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Perceptions of Educators on the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in the General Education Classroom

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Running Head: PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATORS ON INCLUSION

Perceptions of Educators on the Inclusion of Students With Disabilities in the General Education
Classroom

By Abigail Donde

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requirements for the degree of

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in

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and

English

Thesis advisor

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Portland State University 2024

Abstract

This study analyzed the perceptions of educators on how students with disabilities are supported in general education classrooms. I used semi structured interviews to find out how students with disabilities are supported both within their school, and within the district as a whole. I interviewed a total of six participants (two general education teachers, two speech language pathologists, a learning specialist, and a special education teacher) from three different schools in Oregon to see how students with disabilities are included and how those systems of inclusion differ. The results revealed that many inclusive practices and systems are implemented within schools are (a) encouraging students to take breaks when needed, (b) sensory rooms, (c) positive behavior intervention systems (PBIS), (d) providing multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), and (e) using individualized education plans (IEP's) to support a student's individual accommodations and needs in the classroom. Teachers reported needing more time to collaborate with special educators and more professional development focused specifically on strategies for inclusion. MTSS allows students who need high levels of support to move from one tier to the next, and in doing so, receive support in increasingly smaller group sizes. PBIS is a system that reinforces student's positive behavior exhibited in a classroom. This study contributes to the field of education because it studies how students with disabilities are supported in their classrooms and possible areas for improvement to ensure that students with disabilities are better supported by their schools and school districts in the future.

Keywords: inclusion, Positive Behavioral Intervention System (PBIS), Multi Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Individualized Education Plans (IEP), special education

Perceptions of Educators on the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in the General Education Classroom

Until 1975 students with disabilities were removed from general education classes, and separated from their peers (PL 94- 142) (Spaulding 2015). Nearly 50 years later, some students with disabilities are still excluded from general education environments where they miss out on a lot of important instruction in the classroom as well as many social skills that are not explicitly taught, but are learned through spending time with their peers. This separation has long term negative effects on students' mental health, with depression and anxiety being the most common, and leads to social exclusion at their schools (Transitions 2019). The segregation of students with disabilities has been occurring for a long time. Until the later nineteenth century, negative stigmas surrounding disabilities caused many parents of children with disabilities to keep their children at home, instead of sending them to school (Spaulding 2015). Mandatory attendance laws began being enforced in the early twentieth century, and this is when the segregation of students with disabilities deepened. Because teachers were struggling to support students with disabilities, they were often sent to separate schools, or excluded from general education classes (Katz p. 21). After 1950, a more inclusive approach to education began due to new advances in medical studies, and parent groups that supported children with disabilities (Spaulding 2015). Now, schools are shifting to an even more inclusive viewpoint, and students with disabilities are being included and supported in more and more classrooms.

"Inclusive practices for students with disabilities can be supported by policies and structures such as individualized education plans (IEPs), multi tiered systems of support (MTSS), and universal design for learning (UDL) (Hayes 2017). The needs of students with disabilities are specifically addressed by an IEP that is specific to each student and provides information

about what accommodations each student needs in the classroom, and from their teachers.

Common accommodations include using noise canceling headphones, using computers instead of writing on paper, being allowed to listen to music, and having extra time on tests.

Individualized education plans are very common in every level of education, and general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and parents all collaborate during IEP meetings, and decide on what accommodations are applicable for each student and create a plan to help support them in the classroom.

Multi-tiered systems of support is a system that moves students who need more support from a general education setting into smaller groups, or to higher tiers (Pendharker, 2023). When a child needs more support, they are moved from the general education setting (tier 1) to a smaller group setting (tier 2). The final tier, tier 3, is the most restrictive and a one on one setting.

Multi tiered systems of support is another common system of inclusion for students with disabilities in schools. The Oregon government defines MTSS as “...an early detection and prevention system that identifies the needs of students as they encounter obstacles to learning and provides supports to move students forward” (Oregon Department of Education 2016).

