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INCLUSION STRATEGIES AND PERSPECTIVES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

A MASTER'S THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY
MEGHAN FILIPEK

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INCLUSION STRATEGIES AND PERSPECTIVES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

MEGHAN FILIPEK

DECEMBER 2022

Thesis Advisor: Meghan Cavalier, PhD

Program Director: Katie Bonawitz, Ed. D

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Abstract

This thesis is conducted using a literature review with application emphasis. The question to be answered: What options do teachers have for inclusion strategies, and what perspectives are seen in relation to special education in schools? Inclusion is a major concern in the world of education; with a wide range of understandings of what inclusion means, different perspectives are formed. Throughout this project, inclusion will be defined- and strategies will be presented that will provide teachers effective strategies to use in their classrooms. There will also be data presented to show the effectiveness of the given strategies. With the data collected, differing perspectives will be presented to further show the importance of the complete understanding of inclusion. To further understand why there is a range of inclusion in schools, a comprehensive list of literature and data from other research will be reviewed. First, there will be a look into what strategies can be used for increased inclusion as well as strategies for teachers to effectively include all students in their classrooms. Secondly, there will be a discussion as to why there may be different perceptions related to inclusion and which of these perceptions are the most impactful. The aim of this research is to help teachers feel more confident in supporting their students, as well as seeking positive outcomes for students of all abilities.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Inclusion of all students in schools, especially students with different abilities, was and continues to be a battle that has been fought hard for years (Education for All Handicapped Children's Act, 1975). While there have been improvements made, there is still plenty of room for growth. Throughout observations and research collected through literature review, it seems that there are different ideas amongst teachers of what constitutes inclusion, and what it looks like in the schools. According to the IRIS Center at Peabody College Vanderbilt University (2022), inclusion was defined as: "...supporting students with disabilities through individual learning goals, accommodations, and modifications" in a way that they are so that they are "able to access the general education curriculum (in the general education classroom)" and are "held to the same high expectations as their peers" (p. 1). In other words, inclusion goes beyond just including students in the classroom curriculum - it is ensuring that students are developing positive relationships with their peers and teachers, and providing opportunities for students with different abilities to attend school activities. Many inclusion models have been developed to attempt to help students with different abilities be successful in school.

Rationale

Throughout the literature review, more context is provided to support inclusion strategies and explain why teachers should not only be considerate of the various strategies, but also need to be knowledgeable of them. To begin the study of inclusion practices in schools, a study conducted in Norway reviewed three inclusion settings through interviewing teachers within the aforementioned settings (Sigstad et al., 2021). The results showed that the main concern was that

teachers felt unaware of the continuum of strategies to address the variety of needs within their classroom (Sigstad et al., 2021).

To support the importance of needing to provide inclusive classrooms, there are resources that have been mentioned that would be beneficial for both educators and families to review. One major resource is from Reading Rockets (2020); in this case, an article from Reading Rockets (2020) provided beneficial information through visuals, scenarios, and discussions that can help anyone involved in the inclusion process gain more knowledge of what inclusion should look like for a student. Along with this, benefits of making sure that inclusion is occurring within the school are listed, and strategies that have been proven to support inclusion such as co-teaching and Universal Design for Learning (The UDL guidelines, 2022) are explained in detail (Reading Rockets, 2020).

The second portion of the literature review leads into inclusion models in schools. Furthermore, studies were reviewed that also looked into what other schools around the world were implementing to promote inclusion. According to Torres et al. (2018), teachers that they surveyed had various understandings of what inclusion meant and how to implement the different strategies. Researchers also argued that in order for inclusion to be implemented, teachers need to be trained on the strategies for successful implementation. Hansen et al. (2020) suggested the idea of ‘cross professional collaboration’; this phrase referred to the idea that teachers across subject areas collaborate on developing inclusive spaces. Teachers need to learn from others in order to create a productive learning and inclusive environment.

To that end, Ainscow (2020) developed a framework after having similar results from their international study that provided a more specific outline of how to promote inclusion throughout schools around the world. This framework included five main objectives surrounding

inclusion: *administration, inclusion equity as principles, community involvement, and use of evidence*, which all surround the main idea of school development (Ainscow, 2020). With this suggestion, a review of laws related to inclusion in schools are defined. With laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), inclusion is not only highly recommended, but required legally (within the United States).

The third portion of the literature review highlighted curriculum in order to best support inclusion. There were studies completed that reviewed how curriculum has been used in both special and general education settings. According to Pugach et al. (2020), one of the best elements that can happen to make sure curriculum is inclusive is making sure teachers receive training to implement inclusive practices. Not only would this suggestion make teachers more equipped to provide a positive inclusive space, but it would also ensure that the students within the classroom receive the best education possible.

The first strategy that was reviewed is Universal Design for Learning (Parish, 2019). The main idea of this model was to make the learning task accessible to all students who are learning in the given classroom, and to be mindful of all the different learners in the room (Parish, 2019). This strategy has been widely discussed throughout school districts and continues to gain popularity amongst educators. Another popular strategy is utilizing assistive technology and manipulatives within the classroom.

Inclusion is not solely the responsibility of the teachers. There is an entire team of people that needs to be developed in order for successful implementation. This includes administrators, families, and peers, each having a different and equally important role in how students are learning. As stated by Kuntz and Carter (2019), more positive impacts are students with

disabilities have an increased likelihood to reach their goals if they are able to be around their peers. Important life skills such as communication and social skills can be learned through positive peer interactions; however, that can't happen if students with different abilities are pulled out of the classroom for social skills support. To aid this process, administrators need to take on the role of being a leader for their schools, know what strategies exist, and ensure that the educators they hire are equally equipped with that knowledge.

Lastly, a review of perspectives toward special education and inclusion was discussed. This section investigated how teachers view inclusion, their level of understanding and preparedness, as well as how teachers felt about providing an inclusive environment for their students. Several studies were completed surrounding this idea, each brought new perspectives to the table. As previously mentioned, teachers that participated in the study did not feel equipped to provide an inclusive environment. A study completed by Woodcock and Wilson (2018) surveyed teachers from Canada, England, and Australia investigating what support they were receiving to provide an inclusive classroom, and what may prevent them from providing inclusive strategies. Overall, the results showed that teachers were not feeling supported by administrators through the lack of inclusion strategies presented, and that they felt the practice was not valued throughout (Woodcock & Wilson, 2018). In order to prevent teachers from leaving, the profession itself needs to be made more desirable (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Suggestions are outlined that lead to better circumstances for everyone involved.

Definition of Terms

Disability: a condition that limits an individual's participation in everyday activities in a variety of ways, depending upon the individual and their diagnosis (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Inclusion: “...supporting students with disabilities through individual learning goals, accommodations, and modifications” in a way that they are so that they are “able to access the general education curriculum (in the general education classroom)” and are “held to the same high expectations as their peers” (Vanderbilt University, 2010).

Individual Education Program: A educational plan that is created for students with a disability that highlights their academic needs and outlines accommodations that are needed for the student to be successful in the classroom. (United States Department of Education, 2017).

Least Restrictive Environment: Students with disabilities are required to learn alongside same aged peers in a general education setting as much as possible, unless stated otherwise due to a student needing more individualized support. (United States Department of Education, 2017)

Special Education: “...specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including—

(i) Instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and

(ii) Instruction in physical education” (United States Department of Education, 2017, para. 1).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): creating a learning environment where students have access to learning materials that will allow them to be successful in a general education setting (Parrish, 2019).

Statement of the Topic

Throughout the world, inclusive education is seen and understood in a variety of ways. The purpose of this paper is to examine the different perspectives and understandings, highlight

key information, and further educate individuals on the topic to make education more inclusive for students. In doing so, students of all abilities will be able to successfully participate in the academic setting and receive the necessary support they need to be successful.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Search Procedures

In order to establish accurate literature for this thesis, searches of SAGE Journals, Iris Center, Taylor and Francis Online, and ERIC were conducted for publications from 2018-2022. To narrow down the search, studies that focused on inclusion strategies and inclusion models were first reviewed. Then, surveys that were conducted within schools to identify how teachers viewed their school inclusion models were also reviewed. The key words that were used in these searches included “inclusion within schools,” “inclusion models for schools,” and “perspectives regarding special education.” This chapter will review the literature on inclusion strategies and the perspectives related to special education in three sections in this order: inclusion practices, inclusion models in schools, and review of curriculum to support inclusion.

Inclusion Practices

When working in the field of education, teachers are constantly thinking of new ways for their students to learn a variety of content, to better engage them in the material, and to increase their overall learning experience. Teaching goes beyond just planning exciting lesson plans- there is much more to it than meets the eye sometimes. One of the most important components of which teachers have to be mindful is how they are going to include students of all abilities into the learning experience. There have been several studies conducted that look into inclusive education practices. A recent example of this is a study conducted by Sigstad et al. (2021) that specifically looked at inclusive practices in Norway. The research concluded that teachers throughout the different settings of the school had different understandings and practices related to. Although the teachers had the same goal in mind, of doing what they can to make sure all

students were able to fully participate, many gaps arose as to how to successfully implement inclusive strategies for their students.

To accomplish this study, researchers defined three settings to focus on in relation to inclusion: organizational, academic and social settings (Sigstad et al., 2021). Groups of teachers were given a series of interview questions regarding two main ideas: strategies and challenges related to inclusive practices (Sigstad et al., 2021). The results showed that while teachers were successful with providing individualized needs, their concerns revolved around how to effectively include special education students in peer groups in classroom settings.

Practicing inclusion goes beyond defining the term and looking at what other schools are doing. In order for inclusion to be successful, strategies need to be discussed and implemented with fidelity. There are several resources that can be used to discover what works best for each school, and for each individual student. One resource that was found to be beneficial comes from Reading Rockets, a group that takes initiative to provide research-based strategies to everyone that is looking to help students succeed academically. In an article titled: “Inclusive Classrooms: A Primer for Teachers,” the authors provide visuals, scenarios, and discussions that are geared towards developing inclusive classrooms (Reading Rockets, 2020).

