

Inclusion for Students with Moderate to Severe Disabilities

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Abstract: This paper explores the gap between legislative mandates for inclusive education and the continued segregation of students with moderate to severe disabilities. It examines the unique learning challenges faced by this demographic, constituting approximately 1% of the global population, and the necessity of adapting instructional strategies within general education. Highlighting the broad benefits of inclusion, research shows positive outcomes for both students with disabilities and students without disabilities, including academic, behavioral, and social improvements. The paper also addresses the crucial role of family and calls for evidence-based practices and teacher education reforms to alleviate the special education teacher shortage. Ultimately, it underscores the need for a unified approach to ensure that students with significant disabilities are integrated into general education classrooms, advocating for their right to an inclusive educational experience.

Keywords: inclusive education, unique learning challenges, social improvements, educational experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

Even though federal legislation requires students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment, there remains a significant number of students who are taught in segregated settings (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014). This paper will focus on students with moderate to severe disabilities and illustrate the research that supports inclusive practices for this population of students. Finally, it will provide recommendations for moving inclusive practices forward for these students.

Ryndak, & Alper, (1996) stated that “the term moderate to severe disabilities applies to children, adolescents, and adults who have been labeled trainable mentally retarded, severely and profoundly handicapped, autistic, deaf, and blind, or severely emotionally disturbed. . . these individuals usually have moderate to severe levels of intellectual impairments in addition to one or more other types of disabilities. They represent approximately 1 percent of the general population” (p.20). Intellectual disability (ID) is a widespread condition previously labeled mental retardation with a prevalence ranging between 1% and 1.25% of the world’s population based on epidemiological studies (as cited in Vashdi, Hutzler, & Roth, 2008, p.371). These students are considered to have moderate to severe disabilities. There are four learning characteristics of students with moderate to severe disabilities. First, the students learn slower than their age peers do. Second, when the students learn skills and knowledge, they have some difficulties in maintaining them. Third, the students face a big challenge when they need to generalize the skills learned in a situation to a different one. Finally, it is hard for students with moderate to severe disabilities to combine the skills that the teacher taught them at different times (Ryndak, & Alper, p.20, 1996). Teachers need to consider these characteristics before introducing any of the instructional strategies mentioned below. This paper will focus on the benefits of inclusion and provide recommendations for effective inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities.

2. WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF INCLUSION?

Lipsky and Gartner (1996), defined inclusion as “including concepts of neighborhood school, age-appropriate general education classes, and necessary supports and supplementary aids for the child and teacher, to assure the child’s success and prepare the child to participate as a full contributing member of society (As cited in Ryndak, Jackson, & Billingsley, 1999). In addition, another definition of inclusion focuses on three aspects: 1) where students learn, 2) how students learn, and 3) what students learn (Shogren, McCart, Lyon, & Sailor, 2015, p.179). In general, this means that students should be taught using effective instructional strategies in general education contexts and working toward the general education curriculum.

Specifically, Ryndak, Jackson, & Billingsley, (1999) mentioned seven components of a working definition of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities related to including individual students which are “placement in natural typical settings, All students together for instruction and learning, Supports and modifications within general education to meet appropriate learner outcomes, belongingness, equal membership, acceptance, and being valued, collaborative integrated services by education teams, Systemic philosophy or belief system, and Meshing general and special education into one unified system” (p.108-109). Knowing these components is essential for educators in special education because many people miss what inclusion is. Although the law states the preference for least restrictive environment inclusion in our school system, Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, (2014) confirmed that many students with severe disabilities are being educated in segregated classrooms. According to their study, “it would appear that students with low-incidence disabilities that require the most significant support needs are among those most likely to be placed in category C placement, as well as in the most restrictive placements within Category C (i.e., homebound/hospital, residential schools)” (p.234). In fact, there are still some educators who believe that segregated classrooms are more effective for students with moderate to severe disabilities (Grider, 1995; Huefner, 1994).

