

FUTURE ACTION RESEARCH - The Relationship of the General and Special Education Teachers in the Inclusive Setting

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Statement of Problem

Over the past three years I have worked educating children with different needs. Far too often, general education teachers make every attempt to exclude students from “their classroom” who they feel “don’t belong”. I believe that in order to change these beliefs teachers have to be confident in their ability to provide an education for all students. This confidence will develop only with support, hard work, the pledge to work together and proper training. I have decided to focus my attention toward inclusion because I feel that inclusion is not utilized effectively and exclusion does not work. I have observed the power struggle that exists in and outside of the classroom and want to aid in a solution to eliminate this struggle. The problem that I will examine in this action research is how the working relationship between the general and special needs educators in the inclusive setting affect learning in the classroom. I believe that teachers preparing to teach in an inclusive setting need more training. This lack of training creates an inability for inclusion to be utilized and our children miss the opportunity of an appropriate education. The way the system currently works excludes certain students who have the right to be included in their local school educated with their peers. Transporting students to another school other than their local neighborhood school segregates them. Restricting an individual from being included is against their civil rights as an American.

“Separate is not equal. If something is offered to all children it must be accessible to all children. Access should not be denied based on disability or any characteristic alone. Children with disabilities have a right to go to the same schools and classes as their friends, neighbors, brothers and sisters. They have a right to be afforded equal opportunities. Giving every child a sense of belonging, value and worth enhances their overall quality of life. Including children with disabilities in general education classes models acceptance of diversity. It teaches children how to function together with others of different abilities” (www.kidstogether.org/right-ed.htm).

Hypothesis

The working relationship of the general education and special education teacher in the inclusive setting affects the learning environment. Because of the need for team teaching in the inclusive setting, it is necessary for cooperation in all aspects of planning and teaching. If there is a lack of cooperation and or a power struggle emerges, the classroom environment will be negatively affected. With the pledge to work together and proper training, the inclusive setting will succeed. During the school year if there is time spent on collaborating efforts, all of the students within the classroom will receive an appropriate education. I believe that if inclusion is practiced throughout all grade levels, all students will benefit. An education obtained in a diverse classroom environment is the only way to prepare our future generations to function as members in our diverse society.

Definition of Terms

- Accommodations: Changes in the way a student accesses learning, without changing the actual content.
- Differentiated instruction: Education that is responsive to the needs of individual students with a wide variety of learning styles, interests, goals, cultural backgrounds, and prior knowledge.
- Exclusion: Omission of students with disabilities from being educated with peers without disabilities in the regular educational environment
- Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): An education for a person with a disability, regardless of the nature or severity of the person's disability in the public school, without cost to the parent.
- General Educator: Teacher of the general population of students.
- General Education: The gradual process of acquiring knowledge for the preparation for life.
- Inclusion: The educational setting where a child with disabilities can receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) designed to meet his or her education needs while being educated with peers without disabilities in the regular educational environment to the maximum extent appropriate.
- Inclusive Education: All students in a school, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, become part of the school community. They are included in the feeling of belonging among other students, teachers, and support staff.
- Individual Education Plan (IEP): A plan written for an individual student and their specific needs outlining support services to be provided and the expected outcomes for that student.
- Individuals with disabilities in Education Act (IDEA): Federal law that governs special education in all schools receiving federal school aid requiring each state to meet or exceed the law.
- Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): Educational setting where a child with disabilities can receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) designed to meet his or her education needs while being educated with peers without disabilities.
- Modifications: A small alteration or adjustment to curriculum or lessons taught.
- Special Educator: Teacher of students with Individual Education Plans.
- Special Education: Education of children with specific special needs in education.
- Students with special needs: Students that require specialized instruction in education.
- Supportive Teaching: The student receives the instruction from the classroom teacher. Modifications and support are provided to the student within the classroom setting by the special education teacher.
- Team Teaching: Two teachers (Special Educator General Educator) cooperatively plan, develop and teach the lessons.

