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Making Inclusion Work In Rural Southeast Texas

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion is a common term and everyday practice in two rural schools in Southeast Texas. A consortium based on a collaborative endeavor between the regional educational service center, the local university, and two rural school districts was established with a common goal, an effective general education environment, and pedagogical sound instruction for students in inclusive settings. Data was collected to assess the impact of the Inclusion Project. Results indicated an increase in positive attitudes toward the concept of inclusion.

Making Inclusion Work in Rural Southeast Texas

Introduction

Inclusion has become a common term and everyday practice in two rural school districts in Southeast Texas. In an environment sprinkled with rice and crawfish farms, cattle, a semi-vibrant petrochemical industry and miles of flat land, fresh water canals and pine trees, a valuable product is being produced in the general education environment. This initiative is more than an effort to focus on the unique learning differences of all individuals. The practice of “inclusion” has become synonymous with teaching. No longer are children referred to as “those” or “your” students. Teachers in two school districts have embraced each child in their class as “our” and “my” student. Inclusion has become more than a dreaded and somewhat crushing mandate from some entity outside the school district. It has become a way of life almost like breathing, taking roll and dusting the erasers at the end of a vigorous day. The very term “inclusion” has become an accepted and effective way of life.

History of Inclusion

Exclusion or mandating different educational experiences due to predetermined guidelines has been a problem in education that was initially addressed by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 (Zirkel, 2002). Segregation of educational services has expanded from that based on race to the exclusion of students with disabilities from integration into the regular classroom. Public Law 94-142, I.D.E.A., the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and its 1997 reauthorization have had schools considering the question of what is the least restrictive environment (Kluth, Villa & Thousand, 2002).

The first attempts at the concept of “inclusion” may be more of a synonym to the old term “mainstreaming”. Students with disabilities were brought into the school and placed with their peers without disabilities during certain ascribed social activities. The focus was primarily on the social aspect of integration with the academic side kept neatly segregated in special education classes. Many students spent a large majority of the day being excluded from their peers without disabilities. Students with disabilities were allowed to go to the lunchroom, playground and other social events such as special performances and pep rallies held in the auditorium and/or gymnasium. They were placed in proximity to their peers but seldom fully integrated into the general educational environment.

Initially, inclusion was viewed as a placement issue (Downing, Eichinger & Williams, 1997). Schools attempted to interpret the legal mandates by focusing on how children were placed therefore meeting the requirements of providing a least restrictive environment (Hemmeter, 2000). Those placements changed from mainstreaming to the current concept of inclusion. Several attempts were made to include children with disabilities in a regular classroom’s activities and routines. The regular education initiative was the description of inclusion without there being much impact on what was actually happening in the classroom. Inclusion was becoming the reformation of the old inferior and discriminatory mainstreaming concept (Heflin & Bullock, 1999).

Although we often preach the concept of every child is individual and unique, we still adhere to an underlying practice of treating everyone in exactly the same manner. We boast of our knowledge of learning styles, interest inventories and constructivism, yet we keep children in straight rows, expect them to be at the same readiness level and all master criteria related competency-based exams. The paradigm shift in inclusion is changing its focus from teacher-centered pedagogy to a child-centered environment (Beloin, 1998). The most current concept showing great promise in this area is that of

differentiated instruction. In this type of inclusion environment, students at every level of readiness can learn more effectively. Instruction is focused on the individual learning style and education need of each child (Kapusnick & Hauslein, 2001).

Numerous school districts have been implementing inclusion on a trial and error basis (Weiss & Rapport, 1996). Little has been done to look at its true effectiveness at a variety of levels. In southeast Texas, the inclusion initiative became a joint venture to improve a delivery system that would be successful for the child, the regular class environment, the school district and the university curriculum.

The Inclusion Initiative in Southeast Texas

An opportunity arose for the state of Texas to utilize funds from the federal level ear-marked for inclusion purposes. There was an allotment of these funds to the twenty regional educational service centers located throughout the state. Lamar University was invited to participate in planning activities which led to the formation of a collaborative partnership to offer innovations in delivery of services. Out of the twenty regional service centers only one, Region V, networked with a local university to make this initiative successful. Thus was born the Inclusion Project involving Lamar University's preservice education students providing support in public school inclusive classrooms. This was a volunteer project involving students while they completed their requirements for educator certification.

Just how, then, was the first school district from a rural area selected? First considerations were the most obvious, willingness and manageability on the part of the school district. The selected district had a total school enrollment of about three thousand students with 300 – 400 enrolled in the middle school. An arbitrary decision was made early on to focus the Inclusion Project at the middle school level. This model can be found in figure 1.