Universal design for learning is a framework that outlines how teachers should meet students where they are at, and help them with the necessary accommodations to help them succeed. “[UDL is] about building in flexibility that can be adjusted for every person’s strengths and needs” (Morin 2022). UDL and IEPs work together to provide students with the accommodations that students need.

What models of inclusion are being used to support students with disabilities?

Inclusion for students with disabilities looks different in every school district. Some school districts have entirely different curriculums for students with disabilities, and they spend their

entire day segregated, in special education classrooms. Other school districts are fully inclusive districts that aim to include all students at all times, and do not have special education specific classes, but rather support students with sensory breaks and IEPs. School districts are slowly shifting to become more inclusive and accepting. Collaboration is a huge part of creating a support system for students with disabilities. During IEP meetings, parents, teachers, and staff collaborate to make a plan with the accommodations that the student needs. IEPs look very different from elementary school to middle/high school. In elementary schools, students will have less teachers as their general education teacher will teach multiple subjects. In middle or high school, when the student has a different teacher for each subject, all of their teachers will come together to discuss the student's needs.

Some school districts believe in putting students in the least restrictive environment possible, creating fully inclusive districts. Fully inclusive districts mean that students with disabilities are in the general education classroom for almost 100% of their day. "Inclusive education means all children in the same classrooms, in the same schools. It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded" (unicef.org 2017). Inclusive education allows students with disabilities to be more involved in community and academic spaces that they have been traditionally excluded from. Including all students in the classroom does not only benefit students with disabilities, but also benefits the other students in their classes. According to Drexel University's school of education:

All students benefit from interacting and developing friendships within diverse groups of peers, and teachers benefit from getting to know their students in deeper, more meaningful ways. Within inclusive school cultures, teachers and administrators deal with fewer absences and disciplinary issues because students who feel valued and included

tend to be more invested in their own positive participation in the learning community.

For parents and guardians, inclusive classrooms mean that their child is learning and spending much of their young lives in a safe and nurturing environment. (p.1 2023)

Though inclusive education has positive effects on an entire school community, there are barriers to achieving a fully inclusive district. Many class sizes make it difficult for teachers to give individualized attention, and general education teachers, special education teachers, and other paraprofessionals do not have much time to co teach or co plan in order to support students with disabilities.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to learn about how schools in Oregon support students with disabilities. Though systems of inclusion are always changing, I wanted to learn about how students with disabilities are included into the general education classes of their schools. I based our research questions on the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation's (SWIFT) Education Center's domains and features (www.swiftschools.org): (a) administrative leadership, (b) integrated educational framework, (c) family and community engagement, and (d) inclusive policy structure and practice. This study addressed the following research questions: (a) What models of inclusion (if any) are being used to support students with disabilities in Oregon? and (b) What is the criteria for students to be excluded from general education settings? This research can provide useful information for others studying the topic of inclusion for students with disabilities, and assist in the process of assessing which systems of inclusion are being used, and how these systems are working.

Methodology

Positionality Statement

I have elected to study inclusive practices in schools to learn more about other teacher's experiences in supporting students with disabilities, how it impacts their work, and therefore how I can be more inclusive in my role as a teacher. Before I present my methodology and findings I want to acknowledge my standpoint as a future educator, the daughter of an educator, and the granddaughter of a special educator that greatly values inclusion. The lack of support for students with disabilities that I witnessed in my elementary schools has greatly influenced my goal to become an educator, and inspired me to focus my research on inclusion.