Importance of Study

The importance of this study is the improvement of the inclusive setting. With the examination of inclusion and its barriers to success it is my hope to uncover how to fully include successfully. The attitudes that surround special education have fueled the belief that we need to segregate children. “Such prejudice must be directly addressed in the schools. Simply integrating youngsters with disabilities into the mainstream without pedagogically dealing with attitudes is meaningless, and in some cases, increases negative attitudes” (Arthur Shapiro 5).

One purpose of education is to promote the values and beliefs of our democratic and free society. As the facilitators of this obligation, it is the teachers' responsibility to change the negative attitudes and promote non-discrimination to ensure that our future generations will suffer less from the ignorance that exists today. We can no longer exclude based on the label disabled. Teacher and author, bell hooks believes that we should teach our students to "transgress" against racial, sexual, and class boundaries in order to achieve the gift of freedom. She wrote,

"Despite the contemporary focus on multiculturalism in our society, particularly in education, there is not nearly enough practical discussion of ways classroom settings can be transformed so that the learning experience is inclusive. If the effort to respect and honor the social reality and experiences of groups in this society...is to be reflected in a pedagogical process, then as teachers—on all levels, from elementary to university settings, we must acknowledge that our styles of teaching may need to change" (Hooks 35).

As educators it is our responsibility to communicate and cooperate in the development of a successful classroom environment. We have to change the attitudes of inclusion and put a stop to exclusion because exclusion affects our society as a whole. Children develop opinions based on their observations of what surrounds them. How can our children learn to be nonjudgmental if we show them its acceptable? Our schools and classroom communities have to model our diverse society to provide true experiences for our children to learn. John Dewey (1938) wrote about learning from experience, what better personal life experience than the lessons learned through acceptance and cooperation. *"It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, nor even of activity in experience. Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had"* (Dewey 27). Schools have an essential obligation to change these attitudes because schools are a major institution where our society expects its values to be instilled in our future generations.

For change to occur, the first step is for educators to take on the responsibility of including those who are excluded and to believe in their role as an educator in the classroom. It is now time for educators to learn to work together and examine why inclusion has not been successful in most districts and how to make inclusion beneficial for the entire class.

Many Americans are unaware of these negative attitudes because they do not think about nor are faced with their results. Changing the attitudes toward persons with disabilities is extremely important. With a closer look at these effects and their acknowledgement a desire for change will appear promoting a free and welcome environment to learn. The classroom community is a great arena for our children to learn and develop skills based on understanding and cooperation. *"If students with special educational needs are given the chance for small accommodations in the regular classroom, they can thrive in their local community schools. Because of their desire to compensate for their impairments, many are motivated to achieve highly when given opportunities to learn"* (Carol A. Kochhar, Lynda L. West, Julian M. Tayman 6).

Literature Review

"Schools have a responsibility for encouraging diversity and tolerance, eliminating discrimination, increasing among youngsters an understanding of those perceived to be different, and respecting and protecting the rights of all diverse populations within our pluralistic society" (Shapiro 17). If we teach prejudice our only option is for a prejudice

society. *“The role of the school in the development of positive attitudes has now become particularly significant, and to a degree legally mandated”* (Shapiro 20). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments (IDEA) is the law that guarantees all children with disabilities access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). IDEA also requires that students be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

“LRE provisions of the IDEA require that to the maximum extent appropriate for each child, children with disabilities must be educated with children without disabilities, and that removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that satisfactory education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services is not possible” (Least Restrictive Environment Coalition www.lrecoalition.org).

This does not mean that a child can be removed because the school cannot afford additional support. It is mandatory for each local school to provide the appropriate services needed. This means that children are entitled to learn with their peers and not be sent to another school within their community. We as educators can provide the services that are needed as long as we have support in place, the willingness to cooperate and learn how to educate all of our students.