While looking at inclusion models, it is also important to recognize and define the benefits of providing inclusive spaces for all students- not just those receiving special education services. Even though a student may have an Individualized Education Program in place, it does not mean that they cannot receive an equitable education or that they have to be in a separate setting from their peers who are not receiving those same services and accommodations. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), “students who get special education services should learn in the least restrictive environment” (The Understood Team,

2022, para, 4). Essentially, this means that students receiving special education services need to spend as much time as possible in a general education classroom with their peers. This not only provides immense benefits for special education students, but for all students in the classroom. For those receiving services, being in an inclusive classroom encourages them to be engaged with their learning, and provides opportunities for them to develop strong educational skills alongside peers that are modeling positive learning behaviors (The Understood Team, 2022). Inclusive classrooms also allow for students to be exposed to individuals with different abilities and feel more comfortable around them- which leads to positive friendships and interactions throughout the classroom (The Understood Team, 2022).

Further benefits of providing inclusive classroom environments include opportunities for all students to be successful, whether or not they have an Individual Education Program, as referred to as an IEP. Since kids are receiving their necessary services in the classroom, there is less of a need for them to be pulled out of the classroom- leading to more time away from their peers, and being able to be seen as another student in the classroom, rather than someone that is ‘different’ (The Understood Team, 2022). When students of all abilities are able to learn together, they are able to build positive relationships and learn important life skills, and help engage each other in the learning process (The Understood Team, 2022).

Vanderbilt University (2022) designed a program that provides modules for individuals not only learning to become a teacher, but for veteran teachers as well. For the purpose of this thesis, a module titled ‘Creating an Inclusive School Environment: A Model for School Leaders’ (Vanderbilt University, 2022) was reviewed to provide further evidence as to why inclusion is important. Within the module, there are educational videos, links to more resources, statements from school leaders, visuals that help define important concepts, and so much more that can help

someone learn how to effectively provide an inclusive environment. Questions are brought to the reader's attention that are important guides to understanding inclusion through a variety of lenses that guide a viewer's learning experience.

To look further into the module, the page titled: 'How Does Inclusion Differ from Traditional Instruction?' (Vanderbilt University, 2022 p. 2) highlighted important aspects of inclusion further. On the page, a visual chart clearly divides the traditional and inclusive classroom, with examples from a variety of situations that would be present in the school. The situations reviewed are: school climate; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; staff development; support services; parent involvement, community involvement; resources; school self-evaluation; and comprehensive education plan (Vanderbilt University, 2022 p. 2). The chart highlights stark differences between traditional and inclusive classrooms in basic terms- showcasing that an inclusive classroom is more effective for the students throughout the entire school. "Far from being just another fad or add-on program or practice, inclusion is a fundamental shift in how schools approach the instruction of all students" (Vanderbilt University, 2022, p. 2).

Inclusion Models in Schools

Inclusion goes beyond a single classroom- it needs to be considered throughout the entirety of the school. Torres et al. (2018) reviewed several schools with changing demographics and their model of promoting inclusion. The authors describe the characteristics that the schools have promoted to be most effective, with a few of the strategies being building positive relationships, providing equal opportunities, equitable practices, and promoting high expectations. The same researchers sent out a survey to teachers in two different Texas districts.

The survey included questions that were under three categories: organizational justice, organizational outcomes, and leadership (Torres et al., 2018).

The results of these surveys also identified varying understandings and presentations of inclusion throughout the school. Torres et al. (2018) stated that this data should be used in other districts to continue to improve their working models and to promote further inclusion tactics. However, it is important to note that inclusion looks different for each student. Plans may vary due to the needs of a given student population and depending on the skills and training of the teachers and school staff. The most important aspect is that strategies implemented allow for all students to feel included, and to have a fair chance at receiving an equitable education.

Ainscow (2020) conducted a study that analyzed multiple countries of varying economical statuses and what challenges were presented within their schools. Ainscow developed a framework based on the findings to promote inclusion and equity in schools. The framework includes five main objectives surrounding inclusion: administration, inclusion equity as principles, community involvement, and use of evidence, which all surround the main idea of school development (Ainscow, 2020). The framework developed made sure that schools are at the forefront of each objective reviewed. An important note discussed by the authors is the importance of having teachers properly trained, while developing a framework for the school that promotes the opportunity for everyone to use similar language and strategies.

Other strategies that are becoming more popular in schools include co-teaching, or having a special education teacher push-in to the classroom. Co-teaching is when a special education and general education teacher are working together in one classroom to support all students (Morin, 2022). This allows for the opportunity for all students to learn the necessary material, to have their questions answered quicker, and to have their individual needs met with

increased one to one support from a teacher. With more than one teacher in the room, subject material can also be taught in more than one way to meet a larger variety of learning needs.

Hansen et al. (2020) conducted a study in Denmark that further highlights inclusion strategies. Researchers took a different avenue on developing an idea that would potentially better support all students; viewing education as a whole group approach and implementing “cross professional collaboration” (Hansen et al., 2020, p. 48). This would mean that the intention would be to blur the firm line between general and special education, and create an inclusive space for all students based on the collaboration of various staff members throughout the school. The results that were discovered from this research indicated that in order for an inclusive environment to be built, thoughts and actions need to be challenged in order for any positive change to be made. Authors also argue that “inclusive school development involves a process of transforming general and special education into inclusive education, which requires changes in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures, and strategies in education” (Hansen et al., 2020, p. 55).

Colson and Smothers (2018) discussed important laws that are implemented throughout the United States that require students to receive an equitable education. One very important law is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) from 2004. This is an act that has been developed and revised since 1975, when it was then known as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975). Throughout its development to what it is today, IDEIA is intended to:

(1)(A) to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment,

and independent living; “(B) to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected; and “(C) to assist States, localities, educational service agencies, and Federal agencies to provide for the education of all children with disabilities; “(2) to assist States in the implementation of a statewide, comprehensive, coordinated, multidisciplinary, interagency system of early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families; “(3) to ensure that educators and parents have the necessary tools to improve educational results for children with disabilities by supporting system improvement activities; coordinated research and personnel preparation; coordinated technical assistance, dissemination, and support; and technology development and media services; and “(4) to assess, and ensure the effectiveness of, efforts to educate children with disabilities. (Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act, 2004, p. 5)

Along with knowing why IDEIA is in place, it is also important to define free and appropriate education; commonly referred to as FAPE:

...special education and related services which (A) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge, (B) meet the standards of State education agency, (C)include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the State involved, and (D) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required under section 614(a)(5) (Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act, 2004, p. 36).

Not only is inclusion in schools important in general, but it is also law that it is happening throughout the country. Several court cases have brought legal attention to inclusion in schools, and other acts such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) have been created to further support

students in their academics (Colson & Smothers 2018, p. 7-8). In order to completely and successfully provide an inclusive classroom, it is important to be knowledgeable of these laws, the definitions, and the overall impact that each one has.

The discussion of inclusion goes beyond disabilities and should include who is being identified for special education services, and why. Recently, researchers have identified that in some cases, students of color are being over and under identified in special education. Ahram et al. (2021) review patterns of students being overrepresented in special education categories of emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, and specific learning disability. To solve this and prevent this from happening an idea that was brought to the surface from the article is:

working with a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., educators, family members, community members) to address issues of disproportionality, describing the challenging and sometimes contentious push to shift from deficit discourses about students to more expansive discourses that disrupt racial inequities and facilitate systems change (Ahram et al., 2021 p. 327).

While highlighting how important inclusion is, it is equally important to recognize that there are issues within the educational system that need to be addressed. There are further issues within education that cannot be resolved with inclusion practices alone. Educators need to be mindful reasoning for special education services, and work to implement equitable solutions beforehand to help students be successful in the classroom.

Review of Curriculum to Support Inclusion

Pugach et al. (2020) wrote an article that reviewed what curriculum teachers were using, and what can be improved to make the material accessible for all students to be successful. More specifically, the researchers looked at how the curriculum has been used in special education, as well as how students have equal access to the general education curriculum. In essence, the researchers wanted to enhance the existing curriculum and create material that would be useful in both general education and special education classrooms (Pugach et al., 2020). Researchers looked into different programs and discussed why they are beneficial for students receiving special education services.

After reviewing several different studies, one key characteristic of a strong program is teachers with dual certification. These teachers would have received both general and special education training (Pugach et al., 2020). This would help promote inclusion into the classroom since teachers would be knowledgeable of inclusion strategies. Special education training also includes topics regarding collaboration with other teachers on curriculum in multiple subject areas to best support their students. It goes to show that it is vital to create a system that will allow for all students to be included academically, while also implementing strategies that will allow for these students to learn the material successfully.

One strategy that is being taught and widely implemented in schools is known as Universal Design for Learning; also referred to as UDL. Essentially, the main idea of this tactic is to make the learning task accessible to all students that are learning in the given classroom, and to be mindful of all the different learners in the room. Parish (2019) provides three ways to successfully implement UDL: providing content through various learning styles, incorporating student choice, and providing necessary supportive tools to all students in the classroom (Parish,

2019). These points may seem basic, but they are vitally important to student success and a successful inclusive classroom.

