Effective Inclusion Practices

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Abstract

This study examines effective instructional practices, which support the inclusion of students with special needs. Eight teacher and administrator participants completed interviews about their experiences working in a full-inclusion environment. In addition, the research includes narratives based on observations from the school. The findings summarize five practices essential in successful inclusive environments. These strategies include assessing the whole child, performance-based assessments, and use of visuals, specifically graphic organizers, and collaboration. Finally, the data demonstrate the idea that all of these practices benefit students with and without disabilities.

Effective Inclusion Practices

The Tarzan song sung by Dr. Jean's famous voice blares from the boom box. Vibrations pulse the tables and chairs, filling the double sized rectangular classroom. Children wearing brightly colored shirts, blue jeans, dresses, and tennis shoes, as it is a P.E. day, dance around the room. One group of five girls holds hands and gallops in a circle. Blonde, black, and brown pony tails bob up and down in the air. Hanah, a child with cerebral palsy, smiles so wide that all 20 of her bright white juvenile teeth show vividly from anywhere in the room. As her friends pull her in a circular motion, her legs, limp from poor muscle tone, struggle to keep up. Close to the radio, Kert, a child with autism, leads the students preparing them for the upcoming chorus. "After me guys!" Holding one ear closed because the music is too loud for his overly sensitized brain, he sings and shouts, "Tarzan, swinging from a rubber band." The other kids sing the refrain of the song, following Kert's lead. Megan and Ella, two of the most well-liked children in the

class, sit next to Lee, a child with Down syndrome and bounce shoulders back and forth. The music continues, and all is normal in the fully included multi-age class.

Inclusion of children with disabilities differs by definition from person to person. Janney and Snell (2000) describe several characteristics that make up an inclusive environment. First, inclusion occurs in neighborhood schools and facilities whereas children with disabilities interact and build meaningful relationships with the peers living in their community and close proximity to their homes. Additionally, team members work collaboratively making individualized decisions regarding appropriate services and programming. Finally, inclusion occurs when natural proportions of 10% special needs population are not exceeded in a class or school. Odom and Diamond (1998) believe, "the single commonality across definitions of inclusion is that children with and without disabilities are placed in the same setting" (p. 6). Finally, Janko, Schwartz, Sandall, Anderson, and Cottman (1997) claim the global objective of inclusive settings involves providing individuals with disabilities equal access to educational activities. Regardless of the differences between inclusion definitions, it is the more than just being in the classroom together; it is the development of friendships and the true sense of belonging.

Research regarding inclusion is immense. Benefits for children with and without disabilities are abundant. For example, children with disabilities display less isolated play and fewer inappropriate behaviors when included with their typical peers (Hoahan & Costenbader, 2001). In addition, Stahmer, Carter, Baker, and Miwa (2003) found improved gains in language, cognitive, and motor development as well as play skills. Odom (2000) established positive outcomes for development and attitudes. Furthermore, Grenot-Scheyer, Jubala, Bishop, and Coots (1996) recorded increased communication and social interactions, age appropriate models of behavior and skills, active participation in the school community, individualized educational goals and objectives, access to the rich core curriculum, and

opportunities to build a network of friends and other social relationships, all as opportunities and benefits for children with special needs within effective inclusion environments.

Although much of the research regarding inclusion focuses on children with disabilities, the benefits regarding typically developing children is also available. Stahmer, Carter, Baker, and Miwa (2003) ascertained that typically developing children demonstrate advanced social skills, fewer disruptive behaviors, less prejudices and fewer stereotypes, increased awareness of the needs of others, higher rates of acceptance and more responsiveness/helpful to others. Furthermore, Grenot-Scheyer, Jubala, Bishop, and Coots (1996) reported increased skill acquisition, improved self-esteem, intensified positive attitudes and comfort with individuals with disabilities, strengthened commitments to moral and ethical principles, and no loss of engaged time as a result of having students with disabilities included within regular classes. These benefits provide a strong basis for inclusion of students with disabilities.

Historically, schools in the United States were not required to educate children with disabilities. However, within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Congress mandated schools serve *all* students regardless of any extenuating circumstances. Furthermore, in 1975, Congress required the placement of children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Even today, IDEA requires all "children with disabilities to be educated with children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate" (U.S.C. 20 § 1400). IDEA also states "a child with a disability is to be removed from the general educational environment only when the nature or severity of the child's disability is such that education with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be demonstrated satisfactorily in a general education classroom" (U.S.C. 20 § 1400) . Because the LRE is different for each child, this implicit policy continually causes much confusion for many of the stakeholders (i.e., federal, state, and local policymakers, court officials, school administrators, teachers, and parents).