In the past “the notion of “segregated” buildings was state-of-the-art in the early 1970s; “integrated” opportunities were promoted in the early 1980s; “inclusive practices” emerged based on research and evidence of the impact on students in the early 1990s” (www.bridges4kids.org). The belief was that a student with a disability included in the “regular” classroom was not the best setting for them to learn. What they needed to achieve their fullest potential was for them to be educated in a segregated setting, away from their peers. These ideas that some educators still hold are based on the belief that students with disabilities are individuals with different needs that can’t be met in a “regular” classroom. This is where I feel that a change has to be made. We know now that these ideas are false. Educators do not have the right to exclude children from the classroom because they feel that he/she “doesn’t belong”. We as educators are in the business of learning. We guide learning of others therefore it is our job to learn how to provide the proper education to guide all of our children. We have to continue to learn and develop our skills so that we can be successful in our roles as teachers.

Segregated programs, by their very nature, tend to isolate students and lead to more restrictive services and lives within the community. There is ample supporting data to show that segregated settings do not result in interventions that return or “promote” students to regular education status over time; or said another way, more restrictive settings do not prepare students for less restrictive ones.

The goal is not to have children “visit” community settings where peers are; the goal is to enable children with disabilities to be a part of and interact with their peers in ways that will both meet their educational needs and cultivate their membership as a part of the community” (www.bridges4kids.org).

For inclusion to succeed educators have to learn to work together. Education has to be responsive to the needs of individual students with a wide variety of learning styles, interests, goals, cultural backgrounds, and prior knowledge. With an approach to educating and a philosophy of teaching based on providing to each student's needs, inclusion can be successful. Educators need the realization that instruction in a segregated setting (exclusion) deprives all children of an effective education. Exclusion does not prepare children for adulthood. Exclusion acts as a blindfold of

who and what our society is. If we continue to exclude certain members of our society from being educated with the general population, all students will continue to miss out. One major goal of mine as an educator is for my students to learn, share and take from each other's strengths. I believe in not labeling people especially children. In the elementary level most students are at different levels and stages in their education. Working in an elementary classroom, it is my job every day to monitor and develop a plan to guide my students. There will be differences working in a true inclusion setting but the team teaching approach will ensure that each student will learn.

We proudly voice how diverse our society is and in the same breath say that inclusion can't work. I believe this because of certain beliefs that exist and the current teaching style. I agree when I hear teachers say, "It's best for him/her to be pulled out; they won't get what they need in my class." They are absolutely correct. If we fail to change the structure we will not be able to provide an education for all. This is why I feel that we as educators have to have the resources to learn how to implement inclusion. Inclusion is essential for the preparation of students. If we fail to provide the essential support to students' labeled disabled we will insure a disability; which I believe would be a tragedy. As Judy Heumann, disability activist and Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services put it: "Disability only becomes a tragedy for me when society fails to provide the things we need to live our lives; job opportunities or barrier free buildings for example. It is not a tragedy for me that I'm living in a Wheelchair" (www.dinf.ne.jp/doc/english/Us_Eu/ada_e/pres_com/pres-dd/tainter.htm).

Believing that we are in the business of educating the future I do not see how we can continue to exclude. Our classrooms have to mirror the diverse society in which we live. How can our children learn to work in a diverse society without learning in a diverse environment? "Children that learn together, learn to live together" (www.uni.edu/coe/inclusion/). Mara Sapon-Shevin Professor of Education, at Syracuse University wrote: "We know that the world is an inclusive community. It's very important for children to have the opportunity to learn and grow within communities that represent the kind of world they'll live in when they finish high school. Students in special programs might not be prepared adequately for life outside of school, where they will need to interact (sic) with their peers. Students in special programs may not be able to develop the peer social skills they need to succeed in life" (www.uni.edu/coe/inclusion/).

For inclusion to work "educators need special skills to recognize and counter stereotypical negative images and their sources. Their role is critical for the success of full inclusion and acceptance of disabled individuals into our schools and society, which is now a matter of rights as well as matter of right" (Shapiro 19). In-service, training, support, hard work, and the pledge to work together are essential components of inclusion. With the proper training in place educators will have the ability to examine inclusion and reconfigure their attitudes. "All educators must be enthusiastic and ready to implement a change. Research also suggests that attitudes are modifiable and can be altered with proper in-service and training" (Hammeken 41).

