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The emotional impact of inclusion on elementary-aged students with intellectual disabilities:
Educator perspectives

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Abstract

The research presented throughout this paper sought to explore how varying levels of inclusion in schools can positively or negatively impact the happiness, confidence, and sense of belonging in elementary aged students with intellectual disabilities. By analyzing literature and collecting qualitative and quantitative data from educators across Pennsylvania, this study ultimately answered the research question. Statistical trends demonstrated that, when compared to schools with low levels of inclusion, those with moderate to very high levels facilitate increased numbers of happiness, confidence, and sense of belonging in their students with intellectual disabilities. This corroborates the information found within literature, as many scholars asserted that inclusion can positively impact students on multiple domains. However, qualitative data and educator opinions suggest that though inclusion holds countless benefits, fully immersing students with intellectual disabilities in the general education classroom may not serve as the best fit for every individual. Due to the varying needs of each student, schools should work to differentiate their inclusion practices in order to meet the specific wants and needs of children in order for this framework to work most effectively. In order to maintain successful inclusion, districts must also aim to supply their educators–whether that be teachers, paraprofessionals, or other aides–with sufficient training, appropriate resources, and support.

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Acknowledgements

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Literature Review

Introduction

Though interpretations vary across the globe, inclusion is most commonly defined as providing all students, regardless of disability, with equal opportunities to receive instruction within a general education setting (Chen et al., 2021). Despite conflicting opinions about the practice, the United States Department of Education requires all public and private institutions to ensure that students with disabilities are "educated with children who are nondisabled" (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990). Inclusion additionally refers to providing all students with the proper accommodations and resources in order to succeed in a general education setting. Unless the nature of a student's disability prevents satisfactory education from occurring inside of a regular classroom environment with proper support, schools are expected to have all students learn alongside each other as often as possible.

Some of the earliest instances of inclusion in the United States date back to only 1975, through the passage of the Education for All Children Act. This law, issued by President Gerald Ford, "mandated that all students with disabilities be provided with a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment" (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014, p.15). Prior to the implementation of this act, many states could legally exclude students with disabilities from their public schools, while other states failed to provide their students with appropriate services. Ford's decision to pass the Education for All Children Act drastically changed the trajectory of inclusion and built the foundation for special education programs today. Though inclusion in the United States has historically been non-existent, modern practices guarantee all students the opportunity to learn within a general education setting and receive appropriate accommodations and services when needed. Despite the strides made to ensure schools provide all

students–regardless of disability–access to education, inclusion remains a polarizing controversy that serves as a topic of discussion for many families, educators, and administrators.

Due to its novelty and varying definitions, inclusion remains a highly debated subject manner. As research continues to discover the most effective inclusive practices, the way schools approach inclusion tends to vary, leading to multiple different perspectives among those involved. According to Boston College professors and researchers Curt Dudley-Marling and Mary Burns, special education and inclusion are often viewed through two perspectives: a social constructivist or a deficit stance. A social constructivist stance promotes the idea that disability does not lie in the fault of a child. Disability is merely a result of social constructs, and that "it takes a community of people doing just the right things in the right time and place for a student to be identified as disabled" (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014, p.22). Though differences exist between students with and without disabilities, these differences "represent normal human variation" and are only further exaggerated if society continues to ignore the needs of individuals with disabilities. Social constructivists believe that general and special education students are equally capable and can suit each other well in one classroom, especially when provided with appropriate resources and accommodations. They believe that a general education classroom should serve as the default setting for all students and that in order for inclusion to thrive, schools should reform their structures and expectations. This includes setting high-expectations for all students, training all staff to support those with special education needs, and having the "educational environment adapt to the child, not the other way around" (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014, p.26). A deficit stance, on the other hand, views students with disabilities as lacking the skills needed to reach academic success. Through a deficit perspective, the goal of

special education is to make "abnormal" students as normal as possible through remediation, compensation, and accommodation. A deficit perspective shares "the assumption that the problem(s) reside in the student" and that the only way to overcome any deficiencies is to acquire the assistance of a specially trained professional. Those with a deficit stance believe a general classroom environment can be effective for a student with a disability if they can learn successfully within one, but do not believe that is always the most appropriate option.