Furthermore, President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) (NCLB). The purpose of this legislation was to radically reform schools across the nation and ensure *all* children are on grade level in reading and mathematics by 2014. This explicit policy acknowledges the different categories or subgroups of children (i.e., English language learners, students with disabilities, gifted and talented, etc.) and the students' varying needs; however, the policy still holds all children accountable to the same academic standards. In NCLB, Congress weighed in on the inclusion debate and instructed 90% of children with disabilities included in the general education classroom 80% of the day. While current policies are focusing on children with disabilities being included in the general education classroom, research providing a better understanding of inclusion and effective instructional practices is needed for both general and special education teachers (U.S.C. 20 § 6301).

This paper focuses on effective instructional practices that support inclusion. Describing the progression of education policies throughout the past decade provides an understanding of the policies' intent. The research that follows addresses how these policies affect classrooms, teachers, and children. Overall, the research questions guiding this endeavor included: What do general educators, special educators, and administrators describe as effective instructional practices? And, how do these instructional practices support inclusion?

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

The inclusion and focus on minority populations such as individuals with disabilities, flourished throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. Legislation, court cases, and mandates shifted the placement paradigm; however, an incremental rise in inclusive placements continually occurs yearly. Although there are difficulties within the implementation of inclusion, the benefits for children with and without disabilities are well documented.

Legality of Inclusion

In 1971, the United Nations released the Declaration of Basic Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons. Within this document, UN officials mandated equal rights for individuals with intellectual disabilities specifically in the areas of medical care, education, and economic security. Furthermore, the Declaration provided principles regarding rights for individuals with disabilities. Several of these guidelines included the basic rights provided to each individual; rights to proper cause, economic security or work, right to live with family or in a typical setting, qualified guardian, protection from exploitation, abuse, and degrading treatment. Congress later adopted a declaration based on these premises in 1975.

In 1975, Congress passed the Education of All Handicap Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975 or PL 94-142. This groundbreaking policy provided many key components that still exist in the present special education policy. Several examples such as the Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) clause, parental rights, assistance to states and districts for educational opportunities, zero reject, non-discriminatory assessment, procedural due process, parental participation, Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), Individualized Educational Programs (IEP), and mandated services for children 6 to 21 years of age were all included.

Reauthorized on numerous occasions, this legislation continually expands services for individuals with developmental disabilities. In 1986 and again in 1990, Congress reauthorized the Education of All Handicap Children Act. As part of these changes, PL 94-142 updated its title to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This reauthorization reiterated the premises behind LRE and FAPE. Additionally, in 1990, IDEA included voluntary services for infants and children through Part H. These services included transportation, educational services within the natural environment, and the creation of Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP). Within the 1997 reauthorization, IDEA included new language forcing educators to determine if behavior violations conducted by a student were due to

the nature of the disability. Finally, the legislation changed funding formulas based on Census data, rather than Child Count, in order to better account for poverty and allow for cost sharing among organizations and families.

Furthermore, with the inclusion of the aforementioned NCLB, educators worked to merge the two major education policies. NCLB contained ten sections including grants for individuals considered disadvantaged, teacher preparation for highly-qualified teachers; language instruction for English Language Learners (ELL); drug free schools; parental choice; funding flexibility; Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Native Alaskan needs; and loss of funding protections. Although the overall purpose of the legislation was to close the achievement gap and ensure all children perform on grade level in reading and mathematics by 2014, the legislation requires annual NCLB assessment of all children regardless of disability. Ninety-seven percent of children with disabilities complete state assessment with appropriate accommodations. Two percent of children with severe cognitive impairments participate in an alternate assessment. Finally, the legislation exempts 1 percent of students with the most severe disabilities from testing altogether (U.S.C. 20 § 6301).

Within the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, Congress included information that coincided with NCLB. For example, it redefined highly qualified teachers and revised state performance goals. The policy reduced paperwork for special educators and families, brought attention to homeless and mobile populations, and changed procedures for due process and the Manifestation Determination Test. In addition, the legislation provided funding for extension of infant and toddler services beyond two years (U.S.C. 20 § 6301).

Inclusion Today

One mandate within NCLB requires inclusion of 90 percent of students with special needs in the general education (GE) classroom 80 percent of the day. Due to this and potentially other factors the rate of inclusive services for children with special needs continually rises. The United States Department

of Education provided statistics for the 2004-2005 school year claiming that 52.7 percent of students

with special needs aged 6 to 21 years old were included 80 percent of the day or more. See Table 1 for

additional statistics.

Table 1

Percentage Distribution of Students with Disabilities (6-21) Served by IDEA

Year	80% or more in GE	79-40% in GE	Less than 40 in GE	Not GE school
95-96	45.3	28.7	21.6	4.4
99-00	46.0	29.7	20.3	4.1
03-04	49.9	27.7	18.5	3.9
04-05	52.1	26.3	17.5	4.0

United States Department of Education (2005)

Benefits of Inclusion

Throughout studies of inclusion and its effectiveness, researchers identified numerous benefits of

inclusive placements. For example, Katz and Mirenda (2002) reviewed the literature regarding the

benefits for students with developmental disabilities included in the general education classroom. Of

the research included, multiple articles demonstrate a positive correlation between time spent in the

regular classroom with typical peers and increased opportunities for socialization (Brinker & Thorpe,

1984). Furthermore, Hunt, Staub, Alwell, and Goetz (1994) found that when children with multiple

disabilities were included in collaborative groups and settings, they had increased communication output and motor skills behavior while typically developing students provided cues and prompts for the students. Most importantly, these students generalized their behavior and adapted to their social environment.

