INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: WHICH INCLUSION MODEL PROVIDES HIGHER ACADEMIC GAINS FOR STUDENTS WITH MILD TO SEVERE DISABILITIES IN THE SECONDARY SETTING?

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Abstract:
A major premise of inclusive education for students with mild-severe disabilities is to provide the skills which enable them to live, work, and participate in an integrated community of life-long learners. Inclusive education would lead these students to greater independence and opportunity to be educated together in age appropriate general education classrooms. Three inclusion models were compared to determine which model would produce higher gains, both academically and socially in a high school multi-disability classroom. All three groups were their own control groups. Students were assigned to groups based on intellectual functioning and individual needs. Each group consisted of students that were relatively higher functioning, relatively lower functioning and students with severe needs. The settings included a general education classroom with adult/paraprofessional interaction, a general education setting with peer interactions or a small group instructional classroom with peer directed instructional activities. A constant comparison methodology was used to analyze the data across three groups and role of stakeholders. Findings revealed the benefits of inclusive education for all students, but the gains varied depending on the setting/inclusion model used.

Keywords: inclusive education, inclusion model, mild to severe disabilities

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has gained increasing attention over the past decades. It has become a common objective for families of children with special needs (Alberto & Fredrick, 2011; Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Brown & Michaels, 2006; Cater &

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Hughes, 2006; Crimmints & Farrell, 2006; Gallagher & Lambert, 2006), supported by federal mandates for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). The intent of this study was to determine what inclusive education model works best for students with moderate to severe disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines special education as specially designed education, at no costs to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. Inclusion in education refers specifically to how students with learning disabilities are included within general education classrooms (IDEA, 2004). The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) states that schools are required to make reasonable accommodations and modifications to help students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum and learn alongside their general education peers to the greatest extent appropriate (Verbeke, 2002: Agran, Cavin, Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2006) with reasonable accommodations, including minor changes in how instruction is delivered (Laprairie, Johnson, Rice, Adams & Higgins, 2010: Thompson, Morse, Sharpe Hall, 2005). Whereas this does not always mean that students with special needs were appropriately served in the general education setting, it does mandate that schools carefully consider to what extent inclusion in the general education classroom is appropriate. Whereas students with disabilities are included in the general education classroom, and training is provided for professionals to aid in the education of these students, many times their peers are not included in this training (Griffith, Cooper & Ringlaben, 2002).

There seems to be an ever-widening gap between the stated purpose of special education and the practice of special education (Skrtic, 1991). The purpose of special education was to provide needed supports, services, adaptations and accommodations to students in their least restrictive environment. However, that purpose has evolved into a parallel educational structure with very loose connections to the general education curriculum (Sailor and Roger, 2005). Special education has almost grown into a second educational system with its own teachers, administrators, credentialing processes, programs and budgets (Stevens, B., Everington, C., & Kozar-Kocsis, S. 2002; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994).

Empirical questions:
1. Will the student's make larger gains in social skills utilizing inclusion in a large general education classroom or with direct peer interaction in a more individualized activity in a smaller setting?
2. Were the levels of gains with each method different based of the student's disability area/intellectual level?
3. In which method of inclusion were students able to acquire individualized life skills more fluently?

2. Methods

Students in a multi-disability classroom of varying levels were divided into groups, based on current testing, intellectual level and disability area. The students were equally divided into groups to represent each area within the three methods of inclusion to be observed. Students were monitored by the classroom teacher.

The methods of inclusion selected were inclusion with a para-professional monitoring/assisting, inclusion with a peer assistant and self-contained with peer directed individualized activities. Students were followed for six weeks and reassessed weekly for individualized skills and gains. The para-professionals and classroom teachers assisted with documentation during classroom interventions.

Participants supporting the students and the peers were given a planning time with the teacher to plan for students and plan activities for those receiving direct peer instruction. Peer instructors, para-professional and classroom teachers received training in how to assist the student they supported in the classroom. They were provided with the information on the areas in which the students are being monitored. The special education teacher met with the para-professionals, teachers and peers on a regular basis and reviewed the progress of students.

Students were assessed at the start of the project on basic academic skills using a comprehension assessment of reading and math. They were assessed on social skills using an adaptive skills assessment and a social skills checklist. Potential peer students, teachers and para-professionals were interviewed to assess their pre-conceived ideas and feelings about the program. This assisted in selection of individuals with a consistent positive attitude.

Students were divided into three groups of three for the purpose of the study. Each group contained students that were high functioning, moderate abilities and severe needs.

Group 1 participated in full inclusion a minimum of 80% of the day with the support of a para-professional.

Group 2 participated in inclusion with peer assistance in the classroom.

Group 3 participated in peer intervention in the self-contained classroom.

Students were reassessed weekly to monitor progress in each area. Each area was documented as to the observed progress and to assure students were making gains under their current placement in the program. Students were monitored in the following areas: reading, math, social interaction, individualized life skills and adaptive skills.

At the end of the monitoring period, the teacher met with the support staff and peers to review the data on the students they support to assure consistency. The students were rated on social interaction and adaptive skills assessments by the individual that has been providing the intervention for the student as well. Once the team has reviewed their data the special education teacher met with the parents of each

student to review data to determine if student's intervention methods were continued or revised based on the data gained.

3. Results

The results of the project varied as greatly as the original questions. The high functioning students progressed in full inclusion with the support of a para-professional in academic areas but made slower progress in social skills. These students became dependent on adult support but made more significant social skills development with the peer assistance.

The students with moderate disabilities made the most progress in the group with the peer intervention in the general education setting. They developed more independence and sought success in the general environment. The group with the para-professional also became dependent on the adult support. The students with moderate disabilities developed social skills slower and did not self-monitor their academic performance as well in the self-contained classroom with peer intervention

The students with severe needs struggled in the general education classroom under both aspects. The students with severe needs showed more progress in all areas with more direct instruction in all areas in the self-contained classroom.

4. Discussion

The results showed that the extent of inclusion and the format for providing delivery of instruction varied greatly based on cognitive ability and disability area. All students benefited more from peer interventions in social skills areas. Peer intervention is a critical element for students to develop relationships and social interaction with grade level peers.

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