A Qualitative Study of the Perceptions of Special Education Personnel about Inclusive Practices of Students with Disabilities

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Abstract. Students with disabilities in the State of Texas are now required to participate in state wide academic assessments with passing rates tied to federal funding. This qualitative research studied the perceptions of district personnel regarding instructional practices for students with disabilities utilizing open-ended, semi-structured interviews of a principal, special education director, diagnostician, and special education teacher from each of two districts. District 1 exclusively used the inclusion model while District 2 used a combination of inclusive and pull-out programs to provide special education services. The interviews were analyzed utilizing coding which generated the following themes: the importance of positive relationships between general and special education educators and between students and teachers, individualization of the needs of each student, and the importance of the availability of resources such as appropriate staff and dedicated time on the successful implementation of inclusion.

Keywords: Texas education; student disabilities; inclusion; educational resources

Introduction

Ensuring that every student has access to general education curriculum rather than equitable curriculum through placement in general education classrooms is considered an issue of social justice (Turnball, 2012). Increased focus on state wide assessments and accountability for every individual student has caused districts to reconsider best practices for instruction and placement of students with disabilities. In addition, there is no clear guideline to demonstrate successful implementation of such services. Districts with special education populations demonstrating low performance levels benefit from implementation of alternate service models and inclusion style services in the general education classroom. Students with disabilities who receive academic support and services

to ensure their academic success are impacted by this problem. Contributing to this problem are many possible issues including support services dedicated to inclusion implementation and educational placement. This study contributes to the research knowledge base necessary to address this issue by gathering qualitative data to reveal successful and unsuccessful inclusive practices in high schools in South Texas districts 4A and larger as expressed by school principals and lead special education personnel. The University Interscholastic League (2016) assigns school districts in Texas a classification ranging from 1A-6A based on student enrollment.

Review of Literature

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) state level accountability standards and systems for mathematics and reading were developed and implemented with the intention that every student would have and maintain proficiency in both math and reading by the 2013-14 school year. Administrators are also required to examine the annual progress of student subgroups, including those with disabilities. NCLB was an active force in convincing administrators to assess the importance and necessity of access to general education curriculum in the general education setting for all students. Students with disabilities, if they are to be expected to meet statewide assessment standards, need access to regular education curriculum (Ross-Hill, 2009). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and NCLB push the need for inclusive instruction. The triumph of both laws hinges on the expertise and mindset teachers portray in the classroom (Ross-Hill, 2009). Few educators would disagree with federal law, but instructional practices may not reflect that ideology. While general education teachers may be supportive of inclusion in theory, most of them do not feel that, in practice, they can integrate students with disabilities successfully into their classrooms (Santoli, Sachs, Romey & McClurg, 2008).

Least Restrictive Environment

The principle of least restrictive environment (LRE) is a critical component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. LRE necessitates that children with disabilities be educated alongside students who do not have disabilities as much as possible. Aron and Loprest (2012), found that 95% of students with disabilities are in public schools, but they are outside the general education classroom. As a student reaches high school, he or she is more likely to be removed from the general education (Aron & Lomprest, 2012). Inclusion becomes increasingly difficult at the high school level due to course content and curriculum complexity, instruction models, achievement gaps, high stakes testing, and accountability to outside agencies like colleges (Rice, 2006; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Dieker, 2001; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001).

Inclusion

The principle of inclusion requires that all students have the opportunity to participate in society, or in the case of education, the general education setting. Critics of this notion argue that the strengths and weaknesses of the child must be considered along with the environment. Each student has a different level of capacity (Lindsay, 2003). Inclusive education refers to the dedication to educate students with disabilities, to the appropriate maximum extent, in the general education classroom he or she would traditionally attend. Inclusion involves providing needed instructional and/or related services to the

child and involves only that the child advances from being in the class (Yell, 2006). In accordance with the principle of least restrictive environment, inclusion suggests that students with disabilities are placed in the general education classroom with needed supplementary aids and services. Students are only removed from that setting if necessary services cannot be provided in the general education setting. There are many benefits to inclusion for all students, but without proper implementation and support it can be a frustrating process for all stakeholders (Hammel & Hourigan, n.d.).   In the general education setting, special education students are often held to higher educational standards and develop better social skills (Ripley, 1997).

