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A COMPARISON OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION
TEACHERS ON INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The thesis questions were created after reflecting upon past educational experiences as a student with a physical disability and considering how teachers make an impact on the inclusion of students with special needs within their classrooms. The thesis goal was to understand more about how general and special education teachers approach the inclusion of all students and if there are any noticeable differences in these approaches. A questionnaire including qualitative and quantitative response options was created and administered to twenty educators at an urban elementary school in Reading, Pennsylvania. There was a significant difference in how the teachers felt the students may benefit from inclusion with general education teachers indicating the students benefitted academically and special education teachers indicating the students benefitted the most socially. The two groups of teachers were in agreement that most school personnel support inclusion. A majority of both general and special education teachers indicated their preference of going to an administrator with questions or needs regarding inclusive classrooms. General and special education teachers indicated students with special needs did not gain the highest social benefit by being in an inclusive classroom with their peers without special needs. A majority of special education teachers reported that they thought students without special needs benefitted socially by being in inclusive classrooms while general education teachers reported that these students benefitted academically. A greater understanding has been gained regarding the resources both types of teachers use and how they perceive inclusion impacts their classrooms and students since they indicated the resources they use and the impact of an inclusive classroom on students with and without special needs.

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Chapter 1 : Introduction

As an individual with cerebral palsy, a permanent physical disability I've had since birth, I spent my elementary and middle school education in a wheelchair. Due to my lack of independent mobility, I used the elevator to get to many of my classes and needed special accommodations for physical education classes. The schools I attended only had two wheelchair-accessible desks and since there was another student in a wheelchair in my graduating class (he had multiple sclerosis), our classmates and teachers had to move our desks to another classroom for each class since we went to different rooms for classes where we would need to use handicap-accessible desks.

My disability and the way people viewed me because of the wheelchair I used kept me from developing positive relationships with many of my peers and sometimes even my teachers. I felt as if the other students stayed away from me because they didn't understand why I was different or how it affected me. Instead of learning about how the disability affected me, my peers chose to avoid interacting with me in the classroom. I felt as if teachers who understood the needs of students in wheelchairs, like myself, were kinder towards me, while teachers who hadn't had students with disabilities similar to mine were more aloof and seemed as if they pretended I wasn't actually in the classroom. For example, I wouldn't be called on if I raised my hand in class and would be discouraged from participating in class.

From having other students with special needs in their classrooms before, some teachers were more aware about inclusion. The teachers who were more aware of inclusion and students with special needs made sure to treat me just like any other student. For example, they would call on me in class, let me seat myself without assigning me "student helpers," and didn't make a big deal when I was a few minutes late to class because the elevator was slow. Others, however,

appeared ill-prepared for and seemed nervous about students with special needs in their classrooms. They were the teachers who commented in front of the class that having a wheelchair didn't mean I could show up to class later than the bell, ignored me for the majority of the class, and gave me the easiest roles in group projects. These actions angered me because I wasn't stupid, and yet the teachers still treated me like my physical disability affected my cognitive thinking skills, even when my grades proved otherwise. Thankfully, some of those teachers learned to treat me like any other student by the middle of the year, but I constantly felt as if I had to prove to them that I could rise to the challenge and engage with the learning process as much as the rest of my peers could. Others were more patient with me regarding my necessary accommodations and required support within the classroom.

I understand how a teacher who may not feel prepared to teach a special needs student may feel frustrated, especially if there are areas where the student and teacher may not understand what the other may need in order to be successful. As a student, I couldn't understand why my presence in the classroom was a source of stress because I didn't know teachers usually differentiated instruction, or changed the instruction and assessment based on students' needs. My teachers in elementary school didn't understand that my cognitive thinking skills weren't affected by my disability and that I could actively participate in classroom activities with very few accommodations (mainly just a desk to sit at with the wheelchair) and didn't require much differentiation. I think I could have had a better elementary and middle school experience if my teachers had asked me questions or expressed any concerns they had about having me in their class or perhaps if my parents had shared what I would tell them about how I felt in the classroom.

Communication about how the student best learns or what the teacher and student can do in order for instruction to be more effective can only be useful if both the teacher and student are willing to take time to understand each other. For example, a teacher would have to understand

the needs of the student and how to best accommodate him or her within the classroom. The student would have to understand how the teacher may be limited in the number of accommodations or changes he or she can make to a lesson while still making sure the lesson objectives are met. At this time in my education, I felt as if teachers and/or other students didn't understand the disability or how it affects the student in the classroom. The teachers and students were choosing to be ignorant rather than ask questions or learn about my disability. I also used to think that, based on my experience, parents also had a responsibility to be the bridge of communication between their child and the school district, especially if the student had special needs that may need adaptations within the classroom.

In my personal experience, administrators have been verbally supportive of inclusion and yet made students with special needs, like myself, feel unwelcome in school. The administrators of my elementary school thought I needed to be placed in the Autistic Support classroom because I had a disability and administrators of the middle school refused to allow me to use my wheelchair during the first week of school. They justified my classroom placement by telling my parents that I had been healed of cerebral palsy and, therefore, did not need my wheelchair during school. The administration never contacted my doctor for his opinion or had any physician work with me for any period of time, so it appeared to me as if they just made up an excuse to make my life as a student with disabilities difficult. My opinion was strengthened after my parents had a meeting with the administrators, and they told my parents that they didn't want students "like me" in their school. After all, according to the administration, the school didn't get enough money from the government to "make it worth their while." Their words angered me and also helped fuel my desire to become a teacher or an administrator so I could treat all students fairly and make sure every student felt welcomed at school.