Participants

For this study, I recruited participants from three school districts. Our intent was to gather a sample of what inclusion for students with disabilities looked like across multiple districts and get an idea of what each district does to support inclusion. I also interviewed staff who serve different grade levels (e.g. elementary, middle, and high school) to compare how systems of inclusion differ across grade/age levels. The staff I interviewed included two general education teachers, one special education teacher, two speech language pathologists, and one learning specialist. Table 1 displays the demographics of our participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant's Role	District	Years in Role	Years in SD	Grade Levels Served	Inclusion Team Involvement
Speech Language Pathologist	A	4 years	1 year	K-5	No
First Grade Teacher	A	14 years	9 years	1	Yes
Learning Specialist	B	21 years	5 years	K, 2, 4, 5,	No
Speech Language Pathologist	B	13 years	1 year	K-5	No
Science Teacher	C	6 years	6 years	9, 10	Yes
SPED Teacher	C	29 years	9 years	9, 10	No

Table 2

School Demographics

School	Setting	Grades Served	Student Enrollment	Inclusion Team
School A	Suburban	K-5	545	PBIS team
School B	Suburban	Pre-K-5	391	SPED team
School C	Suburban	9-12	1,071	MTSS team

Procedures

Before data collection started, I received approval from Portland State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once I received approval, I began reaching out to administrators, in search of participants within their school who were willing to be interviewed about how students with disabilities are supported in their classroom, school, and school district. The administrators then responded with willing participants, and my advisor and I reached out to them to schedule a time for an interview. Once the participants responded with their availability, the interviews were scheduled and conducted using Zoom video conferencing technology. Before the interview started, the participants provided their verbal consent to the interview, a recording of the meeting, and to the download of the audio transcripts of the interview. The duration of the interviews was 30 minutes on average, and the interviews ranged from fifteen minutes to fifty one minutes. The interview transcripts were checked for accuracy and a copy of the transcript was emailed to the participants for verification and to check accuracy. The interviews were semi structured, and follow up or probe questions were asked when necessary for clarification or for more detailed information. The recordings and transcripts were put in a password protected Google Drive after being downloaded from zoom, and after analysis, the audio recordings were destroyed.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data gathered from the interviews, I created a coding frame. This coding frame was created by looking at existing research on systems of inclusion for students with disabilities, and creating codes for each research question. This coding frame allowed me to understand which systems of inclusion are being implemented at each school district, and which barriers might prevent the inclusion of students with disabilities. After each interview was

conducted, I looked over the transcripts to verify that the words were correct, and that notes taken during the interview were aligned with the transcripts. Then, I put each answer into our coding frame, and separated the answers by each school district. Then, I analyzed the common themes that appeared across the responses.

Results

School A

The school that I interviewed was a suburban elementary school. This school and district are inclusive, meaning that there are two special education classes, but students are included in general education settings for the majority of their day. Students with disabilities check in with school psychologists in the beginning of the day, and the information they provide is passed on to their teachers, so that the teachers have information on how to support the children throughout their days. Students also remain in the general education classroom unless they need sensory breaks, in which case they can access sensory rooms that have sensory swings and fidgets. The school has a leadership team focused on positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS).

School B

School B had very similar demographics to School A. Both schools were suburban schools outside of a metro area. School B was an inclusive school that did not have designated special education classrooms. The students spend all of their time in the general education classrooms besides taking breaks, or being taken out of the classroom for speech practices. Much like School A, students are encouraged to take breaks when they are feeling overwhelmed or dysregulated. The school also allows a lot of time for collaboration and coteaching for educational assistants and learning specialists. The school has special service leadership teams focused on inclusion, which all staff are welcome to join.

School C

School C was a high school, unlike the two elementary schools. This school was also suburban, but much bigger than Schools A and B. School C is not a part of an inclusive school district, but the majority of students with disabilities spend 80% or more of their day in the general education classrooms. The school has an academic seminar class period which allows students to catch up and get extra help on their classwork. School C adopted a new inclusion policy within the past year that pushed students with disabilities into classes, and a lot of students have been struggling because teachers are having difficulties supporting them. There is also a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) team that is working on creating a more inclusive space in the district for students with disabilities.

Strategies

Participants reported a number of strategies in order to support the inclusion of students with disabilities. All schools reported using breaks when students are feeling overwhelmed. Schools A and B both reported sensory rooms for their students, and School C has special education rooms and counselor's rooms that students can visit on their breaks. Schools B and C also reported MTSS as a system used at their school. School B moves students to increasingly restrictive environments as each student needs. School C has an MTSS team focused on facilitating this movement of students, and helping implement the system at their school.