Challenges with Implementation

With such conflicting perspectives, "educators and employers have shown positive attitudes as well as discussed challenges with regard to inclusion of students with disabilities into classrooms and workplaces" (Bennett & Gallagher, 2013, p.99). As a modern practice with little research and opposing attitudes, inclusion often demonstrates challenges with its implementation. Though attitudes may vary between age, gender, and disability, research finds that students with disabilities, often those with behavioral challenges, may face peer rejection or bullying. Though not always "intended to cause psychological harm," (Chen et al., 2021, p.198), this form of exclusion likely decreases a student's emotional health, academic performance, self-esteem, and social behaviors. And though inclusive classrooms often thrive when curriculum is specially designed to meet the needs of all students, many current programs "adopted in mainstream schools are not designed based on flexibility" (Chen et al., 2021, p.198). Busy schedules and specific curricula prevent schools–especially those in a deficit perspective– from being able to adjust and accommodate for specific students. Teaching students who are disabled within a school that fails to promote schedule and curriculum flexibility, in addition to a lack of training, often results in "unsatisfactory performance and overwhelming pressure of educators"

(Chen et al., 2021, p.199). By not supporting students, schools cannot support teachers, leading to inevitable burnout and pessimism towards inclusion. Similar challenges exist within workplaces, as many employers remain unknowledgeable about the benefits of inclusion. Though inclusive workplaces have been demonstrated to positively impact all individuals, young adults with intellectual disabilities are provided "with limited employment opportunities" (Bennett & Gallagher, 2013, p.100)--with only 20% of student graduates finding paid employment.

Successes with Implementation

Despite several obstacles preventing inclusion from reaching its maximum effectiveness, numerous benefits remain. Many researchers argue that inclusion's equitable opportunities serve as its most advantageous feature. By placing students with and without disabilities in the same learning environment, society can begin to view all children as equal. When individuals are separated and categorized by their differences, isolation occurs between groups. Those in power form stigmas and influence others to hold negative attitudes towards individuals outside of the majority grouping–such as people with disabilities. When practicing inclusive education, schools eradicate these stigmas and "render increasing possibilities for special needs students in terms of equal resources as regular students" (Chen et al., 2021, p.197). All students can be viewed under one group, providing equal opportunity for everyone regardless of disability.

With students learning within the same group and setting, both students with and without disabilities can learn and grow from one another. Students with disabilities can gain confidence in their academics when receiving help from peers without disabilities. By working with peer tutors, students can strengthen their academic performance, as well as their communication

skills. Students without disabilities, on the other hand, can also "demonstrate higher scores on measures of advocacy and display more tolerant attitudes towards diversity" (Bennett & Gallagher, 2013, p.102). Though a large body of literature explores the positive impacts of inclusion on all students, many tend to focus on only the benefits for those with special education needs. However, Polish researchers Grzegorz Szumski, Joanna Smogorzewska, and Pawel Grygiel, found the specific impacts of inclusion for students without disabilities through their 2022 study. After reviewing multiple models of inclusive education and examining the academic abilities of students within each one, they ultimately found that the type of inclusive setting has no impact on a student without disabilities' initial achievement. However, when compared to non-inclusive classrooms, "a positive but weak impact on the achievement" of peers without disabilities was observed (Szumski, Smogorzewska, and Grygiel, 2022, p.3) . This demonstrates that, although not by much, the majority of inclusive classroom models can help improve the academic success of not only students with disabilities, but also students without.

Outside of academics and a classroom setting, having "non-disabled peer-tutors and role models" can additionally help assist with social skills (Chen et al., 2021, p.197). As general education students interact and communicate with students with disabilities, improved positive relationships develop.These friendships allow both parties–especially students with disabilities– to "develop better self-images, [become] less critical and more motivated, and [recognize] their own academic and social strengths" (Chen et al., 2021, p.197). While students without disabilities establish a strong sense of acceptance, students without disabilities gain the skills needed for "real world" adaptation.

