

Top-Down View of Experiential Understandings of Inclusion from Instructional Personnel in a
Public Preschool Program

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education initially appeared in research in the 1980s and was put into practice in the 1990s. The benefits of inclusion in early childhood education have been acknowledged by the U.S. Department of Education, the Division for Early Childhood, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children and investigated by previous research (Hebbler & Spiker, 2016), however, documentation of teacher perceptions and experiences of inclusionary education are limited. This mixed methods study examined the professional experiences and perceptions of instructional personnel at a public preschool. A survey completed by instructional personnel investigated specific needs for training, areas needing additional support, and examples of strengths within one inclusive program. The survey requested the experiential understandings and perceptions the instructional staff gathered after one year in an inclusive preschool environment. The results of this study concurred with previous research findings. While the inclusionary staff of the study program agreed inclusionary education benefits all students, they expressed a need for additional training in special education and methods for teaching in an inclusive classroom, as well as the need to hire additional support staff to feel confident supporting an inclusive learning environment.

KEYWORDS: inclusion, inclusionary education, special education, preschool, inclusive preschool, instructional staff, inclusive education, least restrictive environment

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis is dedicated to my beautiful daughters, Mia and Adalyn, who inspire me daily to be a living example of how hard work and dedication pays off. May you always be brave enough to take the road less traveled.

I am grateful to my parents, Candace Admire and Ed Parker, for instilling drive and a strong work ethic in me at a young age. Their constant love and support has kept me motivated and confident. My accomplishments and success are thanks to their encouragement and faith in me. Deepest thanks to my sister, Hillary. She is my rock and my biggest cheerleader. She keeps me grounded yet focused and is always supportive of my endeavors. Special thanks to my bonus editor and the wonderful father to our daughters, Shaun. Much gratitude to my late grandmother, LaVerne Parker, who passed during the writing of this thesis. She always encouraged her grandchildren to obtain a higher education and was very proud of our accomplishments.

An abundance of appreciate goes to Dr. Mary Ann Manos, for her patience, guidance, and support. I have benefited greatly from the wealth of knowledge, humorous disposition, and meticulous editing she provided during this process.

Appreciation goes out to my school district for providing the monetary support to obtain my master's degree. Without their generosity, this would not have been possible. Many thanks also goes out to my coworkers who supported and encouraged me during this program and graciously allowed me to utilize them for my research.

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Problem

After the implementation of Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA) in 1975 and the reauthorization in 1997, the inclusion of children with disabilities into the general education classroom became the law. IDEA states that students have the right to be educated in the *least restrictive environment* (LRE). LRE requires children with disabilities to be educated, to the maximum extent possible, with children who are not disabled (Terzi, 2011). High quality, inclusive environments are directly correlated with the positive outcomes for all young learners with and without disabilities (Barton & Smith, 2015). The benefits of inclusion in early childhood education have been acknowledged and accepted by current research, however, documentation of teacher perceptions and experiences of inclusionary education are limited.

Background, Context, and Theoretical Framework for the Problem

IDEA requires that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive educational environment. Placement in an inclusive classroom is the least restrictive environment for any public school child experiencing learning delays or difficulties (Bryant, 2018). In the inclusive environment, students with disabilities receive their education alongside typically developing peers.

Heebeler and Spiker (2016) completed a study on the benefits of inclusion into the general education classroom and concluded, “Opening the doors of general education classrooms gives children with disabilities access to the general early childhood or elementary curriculum, typical peers, and more of the typical activities available to other children” (p. 14). Inclusionary settings provide an equitable education for students with disabilities (Heebler & Spiker, 2016). The effective, successful implementation of inclusion involves many essential elements

including adequate teacher training, sufficient classroom support, general education teachers' attitudes, and staff acceptance of inclusionary students.

The public school preschool program utilized for this study transitioned to a full inclusion model within the past 5 years. Prior to the transition, all special education services for children aged 3 to 5, including social and academic services, were addressed outside the general education classroom in a separate classroom – a resource room. Moving to the inclusion model was a necessary change for the preschool program to meet the requirements of IDEA as well as to satisfy the requirements of the Illinois Preschool for All grant.

Statement of the Problem

Current research suggests educators do not fully understand the logistics and best practices in effectively creating an inclusive classroom (Bryant, 2018). The researcher of this study examined the professional experiences and perceptions of instructional personnel that represented preschool faculty and support staff to identify their experiences and understandings of inclusive preschool programming. Research was centered around the following questions. Did instructional staff believe inclusion benefited all students? Were instructional personnel confident in their ability to differentiate instruction for all learners in their classroom? Did they believe there were some special education students that should not participate in the general education setting? Did they view the special education teacher as a partner in their classroom? Did they feel they had adequate staff support for an inclusive environment? Did they feel confident with their training to support an inclusive environment? Did they have suggestions for changes that could be made in the inclusionary programming?

H₁-Public preschool instructional personnel would express overall positive perceptions of inclusionary education at the primary level.

H₂– Public pre-school personnel would express overall negative perceptions of inclusionary education at the primary level.

H₀ -Public preschool instructional personnel would have no overall opinion of inclusionary education at the primary school level.

Purpose of the Study

The study public preschool program transitioned from pull-out special education services to push-in, inclusive special education services within recent years. Since the transition, the program has experienced staff turnover. The purpose the mixed methods study was to explore the perceptions of the instructional staff regarding the inclusive program to determine areas of strengths and areas of concern with the implementation of full inclusion within the preschool setting.

Research Questions

After the implementation of push in special education services, the instructional personnel had to adjust the program logistics from what they were used to. On-the-job training was the only training offered by the school district during the changes. The research conducted focused on instructional personnel experiences and/or insights that were acquired regarding primary level full inclusive education.

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance

Research studies by Heebler & Spiker (2016), Kossyvaki & Papoudi (2016), and McCollow & Hoffman (2019) support the significance and benefits of inclusion for students with special learning needs. However, limited research has been conducted on teacher perceptions of public preschool inclusion. Completed research has identified a need for more studies, teacher training, additional support staff and related services training. This study identified specific

needs for training, areas that need additional support, and provided examples of strengths within one inclusive program.

Nature of the Study

The study for the purpose of this research was as a mixed-methods study. A mixed methods evaluation design contains survey questions and open ended questions that are typically focused on evaluating the success of an intervention, a program, or a policy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Anonymous surveys were completed by primary level teachers, support staff, and related service providers.

Definition of Terms

Inclusion-educating children with a range of learning disabilities and/or needs in a general education classroom.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)-students with disabilities receive educational services, to their greatest extent, with nondisabled peers. Special education students are not removed from general education classrooms unless their educational needs cannot be met using supplemental aids and accommodations in the general education classroom.

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)-an individualized educational program that is designed to meet the student's unique, individual learning needs in a public-school setting.

Peer mediated strategies/interventions-typically developing peers are used as models to improve social skills of students with developmental delays, autism, or other special needs.

