

Perceptions Regarding Advantages and Disadvantages
of Mainstreaming Children with Disabilities

by

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ABSTRACT

The movement toward having children with disabilities placed into as many regular education classes as possible is the premise of this review of literature. Though the discussion continues, there are pros and cons to mainstreaming children with disabilities into the traditional style classroom. When placing a child with disabilities in the classroom that supports his or her best interests there are sometimes conflicting opinions. This literature review looks at how determining placement may not always represent what the parents want for their child. Teachers who struggle to individualize the instruction to make the accommodations when the classroom is full of other children each with their own needs may find there may be additional guidelines, paperwork and documentation too.

The literature review suggests that to satisfy the intent of the law, the parent's wishes and the child's needs, it is often best if the teachers and parents can learn to collaborate with one another in making decisions to provide the best learning environment for the child.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

There are many challenges that educators encounter on a daily basis. There are the typical things such as designing interesting lesson plans, giving tests and assessments, dealing with the behavior of troubled students, keeping parents informed, and making sure that the school is a safe place for all students to learn and grow. The focus of this literature review is mainstreaming students with disabilities in a traditional classroom setting often referred to as inclusion. As defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary, inclusion is a relationship between two classes that exists when all members of the first class are also members of the second (Merriam-Webster, 2010). Inclusion in a classroom setting is considered placing a child in a classroom with the least restrictive environment that is most appropriate to the particular child (American Counseling Association Encyclopedia of Counseling, 2008).

Inclusion of students is occurring in schools across America. Inclusion is getting a lot of attention because it is dealing with mainstreaming students with disabilities into standard classrooms instead of having them participate in specialty classes that are in separate rooms from the rest of their peers. There are laws protecting children that have disabilities and there are many rules and regulations that need to be taken into account in order to meet the requirements of mainstreaming children with disabilities in the classroom and for school-related activities.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) was passed in 1975 and became effective in 1977. This act was the first of its kind to protect all eligible students of school age who had disabilities that affected classroom performance. The law is now called the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (IDEA) and was recently amended in

2004. It is now considered the foundation for special education practice and policy (ACA Encyclopedia of Counseling, 2008).

IDEA (2004) requires that all eligible children with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 receive a free, appropriate public education based on their individual educational needs. The needs are determined by a team including the parent(s), teacher, special education professionals, and others who have knowledge about the child and the disability. This may also include the school psychologist or school counselor, school nurse, principal and other supporting staff members. The purpose of the team is to identify needs, evaluate abilities, and develop an individual learning plan that supports the least restrictive environment with parent participation and due process (ACA Encyclopedia of Counseling, 2008).

According to Odom and McEvoy (1988), examination of research revealed emerging interest in the perspective of parents with disabled children and parents of children without disabilities, regarding inclusion in regular education classrooms. There are two types of parents in this situation. First, there is the group of parents who have children that have some form of cognitive or physical disability that may limit their educational functioning. The second group of parents includes those who have children that are deemed non-disabled. Both groups of parents have been questioned about how they feel about inclusion in the classroom.

Parents have expressed concerns about their child being in a classroom with children who have disabilities. However, research has shown that non-disabled children being in a classroom with disabled children can provide them with an opportunity to learn about disabilities, capabilities of people with disabilities, and how important integration is (Galant & Hanline, 1993). If parents accept this belief that all children can learn from one another, they may be able to see the benefit for every student involved. The mind-set of the parents allowing placement of

a child in a traditional educational setting is critical to the success of the integration process. If parents are willing to look at the benefits of the placement, then they should be comfortable and confident in the school's choice for making this placement for their child.

Classes that have a blend of both disabled and non-disabled children can be viewed as a learning opportunity (Galant & Hanline, 1993). If parents of children with a disability are nervous about their child being accepted by the other children, teachers and counselors can conduct guidance lessons to teach about different disabilities and what behaviors and limitations go along with certain disabilities to create further understanding. Informing classmates and parents is empowering not only for the parent but also for the children in the classroom.