Students with and without disabilities not only benefit from working with each other, but also from a larger diversity in teaching methods. As required by the Education for All Children Act, when including students with special education needs in a general education setting, they must be provided with appropriate supports and resources. This allows teachers to provide more flexible instruction in order to meet the individual needs of students. For example, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is "a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn" (*About Universal Design for Learning*, n.d., para 1). Focused on engagement, representation, and action and expression, this teaching style can adapt to varying needs, which helps to "reduce potential obstacles in courses and instruction for students" (Chen et al., 2021, p.198). Though often used to support students with disabilities, the UDL's adaptive format allows this framework to benefit everyone. With its versatile teaching strategies, the Universal Design for Learning encourages teachers to offer flexibility in learning, making students feel more comfortable and motivated in their academics. By providing equal opportunity and adjusting education as needed, students with and without disabilities can "learn quicker, greater, and better" (Chen et al., 2021, p.198).

Impact on Students with Intellectual Disabilities

With the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act listing and defining 13 categories of disabilities, much information on inclusive practices remains unexplored. It can be difficult to determine all successes and challenges with inclusion as each disability category consists of individuals with varying learning and social needs. While completing research, I discovered very little information on the impact of inclusion on students with intellectual disabilities (ID), and therefore decided to focus my studies on this specific category.

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities defines an intellectual disability as "a condition characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior that originates before the age of 22" (Defining Criteria for Intellectual Disability, n.d., para. 1). This means if an individual younger than 22 has an IQ of 75 or lower and struggles with the "conceptual, social, and practical skills that are learned and performed by people in their everyday lives" (Defining Criteria for Intellectual Disability, n.d., para. 4), they likely have an intellectual disability. Examples of intellectual disabilities include, but are not limited to, Down Syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome and Fragile X syndrome.

With only 6% of students with disabilities a part of this category, information about intellectual disabilities continues to be overlooked and under researched. However, as researchers begin to explore more on this topic, evidence continues to grow on how inclusive practices can benefit students with intellectual disabilities. Though researchers indicated no differences in adaptive behavior between students in inclusive settings versus those in specialized settings, data on intellectual functioning and academic performance presented different findings. Results of academic achievement test scores ultimately demonstrate that although mathematics achievement remained consistent, "a significant difference can be observed between the progress made by the two groups in literacy skills" (Dessemontet et al., 2011, p.584). The same study additionally found that though the initial research indicated little differences between inclusive and non-inclusive environments, "children with ID made important progress in their literacy skills, mathematic skills, and adaptive behavior displayed at school and at home during the two year of follow-up" (Dessemontet et al., 2011, p.585). This indicates that inclusion may present more benefits in long-term scenarios, rather than short ones.

Despite some findings on inclusion and the way it impacts students with intellectual disabilities, many researchers claim that between "methodological weaknesses," "differing definitions of inclusive or separated education" and the notion that the development of children with intellectual disabilities has "been less explored" (Dessemontet et al., 2011, p.579-581), quality research on this topic is scarce. Current research, though limited, primarily describes the academic impact on inclusion and fails to explore the emotional influences on students. Though data proves inclusion's slight impacts on mathematical and literacy performance, little information demonstrates the way inclusive classrooms can affect a student's confidence, sense of belonging, and overall happiness. As a result of insufficient research and evidence, this study is to be utilized as an attempt to learn more about the ways inclusion can emotionally impact students with intellectual disabilities, specifically at the elementary level.

Methodology

This study ultimately aimed to answer how inclusion can impact the emotional well-being of students with intellectual disabilities. Per the articles within the literature review, inclusion evidently exhibits many benefits such as increasing levels of tolerance and academic achievement in both students with and without disabilities. These findings helped to develop the hypothesis that high levels of inclusion would positively affect student happiness, confidence, and sense of belonging in school. With the average school day being about six hours and a half hours long (Desilver, 2023), educators spend approximately 30 hours with students each week. Despite only interacting within an academic setting, this time spent together provides educators with the opportunity to gain valuable insights on a student's behaviors. Because of their informative perspective, collecting and studying a combination of qualitative and quantitative

data from professional educators–such as teachers, paraprofessionals, and other specialists–served as the most effective method for exploring this hypothesis. Compiling quantitative data provides precise measurements, lending itself well for statistical analysis–allowing researchers to easily identify patterns, trends, and relationships. Qualitative data, on the other hand, helps researchers explore further into the numerical data. Holding a wide range of participant perspectives provides context and explanations for statistical trends, while simultaneously honoring the diverse experiences and viewpoints of the individuals surveyed.

