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THE ROLE OF INCLUSION IN CREATING A POSITIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE  
AND OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

A MASTER'S THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY

JACOB D. RATH

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BETHEL UNIVERSITY

THE ROLE OF INCLUSION IN CREATING A POSITIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE  
AND OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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### **Abstract**

This paper reviews the current research regarding the inclusion of students with special education services in the general education setting and what steps would be necessary to effectively implement more inclusive approaches in schools today. There has been considerable debate about the potential effects of inclusion on students with and without disabilities in recent years. All students have the potential to make a positive impact in the classroom. Students with special needs deserve to learn in the least restrictive environment possible, having access to the same resources and socialization as their peers. In creating an inclusive education plan for any student, it is important to consider the role and perspective of each person involved in the child's education, relevant data, and current research and best practices.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### Defining Inclusion

Over the past several decades there have been significant changes in federal law to ensure that all children receive a free and appropriate education. With this, research has been conducted to determine best practices in instruction and how placement can impact students with and without disabilities. School districts continue to face growing challenges in identifying and classifying students with learning disabilities and determining what education plan is best for each student. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) passed in 1990, students with disabilities should be educated in the least restrictive environment possible (Lo et al., 2016). This meant spending more time in the general education classroom with their same-age peers without disabilities. The important pieces of IDEA helped lead to the model of inclusion that is seen today.

“Inclusive pedagogy is a pedagogical approach that responds to learner diversity in ways that avoid the marginalization of some learners in the community of the classroom” (Spratt & Florian, 2015, p. 90). Rather than schools isolating students with disabilities in a one-to-one or small group setting, this approach instead looks to build on the potential for creativity and growth that can be achieved with a diverse group of students. Rather than being seen as a detriment, these varying ability levels and different strengths are seen as foundational points for the entire group.

Schools that implement an increasingly inclusive model allow students to have the opportunity to learn alongside their peers with the help of carefully selected

accommodations and modifications. These changes in instruction or assessment are designed to support students as they work towards their specific learning goals but grant them equal access to curriculum and resources in the classroom. These changes can also give them different opportunities to demonstrate their mastery of the subject matter. It is crucial that the entire educational team works together to identify what accommodations will benefit the student in an inclusive classroom, and that the accommodations selected for the student are provided daily to ensure that the child has the tools they need to succeed.

### **History of Inclusion in Education**

Analyzing the past 100 years of education, specifically looking at teaching students with disabilities, there have been significant changes and many improvements. Originally labeled The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires students with disabilities to have individualized services that meet their needs as documented in their Individual Education Program (IEP) (Draper, 2020). There are six main principles of IDEA. The first was that all individuals with disabilities have the right to receive a free and appropriate education. Students were also entitled to a nondiscriminatory, nonbiased evaluation to determine if the student has a disability and what special education and related services the student needs to learn. With this, the education for the child must be designed for the individual child and provided at no cost to the parents. Students with disabilities must be provided education in their least restrictive environment. This meant they should be educated with same-aged peers in inclusive classrooms to the maximum extent possible. Finally, parents and students have the right to participate in the development and decision-making process



about the child's education and have a set of procedural guidelines in place to protect students with disabilities and their parents from any discriminatory or unfair practices (Draper, 2020). These six principles outline what inclusion and education for students with disabilities should look like in schools today.

While inclusion has become more accepted over recent decades, "there is extreme variance in the models of inclusion and co-teaching that are currently being implemented" (Sundeen, 2022, p. 227). Some who initially supported the idea worry about student outcomes, behavior issues, and a lack of support that creates problems for students and teachers alike. There is also question as to the precise definition of least restrictive environment leading to differences in beliefs about what an inclusion model entails (Sundeen, 2022). With the variance in inclusionary programs and the subjectivity in defining the important pieces of the practice, it is up to the school district and leadership team to determine what inclusion looks like in each setting. Rather than simply taking the easier path, it is important to consider all students' academic and social needs, and from there, determine which inclusion model is best.

Reviewing the literature relating to inclusion will help provide educators a better understanding of the different perspectives towards inclusion in education, the current data for students and school districts that have implemented inclusionary practices, and of the best practices for schools and districts that are looking to expand their current model of inclusion. Understanding these segments will provide a roadmap for facing some of the challenges and differences in beliefs among educators and to best provide support to all students regardless of their ability level. Ultimately it is up to the school, teachers, and

parents to determine which course of action and what model of inclusion best meets the needs of each student.