Special Education Service Models

Models for special education services are best described as being a continuum of services and placements. A commonly misunderstood principle is that the least restrictive environment for all students is the general education classroom. While the regular education classroom may be the least restrictive environment within the special education continuum, it may not be the best environment for every student with a disability. In many individual cases, in order to meet a student's needs a variety of potential placements and services may be required (Farris, 2011; Lindsay, 2003). Variations on placements and services include: a student with a disability may be placed in the general education classroom with the general education teacher meeting all needs; or a special education teacher may serve a consultant style role within the general education classroom or may be more extensively involved in the delivery of services. This model is known as co-teaching or the collaborative teaching model. In this particular model, services are delivered in the general education setting with seldom removal of the student from that environment for service participation. In the resource model, a dedicated special education class is attended as needed while a significant portion of the day is spent in the general education setting. The self-contained model requires students to spend minimal time within the general education setting with the majority of services being delivered in a dedicated special education setting or classroom. This model is typically reserved for students for which inclusion has proved unsuccessful and leverages the advantages of small group instruction and increased attention from educators.

Research from 2000-present

The attitude of the general education teacher towards inclusive practices is a key factor in implementation of inclusion (Daane, Beirne-Smith & Latham, 2000; Henning & Mitchell, 2002). Henning and Mitchell (2002) noted that, "teacher perceptions about exceptional students may be the factor with the greatest effect on student success" (p.19). In 2000, Daane, Beirne-Smith, and Latham looked at the perceptions of both administration and teachers regarding the collaboration process of inclusion in elementary grade levels. All parties participating in the study agree that students with disabilities have the right to education in the general education setting. Conversely, all parties also agreed that instruction for students with disabilities in the general education setting was not effective due to concerns with preparedness of the general education teacher, discipline concerns, and workload for the general education teacher.

Research conducted by Ramirez (2006) and Smith (2011) also supports the findings that the majority of administrators believe that special education students have the right to be educated in the general education environment at the cost of academic benefits. A series of qualitative interviews conducted by Daane, Bierne-Smith and Latham (2000) and Mulholland & O'Connor (2016) revealed that teachers believe more collaboration is necessary between general education and special education teachers regarding student individualized education plans (IEPs) and instructional planning for the inclusion process to be more effective. Collaboration is critical for successful implementation of inclusion and should include all stakeholders: administration, general education teacher, special education teacher, counselor, social worker, related service providers, paraprofessionals, and family (Salend, 2005). Collaboration is an ongoing process and all parties must be open minded participants for the development of a comprehensive plan (Daane et al, 2000).

General educators need more guidance on curriculum differentiation, and the implementation of accommodations and modifications. However, scheduling conflicts, lack of knowledge, and lack of time often impede collaboration time (Daane et al, 2000) (Worrell, 2008). Muholland and O,Connor (2016) found that their teachers endorsed time restraints as a limitation to collaboration. According to Rice (2006), teachers are also concerned with the legal, ethical, pedagogical, and procedural aspects of IEP implementation. Legally, general education teachers become responsible for ensuring the service times specified in the IEP are being met. A solid foundation in special education laws, issues and terms, is critical for the general education teacher to successfully implement an IEP (Liston, 2004; Worrell, 2008). Principals need understanding of legal regulations, legislation, and practices regarding students with disabilities, as well (Lasky & Karge, 2006).

