Staff Perceptions of Blending Special Education and General Education in a Public Pre-

school Setting

by

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ABSTRACT

The professional perceptions of instructional personnel at a public prekindergarten program were examined in this mixed methods study. The staff was provided with an anonymous Google form survey. This study investigates the social-emotional outcomes of students in an inclusive prekindergarten program. The outcome of the survey responses showed that students with and without disabilities benefit from the inclusive program.

Keywords: inclusion, inclusive prekindergarten, least restrictive environment, special education, disabilities, social-emotional

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Problem

In schools before 1975, children with disabilities were not included in the general education classroom: instead, they were kept separate in their own classrooms (2022). Then the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) implementation in 1975 and reauthorization in 1997 required school districts to include students with disabilities in general education classes (2022).

Mandating children with disabilities to be included in the general education classroom, allowed for them to be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Chen et al., 2017). Least restrictive environment is having students who have disabilities being educated in a general education classroom with students without disabilities to the maximum time possible (Chen et al., 2017). Inclusive classroom environments in early childhood education allows for students to have benefits to their social-emotional growth (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). Although there has been current research done to prove this, one wonders what the staff perceptions of student's social emotional outcomes in an inclusive program are.

Background, Context, and Theoretical Framework for the Problem

Young children's social and cognitive development are greatly aided by interactions with peers (Chen et al., 2017). Vygotsky understood that social situations and learning were inextricably linked. As a result, it is necessary to discover and apply socially successful techniques (Tubman et al., 2016). Children with a wide range of disabilities used to not be allowed in the general educational settings (2022). Individuals with disabilities were kept home in family care, instead of being placed an educational setting (Smith & Larwin, 2021). In the 19th century, there was no evidence that individuals with disabilities received any form of education (Smith & Larwin, 2021). During this time in the 19th century, institutions for individuals with disabilities came available for individuals to receive a form of education

(Smith & Larwin, 2021). Although individuals with disabilities were able to receive an education at these institutions, several were still not being educated. This was due to poverty, lack of understanding of what was being provided, and hesitant to allow those with disabilities out of their family's care (Smith & Larwin, 2021). It wasn't until the Education Act of 1968 (HCEEP), which gave grants to build model intervention programs for infants and young children with disabilities and their families, utilized their money to support children with disabilities in the classroom setting (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). In the United States, having inclusive classrooms where students with a wide range of disabilities were in a regular education setting was put into place in 1960s (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016).

The Individuals with Disability Act was then implemented in 1975 and had reauthorization in 1997. The IDEA requires that students with disabilities be placed in the least restrictive environment with their typically developing peers for the maximum amount of time possible (Barton & Smith, 2015). IDEA also requires that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE). In an inclusive classroom environment, students with disabilities must receive their education in the same setting with their typically developing peers. In prekindergarten, social emotional skills and growth is a major objective that is looked at for not only typically developing students but also students with disabilities as well.

In Litchfield, IL, the preschool programs are inclusive. The programs do all push in services rather than pull out. This allows for the students who are receiving services to continue to be in the general education classroom setting with their typically developing peers. During the school day when the staff members come into the room to work with their students, they will also have students who do not receive the services work with them and the student receiving the service. Thus, allowing for the students to peer teach as they are also modeling what is needing done or how to socially interact with one another.

Statement of the Problem

The use of inclusive classrooms in public school districts have been shown to be beneficial to students with and without disabilities (Noggle & Stites, 2017). The IDEA prefers for students with disabilities to be placed in a classroom with their typically developing peers, allowing for them to be in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Barton &Smith, 2015). The IDEA mandates inclusion for individuals' birth to age 23 with disabilities (Barton & Smith, 2015). This includes preschool age children due to them falling in the specified age range. Most preschoolers are age 3-5 years old. School districts must be able to comply with allowing students with disabilities to be in the least restrictive environment for the maximum amount of time possible to receive peer interactions to assist them with their social emotional growth (Chen et al., 2017). The problem is that not all public schools use inclusive classrooms in prekindergarten programs, instead some schools will have an early childhood classroom just for students with disabilities. Although early childhood classrooms are beneficial for the students with disabilities that are unable to be in the general education classroom, this also eliminates the social interactions with their typically developing peers. Implementing inclusive programs that would allow for blending during small increments of the day would allow for students with disabilities to still have social interactions with their typically developing peers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate staff perceptions of student social-emotional outcomes in an inclusive Prekindergarten program. Research has shown that students who have disabilities that are placed in an inclusive preschool program have greater outcomes on their social-emotional growth (Park et al., 2018).