Interestingly, when evaluating the instructional time in both an inclusive and small group settings, researchers determined that the time spent on non-academic teaching in the small group classroom was 23 percent higher than the inclusive setting. Furthermore,

> The inclusive classrooms focused instruction to a significant extent on academics (72% of the time) as compared to the segregated settings (24% of the time). More instruction was provided by paraprofessionals and other adults in the segregated setting than in the inclusive classrooms (43% to 21% respectively); conversely, peer-peer instruction was more common in inclusive (18%) than in segregated settings (< 1%). (Katz & Mirenda, 2002, p. 16)

In addition, Alper and Ryndak (1992) and Hunt and Goetz (1997) conducted meta-analyses determining the difference between an inclusive setting and a small group setting. By determining the effect size based on the mean and standard deviations, the researchers concluded either a positive or no significant effect between the two settings. Katz and Mirenda (2002) concluded, "most of the research studies that have studied the relationship between class placement and educational outcomes have found positive effects for inclusion" (p. 15).

Struggles with Inclusion

Despite the research on the positive effects of inclusion as described above, including students with special needs in the typical classroom does come with difficulties. In a study based on perceptions surrounding inclusion, Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McMorick and Scheer (1999) found general and special education teachers demonstrated "the strong [est] positive relationship between understanding inclusion and the belief that teachers can influence students" (p. 152). However, the educators claimed

they need additional support in the area of class-size, in-service training, and time to collaborate (Buell et. al., 1999, p. 151). The researchers explained these necessitates were necessary for successful inclusion and the general education classroom by stating,

> General educators do not feel as confident in their ability to fulfill tasks needed to support
>
> inclusive education […] what is most disturbing is the reported lack of confidence in adapting
>
> materials, curriculum, managing behavior problems, giving individual assistance, and writing
>
> behavioral objectives. Of course, these are skills critical for successful inclusion, but they are also
>
> necessary to effectively teach all students. (Buell et. al, 1999, p. 153)

Furthermore, Scruggs and Mastrpieri (1996) completed a review of literature on inclusion benefits for teachers of students with special needs. The teachers reported struggles including lack of time, expertise, training, or resources to implement effective inclusion. In addition, Salend and Duhaney (1999) reviewed nineteen interviews. Seventeen of the nineteen respondents claimed they experienced an initial frustration, but a change in attitude/perceptions after having a student in an inclusive environment. One teacher stated, "this change in attitude was related to seeing how the effective instructional adaptations that they instituted for students with disabilities benefited all students" (p. 121).

Although there are drawbacks and barriers to inclusion, such as lack of training, time, and expertise, it is possible to overcome these issues. The process of inclusion is not simple. In fact, sometimes there are downfalls; however, many teachers chose to work through the pitfalls to help students succeed. In order to achieve this optimal success, practitioners use effective inclusive strategies.

Effective Inclusion

Researchers consistently report strategies and practices for effective inclusion. Etscheidt (2006) described the importance of staff development and training for improved inclusion outcomes. She

stated, "professional development activities could demonstrate how teachers and care providers in inclusive settings support young children's achievements by embedding learning opportunities that build on the child's interests" (p. 175). Furthermore, she described the need for improved readiness of inclusion. Etscheidt (2006) concluded that based on previous court, legislative, and administrative practices, much of the non-compliance occurred based on the argument that the children were not ready for the inclusive environment. Most of the readiness concerns revolved around behavior problems exhibited by the students. During the reauthorization of IDEA, Congress renamed the legislation to the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA). The revisions addressed this issue by enforcing the use of Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP). Finally, Etscheidt (2006) concluded a need for service providers to improve knowledge of available inclusive environments located near the home of the children they serve. With this additional knowledge, appropriate student placement occurs based on their students' strengths and ability levels.

Additionally, Downing, Spencer, and Cavallaro (2004) researched the development of a charter school created with a full-inclusion philosophy. Within their study, the researchers identified four themes found in strong inclusion classes. One of the four areas of critical components for successful inclusion included the following sub-themes: active parent involvement, high-quality faculty and staff, enrichment opportunities, individualization of the core curriculum, and belief in inclusion. When creating individualization of the core curriculum, "several respondents mentioned the unique qualities of each child and the need to individualize instruction and create adapted materials" (p. 16). Another of the four themes discussed in the article included positive outcomes of the inclusive environment, including acceptance of diversity, student achievement, development of friendships, positive and supportive environments, professional growth of personnel, and collaborative teaming. Furthermore, the researchers discovered improvements in academics, social skills and independence (Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004).