Lack of training on effective implementation of accommodations and modifications is a frequently reported issue (Galano, 2012; Rice, 2006). Galano (2012) noted that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are significantly correlated to the level of training. Shoulders and Krei (2016) found that the more hours general education teachers spent in professional development and co-teaching the higher the efficacy in student engagement. Similarly, limited training in special education also resulted in principals having negative views of inclusion (Galano, 2012). Santoli et al. (2008) found a group of Southeastern middle school teachers who felt confident in their teaching strategies and collaborative strategies in working with special education students, increasing the likelihood of successful implementation of inclusive practices.

Without a positive attitude towards academic outcomes, teachers are just going through the motions. There is a significant relationship between teacher expectations and student success (Henning & Mitchell, 2002; Santoli et al., 2008). Monsen and Frederickson (2004) also identified that special education students' performance on standardized test scores is directly correlated to the attitude of their general education teachers and their teachers' view on inclusion.

The effectiveness of educational inclusion services can be influenced by the campus administrator (Praisner, 2003). In her research with elementary school principals, Praisner found that implementation of inclusive practices occurred more frequently when the principal had positive views of inclusion.

Galano (2012), Ramirez (2006), and Smith (2011) also found a correlation between the promotion of inclusive placements and principal's attitude.

Role of the Campus Administrator in Inclusion Implementation

With the growing implementation of inclusion services, the role of the principal is widened to include more paperwork, an increase in the number of personnel needed, and therefore more duties (Praisner, 2003). Administrators can lead in a way that maintains status quo, or lead in a way that promotes social change. Strong leaders build relationships in the community and build capacity of a campus team. These relationships allow for the implementation of practices that foster a culture that supports diverse learners (Riehl, 2000). Principals promote inclusion in their actions, words, interests, activities, and organization of staff and resources. Villa, Thousand, Nevin & Liston (2005) described that the degree of administrative support for inclusive practices was the strongest predictor of the attitude of the general education teacher towards inclusion. Support can be provided in the form of school climate (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999), opportunity for collaboration (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998), or professional development (Shade & Stweart, 2001).

Dieker (2001) described successful inclusion implementation has hinging on six co-teaching practices. First was a positive climate between students and teachers supporting an attitude of acceptance through cooperative learning. Secondly, inclusion is only accepted primarily through the staff's positive perception. Additionally, active student centered learning is necessary to help create an environment with engaged students while allowing for peer tutoring opportunities. Further, accommodation integration can be achieved through activity based instruction. High academic and behavioral expectations for every student are necessary as well. Mutual planning time between co-teachers must also be used effectively to plan lessons. Finally, multiple evaluation methods such as written assessments, presentations and projects in addition to performance tasks should be used to gauge student learning.

DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) identified skill areas critical for principals in ensuring growth of student with special needs. Principals must have knowledge of each disability along with the learning, behavioral or medical challenges of each. In addition, they must possess thorough knowledge of laws and educational rights of special needs students so that they may communicate with families. Equally important, principals lead the implementation of research based teaching practices on campus. Lastly, principals need a clear understanding of the supports necessary to make inclusion successful (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). They are responsible for securing support services, supplies and necessary resources (Frederico, Herrold, & Venn, 1999).

Methodology

Two high school principals from a 4A or larger district in the South Texas region and six lead special education personnel from each of those districts were interviewed. The qualitative data was coded for themes to determine successful instructional practices in regards to students with specific learning disabilities.

Population and Sample

The researcher began interviews by selecting two high school principals from 4A or larger high schools in the South Texas region. Next, interviews were

conducted with six lead special education personnel recommended by the principal from the district. Principals and lead special education personnel were selected through purposive sampling. The purposive sampling in this study is informational in nature in order to capitalize on the strengths and weaknesses of inclusion programs in Texas high schools 4A and larger in the South Texas Region. Principals and lead special education personnel were selected based on their involvement with special education students on the high school campus. The purpose of interviewing the principals and lead special education personnel from each district was to identify their perceptions of successful instructional practices for students identified with specific learning disabilities. Each district has autonomy in developing service models for special education services, allowing for differences in instruction and therefore achievement.