Research Questions

This study seeks to investigate the answer to the following research questions for staff and faculty:

1. Does an inclusive classroom allow for students with and without disabilities to have social-emotional growth? Explain why or why not.

2. Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms offer more social emotional growth opportunities to students with disabilities? If so, what does it offer to them?

3. Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms benefit all students in the room? Explain why or why not.

4. In an inclusive prekindergarten program, in what ways can students with disabilities grow their social emotional skills by learning from their typically developing peers?

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance

Research studies that have been conducted by Heebler & Spiker (2016), Kossyvaki & Papoudi (2016), and McCollow & Hoffman (2019) in which they supported the significance and benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities. However, there is limited research and data on the staff perceptions of inclusive prekindergarten programs. Knowing staff perceptions of inclusive prekindergarten programs would provide additional data for researchers.

Nature of the Study

The format of this research is a mixed-methods study. A mixed methods evaluation design includes survey questions as well as open-ended questions used to assess the effectiveness of an intervention, program, or policy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative data will be harvested by faculty, support personnel, and other service providers at the early childhood level completing anonymous self-report surveys. To analyze the data, the survey results will be reviewed, and attention will be paid to what key components the staff focuses on when answering the questions on social emotional growth.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout this study about staff perceptions of student social emotional outcomes in an inclusive prekindergarten program.

Inclusion- educating students with a wide range of disabilities in a general education classroom setting with typically developing peers. (Lee et al., 2015)

Social-emotional development- Is the process of gaining the necessary self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills. (Reinsberg, 2022)

Objectives- statements that indicate clearly what the learner will know or be able to perform because of participating in an educational program or activity. (2014)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)- Students with disabilities will receive their education in the general education classroom with their typically developing peers to the maximum extent appropriate. (Chen et al., 2017)

Friend 2 Friend- an intervention that aims to foster respect and diversity among children with disabilities and their typically developing classmates while also fostering friendships. (Movahedazarhouligh, 2018)

Social skill training- Is a behavioral approach for teaching preschool children age-appropriate social skills including communication, problem solving, decision making, self-management, and peer relationships. (McCollow & Hoffmann, 2019)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)- Is a law that makes free, appropriate public education available to children with dishabilles. (2022)

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)- Requires school districts to provide free and appropriate education to children with disabilities. (Bryant, 2018)

Assumptions & Limitations

This study has several assumptions and limitations. The study assumptions include the following:

- all staff currently work in the prekindergarten inclusive program. Staff participating in the surveys for this study will answer honestly.
- Respondents will complete all survey questions

- Limitations may include:

All respondents understand and respond in English, as the survey materials will not be written in any other language.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

This study will be completed in 3 phases:

- Phase One will include expanding on research questions. The study will be contingent upon university approval. The surveys will be distributed to administration, instructional staff, and to the school psychologist.

- Phase Two will include comparing the survey results to the data that has been collected during research to determine areas of needed improvement in inclusive prekindergarten programs to assist with social emotional growth for students with and without disabilities.

- Phase Three will include data analysis and thesis composition.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

According to professional literature, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 mandated that students with disabilities be educated as much as possible alongside their typically developing peers in general education settings (Barton & Smith, 2015). In 1986, IDEA was amended to provide three, four, and five-year-old children the same rights as school-aged children with disabilities under the original statute (Heebler & Spiker, 2016). Providing the same education to children ages 3- 5 years old with disabilities allows for them to join a prekindergarten classroom. The US Department of Education, the Division for Early Childhood, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children have all recognized the benefits of inclusion in early childhood education, and past research has investigated it (Hebbler & Spiker, 2016).