Beckman (2001) illustrated the importance of inclusion and collaboration by stating:

Schools with successful inclusion programs have faculties that work together. It is recognized that all teachers are specialists who bring their areas of expertise to the table when planning and making decisions about students. Classroom teachers are specialists in curriculum; special education teachers, including related service personnel, are specialists in the unique learning and behavior needs of students. Each specialist learns skills from the others with all students being the ultimate beneficiaries. (p. 4)

The concept of collaboration within inclusion allows students to benefit from all experts and professionals involved in their education. This calls for an entire educational program team to collaborate on the appropriate needs and therapies before the student ever receives interventions.

Research Design and Methods

Like in the Downing, Spencer and Cavallaro (2004) study, the first step in conducting this analysis involved identifying a school with effective inclusion practices. Briarwood Elementary (all names are pseudonyms) is a school, which opened its doors with the philosophy of full-inclusion and continues to be a model of inclusive practices.

Participants of the study were chosen using a criterion-based selection method. Creswell (1998) described this method as establishing a set of criteria before selecting participants. After selecting the site for the study, individuals who had taught inclusion for multiple years were chosen. Palmer, Stough, Burdenski, and Gonzales (2005) stated, "The most common indicator associated with the development of expertise has been that of experience, usually defined as years of experience" (p. 15). Therefore, the initial criterion for participation included having more than four years of inclusion teaching experience. Additionally, the participants were selected based on the recommendation of administrators, county employees, and observations. After identifying seven inclusion teachers and three administrators, I conducted interviews with all ten participants. Interviews were one-on-one at a location that worked

well for the participant and the researcher. Each interview was audio taped and transcribed following

each meeting. Table 2 provides specific information about each participant.

Table 2

Participant Information

Participant	Experience	Highest Degree	Degree Area	Positions
Jennifer	6	Specialist	Special Education · Mild Disabilities · Multiple/Severe	Elementary inclusion Special education lead
Tiffany	12.5	Masters	Communication Sciences and Disorders	Hospital SLP Elementary SLP
Lydia	6	Masters	Special Education · Mental Retardation · Multiple/Severe	Middle school special education Small group special education Elementary inclusion
Alice	5	Masters	Art Education	Middle school art Elementary art
Karen	15	Bachelors	Elementary Education	Elementary inclusion
Amanda	12	Masters	Elementary Education Education Leadership	Elementary inclusion
April	9	Masters	Elementary Education	Multiage inclusion
Sara	14	Masters	Bilingual Education Education Leadership	Elementary inclusion Instructional lead Area lead teacher Assistant administrator
Carden	20	Doctorate	Elementary Education French Counseling Education Leadership	Counselor Assistant administrator Assistant principal Principal
Brenda	34	Specialist	Elementary Education Education Leadership	Elementary teacher Assistant principal Principal

Participants and Context

Tolerance, Caring, Respect, Understanding, Perseverance. The large six-foot blue banners with red

lettering outlined in white, line the street of the entrance. Tall ten-foot poles hold the fabric in place

when the wind is not forcing them to sway back and forth. The shiny white words above the door read,

"Briarwood Elementary School: National School of Character."

Cotton County is the third largest county and second largest school district in the state. With slightly over one hundred thousand students, the county includes one hundred and thirteen schools. All of these schools are unique; however, several schools receive special recognition based upon of the population they serve (e.g. math and science magnets, charter schools). One school, Briarwood Elementary, is unique because it is the only full-inclusion within not only the county but also the state. Within this school, all children with and without disabilities participate in every activity together. Over the past ten years, school and county professionals placed specific emphasis on carrying out the school's devoted philosophy of educating all children together. The school holds numerous awards for the programs it offers (e.g., National School of Character and National School of Excellence); causing the program to receive much publicity due to its distinctiveness of programs offered to all students.

Participants in this research study included nine Caucasian and one African-American woman affiliated with Briarwood Elementary. All of these participants were involved with the school throughout its ten-year charter. The women held several different positions, including special education lead teacher, speech language pathologist, area lead teacher, general and special education teacher, and principal. Participants had a variety of previous experiences (i.e., counseling, hospital therapy, special education teacher). The professional experience of the participants ranged from 5 years to 34 years. One participant held a bachelor's degree, six possessed a master's, two completed a specialist, and one participant held a doctorate.

Data Collection

The data collection portion of this study involved interviews conducted within Cotton County. The interview protocol included eight open-ended questions; follow-up questions were asked if necessary. Furthermore, different events observed at Briarwood Elementary School were recorded and described in order to provide readers a visual experience of what occurs daily at the school.