School A

School A is a part of an inclusive school district, and encourages the students to take breaks when necessary. The school has two different rooms for when students need to take breaks; a behavior room, where students can de-escalate when they are feeling overwhelmed, and an academic room where students can get extra help with assignments. Students with

disabilities are given the same curriculum as the general education students, but accommodations are made based on the student's needs, and the requirements of their individualized education plans (IEP). The school also has a PBIS system. The school uses an app to track behavior and how well a student is doing in their classes, and the student gets points. Once they get a certain amount of points, they can trade their points in for rewards, or even pool all of their points together to get rewards for the entire class. Teachers also plan slow starts to the morning, to allow students to check in if they need help, and adjust to being at school. All classrooms are required to have a calming corner with breathing techniques and fidgets so that students can have a calming place to go if they need help. Communication is very important at School A also. Some students have notebooks that travel with them to and from school, so that parents and teachers can write updates to each other back and forth, and have a better understanding of how the student is doing overall.

School B

School B is also an inclusive school. School B does not have any special education rooms, and students are included for almost 100% of their day. Students all receive the same curriculum, but (like School A), accommodations are made based on IEP requirements. The school also has an MTSS system that keeps students in their least restrictive environment (LRE), but moves them to a more restrictive environment if they need support in smaller group settings. The school encourages co-teaching between learning specialists and general education teachers so that there are more available people in the classroom to support their students. This allows students to receive more one on one attention if they need extra support, or are having trouble in the general education setting. The learning specialists also collaborate often with the general education teachers in order to help them provide accommodations to students who need them.

The school also used a system called Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which meets students where they are at, and provides them with the tools they need to succeed in the classroom, such as communication devices, or noise canceling headphones. The teachers and learning specialists also help students set social and emotional goals, and make plans to help them achieve these goals.

School C

School C relied heavily on IEPs in order to support students. Because students have a different teacher for each subject, and so many different subjects each day, teachers relied on IEP meetings in order to collaborate with other teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and parents in order to best support the student. Teachers make different accommodations based on the subject they teach. There is also an academic seminar class for students with disabilities to attend, where they can receive academic support and tutoring on school subjects they need help with. Teachers also work hard to create communities in their classrooms. They discussed how many classes make community agreements in the beginning of the year, and decide how they want to treat each other, the teacher, and their classroom. These can help the students bond with each other and their teachers. It also helps the teacher understand what the students need from them. For example, the general education teacher that I interviewed recalled a class in which the students wanted to hear a joke at the beginning of each class in order to put them in a good mood before they began their lesson. Unfortunately, because the inclusion model was so new to this school, many students with disabilities were failing before they received support. The special education teacher from School C reported that there has not been enough collaboration time between the general education teachers and special education teachers, and as a result, students are only receiving support when they begin to fall behind.

Barriers

Though all three schools had different systems of inclusion, they all reported the same barriers to inclusion. All of the staff that I interviewed mentioned time as their biggest barrier to inclusion. They all agreed that it is important to give teachers and special education teachers more time to collaborate and create plans to help students with disabilities succeed in the general education classroom. Because general education and special education teachers are both so busy, they find it hard to meet and collaborate about their students. Because administrators have not given guidance on collaboration surrounding inclusion, it is up to the general education and special education teachers to figure out solutions and strategies on their own.

They also mentioned that paraprofessionals have a very high case load, and adding more staff to lessen the amount of students each paraprofessional is responsible for would help them provide more individualized support. Teachers from School C reported that there has been a decrease in paraprofessionals within the past year, forcing both the teachers and paraprofessionals to do their best to find solutions on their own.

