outcome of all pupils/pupils in problematic situations, with a goal not to leave anyone out of school as vitally important part of what inclusion means. They added that inclusive experience is about learning to live with one another (Nilholm & Goransson, 2017).

Further, Sansosti & Sansosti (2012) spoke to how students with ASD function in the regular classroom. In the article the authors discussed that ASD students with higher functioning skills seem to demonstrate abilities to perform in the regular education classroom very well. The authors further pointed out benefits of inclusion which will be discussed later in this chapter (Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012).

Additionally, Salend (1999) expressed that inclusion is a movement that seeks to create schools and social institutions based on meeting the needs of all learners and also respecting and learning from the differences each learner exhibits. Evaluating educators' experiences and perceptions, Salend (1999) suggested what a good definition of inclusion does: "create communities of learners by educating all students together in age-appropriate, general education classrooms in their neighborhood school" (Salend, 1999, p. 46).

In the early 1990's, when educators were looking for a common ground on the issue of what inclusion was all about, Freagon and her colleagues provided some noteworthy answers to the most commonly asked question regarding inclusion of children with disabilities in the general education classrooms. They responded that "inclusion involves placement in the home, school and the general education environment(s) with appropriate supports, aides, and curricular adaptations designed individually for each student eligible for special education services" (Freagon, Northern Illinois Univ., D.K., & And, 1993, p. 1).

Least Restrictive Environment Defined

Least Restrictive environment means that if at all feasible students with learning difficulties should be given the benefits from being with other children without disabilities. Although there are some drawbacks, mainstreaming offers children with autism a lot of benefits.

The idea of inclusion and mainstreaming takes its source from the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The LRE requires schools to educate students with varying disabilities as much as possible with their non-disabled peers. The LRE is determined on an individual basis, and also on each student's educational needs rather than the student's disability. (Salend, 2001). "The least restrictive environment concept promotes the placement of students

with disabilities in general education classrooms. It also means that students can be sent to self-contained special education classes, specialized schools, and residential program only when their school performance indicates that even with supplementary aids and services they cannot be educated satisfactorily in a general education classroom" (Salend, 2001, p.11).

Due to the fact that autism is a developmental delay that adversely affects academic performance, the process and means of giving instruction to students that are affected by ASD must be considered greatly. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA) 2004, mandated that children with disabilities would be educated with children that do not have disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate (IDEA, 2004). Teachers are urged to adhere to non-discriminatory procedures and must follow these procedures in line with accommodations and modifications as listed on the Individual Education Program (IEP). This will go a long way to ensure that students with disabilities in the general education environment are included.

For a great number of students, the least restrictive environment implies that they participate fully or almost fully in the general education classroom. According to the Department of education, in 1996-1997 approximately 45.7 percent of all school-age students with disabilities received at least 79 percent of their education in the general education setting (U.S Department of education, 1999).

In the same period, 1996-1997, the U.S Department of Education report revealed that approximately, 28.5 percent of all of all students with disabilities were educated in both the general education and resource room where they received instruction for 21-60 percent of the school day. Also, 21.4 percent of students with disabilities spent more than 60 percent of the school day in a different setting (U.S Department of education, 1999).

The U.S Department of Education (1999) report showed that a considerable number of students with learning disabilities were taught in the general education setting with their peers. However, for a few students, attending a typical school is not in their best interest and it has nothing to do with the least restrictive setting. Friend and Bursuck (2002) mentioned that it is not always conducive to have students with disabilities placed in the general education classroom to be taught with their non-disabled peers. For instance, a student with multiple disabilities who requires medical care in a special environment may receive education in a hospital setting. It's obvious that this setting is very restrictive and used in specific situations. Two settings were noted in the Practical Guide for Classroom Teachers as the least restrictive for some students. A special school attended only by students with disabilities and a residential facility where students who exhibit uncommon needs attend school and live (Friend & Bursuck, 2002). The U.S Department of Education (1999) report highlighted that in 1996-1997, a total of 4.3 percent of students with disabilities were educated in separate schools, home or a hospital environment or a residential setting.

Benefits of Inclusion for ASD Students

Bradley (2016) conducted a semi-structured interview with secondary students with ASD in the United Kingdom and revealed a number of benefits after his study. The students were put together with other peers who had no learning disabilities and were interviewed when they had interacted for a period of time. Two main themes came up after the interviews and analyses of student's responses; their perspective on social and academic inclusion in school and the incidence, effects and response to bullying experienced by students (Bradley, 2016).

Students felt they were not excluded from the social and academic life of school which is an important consideration for many of the students. Answers like the following were given by

students; “I want to achieve and do well at school”, “ I like to spend time with my friends and they help me if I need it”. Other students felt more at ease in managing social and academic issues. They made statements like “I feel happier around other people and understand them better”: I didn’t really know what some lessons were about but I can ask my friend or the teacher if that happens now” (Bradley, 2016, p. 281).