In my experience, most teachers taught in inclusive classrooms using similar techniques. Since students in inclusive classrooms are expected to learn the same material, the teachers only

changed what was necessary to accommodate the students with special needs. However, I think some teachers are more or less kind towards students with disabilities depending on the severity of the disability. Teachers who have students in their classrooms with severe disabilities may have a harder time adjusting to inclusion and providing the necessary accommodations for each student.

Even though special education courses are not mandatory in order to become a teacher, I think the teachers who have had their degrees and teaching certificates for quite a while could feel uncomfortable and unaware of the unique needs of students with special needs. On the other hand, they have more experience in teaching or have taken extra courses on special education instruction. On the other hand, newly certified teachers may have had special education courses and better understand how to address the needs of these students, but they lack experience in teaching their own students. Whether it is the teacher's first time encountering inclusion or their twentieth makes an impact on their level of comfort and preparedness when dealing with students with disabilities. However, teachers with negative feelings towards integrating students with special needs into the class, regardless of their experience or education, will never feel prepared or comfortable working with students with special needs.

I wanted to discover how general education teachers' perceptions about inclusion differ from those of special education teachers. Since both positions involve working with students with special needs in a different capacity, I had hoped to analyze how their opinions differ based on their careers. Not only have I been a witness to how people treat students with special needs, but I have also been one of those students myself, and I believe teachers' perceptions of inclusion influence how the teachers interact and teach students with special needs. My personal experience had been the basis for my thesis research question, fueled my passion for the inclusion of students with special needs, and helped me to educate others on the benefits and impacts of inclusion on all students.

Chapter 2 : Review of Literature

Definitions of Inclusion

Inclusion is defined by Stainback and Stainback (1996) as an approach to educate students with special needs while receiving the necessary accommodations in order for them to learn without being removed from their classroom or learning environment. While Stainback and Stainback offer the above definition, Kupper (1995) provides a definition preferred in the education field by many educators because it stresses the importance of moving necessary services and resources to the student with a disability rather than placing the student in a segregated setting where the services and/or resources are located. The Stainback and Stainback definition does not include this important location detail. Another important part of the definition of inclusion is that the education of all students is the main responsibility of the general education teacher and is merely just supported by the special education teacher and/or staff (Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Thompkins & Deloney, 1995). The student's education must also occur in the least restrictive environment, or an environment where the student with special needs can be included in a standard classroom with appropriate supplementary aids and services, where the student feels he or she can be successful (Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Thompkins & Deloney, 1995). Therefore, students would be growing personally and academically within the classroom with as few hindrances and failures as possible.

Location of Resources and Accommodations

Not all students with disabilities need special resources or services that would need to be moved to the location of the student. However, for those students who need their resources and services moved accordingly, the location of these resources and services makes a difference in their ability to succeed (Kupper, 1995). Students who need physical or instructional accommodations sometimes need to be in a

specific seat or location in the classroom so arranging the classroom to meet the needs of every student is important (Kupper, 1995). Also, teachers walk around the room to monitor student progress and to maintain control of the class during instruction so they need to make sure the students with special needs are seated in a location that meets their needs. At the same time, their location in the classroom should not pose any potential risks to other students. For example, having a wheelchair blocking the exit route from a classroom could be problematic and dangerous in case of an emergency.

Views of Inclusion

General Education Teacher Perceptions

Smith and Smith (2000) compared general education teachers' perceptions of inclusion and the factors that contributed or hindered the teachers' success in inclusive classrooms. Of the research participants, half of the six teacher participants classified themselves as being successful at effectively teaching inclusive classrooms. On the other hand, the other three individuals stated they were unsuccessful at effectively teaching inclusive classrooms. Teachers' perceptions of their success or failure with inclusion are important because it impacts how much effort the teacher puts forth towards including students and their necessary accommodations (Smith & Smith, 2000). Smith and Smith found that there were four major resource categories that influenced whether the teachers believed they were successful or unsuccessful with inclusion: training, class load, support, and time. They also found that the success of any inclusion program depended on the support of the administration because even with well-trained teachers, if they don't have the time or support they need, inclusion will not be successful (Smith & Smith, 2000). In their research, Smith & Smith found that teachers with positive views towards their inclusion experience are more willing to try new methods of inclusive teaching, while teachers with negative experiences might be more hesitant. Teachers who have positive views of inclusion typically use effective teaching strategies and time management skills in their inclusive classrooms, thus making them feel more prepared to teach all types of students. On the other hand, teachers with negative perceptions of

inclusion tend to believe that inclusion places too many demands on general education teachers for them to be effective educators (Zambelli & Bonni, 2004). The educators in Zambelli and Bonni's study believe that the limited amount of specialist training creates an obstacle for the teachers and students since many specialists depend on their additional training to meet the needs of students and also interact with the classroom teacher on a regular basis. If specialists are only trained a few times a year, they don't receive the maximum training they could on how to best meet the needs of their students or on how to work with the classroom teacher to supplement the student's learning effectively. Of the 23 teachers (general and special education) that participated in the study, a majority of them reported that their views on how successful inclusion was in their classroom was strongly influenced by how useful and supportive the special education teacher was when working with students with special needs. Most of the special education teachers reported that increased specialist training would help them become more successful and effective at their job and also to positively impact how educators approach inclusion within their classrooms (Zambelli & Bonni, 2004).