Social narratives or social stories-short story written specifically for a child to describe a skill, concept, or situation that the child needs to master or has difficulty with. Most often used with children with autism using pictures and short sentences.

Integrated play groups-an intervention that is used to develop appropriate play skills, social-communication skills, and meaningful peer relationships in children with autism by adult supported peer interactions.

Friend 2 friend-an intervention used to promote understanding and acceptance while creating friendships among children with disabilities and their typically developing peers.

Social skills training-behavioral development intervention that is used to foster appropriate behaviors in children with autism often using a reward system to teach social skills.

Structured play groups-specific small group activities with typically developing peers and an adult scaffolding support as needed to the student with autism or other disabilities.

Embedded choices-intentional teacher instruction for students with disabilities within the general education environment in classroom activities, routines, and transitions.

Assumptions & Limitations

Over the course of this study, the researcher came across a few factors that influenced the outcome. Identifying such variables was imperative in completing the in-depth study.

Assumptions that could have potentially been identified in the study included:

1. Instructional personnel responded honestly to the survey.
2. Changes to current programming could benefit the effectiveness of inclusion for children with special learning needs.
3. The study could help drive teacher professional development options offered by the public school district on a yearly basis.

There were limitations that could have potentially affect the outcome of this study.

Limitations included:

1. The memory of instructional personnel may not have been accurate

2. A small sample size and only one school district was represented in the data collected. The study took place in a small public preschool which included 3 preschool teachers, 5 support staff program aides, and 4 related service providers.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The remainder of the study expanded on the aforementioned research questions. The study was contingent upon university approval. Surveys were distributed to instructional personnel starting September 2021. Upon survey completion, all results were compared to determine areas of strength as well as areas of improvement. Data was analyzed within 2 weeks of survey completion. Results were submitted to the graduate committee by November 2021. Final approval of study results was given in November 2021.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Professional literature states the enactment of the Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA) in 1975 stated that children with disabilities must be educated in the general education environment alongside their non-disabled peers as much as possible (Barton & Smith, 2015). An amendment to IDEA in 1986 granted three, four, and five-year-old children the same rights the school-aged children with disabilities posed under the original law (Heebler & Spiker, 2016). Inclusive education initially appeared in research in the 1980s and was put into practice in the 1990s. The benefits of inclusion in early childhood education have been acknowledged by the U.S. Department of Education, the Division for Early Childhood, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children and investigated by previous research (Heebler & Spiker, 2016).

Theoretical Framework of Inclusionary Education

The intent of an inclusionary education is to provide all students, regardless of their functioning level, equal educational opportunities. Inclusion allows students with special needs to learn alongside their peers while providing all students with a sense of belonging (Bryant, 2018). Belongingness is the third level of human need on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid. When individuals begin to desire relationships with others, their sense of belonging begins to develop (Poston, 2009). A child needs to feel a level of emotional or social connections because belonging directly affects self-esteem (Poston, 2009). High quality, inclusive environments are directly correlated with the positive outcomes for all young learners with and without disabilities (Barton & Smith, 2015).

Children are not born with socially acceptable social skills. These skills must be taught and fostered in the early years of life and education. Teachers must be intentional with social skills instruction. Placing students with disabilities in an inclusive environment is not sufficient enough to improve social skills (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019). The social skills of young children must be taught, fostered, and practiced authentically. Research indicates that a teachers' involvement in growing peer relationships has a substantial effect (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016).

Literature Review

Several studies have researched and compiled strategies for social skills instruction in the early childhood environment. McCollow and Hoffmann (2019) and Barnett (2018) name scripting and video modeling as two strategies to foster social skills and social play. Scripting provides children with a written or verbal model of appropriate skills to use during social situations (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019). Video modeling allows students to watch another individual or themselves correctly performing a targeted skill multiple times. After viewing, the student is provided an opportunity to perform the skill (Barnett, 2018). Other strategies include *social narratives*, *pivotal response training*, *structured play groups*, *social skills training* (McCollow & Hoffmann, 2019), and *embedding choices* (Barnett, 2018). These strategies assist early childhood teachers in teaching appropriate social skills which benefits the inclusive classroom.

Inclusionary education must include social skills instruction to be effective and provide long term outcomes for children with and at-risk for disabilities (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019). Movahedazarhouligh (2018), McCollow and Hoffman (2019), and Dennis and Stockall (2014) list the use of *peer mediated strategies* as a positive intervention in an inclusive classroom. The teacher's role is to facilitate and train the typically developing peers in the early childhood

environment how to initiate and reinforce appropriate social interactions with disabled peers (Movahedazarhouligh, 2018). The educator's role is to train the typically-developing peers to initiate, prompt, and reinforce social interactions with the student with disabilities. This type of intervention allows both children to build social play skills (Dennis & Stockall, 2014). *Social narratives* or *social stories* are used to introduce social situations such as a fire drill or a visit to the dentist. The intent is to generalize the skill and encourage the correct behavior in all settings. *Pivotal response training* takes a natural approach to a facilitator being able to encourage turn-taking and communication exchange between students/teachers based on the student's interest (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019). Play intervention such as grouping children with other children who have appropriate play skills is effective. *Integrated playgroups*, *friend 2 friend*, and *peer-implemented interventions* are other methods (Movahedazarhouligh, 2018). Teachers and peers can implement several types of research-based interventions that may guide play and build positive social skills in the inclusive early childhood classroom (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019).

Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature of Inclusionary Practices

Research studies by Kossyvaki and Papoudi (2016), Barnett (2018), Noggle and Stites (2018), and McCollow and Hoffman (2019) support the significance and benefits of inclusion for students with special needs. Based on the articles reviewed, teachers support inclusionary education. However, limited research has been conducted on teacher perceptions and experiences of public preschool inclusion.

Several research studies have named play as a natural way for students to practice social skills. A study completed by Kossyvaki and Papoudi (2016) focused on play as an intervention strategy for children with autism in schools. They compared 14 different studies that were completed on children with autism and play-based interventions. Twelve of the 14 studies that

were reviewed reported positive findings of play-based therapy. Kosyvaki and Papoudi's (2016) study suggests play with typically developing peers is a beneficial intervention for children with autism. Barnett (2018) investigated early childhood strategies to help children with autism learn appropriate play skills and social skills in the inclusive classroom. Barnett identified play as an important component of a child's development that produces social and communication skills that eventually lead to creating friendships.

Noggle and Stites (2018) observed typically developing peers naturally including students with special needs during play after facilitation and exposure. The study followed three typically developing peers to record their lived experiences in an inclusive preschool classroom. At the completion of the study, all three typically developing peers had positive social growth and a positive change in the way they viewed peers with disabilities over time. Peers in this study were observed applying the peer mediation strategies that were noted in Movahedazarhouli (2018) and McCollow and Hoffman (2019) studies.

The social benefits of students with disabilities in an inclusive preschool classroom are comparable to their typically developing peers. Children learn skills for social play and social competence. It is important to reiterate that these skills must be intentionally taught and nurtured in an inclusive environment (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019). Children are not naturally equipped with these skills or the proper social language, they must be modeled and provided the opportunity to practice (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019).