### **Implementing Inclusionary Practices in the General Education Setting**

While many ideas and thought processes behind inclusion seem overwhelmingly positive, several challenges need to be addressed in implementing these practices. While certified special education teachers have a comprehensive understanding of their students' varying needs and strengths, many general education teachers have not received the same level of training in working with learners with exceptional needs. This can create feelings of opposition in general education teachers that may feel unprepared to handle these students' learning challenges or feel overwhelmed with added responsibilities. In addition to training and overall preparedness, research has shown that effective communication continues to be one of educators' biggest challenges (Jones, 2011). These challenges need to be addressed for more inclusionary practices to be effective in the classroom.

Additionally, parents and students alike have different perspectives on how this approach will affect the different learners in the classroom. If teachers spend more time focusing on the needs of their exceptional learners, could this negatively impact the rest of the students in the classroom? How will this impact students' social growth? The concerns in implementing an inclusive model, along with those of each party involved, are legitimate and need to be considered when schools decide which model best fits their school. "In studying the successful inclusionary practices reported in the literature, one sees more happening than just placement in the regular classroom. The primary focus must be on the needs of the individual child. There are wide differences in children's needs and the kind of environment that can address those needs" (Hewitt, 1999, p. 133).

## **Definition of Terms**

There are several important terms used throughout this paper that will be defined in this section. Inclusion is “a pedagogical approach that responds to learner diversity in ways that avoid the marginalization of some learners in the community of the classroom” (Spratt & Florian, 2015, p. 90). The most current language for least restrictive environment (LRE) “establishes that children with disabilities must be educated with their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible” (Sundeen, 2022, p. 227). A student’s Individual Education Program (IEP) is developed and implemented by the school and team for each child with disabilities. It includes the child’s goals, accommodations, and modifications. Collaboration refers to “effective communication, cooperation, joint problem solving and planning, and finding solutions” (Jones, 2012, p. 297). Lastly, special education is a term that is used to refer to individualized education that a student receives after qualifying under one of the recognized special education disability categories.

## **Research Questions**

For students with disabilities to be successful, it is important to understand the impacts of inclusion to all involved parties. The first research question that will be analyzed is: How do inclusive classrooms affect teachers, students, and families socially and academically? This question addresses the importance of the entire educational team in supporting a student with a disability. For all parties to “buy in” it is essential to consider the potential impacts that inclusion will have. The second question that will be addressed is: What steps need to be taken for school districts and teachers to successfully implement an increasingly inclusive model in their classrooms? Understanding that there

isn't a set model of inclusion that fits every student, it is important to understand what practices are most important in implementing an inclusive model. Schools and teachers can then take those foundational pieces and implement them in their own classrooms.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

A review of the literature will seek to answer the following questions: How do inclusive classrooms affect teachers, students, and families socially and academically? What steps need to be taken for school districts and teachers to successfully implement an increasingly inclusive model in their classrooms? As teachers, students, and parents all play a role in creating an effective inclusive classroom, all of their attitudes and concerns towards inclusive classrooms will be considered. Data will be analyzed to determine the efficacy of inclusive classrooms for students with and without disabilities. The review will also focus on what steps need to be taken to better support educators in implementing more inclusive classrooms.

### **Educators' Attitudes and Concerns**

If schools are to implement more inclusive strategies into their approach, they need the support of educators and the school leadership team. If teachers are unwilling to adopt these practices in their classrooms, there is no way for the approach to be successful. Understanding educators' perspectives can help identify areas of concern and give leadership teams a direction as they seek support in implementing these practices.

To understand how teachers feel about their ability to be successful in an inclusive classroom, it is essential to consider both teachers new to the profession and veteran teachers. In a study of 1,623 pre-service teachers enrolled in pre-service teacher education institutions in Bangladesh, Ahsan and Sharma (2018) found that these teachers had moderately positive attitudes toward inclusive education. In the attitude survey, the overall midpoint mean score for these pre-service teachers was 2.81. This was above the

midpoint score of 2.5. However, when looking at their training, 87.6% did not have any training in educating students with disabilities.

In comparison, only 1.7% had a high level of training working with students with disabilities. While both the experienced and pre-service teachers reported a lack of training working with students with disabilities, there was a clear difference in their attitudes towards inclusive education. A second study was conducted to determine the reasoning behind less positive attitudes toward children that require communicative technology or an individualized academic program in regular classes. All of those interviewed noted that pre-service teachers had not received training on these issues and that there was no inclusion in the school curriculum. Furthermore, institutional heads claimed that teachers might be less motivated to work with these students as they feel it puts an even heavier workload on their shoulders (Ashan & Sharma, 2018).