Instrumentation

The study involved the gathering of data through open-ended, semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected participants. This questionnaire was composed of twelve open-ended questions. The purpose of the questionnaire was for participants to express their experiences with inclusive practices with students with disabilities and to share their opinions about practices that contribute to successful implementation of instruction for students with disabilities.

Interview Protocol:

1. What is your position with the district and how many years of experience do you have?
2. Are you familiar with the terms inclusion, resource, and co-teaching?
3. If so, how would you describe each one?
4. What instructional service models are used in this district?
5. What is your role in the implementation of services for students with learning disabilities?
6. How does the district implement inclusive instructional support?
7. What have been your experiences with inclusion and resource instruction?
8. What do you think are the factors that contribute to successful implementation of inclusion services?
9. What do you think are the biggest obstacles in implementation of inclusion?
10. Do you believe that instructional setting affects academic success of students with specific learning disabilities? Why or why not?
11. What is your ideal vision of instructional services for students with specific learning disabilities?
12. Are there any comments you would like to add?

Procedures and Data Analysis

Data was gathered by conducting one-on-one interviews with selected participants. The participants were asked to provide their personal experiences in response to the interview questions. A digital audio recorder was used to record the entire interview in order to ensure accuracy. The digital recording for each interview was saved in an audio computer file and transcribed. The data was analyzed through descriptive coding.

Results

District Profiles

District 1 is a large district in the South Texas region. Based on the 2014 State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness End Of Course (STAAR EOC) data, the special education population is 9% of the district population and 77% of the students are economically disadvantaged. This district is predominately Hispanic (94%). Figure 1 summarizes the ethnic breakdown of the student population.
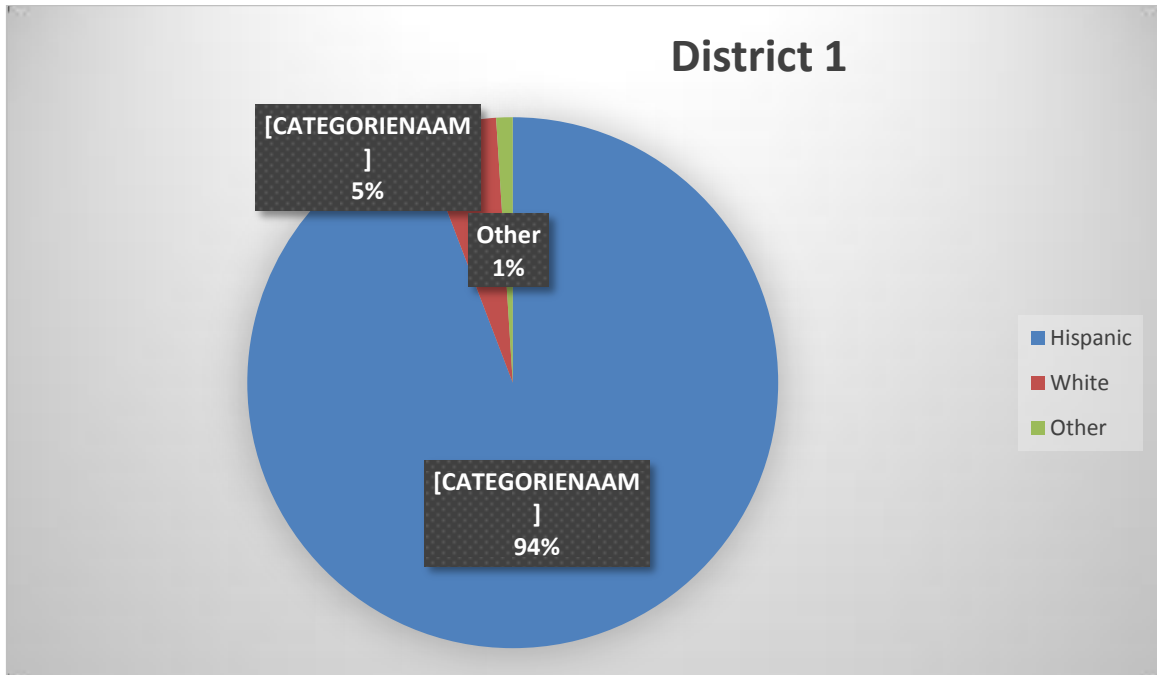

Figure1: Ethnic Groups of District 1

District 1 used the inclusion model to provide services to students with learning disabilities. Interviews revealed that inclusion services were provided by either a special education certified teacher or a paraprofessional and that most students were served in English and/or Math for twenty to thirty minutes three days per week.