All of our participants reported a lack of professional development centered around inclusion. This professional development would help teachers understand how to support students who have a hard time being quiet in the classroom, or who exhibit disruptive behaviors. Professional development also creates a standard process of supporting students with disabilities, and when there is no professional development, it is up to the individual teachers to do their best to support the students, instead of having systems in place. The special education teacher from School C mentioned parent communication as a barrier. They stated that parents are often nervous to talk to the general education teachers, and instead want to communicate solely through the special education teacher, creating more work for the special education teacher.

Discussion

The data that I received from our interviews showed that all three schools were very inclusive. All schools reported that almost all of their students with disabilities were included in the classrooms, however, the special education teacher from School C mentioned that students with disabilities were put into the general education classrooms without support. This special education teacher stated, “Did they support inclusion? They did not. They did not even implement inclusion. They just shoved the kids in the classroom” . This has allowed many students to fail before they received the support that they needed to succeed in their classes. This begs the question of inclusion versus effective inclusion. While all students are being included, they are not being supported, and teachers are not being informed on how to support their learning or social-emotional wellbeing. Schools A and B are both from inclusive districts and have systems in place for when students leave the classroom for breaks, and systems set up in the classrooms, such as calming corners, that take steps to be proactive; supporting their students with disabilities, instead of pushing them into the classroom.

All of the schools seemed to have policies around including students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Though they were included, putting students into classrooms is not the only step for inclusion. Schools could do well to emphasize strategies for including students with disabilities in academics through the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS). Using UDL, classrooms will be more accessible to all students by providing accommodations that make material and curriculum available to all students. Building accommodations into lesson plans will benefit all students and help students who have different learning styles. PBIS will help motivate students to achieve

goals in the classroom by giving positive reinforcement. PBIS will help students feel supported, and that educators are noticing the effort that they are putting into the classroom.

Limitations/Future Research

There were limitations to this research that may impact future research done in this area. I reached out to the possible interview candidates provided by the administration, and I did not hear back from many of them. Future researchers could interview more staff at each school in order to get a deeper understanding of how inclusion functions within their school.

I also focused our research on schools in Oregon. Future researchers can look at schools across the country to learn more about how inclusion differs across different states, and see where inclusion is prioritized.

I interviewed at two elementary schools and one high school, but did not interview any middle school staff. Middle schools have some characteristics of both high schools and elementary schools, and interviewing at a middle school would allow researchers to see how inclusion is implemented at every level of public education, while also looking at how students are supported in the transition between elementary and middle school, and middle to high school.

I also asked administration for staff members who were knowledgeable about their school's inclusion efforts, and practices, meaning that this data was not fully representative of every teacher at the school. The names given to my advisor and I, were teachers and staff who work closely with students with disabilities and are very knowledgeable about how their school uses systems of inclusion. Future researchers could randomly select teachers from a school to interview in order to get a random sample of teachers, and gain more perspective on how all teachers at the school include students with disabilities.

Conclusion

Inclusion for students with disabilities in the general education classroom is something that is still evolving, and educators are working to find ways to best support the students in the classroom. The most common systems of inclusion included placing students in smaller groups focused on their individualized needs, and providing growth for students' social emotional wellbeing (in the case of School A, this is a PBIS system). Inclusion is important, and goes beyond pushing students into the general education classroom; it involves supporting them once they are there and being proactive with making accommodations.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email Script (to be sent to prospective principal):

Dear _____,

My name is Abigail Donde, and I am an undergraduate english student in the Honors Program at Portland State University. I am conducting a research project on how schools support students with disabilities with Professor Dr. Sheldon Loman of the Special Education department at Portland State University.

I am searching for about 4-5 possible individuals to participate in my research project. I am hoping to interview two general education teachers, one special educator, one paraprofessional, and one related services provider (e.g., speech therapist). If willing, I would also appreciate an interview with you as an administrator. All interviews are aimed to last about 20 minutes, but no more than 30 minutes. Your name or any other identifiable information will be confidential.

This research will consist of interviewing each willing participant on how they support students with disabilities in their classrooms and within the school.