As an educator I have the obligation to learn for myself how to teach all students who may enter my classroom. I have taken courses on inclusion, and attended workshops that focused on individual needs. All educators should take the time to learn about educating a diverse group. The information conveyed in these professional hours would benefit all children whether or not they have a disability. Administrators should examine and ask their staff what training would benefit them as teachers. The specific needs of each teacher and or student should be made a

priority. Instead of time spent on how to operate a website time should be spent on strategies to educate. We do not have the luxury of not learning how to include; it is now the law not a choice.

Educational Styles

In the inclusive setting there are two different styles for running the classroom, which are team teaching and supportive teaching. Team teaching is defined as “a group of two or more teachers working together to plan, conduct and assess the learning activities for the same group of learners, i.e., two or more instructors are teaching the same students at the same time within the same classroom”(www.hcc.mass.edu/html/Learning_at_HCC/TeamTeachingModels.htm).

When a classroom is run with supportive teaching there is a head or lead teacher and one teacher who provides “support”. This is where I have seen the power struggle occur. In this case the head teacher (usually a general education teacher) utilizes the support teacher (special education teacher) as an aide. This generates a conflict in most cases creating an atmosphere easily noticeable to the students furthering to isolate the “included” student(s). I prefer the style of team teaching because the only way for inclusion to be successful is with two teachers equally invested in the inclusion setting. Instructional aides are also utilized in the support of students with special needs. These aides are greatly beneficial and useful in the classroom. The problem with using only an aide for an inclusive classroom is that they are not part of the development and delivery of the lessons. The aides are there for the sole reason of helping the student(s) with disabilities. In some cases this contributes to further isolation of certain students. These aides are far to often given responsibilities of a teacher without compensation. For these reasons I feel that a team teaching approach works the best which consists of one special education and one general education teacher. Both educators are utilized in all aspects of education. Both share in the development and delivery of the lessons. In a true inclusion setting you should not be able to walk into a classroom and identify the special or general educator.

The Team Teaching Relationship

During a typical day in a general education classroom the educator takes on the role as the leader guiding the students through the process of discovering and leaning information. During the process of implementing an inclusive setting the teacher who once taught alone has to share the classroom making them re-evaluate their role. “When the special education teacher or inclusive assistant becomes a part of the group, the dynamics of the entire group change. Not all adults are comfortable with another adult in their classroom. Trust will develop. The working dynamics of the inclusion program will change as the comfort level increases. With time one educational team will evolve in place of two separate educational systems” (Hammeken 25).

When team teaching, collaboration is the key.

“Special educators and regular educators view situations differently because of their educational backgrounds and experiences. This is important in an inclusive setting! As a special educator you are an advocate for the student with special needs. The regular educator is an advocate for all students in the classroom. If the program is to be successful, educators must learn to collaborate effectively” (Hammeken 25).

Pairing educators with teaching styles that compliment one another and individuals who are committed to the goal of inclusion is important. The team becomes a professional marriage sharing all aspects of the job.

When two educators engage themselves in inclusion they will experience a much greater reward. There needs to be time allotted for the “wrinkles” to work themselves out. The team has to be honest with one another about how they feel things are going and be committed to solving any problems. The most important thing to remember is that the working relationship effects the classroom environment in a positive or negative way. Cooperation is an important part to an inclusive setting. “The teamed teachers enjoy a continual and collaborative relationship around a shared commitment to inclusive...”(Beverly Rainforth, Judy W. Kugelmass 173). When educating children in the same classroom “this process of spiraling curriculum, which takes its inspiration from John Dewey (1902/1990), determines the organic quality of these classrooms in which growth is experienced on multiple levels”(Rainforth, Kugelmass 173). Differentiated instruction is defined as a “flexible approach to teaching in which the teacher plans and carries out varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and in response to student differences in readiness, interests, and learning needs” (www.misd.net/gifted/terms.htm).