In a similar study, Puliatte et al. (2021) examined freshman students enrolled in pre-service teacher programs. Their study looked at the teachers' self-efficacy and overall attitudes toward inclusion based on their responses to two scales, the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices scale (TEIP) and the Scale of Teacher's Attitudes towards Inclusive Classrooms (STATIC). The average total score for the 68 participants on the TEIP was high, 85.75 of a possible 108 total points. The highest item for teachers was the question asking if they would be able to work jointly with other professionals and staff to teach students with disabilities in the classroom. The average total score on the STATIC was also on the high end, with an average score of 42.62 out of a possible 60 points. The results of this study indicate "a positive relationship between pre-service teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusive practices" (Puliatte et al., 2021, p. 6).

Like pre-service teachers, research indicates veteran teachers are also concerned with their level of training and ability to effectively teach all students in an inclusive setting. In a survey of 55 teachers from two South African provinces, Engelbrecht et al. (2003) found that 75% of teachers were concerned with their ability to teach other learners while focusing on students with an intellectual disability. They perceived their lack of training to meet the needs of a student with a disability as stressful. Teachers from this study perceived increasingly inclusive classrooms as additionally demanding with increased responsibilities. Teachers identified five main areas of concern with implementing this approach in their classrooms. These concerns were administrative issues, lack of support, the behavior of students, teachers' self-perceived competence, and lack of interaction between parents of students with disabilities and teachers. For successful implementation in this setting, there would be a need for additional training and development in inclusive education (Engelbrecht et al., 2003).

It is important to understand educators' perceived level of readiness in this area to develop plans to implement these practices in the general education setting. In a study involving 125 teachers from four elementary schools with well-established special education programs within a district, Idol (2006) found that teachers averaged between 15 to 42% in their belief that they were very skilled in adapting instruction for special education students. Although many felt limited in this area, most teachers were either willing to try inclusion or were very much in favor of it. A possible explanation for the difference and willingness to adopt or, at the very least, try this approach could be the fact that part of Idol's criteria in selecting these schools was finding those that had well-established programs. Support from administrators, training, and developed

relationships and collaboration among educators could lead to a more responsive atmosphere for this approach from teachers.

Dias (2015) surveyed 150 teachers to understand their beliefs about inclusion and their inclusive practices. Teachers rated each statement based on the extent to which they agreed with it. Thirty of the items related to their beliefs about inclusion and fourteen of the items regarding their inclusive practices. The three items that teachers highly agreed with were that the child's IEP should be developed according to their characteristics and learning abilities, the need to promote the acceptance and understanding of all colleagues for individual differences, and the importance of collaboration and teamwork to ease the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Reviewing survey results from 90 kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade regular education teachers from elementary, middle, and secondary schools in northern Florida, Gaines and Barnes looked to identify differences in attitudes and perceptions about inclusion amongst teachers. Special education teachers were not a part of this study. It was noted that teachers with more than ten years of experience had decreased positive attitudes across items. Analysis of mean positive scores showed that the group with 1-5 years of experience had the highest mean score and the group with the most experience had the lowest mean score. Regardless of the teachers experience level, when implementing new strategies or skills not previously taught, teachers look to their administrators for support and opportunities to grow professionally to be more effective with their students (Gaines & Barnes, 2017).



### **Student and Parent Perspective**

A key component of any child's education is the engagement and perspective of the student and their family. Parents need to be active participants in their child's education and should be given a full range of options for communication to best support their children (East, 1994). For families to be involved and supportive of an inclusive classroom, it is important to consider the current beliefs of these parties.

In reviewing the different perspectives regarding inclusion, it is pivotal to try to understand the thoughts and feelings of students with disabilities. Tetler and Baltzer (2011) highlighted the importance of this, discussing the negative impact that comes with limiting or withdrawing a student's influence on their learning. The consequences of this are often passiveness or disengagement, which will prevent any educational plan from being effective.