Often research involving inclusion is either based on what is best for the child, or how difficult it is for the teachers to implement accommodations for disabled students. The viewpoints of the parents are equally important on these topics. The parents of children with disabilities already have so much to worry about when it comes to the needs of their child. In many cases, these parents have been dealing with issues from the disability of their child since the day their child was born. Families who have children with a disability may have to make major sacrifices in their lives because of the lack of child care facilities that take children that have special needs. Some child care providers are not licensed nor are they equipped to handle children with severe disabilities.

This paper covers the perspectives of the parents that have children with disabilities and how they feel in regard to the pros and cons to mainstreaming their child in traditional classes. All parents want what is best for their child. There are advantages to having a child remain in a resource room for support at school and there are disadvantages to isolating the child from their peers if the child needs more support or assistance. Pros and cons reflect whether the teacher has

had more experience and training in working with students that have disabilities. Other examples that may impact the advantages or disadvantages to inclusion may include smaller class sizes for more one-on-one attention available for the child or access to specialized equipment that is readily available in the classroom to assist the child with the task at hand.

Each child differs according to the individualized education plan; therefore, there is not one single perspective that will fit all situations when supporting students that have disabilities. Since each case is circumstantial, the voice of the parents can be an important part of their child's success in the classroom. From the perspective that they provide, educators might determine the critical information that can better assist in helping the child with disabilities.

Statement of the Problem

Because there are recent updates to the laws regarding inclusion and mainstreaming children that have disabilities, parents need to have their voice heard in the development of the individualized educational plan. Parent observations, opinions and input are all critical to the development of the plan for inclusion in traditional classroom settings. The most important factors parents are often worried about for ensuring their child's success in a mainstreamed setting is the support that the teacher offers the child when they need it, and the level of training that the teacher has received to work with their child (Reichert, et al., 1989; Turnbull, et al., 1982; & Hanline & Halvorsen, 1989). Therefore, the problem becomes, what are the parent perspectives pertaining to the advantages and disadvantages of mainstreaming a child with disabilities into the traditional classroom?

Purpose of the Study

This paper presents literature sharing pros and cons to the viewpoints of parents who have children with disabilities and how they feel in regard to their child being mainstreamed into standard classrooms to fulfill the inclusion requirement. The parent's voice in the decisions related to equality and inclusion are important in ensuring success for children in the school setting and school related activities. Now more than ever, the opinions of parents need to be heard and taken into consideration as educational plans for students with disabilities should also strive for individuality.

Research Questions

The specific research questions that will be addressed in the literature review are as follows:

1. What do parents consider positive aspects to inclusion and mainstreaming in the child's school setting?
2. What are the disadvantages to mainstreaming children in a traditional classroom setting?
3. How do parents of non-disabled children view the advantages and disadvantages to including those with disabilities in the traditional classroom setting?

Assumptions and Limitations

It is assumed that parents want the best possible education for their children. It is further assumed that they have a voice in making decisions that pertain to achieving success in the classroom. It is further assumed that a child with disabilities needs to be in a classroom that can provide quality education for the individual. Parents of children with disabilities often want their child in a classroom as "normal" as possible that is equipped with support staff and mechanisms

that support their child's needs in the least restrictive environment. It is also assumed that the literature that was reviewed was accurate and reflects the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion in the classroom.

Limitations include that while it is important that the parents have opportunity to participate in making choices pertaining to a child's education, some parents do not opt to participate. This may limit some of the perceptions in the study. Another limitation is that there is an abundance of research and the author has limited time and resources resulting in the possibility that some literature may have been overlooked. Literature was reviewed in the spring of 2010.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this paper there are many key terms that will be used that are relevant to the reading and understanding of the paper. Provided below are the operational definitions that have been assigned to key terms.

Inclusion: Determining a child has either physical or cognitive disabilities and assigning them into standard school classrooms with other children who do not have physical or cognitive disabilities. The purpose is to include them and not to isolate the child.

Mainstreaming: Taking a child that used to be in a special classroom and placing them in the least restrictive environment, which tends to be standard traditional classrooms.

Physical Disability: A diagnosed disability that affects the body and its functional movements.