Theoretical Framework of Inclusive Early Childhood Education

Language, according to Chomsky, is a natural thing, a component of the human mind that is physically represented in the brain and is part of the species' biological endowment (Barman, 2014). He criticized behaviorism, which aims to understand behavior and language because of environment or context, as a follower of cognitivism (Barman, 2014). He was able to demonstrate its limitations. Many of the features of language, he maintained, are innate and can be discovered in underlying structures of language (Barman, 2014). Children start in the memorization stage and will then slowly move into the understanding stage of social learning (2015). According to Piaget, the children will then be able to apply their knowledge, skills, and concepts appropriately in social situations (2015). The objective of inclusive prekindergarten programs is that students with disabilities be placed in the least restrictive environment with their typically developing peers for the maximum amount of time possible (Barton & Smith, 2015). Inclusion allows for the students to learn alongside their typically

developing peers. The educational goal is for all children to feel a sense of belonging in their

educational environment (Bryant, 2018). Prekindergarten is the age at which children begin

to develop most of their social skills and build up their self-esteem. While belonging has a

direct impact on self-esteem, a child needs emotional or social relationships (Poston, 2009).

One benefit in early childhood education is the benefit of social emotional growth inside the

classroom for students with and without disabilities (Chen et al., 2017). Positive outcomes

for all young learners, with and without impairments, are positively connected with high-

quality, inclusive environments (Barton & Smith, 2015).

When children come into the world, they do not have the social skills that are

acceptable, instead they are learned through their interactions with the people around them.

Innate behaviors and social behaviors are not the same. Innate behavior is present at birth.

Social behaviors can only be learned in a social setting. Social skills must be instilled and

nurtured in children during their early years of life and education in a prekindergarten

program. Teachers must be deliberate when teaching social skills and use modeling to show

the children what is socially acceptable (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019). It is not enough to

place students with disabilities in an inclusive environment to develop their social skills

(McCollow & Hoffman, 2019).

Appropriate social behavior is developed in preschoolers through peer interactions

and their play (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). According to research, a teacher's engagement in

the development of peer connections has a significant impact (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016).

Interactions between young children and their peers give crucial chances for social and

cognitive development, and this is true for both normally developing and special needs

children (Chen et al., 2017). The Montessori approach is known for their child centered

approaches. The teachers, the child's free work, and the prepared environment all contribute

to the child's individual and social development in the Montessori approach (USLU Kocabas

& Bavli, 2022). As a result, highlighting the communication and collaboration established between Montessori teachers, who support the children as guides by observing them, and children, who are at the center of learning by following their own preferences in a prepared environment, will help to reveal the link between the Montessori philosophy and practice (USLU Kocabas & Bavli, 2022).

Literature Review

Learning environments that support all students' growth and development are required for inclusive education (2022). Socially, children without disabilities benefit from being in inclusive educational contexts with children with disabilities (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019). Inclusion reduces fear, anger, prejudice, and discrimination while increasing tolerance, acceptance, and understanding (Kart, 2021). During a study (Rose et al., 2021), they collected data from kids within the school on peers and teacher's attitudes in the inclusive setting. The data indicated positive outcomes in the feature of inclusion having social effects for pupils in the classroom, according to a research study (Rose et al., 2021). Study authors conclude a healthy method for children to comprehend their peers with disabilities if they are exposed to other children with disabilities in their schools. These researchers go farther to suggest inclusion also allows children who are typically developing and children who have disabilities to acquire and build strong social emotional skills that are necessary as they grow up and progress through life (Rose et al., 2021). Study results suggest children will be able to develop patience and understanding when working or playing with peers with disabilities (Rose et al., 2021).

McCollow and Hoffman (2019) suggest being effective and deliver long-term benefits for children with and at-risk of disabilities, inclusionary education must incorporate social skills instruction. The use of peer-mediated strategies is listed as a good intervention in an inclusive classroom by Movahedazarhouligh (2018), McCollow and Hoffman (2019), and

Dennis and Stockall (2014). The teacher's job is to help and coach ordinarily developing peers in an early childhood setting to initiate and promote appropriate social interactions with impaired peers (Movahedazarhouligh, 2018). The educator's job is to teach ordinarily developing classmates how to initiate, prompt, and reinforce social interactions with the disabled student. Both children can benefit from this form of intervention since it allows them to develop social play skills (Dennis & Stockall, 2014).

Zweers (2020) researched social narratives, also known as social stories, are used to teach social situations such as sharing or how to calm down when becoming upset. This researcher found the goal is to make the skill broader and to encourage others to use it correctly. Since the regular curriculum fosters learning and skill progress, students with special needs or disabilities have lots of opportunity to learn through their social interactions with usually developing classmates (Zweers et al., 2020). Barton and Smith (2015) used online surveys to generate information on the current challenges in preschool inclusive programs. Through their research, they found three solutions that could assist schools in implementing a high-quality preschool program. These findings included identifying current resources, using science framework, and implementing it, and supporting ongoing evidence-based practices (Barton & Smith, 2015).