An anonymous and online questionnaire created on Google Forms, a survey administration software, helped to collect this qualitative and quantitative data (see Appendix A). The survey deliberately asked questions designed for educators, with the intention that each response reflected a professional's experience with an individual student. If participants felt inclined to describe more than one student, the survey's settings allowed them to complete the questionnaire multiple times. The first three questions on the form focused on demographics. These questions reviewed background information on the educator, as well as the individual they planned to describe–asking the age and grade of their student in addition to the level of inclusion at their school. The remainder of the survey was split into three sections based on the categories of emotional well-being that this study sought to explore: happiness, confidence, and emotional well-being. Each of these sections first defined the category by listing a clear explanation of the emotion and scale. The survey then asked participants to rank where their student fell within this category at school using a scale from 1 (extremely unapparent) to 5 (extremely apparent). After providing their ranking, participants could describe an explanation for their ranking, as well as any specific examples they could recall to justify their answer. The survey ended with three

general questions about inclusion, inviting participants to express the positive impacts of inclusion they have seen, the negative impacts of inclusion they have seen, as well as their overall opinions on the practice.

Participants for this study were obtained by researching school districts and educators across the state of Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Department of Education's resources particularly helped with this search as their website contains an interactive map of schools throughout the state. After compiling a list of districts, further research on each one yielded details about their special education departments, providing the contact information of their special education directors. These directors were then emailed individually, with each message describing the project and how they can get involved. Each email included a direct link to the survey, in addition to a small note that encouraged recipients to not only answer the questions, but to also share the link with colleagues who also work in special education if possible. Ultimately, over 30 education professionals, working in over 20 districts across eastern, southern, and central Pennsylvania, received contact about completing the survey.

Upon the completion of data collection, information was sorted into four tiers based on the level of inclusion participants described at their school: low, moderate, high, and very high. Further analysis broke down the quantitative data within each tier into the studied components of emotional welling–happiness, confidence, and sense of belonging. Totaling the rankings in each of these categories and then dividing by the number of participants helped to calculate the mean of the data. These averages were then graphed and compared to determine if there was any direct correlation between a school's inclusion levels and a student's emotional well-being. After

reviewing statistical trends, analyzing qualitative data highlighted general educator opinions on inclusion, as well the positive and negative impacts they have observed on the practice.

Findings

Of all survey responses, 50% were from educators working in school environments with what they described as high levels of inclusion. 22% described their workplace to have moderate levels, 17% with very high levels, and 11% with low levels. The students described within the surveys ranged from first to sixth grade, with ages extending from 7 to 12 years. Many participants noted their school's implementation of a least restrictive environment, basing their inclusion practices on student need and ability.

Schools with low measures of inclusion evidently exhibited lower levels of emotional well-being than those with higher measures. When ranking the degree of happiness in students with intellectual disabilities, educators at these schools typically provided lower totals–with an average score of 3 out of 5. Participants described that their students would often verbally express their happiness–or rather unhappiness–through actions such as screaming. In regards to confidence, rankings were even lower with an average score of 2 out of 5. Similar patterns appeared when educators ranked their student's sense of belonging, providing an average score of 2.5. Overall, educators who described their school as having low inclusion levels also classified their students with intellectual disabilities to have a slightly weaker emotional well-being, with a total score of 7.5 out of 15.

Participants who described their school to have slight levels of inclusion were labeled as "moderate." The participants at these schools described their workplaces to partially include students with intellectual disabilities, but only for certain portions of the day. Rankings of

happiness of students with intellectual disabilities from these schools–according to their

educators–averaged at a 4 out of 5. Participants noted that their students demonstrated a sense of

excitement to return to school, often engaging and laughing with peers. Though confidence

levels were marginally smaller, with an average ranking of 3.75, educators recognized that their

students display an eagerness to participate and engage with content. The sense of belonging at

these schools also had an average ranking of 3.75, with several responses describing the positive

rapport between students with intellectual disabilities and their peers. Ultimately, though the

inclusive practices only differ slightly, the emotional well-being of students with intellectual

disabilities at schools with moderate levels of inclusion has a totaled score of 11.5 out of

15–nearly 50% more than schools with low levels.