What Inclusion Looks Like

When educating it is important to remember that equal does not always mean the same. *“An educationally inclusive school is one in which the teaching and learning, achievements, attitudes and well-being of every young person matter. Effective schools are educationally inclusive schools. This shows, not only in their performance, but also in their ethos and their willingness to offer new opportunities to pupils who may have experienced previous difficulties. This does not mean treating all pupils the same way”* (Stephanie Lorenz 38).

Inclusion has to be a planned process; inclusion does not just happen. There has to be hard work and a commitment for success. Just like any new approach there will be times of doubt, but with commitment and the desire inclusion can and will work in any classroom. The educators involved in the inclusive classroom have to take ownership in the development and have an ongoing commitment to maintain success. “However enthusiastic you might be as a head teacher to introduce more inclusive practices in your school, it is vital that you have the support of your staff and your governors, even if this means going more slowly that you might otherwise prefer” (Lorenz p 41). There needs to be community that believes in the goal. The idea of inclusion is not always thought highly of. For inclusion to work the first step is to change the minds of the staff within a school. I believe that the most powerful way of changing any ones mind is by showing them the success. If this means that you will have little support than your commitment must be that much stronger.

“In creating an inclusive culture, it is important that everyone is made to feel welcome be they visitors, staff or students” (Lorenz 39). *“In the inclusive school, students help each other and collaborative working is encouraged. Bullying and name calling are dealt with effectively and students feel that they will be listened to and believed if they report concerns. This is particularly important for disabled students who may find it difficult to articulate their worries and need friends who can support them in seeking adult help”* (Lorenz 39). *“High expectations of all students are the key to successful inclusive practices”* (Lorenz 39). *“Inclusive classrooms look different all the time because the environment is created by whatever interactions the*

teacher and students have as a group or as individuals in the group. It's a lot of students doing things with people helping them, students moving from one environment to another. It's also a classroom where everybody is smiling, the students are actively engaged, and the teacher is delighted to be there" (www.uni.edu/coe/inclusion/).

Philosophy of Inclusion

For inclusion to be successful there has to be a commitment to do whatever it takes to provide for each student. There has to be a change in the philosophy and belief about inclusion. Inclusion is an attitude not an action. Every child has unique contributions to offer to the community of learners. The right to belong does not have to be earned it is a right. All teachers and staff have to take ownership for all children because real learning results from collaborative efforts. As an educator you have two choices when a student is having a difficult time learning the material taught. You can either teach the material the same way and hope that they will understand or change and adapt the way you deliver the material.

Research Design

For this action research paper I have decided to develop a plan to conduct the research based on the qualitative approach. I feel that using the qualitative approach will allow the researcher to gather information first hand within the walls of a school. "The power of qualitative research is in its ability to enrich our understanding of a given phenomenon" (Jeffery Glanz 92). I chose this approach because "The value of qualitative approaches is that they provide rich detail and insight often missing from qualitative studies" (Glanz 92). This research will examine how the working relationship between the general and special needs educators in the inclusive setting affect learning in the classroom.

This study will be done in an elementary school in Middlesex County New Jersey. The elementary school consists of 17 teachers and a student body of approximately 300 children in grades K-5 located in an affluent area of New Jersey. The research will be conducted with a sample of 25 first grade students and 2 classroom teachers. 1 student is classified as learning disabled, 1 student is classified as having Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and 3 students are currently being evaluated for learning disabilities. Children enter the first grade with a vast range of ability levels. First grade is typically where disabilities are noticed, services and modification are put into place and the process of evaluation begins. Based on these facts the typical first grade classroom is an inclusive setting. This research will be conducted over the course of one school year.

The research questions that will be sought out are "How can the inclusive setting succeed? What training for educators can benefit their understanding of inclusion? What support can the administration and school staff offer the inclusion team teachers? How can the working relationship positively benefit the inclusive setting? How can the team maintain a positive working relationship? What techniques/strategies can the team teachers utilize for the benefit of the inclusive setting? Can inclusion succeed in all aspects of the classroom?"