Review of the Research Literature and Methodological Literature of Inclusion Practices

The importance and benefits of inclusion for students with exceptional needs are supported by research studies by Kossyvaki and Papoudi (2016), Barnett (2018), Noggle and Stites (2017), and McCollow and Hoffman (2019). In prekindergarten programs, children aged 3-5 years old has been found to have that play is a natural way for the children to practice social emotional skills (Kossyvaki & Papoudi, 2016).

According to research (Chen et al., 2017), interactive peer play has positive effects on young children's learning and development, particularly in terms of spatial reasoning. In a

research study conducted by Noggle and Stites (2017), typically developing peers naturally

including students with exceptional needs during play. In this study, three typically

developing peers were observed in an inclusive preschool classroom to capture their lived

experiences. Researchers Noggle and Stites (2017), concluded all three, usually developing

peers, experienced positive social progress, and a positive shift in how they saw peers with

impairments at the end of the study. In this study, peers were seen using peer mediation

strategies that had previously been identified in studies by Movahedazarhouligh (2018) and

McCollow and Hoffman (2019).

Studies have concluded that educators should emphasize that these abilities must be

explicitly taught and cultivated in a welcoming setting (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019).

Children are not born with these talents or the appropriate social language; they must be

taught and given opportunities to practice (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019).

In a study conducted by Kwon, Hong, and Jeon (2017) they used teacher surveys.

Teachers were polled to gather their attitudes towards inclusive classrooms and their

practices. Researcher also interviewed the students on how they viewed inclusive classroom

settings. The findings of their study showed that the attitudes of the inclusive classroom, and

attitudes about children with disabilities were positive. In the study the researchers

completed, they found that the teachers and students had positive attitudes, and the teacher

responses also mentioned more trainings for the teachers to better understand that disabilities

for the students they were having in their inclusive classrooms (Kwon et al., 2017).

Conclusion

Children's knowledge and acceptance of peers with disabilities are promoted and

educated by properly trained teachers (Kwon, Hong, & Jeon 2017). One wonders, will

additional teacher professional trainings need to be conducted specifically in the

prekindergarten inclusive programs to enhance the knowledge of teachers? This study will

focus on staff perceptions of blending special education and general education in the prekindergarten setting.:

- Does an inclusive classroom allow for students with and without disabilities to have social-emotional growth? Explain why or why not.

- Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms offer more social emotional growth opportunities to students with disabilities? If so, what does it offer to them?

- Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms benefit all students in the room? Explain why or why not.

- In an inclusive prekindergarten program, in what ways can students with disabilities grow their social emotional skills by learning from their typically developing peers?

Chapter 3: Methodology Design

Introduction

The research action plan was conducted to examine the perceptions of instructional personnel, school psychologist, and administration of inclusive preschool programming and the outcomes in social emotional skills in a rural preschool program in central Illinois. The results of this study indicated a need for training or programmatic adjustments for students in preschool inclusive programs.

Statement of the Problem

The use of inclusive classrooms in public school districts have been shown to be beneficial to students with and without disabilities (Noggle & Stites, 2017). The IDEA prefers for students with disabilities to be placed in a classroom with their typically developing peers, allowing for them to be in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Barton & Smith, 2015). The IDEA mandates inclusion for individuals' birth to age 23 with disabilities (Barton & Smith, 2015). This includes preschool age children due to them falling in the specified age range. Most preschoolers are age 3-5 years old. School districts must be able to comply with allowing students with disabilities to be in the least restrictive environment for the maximum amount of time possible to receive peer interactions to assist them with their social emotional growth (Chen et al., 2017).

The problem is that not all public schools use inclusive classrooms in prekindergarten programs; instead, some schools will have an early childhood classroom just for students with disabilities. Although early childhood classrooms may be beneficial for the students with documented disabilities unable to be in the general education classroom, this also eliminates the social interactions with their typically developing peers. Implementing inclusive programs allows for blending during small increments of the day, thus would allow for students with disabilities to have social interactions typically with developing peers.