District 2 is also a large district in the South Texas region. Based on the 2014 STAAR data, 10% of the district population receives special education services and 41% of the district is economically disadvantaged. District 2 is predominately Hispanic (56%). Figure 2 illustrates this information.
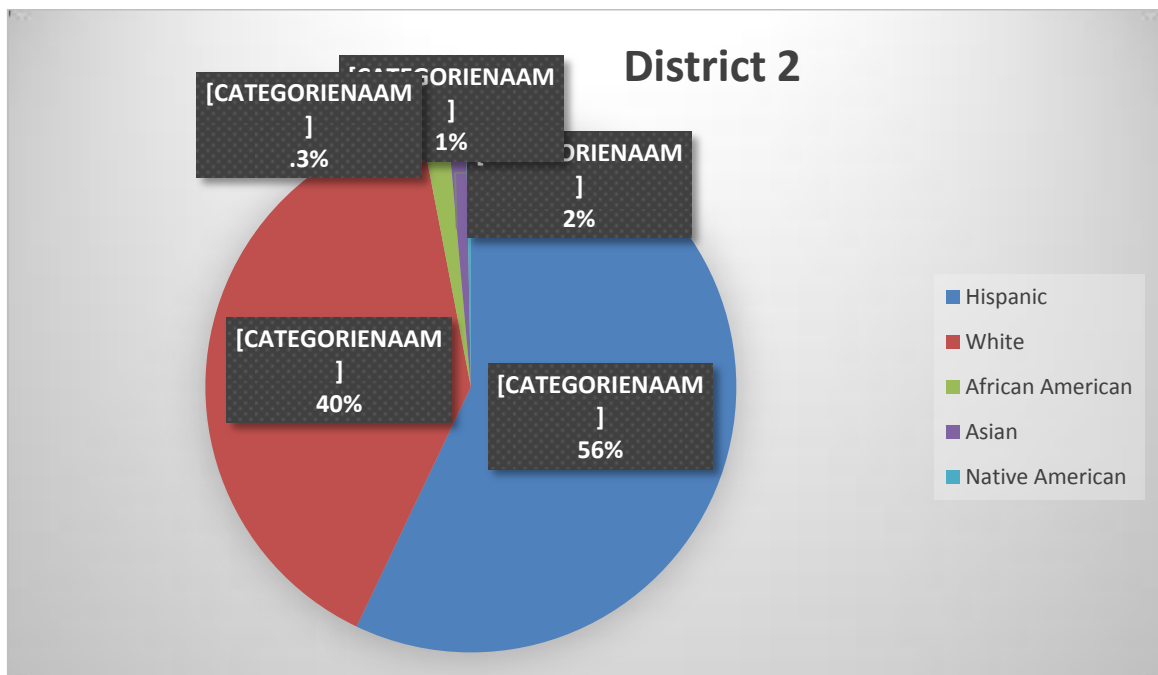
Figure 2: Ethnic Groups of District 2

Participants from District 2 reported using a combination of co-teaching, other inclusive practices, and resource support to provide services for students with learning disabilities. Co-teaching was done by two certified teachers five days per week for the entire class period. Inclusion support was provided by a certified teacher or a paraprofessional. Frequency and duration ranged, and depended on the needs of the student. Resource services were provided in a location other than the general education classroom. The class was taught by a teacher who is certified both in the content area and in special education.