DeVries et al. (2018) completed a study using The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and the Perception of Inclusion Questionnaire to determine the perceived levels of inclusion for students with special education needs. In the study of 407 grade six and seven students, 48 with special education services, learners receiving special education services had lower levels of social inclusion, emotional inclusion, and academic self-concept. However, the gap between these students and their typically developing peers was significantly smaller between sixth and seventh grade for students learning in inclusive settings. While more research would be necessary to determine the specific cause of these changes, "this may be related to the longitudinal effect of inclusive schooling, which may boost the academic self-concept, as well as the social and emotional well-being of learners with special education needs" (DeVries et al., 2018, 16).

While it is critical to consider the perceptions and experiences of school leadership, teachers, and students, the input of parents and families is equally important. It is not uncommon for parents of students with special education services to feel that they or their children are not essential parts of the IEP process or team. For inclusionary practices to take place, there needs to be a strong relationship between the family and the school. Parents and students need to have a voice. There should be constant evaluation of inclusive practices and ongoing training for all teachers and support staff (Yssel et al., 2007).

As experts in the field of special education, it is imperative that special education teachers help support families' understanding of the different components of their child's IEP. A comprehensive plan goes beyond simply identifying a child's time in a general education classroom. Reviewing her perspective on full inclusion as a parent of three children with disabilities, East highlighted the value of inclusion. East supported the idea that children with disabilities should be educated and encouraged to interact alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent with appropriate supports in place. "Inclusion without appropriate services may constitute exclusion for some individuals" (East, 1994, p. 167-168). The services and accommodations for each student should be selected to allow the student to gain access to the content and complete the assigned work in the classroom.

Yssel et al. (2007) invited parents of children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms to participate in their study focusing on perceptions of parents regarding the inclusion of their children with disabilities. Yssel and colleagues included parents from both the United States and South Africa as part of the focus group discussions. Within

these focus groups, the common theme was “you against them”. Parents noted issues with the number of people present, as well as the “professional jargon” and processes that were not fully explained. Parents also noted how determined their children were to fit in, and that they just wanted to be like everyone else. While the focus groups did point to many issues with the current processes and practice of special education teams, there was some praise noted for teachers’ efforts. One parent noted, “I really have found wonderful teachers. They want to help, they want to understand” (Yssel et al., 2007, p. 362).

Understanding the struggles that parents of students with disabilities face is crucial. For IEP teams to be effective, current practices need to change to positively impact parents’ current perspectives.

### **Student Data**

While considering the concerns and perspectives of all parties involved is an essential piece of inclusion, ultimately, many decisions that affect education are based on data. A key component to review in pursuing more inclusive classrooms is the impact that it will have socially and academically on students with and without disabilities. The following section will describe the overall impact that inclusive classrooms can have on students.

Research by Hunt and Farron-Davis (1992) compared educational programs for students with severe disabilities placed in the general education setting versus those placed in separate special education classrooms. The study found that students placed in the general education classroom had significantly higher scores for the quality of the IEP objectives when compared to those for students in separate special education classrooms. They noted that students who were full-time members of the general education

classrooms would have increased opportunities to socialize with their normally developing peers. There are significant differences in key quality and student outcome variables when looking at full-inclusion classrooms versus self-contained classrooms.

In a second study, Hunt et al. (1994) reviewed 16 general education campuses throughout California. Two students were selected from each program. All students with disabilities were placed in full inclusion classrooms or in a special education class that was surrounded by regular education classes for students of the same age. It was determined that students with disabilities were significantly more engaged in full inclusion programs (Hunt et al., 1994). Peer effects were the least consequential for children without disabilities whose classmates had relatively strong language skills and the most consequential for children with disabilities whose classmates had relatively poor language skills (Justice et al., 2014).

McDonnell and colleagues (2000) examined the instructional contexts of six students with severe disabilities and six of their peers without disabilities that were enrolled in the same general education classes. The two groups were compared on four areas: the extent to which they were the exclusive focus of instruction, the amount of one-to-one, small group, and whole group instruction they received, the person that delivered instruction, and the different instructional interactions that were directed towards them. Within the study, they determined that students with severe disabilities were thirteen times more likely to receive direct instruction than their non-disabled peers. With this, students with disabilities were twenty-three times more likely to receive one-to-one instruction than their peers without disabilities. This data suggests that general and special education teachers can provide individualized instruction for students with

unique learning needs in the general education setting alongside their non-disabled peers. The research highlights the importance and potential impact that general and special education teachers can have in collaborating and adjusting instruction to allow all students to participate and succeed in classroom activities.