Inclusionary primary school settings are global. Zabeli and Gjelaj (2020) interviewed 10 experienced preschool teachers in Kosovo and concluded that the teachers view inclusive classroom environments as an excellent opportunity for all children. While the teachers interviewed expressed a common understanding of inclusion, they often lacked the proper skills

and knowledge of adequate teaching methods to work with children with special needs (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020).

A study by Majoko (2018) in Zimbabwe examined 21 preschool teacher participants' perceptions of inclusion in early childhood education. The study identified the participants' major concerns with inclusionary education included the lack of physical facilities, time, clear and specific policy, finance, support services, and flexible curricula. Overall, the participants of this study were not supportive or in favor of inclusionary practices.

Lee, Yung, Tracey, and Barker (2015) conducted a study in Hong Kong to examine preschool teachers' attitudes toward including children with special needs in regular classrooms. The study suggests early childhood teachers reported having modest support for including children with specific learning needs in inclusive classrooms and that the longer a teacher was involved with implementing inclusion, the more accepting of the practice they became. The teachers with special education training tended to be more positive about inclusion, which concluded that training in special education offers the greatest prospect of promoting inclusion (Lee et al, 2015). Park, Dimitrov, and Park (2018) found similar results from 679 early childhood teachers' responses to a survey listing concerns with inclusive education. The surveys revealed that teacher background factors directly affect their confidence in teaching children with disabilities. These findings implied that teachers need ample opportunities to use pedagogical practices to raise their confidence teaching an inclusive classroom. Suggested ways to foster confidence are direct teaching experience, task-similar experience, peer observations, and verbal persuasion to boost confidence to reinforce positive teacher experiences and perceptions of inclusion (Park et al, 2018).

Kwon, Hong, and Jeon (2017) interviewed 91 4- and 5-year-old children and surveyed teachers to examine teacher experiences with children with disabilities, teacher attitudes towards disabilities, inclusive classroom practices, and the association between children's attitudes toward peers with disabilities and child and teacher factors. The teacher factors explored in the study were teacher trainings, experiences, attitudes, and classroom practices. The study suggested the inclusive environment was positive. Teachers' and students' attitudes about children with disabilities were positive. Teacher factors did positively influence the children's attitudes towards students with disabilities. However, the study identified a need for better teacher trainings to enhance teacher understanding of disabilities (Kwon et al, 2017).

Bryant (2018) interviewed 8 general education preschool teachers regarding experiences and perspectives on preschool inclusion. At the conclusion of the interviews, Bryant suggested 3 conclusions:

- a need for the preschool teachers to better understand their role in the educational environment,
- more training on inclusion was necessary,
- the attitudes of teachers and parents impact the effectiveness of preschool inclusion.

The study compiled concrete data of teachers' feelings of working in an inclusive environment. After data review, Bryant recommended additional studies be completed to determine the coursework needs in special education for pre-teacher programming (Bryant, 2018).

Conclusion

Findings from current literature has resulted in the identification of a need for more studies, teacher training, additional support staff, and related services training, not just in the

United States, but internationally as well. There is a need for teacher training to be developed further to improve teacher understanding of disabilities. Properly trained teachers promote and educate children's understanding and acceptance of peers with disabilities. (Kwon, Hong, & Jeon, 2017). Additionally, Bryant (2018) concluded the need for more studies to be completed of pre-teacher programs to determine the need for additional coursework in special education courses. Additional research is also needed to investigate and improve the peer training component of pre-school inclusion. Finally, consistent application techniques must be added to pre-service teacher programs to (Noggle & Stites, 2018).

Barton and Smith (2015) gathered information from online surveys to identify current challenges and solutions to preschool inclusion. At the conclusion of the study, the authors opine that insubstantial progress had been made in early childhood inclusive placements. The study generated 3 recommendations as solutions to implement high-quality preschool inclusion. They include;

- Identify and leverage current resources,
- support ongoing research to identify evidence-based practices, and
- use of an implementation science framework.

Previous research literature suggests early childhood general education teachers need more quality training and experience. They also need proper support to feel confident and effective while teaching in inclusive settings (Bryant, 2018; Park et al, 2018; Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020). This study investigated a rural preschool instructional personnel's perceptions.

Participants shared experiences of inclusionary education. The study focus was to determine the strengths and areas of concern regarding the implementation of full inclusion.

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY DESIGN

Introduction

The research action plan was conducted to examine the experiences and perceptions of instructional personnel of inclusive preschool programming in a rural preschool program in central Illinois. Conclusions of the study were drawn from surveys completed by the instructional staff. The results of this study enhanced current research about instructional strengths and suggested adjustments necessary to shape an effective inclusive educational environment.

Statement of the Problem

Numerous research studies support the significance and benefits of general education inclusion for students with special learning needs (Bryant, 2018; Kossyvaki & Papoudi 2016; McCollow & Hoffman, 2019). A study by Bryant (2018) suggested educators do not fully understand best practices in creating an inclusive pre-school classroom. Additionally, limited research has been conducted on teacher perceptions of public preschool inclusion. Completed research has identified a need for more studies, teacher training, additional support staff and related services training. This research investigated specific needs for training, areas needing additional support, and examples of strengths within one inclusive program.

Purpose of the Study

The public preschool program in this study transitioned from *pull-out* special education services to *push-in*, inclusive special education services. Since the transition, the program has experienced staff turnover. This mixed methods study explored the perceptions of the instructional staff in the inclusive public preschool program. Findings determined areas of

strengths and areas of concern regarding the implementation of full inclusion within the preschool setting.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Implementation of push in special education services prompted instructional personnel to adjust the program logistics from traditional schedules. On-the-job training was the only training offered by the school district during the changes. The research centered on the faculty and staff experiences and/or insights. The hypothesis of this study was that public preschool instructional personnel would express overall positive perceptions of inclusionary education at the primary level. The null hypothesis was that public preschool instructional personnel would have no overall opinion of inclusionary education at the primary school level.

Research Methodology

This study was completed using mixed methods research to investigate the perceptions and experiences of instructional personnel in an inclusive preschool setting after 1 year.

The research was conducted via a Likert scale teacher survey and self-reported survey questions (see Appendix B). Individual perceptions of inclusionary education in the study program were investigated. The survey questions were:

1. Do you believe inclusion benefits all students?
2. Are you confident in your ability to differentiate instruction for all learners in your classroom?
3. Do you believe there are some special education students that should not be in the general education setting?
4. Do you view the special education teacher as a partner in the classroom?
5. Do you feel you have adequate staff support for an inclusive environment?

6. Do you feel confident with your training to support an inclusive environment?

The Likert scale ratings are:

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) No opinion
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly agree

Open-ended comment boxes were included after each question above.

Self-report survey questions were:

- Do you have suggestions for changes to be made to the inclusionary program?
- What trainings, if any, do you feel you would benefit from?