Seven female and one male participated in the semi-structured interviews. Ages ranged from 34-63. Two of the female participants were Hispanic, and the other participants were Caucasian. Table 1 presents the pseudonym, position and district for each participant.

Table 1: Research Participants

Interview #	Participant	Position	District
1	Dan	High School Principal	1
2	Sue	Special Education Director	1
3	Jan	Educational Diagnostician	1
4	Cindy	Lead Special Education Teacher	1
5	Amy	High School Principal	2
6	Mary	Special Education Director	2
7	Elizabeth	Educational Diagnostician	2
8	Ann	Lead Special Education Teacher	2

Both principals defined the terms inclusion and co-teaching in similar ways. Inclusion was seen as a classroom composed of both general education students and special education students of varying instructional levels. Primary

delivery of instruction is performed by the general education teacher with a special education teacher or paraprofessional as a support system. In co-teaching, "both teachers deliver the primary lesson" and students have the opportunity to "learn in two different ways". It was explained that teachers in this model have "the same conference time to plan together" in order for both teachers to be "on the same page". Personnel in special education agree that co-teaching and inclusion both involve the education of special education students in the general education setting with some instruction provided by a special education teacher or paraprofessional.

The recurring idea shared by the six special education professionals is that theirs is a role of support. Directors support services by providing training opportunities and sending staff to workshops. Diagnosticians and special education teachers support general education teachers in a variety of ways. Special education teachers support all students in the classroom by "re-teaching, redirecting, and varying instructional strategies".

The theme of relationships emerged as the primary factor affecting successful inclusive practices. Both principals reported that the relationship between the general education teacher and the special education teacher is the leading predictor of whether inclusion will be successful. Special education personnel agree. Successful inclusive practices depend on the "attitude of the general education teacher." "The teachers have to be willing to learn new instructional strategies and willing to accommodate for our students." The special education teachers also stressed the importance of building relationships with the special education students in the classroom.

All personnel interviewed spoke frequently of the importance of individualization when it comes to the education of special education students. Both principals agreed that individualized supports should be in place for each student, and that some students require a smaller setting to find their "comfort zone" and address their "learning style."

The most important limiting factor in the implementation of inclusion identified by all respondents was time. All participants stressed that it is crucial for inclusion and general education teachers to have a common planning time for inclusion to be a success, but that scheduling and the master schedule were obstacles.

The participants also spoke of needing more staff to implement services. According to one participant, "some of our teachers are supporting three different teachers. It is hard to plan and have any ownership of that many classrooms."

Money and time also affect the ability of the districts to provide training to their teachers. All respondents voiced a need for increased training. Respondents noted that training for general education teachers is needed to ensure understanding of the inclusion models and disability education.

Conclusions

Several themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews. All participants discussed the importance of relationships in successful inclusive practices. Relationships must be developed between general education and special education teachers, as well as between teachers and the students. The

second theme was the need for individualization in making decisions regarding educational settings for students with learning disabilities. Participants agreed that the needs of each student must be considered individually, on a case-by-case basis. Participants also agreed that the availability of resources limits the successful implementation of inclusion. Specifically, time and staff were named. Time is necessary to develop collaborative relationships between teachers and between teachers and students, and to plan for instruction. Lastly, respondents voiced a need for training for both general education and special education teachers. Topics included the implementation of accommodations and modifications and the nature of disabilities for general education teachers, and content area curriculum for special education teachers.

The findings of this study suggest that there is no one size fits all model for all students with learning disabilities. Participants in this study expressed the idea that a continuum of services be available to meet the needs of each student. The results of this study provide information to be used by lead special education personnel, Administrators, and Admission, Review, and Dismissal committees as they seek to meet the needs of every student including students with disabilities. This research suggests that instructional arrangements, or the placement of a student with a disability in general education or resource classrooms, may not be a significant factor contributing to academic achievement for students with disabilities. This study limited qualitative data to interviews with administrators and lead special education personnel in each district. Future research could include perspectives from other stakeholders such as general education teachers, parents, and students.

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