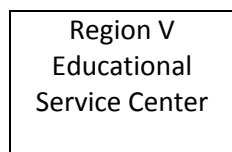


Figure 1



The Consortium Model

A quote from the film, “Inclusion” produced by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD, 1995) reminds one that “student and staff attitudes are critical” to the success of any inclusion program. Three common factors should also be considered in program development: 1) Collaborative partnerships; 2) Assessment and placement; and 3) Resources and accommodations (ASCD, 1995).

In the Lamar University Inclusion Project, careful heed was taken to include these important factors. First, the collaborative partnerships were initiated: the university, two rural school districts, and the Region V Educational Service Center (Region V ESC). The schools had completed all necessary assessment and placement of students with disabilities into the regular education classroom, thus, the team-approach was initiated to encompass resources and accommodations. The most valuable resources were the university students who would be selected to participate in the inclusion project. These preservice teachers would work collaboratively with school district personnel, administrators, teachers, staff and paraprofessionals. They would become part of the inclusion team.

The two school districts represented varied ends of the spectrum in an environment of rice and crawfish farms, cattle, petrochemical and miles of fresh water canals and pine trees. One district is primarily a small rural town that focuses around the pine trees and the agriculture industry. The other was a rural district outside a semi-vibrant petrochemical area of southeast Texas.

University students volunteering for the Inclusion Project were junior and senior level education majors enrolled in a variety of special education or general education courses. Those selected were

invited to a general meeting on the Lamar University campus at the beginning of each fall and spring semester. This orientation was designed to reflect the didactic nature of the course as well as outline the semester activities within the project.

Approximately one week later, all participants met with respective teams. A wide variety of issues were addressed at these site meetings. Here teams of teachers, university students and university professors got to know each other and began to develop their educational strategies within their groups. Collaboration and extensive planning incorporated the needs of the school, the preservice teachers' course load requirements as well as their other outside responsibilities. Participants' schedules had to be arranged to match those of the school and the inclusive classrooms they worked with. The university students also had an on-site orientation outlining requirements of the inclusion team, instructional responsibilities, school climate and environment and any additional information that might be helpful to the participants.

One of the participating schools has the Tiger as their high school mascot. In this district participants had "fun" joining the various middle school teams. Some selected to be a member of the Alley Cats, the Stray Cats, and the Top Cats. Following their team meetings and the selection of the inclusive classroom sites, the preservice educators began their assignments. Students were required to sign in and out each time at their school site just like the full-time teachers did on a daily basis. Each individual was to keep a daily journal on their experiences while involved in the Inclusion Project.

Each participant had an assignment sheet that was to be completed by the end of the semester. This form listed a variety of required activities such as attending an IEP meeting, attending a parent conference, assisting in different content area classrooms with different teachers, as well as attending after-school activities. The university students were eager to become participants in this new concept. Although there had previously been limited field-based experiences for preservice educators, the Inclusion Project brought these future teachers directly in contact with teaching in an inclusive

classroom. Some fearing the inclusion of students with any need of modifications, etc. were able to see firsthand how successful effective planning and team collaboration could support the instruction of a wide variety of learners within the general education environment.

Inclusion Project participants were involved in many aspects of this collaborative endeavor. They were able to observe, work directly with and plan instruction that would enhance the academic success of the students within the inclusive environment. Many were excited about their students learning certain skills as well as their maturity and increase in self-esteem. In observing their daily logs, university instructors were able to note the changes in attitudes toward students with disabilities, how they used the pedagogical concepts learned in their university courses to develop new instructional strategies and the shared ownership for learning between all staff, teachers, administrators and paraprofessionals within the school.

The university students were also required to attend an end of the semester meeting with all school staff, teachers, administrators, Region V ESC personnel and university faculty. Here they were presented with a certificate of appreciation for their participation within the project. Students were also provided a small stipend as a reimbursement for gas and travel from the university to the rural school districts. This was part of the seed money given to the Regional Educational Service Center to fund a new delivery system. The consortium felt that the money from the Texas Education Agency should be used for resource and training materials as well as to compensate travel of the preservice education students participating within the project.

The Special Advantage of Inclusion in Rural Southeast Texas

The special advantage of inclusion within rural southeast Texas is that it has a great deal of support within the smaller schools. Administrators, teachers, staff and paraprofessionals have all felt that inclusion could work, it would work and it was the best for their students. With fewer schools in these districts it is easier for teachers to meet and develop a common mission and set of goals on the

inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education environment. Unlike large urban districts where schools are individual camps many times unto themselves, ownership of the learning environment is shared district wide. The Inclusion Project has had an overall impact on helping these rural districts achieve the objective of improving the general education environment and instruction for students in the inclusion setting.