One area of benefit to students is understanding how others did things and sharing ideas and interests with them. Some of the answers they provided were “I didn’t realize other people liked the things I did”; “I had a problem with homework and they showed me how to do it”. One of the student had a tough time with their increased awareness of the social context of school. He stated that he didn’t have many friends as the other children and had not thought about it before but he felt it was because of his ASD and being different (Bradley, 2016).

Students with ASD talked about their disability for most part of the sessions together. For many, it helped the process of feeling understood and accepted by other members of the group. One student with ASD said “I was worried about telling them (about my autism) but it was okay. Most of them knew someone already with ASD; I think having autism doesn’t mean I can’t do anything the others can. They are good and bad at stuff just like me.” (Bradley, 2016, p 282).

Bui, Quirk, Almazan and Valenti (2010) showed in their study that the benefits of inclusion are not academic alone. The National Longitudinal Transition Study examined the outcomes of 11,000 students with a range of disabilities and found that more time spent in general education setting resulted in fewer absences from school, fewer referrals for disruptive behavior, and better outcomes after high school in the areas of employment and independent living (Bui et al. 2010).

Students with autism benefit in many ways as learners from participating in an inclusive classroom as well as their peers and their teachers. For instance, when students with autism are meaningfully included in literacy instruction, Chandler-Olcott and Kluth (2009) established that conception of literacy is expanded, multiple ways of participating in classroom life are valued, instructional planning focuses on outcomes and not activities as well as teachers positioned as inquirers (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009).

Children with autism and other special needs benefit immensely from spending time in the general education classroom as pointed out by Ingersoll and Schreibman (2006). Fully inclusive classrooms are an ideal location for the implementation of social interaction intervention and behavioral interventions because of being with their peers in a natural environment (Mazurik-Charles & Stefano, 2010). There's no denying that the general education classrooms are least restrictive environment for most students. As pointed out earlier, school settings have proven to be effective locations for both behavioral and social skills interventions. When students interact socially with peers and classmates while interventions for the ones with special need are in place the school day is successful (Salend, 1999).

Salend and Duhaney (1999) noted that when children with ASD spend time in an inclusive setting it provides the opportunity to interact with different children, not just those with disabilities. They posited that inclusion can help children without disabilities improve in their interaction with people from all backgrounds. They also provided a summary of research regarding benefits for students with ASD and other disabilities namely social skills improvement and academic skill development. They stated: "...resulted in improved educational outcomes..., standardized test scores, reading performance, mastery of IEP goals, grades, on-task behavior, and motivation to learn…." (Salend & Duhaney, 1999, p. 118).

Salend and Duhaney (1999) referred to data collected by the Michigan Department of Education which included interviews with teachers and counselors where students with disabilities were integrated in the general education classroom. Their findings indicated that students received good grades and excelled really well.

A big part of Salend and Duhaney's (1999) study indicated that students with learning disabilities had improved self-esteem and motivation as well as learning the good behavior of their peers without disabilities. Further, the study indicated that the intervention put in place resulted in an increase in reciprocal interactions between students with disabilities and their peers and a decrease in the numbers of assistive behaviors engage in by the teaching staff. Besides, the number of social interactions initiated by students with disabilities was increased. Additionally, the students identified themselves as friends of the students with disabilities. The teaching staff noted that the various components of the intervention put in place contributed in many ways to the development of friendship between both groups of students (Salend & Duhaney, 1999).

In a related study, Friend and Bursuck (2002) indicated that children with disabilities who are included in the general education classroom with their typically developing peers stand to reap positive gains across developmental domains. They pointed out that students with learning disabilities included in the general education setting are more likely to exhibit positive social and emotional behaviors at a level that is much greater than their peers who are taught in programs that serve only children with disabilities.

Researcher Salend (1999) showed that inclusive classrooms are ripe with opportunities to engage children with disabilities in their daily routine and in activities that elicit and challenge academic performance. In another study, Salend and Duhaney (1999) noted that the quality of

young children's social communication behaviors are highly predictive of long-term developmental and functional outcomes.

Similarly, Freagon, Northern Illinois Univ., D.K., and And (1993) suggested that there are many and far reaching gains that come with inclusion. They believed that students with disabilities get the valuable chance to interact with students who are not labeled. They learned that separating students with disabilities at the beginning of their school years is "toxic to their growth and development". They added that these same students without disabilities would in the future become parents, employers, teachers, doctors, lawmakers, and their mingling with learners with disability would enable them to empathize with them and support when they are in a position to do so (Freagon et al., 1993).

Moreover, Freagon et al. (1993) revealed that "when children with disabilities are included in all aspects of school life with their brothers, sisters, neighbors and friends, life is normalized for all family members. Parents no longer have to go across town or to a different town for parent teacher conferences, school plays, games and dances" They also highlighted the fact that learners with disabilities get valuable educational opportunity that are missed when they are not included. Several student with disabilities attain achievements academically which exceed those made in the special education classroom. Their study showed that society benefits overall "through the self-satisfaction of caring and the alleviation of the worry associated with belonging based on performance" (Freagon et al., 1993 p. 32).