Idol (2006) analyzed statewide test scores for four elementary and four secondary schools over four years in a large metropolitan school district. For research purposes, inclusion meant that the special education student was attending general education classes with their same-age peers the entire school day. The primary intent of the study was to evaluate each program to determine how much inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes was occurring at each of the eight schools. Additionally, they hoped to have a better understanding of how each school provided for students with disabilities in their least restrictive environment. While implementing inclusion in these classrooms, three of the four elementary schools made improvements in their average test score and all four of the secondary schools made noticeable improvements in their average score over the course of four years.

Huber et al. (2001) completed a similar study of 477 male and female general education students in grades 1 through 5. Each of the students in the study attended one of three elementary schools in Eastern Pennsylvania between 1992 and 1995. This district had no previous experience or training relating to inclusion. The study of high, middle, and low-achieving students found that students that started with lower academic skills appeared to benefit academically after inclusive practices were implemented. Beyond this, the number of students with disabilities in a general education classroom did not appear to significantly affect reading growth for general education students. "Contrary to

our expectations, the presence of larger numbers of children with disabilities did not lead to lower achievement by general education students" (Huber et al., 2001, p. 503).

Sharpe, York, and Knight (1994) looked to answer the question of what effect an inclusive environment would have on general education classmates given measures of academic performance and behavior. Teachers and other service providers were not aware of this study. Data were collected from student files two years after the inclusion program began. Researchers compared data of general education students with newly included students and those that did not have students with disabilities. The participants included 143 general education students in grades 3 and 4 at the time of data collection. Of the 143 participants, 35 children made up the inclusion group while the remaining 108 represented the comparison group. Sharpe and colleagues (1994) failed to show statistically significant evidence of performance differences between the two groups of students. These studies suggest that there is not a significant decline in academic or behavioral performance in inclusive classrooms.

While academic performance is an important indicator to assess, it is also critical to understand students' social and personal growth. Within Allan and Persson's (2015) study of a Swedish municipality that flipped from a bottom-ranking school to a top-tier school within three years through an inclusive education model, they documented the positive social changes and benefits that can come with a more diverse group of students. In describing the satisfaction of students collaborating and helping each other in the classroom one student noted, "And it's very nice. I feel I can ask almost everyone in my class if I do not understand. So we have created together." Another student described it similarly, stating, "I think you get an insight into the different difficulties for some and

the extra help that some need and you know how to handle situations in the future" (Allan & Persson, 2015, p. 89). It is important to recognize the student's growth in their ability to work with and appreciate the differences between themselves and their classmates as is evident in these students' responses. Alongside academic progress, it is important that teachers and schools consider what opportunities they can offer to prepare students for future life experiences and career opportunities.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) reviewed more than 11,000 students aged 13 through 16 that were receiving special education services in seventh grade or above during the 2000-2001 school year. The report focuses on four main questions to guide research. First, how well youth with disabilities achieve in the content areas of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Next, they looked to compare their achievement to that of their same-aged peers within the general population. With that, researchers looked to determine what factors relating to the student's disability or functioning, demographics, family support, and school experiences are statistically associated with higher achievement among youth with disabilities. Lastly, the study aimed to find the functional ratings of students' abilities (Wagner et al., 2006). In analyzing the data, Wagner and colleagues found that students that spent more time in the general education setting tended to have fewer absences, fewer behavior referrals, and were more likely to have paid work experience.

### **Steps Towards Implementation and Best Practices**

Ultimately, for students and teachers to be successful in the classroom there must be an understanding of current best practices in the field of special education and processes in place to ensure teachers can successfully implement these in their

classrooms. Understanding that many teachers do not feel equipped to work with students with disabilities, schools should identify different ways that they can continue to support their teachers in this aspect of education. Like any other professional development, schools should emphasize the importance of continued learning, collaboration, and field experiences to help general education teachers prepare to work with a more diverse group of students.

Male (2011) examined whether a professional development program in special and inclusive education would effectively achieve a shift in teacher attitude. In a study of 48 teachers enrolled in a master's program, there was an overall increase in teacher attitude towards inclusion from the start of the professional development program to its conclusion. Participants' responses surrounding inclusion aligned closest to 'somewhat agree' at the start of the program and moved to 'agree' after they had completed the ten-week program. This would suggest that teachers that complete a professional development program or training in inclusion would have a more positive attitude towards it than those who have not.