Most larger and urban districts within this area have only limited success with inclusion. Schools are often fragmented from their central office. Although extensive training has been done by the regional educational service center as well as support from the university, most schools have not developed a sense of ownership of this type of delivery system. Inclusion is still a struggling and somewhat new concept for these districts.

The Project Findings

In an effort to improve the university curriculum and the public school inclusive classroom, a survey was developed to address the areas of learner progress, the impact of attitudes, school culture and inclusion team effectiveness. A cross-sectional study was conducted to determine impact of attitudes between those entering the educator preparation program, those in their clinical semester (student teaching), individuals participating in the Inclusion Project and the public school inclusion teams. Data was analyzed to determine the types of attitudes, skills, and strategies needed to improve both the university curriculum and the general environment and instruction for students in these inclusion settings. The following results in Table 2 were found to assess the Inclusion Projects effectiveness.

INCLUSION PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS (Table 2)

RESPONDENTS	POSITIVE FEELINGS TOWARD INCLUSION	NEGATIVE FEELINGS TOWARD INCLUSION
Sophomore & Junior Preservice Education Major	43%	57%
Student Teachers	63%	27%
Inclusion Project Participants	95%	5%
Public School Inclusion Teams	99%	1%

Data indicated that students entering the educator preparation program had more negative feelings toward the concept of inclusion. More than half (57%) did not support the concept of students with disabilities being placed in the regular education classroom. Many that answered wrote comments that expressed their concern of the level of the disability, indicating that the more severe the disability the more negative their response. Only 43% had a positive attitude toward inclusion.

Respondents completing their final semester of clinical experience (student teaching) had significantly less negative feeling, (37%). The positive attitude toward inclusion had reached a significant 63%. This indicated that inclusion had an increased positive concept among students that were in the final semester of their educator preparation program.

Inclusion Project participants were preservice students involved in direct instruction of students in the inclusion settings. These individuals were directly engaged in the instruction of students with and without disabilities as well as participated as members of the inclusion teams. Their negative feelings were only 5% with most comments directed at the level of disability. Those directly involved with the Project had an overwhelmingly positive attitude of 95%. Overwhelmingly these students indicated that they agreed with the concept of inclusion.

The group with the lowest percentage of negative feelings (1%) was the inclusion teams in the public schools. These individuals consisted of regular education and special education teachers, paraprofessionals and administrators. Overall their attitude toward inclusion was 99%, a number that indicates high approval and acceptance of this concept by the schools involved in the project.

Conclusion

Inclusion has been a strongly debated topic for quite some time. Although there are a wide variety of strategies and techniques for implementing this concept, the most effective seems to involve the building of teams or consortiums (Hammond, Olson, Edson, Greenfield & Ingalls, 1995). The Inclusion Project, a consortium consisting of Lamar University, the Region V Educational Service Center and two rural public school systems was established with a common goal, the effective incorporation of a wide variety of student abilities within the general education classroom. Its purpose was to forge past the social aspects of including students with disabilities and incorporate the concept of academic inclusion for all students within this environment (Beloin, 1998). The Inclusion Project was designed to meet the needs of preservice and in-service educators in rural Southeast Texas. Through these efforts there was the redevelopment and alignment of university curriculum, and as the general environment and instruction of students within the inclusion settings.

A survey was developed to assess the effectiveness of the Inclusion Project. Data was found to indicate that a large majority of students entering the teaching field had more negative attitudes toward the concept of inclusion. Most felt that students with disabilities should not be included in the regular education classroom. Only 37% of these students had positive attitudes toward inclusion. As these individuals completed their educator preparation program the results changed to a greater percentage of positive attitudes. The percentage of positive attitudes toward inclusion by student teachers had risen to 63%. This data showed that overall there was an increase in positive attitudes toward the inclusion delivery system.

The effectiveness of the Inclusion Project was found in the data collected from the preservice educators involved at the school sites and the members of the inclusion teams. Students working with direct instruction in the general education environment had a positive attitude of 95%. Those individuals

working within the schools such as teachers, staff, administrators and paraprofessionals indicated strong support for inclusion. These individuals had a positive attitude of 99%.

Inclusion has become a synonym for success and a way of life in these two rural schools. All students are part of the classroom and no one looks at a child as being “one of those” children. There is success at the academic level, social level as well as the personal level of each child in the inclusive classroom. Although there have been attitudinal barriers to address, roadblocks to overcome, and the development of ownership of this delivery system, there has been a great improvement in the general education environment and its pedagogical effectiveness. Inclusion in rural southeast Texas is working, very well indeed.

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