Research has shown students who have disabilities and are placed in an inclusive preschool program have greater outcomes on their social-emotional growth (Park et al., 2018).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate staff perceptions of student social-emotional outcomes in an inclusive Prekindergarten program in a public school district setting.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study investigated the following research questions for staff and faculty:

- Does an inclusive classroom allow for students with and without disabilities to have social-emotional growth? Explain why or why not.

- Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms offer more social emotional growth opportunities to students with disabilities? If so, what does it offer to them?

- Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms benefit all students in the room? Explain why or why not.

- In an inclusive prekindergarten program, in what ways can students with disabilities grow their social emotional skills by learning from their typically developing peers?

Research Methodology

This study employed mixed methods research to investigate the perceptions of instructional personal, the school psychologist, and administration on the social emotional outcomes in an inclusive prekindergarten program. The researcher will distribute the online surveys to the staff using anonymous Google Forms survey. The survey questions were:

- Does an inclusive classroom allow for students with and without disabilities to have social-emotional growth? Explain why or why not.

- Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms offer more social emotional growth opportunities to students with disabilities? If so, what does it offer to them?

- Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms benefit all students in the room? Explain why or why not.

- In an inclusive prekindergarten program, in what ways can students with disabilities grow their social emotional skills by learning from their typically developing peers?

After the surveys were completed by the instructional personnel, psychologist, and administration, the researcher imported the data into percent to show the common answers that were answered among the staff members. The answers allowed the research to investigate strengths and weaknesses in an inclusive prekindergarten program on student's social emotional growth.

Research Design

A Google Form survey was used to collect the respondent perceptions about inclusionary education at the prekindergarten level and the social emotional outcomes it has for the students. The survey helped to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the prekindergarten program. The open-ended questions were used to analyze the research focus on public preschool programs.

Target Population

The target population of the study was prekindergarten teachers, school psychologist, support staff and administration at the prekindergarten level in a public school district. The study was conducted to identify the outcomes of social emotional growth in a blended prekindergarten program. The research was distributed by a Google Form survey amongst the staff that works closely with the blended program. The surveys were conducted with anonymity so that individuals participating would freely share their perceptions and experiences without identification. The survey was developed to gather data relating to perceptions and experiences of staff to the social emotional growth of the students in the blended prekindergarten program.

Source of Data

A Google Form survey was developed and distributed to the instructional personnel (one general education and one special education) at the prekindergarten level, the school psychologist, support staff and administration who work within or with the students in the inclusive prekindergarten environment.

Data collection and Baseline Data

There is not a need for baseline data in this study.

Field Test

There is not a need for a field test in this study.

Pilot Test

There is not a need for a pilot test in this study.

Management of Variables

While using mixed methods research, many variables may occur in the study. The survey will depend on the staff members answering the questions with honesty. It will also depend on them using the current knowledge of inclusionary environments.

Data analysis procedures

There was a total of 4 open-ended questions in the survey. The researcher investigated staff perceptions of the program being implemented, knowledge, and experiences on the topic.

Internal Validity

The instructional personnel, physiologist, support staff and administration completed confidential surveys on their perceptions on the social emotional outcomes of students in the prekindergarten inclusionary programs. The staff's honesty may impact the information they provide. The sample population and their comprehension of special education services were also considered for internal validity. The main researcher has the education and experiences

to compose the survey. The respondents are state certified in the teaching level and currently work in the target program.

External Validity

The setting of the survey was online. No perceived school faculty or administration pressure will be experienced during the survey.

Expected Findings

The expected findings of this study may include perceptions of the staff who work closely with prekindergarten aged students in an inclusive public-school program. The public prekindergarten staff is expected to express positive outcomes towards the social emotional outcomes of the students in the program. The topics will include: social emotional growth opportunities in the classroom, in what ways can their social emotional outcomes increase, and does it benefit students with and without disabilities.

Ethical Issues- Conflict of Interest, privacy, confidentiality, lasting effects

The results from the survey include no personal information. There were no lasting benefits or harm to the participants in the study. The results of the surveys were kept on the researcher's password protected laptop. All participants were volunteers and their personal answers to the surveys were kept confidential.

