

Positive and Negative Aspects of Inclusion Services

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper was to investigate the conceptions and misconceptions of an inclusive education. Inclusion was formulated upon three core inclusionary principles, these being: setting diverse suitable learning challenges, responding to needs of pupils, and overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of children. As a result of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the even more recent mandates of the revised Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004, which defines “highly qualified” in new ways, it has become increasingly important for schools to utilize their resources using more effective and creative means.

Introduction

One of the major concerns of school administrators, teachers, and parents today is the achievement level of students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) receiving an inclusive education. Research is constantly showing various teachers’ opinions of inclusion services in a general education classroom. Inclusion provides specific learning disabled students with extra support they need in order to be successful in an “ordinary” classroom (McLesky & Waldron, 2007). When students with specific learning disabilities receive inclusion services, they are provided with daily schedules and activities that are homogeneous with students who do not have special needs.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to investigate the conceptions and misconceptions of an inclusive education. Inclusion was formulated upon three core inclusionary principles, these being: setting diverse suitable learning challenges, responding to needs of pupils, and overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of children.

Review of Related Literature

The origins of inclusive education can be traced back to the early 1900’s and the welfare pioneers who believed in a non-segregated schooling system (Cesar, 2006). The emergence of inclusive education was first grounded during the World Conference on Special Education which took place in Spain, 1994. At the World Conference, 25% international organizations, and 92% governments developed a “bold and dynamic statement that called for inclusion to be quite simply- the norm” (Clough, 1998). The statement which was formulated at the conference stated

that: Schools should assist them (children with special educational needs and disabilities) to become economically active and provide them with the skills needed in everyday life, offering training in skills which respond to the social and communication demands and expectations of adult life (Clough, 1998, 10).

The evolution of inclusive education within the English educational system began with the election of the New Labour party in 1997. It became quite clear, to observers, that the government had put inclusion firmly on the political agenda, as it stated:

We want to develop an education system in which special provision is seen as an integral part of overall provision aiming wherever possible to return children to the mainstream and to increase the skills and resources available to mainstream schools, and to ensure that the support services are used to support mainstream placements (Richards, 2007, 64-68).

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the evolution of inclusive practices being supported by a raft of governmental policies, initiatives and legislation. The Special Education Needs and Disability Act revised section 316 of the Education Act 1996 and so strengthened the right of children with special educational needs to be educated in a regular education setting.

On a study done with newly qualified teachers, questionnaires that contained a number of items, including open-ended questions, allowed each teacher to express their feelings about including specific learning disabled students into their regular education classroom setting. At the beginning of the study, 100% beginning teachers believed that inclusion meant “education for all” (Hodkinson, 2006). At the end of their first year of teaching, only 40% of these participants changed their definition of inclusive education. There was also a decrease by 20% that teachers believed the individual need of the student could be considered. The teachers felt that not all students with special needs could be included into a general education setting, and that including these students was a disadvantage to students without special needs. Teachers believed that in order to ensure successful inclusion schools should: have a policy relating to inclusion, positive aspects of diversity should be emphasized in the classroom, more training for teachers should be considered, additional resources pertaining to inclusive education should be available, and more support from outside agencies (Hodkinson, 2006, 43-55).

Many teachers argue that the general education classroom is a separate and different setting for students with specific learning disabilities. A second study suggests that there is a great need to make differences normal as inclusive education is being evolved in various school systems. Researchers believe that educators can make an inclusive classroom normal for students with disabilities as well as those without disabilities (Keil, 2006, 168-172). There are four main issues that will ensure inclusive classrooms will be successful if they provide an ordinary environment for all students. These issues include creating inclusive classrooms, which are considered different, as ordinary as possible. A second issue is to gain more support and collaboration from personnel to make the inclusive classroom as natural as possible. The third issue focuses on keeping constancy and order throughout the day. The last issue suggests that all students must become part of the classroom and engage in all learning and social activities.

After observing several classrooms with specific learning disabled children in each, there were no classrooms that were equipped to accommodate all academic achievement and behaviors that exist in the school system. This observation shows that teachers need to be more flexible in making a different environment ordinary. The general education classroom should always be as natural and unobtrusive as possible. Both special education teachers and general education teachers should work with all students, not just those students that are considered special need students. Teachers must increase their tolerance level towards behavior problems and be provided with thorough support each day. General education teachers should collaborate with special education teachers often. Teachers should use co-teaching methods which enable the teacher to have more one-on-one time with each student, and these also help be decreasing student teacher ratio.

A good inclusive classroom sets daily schedules and activities for students with special needs that coincide with the daily activities for students without special needs. If the daily scheduled activities are not constant, students' routines could be affected tremendously. Disadvantages of interrupted schedules include: limited instructional time, difficulty for teachers to provide effective instruction, difficulty for students to learn appropriate behavior in different settings, and stereotyping students as odd because they leave the general education classroom during instructional time.

A study done on final year teacher trainees' knowledge and understanding of inclusion posed three main questions: (1). How do trainees define inclusive education? (2). What factors do they believe are inherent in its success? and (3.) Do they feel confident to support the development of inclusion educational practices (Hodkinson, 2005)? Eighty participants were given questionnaires after their first year of teaching. The research explored final –year initial teacher trainees' conceptions of inclusive education. The exploration seeks to ascertain how trainees conceptualize inclusive education and whether they have the requisite understanding to enable them to engage fully in the development of inclusion's important educational initiative. The data from the questionnaires indicate that 100% of the trainees define inclusive education as one where all children are included. Forty-two percent of trainees define inclusive education as having the student's individual needs considered. Twenty-one percent of trainees define inclusive education as being treated equally, and 18% of teachers believe that an inclusive education means that students are enabled to reach their full potential.