Exactly 50% of participants marked that they observed high levels of inclusion at their

school, with many noting their school's commitment to maintaining a least restrictive

environment. Several educators in these schools commented how students with intellectual

disabilities experience inclusion in most general education classes, with some exceptions based

on a student's tolerance and ability. Despite higher levels of inclusion, the emotional well-being

of students did not appear to improve drastically. Similarly to schools with moderate levels,

responses indicated that many students appeared happy at school, often smiling, participating and

working with peers. Despite comparable behaviors, schools classified as having high inclusion

displayed a slightly lower happiness ranking, with an average of 3.9 out of 5. In regards to

confidence, responses indicate that a student's self-assuredness varied based on subject and

content matter–with an averaged score of 2.78 out of 5. Sense of belonging levels decreased as

well, moving from a 3.75 down to a 3.6 out of 5. However, numerous responses highlighted the

idea that their students with intellectual disabilities have developed strong relationships with peers and enjoy the moments in which they get to interact. Ultimately, the final emotional well-being score declined slightly from schools with moderate levels of inclusion, now with a total of 10.28 out 15.

Those who marked their schools as having "very high" levels of inclusion described their students as being included in all subjects, unless testing dictates otherwise. Both happiness and confidence rankings averaged at 3.7 out of 5, with educators explaining that their students often smile, participate, and engage with others. The sense of belonging ranking in these schools was calculated to be a 3.33 out of 5 as educators described that their students participated in the school community, but did not have many close friends. Though their inclusive practices were described to be the highest, these schools failed to receive the highest overall ranking, with a total of 10.73 out of 15. Ultimately in all categories, schools with the lowest inclusion levels demonstrated the worst rankings of emotional well-being in students with intellectual disabilities, whereas schools with moderate inclusion levels demonstrated the highest (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Results for Average Happiness, Confidence, Sense of Belonging, and Emotional Well-Being

Average Sense of Belonging Levels

Average Emotional Well-Being
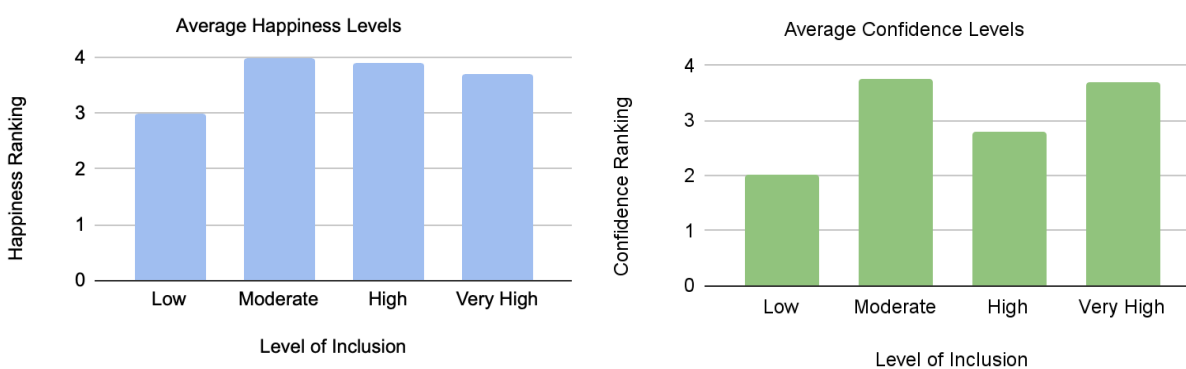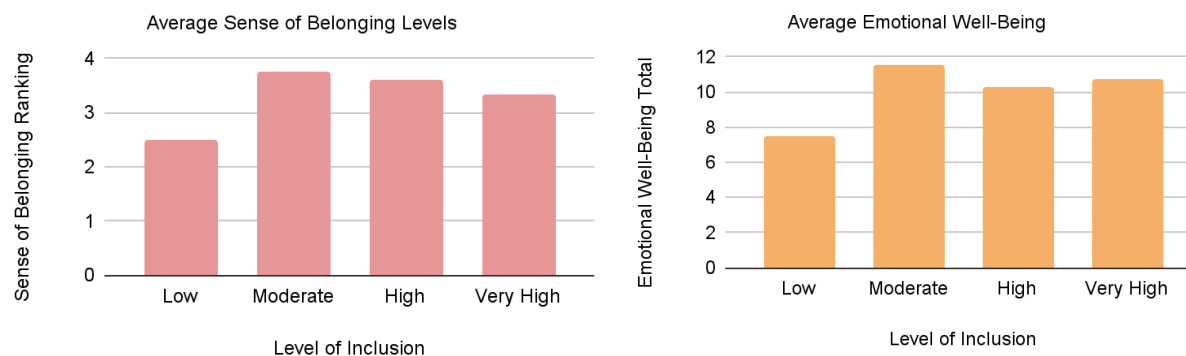
After reviewing the quantitative data, the qualitative information was analyzed. Despite the varying emotional well-being between schools and students, almost every participant remarked that inclusion has positively affected not only students with intellectual disabilities, but also students with general education needs. By providing all students with the opportunity to interact with one another, educators described that inclusion can help build a "culture of acceptance" and a "sense of empathy." By seeing each other's differences, students can grow more tolerant and learn that everyone holds unique learning abilities. Educators additionally described that inclusion pushes students with intellectual disabilities to improve their social and communication skills, and that modified education can assist all students–regardless of disability–to "find success." Many claim that by teaching under an adaptive framework that focuses on providing multiple means of instruction–such as the Universal Design for Learning–all students receive a personalized learning experience that guides to benefit their academic achievement.