Inductive Analysis

In order to give participants the freedom to create their own meaning of inclusion, inductive analysis was utilized. This procedure allows researchers to explore and discover themes grounded in the data (Patton, 2002). Interested in a phenomenon, researchers stay within the data inductively analyzing the language, actions, and environments related to the participants. The researcher's main responsibility includes understanding the new and undiscovered processes involved within the actual research. Investigators focus on the data and allow for the identification of themes. Researchers create trustworthiness while analyzing the data by either "bracketing" subjectivities or acknowledging them. Occasionally, researchers use their biases to create sound understanding of the data. Before beginning this project, I feared my passion for inclusion and previous teaching experience at Briarwood Elementary School might distort my analysis; however, acknowledging my subjectivities and using this knowledge helped me understand the data from different viewpoints. Research based in inductive analysis focuses on open-ended interviews, allowing "the respondent to describe what is meaningful and salient" (Patton, 2006, p. 56). For this study, thirty-minute interviews were completed and transcribed verbatim. Next, the transcripts were entered in the Atlas: Ti software. Then, "establish[ed] themes and correspondences between participants and comments" were established by looking for common topics and relationships (Austin, Z., Gregory, P., & Martin, J.C., 2006, p. 162).

During the analysis process, researchers code data looking for the identified themes. The coding strategy used depends on the purpose or question of the research. For example, some researchers use word-by-word or line-by-line coding. This time consuming coding procedure involves applying codes to each word or line (Strauss, 1987). Charmaz (2000) believes this coding method prevents researchers from applying their own beliefs, thoughts, and values into the data. Additionally, in-vivo coding uses the "interviewee's expressions" for labeling purposes (Flick, 2006, p. 299). Using these various strategies (i.e., line-by-line, in-vivo coding, etc.), codes were applied throughout each transcribed interview.

Because the coding methods provided multiple codes, I looked for consistencies within these categories. Following the coding process, each transcript was read for its identifying themes and main categories (Yeon Han, S. & Hill, J.R., 2007). Finally, two of the participants were again interviewed, in order to clarify questions that emerged throughout the coding process.

Regardless of the coding method used, the most important aspect of inductive analysis involves staying close and grounded to the data. This allowed me the ability to determine ongoing and reoccurring themes within the data.

Interpretation/Findings

When analyzing the data, four effective instructional practices supporting inclusion emerged from the data. These four practices included a whole child approach, performance-based assessments, use of visuals and graphic organizers, and collaboration.

Seeing the Whole Child

Standing in the quiet but vibrantly decorated hall before the early morning bell, the two blond-headed teachers wearing their royal blue and red Briarwood Elementary School Spirit Day shirts discussed the recent relief they felt about one of their students. "You know this has been a really hard year for Erica. With her parents' divorce, I was worried how she would handle the transition to first grade. I'm glad her parents kept us in the loop and worked so closely with us so we were able to provide her some extra support." Relieved as well, the special education teacher joins in, "I agree. I cannot believe the reading progress she has made too!"

Using a strength-based approach allows educators understanding of the whole child as opposed to just the deficiencies the child possesses (Reid, Epstein, Pastor, & Ryser, 2000). Participants of the study claimed this strategy allowed them to differentiate instruction in order to best meet the needs of their students. Tiffany, a speech language pathologist, comes from a medical background. She worked for multiple years within a hospital-based program. Because of her background, she believes it is

essential for program providers to look not only at the child's weaknesses, but also at the child's

interests and strengths. She declared,

> I tend to really look at the whole child from more of a full developmental standpoint […] with
>
> what they need to have to be able to learn. […] [As far as teaching the kids, because of the
>
> nature of my job, every child is looked at individually, and I truly have to differentiate […] to that
>
> child's needs.

Tiffany proclaimed the importance of individualization of the child. All children are extremely different,

and she uses the child's uniqueness to improve her instruction and better meet the their needs based

on physical and cognitive abilities.

Special education is based on the premise of individualization. From Individual Educational

Programs (IEP) to Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP), educational program teams provide

individualized assessment and instruction. April, a general education second grade teacher,

acknowledged the importance of individualization and the whole child when establishing the child's

educational program goals. She declared, "with inclusion you need to have a small group setting where

you look at the children and their needs individually and set goals for them." Furthermore, she

described a situation when inclusion failed in her classroom because she did not look at the child's

abilities when determining appropriate programs. She claimed, that the problem was "just not knowing

the child" – not being familiar with him or her – "and it backfired." This belief displayed the importance

of assessing the child's abilities and needs. Without this, she felt inclusion failed in the context of this

child.

Children entering school today come with problems and struggles that teachers have sometimes

never dealt with previously. Acknowledging this uniqueness allows teachers a better understanding of

what occurs within each child and their family. Brenda, the principal of Briarwood Elementary School

and long-term educational veteran, believed looking at the whole child allows the teachers to best meet

the student's academic needs. She reported, "We have to really tap into what the needs are of that particular child, where he is coming from. We have to have some understanding of what his life is like in order to know how we're going to approach teaching him." Using this strategy, she feels teachers understand the current level of performance and what the child is experiencing before beginning instruction. Therefore, educators have a better appreciation for the child's learning.