Cognitive Disability: A diagnosed disability that affects the brain and mental capacities of the individual.

Special Needs: Extra help or additional support that needs to be offered or given in order to accomplish the task at hand.

Standard Classroom/Traditional Classroom Setting: a typical traditional school room where courses are being taught to regular education children.

Social Aspect: Friends and activities both inside and outside of school setting that provide opportunity to talk, play and work along with others.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this paper was to learn more about how parents feel about the advantages and disadvantages to a child being mainstreamed in school. Parents have both positive and negative view points on having their child mainstreamed into standard education classrooms. The literature provided the foundation for the discussion for children being taught in the least restrictive environment. The laws that protect children with disabilities, clearly states parents have the right to be involved in planning for the best education for their child. There are both positive and negative aspects to children being mainstreamed. This paper will highlight the findings.

History and Legal Mandates

There are many laws designed by legislatures that mandate certain opportunities and accommodations that are to be available to all children who have a qualifying disability. These laws were enacted to prevent any exclusion, harassment, or illegal discrimination toward people with disabilities. The laws also to make sure that people with disabilities have equal opportunities in education before and after school activities and on the job.

Brown vs. the Board of Education (1954) is considered to be one of the initial court cases that moved schools toward inclusion and equal access for all children in educational classrooms (Schirmer et. al, 1995). This law established that all children have equal rights to access their education. This is important legislation because Brown vs. The Board of Education was a monumental case in history, not often linked with children with disabilities but rather toward children of different races; however, it provided that first step in equality in education for all.

A law called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed in 1975 and mandated that children be taught in the least restrictive environment (Schirmer et. al, 1995). This law meant that all children who were identified as having a disability were to be given as close to “normal” classroom practices as possible while they were at school and in related after school activities including clubs and athletics. Prior to recent changes in the law, children with disabilities were isolated from the traditional classroom setting, and learning occurred in a special education classroom. Now, children are supposed to be in a standard education class unless the severity of the disability prevented them from doing so. This law was amended in 1990, 1997 and again in 2004. It is now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) (Schirmer et. al, 1995).

This Act made it possible for parents to be more involved with decisions concerning their child’s referral, testing, program planning, placement, and program evaluation (Leyser & Rea, 2004). The two laws previously mentioned are the two most prominent laws enacted in regard to the treatment of children with disabilities. These laws were established not only to protect the best interests of the child with disabilities but also to provide the needed support for their family.

Least Restrictive Environment

There are many studies indicating how parents feel about their child with disabilities being mainstreamed into standard education classrooms. Research demonstrates that inclusive settings support growth and development for children with disabilities and coincide with the public views on least restrictive environment (Guralnick, 1990). One very important consideration according to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 is that all children are to have the opportunity to learn in the least restrictive environment (Schirmer et al, 1995). This means that all children have to right to an education that supports their needs as identified in the

Individualized Learning Plan (ILP). This is to ensure that children are included in the classroom and in school related activities to the best of their abilities. Accommodations are made as needed to help the student reach their potential both individually and academically.

This law supporting education for students with disabilities also prohibited the unnecessary removal of students from regular classroom settings or schools and being placed into special needs classrooms unless if it was deemed absolutely necessary to do so (Schirmer et al, 1995). The removal of students from regular education classrooms, programs, and even schools was happening more than necessary prior to the law often because it was easier to remove the child than it was to accommodate them. This law offered opportunity for inclusion to children who were traditionally placed in standard schools and classrooms and they were to use the support services offered in the resource room as necessary. Often para-professionals or trained special education teachers team-taught the core classes to assure that learning for all was taking place. This law also made schools that identified children with disabilities document student assessment, evaluation, and annual goals in the program. This law was amended in 1990 and was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Schirmer et. al, 1995).

While it is understood that parent perspectives may vary as the needs of each child are very individualized, it is important to share pros and cons to mainstreaming children with disabilities. The literature reviewed presents both sides of the discussion and an accurate picture of the dilemma parents have regarding placement of their child in a mainstreamed standard school classroom.