Stites et al. (2018) examined 120 early childhood and elementary preservice teachers from two universities. These included teachers from the general education and special education programs. Stites and colleagues looked to identify if there was a difference in preservice teachers' perceived level of preparedness to work in inclusive settings. Additionally, they aimed to see how preparation programs could more effectively develop preservice teachers' levels of self-efficacy toward inclusion. Reviewing the data from the 17-question survey they administered to participants, they determined that there wasn't a clear or coherent understanding of what inclusion means.



Of the 74 responses, only three preservice teachers defined inclusion with consideration of individual needs. None of the responses mentioned the student's least restrictive environment. General education teachers need to be prepared to support an increasingly diverse group of students. Pre-service education programs should consider "ways to more explicitly and coherently integrate preparation for inclusion" (Stites et al., 2018, p. 33) including it as a foundational component of a teacher preparation program. There is a clear difference between the way a special education student receives services in schools today and what is currently covered in teacher preparation programs. New teachers need to understand what their role is as general education teachers with students of varying needs in their classes. They should have the resources and skills to address different situations that may arise. "The most frequent perceived need was more opportunities and experiences" (Stites, et al., 2018, p. 34). Both pre-service teachers and veteran teachers need experience in inclusive environments. Field experiences will provide an opportunity for educators to observe how these practices can be successful in the classroom and practice differentiated instruction with students. Ultimately, these strategies could be effective for students of all ability levels.

In a 14-week study of thirty-two preservice teachers, Gümüş collected data through observation, interviews, reflection journals, and group discussions. Gümüş aimed to understand what is going on in teachers' minds as they work through content relating to special education as they grow professionally. During the study, candidates completed three classes: changing attitudes towards individuals with disabilities, traditional and alternative assessment methods, and functional behavior assessment. All teacher candidates stated how pleased they were to have experience working with real students in

the field. After nine weeks in the field, teacher candidates who had reported thinking this may be the wrong profession for them had overcome some of their initial fears and hesitation. Speaking about his reflective journal, one participant stated during the thirteenth week of the study, “please disregard what I have written in my second reflective journal. I now feel so ashamed of being so scared and giving up on this noble profession” (Gümüş, 2015, p. 7). The disappointment and confusion that he had originally described in his week 2 reflection was absent after completing these preparation classes. Without adapting the current model of teaching preparation programs, there will continue to be disappointment and ineffectiveness in new and veteran teachers alike (Gümüş, 2015).

While reform in teacher preparation programs could be beneficial, expectations that all pre-service teachers will be able to meet the needs of every student may not be realistic. In terms of meeting the needs of all students within a school, there is generally not always a perfect fit. In phase 2 of their study, Ahsan and Sharma (2018) conducted interviews with six administrative heads of pre-service teacher education institutions to determine the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards the inclusion of students with higher support needs and what factors influence their attitudes. As was noted earlier in this review, the majority of pre-service teachers surveyed had no training in educating students with a disability. During their interviews, institutional heads recommended revisions to the curriculum as training for multiple disability categories is not at all present in the existing curriculum. They noted that while it may not be possible for all pre-service teachers to learn Braille or master sign language, having some pre-service teachers expand into areas like these would have some positive impact. Along with that,

additional training and skills in these areas would likely improve their employability in the sector. Any reform in this area should be centered around positively impacting students that may otherwise be underserved.

Lee et al. (2015) uncovered similar ideas in their study of 410 principals and teachers of regular preschool education programs in Hong Kong. All of the participants had received a certificate in early childhood education and 76% of them had received some level of training in special education. A key finding from this survey was that being trained in special education was associated with a higher acceptance of inclusion. This was true for both principals and teachers. The mean scores in the areas of intellectual, visual, hearing, and speech disabilities were all higher for those that had received training than those that had not received special education training in these areas. While the results only show modest support for inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education setting, there is a correlation between training and acceptance of inclusion in educators.

Jones (2011) used a model referred to as the Special Education Students at a Glance Approach (SESG) which was based on best-practice research to create effective collaborative efforts between special education teachers, general educators, and paraprofessionals. The SESG consists of a Beginning of Year (BOY) form, End of Year (EOY) form, and the Inclusion Running Record (IRR). The BOY and EOY forms can be used as collaboration tools by special educators. These forms can help communicate information from the student's IEP to general educators. The IRR can be used as a collaboration tool to better support paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities in general education settings. Understanding that collaboration amongst

teachers is a key piece to any IEP, the SESG is designed to help facilitate communication and collaborative efforts. Utilizing the SESG or a similar system could impact future collaborative efforts between educators by establishing lines of communication and good working relationships.