There are measures that educators can use to identify the effectiveness of an inclusive practice. Kurth, Lyon, & Shogren (2015), noted in their findings from observing practices for students with severe disabilities that there are seven themes related to supporting these students. First, the teaching arrangements: either general education teachers, paraeducators, special education teachers, special teachers, related service providers, or student teachers. Second, the level of engagement of the students in the activities such as: actively engaged, passively engaged, or not engaged. Third, the type of support in the general education classroom which including personnel, systems, and procedural supports. Fourth, the student support provided includes behavior, communication, physical, and sensory support at the school. Fifth, the type of activities that are available for the students and adaptation if needed. Sixth, the interaction with others in the school. Finally, the choices for academic, behavioral, objects and free time activities are available to the students to choose from (p. 265-268, 2015).

3. BENEFITS OF INCLUSION FOR DISABLED STUDENTS

Research has consistently confirmed the positive outcomes of inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Kurth, Lyon, & Shogren, (2015) confirmed that “Research over the past 40 years has continued to demonstrate that inclusive practices are in fact associated with improved outcomes for students with disabilities” (p.271). Also, Sailor, & McCart, (2014) mentioned “there is a clear evidence that inclusive educational practices for students with significant disabilities are associated with increased developmental, social, and academic outcomes” (p.59).

Moreover, a case study by Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein (1999) supported the positive outcome for a young woman with moderate to severe disability. The result from this case study showed an improvement in her literacy development and a decrease in inappropriate behavior she had. Shogren et al., (2015) conducted a study that examined the experience of students with disabilities and without disabilities in inclusive schools. The participants of the study were 86 students, 33 with disabilities and 53 without. The result of the study indicated that all the students felt that they had a highly positive school culture, and the principals and teachers were supporting and interacting with them. The students mentioned the safety in the school and how their school posted signs made by students that showed the school philosophy of “everyone being included”. Many students without disabilities reported the positivity of having students with disabilities in their classes. For example, one student said “I like it more if there are people that are above me so I can learn different things from them, and if there are people below me that means that they can learn from me. I like learning from other people, and I like teaching other people what they haven’t learned yet” (p.250). Another student described how the school provides opportunities to

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interact with students with disabilities, “there is this girl in my class and last year she never really got to play with anyone at recess. So then me and my best friends, my teacher said, (Why don’t you guys play with her). So, we went and played with her and she turned out to be really nice. And we kind of learned more about her, so it’s fun” (p.250). The students with disabilities appreciated being in inclusive schools and preferred to be educated with their peers.

These findings are substantiated by Shalev, Asmus, Carter, & Moss, (2016) who conducted a study of 44 students in high school to examine their attitude toward students with severe disabilities in their general classroom. The result showed a positive attitude towards their disabled peers. Moreover, females had a more positive attitude towards their peers with severe disabilities. Another finding from Francis, Turnbull, Hill, Haines, & Gross (2016) confirmed the positive outcomes for the inclusion of students with disabilities. According to Francis et. al (2016), “Parents of children with disabilities commented on their satisfaction with notable improvement in their child’s academics, social skills, and behavior that they attributed to inclusive education. Several participants reported specific gains, including enhanced reading skills, improved self-monitoring skills, more friends, greater self-awareness, and increased self-confidence. Many participants also reported a decrease in disruptive or aggressive behavior” (p.290). The author's findings insist that inclusion has a positive impact on student’s outcomes socially, academically, and behaviorally.

4. BENEFITS OF INCLUSION FOR PEERS WITHOUT DISABILITY

There are many benefits of inclusion to nondisabled peers. According to Kochhar-Bryant, West, & Taymans, (1996) inclusion “facilitates greater acceptance of students with disabilities in the classroom and learning team, learning that it is not always easy to identify classmates who have disabilities, offers the advantage of having an extra teacher or aide available to help them with the development of their own skills, and provides opportunities to tutor or guide a classmate who has a disability” (p.25).

Many people think that interaction with individuals with disabilities will negatively affect their non-disabled peers. However, Francis, Turnbull, Hill, Haines, & Gross (2016) confirmed in their study that “several participants who did not have children with disabilities admitted feeling surprised and relieved that their children's education was not embedded, but instead benefitted from students with disabilities being included in the general education setting. All participants generally agreed that the additional staffing, which occurred in inclusive classrooms, globally benefitted students because paraprofessionals and other specialized staff assisted all students” (p.289). This finding confirmed that inclusion is not only beneficial for students with disabilities but also benefits students without disabilities.