Research Design

An anonymous Google Forms survey was used to determine the perceptions and insights about inclusionary education of instructional personnel in the study school. The survey was created to help determine the strengths and areas of need in the study program's inclusive education environment and programming. Comment boxes were available after each rating question and 2 open-ended question prompts from the surveys were analyzed to test the hypothesis that public preschool instructional personnel would express overall positive perceptions of inclusionary education at the primary level.

Target Population, Sampling Method, and Related Procedures

The target population of the study was primary level teachers, support staff, and related service providers. The study was conducted to identify the strengths and areas of need in the study program's inclusive education environment and programming.

Permission was granted by Dr. Watterson of Greenville University and by the Director of the study program (see Appendix A) to distribute a Google Forms survey amongst all instructional personnel. It was agreed that the survey was conducted with anonymity so that individual staff would freely share their perceptions and experiences without identification. The

survey was developed to gather data relating to instructional personnel perceptions and experiences relating to the study program's inclusionary education program. Further data was analyzed for potential staff professional development needs.

Source of Data

A Google Forms survey was developed and distributed to preschool instructional personnel including teachers, support staff, and related services staff who work within the inclusive environment. Instructional staff members were able to answer the survey at their convenience.

Data Collection and Baseline data

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

Field Test

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

Pilot Test

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

Management of Variables

Many variables could occur in the context of mixed methods research. The survey accuracy was fully dependent on voluntary participants honesty and having an accuracy of their memory of the inclusionary settings.

Data Analysis Procedures

To analyze the data, the survey results were reviewed from the September 2021 instructional personnel surveys. Attention was paid to the rating scores submitted on each survey. The Likert scale responses of each completed survey were compiled into a data charts to reflect trends or patterns of scoring. This determined instructional staff perceptions of

inclusionary education and identified areas of need in the study program. The open ended questions were analyzed for key ideas in responses of the study program's strengths or areas needing improvement.

Internal validity

Instructional personnel in the study program completed confidential surveys of perceptions and experiences in inclusionary education programming. The honesty and memory of instructional personnel could have impacted the information they provided while completing the surveys. The internal validity also included sample population and their understanding of special education services.

External Validity

The findings of this study could be compared or generalized with similar early childhood inclusionary programs in rural areas.

Expected Findings

The findings of this study included potential areas of strength and weakness in programmatic planning. Public preschool instructional personnel expressed overall positive perceptions of inclusionary education at the primary level. Topics included identification of specific needs for training, areas needing additional support, and examples of strengths within one inclusive program.

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

The results from the teacher survey included no personally identifiable information. Information was shared with administration or the instructional personnel. The approach to gathering information was performed in an unbiased manner. The questions on the survey were conveyed in a non-abrasive manner so that personnel would answer honestly. No lasting benefits

or harm was experienced by any participants. The researcher was and currently is an employee of the program mentioned in this study. All data was kept secure on the main researcher's password protected laptop. The privacy of instructional personnel's answers to the survey was kept confidential. All participants were volunteers. That variable alone may have skewed the survey results.

Chapter 4: Findings

Study Setting

The study was conducted at a public-school pre-kindergarten program. The pre-kindergarten program consists of 120 students, 3 general education teachers, 1 special education teacher, 5 paraprofessionals, and 4 related service providers (speech and language pathologist, hearing itinerant, occupational therapy assistant, and physical therapy assistant). The school district educates around 1400 students each year. According to the district report card, 1280 students are white, 760 students qualify as low income, and 268 students receive special education services. The school district serves a community of around 6,600 people, of which 96.8% are white. The average household income is \$60,200 with a 18.17% poverty rate.

Population and Data Summary of Demographics

Twelve instructional staff members of the study program were sent a survey via email for completion. Eleven instructional staff members completed the survey, which equaled a 91.6% completion rate. Study participants consisted of 10 (90.9%) females and 1 (9.1%) gender not identified. The highest educational degree earned by participants ranged from initial certification (1), an associate's degree (4), a bachelor's degree (3), and a master's degree (1).

Participants were asked how many years of experience they had in early childhood education. Four (36.4%) instructional staff have 0-4 years of experience, 3 (27.3%) have 5-9 years of experience, 1 (9.1%) have 10-14 years of experience, and 3 (27.3%) participants have 20+ years of experience.

Other Researchers

No other researchers were involved in conducting or analyzing the data provided.

Study Timeline

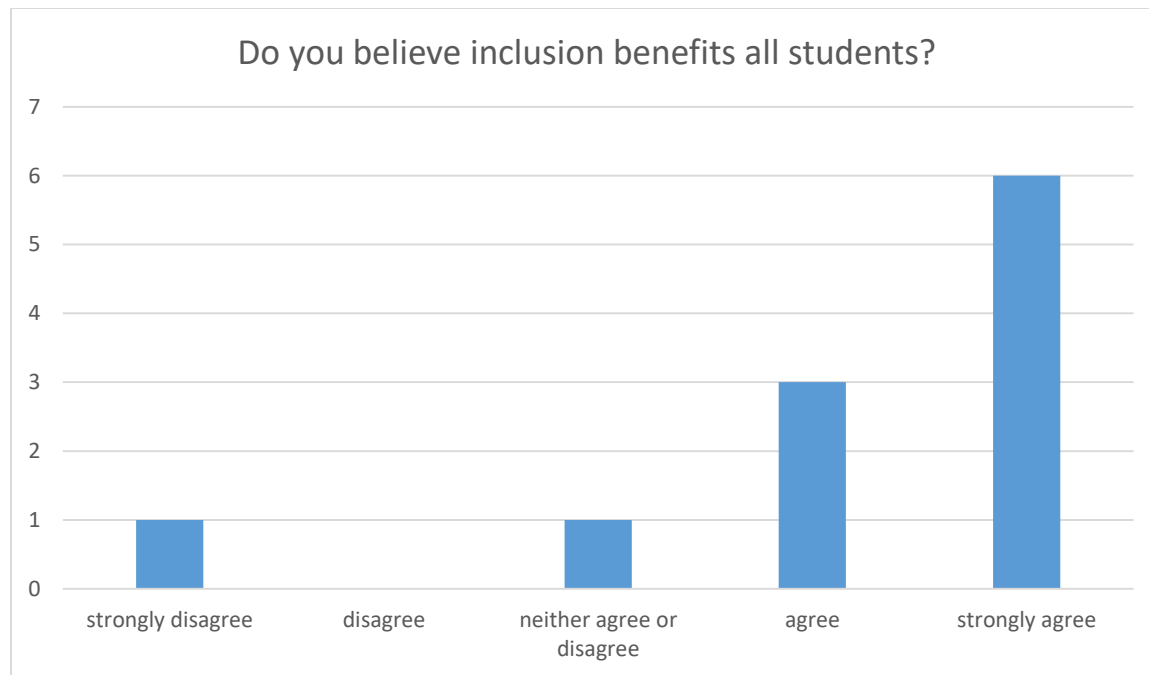
The survey was sent to instructional staff of the study program in late September 2021. A follow-up email was sent September 28, 2021 reminding staff to complete the survey. Instructional staff had approximately two weeks to complete the survey which included 10 working days. Accurate, current demographic data was collected via survey questions.