Special Education Teacher Perceptions

Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, and Scheer (1999) conducted research on inclusion and general and special education teachers' perceptions of inclusive classrooms. They discovered that a high percentage of general education teachers believed they needed more support from specialists within the classroom, as well as more training in order to feel comfortable and confident working with students with and without special needs (Buell et al., 1999). This information supports my theory that teachers with some educational background in special education are slightly more prepared to accommodate and teach an inclusive classroom, while teachers with little to no special education knowledge don't know what to expect or how to deal with the needs of special students. Therefore, the teachers with less special education training feel unprepared and more nervous. The teachers' nervousness affects their teaching to both the students with and without special needs because they lack confidence in the effectiveness of their

own teaching (Buell et al., 1999). The majority of educators in a study conducted about classroom environment and its effect on student achievement believe that special education classrooms are the best placement for students with disabilities because the students with disabilities can receive more individualized instruction (Garriott, Snyder, & Miller, 2003). When in special education classrooms, students with disabilities are less of a distraction to the typical students than if both types of students were together in inclusive classrooms (Garriott, Snyder, & Miller, 2003). Since Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, and Scheer (1999) compared special education and general education teachers' feelings of effectiveness while teaching an inclusive classroom, they discovered how the feelings of effectiveness influence the desire for more training and support that the general education teachers believe the special education teachers need in order to be successful when co-teaching or giving support to students. Since the teachers work together on a regular basis, having an equal amount of training allows teachers to collaborate easier in order to meet the needs of their students (Buell et al, 1999).

The study also showed that while special education teachers felt more confident than general education teachers when working with students with special needs within the classroom, they did not feel like they had the resources necessary to make a significant impact on the students' learning. The study participants reported that they feel prepared and self-confident when teaching students with special needs since preparedness can help a teacher feel more in control of his/her classroom (Buell et al., 1999). The special education teachers' specific training also assisted them in knowing which strategies to use when working in a classroom that includes students with special needs (Buell et al., 1999). Both the general and special education teachers they interviewed agreed that general and special education teachers should be prepared and educated in how to teach a class of students with and without special needs while at the same time also accommodating the needs of students with special needs. After all, in some schools, they co-teach an inclusive classroom with students of various needs and learning abilities (Buell et al., 1999).

When Lava, Recchia, and Giovacco-Johnson (2004) interviewed twenty-five special education educators about "their perceptions and experiences regarding their first years of practice within urban

schools” (Lava et al, 2004, p. 190), they discovered that they shared common challenges such as “collaboration with colleagues, seeking and finding support, working with complex family issues, and dealing with the demands of a large bureaucratic system” (Lava et al, 2004, p. 190). All participants agreed that inclusion has made lasting impacts on teacher-to-teacher relationships, teacher-to-administrator relationships, and teacher-to-student relationships because there are so many important pieces necessary to accommodate for students with special needs in a classroom of diverse learners (Lava et al, 2004). When working with students with special needs, special education teachers felt overwhelmed due to a lack of support from both administration and general education teachers. Several teachers also remarked on how the classrooms have become more multilingual, and this shift has occurred with regards to the number of students with special needs as well (Lava et al, 2004).

While all of the interview participants in Lava’s study support the inclusion of students with special needs, there were some who noted that inclusion is becoming more difficult for the students and both types of teachers. One teacher stated that she felt special education teachers are now being viewed as a “‘bridge’ between disciplines” for students with special needs in inclusive classrooms or the educator responsible for making sure the students understand how to connect information they’ve already learned and information they’re going to learn (Lava et al, 2004, p.194). The special education teachers felt as if the general education teachers often did not make the transition to the next lesson with the students’ special needs in mind because the general education teachers had other students within the classrooms to teach as well (Lava et al, 2004). However, since inclusion has become widespread throughout the nation, special education teachers are feeling as though they are unprepared to give students additional support to supplement what the students are learning in the regular classroom (Lava et al, 2004). After all, some special education teachers work with students on fundamental skills to better prepare them for the inclusive classroom so all students can learn together, not to supplement what they may not fully understand from a lesson taught previously (Lava et al, 2004).

Paperwork and other “non-children” related responsibilities were also a concern of many of the special education teachers when asked about how inclusion and their presence were affecting the students with special needs and their progress (Lava et al, 2004). Concerns were voiced about how much time is required of special education teachers to go to meetings to advocate for the placement and frequency of services for students with special needs instead of that time being used to work with the students themselves (Lava et al, 2004). One teacher expressed her thoughts concerning her role working with students by stating, “I would just rather be in the classroom” (Lava et al, 2004, p. 195). When meeting the needs of students with special needs placed in general education classrooms without personal aides, many special education teachers felt the same way (Lava et al, 2004).

Another major concern of the special education teachers was that there was a lack of formal support even as more students with special needs enter the general education classrooms. They mentioned such things as a need for mentors who were more experienced with working with students with special needs and also better support from supervision/administration. With these extra resources, the special education teachers stated they would have more funds of knowledge available when attempting to meet the needs of each student who is unique (Lava et al, 2004). After all, there is no “one size fits all” resource that supports all students with all kinds of special needs (Lava et al, 2004). Positive aspects of formal support included higher education courses focused on disabilities, special needs, and available resources, while others commented on how training programs and courses can only offer so much before one must enter an inclusive classroom and learn hands-on (Lava et al, 2004). Overall, all the participants believed they were making a positive impact in the lives of students with special needs who appreciate the individualized support within inclusive classrooms, even when they feel necessary changes in support to be more effective with these students.