Data also showed that teachers believed that in order to ensure successful inclusion, educational practice depends upon: the adaptation of teaching style to correspond with the individual learning styles of pupils; having a policy relating to inclusion; positive aspects of diversity emphasized in the classroom; have appropriate materials; training for teachers; teamwork of staff; support from outside agencies; broad curriculum; careful assessment; mixed-ability teaching; strong links with the home environment; and non-discriminating teachers.

Only 46% of the teachers believe that all mainstream schools should be inclusive. These teachers believe that they needed more training in respect of special educational needs.

The findings of this small-scale study suggest that although, in theory, the trainees support the concept of inclusive education, they display a shallow understanding of how it may be delivered

in practice within the applied educational setting. The study also showed that the majority of trainees feel confident in their ability to deliver inclusive education successfully in their first year of teaching.

A third study was done on collaborative work contributions to more inclusive learning settings. The purpose of this study was to present findings of efforts made to use collaborative work as a mediation tool in order to achieve more inclusive learning settings. The study used a critical and ethnographic approach and thus peer interactions were implemented as a daily practice. This research addressed five main questions: (1) What are the contributions of collaborative work to the promotion of more inclusive learning settings? (2) How can inclusivity be seen in students' talk during peer interactions within mathematics classes? (3) How does collaborative work contribute to students' mathematical knowledge appropriation and to the development of higher mental functions? (4) What is the role of the new didactic contract in the promotion of knowledge appropriation? (5) Is there an impact of working collaboratively over several school years in students' identities and life projects? Data were collected through participant observation (audio and videotaped), questionnaires, tasks inspired in projective techniques, interviews, reports, and sets of materials gathered by the teachers.

After completing the study, researchers showed that students who were a part of an inclusive setting remained in their ways of thinking after the research was completed. This study includes an action-research level, in which 33 teachers/researchers and four psychologists study and implement collaborative work, namely peer interactions. The study focused specifically on the experience of one student categorized as having Special Education Needs (SEN), who is similar to many others studied within the project. The student categorized as having SEN worked in a group of ninth grade students. The students had been in the project since the eighth grade and only one student had failed a grade. Each class of students worked collaboratively for an entire year. During the first week of the project the teachers introduced the didactic contract to the students. The didactic contract is intended to promote collaborative work amongst and as well as teacher interactions. The students were also placed in dyads meaning they were placed in pairs. Students had to work collaboratively with their peers on all activities. After dyad or group work there would be a whole class discussion.

This study showed that one student, after completing a year in an inclusive setting, gained more confidence, positive academic self-esteem, and sense of responsibility. Students who experienced collaborative learning settings are able to maintain collaborative ways of acting, even in other complex and dynamic settings. The didactic contract contributed to the creation of a more inclusive learning setting. The students were able to explore new concepts and challenging tasks. The researchers and teachers decided to implement a ten-year follow up of some selected classes in order to study the impact of collaborative work on students.

A fourth study was done on how to make co-teaching work in front of students. As a result of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the even more recent mandates of the revised Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004, which defines "highly qualified" in new ways, it has become increasingly important for schools to utilize their resources using more effective and creative means. Research has shown that students pulled from general education classes and taught in a resource setting do not benefit from the instruction of content area teachers. Research also

shows that all general education teachers do not possess the expertise to meet the learning differences posed by students with disabilities. Co-teaching has become one of many collaborative strategies that schools are looking at in an effort to meet the needs of all students within this educational framework that we call school. Co-teaching teams have been forced into the general education classroom where veteran teachers feel insulted to have a special education teacher placed in the room with the expectation that they both teach content area critical concepts. The purpose of this study was to show that students do not benefit as much from instruction in a resource setting as they do in an inclusive general education classroom, but general education teachers do not possess the expertise to teach students with disabilities, effectively forcing a team-teaching situation. Results of a teacher survey given by the researcher indicated that the majority of co-teachers believe co-teaching influences student achievement. Research has showed mixed results on the effects of co-teaching. Studies have shown that students with disabilities showed larger gains in math and equal gains in reading when compared to students receiving pull out services and that consultation plus co-teaching was as effective as other service delivery models. The researcher conducted a study of the attitudes and concerns of secondary teachers from 15 urban and suburban districts in and around Seattle, Washington. Using a structured interview format, general and special education teachers were asked to reply to a series of open and closed ended questions. Participation was anonymous and interviews were conducted on a one to one basis. Teachers were asked to share their opinions as well as factual information about the effects of co-teaching. The majority of teacher surveys stated that they did not participate voluntarily to co-teaching and they had no prior planning before participating in the co-teaching process. According to 75% of the surveys teachers stated that co-teaching influenced student achievement. One hundred percent of the 77% stated that the impact was positive and that some students made academic gains. Only 10% of teachers stated that there was no influence on student achievement.

Statement of the Hypothesis

In conclusion, research shows that teachers' definition of inclusion meant education for all. The teachers in many of the studies believed that if they were given proper training such as workshops pertaining to inclusion services, more resources made available, and support from other staff and administrators, meaning that staff and administrators are working together and doing whatever it takes to help each student reach their full potential, inclusion services could be very successful. Many of the teachers believed that the administrators were concerned about students receiving inclusion services and being successful in their classes, but the teachers also believed that the administrators did not know how to properly implement inclusion services. Therefore it has been hypothesized that there will be a difference in the attitudes, related to inclusive education, from teachers who receive no staff support, administrative support, and no training prior to their first year of teaching compared to those who have received some training and support either during their first year of teaching or over many years as a teacher.

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