Data Analysis of Instructional Staff Perceptions of Inclusionary Education

The survey questions inquired specifically about staff perceptions of inclusionary education of the study program. Questions were answered using a 5-point Likert scale of *strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree or disagree, agree, and strongly agree*.

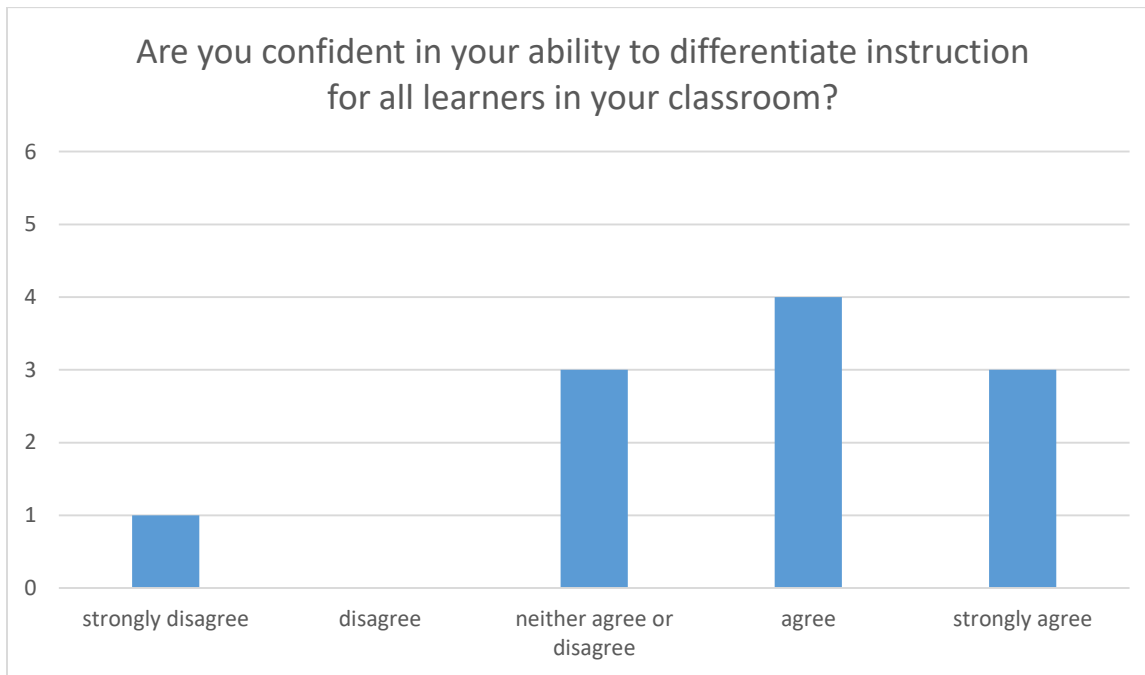
Table 1

Results of Inclusion Benefitting All Students



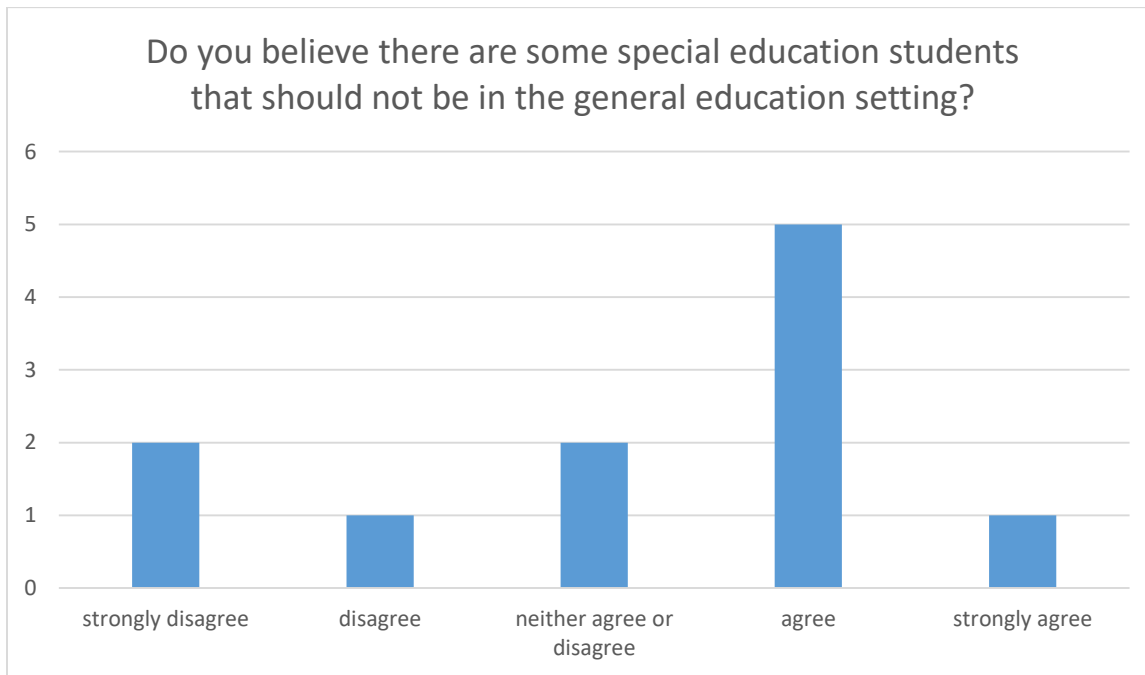
A majority of (6) staff members strongly agreed that inclusion placements benefits all students. Three staff members agreed that inclusion benefits all students. One staff member neither agreed or disagreed. One staff member strongly disagreed that all students can benefit from inclusion.

Table 2

Results for Confidence in Ability to Differentiate Instruction

As displayed in table 2, a majority of instructional staff members agreed (4) or strongly agreed (3) that they were confident in their ability to differentiate instruction for all learners in their classroom. Three staff members neither agreed or disagreed. One staff member strongly disagreed with feeling confident in their ability to differentiate instructions for all learners.