General Education and Special Education Co-Teaching

In a study conducted by Gurgur and Uzuner (2010), two teachers (one general education and one special education) were asked to implement the co-teaching model of instruction in their inclusive classroom, and their opinions about its success/failure were evaluated (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2010). While the general education teacher thought the application went well, aside from the timing of planning meetings, the special education teacher felt as if this model wasn't utilizing him for his specialty of working with students with special needs. The special education teacher mentioned how the general education teacher became the leader and how there was a lot of stress and ineffective communication. The co-teaching schedule appeared to be the solution to the lack of adequate planning since both teachers had schedule conflicts that made teaching alone but sharing information and data difficult. With limited planning time, the special education teacher in the study was forced to become more of an assistant teacher to the general class than a specialist focused on meeting the needs of special education students (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2010). When the special education teacher tried to work with the students with special needs, either other students caused distractions or the students he worked with did not view him as an authority figure. The special education teacher stated his lack of authority and the increased student distractions were due to the general education teacher not giving up any control of the classroom or communicating a clear breakdown of the roles and responsibilities (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2010). Other teachers who were interviewed agreed that this model of authority is becoming more common in inclusive classrooms and causes problems between teachers, administrators, students, and their parents if communication and a common goal for the students are not priorities (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2010).

Valeo (2008) conducted a study of teacher and administrator views of inclusion because she believed it's an important factor in the success of inclusion and inclusive classrooms. One special education teacher commented on how many general education teachers acted as though special education teachers held sole responsibility for students with special needs within inclusive classrooms. Concerns were also expressed about a lack of appreciation for the extra support given to general education teachers

of inclusive classrooms (Valeo, 2008). Both general education and special education teachers had difficulty defining what successful inclusion was and what their exact roles were when working with students with special needs (Valeo, 2008). However, special education teachers expressed a strong desire for a close relationship between themselves and the general education teachers. A closer relationship would help the special education teachers provide the maximum support for the students with special needs and utilize all available resources without feeling overlooked or less important than the general education classroom teacher (Valeo, 2008).

Conclusion

Research has shown how special education and general education teachers' beliefs of inclusion in their schools and its success rates may differ based on their individual roles within the school. Their beliefs impact how successful inclusion is within classrooms that include students with special needs and/or disabilities since both types of teachers are instrumental in creating and implementing effective instruction for each student while keeping the needs of the students in mind. General education teachers with a more positive view of inclusion have been shown to collaborate better with the special education teachers since they view special education teachers as a valuable resource within the classroom. Special education teachers' views of inclusion also make an impact because of how they are viewed within the classroom, either as a resource or as a hindrance to the general education teacher. After all, people are more effective when feeling appreciated and useful rather than feeling they are in the way or a problem. How teachers feel about inclusion within the classroom affects how they interact with students with special needs and their peers. Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion make an impact on their teaching and how comfortable they are working with and teaching students with special needs on a regular basis within their classrooms.

Chapter 3 : Methodology

Introduction

This research was conducted in order to assess the perceptions of inclusion held by general education teachers and special education teachers. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How are the general education teachers' and special education teachers' definitions consistent with the IDEA law?
2. How prepared do teachers (general and special education) feel towards implementing inclusion in their classrooms?
3. How do general education and special education teachers' perceptions of inclusion differ?
4. How do general education teachers and special education teachers perceive inclusion to impact their classroom communities?

Questionnaire

The study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain data to address research questions. The qualitative method, which encourages the expression of personal opinions and thoughts by leaving room for additional comments and responses, allows the respondents to write responses based on the question in order to express their beliefs without influence through voice inflection or verbal and physical cues from the researcher, such as a prompt or signal towards a specific response. The quantitative method, which includes given responses for the respondents to choose from, was also selected for the research because it allows the research problem to be conducted in very specific and set terms (Cooper & Schindler, 1998). Using quantitative research questions allows the researcher to analyze the data concretely, excluding

additional information or opinions outside of the questions. When both types of data collection are used, the researcher can gain numerical values for each question and the percentage of each option selected while also analyzing additional comments or opinions outside of the multiple choice answers. After each objective question on the questionnaire, the researcher included a space asking the respondents to explain their choices and/or written responses.

Pilot

In order to test my questionnaire, I gave a pilot questionnaire to five teachers from 16th and Haak Elementary School. I wanted to see if the questions were worded correctly in order to get responses I could analyze and to get an estimate of how long the questionnaire would take to complete. I also used the pilot questionnaire to see what the teachers thought and if their responses would answer my research questions. Their responses were analyzed to see if any edits were needed before sending the questionnaire to a larger group of participants. The educators' original questionnaire responses were not used as part of the research. All five original teachers who tested the questionnaire were also sent the revised questionnaire after changes were made. While the teachers had minor comments on the wording of a few particular questions on the pilot questionnaire, there were two important suggestions that I took note of – length and focus. I removed questions involving how the teachers thought students with special needs felt they were treated by other students because I realized that the teachers wouldn't necessarily know how these students personally felt.

I originally had wanted to compare the perceptions of general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators because I was curious to see if there were any major differences in their opinions based on their roles within the school. It was my hope that gathering data on administrators would help me understand how not all administrators are like the ones I encountered in elementary and middle school. There were too few administrators at 16th and Haak

Elementary School to do a meaningful comparison of administrators' and teachers' different perspectives. Therefore, after discussing my research and motivation with my advisor, I removed the questions for the administrators from the questionnaire. By removing the administrators' questions, I was able to focus my thesis and research to be more meaningful to my interests concerning general and special education teachers and inclusion. With the administrative questions no longer part of my research, I was also able to make the questionnaire shorter and more time efficient since the teachers testing the questionnaire reported that the questionnaire was too long.