Looking at the whole child provides teachers with an understanding of what the child already knows and areas where he or she needs additional practice. Sara, a new administrator and former Briarwood Elementary teacher, believed looking individually at the child allowed for better instructional practices and, in turn, higher success by the students. She reflected,

> I've seen such a change in what […] society views as the typical, if you will, second grade class where all the kids come in from the same place with the same prior knowledge, and I just don't think that exists anymore. […] [We get kids from every walk of life, every different opportunity of everyday experience, and […] then, you have children in your class, let's say twenty-five of them, that are all very different. And to say that one way is going to work for all of them is really, […] is not possible in my belief. […] [If] all twenty-five are going to respond in a successful manner. […] I've got to find ways to get to know my kids and to meet their needs.

She described the diversity within classrooms; however, she illustrates the importance of looking individually at the child to better develop instruction. Furthermore, she described the importance of individual instruction to meet the needs of all the students within the classroom.

In order to have a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the child or to provide stronger instructional practices, educators assess, plan, and instruct for the whole child. Consequently, this strategy promotes each teacher's further knowledge and understanding about the child and his or her life situations.

Performance-Based Assessments

"We've been learning about how a seed becomes a flower. Today, I want you to show me the process.

We are going to do 'Sing, Make, Write and Do.' I want you to decide now how you are going to show me

that you know the process a seed goes through to become a flower. Once you decide if you want to make

up a song and sing it, use play dough to make a model, write the steps, or act it out, give me a thumb's

up. Then, we'll split into our groups for some active preparation time. "

Throughout the data, multiple participants described the use of performance-based

assessments. When students demonstrate their knowledge by performing and creating as opposed to

taking simply paper/pencil tests, students utilize multiple modality learning. Carden, a former Briarwood

Elementary administrative assistant, believed the use of performance-based assessments allowed

students to perform their understanding in ways that paper/pencil tests do not allow. She stated,

> The most effective instructional practices are those that provide an opportunity for kids to
>
> demonstrate what they know. Not all children can […] perform on a test. Not all children are
>
> capable […] of doing a project. All students, not even just special needs students, […] perform
>
> differently. For example, there is no reason to fail a student because they can't perform on a
>
> paper/pencil test. […] Some of our children are not verbal at all, but they can create a beautiful
>
> project that demonstrates understanding of the content. Other children cannot write at all, but
>
> they can verbally tell you their understanding of the content.

In her experiences, Carden saw children retained and fail because they could not perform on written

tests. She struggled with this idea because she knew the students' strengths were in other areas.

However, the use of performance-based assessment diminished this uneasiness.

These performance-based assessments encourage the use of hands-on activities and the

strengths of children. Brenda wanted her teachers completing activities with their students that allowed

them to create. She believed the best way for children to learn was not through lecture and writing but

through making. She said, "[Kids need to be doing something with their hands whenever possible. It is

not always possible, but I think […] they are not good a lot of times with a worksheet." Brenda encouraged her teachers to use multiple learning modalities in their teaching and not to measure student success simply through worksheets.

Visuals

"Let's discuss our plan for the rest of the day. I want everyone's eyes on the picture schedule right here. We just returned from lunch, so I am going to turn that over so we know we are finished with it. Jordan, can you read the rest of our schedule?" Jordan, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed 5 year old with Down syndrome, pushes himself up using his arms. In his red tennis shoes with white laces, he slowly walks his slender body over to the calendar. He points to the words and uses the visuals as a cue while he reads the schedule for the remainder of the day. "Centers, music, rest, snack, go home," Jordan states. Grinning so wide, he shows three holes from missing teeth. Jordan returns smiling to his seat.

In addition to the use of performance-based assessments, using visuals in the classroom provides additional support for students. Four participants described the use of visuals as essential in the success of children with and without disabilities. Jennifer, a former special education teacher at Briarwood Elementary, described the use of visuals as essential when working with kids with special needs. She confessed,

> I take a lot of the language out of what I am doing and make it more concrete. […] I see a lot of my students struggling […] when the concrete, […] information starts getting abstract and they can no longer visualize what it is we are talking about and […], I can put a manipulative or picture or anything [to make it more] concrete […] makes it successful when you are looking at kids with more severe needs.

By using visuals, she supports her students' strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, the use of pictures instead of words, allowed student success in academic and social areas.

Using visuals in the classroom can range from picture schedules to vocabulary cards. Children use visuals and pictures to write or simply as cues for understanding. Tiffany described the use of visuals as essential for the students she works with (e.g., children with speech and language difficulties). She stated,

> I use a lot [of] picture support with […] all of my kids. And in fact this year, in one of our classrooms I would go in during my session and do activities with picture support for the science and social studies curriculum with their whole class, they […] knew the answers. They had the pre-teaching support and the picture support, so that they had been able to […] participate in class.