How do students react to their peers with intellectual disabilities in a general classroom? One international study involving 563 children in eight schools concluded that “...the attitudes of school children toward their peers with an intellectual disability are relatively positive overall” (Townsend, Wilton, & Vakilirad, 1993, p.409).

5. THE ROLE OF PARENTS

Emerson, (2014) confirmed that “In the vast majority of instances, children with an intellectual disability are cared for by their parents who (along with other family members) serve as their most constant and lifelong caregivers. They play a critical role in shaping the development and life experiences of their children with intellectual and/or developmental disability. In many contexts, family involvement extends over the lifespan of parents, with siblings and extended family members taking on caring roles, especially when parents are no longer able to” (p.421).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Research confirmed the effectiveness of instructional strategies that benefit students with moderate to severe disabilities. Considering a practice as an evidence-based practice is essential in special education, and it needs to have to have specific research design and quality criteria (Council for Exceptional Children, 2014). One of the evidence-based practices in inclusive settings is a Multi-Tiered System of support (MTSS) such as Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (Sailor, & McCart, 2014). MTSS is a framework of schooling that incorporates academic and behavioral instruction and inclusion. Sailor, (2015) mentions the reason for the importance of MTSS. He confirmed that MTSS/RTI “enables evidence-based practices originating through research in special education to be extended to a broader class of students in the context of prevention. MTSS/RTI helps practitioners shift their focus from locating learning problems strictly within an individual to a broader concept of examining the measured needs for extra support in the context

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of particular environments” (p.95). Teachers need to apply effective strategies that will work with their students and help the teacher to see the best of their students. Another evidence-based instructional strategy is Embedded Instruction. According to Jimenez & Kamei (2015) “embedded instruction was found to be an evidence-based strategy to support academic learning of students with disabilities” (p.2). Teachers need to have effective instructional strategies such as embedded instruction to make sure that their students have access to the general curriculum. In addition, Hudson, Browder, & Wood, (2013) proved that embedded instruction is effective especially when using a constant time delay.

One of the recommendations for an inclusive system to be successful is having a trusting family-professional partnership. As mentioned before, parents of students with disabilities play an important role in their children’s lives, therefore they need to be involved. According to Kozleski, Yu, Satter, Francis, & Haines, (2015) having a shared commitment “resulted in increased trust between families and professionals and contributed to a positive school culture that values inclusion” (p.219). Families need to feel that the school system includes them and collaborates with them in order for their children to succeed. In addition, Francis, Turnbull, Hill, Haines, & Gross (2016) mentioned in their findings that “in order for trusting family-professional partnerships to occur, the culture of the school had to promote a sense of belonging and membership for all stakeholders, including school professionals, students, and families” (p.291). The main role of having a good relationship relies on the school administrators and they need to make sure that the families are involved in the process. One way to do that is by maintaining an “open door policy” or “invite community members to serve in various roles within the school” (p.28, Gross, Haines, Hill, Francis, Blue-Banning, & Turnbull, 2015). By adapting these strategies, the families can engage with the school and community and help the school to have an effective inclusive system.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

The field of special education has a teacher shortage. There is a need for qualified teachers to support students with moderate to severe disabilities in the general education classroom. An article by Ryndak, & Kennedy (2000), supported the fact of teacher shortage and provided several solutions for this problem. According to the authors, one of the solutions is having a dual licensure program in higher education to prepare qualified teachers to support this population. Another solution is having a teacher education program by using distance technology to support many teachers in different locations. To have successful inclusion in a school system, we need to have a special education teacher in the general classroom or have a paraprofessional to support students with significant disabilities (Morningstar, Shogren, Lee, & Born, 2015).

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated the elements necessary for successful inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities. It first defined the meaning of moderate to severe disabilities and described the characteristics of this population. Then, it outlined the definition of inclusion and the benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities and their peers. Finally, the paper provided several recommendations for having an effective inclusive school system. We must ensure that every child with a moderate to severe disability has the opportunity to engage with their peers in the general classroom.

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International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

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