To conduct my research, I completed a study request to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Pennsylvania State University that had to be approved before I was allowed to conduct research involving human participants. The IRB reviewed my original questionnaire, research request, and the Informed Consent documentation I had created, which made the participants aware of my research intent and what I expected from them as participants. It also stated that there would be no negative consequences for the participants for participating in the research. The documentation also stated there were no incentives for participating in the research study. Issues with informed consent, data protection, and participant privacy were addressed before conducting the research to make sure no ethical problems arose. I detailed in my original email to potential participants that I would not share any information with others, except my thesis advisers. I also included in the original email how I was keeping the names of respondents confidential. Participants' names and responses were kept safely in a password-protected document and laptop, with each participant given a pseudonym for additional protection and privacy.

Participants

Recruiting and data collection took place beginning May 2012 and ended September 2012. I contacted the school principal for permission to contact the teachers and, after gaining her approval, I wrote an email explaining my research. I also attached the Informed Consent page and questionnaire and sent it to the Vice Principal to forward to the teachers. In hopes of increasing the return rate of questionnaires, I also made copies of the questionnaires for every teacher and placed one in every teacher's mailbox. I collected all questionnaires and signed consent forms from the teachers, rather than involving a person outside of the research study, to add another layer of security for all participants. Since no one else has access to my email, all email responses were private. I also printed the responses for my records. Responses were recorded and organized according to the respondent's role within the school. The participants were selected by their employment location of 16th and Haak Elementary School located in Reading, Pennsylvania.

Chapter 4 : Results

Study Sample of Participants

Table 1 represents the number of general education teachers and special education teachers who participated in the study from 16th and Haak Elementary School located in Reading, PA.

| <i>Type of educator</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|----------------------------|--------------|
| General Education Teachers | 12 |
| Special Education Teachers | 8 |

Inclusion Support within the School

Table 2 displays how much support the teachers think exist for inclusion is in their school from their fellow teachers, educational support, and administration.

| | All personnel | Most personnel | Some personnel | No inclusion support |
|----------------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------------|
| General Education Teachers | 0% | 67% | 33% | 0% |
| Special Education Teachers | 0% | 75% | 25% | 0% |

The responses of “Most” and “Some” in terms of support for inclusion were the only two selected responses. Among general and special education teachers, “most” was the most selected response with no additional comments from either group of educators.

Amount of Inclusion Based on Severity of Disability

There was a strong difference in the responses of general education teachers and special education teachers when participants responded to the amount of inclusion students with special needs should have and whether or not that amount varied due to the severity of the disabilities (Table 3).

| Table 3: Is full inclusion best for students with all types of disabilities? | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|--|
| | <i>Inclusion benefits students who have all types of disabilities</i> | <i>Only best for students with mild disabilities</i> | <i>Rarely best for students with any disability</i> | <i>Students with disabilities should be in a different classroom</i> |
| General Education Teachers | 25% | 75% | 0% | 0% |
| Special Education Teachers | 0% | 100% | 0% | 0% |
| Special Education teacher comments: Only including students with physical or learning disabilities, not emotional support or mental retardation; Students must give teachers a chance and be willing to work with them. | | | | |

While the general education teachers were split between having all students (regardless of severity of disability) in the inclusive classroom, special education teachers were 100% in support of having only students with mild disabilities in inclusive classrooms. The explanations from special education teachers ranged from specifying which disabilities would be easier for teachers to accommodate for to noting how students have to be receptive to teachers in order to make the collaboration between student and teacher a successful endeavor.

Areas Where Regular Students Benefit Most in Inclusive Classrooms

As seen in Table 4, a large majority of general education teachers agree that regular students benefit academically by being in an inclusive classroom, while 62.5% of special education teachers state that regular students benefitted more socially by being in an inclusive

classroom. One special education teacher stated how students benefit socially by fostering relationships with their peers within the classroom.

| Table 4: Regular Students have benefitted from inclusion of students with special needs in the following areas: | | | | |
|---|----------|--------------|-------------|----------------------------------|
| | Socially | Academically | Emotionally | Awareness of Student Differences |
| General Education Teachers | 17% | 83% | 0% | 0% |
| Special Education Teachers | 62.5% | 37.5% | 0% | 0% |
| Special Education teacher comments: Kids grow by communicating and building relationships with other people, not memorizing facts | | | | |

Resources for Educators of Students with Special Needs

A majority of teachers in both groups said they would go to an administrator for support or help with a student with special needs, even though their other responses varied between the other response options as seen in Table 5. The majority of general education teachers reported that they would seek assistance about inclusion/inclusive students from an administrator and the second most selected response was a special education teacher.

| Table 5: Who Do Teachers Go to for Support or Help when Working with Students with Special Needs? | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|----------|--------|
| | General Education teacher | Special Education teacher | Administrator | Internet | Other* |
| General Education Teachers | 0% | 25% | 67% | 0% | 8.3% |
| Special Education Teachers | 12.5% | 0% | 75% | 0% | 12.5% |
| * Teachers listed Other as their own knowledge, parents, trainings, or colleagues in other buildings. | | | | | |

A few teachers also chose to comment in the additional explanation space given that there are other resources than those listed as options. The teachers added resources including their own

knowledge, parents, trainings, or colleagues in other buildings. While the teachers didn't respond with how often they used these additional resources, the resources must be beneficial enough that the teachers thought they were important to include. About 13% of the special education teachers responded by saying they would contact a student's general education teacher for help or support. There were no additional comments regarding this question and neither group indicated a preference for the Internet as a resource.