In a similar study, Nilholm and Goransson (2017) referred to Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden's study and highlighted their view that: "inclusion offers mixed group interaction which foster understanding and acceptance of differences" (Nilholm & Goransson , 2017, p445).

Responses Concerning Inclusion of ASD Students as per Current Practitioners

A few current special education teachers submitted email responses to questions that this author and advisor requested. A. Schultz (personal communication, November 22, 2017), a middle school special education teacher who is currently completing ASD Practicum requirements through Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota, teaching in the Rosemount, Eagan, Apple Valley School District, responded by indicating: "The students are able to see how their peers interact with one another, which models for them how to appropriately communicate with other students. If they are in a co-taught setting there is also an opportunity to practice some of the social skills they learned in a small group setting with the co-teacher in a larger setting." Ms. Schultz pointed out that students with ASD benefit from improved communications, and model more appropriate social skills in inclusive, regular classroom settings.

Another graduate student and now special education teacher, Paul Stariha (personal communication, November 15, 2017), in the Rockford School District, Rockford, Minnesota, indicated some benefits when he stated in her response that: "The ASD student can work on their social skills. They can practice the skills they have learned in a special education classroom/environment. The ASD student can show that they are as capable and sometimes more than capable of doing the academic rigor of their non-disabled peers. It puts them into an environment where they can have successes. This also prepares them to work with non-disabled peers, which could be similar to being in the workforce in the future. The ASD student will need to be able to make adjustments to sensory conditions and find ways to not become anxious."

Further, a current graduate student from Bethel University responded to this point as well. Amanda Rasmussen (personal communication, November 19, 2017), Special Education teacher in the Centennial Schools, Lino Lakes, Minnesota, indicated benefits students receive in her response. She wrote: "students with ASD have an opportunity to receive instruction from a

licensed teacher in a specific content area. Students with ASD have an opportunity to interact with non-disabled (neurotypical) peers. It provides students with ASD an opportunity to generalize skills learned in other settings. It helps prepare students with ASD for life after high school."

Caitlin Siems (personal communication, November 17, 2017), a Special Education direct service provider in the St Michael-Albertville Schools, Minnesota, stated in her response: "I think the greatest benefit will always be their peers, particularly those peers that are intentional about developing relationships with ASD students (or any student with a disability that may impact functional behaviors). Other teachers and I have recognized the value of including mainstream students in our special education classroom because it allows any and all student to feel helpful and useful. Recently, a co-teacher of mine asked if one of her students who has been having off-task and disruptive behaviors could join my class. The moment he walked through the door one of my students (a child with later on-set ASD) was having a behavior issue. Within minutes of asking the two students to work together, they completed all assigned tasks and spent quality time together playing and reading. Adults can be impactful in providing support, of course, but I strongly believe the peer connection will always provide the basic need for acceptance and care."

In part of her response, Corine LaGree (personal communications, November 27, 2017), Special Education teacher in the Anoka-Hennepin Schools, Coon Rapids High School, Coon Rapids, Minnesota, mentioned that students with ASD benefit when they are placed in the same class with typical peers; copying the good attitude and social interactions they observe from their non-disabled peers as well as other good habits they show..

In summary, all of these special education teachers who attended Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota seem to agree that the largest benefit is the development of social skills of students with ASD when they are included in regular education classrooms.

Benefits of Inclusion for Regular Education Students

Waldron, Cole, and Majib's (2001) study (as cited in Bui, Quirk, Almazan & Valenti, 2010) reported that more students without disabilities recorded comparable or greater gains in math and reading when taught in inclusive settings as opposed to traditional classrooms without students with disabilities (Bui et al, 2010).

McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998) found out (as cited in Bui, Quirk, Almazan & Valenti, 2010) that inclusion doesn't compromise general education students' outcomes. Typically, peers benefit from forming relationships with students who have disabilities in inclusive settings. Also, the presence of students with disabilities in the general education classroom provides new learning opportunities for students without disabilities (Bui et al, 2010).

In another study, Eldar (2010) revealed that one advantage of including students without disabilities is setting them up for life outside school, including college and work. In this environment, children and adults must interact with many different people both with and without disabilities. Regular education students benefit from the exposure to children with varied forms of temperament (Eldar, 2010).

Bradley (2016) noted in his work with student without disabilities who were peer-mentoring students with ASD that the most significant impact of being involved and learning together was the feeling of "being a peer mentor for other students". One student said that it was a good experience for him as other students do not normally like his ideas or listen to him in class but they did when they were grouped together. The same student added that he really liked

that he was good at math and he could help the others when they didn't know what to do (Bradley, 2016, p. 282). The inclusion experience results in profound change in beliefs and attitudes of the school community towards disability (Andrias, Burr & Bank Street College of E, 2012).