Assistive Technology and Manipulatives in the Classroom

Another vital inclusion tactic that is gaining popularity is the use of assistive technology. More students have access to cellphones, schools are providing individual computers, and teachers are gaining digital resources to provide a differentiated angle of instruction. Within the conversation of technology, it is important to discuss online teaching and digital learning through the COVID-19 pandemic. Evans-Amalu and Claravall (2021) review articles that relate to the gaps in education that were highlighted, and how teachers' problems were solved during the challenging time. For some students, the switch to online learning may have been beneficial to their learning styles. For others, it was incredibly hard for more than one reason. Evans-Amalu and Claravall stated:

“We define an inclusive curriculum as the commitment toward attaining social justice and equity in teaching and learning. It is our vision and desire to develop and foster curricula that challenge and dismantle structural and systemic issues (e.g., racism, ableism, sexism, classism, linguicism, ageism, heterosexism, religious bias, and xenophobia) that our global society currently faces” (Evans-Amalu & Claravall, 2021, p. 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought several challenges, such as lack of access to materials and necessary tools needed to support students, to the spotlight. So many students were left with less resources at home than they had at school, and were not receiving the necessary support that they needed while at home. If anything, this helped teachers navigate how to further implement technology into their curriculum. Technology can be beneficial for several students in a variety

of ways. One article that was reviewed by Evans-Amalu and Claravall (2021) is the article titled: “Lessons Learned from a Rural Classroom Study: Transitioning from Concrete to Virtual Manipulatives to Teach Math Fact Fluency to Students with Learning Disabilities.” The authors discussed how using technology in math provides a different and effective approach to learning that can help to increase student understanding of the subject. “Using representations, particularly manipulatives, was one of the most effective evidence-based strategies for students with disabilities followed by peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS)” (Kabel et al., 2021). This goes back to the idea that one student does not learn like another, and that when there are more avenues for students to learn through, the better understanding of the content there will be. Two types of virtual manipulatives that the author mentioned are: static (visual) and dynamic (able to move) manipulatives (Kabel et al., 2021). With new ways to implement technology in the classroom, these tools can be used for all students. In a lot of cases, using technology as a tool is used as an accommodation for students on an IEP. The more tools that we can make accessible for everyone, the better off students will be.

Kuntz and Carter (2019) focused on inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities. From their research, they stated: “Many scholars have argued that the communication and social skills difficulties experienced by many students with intellectual disability could be positively impacted by ongoing opportunities to learn alongside classmates without similar disabilities” (Kuntz & Carter, 2019, p. 104). Even though students may be struggling with important life skills such as communication, they may benefit from being around their peers and have the opportunity to learn those skills from them. Secluding students from this opportunity may do more harm than good.

Interventions that the authors reviewed included systematic instruction, peer support arrangements, self-management strategies, peer-mediated communication interventions, and educational placement changes (Kuntz & Carter, 2019). After 40 different articles were reviewed, they found that these interventions can be combined together for beneficial academic, social, and behavioral outcomes (Kuntz & Carter, 2019). As students get older, the academic curriculum becomes harder, and expectations rise amongst teachers. Although students are required to spend as much time in the least restrictive environment, students with intellectual disabilities are spending their general education time in elective courses, rather than academic courses (Kuntz & Carter, 2019). With that being said, more work needs to be done to make better program placement decisions for students that will ensure they are able to learn in the least restrictive environment.

To specifically hone in on one academic subject, Roos (2019) wrote an article that primarily focuses on math and how to make the subject more inclusive to all learners. Math can be a challenging subject for a lot of students, even more so for those students who are living with a disability. While keeping that in mind, teachers need to be better about creating accessible materials that students can be successful with. Every student can be successful with the right tools. If students are struggling, that is a sign for the teacher to get them further help.

Inclusion can look different in a variety of settings, but when it comes to academic subjects such as math, it is all about creating opportunities for all students to learn and be successful in that given environment. Roos (2019) concluded her literature review by stating: “to promote a sustainable development of inclusion, the two uses need to be connected; a hope is that inclusion can be used more in terms of nuance of a color, origination from the same core, but with variation expressing its various aspects and connecting and interrelating the ideological and

operations aspects of inclusion” (Roos, 2019, p. 37). Essentially, both the idea and the way of teaching need to be used together to create a successful inclusive classroom.

Preparation for Inclusion

In order to have inclusive practices in place and inclusive classrooms, teachers and principals must be prepared to do so. It all starts with having strong leaders in administrative roles within the school that promote the inclusive environment. They need to be aware of the existing practices and be taught on what an inclusive space looks like for students with different abilities. According to DeMatthews et al. (2020) it all starts with being taught how to be a leader in education. Specifically for special education, principals need to be aware of special education laws and policies that are in place, be mindful of the gaps and disproportionality, and prepare the teachers within the school on how to be successful for each student in their classroom.

Throughout their research, the authors discovered that “each principal learned very little about disabilities” (DeMatthews et al., 2020, p. 312). This is a very alarming statement. Change cannot be expected unless there is change happening behind the scenes. In order to serve our students better, teachers and principals need to be better prepared. Knowing that principals are being taught very little about special education practices, further research can be done to make sure that the programs are being built upon to better teach about special education. When the school leaders are being taught about needs in relation to special education, a better inclusive environment can be developed overall.

Attitudes towards Inclusion and Special Education

Inclusive education is something that can be easier said than done, and in some cases, easier said than received by some people. One study that was completed focused on the perspectives from special education teachers (Carslile, 2021). The two main questions that were

asked aimed to find the answer to whether or not there is a correlation to years of experience and the perspectives that are held, as well as whether or not perspectives differ based on the academic setting (Carslile, 2021). Legally, all teachers have to provide the least restrictive environment for all students. This derives from the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004, which has been accompanied by other court cases that have fought for inclusion in schools that have continued to place a spotlight on inclusion (Carslile, 2021). With that being said, teachers need to be prepared to include students with disabilities in their classroom. Special education teachers are there to support this, although there are attitudes from general educators that can make or break the effectiveness of the inclusion strategies presented.

Training for Inclusion

One important fact that needs to be acknowledged with regard to needing teachers to be properly trained on inclusion, is that in order to train teachers, we need teachers to continue in their career. There is an especially major shortage of special education teachers. With that being said, there are still so many student needs that have to be met. An article that was written focused on these exact factors, and provides examples on how to make sure students with disabilities are still getting what they need to be successful. The main components that were focused on included: “staffing schools in remote and rural areas, recruiting and retaining teachers of color, staffing alternative educational placements, and combating attrition” (Mason-Williams et al., 2020, p. 49). Understandably, people want to work in a good environment, and be paid better money than what they currently are. To help slow the shortage, a few ideas that the author proposed include: paying teachers more in all areas, improving working conditions, continuing to gain support from changemakers, and being willing to provide more information on how to work with students with disabilities (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

On top of this, another study was done that discussed inclusion with teachers from Canada, England and Australia. Teachers were asked a series of questions on what sort of support they are receiving, as well as an understanding of inclusion (Woodcock & Wolfson, 2018). Two questions that were asked ask about what support there is for inclusion, and what barriers may exist that prevent inclusion from happening in the classroom (Woodcock & Wolfson, 2018). When it came to discussion creating an inclusive environment, a majority of teachers had negative responses. The teachers that participated in the study stated that there is limited time to prepare, increased demands, a feeling of being overwhelmed, and feeling burned out (Woodcock & Wolfson, 2018). Then, when teachers were asked about their perspective on inclusion, there were also negative responses geared toward other teachers being unwilling to help and do not value inclusion, families not being supportive, and again not feeling supported (Woodcock & Wolfson, 2018). With reviewing these results, it is clear that teachers need to be better trained and supported if inclusion is being best implemented in schools.

To further look into what other perspectives are, Carlisle (2021) utilized several questions to discover possible answers to the two questions presented. The author notes that concerns that were mentioned by general and special education teachers through the questions asked included: “inclusion could potentially harm special education student success, disrupt the learning of general education students, lead to bullying of special education students, and place undue burden on teachers” (Carlsile, 2021, p. 82). The author also noted that there was no correlation between years of experience working in special education and views on inclusion, but that there was a strong sense of need for training from teachers to help them to feel more prepared with supporting all students within their classroom (Carlsile, 2021). With research like this conducted, further emphasis can be placed on the need for training to be implemented to further support

teachers. When teachers are supported, there is nothing but good that can come out of it for all students.

A study was completed that reviewed attitudes towards inclusion in Australia, Barbados, Romania, Turkey, and the United States. Gregory (2017) states that: “If the goal of a system of education is to be inclusive, then this research suggests that deconstructing the parallel system of special education will improve the affective and behavioral domains of educator’s attitudes and behavioral intentions. This, in turn, will positively impact the educational experience of students with mild to moderate disabilities, as the promises of inclusive education can be realized” (Gregory, 2017, p. 143). Each country has different educational systems put in place, with the United States being known for separating students with special needs. (Gregory, 2017) Although, there have been major turning points within the United States that have created more inclusive classrooms around the country, due to the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004 (Gregory, 2017) While it is positive to see that there have been changes within the United States, there is still plenty of work to be done to continue to promote inclusion.

Legal Support for Inclusion

Specifically in the United States, inclusion in schools has been known to increase within the last twenty years with the No Child Left Behind Act from 2001 and the Individuals with Education Improvement Act from 2004 (Gregory, 2017). Although, not all children are having a fair shot at receiving the fair education that they deserve (Gregory, 2017). Students are not being supported correctly if they are being pulled away completely from the general education setting. Doing this takes away a student's ability to access the needed education and build important relationships with peers.

With acknowledging that there are varying perspectives towards special education, it is important to further acknowledge that negative attitudes towards this subject will not change overnight, nor will it be an easy task. A study that looked at attitudes towards students with different abilities at five schools in Hungary resulted in researchers making this statement: “participants value an inclusive approach in the overall development of students with disabilities, but display mixed attitudes towards the ‘full’ participation of pupils with disabilities in inclusive classrooms” (Sharma et al., 2018, p. 83). Researchers looked at what teachers value in making sure students are included, as well as their overall attitude towards students with disabilities.

Researchers noted that part of their study was looking at what advantages and disadvantages students have in an inclusive environment. Without surprise, there were more advantages than disadvantages listed (Sharma et al., 2018). Hungary has been known as a country that has been a leader in special education services. They established the first school for students with hearing disabilities, and developed the first teacher training program, and have been leaders in providing an inclusive education throughout Europe (Sharma et al., 2018). Knowing this, it is important to reflect on what has been successful within their schools and consider what changes could be made within the schools in the United States. After reviewing the results that were presented, it seems that there is a consistency in the fact that attitudes towards students with disabilities and special education. Results were based on factors such as age, gender, and previous experience (Sharma et al., 2018), but tended to agree that inclusion is important for students with disabilities to learn effectively (Sharma et al., 2018). It is positive to see that there are some that see inclusion as a major part of education, but equally disappointing

to see that there are still people out there that do not understand the importance of including all children in a given classroom.