Robinson (2017) conducted a 22-month study with 22 participants that yielded similar results. Through classroom observations, participant reflective writing, conversations, personalized learning plans (PLP), systematic reviews of projects actions, and fieldwork journals, she found a correlation between collaboration with staff at different levels and ongoing engagement in current research to improve inclusive practices. There isn't a single component that will result in the successful implementation of an inclusive model, but an increased emphasis on collaboration should lead to greater buy-in from educators to not only understand the best practices in the field but to implement more inclusive practices in their classroom.

For classroom teachers to effectively promote and implement inclusive practices, it is essential that each student is a valued participant and feels as such. In their study of seven new teachers, Spratt and Florian (2015) explored how these teachers practiced inclusive pedagogy in their classrooms. The goal was to determine how teachers new to the field understood inclusion and enacted it in their classrooms. The findings from this study suggest that an inclusive approach to teaching “requires teachers to make thoughtful choices, underpinned by a sound professional knowledge, in order to provide opportunities for all to participate in the learning community of the classroom” (Spratt & Florian, 2015, p. 96). The teachers that were a part of this analysis used strategies that accounted for all students and responded to difficulties without targeting an individual

child. Regardless of a teacher's experience in the classroom, these strategies allowed for positive interactions enabling students to be active members of the learning community.

## CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### Summary of Literature

When determining the best placement for students with disabilities, it is important to consider what setting is best for the individual student (Hunt & Farron-Davis, 1992). While many factors are involved in this decision, the goal of educators should be for each student to receive the support that will help them to maximize their growth at school (Allan & Persson, 2015; Huber et al., 2001, Sharpe et al., 1994; Wagner et al., 2006). Unfortunately, many educators feel that by implementing inclusion in their classroom they are taking on an extra burden in providing additional instruction for students with disabilities that they are not properly trained to support (Ahsan and Sharma, 2018; Dias, 2015; Engelbrecht et al., 2003; Gaines & Barnes, 2017; Idol, 2006; Puliatte et al., 2021). Many parents and students also have concerns when considering a more complete transition towards inclusive classrooms and the potential negative outcomes that may arise with this change (East, 1994; DeVries et al., 2018; Yssel et al., 2007).

For inclusive practices to be successful, it is important that there is an overall commitment and cohesiveness amongst all members of an academic team. For this to happen, pre-service teachers and current teachers need to receive proper training, there needs to be an atmosphere of collaboration emphasizing the importance of a team approach, and proper support needs to be put in place that gives students with disabilities the best possible chance to be successful in the classroom. This involves the proper allocation of teachers and aides throughout the school, as well as increased thoughtfulness about the accommodations and modifications that are necessary to help

students find success in the general education setting and an approach that consistently provides these necessary supports (McDonnell et al., 2000).

Teachers that have specific training in special education tend to have more positive beliefs toward inclusion. The importance of proper training and collaboration between general education and special education teachers is a key piece in the puzzle that is inclusion (Dias, 2015; Gümüş, 2015; Male, 2011; Stites et al., 2018). A teacher cannot be expected to embrace and promote an approach they know little about or feel like they have little support with (Ahsan & Sharma, 2018). An overhaul in thinking needs to take place that prioritizes the research and practices behind inclusion, creating engagement amongst all parties and a willingness to move outside of a comfort zone to better meet the needs of all students (Hunt et al., 1994; Justice et al., 2014, Lee et al., 2015).

Alongside training, the collaboration between general education and special education teachers should be a central piece of every child's educational plan (Jones, 2011; Robinson, 2017). This will be beneficial for students and teachers alike. Added support from a special education teacher could help general education teachers manage classroom-wide expectations while also better meeting the needs of their students with disabilities. Rather than creating more work for the classroom teacher, successful collaboration could help all parties see the benefits of inclusive classrooms and be more optimistic about implementing it in their classroom. Frequent collaboration alongside data tracking could help more students find success in their least restrictive environment (Spratt & Florian, 2015).

### **Limitations of Research**

Searches of ERIC and EBSCOhost Academic Search Premier were used to locate literature for this thesis. Publications ranged from 1994-2022 focusing on inclusion of special education students in the general education setting. Only peer-reviewed journals were used for this literature review. Keywords used in searches were “special education”, “inclusion”, “educator and parent perspective”, and “best practices”.