Concerns Regarding Mainstreaming Children

Parents who might oppose inclusion or mainstreaming may prefer that their child is offered more one-on-one teacher time often found in a special education classroom that is often referred

to as the resource room. A student with severe disabilities, disfiguring disabilities or limited mental capacity may feel more comfortable in a familiar, small classroom setting with others having similar needs. It allows the student more privacy and less interaction with peers who may tease them or say unkind remarks. Attending school is often a struggle to begin with, without having to deal with others who do not always understand or show compassion toward individuals with disabilities.

A concern of the parents of children with disabilities is that the amount of services and the quality of services for their child will decrease if they are mainstreamed into traditional education classrooms (Galant & Hanline, 1993). Parents express concern that if their child is not in a designated special education classroom they are not going to receive all of the services that are available in a special education classroom. It is the supportive services for the children that can have a significant impact on a child's success in school, and without the support and accommodations, the parent's are not always sure that their child will have the same opportunities for success they had anticipated.

Palmer et al. (2001) reported that parents are concerned that the severity of a child's disability may over rule the benefits of inclusion because the child with sever needs could become aggressive and harm other children, or may become too much of a medical responsibility for the general education teachers, or may act aggressively toward others and disruptive in the classroom. These concerns can come from both parents with or without children who have a disability. Most teachers have enough going on in the classroom that when asked to change adult diapers, feed through medical devices, assist with toilet training, change clothing or meeting other needs to adapt things for the children with severe disabilities.

The parents of the severely disabled student could further worry that their child will not have enough adult supervision resulting in harm to another child, while the parents of non-disabled children are worrying about their child's safety too. Basing placement on individual needs seems to be the best compromise for all involved.

Parents Positive Perspectives of Mainstreaming

Parents of children in integrated settings have confidence that all children's needs are more likely to be met within the organization and structure of an inclusive setting (Kaskinen-Chapman, 1992). Research indicated that parents viewed inclusion as a positive aspect of their child learning opportunities and socialization in a standard school classroom. Parents indicated an obvious positive perspective when academic advantages result from having the child in the least restrictive environment.

In a research study by Smoot (2004), it was determined that having special education support in a classroom not only helped the child grow academically, but also contributed to lowering levels of stressful interaction between the child with a disability and the other children in the classroom. Having a teacher aid takes some pressure off the classroom teacher also. When isolated in a resource classroom there isn't as much opportunity for interaction between students, whereas in a mainstreamed education classroom, the child can work with peers or even perhaps have a peer assist them with their academics and social skills (Downing, 2008).

The ultimate academic goal that parents are looking for when wanting their child to be mainstreamed into standard elementary education classrooms is that their child has the same opportunities as non-disabled children do when it comes to academics and is given the necessary support and accommodations to obtain those goals. If all parents have the same desire for

quality education and equal access, then why not provide children with the support and inclusion that they need to have success in the classroom (Downing, 2008).

Another positive perspective that parents shared in the Smoot study (2004) was when a child with disabilities was mainstreamed into traditional elementary education classes it was determined that the more time a child spends in regular education classes, the more likely that they are to be accepted by their peers. A common concern that parents expressed was being worried about their child's social skills and friendship issues they may be facing in school as a result of the disability. Parents have been finding comfort in the issues such as friendships, peer-acceptance, and attitudes toward understanding a disability is being covered through inclusion classroom curriculum and mainstreaming learning activities (Leysner & Rea, 2004).

Many parents of children with disabilities voiced a priority for their child to make friends with children that do not have disabilities (Galant & Mary, 1993). Parents want their child to lead as "normal" of a life as possible. Inclusion in mainstreamed classrooms provides socialization and learning opportunities with peers. Having children with varied disabilities in the same classroom may provide a social learning experience for all children involved. Learning that just because someone looks different or needs special mechanisms to get around does not mean that they are not a human being just like everyone else.

It is important to have exposure and understanding of diversity in the classroom to develop respect for differences in others (Lundy, 2005). Situations where students are mixed together in mainstreamed classrooms may provide opportunity to teach all students to build relationships and develop acceptance for people who are different than they are (Galant & Mary, 1993).