Strong advocates of inclusion Salend and Duhaney (1999) stated: "the principle benefits include an increased acceptance, understanding, and tolerance of individual differences and the development of meaningful friendships with classmates with disabilities" (Salend & Duhaney, 1999, p. 123).

Andrias, Burr and Bank Street College of Education (2012) provided supportive thoughts concerning benefits for regular education students in that students without disabilities were more caring for their disabled classmates, improved teaching strategies, and community was better developed in the classrooms and school environment (Andrias, Burr and Bank Street College of E, 2012, p. 16).

Writing on the impact inclusion have on students without disabilities in relation to academic outcomes, Salend and Duhaney (1999) referred to data collected and compared by researchers: Hollowood, Salisbury, Rainforth, and Palombaro. Their study revealed that "the placement of students with severe disabilities in inclusive classroom did not have a significant effect on the amount of allocated or engaged instructional time devoted to their peers without disabilities" (Salend & Duhaney, 1999, p. 119).

Discussing the benefits students without disabilities receive from inclusion, Salend and Duhaney (1999) mentioned that students felt being in an inclusive setting helped them to really "understand individual differences in physical appearance and behavior, the connection between

their experiences and the feelings of students with disabilities and the worth of their peers" (Salend & Duhaney, 1999, p.119).

Likewise, Freagon et al. (1993) noted that achievement scores went up when students with learning disabilities were included in the classroom. They also referred to research that was conducted in four states - Minnesota, Colorado, New York and Michigan that looked at the impact of achievement scores of students without labels when they were included with students with learning disabilities and concluded no negative impacts or achievements were reported (Freagon et al. 1993).

Practitioner Responses of Benefits for Regular Education Students

Again, a number of current special education teachers in Minnesota were surveyed as to their observations on the benefits for regular education students with ASD students in their classes. A. Schultz (personal communication, November 22, 2017), Special Education Teacher, Rosemount, Apple Valley Schools, Egan Schools indicated by stating, "Just like every student, students with ASD have many strengths and other students can learn from them. They can provide different perspective to class discussions that can cause regular classroom students to understand things in a different way."

Amanda Rasmussen (personal communication, November 19, 2017) in Centennial Schools, Minnesota, indicated by stating: "They (Regular Education Students) have an opportunity to learn tolerance and how to work with others who are not like themselves. I have a student right now who is very gifted with technology. He has a lot to offer his peers when it comes to creating a visual for a group discussion."

Paul Stariha (personal communication, November 16, 2017), Rockford Public Schools Special Education teacher, indicated by stating, "The benefits are numerous…. They get to work

with creative individuals. They learn to help others less fortunate than themselves. They may see things from a different perspective. The students may realize that in many ways they have similar interests and ideas. When you help or teach something to someone else you learn it better. Friendships are formed and possibly things are seen from a different view pint. Teachers, hopefully, will teach in a way that incorporates all of the learning styles. Teachers may allow assessments in a different way."

Corine LaGree, (personal communication, November 27, 2017) Special Education Teacher at Coon Rapids High School, indicated her perspective on benefits to regular education students when she stated, "Regular Education students have opportunity to work with different personalities and styles of learning."

Caitlin Siems (personal communication, November 17, 2017), St. Michael-Albertville Schools, Minnesota, pointed out when she stated the benefits in her reverse inclusion model, "They (regular education students) got to know my students and became a support system and provided them a sense of belonging." She further reported, in part, that the experience of helping ASD students, "...to see a student care for another at a basic and genuine level is so gratifying and honorable."

Challenges of Inclusion for ASD Students

While inclusion offers many benefits, there are also some challenges that come with the practice. Majoko (2016) mentioned a number of findings in his work to do with the drawbacks of inclusion of student with autism. Majoko reported on social barriers to inclusion. Teachers questioned in his study noted that 'self-imposed' social isolation interfered with the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classroom. Children with ASD are not interested in what goes on around them, children with ASD prefer to be with adults to socializing with with peers of

same age group. Majoko added that ASD children live in a “fantasy world” and they hardly engage in any communication to share their observations or experiences with their mainstream classroom peers. Besides, they respond to social interactions in their mainstream classroom but they do not initiate them. They find it hard to maintain relationships (Majoko, 2016).

Behavior of children with ASD interfering in the instruction and classroom activities was another drawback revealed by Mojoko (2016) in his study. Children with ASD are fond of repetitive behavior, ritualistic or compulsive behavior patterns such as rocking and sucking which negatively affect their inclusion. The participants also mentioned children's obsession with desires and ideas as well as unusual attachment to objects. Talking excessively about specific topics while also exhibiting obsessive behavior, routines and rituals (Mojoko, 2016).

The problem of bullying children with ASD by their non-disabled peers is a hindrance to inclusion of ASD students in the mainstream classrooms. Mojoko (2016) revealed that children without ASD threaten and physically attack peers with ASD and made gestures behind them because of their irregular behavior. In like manner, offensive names are used by children without disabilities to insult their peers with ASD.