The materials that will be used for this study include workshops, videos of successful inclusion stories, literature of successful inclusive classrooms, interviews, observations and a survey on inclusion. The workshops, videos and literature will be used to aide in the understanding of and

development of the inclusion classroom. The inclusion staff and parents will be interviewed four times over the course of the school year. The observations will take place throughout the course of the school year. The first survey will be distributed at the first staff meeting to gather information on the beliefs about inclusion. The second survey will be distributed at the last staff meeting of the school year to gather information and ideas for improvement of the inclusion classroom.

The procedures for this study will consist of the following:

- (a) Comprehensive review of related literature/websites
- (b) Staff workshop to review literature
- (c) Attendance to staff development workshops on successful inclusion strategies
- (d) Staff meetings during the summer to review the philosophy of inclusion and the structure of the inclusive setting
- (e) School staff meeting to introduce the inclusive philosophy
- (f) Staff meetings scheduled once a week to review strategies that work and brainstorm new ideas
- (g) four scheduled interviews throughout the school year of parents and inclusion staff
- (h) Strategies that will be initiated during this research include:
 - Structured, consistent, predictable classes with schedules and assignments posted and clearly explained
 - Information presented visually as well as verbally
 - Use of activities and materials that are interesting and motivating
 - Provide choices in activities, location, and/or materials
 - Actively engage students as much as possible
 - Students work in small cooperative groups
 - Provide opportunities to interact with non-disabled peers who model appropriate language, social, and behavioral skills
 - Reduced class size and appropriate seating arrangement
 - Use a combination of positive behavioral supports and other educational interventions
 - Frequent and adequate communication among teachers and parents

The first step in the procedure is designed to inform the staff of literature based on inclusion. Literature of successful inclusion practices and inclusive classrooms will be assigned to read during the summer, followed by the second step where staff will join to review. The third step in the procedure will be the attendance of a staff development workshop based on successful inclusion strategies. This workshop will be held in August prior to the first day of the school year. The fourth step in the procedure will be a staff meeting to review the philosophy and structure of the inclusion classroom. This meeting will be designed to allow the team teachers to voice concerns and strategize the teaching approach. The fifth step in the procedure will take place during the first staff meeting of the school year. This step is designed to inform the school staff of the inclusion philosophy allowing time for questions. Step six will continue throughout the school year. There will be weekly staff meetings held in the morning to review strategies, voice concerns and brainstorm ideas. The seventh step in the procedures will take place over the course of the school year. There will be four scheduled interviews conducted of the parents and staff members. Each interview will take place with the researcher and a Child Study Team member. The final procedure will consist of strategies that will be initiated during this research. These strategies will continue to develop throughout the school year.

The researcher will accompany all of the staff scheduled meetings to observe the development of the inclusive setting. The researcher will meet once every other week to discuss with the teachers any problems they feel there are. The researcher will continue to observe the working relationship of the team teachers making notes on the positives and negatives of the relationship. All aspects of the inclusive setting will be observed. The researcher will take notes on the opinions of the staff members of the elementary school and parents of the children of the inclusive setting.

All of the information collected during this study will be compiled into a thesis paper to describe the development, implementation and success or failure of the inclusive setting. The researcher will focus his concerns on the working relationship of the team teachers. This relationship will be analyzed looking for areas of success and areas of improvement. The researcher will be mostly concerned with the areas that affect the learning in the classroom. These areas will be reviewed, analyzed and described with the hope to improve the working relationship between the general and special needs educators in the inclusive setting.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study are parental agreement for their children to be assigned to an inclusion classroom. Other limitations could consist of the support from administration, child study team and school staff which can greatly affect the success of the inclusion classroom. Without the support of the school and staff members the philosophy of inclusion will be broken. The school has to embrace this philosophy to create a unified belief that everyone belongs. Time is the final foreseen limitation to this study because it will only be conducted over the course of one school year.

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