Another study done in British Columbia was completed through survey results that were completed by teachers, parents, principals, and superintendents. The survey that was sent out asked eight different questions under these categories; grade transitions, school setting, standardized testing, graduation rates, delegated time within the program, consistency or change in setting, sociodemographic variabilities (Baumbusch et al., 2019). The approach that was taken for this study was referred to as RPS- Research Priority Setting (Baumbusch et al., 2019). The objective of RPS is to “establish consensus among stakeholders (that is, knowledge users and researchers) in order to direct research efforts” (Baumbusch et al., 2019 p. 2) and “to explore educational leaders’ perspectives on research priorities in special education” (Baumbusch et al., 2019, p. 3).

The results of this survey indicated that the objectives that were rated with the highest importance were: grade to grade transitions, high school graduation, time to designation, and sociodemographic differences (Baumbusch et al., 2019). In relation to grade to grade transitions, the author notes that: “By prioritizing this area first, educational leaders may be indicating the need for research to further examine what systems of delivery best support the educational journeys of students with special needs” (Baumbusch et al., 2019, p. 12). Overall, researchers concluded that the research that they had conducted is another step forward in highlighting the importance of educators being a part of the results brought to the surface to make sure that they are prepared in their classrooms, and are able to have a positive outlook in relation to making sure every student is successful in the learning environment.

Another article that was written looked into what sort of attitudes teachers in Finland had toward the concept of inclusion. The author reviewed numerous studies and initiated a questionnaire that was given to teachers that were chosen to be participants in the study. To look further into the idea, the author used the *Teachers' Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education Scale (TAIS)* and the *Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES)* to collect accurate data. Results found that: "Finnish teachers' overall scores have been near the neutral midpoint of the scales, indicating a generally lower acceptance of inclusion than that obtained in other western countries" (Salovita, 2020, p. 273). These results further indicate that there needs to be change in perspectives and attitudes world-wide to provide an inclusive education for all students.

Inclusion Teams

With discussing attitudes towards special education, it is important to acknowledge the team of people that it takes to ensure students with special needs are receiving the correct services they need to be successful. One of the most important aspects of the team is the parents. A study was conducted that had the purpose of examining "parents' perspectives and experiences of special education, including the degree to which decisions about their child's education were implemented as they had agreed upon with the school personnel." and "understand how parents explain why school personnel do or do not implement elements of their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP)" (Zagona et al., 2018, p.105). To conduct this study, researchers put together seven groups of parents of children that have an intellectual or developmental disability to discuss with them what their experience was in helping to make the decisions for their child's educational experience (Zagona et al., 2018).

Not only is parents' involvement essential in the IEP process, but it is also required by the U.S. Supreme Court. This decision was made in 2007- the Supreme court held the *Winkelman v.*

Parma case which required parent involvement through the IEP process, and identified the rights of the families involved (Zagona et al., 2018). Although parent involvement is required by law, this does not mean that families have the best experience possible. There are still times where trying to make sure students are receiving the necessary support is extremely difficult. Parents have reported that they have trouble receiving the services they want for their child, and that it can be challenging to agree on what is best for the given student (Zagona et al., 2018). Results of this study included the fact that parents were struggling to reach an appropriate agreement with the school due to the lack of services provided, as well as barriers in the system such as educators being unaware of student needs and being knowledgeable of proper inclusion strategies (Zagona et al., 2018).

In comparison to this study, data was collected from schools in Germany that continued to view how parents felt about inclusion. The results of this study were collected by the *JAKO-O* survey which seeks to gain parents' perspective of the overall support a child receives from their school (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). Just as in the United States, there are varying views and perspectives in relation to inclusion. One important result that came from this study was the fact that depending on what disability the child was living with depended on how parents felt about their inclusion (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). In response to this results, authors note: "Starting a dialogue with parents can help to change their attitudes towards inclusion and make them aware of the chances of inclusive practice for all children, but can also help to make them strong partners in joint endeavors to improve the pre-conditions for a successful implementation of inclusion" (Paseka & Schwab, 2020, p. 269). By including parents in the inclusion conversation and making them a bigger part of the process can help to ensure that there are positive perspectives and changes made.

To continue the discussion revolving around family involvement, another study was completed in Saudi Arabia that reviewed how satisfied families were with the support their children were receiving from the special education program. The two main goals of this study were “to examine family members’ opinions regarding their children’s development in academic or life skills” (Alnahdi & Elhadi, 2018, p. 91). Researchers gathered 150 families from elementary and middle schools that were receiving special education services to support their child’s intellectual disability. These families were presented with a series of questions where they rated their satisfaction rate in relation to a given example. Questions that were asked included how well their student was progressing in a variety of academic skills such as reading and math, as well as life skills such as gaining independence and building social skills (Alnahdi & Elhadi, 2018). Results indicated that families felt that their expectations were not being met with either academic or life skills for their child (Alnahdi & Elhadi, 2018).

With the result of families feeling disappointed in their children's progress, it is clear that there is more than enough room to grow to make sure every student is able to be successful. The suggestions that were presented include: family involvement, collaborating with teachers, providing more individualized learning, and focusing on life skills more than academic skills (Alnahdi& Elhadi, 2018). All of the strategies allow for everyone involved to have the opportunity to better support all students, leading to better success rates with life and academic skills while at school.

Peer Support

Another important part of support a student needs is a group of people that are not always recognized for the impact that is made: their peers. While this is important to reflect on for students of all ages, one study that was conducted put the focus on college aged students with

intellectual and developmental disabilities. To support students when they do go off to college, they are supported by the Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) movement that has ensured that “nearly 300 colleges and universities across the United State now offer formal programs that enable students with IDD to participate in everyday aspects of collegiate life” (Carter & McCabe, 2020, p. 216). These programs not only allow for students to actively participate in their college experience, but it also allows for students without disabilities the opportunity to be supportive by becoming involved as: “academic tutors, job coaches, residential assistants, or social supports” (Carter & McCabe, 2020, p. 216). With peer involvement in mind, researchers sought to seek answers to eight different questions that focused on peer involvement, relationships built, the effect of participating in IPSE, and attitudes towards students with disabilities (Carter & McCabe, 2020). To do this, they reviewed studies that were previously conducted that also focused on their selected topics. The results of their findings indicated that peer participation is an important source of feedback that needs to be further explored and utilized (Carter & McCabe, 2020). They are another direct source supporting students in their growth for academic and social success.

Inclusion takes a team effort in order for it to be successful throughout a school. As noted throughout the chapter, there have been studies completed by researchers such as Sigstad et al. (2021), and Hansen et al. (2020) that review strategies from countries around the world. There are curriculum ideas by Pugach et al. (2020) to ensure that students with disabilities are able to receive equal academic opportunities while they are in school. Inclusion is not something that is learned overnight. It is continually practiced everyday in classrooms, and built off of opportunities such as professional development series to improve such strategies. It is important to not only listen to strategies presented, but to have a hands on approach that allows for

individual understanding. With that, it is equally important to hear first hand from students why inclusion matters to better define the overall importance of inclusion, all of which is discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH APPLICATION

The application portion of this study will take place through two professional development series, and the findings of this research will be presented through presentation and conversations with teams which will allow for further collaborations with teachers. According to Sheppard (2018) instruction for educators needs to be present in order to expand the learning experience. To support this idea, the information that is found throughout the literature review will have the ability to be presented via PowerPoint and collaboration activities to administrators and teachers. Throughout the series, there will be opportunities for small discussion groups and collaborative work sessions that will further enhance individual understanding of inclusion strategies, and hopefully allow for positive understanding of the importance of inclusion. The goal of this presentation is to ensure that all educators within the school are on the same page with understanding the definition of inclusion and are feeling prepared to create an inclusive classroom. This would also work to challenge individual perspectives to change mindsets towards a positive outlook of inclusion.

As mentioned before, promoting and learning about inclusion is a whole group effort. A framework was created that I intend to base my professional development off of to be better prepared for presentation. Ainscow (2020) developed a framework that keeps school development at the core of promoting inclusion, while administration, inclusion and equity as principles, community involvement, and use of evidence around the core idea. With this framework in mind, I am better able to shape instruction modules that will keep inclusive development at the forefront, while individuals are making progress in their learning and overall understanding of the concept.

Inclusive Practices: Making a Better Environment for All

The title of this Professional Development series is: *Inclusive Practices: Making a Better Environment for All*. The presentation can be viewed in Appendix A: Professional Development Presentation. This series begins with a brief presentation of providing definitions of inclusion, showing research results, and providing real-world examples. This way, everyone is set-up for success prior to diving deeper into the subject. The agenda for the session is noted in Appendix B: Agenda Outline. After the short introduction to inclusion, groups would be formed that would look into six different inclusion strategies and what impact each strategy has within this classroom. This would then allow for further discussion and collaboration amongst teachers to enhance their knowledge and understanding of inclusion. Following this venture, a conversation would be held to challenge individual perspectives regarding special education and inclusion.

It is known that teachers feel underprepared and undereducated on successful inclusion strategies. The next portion of this series would work to give teachers a better sense of understanding such strategies, and hopefully walk away feeling more confident with their role in inclusion. To start, small groups of teachers from different academic subjects would be created. Once the groups are formed, an inclusion strategy and resources to search for information on that strategy would be given. Inclusion strategy topics would include: co-teaching, Universal Design for Learning, assistive technology, manipulatives, peer support, building relationships, and providing a safe environment. The groups would be given 10 minutes to develop the main ideas of each strategy using the provided resources. Once time is up, groups would then be reformed into subject areas such as math, language arts, science, arts, foreign language, social studies, and health and physical education. Once they are in their academic topic groups, each member would present their given inclusion strategy. This would allow for each member to have a general

understanding of a strategy and be able to hear more from their current cohort of subject matter team members.