Educators most commonly reported that their biggest issues with the practice included student skill level and teacher training. The content presented in general education classes can

sometimes present challenges for students with intellectual disabilities, reducing their confidence and making it difficult to keep up with their peers. Many also remarked that schools often provide very little training and resources for general education teachers working in inclusive classrooms. With a lack of paraprofessionals and little to no professional development on the subject, districts fail to equip educators with the proper materials to effectively support all of their students. A lack of knowledge, rather than a lack of skill, prevents teachers from understanding the best way to meet the learning needs of students with intellectual disabilities, while also meeting the needs of their general education students. Overall, participants strongly support inclusion, but emphasize that teacher training and appropriate placements are integral for its success. To avoid teacher and student burnout, districts must work to supply both groups with appropriate resources. Full inclusion may not always serve as the best practice for every student and teacher, and therefore schools must strive to grow more flexible in order to retrieve the most benefits from the practice

Discussion

The data collected from this survey suggests school inclusion levels have some impact on the emotional well-being of students with intellectual disabilities. Though the final results demonstrate no prominent correlation between both variables, the significant change in emotional well-being rankings between schools with low inclusion versus schools with moderate, high, or very inclusion exhibits noteworthy trends. In all categories of well-being–happiness, confidence, and sense of belonging–schools that were described to exhibit little to no levels of inclusion also scored the lowest in their rankings. Whereas schools that were described to have at least moderate levels of inclusion scored at least 20% higher in each

domain. Despite a lack of a true positive correlation, evidence clearly demonstrates that not providing students with any form of inclusion can drastically impact their emotional health.

This data additionally disproved the proposed hypothesis, as the highest ranking of emotional well-being in every category came from schools with only moderate levels of inclusion, rather than very high. These findings could indicate the importance of differentiated inclusion and that full immersion in general education classrooms may not serve as the most appropriate practice for every individual and their social, emotional, and learning needs. This notion corroborates many educator opinions, as several participants remarked that they believe inclusion works best on a "case by case basis" and is "right for some students, but not all." These beliefs help to drive the idea that school districts must continue to prioritize learner individuality and determine a student's placement based on their own, unique needs. As schools continue to adopt the least restrictive environment principle, it remains crucial that they consider a student's ability, desires, and overall well-being before determining their appropriate classroom space.

Participant comments additionally asserted that effective inclusion does not only come from adapting to individual student needs, but also from adapting to teacher needs. Many remarked on their lack of preparedness and claimed that in order to implement inclusion in "the correct and meaningful way," their employers must supply them with "time, necessary training, and resources." This could range from more preparation and clerical time, to hosting more special-education focused professional development days, to providing classrooms with paraprofessionals and aides.. Advocacy also plays an important role in inclusion's success, as these adaptations may never experience implementation without the urgency and determination from supporters. As advocates encourage schools and districts to consider these factors, students

and educators can receive proper support, preventing burnout and helping to increase the emotional well-being of both groups.