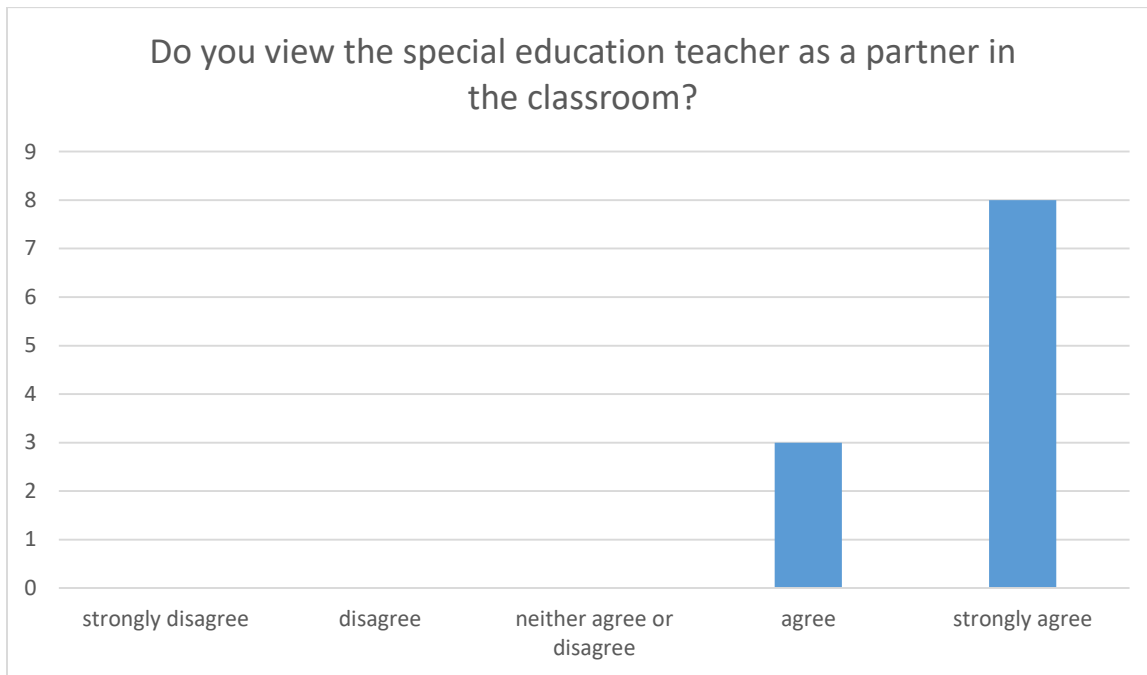
Table 3

Results for Including Special Education Students in the General Education Setting

As seen in table 3, three staff members disagreed (1) or strongly disagreed (2) that some special education students do not belong in the general education setting. Two staff members elected to neither agreed or disagreed while five staff members agreed that some students should not be placed in the general education classroom. One staff member strongly agreed that some special education students do not belong in the general education classroom.

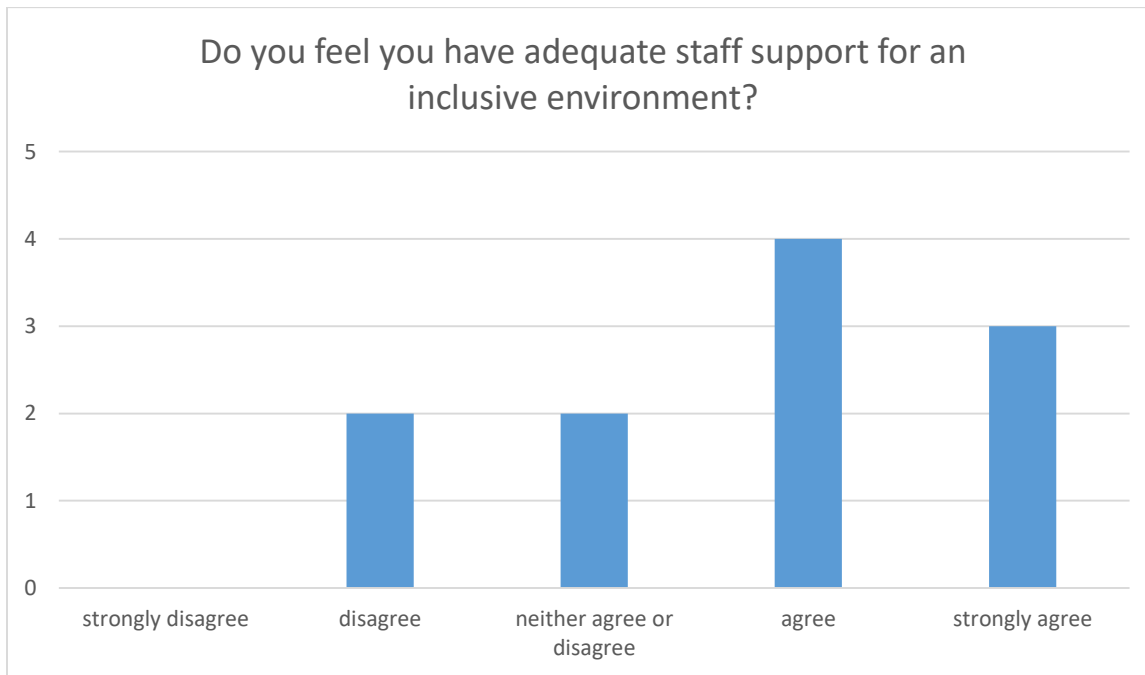
Table 4

Results for Perception of Special Education Teacher in the General Education Classroom



As seen in table 4, eight staff members strongly agreed and three staff members agreed they view the special education teacher as a partner in the inclusive preschool classroom.

Table 5

Results of Adequate Staff Support in the Inclusive Environment

As shown in table 5, instructional staff opinions varied regarding adequate staff to support an inclusive environment. Two staff members disagreed the study program has enough staff to support an inclusive environment. Two staff members elected to neither agree or disagree about adequate staff support. Four staff members agreed the study program has adequate staff to support an inclusive environment. Three staff members strongly agreed that there is adequate staff to support inclusionary education in the study program.

Table 6

Results of Confidence in Training to Support an Inclusive Environment

As shown in table 6, perceptions also varied on individual staff confidence in their training and abilities to support an inclusionary education environment. Three staff members strongly agreed that they felt confident in their training to support inclusionary education. Four staff members agreed that they felt confident with their training to support an inclusive classroom. Two staff members disagreed that their training gave them confidence to support inclusion. Two staff members elected to neither agree or disagree with this question.

Qualitative Data Responses

Six staff members of the sample answered the qualitative question, “Do you believe inclusion benefits all students?” All 6 (100%) of the responses agreed that inclusion benefits all students. Additional comments included:

- *“It teaches all students how to socially interact with peers.”*

- *“Children are exposed to a wide variety of disabilities and learn inclusion and compassion.”*
- *“It helps them with social skills that they wouldn't gain from a sped classroom only.”*
- *“Inclusion is a benefit for all students, for the students can learn from each other. The students with a disability can learn social goals from others, and students without a disability can have the exposure to a child with a disability.”*
- *“Benefits to inclusion are that it allows for all students to be exposed to learn from each other in the same environment. Allowing students who would typically be in a special education classroom are allowed to learn not only from their teacher but also their peers as well.”*

Three staff members of the sample responded to the qualitative question, “Are you confident in your ability to differentiate instruction for all learners in your classroom?” All 3 (100%) of the responses stated in a positive manner. Additional information included:

- *“I can modify or accommodate the activity according to the student's need.”*
- *“I try to think of a game to play with the students and try to adapt to their needs while still having the same goal in mind.”*