Chapter 4: Findings

Study Setting

The study was carried out at a pre-kindergarten program in a public school. The program consists of 120 students, 3 general education teachers, 1 special education teacher, 5 paraprofessionals, and 4 related service providers make up the pre-kindergarten program (speech and language pathologist, hearing itinerant, occupational therapy assistant, and physical therapy assistant). Every year, the school system instructs about 1400 students. According to the district report card, 268 kids receive special education assistance, 760 students are considered low income, and 1280 pupils are white (Litchfield Prekindergarten: School Snapshot). A population of about 6,600 residents, 96.8% of whom are white, is served by the school system. With a poverty rate of 18.17 percent and an average household income of $60,200 (Litchfield Community School District #12).

Population and Data Summary of Demographics

Eight instructional and support staff members of the study program were sent a survey via email for completion. Seven of the instructional and support staff members completed the survey, which equaled an 87% completion rate. Study participants consisted of 5 (71.4%) females and 2 (28.6%) males. The highest degree earned by participants ranged from bachelor's degree (1), master's degree (5), and specialist degree (1).

Participants were asked how at what grade level they worked. Five (71.4 %) work only at the prekindergarten grade level and two (28.6 %) work at the prekindergarten and lower elementary grade level.

Other Researchers

The main researcher designed, conducted, and analyzed the study data. No other researchers were involved in conducting or analyzing the data provided.

Study Timeline

After IRB approval in early June 2022, the researcher sent the survey to instructional and support staff of the study program in early June 2022. A follow up was send out to all participants on June 22, 2022, reminding the staff to complete the survey. The instructional and support staff had approximately three weeks to complete the survey which were all non-working days due to it being summer break. Accurate, current demographic data was collected via survey questions.

Data Analysis of Instructional Staff Perceptions of Social Emotional Growth

The survey questions inquired specifically about staff perceptions of blending special education and the social emotional growth benefits that come from the inclusive environment. Questions were answered using short answers. Seven staff members of the sample answered the qualitative question *Does an inclusive classroom allow for students with and without disabilities to have social-emotional growth? Explain why or why not*. All seven (100%) of the responses answered yes that inclusive classrooms allow for all students to have social emotional growth. Additional comments included:

- "They are able to learn from one another"

- "Those with special needs have the opportunity to learn from those who don't have the same needs. It is also a language-rich environment, where all students are learning from each other through various forms of communication."

- "It teaches them empathy, caring, patience, that not everyone is the same and that's okay."

- "It allows these students to interact with same-age peers and have those peers as role models for what to do/ what not to do."

- "Both groups benefit from interacting with peers who have a wide variety of abilities and challenges. Specific social- emotional learning benefits include: tolerance, compassion, tenacity, patience, self-acceptance, etc."

Seven of the staff members of the sample responded to the qualitative question, *Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms offer more social-emotional growth opportunities to students with disabilities? If so, what does it offer to them?* Seven (100%) of the responses stated, yes that they believe inclusive classrooms off more social-emotional growth opportunities to students with disabilities. Additional information included:

- *"*It gives them peer models and helps them foster relationships with non-disabled peers."

- "It allows these students to develop more social-emotional skills by offering them a multi-modal approach to learning, giving them tools for interacting with peers, provide friendships by finding common ground and finding different ways to interact as friends."

- "An inclusive classroom offers more social -emotional growth because it is very difficult to teach social skills in a 1:1 environment. Kids tend to learn more from their peers, not the adults."

Seven of the staff members from the sample responded to the question, *Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms benefit all students in the room?* Six (85%) of the respondents stated yes that all students benefit from inclusive classrooms. One of the respondents stated that some students may have needs to where they would not benefit from being in an inclusive classroom. Additional information included:

- "They learn from each other. All of the students in the classroom have different skills and skill-levels and it is important to learn and develop from each of them."

- "Children without disabilities learn to interact with children with disabilities and vice versa. It promotes these children to communicate in their own way (AAC, PECS, verbally, etc.)."

- "Some students may have needs that cannot always be met in the inclusive

   setting. Sometimes it is based on limitations of program resources or

   individual teacher preparation and knowledge base/ experience."

Seven of the staff members from the sample responded to the question, *In an inclusive prekindergarten program, in what ways can students with disabilities grow their social-emotional skills by learning from their typically developing peers*? All seven (100%) of the respondents' multiple ways in which students are able to grow their social emotional skills in a positive response. Additional information included:

- *"They can imitate appropriate behaviors, they can watch other children caring

   for each other, they can learn social cues of body language and facial cues,

   they can practice their own skills with same aged peers."