Social Interaction Benefits for Students with Special Needs

The majority of both special education and general education teachers stated that social interaction is not the most important benefit of inclusion for students with special needs (Table 6). One general education teacher stated that she felt "the special needs students are in the classroom for academic support and enrichment from their teacher and peers, not to socialize," while another said "it[']s good experience for them to be social with other children since that's an important aspect of school, but we can't ignore the education." This latter teacher also stated that inclusion was a positive strategy within the classrooms so students might be able to get a quality and equal education as their regular peers do.

| | Don't Know | Strongly Disagree | Somewhat Disagree | Somewhat Agree | Strongly Agree |
|----------------------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
| General Education Teachers | 17% | 83% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Special Education Teachers | 25% | 62.5% | 12.5% | 0% | 0% |

The students also have an opportunity to further develop their social skills through group work and other academically-oriented activities. When asked to provide additional comments about

anything relevant not addressed in previous questions, a general education teacher commented how they sometimes have in-service days focused on students with disabilities or special needs.

Additional Comments and Explanations

The final table consisted of the additional comments or explanations that the respondents felt weren't addressed in the questionnaire, or they wanted to further explain an answer to a previous question.

| Table 7: Additional Comments/Explanations: | |
|--|--|
| General Education Teachers | <p>The special needs students are in the classroom for academic support and enrichment from their teacher and peers, not to socialize</p> <p>It's good experience for them to be social with other children since that's important [in their education], but we can't ignore the education</p> <p>In-service days sometimes focus on special/disabled students. Always relevant.</p> |
| Special Education Teachers | <p>Only including students with physical or learning disabilities [should be included], not emotional support or mental retardation</p> <p>Students must give teachers a chance and be willing to work with them</p> <p>Kids grow by communicating and building relationships with other people, not memorizing facts that they later have to use in a test</p> <p>Administration helps staff get resources when needed.</p> |

When asked about how the students with special needs benefit from being in an inclusive classroom, one general education teacher commented that the most important aspect is the students' education while another general education teacher highlighted the importance of social interaction but agreed that the students' education is paramount. The final comment from a general education teacher stated how teachers sometimes receive in-service training related to students with special needs.

The special education teachers also explained their selected responses by adding comments regarding inclusion and the questions given on the questionnaire. One special

education teacher further explained her answer to the question, “What is your belief about inclusion for students with special needs?” The special education teacher stated how students with physical or learning disabilities should be included in inclusive classrooms while students with mental or emotional disabilities should not be included in inclusive classrooms. Since students with disabilities have disabilities of different levels of severity, their effect on the classroom environment and their peers must be different for each student. For example, a student with a strong mental disability may have difficulty controlling him or herself and cause a larger distraction than a student with a minor physical disability that doesn’t distract other students as often. A special education teacher also noted the importance of all students developing relationships and communicating with each other within the classroom. The teacher’s support for fostering relationships highlights the value of socializing in school and also takes into consideration how students build relationships while learning. For example, students will communicate with peers while working collaboratively or in small groups on problems or on projects. When students work together, their social and academic needs are being met. When asked about resources available for teaching staff and students, a special education teacher commented how the administration is helpful in securing resources and how the amount of resources available makes a difference in the students’ education if used effectively by either special or general education teachers.

Chapter 5 : Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The data I've analyzed has helped to answer the questions that drove my research. I originally had wondered how the general and special education teachers' definitions of inclusion may have been consistent with the IDEA law. However, after considering the literature, I decided not to ask teachers to define inclusion because I had researched how different people define inclusion. The two main differences in the definitions in the literature review differed on accommodations being given in the student's classroom or at another location like a special education classroom. When considering how the students and their accommodations are influenced by their location within the learning environment, teachers often have to consider where the student can be placed in order to get the accommodations he or she needs with as little disruption to the other students as possible. From both the literature review and data, I was able to conclude that many teachers can only be successful with their inclusive practices if there is enough support from other individuals within the school and district. I think the amount of support the teachers expressed for inclusion in the school was impacted by who they felt they could go to with questions regarding inclusion. After all, if administrative personnel support inclusion and provide teachers the appropriate training, the teachers' feelings of preparedness may have changed. Similarly, if the teachers felt there was a lack of support for inclusion and a lack of adequate training, the preparedness level may not be as high.

Questioning the participants about how prepared they felt about implementing inclusion in their classrooms led me to some interesting conclusions that I hadn't expected. For example, while no special education teachers indicated that students with all types of disabilities should be in inclusive classrooms, a few general education teachers did. Some general education teachers

agree that creating accommodations for all students with special needs in a classroom isn't difficult. Based on the literature review and data, I have concluded that general education teachers would need more supplies, aides, or special education teachers to accommodate students with special needs since they don't receive the formal special education training that special education teachers receive. Since no respondents expressed that inclusion was bad for students, I conclude that most teachers believe students with and without special needs benefit from being in an inclusive classroom over a self-contained classroom. This conclusion supported my belief that while the students make a difference in their learning environment by working together with students of various ability levels who may require accommodations, the learning environment, consisting of all students, also influences the students.