According to Ni Bhroin and King (2019), educators need support from other teachers in order to effectively continue their learning and develop new understanding of topics such as inclusion. Once all strategies have been presented throughout the group, they would then decide what strategies would work best based on their academic subject. Group members would develop examples on how to use these strategies in their topic areas and be prepared to share out to the whole group at the end of the session.

Once teachers have been given the opportunity to better understand a few supportive strategies that they can implement into their classroom, the next challenge is the perspectives around the topics of special education and inclusion. Teachers would have the opportunity to answer a series of questions that will encourage them to think deeper into the topics and guide them towards seeing the positive impacts that special education programs have, as well as the importance of creating an inclusive environment for all students. These questions could be presented through a virtual survey, or through an activity with posters around the room that they would be moving around the room to answer. Questions that would be asked can be found in Appendix C.

Gaining perspectives through student voice

In order for a true impact to be made, teachers and administrators need to first hear first-hand what their students are feeling in regard to the topic, and how teacher perspectives and actions impact them directly. According to Mansfield et al. (2018) hearing from students and listening to their opinions is not made a priority. When in fact, collaborating with students can only strengthen plans that are in place (Mansfield et al., 2018). Prior to implementing the

professional development series, I would seek to find students throughout the school that would be willing to participate in a questionnaire surrounding how well they believe their needs are being addressed to set them up for success. Questions that I would aim for students to answer can be found in Appendix C: Presentation Questions.

I would then present the results of these questions to all staff members which would lead to a discussion around these responses. The hope would be to acknowledge student thoughts, identify areas of improvement, and what prompted the responses from students.

Another idea that would be helpful in making sure student voices are heard is holding a student panel that would allow students to discuss their experiences in relation to inclusion. I would again seek students who are willing to discuss their story to share their successes, struggles, and the positive and negative impact their teachers have had on them. Questions would be created prior that students would have the option to answer if they choose.

By holding this panel, teachers and administrators would be able to hear these responses coming from the students that they see every day. In doing so, I would hope it would encourage teachers to reflect on their teaching strategies, consider areas of improvement, and be mindful of the different learners within their classrooms. Between teachers having the opportunity to develop a better understanding of inclusion strategies, being given time to develop better models within their cohorts, and hearing from students that they teach, this professional development series would encourage teachers to take a positive step towards being an inclusive teacher.

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Summary of Literature

In order to organize the literature review, topics were divided into four categories: inclusion practices, inclusion models in schools, review of curriculum to support inclusion and attitudes towards inclusion and special education. To begin, four articles were reviewed to identify a wide variety of inclusion practices. The first study reviewed by Sigstad et al. (2021) organized a study where 40 teachers from Norway were given a survey where they asked questions about what strategies they were using in the classroom, and what challenges they faced when it came to inclusion. To narrow down results, they used inclusion categories created by Nilsen: organizational/physical inclusion, social inclusion, and academic inclusion (Nilsen, 2020). The results of this study indicate that whether or not it was intentional, the educators that were surveyed were putting their best effort towards promoting inclusion throughout the variety of settings (Sigstad et al., 2020).

To continue supporting teachers, there are several online resources that are available to educators, and anyone that wants to be in the know of inclusion strategies. One of these resources was reviewed for the purpose of this literature review, being from Reading Rockets (2020), a program that provides research-based strategies and resources to support teachers with creating a successful classroom. The article specifically provides a definition of what an inclusive classroom is, and provides visuals to better understand the idea. Along with this, there are examples of what inclusion does and does not look like, and links to other articles that take a deeper look into different inclusion strategies. Another example of a resource that can be utilized stems from The Understood Team (2022), a company that strives to provide support to everyone living with a different ability, as well as to those that are supporting those individuals. This site

also provides related articles to inclusion strategies, as well as an article that describes the benefits of inclusion. Lastly, Vanderbilt University (2022) developed learning modules that clearly outline and define a variety of educational topics, including inclusion. Within the modules, there are situations presented through video, instructional visuals, and words of experience presented through professionals in education. Topics discuss models, preparation, and changing school environments (Vanderbilt University, 2022).

Multiple studies were reviewed in order to identify what inclusion models were being used in schools. Surveys were sent out in multiple studies, and literature was reviewed to further engage the conversation of inclusion and to gain insight as to how educators and other individuals involved react to the idea of inclusion. In studies completed by Torres et al. (2018), Ahram et al. (2021), Hansen et al. (2020) and Ainscow (2020), there are models that they created to promote an inclusive environment within a school are mentioned based off of the findings from the given studies. Ainscow (2020) specifically focused on schools across the world to develop a framework that schools can follow. Hedegaard et al. (2020) also compared perspectives related to special education in order to create a framework that provides suggestions to blur the stark line between general education and special education. In comparison to this, Torres et al. (2018) utilized a survey that asked educators to define their understanding of inclusion, and what strategies they were using to be able to effectively create a suggestion of inclusion as well. In relation to this, Ahram et al. (2021) reviewed studies that had been conducted that further looked into disproportionalities in special education, and identified that there were varying results. With that being said, they attempted to create a framework that would assist researchers in the future to decide whether the results that are received are on point, or way off track.

Other sources such as Understood (2022) supply information in easy to understand terms for anyone that is looking to better understand a concept such as collaborative team teaching. This technique is one of several that create an inclusive classroom. To further highlight the necessity of inclusion, especially in relation to co-teaching, Colson and Smothers (2022) identified important laws in relation to special education to support the co-teaching strategy. Laws that they highlighted include: Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, Education of All Handicapped Children Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (Colson & Smothers, 2022) With this, authors reviewed the timeline of each act and how each was transformed to continue to better support students with different abilities.

In order to review the curriculum to support inclusion, several articles were reviewed to obtain accurate information. To begin, Pugach et al. (2020) mentions that past curriculum has not been developed for students with different abilities, causing a clear divide between general and special education. Recommendations for providing inclusive instruction include: providing the learning in a variety of ways, providing choices to learn the given skill, and make accommodations available to all students (Parish, 2019). Kuntz and Carter (2019) focus specifically on strategies for students with intellectual disabilities. One strategy highlighted was utilizing peer support- this allows for students to build positive relationships and creates positive academic outcomes (Kuntz & Carter, 2019). In order for inclusion to be truly successful, everyone has to be on board with the idea. DeMatthews et al. (2020) write about the importance of leaders such as administration needing to be responsible for preparing their teachers to implement inclusive practices within their classroom (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

One way to provide differentiated instruction is through the use of technology. Technology became an essential aspect of education when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020,

everyone had to make the shift to virtual learning without prior practice (Evans-Amalu & Claravall, 2021). This presented new challenges towards not only inclusion for students with special needs, but for everyone involved. To hone in on one subject specifically, Kabel et al. (2021) reviewed how integrating technology into math can provide benefits for students that may struggle to learn mathematical concepts. This corresponds with the idea of teaching one subject in many ways in order for students to learn the material in a way that works for them. In relation to this, Roos (2019) also looked into inclusion strategies that could be beneficial in a mathematics classroom. Roos (2019) examines the ideas in relation to different settings and describes the costs and benefits of each.

Throughout the worlds in education, there are varying perspectives in regard to students with disabilities and how to effectively include them into the academic setting. Carlisle (2021) reviews the perspectives of special education teachers, and whether or not those perspectives differ based on what grade level is taught. The results indicate that special education teachers voiced several concerns, including not feeling supported (Carlisle, 2021). To further this conversation, Gregory (2017) looked into teachers' attitudes towards inclusion in Australia, Barbados, Turkey and the United States. The results of the study indicated that perspectives related to experiences with students of different disabilities, as well as the overall educational system of the given country. Sharma et al. (2018) also explores the perspectives of teachers working with students with disabilities in Budapest. Again, educators shared their perspectives, with more positive opinions in some cases (Sharma et al., 2018).

When teachers do not feel supported, this leads to quick frustration and negative perspectives, and worse: teachers leaving the profession entirely. Mason-Williams et al. (2020) looks into reasons for why there is a special education teacher shortage across the world. Circling

back to the idea of needing everyone on board with providing an inclusive environment, Woodcock and Woolfson (2018) review how the leaders of schools in Canada may or may not be doing their part to break barriers for inclusion. The results indicated that although in some ways inclusion is happening, there is still a strong need for further guidance from leadership in order to be truly effective (Woodcock & Woolfson, 2018). To continue with this idea, Baumbusch et al. (2019) reviewed what perspectives leaders in education have towards special education as a whole in British Columbia. Results showed that the administrators' most important objectives are: grade to grade transitions, high school graduation, time to designation, and sociodemographic differences (Baumbusch et al., 2019, p. 3). Another country that was used to study perspectives of inclusion was Finland. Saloviita (2020) discovered that teachers within the country do not have a positive perspective on the topic. Reasoning for this may be that special education strategies are not taught in degree programs unless enrolled in that program, and Finland is known to have a large group of students being taught in a special education setting, rather than in a mainstream setting (Saloviita, 2020).

Not only are administrators and teachers important players of inclusion, but family members of students with different abilities play an important role as well. Zagona et al. (2018) examines what perspectives parents have in relation to their experience with special education. Results indicated that at times, parents struggle to feel the support that they need for their child to be successful in school (Zagona et al., 2018). Another study was conducted in Germany that reviewed what perspectives parents had towards inclusion by Paseka and Schwab (2020). Similar results were received, but one differing point that was made was that the perspective of inclusion related to what disability the student was living with. On top of this, Alnahdi and Elhadi (2018) completed a similar study in Saudi Arabia. Again, similar results of negative

perspectives arose, with an emphasis on families feeling disappointed in progress their child had made in school (Alnahdi & Elhadi, 2018). Students with different abilities need support beyond grade school, there are students that need support into college and beyond. Carter and McCabe (2020) identified 300 colleges and universities across the United States that provide a peer support program to encourage students with different abilities to participate in everyday activities that come with being on campus. Student peers are another form of support that students need that have great benefits on student learning outcomes (Carter & McCabe, 2020).