Thank you for your consideration and I hope to hear from you! Your help will be much appreciated.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me (Abigail Donde—adonde@pdx.edu) or my advisor at (Sheldon Loman- sheldon.loman@pdx.edu)

Best,

Abigail Donde

Appendix B: Interview Script

Interview Script

Introduction

Hi my name is Abigail Donde, I am an Undergraduate at Portland State University. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. I expect this interview to take approximately 20 minutes but no more than 30 minutes. Does this amount of time work for you?

If yes, proceed with interview

If no, find a time that would work better with their schedule

Our study focuses on how schools support students with disabilities in general education settings. I am going to ask 10 questions about your teaming and teaching for including students with disabilities. Additionally, we want to understand how you promote inclusion and the barriers for inclusion at your school.

A risk to participating in this study is the possibility of breach of confidentiality. We will take measures to protect your privacy including not collecting any information that would connect you to your personal identity. You as well as your school will remain anonymous for this research project. A voice recording device will be used to store the participants responses to the interview questions. These recordings will be backed up in a Portland State University password protected google drive. Recorded data will not be personally identifiable and the recordings will be deleted after data is collected. Participation is completely voluntary and you may choose not to answer any questions or discontinue the interview at any point. Do you agree to the recording of this conversation?

If yes proceed with the interview

If no ask, "Do you agree to complete the interview where I record your answers using paper and pencil?"

If yes proceed with the interview

If no discontinue interview

Before getting started do you have any questions?

If yes respond to questions if any

If no proceed with the interview

As a part of this study, I will be collecting perspectives from general education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and other service providers (e.g., speech therapists, occupational therapists).

This study will aim to collect first-hand information about how these students are currently being supported through the lens of educators, administrators, and support staff and be a guide to promote the support of children with disabilities in general education settings.

Administrator(s):

General educator(s):

Special educator(s):

Great, I will start the audio recording now (if agreed to audio recording)

If agreed to audio recording, start recording now

- a. Please share with us your role within your school.
 - b. What grade levels do you work with?
 - c. How many years of experience do you have in your role?
 - d. How many years have you been at your school?
1. What percentage of your students with disabilities attend general education classrooms for more than 80% of their day? When do students with disabilities NOT attend general education classrooms?
 2. What systems of inclusion are implemented at your school to support students with disabilities? (Do you have time to collaborate with special education teachers and paraprofessionals? How often do you meet?)
 3. Does your school have a leadership team that focuses on including all students in the general education classroom?
 4. How does your school provide professional development/support for staff to support students with disabilities in general education classrooms (do special ed general education teachers receive the same training?)
 5. How does your school use instructional strategies for academics for students with disabilities in the general education setting? (Is the curriculum the same? What modifications are made?)
 6. How does your school support social and emotional development for students with disabilities in the general education setting (Who supports them? Are they with their peers during this time?)? How does your school support students with disabilities who experience behavioral challenges in the general education setting?
 7. How does your school use collaborative teaching to support students with disabilities? How do parents/guardians collaborate with educators to support students with disabilities in the general education setting? (Do the special education teachers co-teach in your classroom? Do you co-plan? What does that look like?)

8. How does your district support the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms? (Are there district wide policies?)
9. What specific barriers have made it challenging to include students with disabilities in the classroom? What curriculum is used for students with disabilities, and is this curriculum different from the general education curriculum? (How are students with disabilities included in the general education curriculum?)
10. What would be helpful to you to support students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Probe/Follow Up questions may include:

1. Can you tell me more about that?
2. Can you tell me more about the [strategies/barriers] related to systems to support?
3. Can you tell me more about how your team plans to sustain and monitor inclusion of students with disabilities in order to meet the ongoing needs of students and staff?

Closing

That will conclude the questions that I have for you today.

Thank you for participating in this interview today. I appreciate the time you spent answering my questions about your school. Do you have any questions regarding anything that we have covered today?

If yes respond to questions

If no proceed

Again, thank you for your time today