The teachers' perceptions of how inclusion impacts their classroom communities differed among the types of teachers. The differences in opinions may arise because both types of teachers work with students for different amounts of instructional time. My own observations and literature has documented that most general education teachers work with students for the majority of the day teaching their own classes while special education teachers work with students with special needs during certain times of the day or for portions of a lesson as needed. When the special education teachers indicated their belief that students without special needs benefit socially when in inclusive classrooms, I was surprised because, in my experience, students without disabilities sometimes avoided interacting with students with disabilities unless specifically directed by the teacher to do so. Since special education teachers indicated the students without special needs benefitted socially, perhaps increased social interaction with peers with and without special needs would make a difference in students' understanding of each other. When students understand each other and how they are similar and different, the students can also work better collaboratively within the classroom and be more engaged in their own learning. However, when asked if the students with special needs gain socialization opportunities with

peers by being in inclusive classrooms, both types of teachers strongly disagreed. Since the academic aspect of the classroom is where the students with special needs get their accommodations, both types of teachers may recognize that school is an academic learning environment first and foremost. It has been my experience that memorable and effective teachers are concerned about all aspects of students' lives in school but are responsible for their academic learning more than their social or emotional development, even though students do develop those skills while being in school. When asked to give additional comments, two general education teachers explained how they focus on the academic aspect of the students' education, but one of those general education teachers also commented that the social aspect of school should not be ignored or overlooked. I was glad to see that these general education teachers understood the value of inclusive classrooms and how it has positive affects on the students. I think the general education teachers may be focusing on the academic aspect of inclusion because they teach an entire class of students all day. Working with students and helping them learn in a way that is most effective are key goals of teaching, in my opinion, so I wasn't surprised that the general education teachers would highlight that aspect of the school environment.

One teacher commented how the teachers receive professional development training on inclusion and meeting the needs of students with special needs. With the literature supporting that teachers feel they need more training and support, the professional development may be just what they needed to feel more prepared. The amount of support for inclusion in the school may have influenced how prepared the teachers felt regarding their teaching responsibilities within inclusive classrooms. After all, having administrative and teacher support for inclusion may make resources more easily available and allow for more trainings in order to prepare both types of teachers. Teachers can also get support from resources besides professional development trainings. Some of these other options include visits to other schools or districts, reading academic and special education journal articles and magazines, or even taking additional courses

concerning early intervention and inclusive strategies. Teachers can read about the most current practices and strategies used by both general and special education teachers in academic journals to meet the needs of their students. University courses are also available that instruct students and professionals on various topics concerning students with special needs. Such courses could be taken by general and special education teachers alike to further their understanding and implementing of appropriate accommodations.

Limitations

The limitations of this research included the number of teachers I received questionnaires from, since I only looked at one school. If I conducted similar research in the future, I would try to include a larger number of general and special education teachers and branch out to include multiple schools. Reaching out to other schools and districts could improve the research because different schools have different resources available for general and special education teachers and may have more or fewer special education teachers and aides depending on their budget. A school's budget impacts what resources, such as trainings and learning tools, are available for the teachers and students. I would like to investigate how the amount of special education resources a school provides differs among two schools or districts and see if the amount of special education resources changes the general and special education teachers' ideas about inclusion. I could also consider if the number of students who attend the school or district impacts these resources and how much support is available at a given school. An interesting comparison would be to do similar research with a mix of urban, suburban, and rural schools to determine if the teachers' responses would differ based on the demographics of the students and school location. I could also consider varied approaches to gathering the data to obtain true values and feelings from educators, since their responses to a questionnaire may be different based on daily stress or pressure to answer a certain way. There is also no way to determine the teachers' honesty in their

responses so gathering data through observation or another method would have to be used in order to get as honest results as possible.

Conclusion

Considering my own background of being in inclusive classrooms throughout my educational career, I was interested in seeing how educators responded regarding teaching inclusive classes. My research gave me the opportunity to question elementary educators and examine literature to find answers to my research questions. This thesis has changed my outlook on how general and special education teachers approach inclusion. No matter what their role is within an inclusive classroom setting, most general and special education teachers want their students to succeed. Even when my past experience with teachers' treatment of students with special needs hadn't been the best, I knew great teachers want success for their students. Such teachers are ones who teach because they want to make a difference in the lives of their students. Teachers who work in inclusive classrooms deal with the challenges of providing accommodations for students and also the challenges of making the content material relatable for all students. I also found that the teachers' approaches to inclusive classrooms were different among the two types of teachers based on the resources available and time spent working with students throughout the day. Just as the teachers' approaches to inclusion differed, so, too, do their roles in regards to how they teach the students they work with. From this research, I learned that most teachers agree that inclusive classrooms are beneficial for students with and without special needs. Before beginning my research, I had believed most teachers thought students with special needs only belonged in self-contained classrooms. I have realized that most teachers appreciate the benefits of inclusive classrooms and, as a future teacher, I have recognized the many benefits for students in inclusive classrooms.

Before beginning my research, I believed that general education teachers were mainly responsible for teaching an entire classroom of students and the special education teacher gave support as needed or requested by the teacher or students with special needs. I did not realize how extensive the resources were that can be used to support various students. Since, in my experience, I had never seen the special and general education teachers co-teach, I didn't realize how that could benefit students. I also didn't know that some special education teachers rotate between co-teaching and providing one-to-one individualized assistance. In Gurgur and Uzuner's study, they found that co-teaching between general and special education teachers was becoming more common, even when the special education teacher in the study expressed a desire to work strictly with a smaller group of students with special needs. The literature explains how general and special education teachers have different responsibilities within a classroom depending on what the expectations are for each teaching role and to what extent they work with students with special needs. Some special education teachers work with students in small groups in the inclusive classrooms or in a separate room. Other special education teachers use the co-teaching model where they supplement the instruction of the general education teacher and become a support resource for the students who may not be understanding a concept taught by the general education teacher. In my experience, students with special needs either sat in the back of the classroom with the special education teacher or were relocated to a separate room while the general education teacher taught the rest of the class in whole or small groups. It has been my experience that the administrative personnel weren't supportive of inclusion and only some of the other teachers appeared to get along with the special education teachers or give them any extra tools than what the special education teachers brought with them to the classroom or other room.