There are certain limitations that exist within this topic of research. There is a vast amount of research surrounding the topic of inclusion, some that go in-depth on specific aspects such as teacher perspective or student data, and some that may touch on a small piece of one aspect of an inclusive program. With the varying makeup of schools today, there is no one-size-fits-all model. Schools that lack necessary resources, such as those in small rural areas, may not be able to provide the same support and accommodations that a larger school district with more funding can provide. This is not to say that the needs of students with disabilities may not be met, but that schools may need to be flexible in determining and providing special education services and placement for these students.

There is also some subjectivity involved when reviewing studies relating to inclusion and considering the perspectives of those involved in surveys and discussions surrounding the topic. While most would agree that inclusion involves supporting students with disabilities through different goals and accommodations to be successful in the general education classroom, there may be different levels depending on your school or district. Similarly, a teacher that has little experience working with students with disabilities may have limited knowledge of the subject, therefore, affecting their perception of inclusive education. Just as education, preparation, and support are



important, so are the views and beliefs of those expected to be a part of these practices. This is an important aspect that cannot be ignored and one that should be addressed through team building, collaboration, and support from administrators.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future research in this area should continue to focus on practices that can better prepare pre-service teachers in teacher education programs and novice and veteran teachers to handle the different challenges that this approach will present. Past research included discrepancies between different age groups, so it is important that research is continued across all academic levels. The recurring theme through research is that teachers have reservations about this approach as they do not feel they have the proper training to deal with these exceptional learners. Identifying what training is most beneficial and incorporating that into new teacher programs and professional development will alleviate some of these reservations in educators.

Additionally, research should determine how to best allocate staff and resources to meet the needs of students and teachers. By analyzing special education programs that have successfully implemented inclusive practices, researchers can determine why these programs have succeeded in replicating that success at separate facilities. No matter the research, there will never be a model that will work for every school across every age group. However, understanding the foundational structure of successful programs will allow schools to modify their current practices. Research that enhances teacher training, continued education, and collaboration will be key in continuing to support inclusive education for all students.

### **Professional Implications**

Understanding the research in this area, educators should take this as a challenge and push toward collaboration. Inclusion requires a team effort, with general education teachers preparing for more differentiation in their instruction and special education teachers committing to greater support in the classroom to ensure that these at-risk students are receiving the support they need to make progress. Administrators need to ensure that all teachers have received proper training in these areas so that teachers have a more positive attitude towards this approach and are willing to implement it within their classrooms. Opportunities need to be created to not only learn about this approach but to see it modeled by experienced teachers. For any program to be successful it needs to be a priority. Time should be set aside to learn about best practices, modeling and coaching, as well as time for reflection and revamping.

Rather than finding solutions that make the job of teachers easier, educators should constantly be looking for ways to better support students in their least restrictive environment. Before making the decision to pull a student with special education services out of the general education classroom into a small group setting, the team should look at what accommodations could be implemented that could help support the student to keep them in the classroom with their peers. Special education staff has extensive training in differentiating instruction as well as developing and implementing accommodations. As advocates for these students, they should be exploring these options to better support the student before a change of setting is deemed necessary.

Inclusive practices and ideas in education are not new, but still, there is a certain level of resistance amongst many educators to move towards more inclusive models. A

critical piece of a successful inclusive classroom is the attitudes of the teachers that will be a part of it. Teachers need to understand and accept the positive outcomes that come with inclusive practices to best implement them (Lee et al., 2015). New and experienced teachers alike need opportunities to grow in these areas while being open to change and a new approach. Rather than seeing this as a completely new system, it should be viewed as a new opportunity to meet the needs of each student in the class regardless of their strengths, limitations, or preferred styles of learning.

### **Conclusion**

There are many perspectives and an abundance of data to consider when choosing to implement inclusive practices in schools. General education teachers cannot be expected to take on these additional challenges and responsibilities, given minimal training or support. Ultimately, for implementation to be successful, schools need to educate staff on the potential of this framework and increase their engagement in the program through in-depth training and experiences. Students with disabilities and their peers can benefit from an increasingly diverse learning environment in the general education classroom that caters to the needs of all students and allows each to work from their strengths. Rather than creating an "us versus them" mentality between general education teachers and special education teachers, there should be a collaborative environment that places the student at the center of the discussion. By continuing to implement research-based strategies, educators can ensure that each student has an opportunity for continued growth and success in the classroom.

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