- "Through play, routines, self-help skills, and overall modeling is a great way

   for any of these kids to learn the expectations of the classroom."

- "They can see how they react to situations, how they play and socialize. Also,

   just by pure exposure."

Eliminated Data

There was no data eliminated form this survey or study. All data collected was used.

Mitigating Events

The researcher emailed the survey to the participants anonymously to prevent potential bias. The researcher was unable to identify the instructional staff member who didn't finish the survey as a result. Due to the small sample size of this study, only seven of the eight surveys were completed and examined. All responses were finished completely and returned within the set study time limits.

Changes in Protocol

No changes in protocol happened during this study.

Data Trends and Patterns

In the overall responses, the majority of staff participants stated that students with and without disabilities gain social-emotional growth from being in an inclusive prekindergarten program. Social-emotional growth can be gained from a verity of ways inside the classroom. Below are the results from the survey:

- Peer modeling of expressing feelings and appropriate behavior.

- Observing other peers in the classroom.

- Socializing with peers inside the classroom and on the playground.

- Social-emotional growth happens through play.

Data Outliers

One staff participant did not agree with the others that all students with and without disabilities benefit from an inclusive classroom environment. This participant stated valid reasoning for their belief. They stated that students needs and accommodations that need to be met may not be able to in an inclusive setting.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Conclusions

Overall, the research survey responses indicated that prekindergarten inclusive classroom settings allow for students with and without disabilities to grow their social emotional skills. For example, students can grow this skill through socializing, playing, and modeling with peers inside the classroom.

Mixed opinions for inclusive classrooms benefiting all students were seen as well. For example, one participant stated that not all students are able to have all their needs and/ or accommodations met in and inclusive classroom.

Respondents generally felt having inclusive prekindergarten classrooms allow for the students to learn and grow their social- emotional growth through modeling, imitating, observing, and play with their peers.

Study Strengths

Seven of the eight surveys distributed were completed to the researcher within three weeks. The results of the surveys were anonymously returned to the researcher to ensure authentic and honest opinions. No respondent identifying information was expected or requested. Staff members were able to complete the survey at their leisure and were asked to provide their answers in short answer form. All respondents have direct experience in the instructional organization. All responders are certified and state-approved for their current employment.

Study Weaknesses

After analyzing the responses to the quantitative questions, the short answer responses should have been multiple choice in some areas. Some questions were answered at great lengths and made the data gathering more challenging than others. A multiple-choice question could have potentially encouraged participants to give one direct choice for forward

answers. Collecting the survey as anonymous results encouraged honest responses. Thus, practice also made it impossible to determine which staff member(s) did not compete the survey. It would have been beneficial to the data and information provided if all the surveys were returned.

Perhaps, an additional qualitative question the researcher may have included is, "In what ways can inclusive prekindergarten programs increase the social-emotional growth for students with and without disabilities?" The answer to this question could generate additional information for stakeholder's suggestions in assisting the social-emotional growth to grow more.

Validity

All respondents are volunteers. That alone may have skewed the results somewhat. The survey wasn't standardized or examined. An experienced, credentialed educator who has the training and knowledge to discuss social-emotional growth created the survey. Since every respondent worked for the public prekindergarten inclusion research program for at least a year, the external validity was high.

Setting Impact

This study was conducted entirely online. There was no face-to-face interaction during the research. The survey was emailed to the participants, who then completed it and returned it. The study does not include instructional staff who did not complete the online survey. The research study's involvement may have been restricted by the virtual environment.

Hypothesis and Results

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- Does an inclusive classroom allow for students with and without disabilities to have social-emotional growth? Explain why or why not.

- Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms offer more social emotional growth opportunities to students with disabilities? If so, what does it offer to them?

- Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms benefit all students in the room? Explain why or why not.

- In an inclusive prekindergarten program, in what ways can students with disabilities grow their social emotional skills by learning from their typically developing peers?

The results of the staff perceptions believe that social emotional growth is happening in an inclusive prekindergarten classroom.

General respondent conclusions include –

- Students with and without disabilities are benefiting from the inclusive environment from modeling, imitation, observation, socializing, etc.