The questions I posed for my research were driven by my personal curiosity based on my past experiences in inclusive classrooms and my recent educational experiences learning about and interacting with students with special needs. Guided by my research questions, I was able to

gain insight into how general and special education teachers approach inclusion and how they believe it impacts their classrooms. Due to the conclusions I've found from this research, I am excited to begin my own teaching adventures and gain my own hands-on experience working with students with special needs. In my future classroom, I will try to use any and all resources available in order to accommodate the learning needs of all my students. I've seen how inclusion for both students with and without disabilities benefits the students socially and academically. I hope to nurture academic and social growth within my own students. By reading the literature and gathering the data, I have become even more aware of how the general and special education teachers' experiences and views about inclusion make a difference in their inclusive classrooms. Therefore, I will strive to create an inclusive environment and support meaningful learning for all students, no matter what accommodations or adaptations they may need in order to achieve success in the classroom.

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Name:

Position:

Length of time teaching:

- 1) What is your role in regards to inclusion within your classroom/school?
- 2) How do you work with students with mild to severe disabilities?
- 3) The teachers and administrators in this school believe that inclusion is best for all students (choose one)
 - a) All the teachers and administrators in this school believe that inclusion is best for all students
 - b) Most of the teachers and administrators in this school believe that inclusion is best for all students
 - c) Only a small portion of the teachers and administrators in this school believe that inclusion is best for all students

PLEASE EXPLAIN YOUR ANSWER:

- 4) What is your belief about inclusion for students with special needs?
 - a) I believe that inclusion is best for all children no matter how severe their disability
 - b) I believe that inclusion is best only for children with mild disabilities
 - c) I believe that inclusion is rarely best for children with any type of disability
 - d) I believe children with disabilities should be in a separate classroom or building for education.

PLEASE EXPLAIN YOUR ANSWER:

- 5) Do you believe that inclusion has social benefits for students with disabilities in your classroom? Why or why not?
 - a) I believe students with disabilities always benefit from increased social interaction and conversation with their peers in an inclusive classroom.
 - b) I believe students with disabilities benefit most of the time from increased social interaction and conversation with their peers in an inclusive classroom.
 - c) I believe students with disabilities sometimes benefit from increased social interaction and conversation with their peers in an inclusive classroom.
 - d) I believe students with disabilities rarely benefit from increased social interaction and conversation with their peers in an inclusive classroom.

PLEASE EXPLAIN YOUR ANSWER.

6) How have the regular students in your classroom benefitted by the inclusion of these students with special needs? (Choose all that apply)

- a) Socially
- b) Academically (peer support, tutoring, etc.)
- c) Emotionally
- d) Awareness (understanding differences, accepting people, etc.)

PLEASE EXPLAIN YOUR ANSWER FOR EACH OF THE ABOVE:

7) Increased social interaction is the most important benefit for special needs students in inclusive classrooms/schools.

- a. Don't Know
- b. Strongly Disagree
- c. Somewhat Disagree
- d. Somewhat Agree
- e. Strongly Agree

PLEASE EXPLAIN YOUR ANSWER:

8a) If you HAVE had a student with special needs in your classroom/school: when you learned that you would be having a child with special needs in your classroom/school, what did you think that the problems would be? How did the situation turn out compared to what you expected? What were the positive and negative aspects?

8b) If you have NOT had a student with special needs in your classroom before: what problems do you anticipate having in your classroom when you do have a student with special needs?

9) Are you the parent of a student with special needs? If so, are you satisfied with how the school handles the inclusion of your child? Please explain.

10) Who do you go to for support or help with understanding or working with students with special needs? Please place the following in order of the most useful resource (1) to the least useful resource (5).

- A. General Education teacher
- B. Special Education teacher
- C. Administrator
- D. Internet

11) Other than the resources listed above, what other resources do you use?

12) What other thoughts do you have about inclusion that you didn't explain above.

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- Wrote and taught inquiry-based science lessons using a variety of manipulatives to meet the needs of each learner
- Planned and held after-school tutoring sessions with my students regularly for an hour per week for two months
- Built and maintained positive relationships with students' parents, teachers, and peers
- Effectively utilized technology to meet the learning needs of my students, including Promethean Board flipcharts, Microsoft Word and Excel, and iMovie

Field Experience, Fourth Grade

Fall 2012

- Coordinated and taught engaging Guided Reading lessons
- Designed and taught effective small group instruction in various subject areas
- Created supplemental material for multiple lessons to support the learning needs of my students
- Provided one-on-one support and translation for ESL students

Related Experience

*International Field Experience
Germany*

Summer 2012

- Observed German teaching strategies
- Assisted in the creation of a partnership between Frieburg University and Pennsylvania State University for further educational research

Personal Learning Assistant

September 2010 – December 2011

Northwest Middle School, Reading, Pennsylvania

- Implemented lesson plans designed to meet the needs of a diverse student population
- Provided tutoring, mentoring, and homework support to students in an after-school environment

Language and Literacy Field Experience

September 2011 – December 2011

Cornwall Terrace Elementary School, Sinking Spring, Pennsylvania

- Reading intensive field experience focused on implementing effective and scaffolded lesson plans
- Created engaging and developmentally-appropriate Guided Reading lessons

Professional Affiliations

- National Science Teachers Association, President
- Pennsylvania Student Educational Association
- Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society
- Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society