She used the visuals as a way to help children communicate and further participate in the general education environment. Although she used the visuals for academic support for the students, their participation promoted not only academic success but also social/emotional benefits considering they were able to complete a task similar to their non-disabled peers.

One specific strategy participants stated in relation to visuals was the use of graphic organizers. Typically, students use these tools when organizing their thoughts and understanding around a specific topic. Brenda, the principal at Briarwood, encouraged the use graphic organizers as a visual to help students succeed. She stated, "visuals, graphic organizers, are fabulous for kids. I think most kids are very, very visual rather than auditory. I mean most adults I know are very visual. So, I think whenever teachers have visuals that kids can refer to, I think kids need that." Her belief that most children are visual learners supports the practice of using graphic organizers. Therefore, her promotion of these academic learning tools occurred on a regular basis within the school.

Numerous graphic organizers exist to support students' learning. Sara also professed a need for graphic organizers in the classroom. She expanded the need for them past simply academics, but also for teaching social skills. "Using those graphic organizers for kids that struggle academically or even

struggle with social skills, a picture to look at, something to see this is what it looks like, this is what you should be doing, is really helpful." Sara encouraged the use of graphic organizers across the curriculum when providing students a visual understanding of the content or a specific topic.

The use of visuals and graphic organizers allows students better organization of their thoughts and knowledge around a specific topic or concept. In addition, the tools assist students as visual cues encouraging participation in the classroom.

Collaboration

"I want to do a unit on dental health next month, but I am worried about some of the vocabulary from the unit," the tall, lanky, brunette teacher confesses. Pulling out a folder marked February from the shiny black file cabinet, the special education teacher pushes her small wire-rimmed glasses back with a smile and dissolves her worries: "I have plenty of resources that we can use to pre-teach some of these skills. I think the kids will be just fine."

Collaboration is a buzzword often discussed within the realm of inclusion. Participants in the study described collaboration as working together with numerous personnel to reach a common goal. Jennifer believed collaboration was essential to the success of inclusion. She declared,

> You've got to be able to collaborate with numerous personnel…the special ed teacher, the special ed para-pro, to related support. […] [So many people can come in and out of your classroom, […] working with the different needs of your students.

When working with children with special needs, Jennifer claimed chaos was inevitable without strong collaboration between professionals. Educational program teams are made up of numerous personnel; therefore, collaboration is essential to each child's success. In addition, Jennifer described an in-service training conducted within the county on various co-teaching models. She directed the same training at Briarwood for all of the faculty members as one of her special education lead teacher duties. Consequently, she requested all teachers choose a method best connected to their teaching method

and implement it within their classroom. Briarwood Elementary publicized this emphasis to parents and other schools in hopes of creating a stronger and more open, collaborative setting.

The use of collaboration creates a smooth and efficiently run classroom. Brenda explained that both the general and special education teachers work effortlessly together, guaranteeing all children meet their maximum learning potential. She stated, "[She has to be open to [collaborate] with the regular ed teacher, […] trying her best to make it look seamless when they are working together." This idea of seamless collaboration is not possible without two participants working together towards a common goal.

Although inclusion instructional practices are different from setting to setting, multiple practices encourage success. Looking at the whole child from a strengths-based approach requires teachers to focus and improve on the abilities of each child. In addition, the use of performance-based assessments allows children active participation when demonstrating their understanding of concepts. Furthermore, using visuals for academic and social support within the classroom provides students with more opportunities for participation and greater success. Specifically, graphic organizers provide a visual for students and a reference point within their learning. Finally, collaboration among all professionals responsible for student achievement is essential when creating a seamless and functional setting.

Discussion

The practices identified within this research included assessing the whole child, using performance-based assessments, the use of visuals and graphic organizers, and collaboration. All of these practices not only support children with disabilities, but they are useful for children without disabilities as well. Brenda, the most tenured participant stated, "I know that a lot of the strategies that special ed teachers employ are just as good for general ed kids, and they really benefit from those things as well." The idea of employing strategies that meet the needs of *all* students is essential when ensuring *all* students succeed.

Within the area of special education, many service providers look mainly at areas of weaknesses when working with a child with a disability (Reid, Epstein, Pastor, & Ryser, 2000). Individualized Educational Program meetings typically emphasize the chronological functioning level of the child by making comments such as, "Child X is performing at the 3 year 7 month area in verbal reasoning." These comments made to a parent who already knows their child is struggling are frustrating and degrading. Therefore, when working with a child and their family, it is important to focus on the whole child, not simply looking at the difficulties of the child, but also entertaining the areas of strength.