Mojoko (2016) further revealed that rule-bound nature of children with ASD interfered with their inclusion in mainstream classroom. Children with ASD expect others to abide by their ways of doing things. They do not understand the feelings of others in their midst. They are so rule-bound in their ways that they find it hard to tolerate individuality. Another significant factor is that when children with ASD are good at something they expect their peers to be like them.

Transition is a notable factor Mojoko (2016) included in his social barriers towards inclusion. He noted that children with ASD have hard time transitioning from one academic or social activity or environment to another. Their inability to adapt to change with ease is an

impediment to the inclusion in mainstream classroom. In the area of social skills and interests they are "static" as they tend to have same interests and expectation as they grow up.

The problem of social rejection is one factor Mojoko (2016) highlighted in his study. He noted that children without developmental delays avoid associating themselves with their peers with ASD. This is usually due to misunderstanding towards disabilities. Some children without disabilities associate with their peers in the classroom environment only. They do not want others in the school to realize such association.

Andrias, Burr and Bank Street College of E (2012) stated: "For all the good will that most of the children expressed, there were still incidents of cruelty, teasing, and taking advantage of students…". In others words, schools do have challenges when there are varied types of students, disabled and non-disabled (Andrias, Burr and Bank Street College of E, 2012, p. 16).

In similar fashion, Salend and Duhaney (1999), indicated that students with disabilities "perceived the academic instruction they received in their SE classrooms as low-level, not related to their lives, repetitive, unchallenging and ineffective". Responding to survey questions, students expressed negative sentiments in the general education classroom that related to "encounters with teachers who failed to adapt instructions to meet their unique learning needs". Students felt inclusion was unrealistic as they deemed it unreasonable to expect the general education teachers to adapt instruction to meet their unique learning style which results in being labeled among their peers (Salend & Duhaney, 1999, p. 118).

Benefits for ASD Students in the General Education Classroom

Although various studies stress overwhelming benefits of inclusion, Salend and Duhaney (1999), pointed out that the social benefit of helping students to interact with peers and building the confidence of students with disabilities are assistive in nature and decline as the year goes by.

Report on the impact inclusion have on students by Saland and Duhaney in the same study says students with disabilities are less often accepted and more often rejected by their classmates without disabilities and they tend to have lower self-perception than their peers without disabilities.

Salend and Duhaney (1999), indicated that elementary students with disabilities expressed that they preferred spending their school days in inclusive setting to being pulled-out. The students mentioned that "leaving the GE classrooms for specialized services was embarrassing for them and caused them to be targets of name calling and ridicule from their peers" (Salend & Duhaney, 1999, p. 119).

Freagon et al. (1993) suggested that "most common pitfall" of inclusion is not making sure appropriate supports and aides are readily available. In that period, Freagon and her colleagues revealed that school district in Illinois found that when implementing inclusion it was better to put in place too many supports than fewer. Also, they mentioned that some school districts viewed the notion of inclusion as a way to bring the cost of special education down. They warned that "if this is the primary motivation, the chances for successful inclusion are greatly reduced." (Freagon et al., 1993, p. 31).

In her address at the Gulliford Lecture, Jordan (2008), mentioned a host of drawbacks to inclusion of students with ASD noting that the foundation of inclusion programs are in fact not what we deem them to be; they were actually just forms of integration. She elaborated that the content of the curriculum taught were not modified to suit children with ASD as it was assumed that the content was equally relevant to all students. The creators of the program did not take into account that 'breaking down' curriculum into smaller steps which in no doubt helped learners with difficulties is not suitable for children with ASD. For these category of students their

development and mode of learning are different; learning about the goal and intentional behavior is of vital importance (Jordan, 2008).

Jordan (2008) further asserted that there is a problem with the notion of inclusion. The various aids put in place to help with learners with ASD to succeed in the general education classroom end up making the children more isolated from peers. Also, classroom assistants hardly receive adequate training in helping students with ASD to make positive contacts with peers. Jordan (2008) asserted that the extra resources provided to ASD students to enable them have access to other children and be included has never been tested. She also believed that until recent times the mainstream system had no interest in the diversity of children considering that learners with ASD show a big difference from learners without disabilities (Jordan, 2008).

In the same address, Jordan (2008) posited that some institutions responsible for special needs education renamed themselves adding the word 'inclusion' an indication that the word was used in a way that had nothing to do with mainstream setting. In cases where the supposed inclusion was unsuccessful it was blamed on the child and the child given a specialist support or segregated. The kind of support that should be in place to enable ASD students to thrive in mainstream setting is denied until they fail and then going back to the mainstream becomes a great task to pursue.

Teixeira De Matos and Morgado (2016) came up with a host of challenges in relation to inclusion of students with ASD in the mainstream classroom. They noted that although there is gradual development in the policy of inclusion, it still has weaknesses resulting from political influences to classroom issues. They added that efforts are made towards inclusion but schools are not yet prepared for true inclusion. They also revealed that there is a good perception, acceptance and in most cases refreshing feelings towards the presence of students with ASD in

the classroom, their presence is just physical and not really being involved in general school activities (Teixeira De Matos & Morgado, 2016).