Limitations of the Research

To address the research question of: What options do teachers have for inclusion strategies, and what perspectives are seen in relation to special education in schools? Several sources were reviewed to find accurate information that best represents the topic. In order to establish accurate literature for this thesis, searches of resources such as SAGE Journals, Iris Center, Taylor and Francis Online, and ERIC were conducted for publications from 2018-2022. To narrow down parameters, search for keywords such as: “inclusion within schools,” “inclusion models for schools,” and “perspectives regarding special education.” In addition to this, phrases such as ‘student voice’, ‘inclusion practices for teachers’ and ‘perspectives of special education students’ were also searched.

While completing the literature review, there were limitations within that process that affected how this thesis was structured. There were several sources and research articles that were available for review, but not all of them met the expectations for the criteria that was set. Some specifically focused on a given academic topic, while others provided too broad of information. In other cases, there were times where an article seemed promising, but after reviewing the text it did not supply the information that would have been helpful to answering

the research question. The most difficult part of this process was finding articles related to perspectives in special education- not only were there articles related to this topic, but they seemed to guide the research even further by shifting the focus to the reasons why there were negative results presented. The negative perspectives were a result of lack of support and feeling overwhelmed (Woodcock & Wolfson, 2018). It seems that although there have been studies done in the area of perspectives in special education, there are such wide perspectives that it is difficult to narrow the search down to one given perspective to focus on. Educators have various understandings, strategies, and approaches to special education that presents the idea that there is a lot of work to be done before anyone can start changing perspectives towards special education.

Implications for Future Research

Based on the topics that have already been reviewed in this paper, there are several avenues that could be taken to continue this research. To begin, one recommendation that would be beneficial to continue the research would be to hone in on the purpose of inclusion, and the importance of such strategies. This could be done by examining and clearly defining the benefits of inclusion for each category of disability. Since each student has a unique need, it may also be beneficial to break down inclusion benefits for each category of disability- given that there is not a one size fits all solution to effective inclusion. Such categories would include: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Emotional Behavior Disorders, Specific Learning Disabilities, Visual and Hearing Impairments, and Other Health Impairments. By identifying what inclusion can look like for students within each disability category, teachers can be better prepared to serve any student that walks through their classroom door and have strategies that could be relied on based on the research that would be done.

Another recommendation for further research to occur would be to identify all factors towards the perspectives related to special education, and define the correlating factors between each reasoning. This would be beneficial towards identifying next steps that can be taken to better support educators across the world. To do this, perspectives could be broken down into categories such as: positive, negative, and gray area perspectives. As responses are received for each category, then the reasoning for each perspective could be identified. It would be interesting to see what correlations could be made for each perspective, and what solutions could be identified to make sure that more often than not, educators have a positive perspective regarding special education.

Implications for Professional Application

The research that has been completed can be applied in a professional setting by opening up further conversations for inclusion, and creating opportunities for educators to learn better strategies to make sure every student is able to be successful in their classroom. Not only is a definition of inclusion provided, but there are also strategies and models that are reviewed to better support the research. It would also be beneficial for educators to review how other educators from across the world view inclusion in education to compare and contrast what is personally viewed from themselves and their surrounding colleagues. When a learning opportunity such as this is presented, educators are able to grow professionally and be able to better benefit their students in the long run. The research will be able to apply to several educators within the profession that keep inclusion at the top of the priority list, and can benefit educators that may not see it as something that is that important to them.

Once other educators have a better understanding of inclusive education, strategies, and other perspectives, individuals are able to learn and grow to do nothing other than improve their

teaching. Not only will they have a better understanding, but they will then be able to implement such strategies and be mindful of the different learning styles and challenges that their students face. Once they are able to confidently implement inclusive strategies, students will begin to feel better supported, and will have the opportunity to further engage in their academic journey. Not only does this benefit students, but it benefits teachers immensely. They will also feel better supported and prepared, which can hopefully lead to more positive perspectives related to inclusion and special education.

This research applies to me specifically because I was able to take the opportunity to review inclusion models that have been developed across the world and review what other teachers felt in regards to the topic. This was important for me because the process opened my eyes to what work has already been done to include students of all abilities, and what I can do to continue to support the effort that is being made by others. From this research, I feel that I am able to better understand inclusion and how I can be more mindful of strategies that I can use in my own classroom, and be equipped to provide effective strategies to general education teachers when they ask for extra support when working with students on my caseload.

Overall, there are several strategies that educators can learn from this research, and that will benefit their teaching practice. Especially with specific strategies outlined, educators can review these strategies and consider how to effectively implement them in their classroom. Research such as this is incredibly important to encourage not only teachers, but administrators, families, and even students to learn more about what can be done to create an inclusive environment for students with different learning abilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research question: What options do teachers have for inclusion strategies, and what perspectives are seen in relation to special education in schools? provided answers that will be beneficial to educators everywhere. Educators will be able to look further into resources that were highlighted such as Understood (2022), Reading Rockets (2020), and the Vanderbilt University (2022) to gain a better understanding of what inclusion looks like in a school. Studies by researchers such as Ainscow (2020), who developed a framework that can help increase inclusion within schools, will allow for exploration of what strategies can be incorporated further. Other studies from around the world will also be able to be reviewed, and see what strategies have been successful.

With these results from various studies and the development of a professional development series, educators will be able to feel better supported to help their students and create inclusive classrooms. Not only that, but they will also be able to recognize how the topic of inclusion is viewed by others to further encourage help towards making inclusion a positively known aspect within education. The hope is that the information that is provided in this paper will encourage others to continue working towards helping others create an inclusive environment for students around, and inspire more individuals to see the importance of inclusion.

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Appendix A: Professional Development Presentation



Session 1
Inclusive Practices:
Making a Better Environment for All

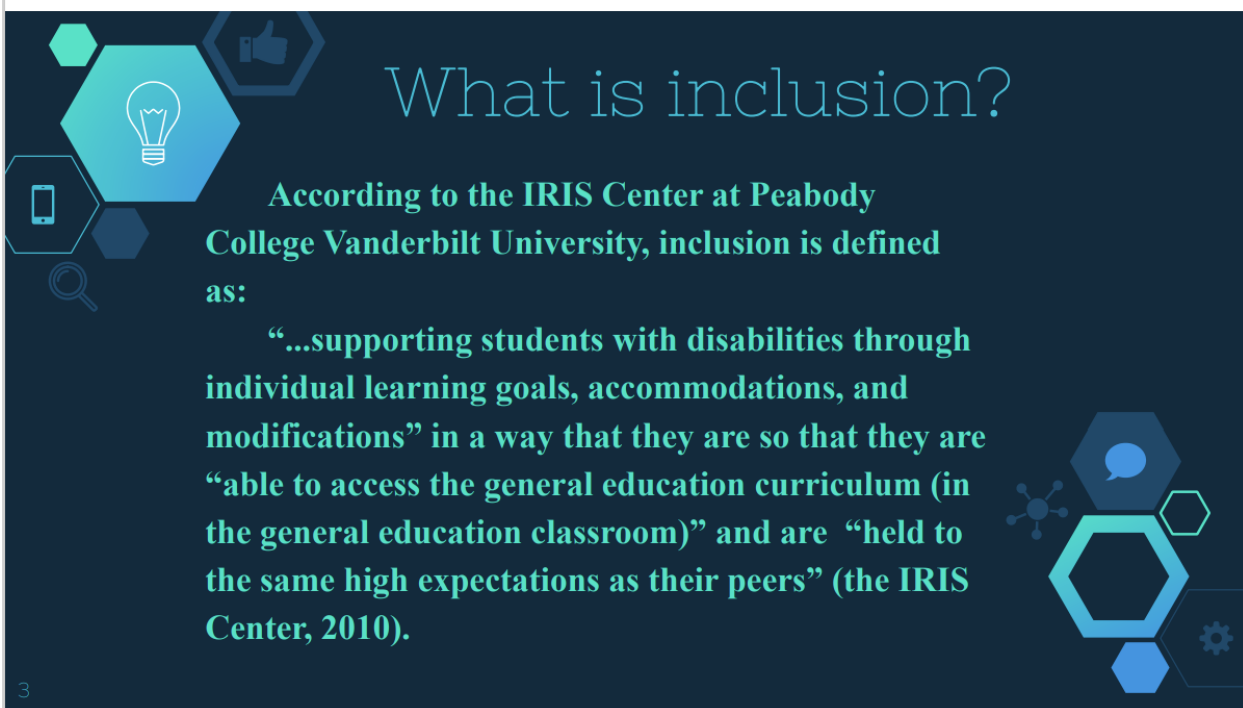


Agenda:

- Introduction: defining inclusion
- What does inclusion look like in the classroom?
- Inclusion strategy groups
- Whole group presentation and conversation
- Subject Area discussion
- Individual Reflection questions