Ultimately, inclusion serves as an effective tool that can benefit numerous individuals, regardless of disability. Data continuously demonstrates the practice's positive effects, and this study helped to further the idea that inclusive schools play a necessary role in a student's happiness, confidence, and sense of belonging. With an estimated 30-35% of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities having a psychiatric disorder–and with depression being the most prevalent (Bordeianu & Smith, 2022)–researching this topic highlights the ways schools, families, and advocates can work to increase emotional well-being in students: promoting inclusion. Though not every individual may benefit from full immersion in general education classrooms, research continues to emphasize the positive effects inclusion can play on the emotional health of students with intellectual disabilities. Papers like this–ones that specifically explore emotional well-being in students with intellectual disabilities– can serve as an effective resource to support future research on this topic, but it grows important to consider this project's many limitations. Before moving forward on exploring this topic, researchers should contemplate several factors that affected the results of current data such as sample size and subjectivity. Adapting future research to prevent these factors from developing limitations can help provide more accurate information and statistics.

Limitations

This study experienced several limitations that could have potentially impacted the overall findings–a factor to consider while implementing future research. Surveying a limited sample size served as one of the most prevalent conditions that impacted the overall results. With

such a small pool of participants, it proved difficult to determine if the results can represent all

schools across Pennsylvania, or if these findings can only apply to those who took the survey.

Because of the limited sample size and lack of consideration while finding educators, data also

demonstrated an unproportionate number of participants from schools with high levels of

inclusion, as opposed to those from schools with low, moderate, and very high levels. With a

significantly larger number of individuals providing information from high-level schools, the

other groups represented may not have exhibited as accurate of findings. Future researchers must

consider gathering an increased number of participants from a variety of backgrounds and school

environments in order to maximize validity. They must also prioritize the ratio of participants

from each type of school in order to equally account for all groups. Collecting a diverse sample

size ensures representation, reduces bias, and enhances the overall generalizability of research

findings.

Despite the valuable viewpoints of educators and their ability to observe student behavior

at school, future researchers must also consider that a student's emotional well-being cannot be

fully assessed without exploring the perspectives of parents and students themselves. The

behaviors noticed at school only account for half of an individual's waking hours and may fail to

represent a student's actions at home–especially if they tend to act differently between settings.

Retrieving data from parents can help supply data on how a student behaves outside of school,

whereas collecting information from students themselves can provide direct accounts on their

personal thoughts and feelings about their happiness, confidence, and sense of belonging.

Surveying both groups could yield significant information that has the potential to alter previous

results and conclusions. Though this project originally intended to survey educators, parents, and

students, collecting data from all three groups ultimately grew too difficult. With time constraints, a lack of willing volunteers, and inability to collect student information, the research required modifications to gauge only the perspective of educators. However, if provided with more time and resources, exploring additional perspectives of parents and students would likely provide meaningful insights–an important note for future researchers to consider.

An additional flaw that comes naturally from human data collection includes the element of subjectivity. Some biases exist subconsciously and may be reflected within participant responses. Whether these biases emerge from personal beliefs, experiences, or preferences, they hold an inevitable presence in research. Examples include participants providing answers that believe researchers want to receive, participants providing answers to match societal norms, or participants providing answers that align with their individual ideologies. Subjectivity can additionally emerge from factors such as contextual and cultural differences. With data collected across the state of Pennsylvania, the dynamic of participant school environments may have varied based on region and district. Their experiences in schools and involvement with students can impact their knowledge on inclusion and how it can affect individuals with intellectual disabilities. Participants may have additionally felt influenced by ethical considerations. Despite the survey's anonymity, participants may have felt an obligation to keep their experiences and student information private. Future researchers can work to prevent these biases by collecting diverse participant samples, clearly describing how participant information will be used, and maintaining transparent communication about the research process.

Conclusion

Despite the rise of inclusion's popularity since the passing of the Education for All Children Act in 1975, the practice remains under-researched. With such little information gained about inclusion, the polarization of its implementation continues to grow. By failing to explore the most effective inclusive methods, educators cannot execute inclusion to its fullest potential. This variation in implementation results in differing experiences between students and teachers, allowing some schools to excel and see benefits in inclusion, while causing other schools to not. Despite inclusion opinions and experiences differing greatly between schools, districts, ctiies, or states, current research–though limited–demonstrates how this practice can positively affect both students with and without disabilities.