- Students can learn from their peers with and without disabilities on how to also understand facial cues and body language cues when in situations in the classroom.

Overall, the main researcher can conclude this investigation is beneficial to inclusive prekindergarten programs. will benefit students and teachers to learning the benefits and growth for social-emotional skills that are encountered inside the classroom with students with and without disabilities. Study results seem to indicate respondents believe students in prekindergarten inclusive programs are increasing their social emotional skills more by learning from their peers rather than their teachers. It was stated in the survey responses that students learn best through their play and interactions with peers than they do their teachers for their social-emotional skills.

Recommendations

If the study were to be replicated, I recommend using observation data from primary students inside the classroom to document any social emotional growth they are making from the beginning of the year to the end. Perhaps by using student data from observations and

staff perceptions, it can be more complete data on if social-emotional growth is happening inside the classroom and what are the most benefiting factors for that. Another recommendation is to use multiple-choice questions when interviewing the staff through survey. Such modification may allow for easier data gathering and better idea of respondents' opinions.

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Appendix A

LITCHFIELD PRE KINDERGARTEN
G.A. Sihler School
601 South State Street
Litchfield, Illinois 62056
Ph: (217)-324-3514 - Fax (217)324-2129

Adam D. Favre, Director
afavre@litchfieldpanthers.org

June 7 , 2022

Institutional Review Board
Greenville University
315 E. College Avenue
Greenville, IL 62246

To Whom It May Concern:

As Director of Litchfield Pre-K, I give permission for Ashley Schaefer to recruit participants and collect data on our campus for the study entitled "Staff Perceptions of Blending Special Education and General Education in a Public Pre-school setting". I have been fully informed about the purpose and scope of the project, and I have been provided with copies of all study related documents, recruitment materials, and data collection instruments.

Sincerely,

Adam Favre
Director
601 South State Street
Litchfield, Illinois 62056

Appendix B

Recruitment Statement

1. Ashley Schaefer a graduate student enrolled at Greenville University, under the supervision of Dr, Mary Ann Manos invites you to participate in this research study.

2. The title of this study is Staff Perceptions of Blending Special Education and General Education in a Pre-school setting. The purpose of this study is to investigate staff perceptions of student social-emotional outcomes in an inclusive Prekindergarten program.

3. Your participation in this study will involve completing a Google Survey. Participation will take approximately 30 minutes.

4. The potential risks associated with participation in this study are minimal and include loss of anonymity regarding study participation, loss of time and possible boredom with the questions. Efforts to alleviate these risks include making the survey as brief and interesting as possible. Because you will not provide your name on any questionnaire, the risk for loss of anonymity is minimal.

5. The results of this study will be publicly presented at a later date. Additionally, the results may be published in scientific research journals and/or presented at professional research conferences. However, your name and identity will not be revealed, and your responses will remain anonymous. No names or other personally identifying information will appear on any questionnaire or data gathering instrument, so there is no possibility of your responses being linked back to you.

6. Participation in this study will not benefit you directly. Your participation may benefit others by contributing to knowledge of student social emotional outcomes in an inclusive Prekindergarten program. This knowledge may help educators, educational administrators, and other researchers determine effective means of dealing with social emotional growth in an inclusive prekindergarten program.

7. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, there will not be a penalty to you or loss of any benefit to which you are otherwise entitled. If you consent to participate now, you may still withdraw from this study at any time.

8. If you have any questions about this research study, you may call Ashley Schaefer at 618-980-6322, or Dr. Mary Ann Manos at 309-258-4159.

1. Do you agree to participate in this project?
Yes, I agree.
No, I do not agree.

Demographic Questions

2.Are you a male or a female?

Male

Female

Prefer not to say

3.What is your role?

teacher

administrator

educational support staff

Other:

4.   At what grade do you work?

PreK

lower elementary

PreK and lower elementary

upper elementary

Middle School

High School

5.   What type of training have you had? (Short answer)

Research Questions

1. Does an inclusive classroom allow for students with and without disabilities to have social-emotional growth? Explain why or why not.

2. Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms offer more social-emotional growth opportunities to students with disabilities? If so, what does it offer to them?

3. Do inclusive prekindergarten classrooms benefit all students in the room? Explain why or why not.

4. In an inclusive prekindergarten program, in what ways can students with disabilities grow their social-emotional skills by learning from their typically developing peers?