Humphrey and Lewis (2008) examined inclusion practices in Manchester, United Kingdom and found that teachers in mainstream school do not have the necessary training and support to provide adequately for students with ASD. They revealed that teachers felt ASD students were more difficult to include than other students with different special needs. This contributed to disaffection and exclusion in students with ASD. The study also showed schools assumed that ASD students should be able to cope in mainstream setting but this assumption was wrong as difficulties in social communication and interaction experienced by ASD students increased their exposure and vulnerability to bullying and social isolation which wasn't the same for those with other disabilities or special needs (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Besides, they revealed that the preference for routine , predictability and low sensory stimulation that are traits of ASD students is at odds with the noisy and chaotic environment that is usually associated with mainstream setting (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

The findings of Humphrey & Lewis' (2008) study questioned the spirit and commitment to inclusion in the mainstream settings. They revealed that inclusion was only in name; in the sense of physical placement of students with ASD in mainstream classes. However, they could not establish they were included in the sense of acceptance and participation among others. The study highlighted that the major difficulty is the senior management team of the school. The management team they said don't really understand the needs of the students with ASD (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Responses Concerning Challenges of Inclusion of ASD Students as per Practitioners

Alyssa Schultz (personal communication, November 22, 2017) stated that "for some students with ASD the larger classroom can be overwhelming. It can be sensory overload for them. They also struggle with how to interact appropriately sometimes with their peers and being in a large group setting forces them to have to interact more with their peers, which can cause some students to become very anxious." Ms. Schultz added that her student have told her they feel more relaxed and at ease in her small group social skills class.

In part of her responses, Amanda Rasmussen (Personal communication, November, 19, 2017) said that "students with ASD may receive social punishment social punishment for (knowingly or unknowingly engaging in quirky and/or unexpected behaviors. Students with ASD often struggle with demands in the mainstream setting related relate to social thinking, perspective taking, flexible thinking, working with others, problem solving, executive function, etc. ...have difficulty managing unexpected change and transition. ...difficulty during unstructured times in class. ...get stuck in their thinking and perseverate - and subsequently fall behind on completing academic demands...have trouble getting started on activities that they don't see the value in or they cannot complete with perfection. The mainstream doesn't always provide the structure and routine that a student with ASD needs. The mainstream setting generally doesn't provide time to address social demands in the classroom, only academic demand."

Answering same question Paul Stariha (Personal communication, November 16, 2017) noted that "the challenges ASD students face are working in an environment that may cause them to become anxious. That may be an environment where there are sensory issues that may cause them to shut down or make them want/need a break. Possibly they could be in a place that their thinking is challenged. A scenario might be someone not following the classroom rules.

This may upset or cause the ASD student to want to address the situation. The ASD student may have to work in a group or present something. This might cause feelings of anxiety. Where do you begin to modify or accommodate for them. They may have to work in a room that has too many stimuli in it?"

Like the other responders, Caitlin Siems (personal communication, November 17, 2017) observed that "the biggest challenge for some ASD students is being able to "buy in" to the expected behaviors of the classroom and generalizing those behaviors to other classrooms or school settings. It can be difficult to understand why one teacher expects this but another may not allow it. The rigidity and inability to generalize can sometimes lead to isolating behaviors that other students may not be able to understand. Additionally, when general education students approach some with a caring helpful attitude, it may backfire because the student is unable to move from a behavior pattern or fixated on a particular idea".

Corine LaGree (Personal communication, November 27, 2017) responded briefly by stating that "it depends on the level of autism. Students with severe autism are going look different than those with higher functioning autism. General education students might not want to associate with them because of their differences.

Challenges of Inclusion for Regular Education Students

While there are many benefits for regular education students there are also challenges for them when they have students with disabilities in the classroom. This researcher has been challenged to find any research that specifically discusses this point in the Thesis. However, it seems that time may be a disadvantage when the classroom teacher needs to spend a substantial amount of time with students who have disabilities. Thus, taking away time to spend with

general education students. That said, this researcher sent out personal emails to current special education teachers and the following responses were given:

Amanda Schultz (personal communication, November 22, 2017), Special Education teacher, Rosemount, Apple Valley, Eagan Schools, indicated that "Sometimes students with ASD have behavior needs that can cause a distraction in a regular education classroom. This can cause a disruption in learning, which can affect the regular classroom students. Teachers at times have to provide more support to students with ASD, which indirectly causes them to not provide as much support to regular classroom students".

Amanda Rasmussen (personal communication, November 19, 2017), Centennial Schools, Lino Lakes, Minnesota, indicated in her response that "...regular education students who are not tolerant of people with disabilities, may struggle to refrain from doing things that they know will trigger unexpected behaviors by students with ASD. Regular education students have a difficult time understanding why students with ASD only want to talk about their preferred topic (i.e. video games, animals etc…). Regular education students may get frustrated that students with ASD struggle with perspective taking and are inflexible when working in group projects."