By placing students with and without disabilities in the same academic environment, all students receive equitable learning opportunities. By differentiating resources to promote the needs of each individual, students can discover the methods and materials that work best for their learning. Especially through ideologies such as the Universal Design for Learning, flexibility in teaching and learning allows all students to work within a classroom that prioritizes their instructional demands. Having students work together also allows those with disabilities to enhance academic performance and communication skills, while helping those without disabilities work on their advocacy and tolerance toward diversity. Though research continues to prove inclusion's many benefits, the topic strongly lacks comprehensive exploration. Current data supports the practice, but fails to represent several groups of individuals, such as those with intellectual disabilities. As inclusion affects such a large percentage of people, research on the subject should remain a priority–especially when it comes to the emotional well-being of

students. The need for more data in this field inspired this research project and sought to answer the question of how varying levels of inclusion can affect a student's happiness, confidence, and sense of belonging.

By collecting qualitative and quantitative data from elementary educators across Pennsylvania, results implied a potential correlation between a school's inclusion level and emotional well-being within students with intellectual disability. In regards to student happiness, confidence, and sense of belonging, schools with the lowest inclusion levels scored significantly below schools with moderate, high, and very high levels. This indicates how implementing even small amounts of inclusion, while also appropriately adapting to student learning needs, can drastically impact an individual's emotional health. Participants additionally expressed their personal opinions on inclusion, describing that they believe it works best on a case by case basis. Numerous educators explained that because every child holds different needs, the way schools accommodate them must differ as well.

Data highlighted that inclusion positively impacts student happiness, confidence, and sense of belonging, but that this emotional impact ultimately depends on the individual child and what works best for them. In some cases, full inclusion may not support a student in the most effective way. Placing a student in a general education classroom when they work best in an isolated setting may decrease a child's emotional health and academic performance, while simultaneously creating additional stress for educators who lack the training on ways to best accommodate. Inclusion serves as a vital tool in a child's life and can benefit them in numerous ways, but without proper support, accommodations, and advocacy for students with intellectual disabilities and educators, then it cannot reach its fullest potential. In order to continue to reap

the researched advantages of inclusion, it remains vital to analyze student and educator needs and ensure districts supply these groups with the necessary resources.

In conclusion, schools with moderate to very high levels of inclusion demonstrated significant positive effects on students' happiness, confidence, and sense of belonging compared to those with low inclusion levels. However, these findings additionally highlight the importance of individualized approaches to inclusion, recognizing that a one-size-fits-all model may not suit every student's needs. It also remains critical to provide adequate resources for both educators and students to prevent burnout and maximize the benefits of inclusion. Moving forward, it remains imperative for schools and policymakers to prioritize differentiated inclusion strategies and allocate resources effectively to create inclusive environments that foster positive emotional well-being for all students.

Appendix A

Emotional Impact of Inclusion Educator Survey

Age of student with intellectual disability

Your answer

Grade of student with intellectual disability

Your answer

How would you describe the level of inclusion at your school?

Your answer

Happiness
Happiness refers to feeling good, glad, excited, or satisfied. Please fill out the following questions according to the scale below:

1- Extremely unhappy
2- Somewhat unhappy
3- Neither unhappy nor happy
4- Somewhat happy
5- Extremely Happy

How happy does your student appear at school?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Extremely unhappy	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely happy

How do you know? Provide examples if possible.

Your answer

Confidence
Confidence refers to knowing that you are capable of doing something and feeling sure of yourself and your abilities. Please fill out the following questions according to the scale below:

1- Extremely unconfident
2- Somewhat unconfident
3- Neither unconfident nor confident
4- Somewhat confident
5- Extremely confident

How confident does your student appear at school?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Extremely unconfident	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely confident

How do you know? Provide examples if possible.

Your answer

Sense of Belonging
A sense of belonging refers to feeling like you fit in and are an important part of a group. Please fill out the following questions according to the scale below:

1- Extremely low
2- Somewhat low
3- Neither low nor high
4- Somewhat high
5- Extremely high

How high or low do you think your student's sense of belonging is at school?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Extremely low	○	○	○	○	○	Extremely high

How do you know? Provide examples if possible.

Your answer

What positive impacts of inclusion have you seen at your school? (if any)

Your answer

What negative impacts of inclusion have you seen at your school? (if any)

Your answer

What is your overall opinion of inclusion?

Your answer

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