Parents Negative Viewpoints on Inclusion

With so many positive outcomes for mainstreaming children with disabilities, it is hard to imagine that there are any negative impacts of inclusion. Literature has shown that parent's viewpoints on having their child with disabilities mainstreamed was not without controversy. When teachers are stressed or overwhelmed with large class sizes, it is a challenge to meet the needs of every student. It is hard to keep track of all the children and when they enter or leave the classroom to get outside support from the resource room, it takes a lot of pre-planning and organization. Teachers who lack training in making accommodations may also present challenges for the parent.

Some parents feel as though a situation where their child with disabilities is being mainstreamed into a traditional education classroom is better for the child but may be harder on the parents and family of that child (Galant & Mary, 1993). Parents are often intimidated by the educational jargon used by teachers and other professionals in the school setting (Galant & Mary, 1993). Parents are often faced with difficulty understanding assessments, options, and how to best meet the needs of their child. When parents feel listened to, included, and valued they are more likely to become partners in the education process. Because having a child with a disability is often a time consuming part of these parent's lives, knowing the school and supporting personnel who know how hard it is to deal with sometimes, is a welcome comfort for those parents.

Keep in mind that one of the most significant barriers to successful adaptation for inclusion is the fear of the unknown (Downing, 2008). If change happens without some transition planning, schools are less likely to meet parent resistance; however, being diagnosed with a learning disability can create fear, especially for parents, when it has to do with the well being of

their child. Parents often wonder what they did wrong or what happened that suddenly their child is struggling in school and diagnosed with a learning disability. Safety concerns for their child with disabilities, fear of acceptance and stereotyped attitudes of peers, the quality of the special education program, and staff support are just a few of the main concerns that parents have expressed (Leyser & Rea, 2004).

Parents are generally doing their very best to provide for their children, and in so doing they are challenged to make a lot of hard decisions. In addition, parents of children with disabilities often have even more to worry about with their child in social settings. Added to the standard worries of having a non-disabled child, there is more worry about how their child is being treated and cared for while at school. The literature reports that non-disabled children are sometimes less accepting of children with disabilities and direct more negative attention toward those children, as well as excluding children with disabilities from many of their social activities (Gresham, 1982; Guralnick & Groom, 1988; Ray, 1985; Taylor, et al., 1987; Van Hook, 1992). Parents often worry if their child is being accepted, included, and treated well while they are at school. Working together as a team is critical to reducing the anxiety that parents feel.

On the other side of this perspective are the parents of non-disabled children. Parents of children without disabilities fear that including children with disabilities into the traditional education classrooms will have negative effects on their child's development. They are concerned that their child will not receive adequate attention from their teachers and staff, the class curriculum may have to move at a slower pace, and that there may be more disruptions to the day (Peck, et al., 1992; Reichert, et al., 1989). Even though children tend to spend more hours in the day with their teachers than with their parents, the parents still need to remain actively included in what happens with their child's school coursework and related activities.

The literature reviewed for this study included both positive and negative aspects to mainstreaming children with disabilities in a traditional classroom setting. Depending on the severity of the disability, the child's individualized plan for educational support, and the level of involvement in the schools, parent perspectives varied from situation to situation. The research shows that parents are not only worried about the child's well being they are also concerned about academic opportunities that are being provided to their child.

Academic achievement and optimum learning potential is a priority for the majority of parents. The social aspects of making and maintaining friendships are very important to parents too. These two components may influence the positive and negative perspectives on an individual basis. For those involved in making the decisions to include children in traditional classrooms, one-size doesn't fit all when mainstreaming children with disabilities. The reason for the Individualized Education Plan is to work in partnership with the team to determine the best placement for each child.

Chapter III: Summary and Recommendations

Summary

There is an abundance of literature to support how inclusion impacts parents, students and teachers. Research indicated there are different perspectives regarding the pros and cons to inclusion in the classroom for students with disabilities.