Paul Stariha (personal communication, November 16, 2017), Rockford High School, in his response noted that "At times ASD students can become a distraction. They may require more teacher focus and directions. They may be required to work with someone they do not feel comfortable with"

Corey LaGree, Coon Rapids High School, indicated in her (personal communication, November 22, 2017) that regular education students "...have to put up with behavioral outbursts. They need to learn patience. If they are easily annoyed by others behaviors, it might be more difficult for them."

Caitlin Siems (personal communication, November 17, 2017), St. Michael-Albertville Schools, Minnesota, responded to her reverse inclusion model by indicating that "every individual and personality is different, no matter what age. There will always be individuals who are uncomfortable with unknowns and the varying and sometimes challenging behaviors that associated with a spectrum disorder…. I spend some time talking about those things to allow everyone who is present (special education and regular education students) to feel heard and valued".

Challenges General Education Teachers have with ASD Students in Their Classes

Salend and Duhaney (1999) examined some comments and concerns expressed by teachers and indicated that in the inclusive classroom both general education teacher and the special education teacher start their co-teaching experience with concern regarding teaching space, identifying their roles, style of teaching and philosophical differences.

Further, writing in *The Journal of Special Education*, Hunt & Goetz (1997) shared some critical points regarding positive and negative aspects of the inclusive model when they stated:

> In addition to their accounts of transforming experiences, the teachers identified the type of assistance they were receiving from the special education support staff as "helpful" or "not helpful." An effective relationship (helpful) with support staff included (a) a shared framework and goals for including the student with disabilities in the general class routine; (b) the presence of another person on they could rely; and (c) teamwork, which provided them with technical, resource, evaluation, and moral support. An ineffective relationship (not helpful) included (1) goals not relevant to the general education classroom; (2) assistance that was intrusive and disrupted the classroom routine; (3) assistance that was overly technical and specialized; (4)the presence of multiple specialists and other visitors associated with the child with disabilities; (5) pull-out of the student with disabilities from classroom activities; and (6) the use of activities, materials, and approaches that were not typical of the general education classroom (Hunt & Goetz, 1997, p. 14).

In another study by Soodak, Podell and Lehman (1998) published in the Journal of Special Education, they put forward that inclusion can create various feelings that are positive and negative in including students with special needs (Soodak & Podell, 1998, p. 491).

Summary

In conclusion, Chapter II has shared information about the pros and cons of including students with disabilities in the general/mainstream classroom and it addressed some challenges for general education students with students who have identified disabilities notably ASD. The final chapter will provide a discussion and some conclusions about the inclusive educational model in schools.

CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Literature

In this thesis I have researched and provided information which addressed my two thesis questions: what are the pros and cons of inclusion of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the mainstream classroom? Also, what are the pros and cons for general education students with ASD students in their classes?

I defined autism in accordance with the DSM-V as a "complex developmental disorder that can cause problems with thinking, feeling, language and ability to relate to others." I also indicated the effects of autism and the severity of symptoms being different in each person. I noted that the effects of autism on learning and functioning range from mild to severe and can cause confusion and other related issues in many ways.

One effect of autism on learning that came up in my research is that manifestations of ASD vary greatly depending on the age and developmental level of the person. Also, I was taken aback to read about how rapidly the disorder is growing among children especially in 11 states in the USA. It was eye opening for me to know that one in 68 U.S children has an ASD, which is a 30% increase in 2012 as revealed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The benefits of inclusion for ASD students in the classroom is one area in the part of my research which was very endearing to read. The study by Bradley (2016) when he interviewed secondary school students in England and noted their positive responses because they were included in the general education classroom is thought provoking. Also of interest is the immense benefit students enjoyed such as social skills improvement and academic skills development. I came across similar benefits mentioned by various researchers' notably, positive

gains across developmental domains as well as exhibiting positive social and emotional behaviors at a level higher than students with ASD that are not in inclusive settings.

In their email responses to my questions, few current special education teachers provided answers that buttressed my view on the immense benefits that come with inclusion. One of the responders, Ms Schultz, pointed out that ASD students benefit from improved communication, and model more appropriate social skills in inclusive settings. Most of the answers provided by the special education teachers highlighted the benefits students in inclusive setting derive such as: practicing the skills they have learned in special education class, allowing all students to feel helpful and useful, helping to prepare students with ASD for life after high school among other similar statements.

The benefits of inclusion for regular education students underscores the argument for inclusion in my research. I noted that researchers recorded greater gains in math and reading when students are taught in inclusive settings as opposed to being taught in separate settings. What is interesting to me is the provision of new learning opportunities for students without disabilities. Eldar (2010) and Bradley (2016) both mentioned similar benefits in relation to including students without disabilities. Among the benefits noted were setting students up for life outside school including college and work and students learning at a young age to respect diversity in the community and society at large.