2

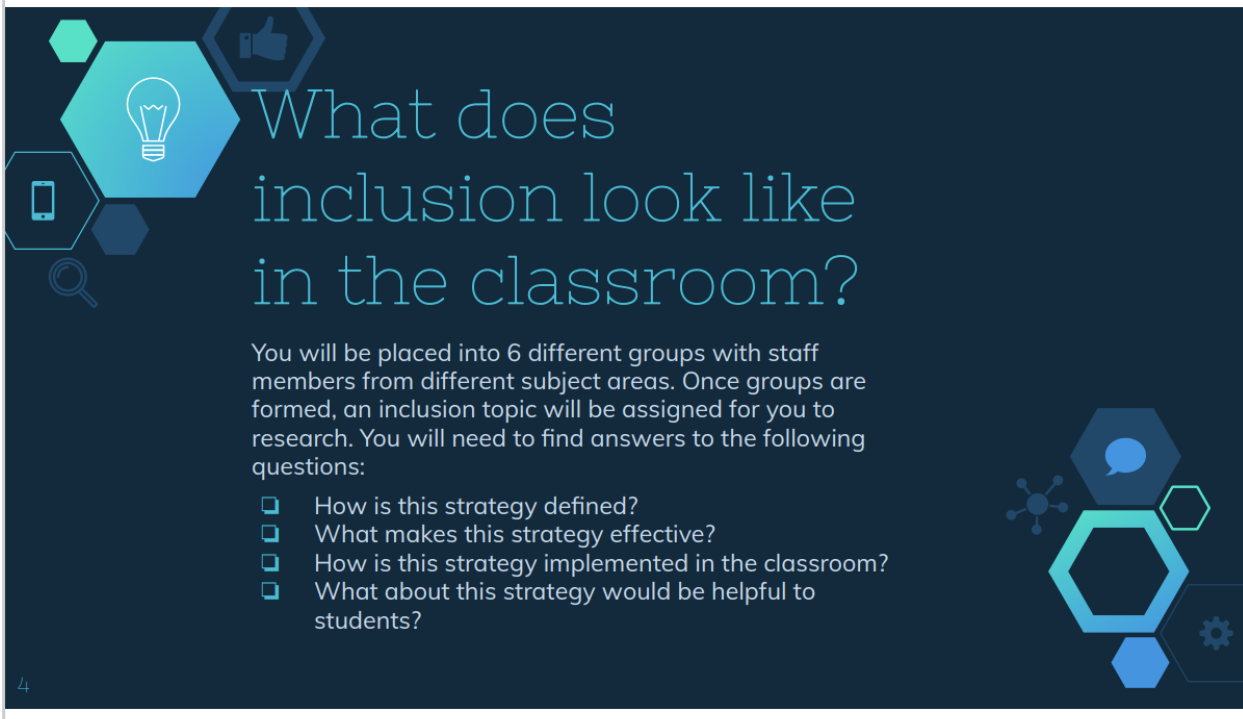


What is inclusion?

According to the IRIS Center at Peabody College Vanderbilt University, inclusion is defined as:

“...supporting students with disabilities through individual learning goals, accommodations, and modifications” in a way that they are so that they are “able to access the general education curriculum (in the general education classroom)” and are “held to the same high expectations as their peers” (the IRIS Center, 2010).

3




What does inclusion look like in the classroom?

You will be placed into 6 different groups with staff members from different subject areas. Once groups are formed, an inclusion topic will be assigned for you to research. You will need to find answers to the following questions:

- How is this strategy defined?
- What makes this strategy effective?
- How is this strategy implemented in the classroom?
- What about this strategy would be helpful to students?

4



Group Topics:

1. Co-teaching
2. Universal Design for Learning
3. Assistive Technology
4. Manipulatives
5. Peer support
6. Building relationships & providing a safe environment

5


The slide features a dark blue background with a decorative cluster of hexagons on the left side. The hexagons contain icons for a lightbulb, a thumbs-up, a smartphone, a magnifying glass, and a gear. The title 'Group Topics:' is written in a light blue, sans-serif font at the top right. Below the title, six white rectangular boxes with blue borders are arranged in two rows of three, each containing a numbered topic. A small white number '5' is located in the bottom left corner of the slide.



Co-teaching

→ Co-teaching is when a special education and general education teacher are working together in one classroom to support all students (Morin, 2022).

The slide features a dark blue background with a decorative cluster of hexagons on the left side. The hexagons contain icons for a lightbulb, a thumbs-up, a smartphone, a magnifying glass, a gear, and a speech bubble. The title 'Co-teaching' is written in a light blue, sans-serif font at the top right. Below the title, a white arrow points to a line of text in a light blue, sans-serif font. The slide is visually consistent with the 'Group Topics' slide above it.



Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

- Essentially, the main idea of this tactic is to make the learning task accessible to all students that are learning in the given classroom, and to be mindful of all the different learners in the room.
- “teach content in many ways, provide choices to sustain student engagement, [and] provide accommodations for all students.” (Parish, 2019)



Assistive Technology

- technology has given students the ability to break language barriers to communicate their needs, and access other tools to further enhance their success such as voice-to-text
- In a lot of cases, using technology as a tool is used as an accommodation for students on an IEP. The more tools that we can make accessible for everyone, the better off students will be.



Manipulatives

- “Using representations, particularly manipulatives, was one of the most effective evidence-based strategies for students with disabilities followed by peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS)” (Kabel & Hwang, 2021)



Peer Support

- “Many scholars have argued that the communication and social skills difficulties experienced by many students with intellectual disability could be positively impacted by ongoing opportunities to learn alongside classmates without similar disabilities” (Kuntz & Carter, 2019, p. 104).
- Peers are another direct source supporting students in their growth for academic and social success. Since they are building relationships and wanting to be involved in supporting students with intellectual disabilities, they have valuable feedback that can be beneficial to improving programs within colleges, as well as programs that guide students towards receiving a higher education.



Building Relationships & Providing an Inclusive Environment

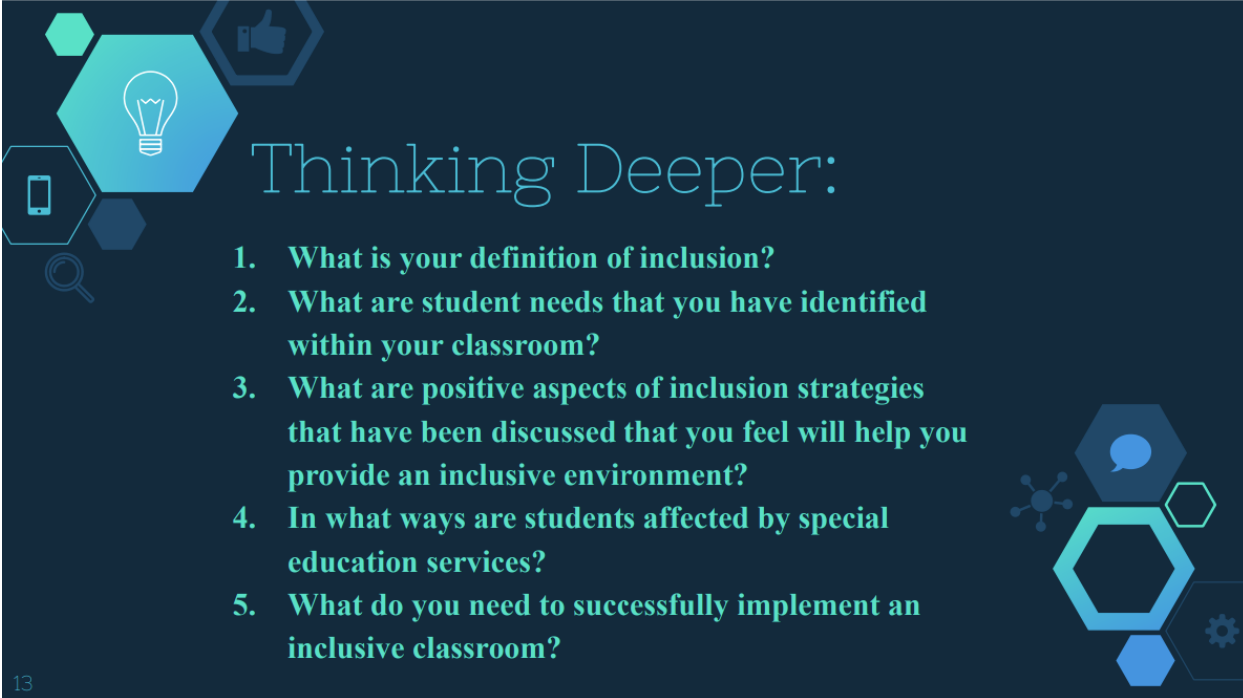
- For those receiving services, being in an inclusive classroom encourages them to be engaged with their learning, and provides opportunities for them to develop strong educational skills alongside peers that are modeling positive learning behaviors (Team, 2022).
- Inclusive classrooms also allow for students to be exposed to individuals with different abilities and feel more comfortable around them- which leads to positive friendships and interactions throughout the classroom (Team, 2022).
-



Subject Area Groups

Now that everyone has researched 6 different inclusion topics, and has heard main ideas from each topic, you will find the teachers from your sam subject area to discuss how these strategies can be used in your classroom. Questions to think about to guide discussion can include:

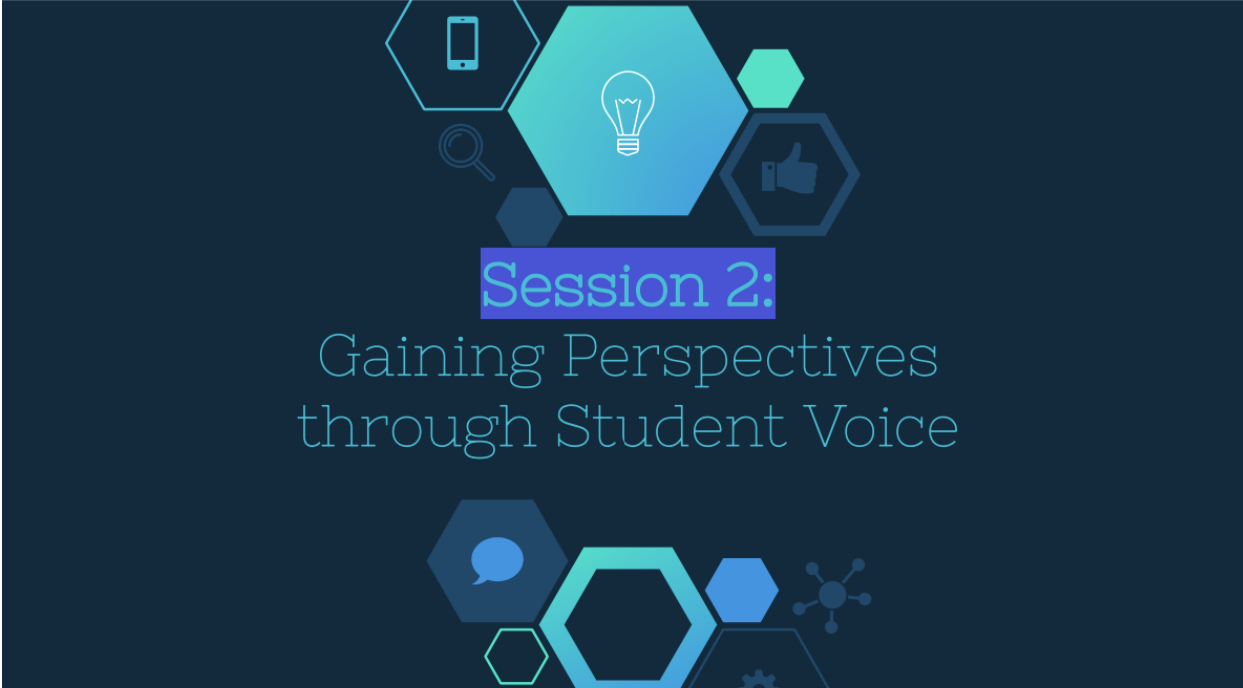
- What are strategies that would align with my curriculum?
- What strategy would be most effective in making sure students are learning?
- How can the strategies be implemented in my classroom?
- What adjustments need to be made in my classroom to support student learning?