Five staff members of the sample responded to the qualitative question, “Do you believe there are some special education students that should not be in the general education setting?” One (20%) staff member answered no. One (20%) staff member stated yes. Three (60%) staff members stated it was a case by case situation. Additional information included:

- *“No, all students learn their own way, at their own pace, and need social interaction from their own peers.”*

- *“Yes, if a student has violent behavior or disrupts class where the other students no longer are learning.”*
- *“Depends on the severity I think.”*
- *“If a child is not able to control his/her emotions or if the child makes too much noise so the other students or teachers are not able to concentrate on their tasks, it might not be beneficial for the whole class.”*
- *“I would say that it just depends on their disability. There are some students who wouldn't benefit from a general education setting for they could have some severe obstacles and the objectives would be way to advance for them in a "normal" classroom.”*

Six staff members of the sample answered the qualitative question, “Do you view the special education teacher as a partner in the classroom?” All 6 (100%) agreed that the special education teacher is an important partner in an inclusive classroom. Additional information included:

- *“If I am not sure how to modify or accommodate a student, I can go to the special education teacher for advise on how to help the student succeed.”*
- *“The special education teacher provides knowledge that a regular teacher might not know about. The fact that there is an extra teacher in the classroom to help with the special education students is very beneficial.”*
- *“Yes, they are so important to the classroom environment.”*
- *“The special education teacher is a huge partner in a classroom. They have insights that would help anyone who are working with a special needs student. Working side by side can help the student reach goals that they are supposed to reach.”*

- *“Our special education teacher is an AMAZING partner!”*
- *“The special education teacher should work hand in hand with the general education teacher to promote overall success. The special education teacher should target the student’s identified areas of weakness while still providing access to the general education curriculum. Lessons should be infused to target both the general education curriculum while also targeting the students’ deficit areas.”*

Five staff members of the sample answered the qualitative question, “Do you feel you have adequate staff support for an inclusive environment?” Two (40%) staff members stated yes, there is adequate staff to support an inclusive environment. One (20%) staff member said adequate staff depends on the needs of the classroom while 2 (40%) stated that they do not feel the study program has adequate staff support to an effective inclusionary program. Additional information included:

- *“We all work together as a team.”*
- *“There does not seem to be enough staff in classrooms to assist with various disabilities.”*
- *“It all depends on how many special education students there are in the room. In most cases, there is only one special education aide in the room. There could be multiple students who require extra help. The special education teacher might have to spend time in a few different classrooms. It can get challenging at times.”*
- *“Yes, Support staff is great and very helpful.”*
- *“In a large general education classroom, students can’t have the opportunities needed to work on both the gen curriculum and their deficit areas. They simply don’t have enough staff to provide both continuously throughout instruction. Many kids don’t get*

instructional attention because they are behaving properly in class, but they are missing concepts and opportunities to work on needed skills.”

Four staff members of the sample responded to the qualitative question, “Do you feel confident with your training to support an inclusive environment?” Three staff members stated they are confident in their ability to support an inclusive environment. One staff member reported not feeling confident in their training to support an inclusive environment. Additional information included:

- *“I am comfortable to go to any team member asking for advise on how to help the students succeed.”*
- *“I have not had the training to learn how to prevent myself from getting hurt while taking care of children who might require extra help.”*
- *“I feel confident in my specialized training, but struggle with administrators reluctant to provide services adequately incorporated into the general Ed program.”*

Eleven staff members of the sample responded to the qualitative question, “Do you have suggestions for changes to be made to the inclusionary program?”

Suggestions for inclusionary program improvement included:

- *“Hiring of more staff.”*
- *“General education classroom teachers need to change their viewpoint on the classroom dynamic. Instead of seeing certain kids as special education it would be helpful to see the class as an inclusive class such as using visual aids for every student because it could always help everyone.”*
- *“All teachers and aides should have training on how to properly guide children when only using words is not effective.”*

- *“Special education staff in each room for each session, full time so students can be divided up better and get better support.”*
- *“More trainings for all aides not just the special education aides.”*
- *“All staff should be trained properly on how to operate an inclusion classroom.”*
- *“More language focused strategies for all kids. Learn to create a more ‘child expressive’ environment instead of the typical ‘child receptive’ environment. All children, special education or gen education, would benefit from more opportunities to use language during instruction instead of being talked at.”*

Eleven staff members of the sample responded to the qualitative question, “What trainings, if any, do you feel you would benefit from?”

Suggestions for trainings included:

- *“Ideas to better help with inclusion.”*
- *“Training on how to restrain children so they are not running away or hurting other children.”*
- *“Instructional planning, behavior management techniques, autism spectrum, adhd behavior management techniques.”*
- *“CPI training for general education teachers.”*
- *“Trainings that have simple sign language as the core material. There are a lot of kids who start out nonverbal, and being able to communicate with their hands is a huge benefit. That way they won't get upset and melt down when an educator can't understand what they're trying to say.”*
- *“How to handle behavior students.”*

- *“More training on advocating for students needs and providing more direct push in instruction instead of pull out direct sessions. Provide children with more peer time instead of adult time when it comes to learning. Use adults as facilitators, but student driven learning.”*

Eliminated Data

There was no data eliminated from this survey or study. All data harvested was used.

Mitigating Events

In an effort to eliminate possible bias from respondents, the survey was sent anonymously via email from the researcher. This made it impossible for the researcher to determine which instructional staff member did not complete the survey. Therefore, only eleven of the twelve surveys were completed and analyzed for this study, which had a small sample size. The email responses seemed forthright and timely. All were completed and returned within study time parameters.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Conclusions

The research survey responses indicated that the public preschool instructional personnel expressed overall positive perceptions of inclusionary education at the primary level. Mixed opinions regarding the benefits of inclusion for all students were seen. The hiring of more staff along with additional staff training on inclusionary education, behavior management, and special needs were common program improvement suggestions.

Study Strengths

Eleven of the twelve surveys distributed were completed and submitted to the researcher within two weeks. Survey results were anonymously returned to the researcher to gather authentic, honest opinions and perceptions. No identifying information was expected or requested. Staff members were able to complete the survey at their leisure and were asked to provide additional comments on the six qualitative questions, but not required.

Study Weaknesses

After analyzing the responses to the quantitative questions, the option *neither agree or disagree* should have been worded as *no opinion*. *Neither agree or disagree* was used more often than expected. A *no opinion* option could have potentially encouraged the staff member to elect to either agree or disagree with the question.

Collecting the survey as anonymous results encouraged honest responses. That practice made it impossible to determine which staff member did not complete the survey. In hindsight, some identifying data would have been beneficial to the results data and information to have all surveys returned.

Perhaps, an additional qualitative question the researcher may have included is, “In what ways can the special education teacher support you, your students, or the inclusive environment more?” The answers to this question could generate additional needs and support information. Additionally, necessary program changes the special education teacher can implement for instructional personnel and the inclusionary education program may have been mentioned.