Prominent researchers in the area of inclusion, notably Andrias, mentioned that students with disabilities were more caring for their disabled classmates, improved teaching strategies, as well as community building was evident in the classroom and school environment. Contrary to unfounded beliefs, researchers Salend and Duhanney compared data from different sources and established that including learners with disabilities did not impact negatively on the amount of

engaged instructional time devoted to their students without disabilities. Infact, students without disabilities rather understood individual differences in physical appearance and behavior which go a long way to benefit them in their future lives.

It will be in no one's interest to put forward that it's always smooth sailing when learners with disabilities are included in the general education classrooms. More funds from the federal government is spent on the education of learners with disabilities in comparison to those without disabilities. However, in general the cost of inclusion are lower than keeping separate, special education classroom.

Professional Application

Inclusion doesn't work in the same way for all students. For example, what works well for student A might not work for student B. Student A could do great in an inclusive setting while student B might thrive well in a pull-out system. In my current school we plan how we include learners or pull out students depending on their needs and what works well for them. I closely collaborate with general education teachers to enable us give learners with disabilities the best and suitable program or service model to help them to succeed.

Limitations of Research

While I was able to find much research on the thesis topic, there is still many needs to complete further research to help with the concept of inclusion of ASD and other students with disabilities. Further research could be completed on the benefits and challenges of inclusion of ASD and other students with disabilities. Additional training for general education teachers to enable them work efficiently with learners with disabilities should be encouraged.

Implications of Future Research

Future research needs to focus on continued training of teachers (general & special education) on the strategies that are current and more effective in the use of “inclusion”. My studying, reading, comparing, analyzing, and overall reviewing the works of various researchers on the topic of inclusion revealed that for the ideals of inclusion to prevail a very big responsibility lie on the way and manner all involved in the education of a child, most importantly the teacher, to help the student in any way possible to succeed. When a student is identified as having autism it is the teacher’s responsibility to investigate the characteristics of this student because every child with autism is unique. This will go a long way to avoid making their own preconceived notions. Rather than viewing the student as “autistic” or “disabled”, teachers must look past the label and understand that behaviors that the student may exert are symptoms of the disability.

Additionally, teachers must spend time to get to know their students on a personal level, understanding their interests, strengths and weaknesses in order to help incorporate individualized goals and objectives in planning for classroom instruction. The inclusive teacher must be prepared to be persistent in their beliefs and continue to implement various strategies to help the student until a strategy is deemed effective. However, as noted earlier every student with autism is unique in their own way and it is the teacher’s responsibility to learn what is best for the individual student. The most important aspect of teaching a student with autism is to provide the students with opportunities to achieve, by breaking down tasks and immediately reinforcing the students for appropriate behavior. Although the teacher is responsible for meeting the needs of the students, other individuals within and outside of the school should be involved in planning and implementing programs for the student with autism. Teachers should reach out to previous

teachers, resource consultants, educational assistants, parents/guardians, and the students themselves in order for the student to succeed in and outside the classroom environment.

Not only are there implications for teacher practice, there are implications for the education of teacher candidates and their professional development. Looking at my experience in teacher education, personal beliefs about disability were not discussed in depth as often as it should be in relation to curriculum planning, behavior management, assessment, and other practice teaching topics. By discussing the various belief systems that teachers hold, candidates will begin to develop their own belief system and recognize how their beliefs can shape their interactions with students. Teacher candidates should reflect on their beliefs and actions throughout their practice. Reflecting on what is done in the classroom, the reason as to why it was done, and thinking about the effectiveness of their actions will help teachers create the best learning environment for all students.

Conclusion

The answer to the question of whether inclusive programs benefit all and sundry doesn't come with a straightforward answer. My experiences dealing with students with autism and other learning disabilities tell me that the inclusive setting can be a very effective means of setting students up for success. It is vitally important to draw attention that inclusion does not begin and ends in the immediate school environment. Most of the literature suggest that inclusive practices need to be underpinned by the production of inclusive policies and the creation of inclusive communities and cultures.

Inclusion should not be about putting together of teaching tips. The various ideas outlined in the literature reviewed wouldn't work unless they are supported by core values and attitudes that include respect for diversity and celebrating same, a commitment to reaching out to all

learners, the philosophy of excellence for all, and having in mind that the concept of inclusion is a series of actions taken to achieve an objective rather than a state.

This researcher is of the view that despite the educational placement chosen and the intervention strategies put in place, the needs of the child comes first. Full inclusion should be used as often and in as many situations as possible. However, it should not be implemented when it's not in the child's best interest. As noted there is no "one size fits all" approach to helping a child in a classroom setting. One child may thrive when included fully in the regular education setting and another student may make a great deal of progress when pulled out occasionally to receive service. Irrespective of the classroom setting the onus lies on the teacher as well as all stakeholders; parents, therapists, and medical personnel, to look at all available options that will best suit and influence the child with autism. In working together, all stakeholders should not only look at what would make the child an important part of the community but also look at what is going to make the child a happy individual and enjoy life as it should be.

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