In addition, several program-planning guides help teachers and service providers alike to focus on the interests and strengths of a student in order to improve a child's weaknesses. For example, the Making Action Plans (MAP), Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH), and Personal Futures Planning (PFP) involves the child's entire team looking into the hopes and dreams for the child with a disability (Forest & Lusthaus, 1989; Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989; Kincaid & Fox, 2002; Pearpoint, O'Brien, & Forest, 1993; Mount & Zwernick, 1988; Kincaid & Fox, 2002). Developed to help provide a child access to the regular education classroom, the opinions of people close to the child help establish a positive understanding of the student's strengths and how to use these to improve the weaknesses. This process mimics Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory of encompassing the child with supports ranging from family to communities. This approach looks closely at the whole child within his or her ecological settings.

The idea behind performance-based assessment is not new to the field of education. Similarly to problem-based learning, the use of performance-based assessments in compulsory education is a concept taken from educating medical students (Norcini & McKinley, 2007). As expected, the use of hands-on activities and evaluation in the medical field provides the most universal understanding of a student's learning. Over the course of the past 5 to 7 years, the state moved from standards, entitled the Quality Core Curriculum, to the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS). Obviously, from its name, the

GPS promote student understanding through performance using multiple learning modalities. These performance standards came from the theory behind performance-based assessments. Parke, Lane, and Stone (2006) claim, "the assessments can provide direction for instruction and learning, provide results that allow for insights on the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum, and provide information that can improve teaching and learning" (p. 240). Some states, such as Maryland, New York, and Kentucky, developed performance-based assessments for statewide use in literacy areas. However, critics of performance-based assessments claim the tests lack standardization; therefore, the validity of the assessments is undetermined (Williams, Hetrick, & Suen, 1998). In a field such as special education where standardized measures do not always provide accurate displays of a child's ability, the use of performance-based assessments offer alternative views of a child's capabilities. Furthermore, the comfort level with regards to performance-based assessments for many practitioners lies in the purpose of the assessment. The uses of these assessments vary from progress monitoring, formative assessments, and actual graded activities.

Many of the above mentioned performance-based assessments coincide with the use of visuals. Although most research surrounding the use of visuals with students with special needs is supported in context with children with autism (Bryan & Gast, 2000; Massaro & Bosseler, 2006; Dunlap & Fox, 1999; Sansosti & Powell-Smith, 2006; Cafiero, 2005), other students demonstrate benefits as well (Spriggs, Gast & Ayres, 2007; Hunt, Alwell, & Goetz, 1991; Mirenda & Dattilo, 1987; Mizuko, 1987; Reichle & Yoder, 1985; Sevcik, Romski, & Wilkinson, 1991; Anderson, Sherman & Sheldon, 1997). The use of visuals range from picture schedules, cue cards, vocabulary word cards, and many more. In addition, graphic organizers provide a visual component useful for many children. Gallavan & Kottler (2007) claim, "graphic organizers are visual models that provide teachers and students with tools, concepts, and language to organize, understand, and apply information to achieve a variety of purposes and outcomes" (p. 117). Therefore, educators use graphic organizers for all skills ranging from literacy to art.

Numerous graphic organizers exist, as well as teacher developed ones. Furthermore, companies such as Thinking Maps created and tested the use of eight various maps that work on eight essential skills (i.e., defining context, describing with adjectives, sequencing/ordering, identifying part/whole relationships, classifying/grouping, comparing/contrasting, analyzing cause and effect, and seeing analogies). Many schools, such as Briarwood, adopt curriculum such as the Thinking Map Program for use with all of its students.

The strategies described above all deal with instructional practices, materials, and assessments used to directly enhance the academic gains of students. Indirectly, collaboration greatly affects students in a classroom. Friend and Cook (1990) define collaboration as " a style for interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal" (p. 72). Furthermore, they establish six criteria necessary for collaboration to occur within schools. These provisions include "(a) a mutual goal, (b) parity among participants, (c) shared participation, (d) shared accountability, (e) shared resources, and (f) voluntariness" (p. 72). These six requirements occurred at Briarwood in various forms. For example, general and special education pairs worked toward a mutual goal of inclusion found within the philosophy and beliefs of the school. Furthermore, as part of the school and employment responsibilities, pairs shared accountability and resources in order to successfully implement inclusive practices. Within full disclosure, teachers claimed they did not always choose their partner; however, they did have a voice in the decision-making process.

As the music plays over the school-wide speakers, students begin to cheer loudly. The principal and assistant principal march forward with a yellow sign professing the words "Good-bye Fifth Grade" in blue and red. The principal rings a large golden bell indicating the end of the school year. The fifth graders full of wide bright smiles and tears of joy continue the path lead by the administration. The students in kindergarten through fourth grade clap loudly, pointing out their siblings and friends. One second grade teacher sprints up and down the chaotic group of fifth graders giving high fives. A first grade teacher

runs out into the crowd hugging her students from her first year of teaching. Tears roll down her face as she recalls the struggles they experienced with a novice teacher. The parade continues out the door of the school into the line of bright yellow busses marked Cotton County Schools. The students board the bus as all the teachers line the concrete sidewalk waving exhaustedly to the students as they depart for the summer.

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