Validity

The internal validity of the study was strong due to the use of an original survey for the participants to complete. The survey was voluntary which may have skewed the results somewhat. The survey was not normed or tested. The survey was composed by a professional, certified educator who has the background and experience to discuss the program needs. The external validity was strong because all the respondents were staff members for one year or more of the public preschool inclusion study program.

Setting Impact

The setting for this study took place fully online. No person-to-person contact was made during the study. Participants received and returned the completed survey via email. Instructional personnel who did not complete the online survey are not represented in this study. The virtual setting may have limited the participation in the research study.

Hypothesis and Result

Null hypothesis: Public preschool instructional personnel would have no overall opinion of inclusionary education at the primary school level.

Directional Hypothesis: Public preschool instructional personnel would express overall positive perceptions of inclusionary education at the primary level.

Result: Instructional personnel of the study program expressed positive perceptions of inclusionary education. The directional hypothesis was confirmed.

A majority of the staff (81%) agreed inclusion benefits all students. There were mixed perceptions about the general education environment benefitting all special education students. A majority of the staff members (63%) agreed they were confident with their training and feel the study program has adequate staff to support an inclusionary environment. Nearly half, 36% of the staff, expressed concerns with these two areas.

Recommendations

Survey results seem to indicate the following:

- The need for additional teacher and support staff training in special education.
- The need for training regarding effective inclusion teaching methods.
- The need to hire additional support staff to effectively implement inclusion.

Based on the current results, it is the researcher's recommendation all staff members are offered trainings in areas they perceive themselves to be deficient. According to survey results, inclusionary personnel of the study program feel that each classroom should be staffed with one general education teacher and two paraprofessionals to provide adequate support for the successful implementation of inclusionary education. It is the recommendation of the researcher that the study program hire one additional full time paraprofessional in order to effectively address and meet student and program needs. Each classroom of the study program would then be staff with one general education teacher and two paraprofessionals full time.

High quality, inclusive environments are directly correlated with the positive outcomes for all young learners with and without disabilities (Barton & Smith, 2015). The benefits of inclusion in early childhood education have been acknowledged and accepted by current

research, however, documentation of teacher perceptions and experiences of inclusionary education are limited. This study was conducted to determine instructional staff perceptions of the strengths and areas of need in one inclusive public preschool program.

Based on completed research reviewed, teachers support inclusionary education overall. Inclusionary education studies have identified a need for more studies, teacher training for early childhood general education staff, and additional support staff. Research also indicated the need for proper support to feel confident and effective while teaching in inclusive settings. The results of this study reiterated previous research findings. While the inclusionary staff believed inclusionary education benefits all students, they expressed a need for additional training in special education and methods for teaching in an inclusive classroom, as well as the need to hire additional support staff to feel confident supporting an inclusive learning environment.

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Appendix A

LITCHFIELD PRE KINDERGARTEN



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Litchfield, Illinois 62056



Ph: ~~217-324-3514~~ - Fax (217)324-2129

Adam D. Favre, Director
afavre@litchfieldpanthers.org

September 20, 2021

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

To Whom It May Concern:

As Director of Litchfield Pre-K, I give permission for Heather Diltz to recruit participants and collect data on our campus for the study entitled "Top-Down View of Experiential Understandings of Inclusion from Instructional Personnel in a Public Preschool Program. I have been fully informed about the purpose and scope of the project, and I have been provided with copies of all study related documents, recruitment materials, and data collection instruments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam D. Favre". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Adam Favre
Director
601 South State Street
Litchfield, Illinois 62056

Appendix B

Experiential Understandings of Inclusion from Instructional Personnel in a Public Preschool Program

Welcome to my survey. Please read the information below and indicate your willingness to participate.

* Required

Recruitment Statement for Perceptions and Insights of Instructional Personnel of Inclusive Education

1. Heather Diltz, a student enrolled in the EDU 583 Capstone course at Greenville University, under the supervision of Dr. Mary Ann Manos, invite you to participate in this research study.
2. The title of this study is Top-Down View of Experiential Understandings of Inclusion from Instructional Personnel in a Public Preschool Program. The purpose of this study is to determine the strengths and areas of need in the study program to shape an effective inclusive preschool education.
3. Your participation in this study will involve a brief Google Survey. Additionally, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire. Participation will take approximately 30 minutes.
4. The potential risks associated with participation in this study are minimal and include loss of anonymity regarding study participation, loss of time and possible boredom with the questions. Efforts to alleviate these risks include making the survey as brief and interesting as possible. Because you will not provide your name on any questionnaire, the risk for loss of anonymity is minimal.
5. The results of this study may be publicly presented at a later date. Additionally, the results may be published in scientific research journals and/or presented at professional research conferences. However, your name and identity will not be revealed and your responses will remain anonymous. No names or other personally identifying information will appear on any questionnaire or data gathering instrument, so there is no possibility of your responses being linked back to you.
6. Participation in this study will not benefit you directly. Your participation may benefit others by contributing to knowledge of instructional personnel strengths and needs to improve inclusive programming in the public preschool environment. This knowledge may help educators, educational administrators, and other researchers determine effective means of dealing with the implementation of inclusive programs.

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

8. If you have any questions about this research study, you may call Heather Diltz at 618-698-3531 or Dr. Mary Ann Manos at 309-258-41 59.

1. Do you agree to participate in this research project? *

Yes, I agree to participate.

No, I do not agree to participate.

Demographic Questions

2. Are you a male or a female? *

Female

Male

Prefer not to say

3. What is the highest degree you have earned? *

4. How long have you worked in early childhood education?

a. 0-4 years

b. 5-9 years

c. 10-14 years

d. 15-19 years

e. 20+ years

Research Questions

1. Do you believe inclusion benefits all students? *

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neither agree or disagree

Agree

Strongly Agree

2. Do you believe inclusion benefits all students? Comment below.

3. Are you confident in your ability to differentiate instruction for all learners in your classroom? *

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neither agree or disagree

Agree

Strongly agree

4. Are you confident in your ability to differentiate instruction for all learners in your classroom?

Comment below:

5. Do you believe there are some special education students that should not be in the general education setting? *

- Strongly disagree
Disagree
Neither agree or disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree
6. Do you believe there are some special education students that should not be in the general education setting? Comment below:
7. Do you view the special education teacher as a partner in the classroom? *
- Strongly disagree
Disagree
Neither agree or disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree
8. Do you view the special education teacher as a partner in the classroom? Comment below:
9. Do you feel you have adequate staff support for an inclusive environment? *
- Strongly disagree
Disagree
Neither agree or disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree
10. Do you feel you have adequate staff support for an inclusive environment? Comment below:
11. Do you feel confident with your training to support an inclusive environment? *
- Strongly disagree
Disagree
Neither agree or disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree
12. Do you feel confident with your training to support an inclusive environment? Comment below:
13. Do you have suggestions for changes to be made to the inclusionary program?*
14. What trainings, if any, do you feel you would benefit from? *