According to Hanson & Hanline, and Stagg & Catron, inclusion holds the promise of involving the children and their families into the school and community (Hanson & Hanline, 1990; Stagg & Catron, 1986). New teachers may need training on how to make appropriate accommodations, how to work with para-professionals in the classroom, and how to write and monitor Individual Learning Plans that reflect parental input and involvement. Even though it is a parent concern that a child with disabilities will not fit in or be accepted, research indicated that parents of children in inclusive settings report very few problems with peers and think that inclusive settings promote positive social interactions for all children (Green & Stoneman, 1989; McDonnell, 1987).

After reading the literature about parent's perceptions and how they feel about having their child with disabilities mainstreamed, it is obvious that parents are worried about their child receiving the best education available to them in the least restrictive environment. They want their child to be able to succeed both academically and socially throughout their school experiences. Overall, most parents feel as though inclusion has the potential of being beneficial for their child.

These statements are further supported with research by Smoot (2004), finding that the more time a child with disabilities spends in traditional education classes, the more likely they are to be accepted by their peers (Smoot, 2004). Depending on how teachers in standard

classrooms relate to and integrate students with disabilities into their classrooms, there is room for the parents to be skeptical about the opportunities that are or are not being provided to their child in the regular education classroom. It is important for teachers to have training in making accommodations for students to support educational efforts and opportunities in the classroom. Teachers continue to adapt their curriculum for children with disabilities but the parental concern is whether or not teachers may be adapting the subject matter enough to meet the individual needs for each child.

Perceptions of parents of non-disabled children regarding inclusion for the children with disabilities in their child's classroom found that they were worried that too much of the teacher time would be spent helping the children with disabilities and that their child might be overlooked in the process. Even though parents of children with disabilities may believe that parents of children that don't have disabilities might have preconceived notions about a child in the traditional education classroom parents don't want those biases to reflect against their child.

Research has shown that this is not the case and that parents of children with disabilities can empathize with the parents of children without disabilities more than one would think. The parenting styles are similar; they just need to be adapted just like the curriculum in a regular education classroom. Parents want an optimal learning environment for their child, which includes social and academic opportunities.

Even though most research points toward regular education classrooms as providing the least restrictive environment, parents are not always confident in the abilities of their child's teacher to integrate them into the classroom, or for the teacher to build curriculum that will be understood and accommodated for their child with disabilities. Parents know that this is often the best social environment but are still skeptical whether or not it is the best academic

environment for their child. Along with the social environment it is still a strong belief of parents that have children with a disability that parents of non-disabled children dislike and resent children with disabilities for being in their child's traditional classroom.

There is still much to be learned when connecting what parents want for their child with what is realistic in school systems. To make a seamless transition process, the resource team should consider what parents want. Not only is it about inclusion in the classroom, but inclusion for the parent's involvement in providing input. Parents will want to work in partnership with the schools to determine what accommodations can be made for the child at school and what they can do at home to help the teacher implement those accommodations in the classroom. If teachers and parents put aside their differences and make decisions based on what is best for the child personally, academically and socially, the child may experience more independence and increase the likelihood for success. Each child is an individual with his or her own set of needs, and that is how each child's educational path should be planned.

Recommendations

A few recommendations for further research including looking at how combining all three partners in the child's education including parents, teachers, and staff members working together to determine the best placement in the proper least restrictive environment. How often the child part of the process and what is the impact of that insight? Not much research was available on surveying the students to get their perspectives on inclusion and mainstreaming.

Young children are being mainstreamed into traditional education settings with increasing frequency throughout the United States and with the end goal to ensure social, instructional, and physical benefits for all students (Allen, 1992; Cook, Tessier, & Klein, 1992). The final recommendation for further research is to remember that each situation is relevant to each

individual and should not be applied as a one-size-fits-all directive for all children with a disability and their circumstances. Future researchers may wish to consider follow-up surveys to determine if accommodations are making a difference in reducing the parent perceptions and negative stereotypes for inclusion. When schools know what types of discrimination, bullying or harassment occurs for children with disabilities, they can be more proactive and use researched based programs that support inclusion, awareness of disabilities and support mainstreaming children to provide the best learning environment for all.

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