Thinking Deeper:

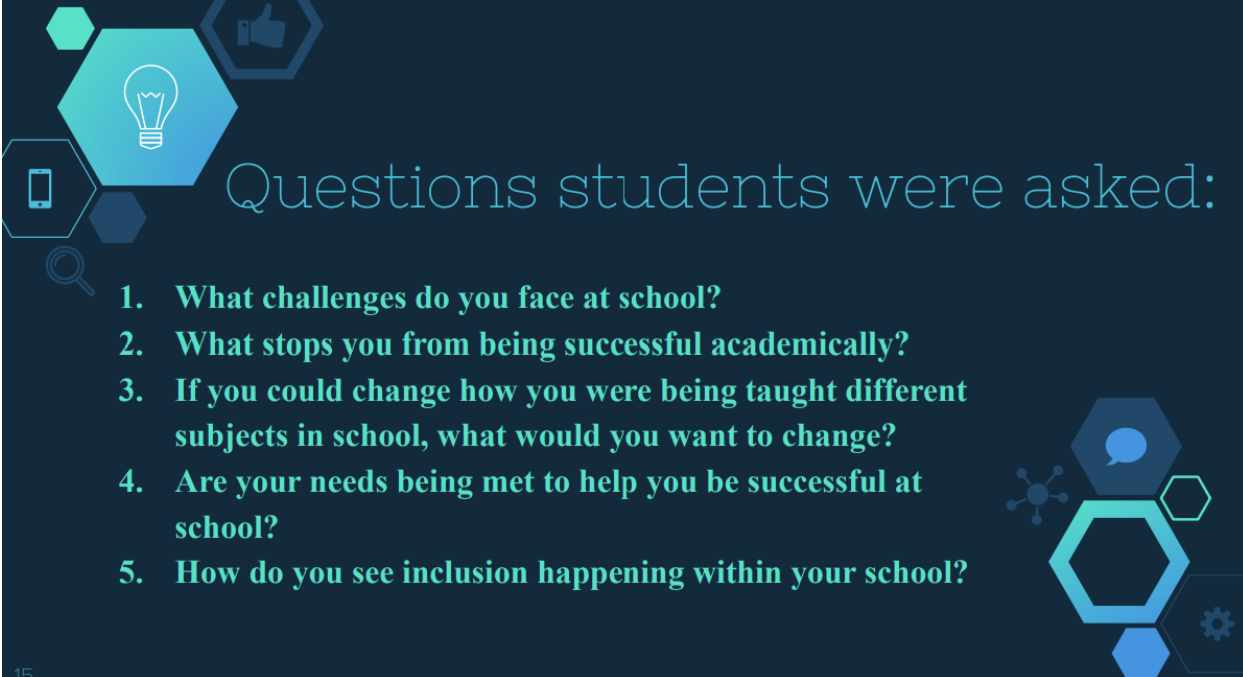
1. **What is your definition of inclusion?**
2. **What are student needs that you have identified within your classroom?**
3. **What are positive aspects of inclusion strategies that have been discussed that you feel will help you provide an inclusive environment?**
4. **In what ways are students affected by special education services?**
5. **What do you need to successfully implement an inclusive classroom?**

13



Session 2:

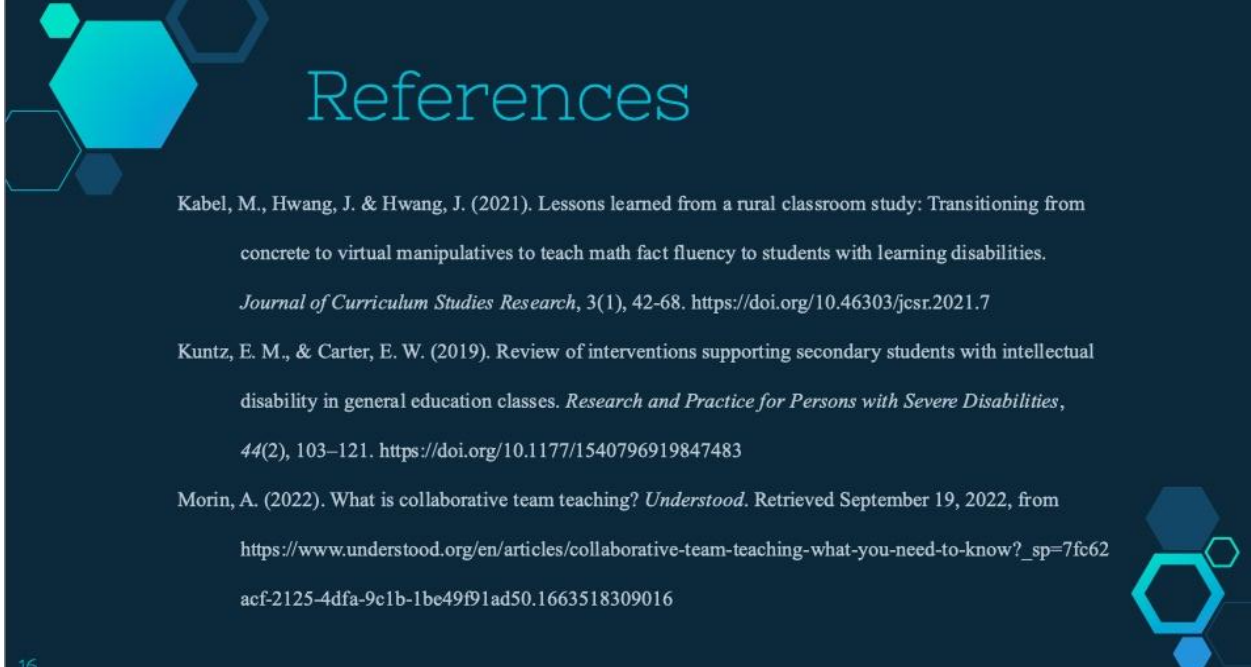
Gaining Perspectives through Student Voice



Questions students were asked:

1. **What challenges do you face at school?**
2. **What stops you from being successful academically?**
3. **If you could change how you were being taught different subjects in school, what would you want to change?**
4. **Are your needs being met to help you be successful at school?**
5. **How do you see inclusion happening within your school?**

15



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16




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Appendix B: Agenda Outline

Agenda:

1. Introduction: defining inclusion

Notes for facilitator: a definition of inclusion is provided. It may be a productive conversation starter to first ask the group what they believe the definition to be.

2. What does inclusion look like in the classroom?

Notes for facilitator: this is where strategy groups are formed- a team of teachers from different subject areas will be formed, and an inclusion strategy will be assigned. There are questions listed on the slide to encourage discussion amongst the group as noted in Appendix C.

3. Inclusion strategy groups

Notes for facilitator: groups will be researching and discussing their assigned inclusion strategy. They are looking to define the strategy, the effectiveness, implementation, and the importance of the strategy for students. Allow 10-15 minutes for group time.

4. Whole group presentation and conversation

Notes for facilitator: Have each inclusion strategy group present their findings, and provide further notes as needed- there are important aspects of each strategy listed on each slide to continue discussion.

5. Subject Area discussion

Notes for facilitator: teachers will get into subject area groups to discuss how the different strategies would work in their classrooms and subject areas. Allow 10-15

minutes for discussion.

6. Individual Reflection questions

Notes for facilitator: To wrap up the session, reflection questions will be presented through a survey, or there can be posters around the room where teachers can write their responses on post-it notes and place them on the posters, depending on the space available. Questions to be asked are noted on the slide as well as in Appendix C.

Appendix C: Presentation Questions

Questions to encourage discussion amongst inclusion strategy groups:

1. How is this strategy defined?
2. What makes this strategy effective?
3. How is this strategy implemented in the classroom?
4. What about this strategy would be helpful to students?

Questions to encourage discussion amongst subject area groups:

1. What are strategies that would align with my curriculum?
2. What strategy would be most effective in making sure students are learning?
3. How can the strategies be implemented in my classroom?
4. What adjustments need to be made in my classroom to support student learning?

Questions to be asked to encourage deeper thinking after discussing inclusion strategies:

1. What is your definition of inclusion?
2. What are student needs that you have identified within your classroom?
3. What are positive aspects of inclusion strategies that have been discussed that you feel will help you provide an inclusive environment?
4. In what ways are students affected by special education services?
5. What do you need to successfully implement an inclusive classroom?

Questions to be asked to students to create the opportunity for teachers to hear thoughts from a student perspective:

1. What challenges do you face at school?
2. What stops you from being successful academically?

3. If you could change how you were being taught different subjects in school, what would you want to change?
4. Are your needs being met to help you be successful at school?
5. How do you see inclusion happening within your school?