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Voices of Classroom Managers: Their Realities of Full Inclusion

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of the three regular education teachers about full inclusion practice in a metropolitan elementary school. This study was intentionally designed as a participatory and constructivistic inquiry. Through the process of classroom observations, participant observations and in-depth interviews, this study was attempted to answer three research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of regular education teachers who participate in the full inclusion program? (2) What are their perceptions about student learning? and (3) What are the advantages and disadvantages of full inclusion? Findings revealed three themes that were related to the participants' emotional reactions in implementing full inclusion, their perceptions about student learning, and their viewpoints about full inclusion. Implications for successful full inclusion program were discussed.

Voices of Classroom Managers: Their Realities of Full Inclusion

Introduction

Inclusion remains a controversial concept in education (Stout & Huston, 2007). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as amended in 2004, does not require inclusion. However, IDEA does require school districts to place students with disabilities in a least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE means that, to the maximum extent appropriate, school districts must educate students with disabilities along with their nondisabled peers. The IDEA contemplates that the LRE is the regular education classroom. In developing the Individual Education Program (IEP) for a child with disabilities,

the IDEA requires the IEP team to consider placement in the regular education classroom as the starting point in determining the appropriate placement for the child. If it is determined that the regular education classroom is not the LRE appropriate for the child, the team has to justify and explain why the setting is not appropriate. Nonetheless, the law does not specify how far schools must go for including a child with disabilities in the regular setting.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act furthers the integration of special education with regular education (Sailor & Roger, 2005). First, NCLB makes clear that all children in public education are regular education students. Second, the law is firmly anchored in accountability and stresses on adopting instructional strategies which are based on scientific research to ensure student achievements. In addition, NCLB requires all public school students to participate in annual testing, including students with disabilities (Cortiella, 2005). The Act mandates that those students who are covered under the IDEA or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act must be provided the appropriate accommodation necessary to participate in these tests. As a result, because of the requirements of the laws and regulations, inclusion becomes the trend which allows students with disabilities to gain greater access to the general education curriculum (Jackson, Harper, & Jackson, 2002).

Inclusion can be full inclusion or partial inclusion. For the purposes of this study, full inclusion is defined as the situation where all students, regardless of the condition of disabilities or severity, will be in a regular classroom full time. All services must be taken to the child in that setting (Stout, 2001). Partial inclusion or inclusion refers to the situation where some of the time, the students with disabilities are removed from the regular education classroom for special education or related services (Smoot, 2004).

Statement of Questions

This qualitative study was an outgrowth of my involvement as a special educator in Urban Elementary School (pseudonym). After 3 years of partial inclusion, the Superintendent and the Director

of the Division of Student Support Services of the school district finally commanded Urban Elementary to carry out full inclusion in school year 2005-2006. During the time that this study was conducted, Urban Elementary had just started full inclusion for one school semester.

This study was intentionally designed as a participatory and constructivistic inquiry. Through the process of classroom observations, participant observations and in-depth interviews, this study was attempted to answer three research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of regular education teachers who participate in the full inclusion program? (2) What are their perceptions about student learning? and (3) What are the advantages and disadvantages of full inclusion?

Review of Literature

Daane, Beirne-Smith, and Latham (2001) in their recent study stated that as inclusion required the collaboration between regular and special education, researchers should analyze the phenomenon of classroom teachers' and administrators' perceptions about including students with disabilities in regular education settings. Because school administrators and teachers were responsible for inclusion in schools, it was imperative that their perceptions be recognized by policy makers. In their study, the perceptions of the school administrators and teachers toward inclusive education of a school system were investigated through a questionnaire survey and individual interviews. The research findings indicated that the perceptions of the three groups were mixed. They agreed that regular education and special education teachers were cooperatively planning Individual Education Programs (IEPs) and using team teaching in the general education classroom. However, they believed that regular education teachers and special education teachers did not feel comfortable collaborating with each other. Moreover, all three groups disagreed that students with disabilities could receive effective instruction in the inclusive classroom. They recognized that the presence of students with disabilities in the inclusive setting increased the instructional load of the regular education teacher. Not only was the instructional load heavier, but also both groups of teachers indicated that there were more management problems

when students with disabilities were placed in the regular education classroom. However, the administrators disagreed. In addition, all three groups agreed that regular education teachers were not prepared for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Lastly, all three groups disagreed with the idea that students with disabilities achieved more academic success in the regular education classroom.

Moreover, limited qualitative research has been conducted to examine the perceptions and attitudes of educators toward full inclusion. In a study, Haver (1997) employed a symbolic interactionist framework to investigate the ways in which inclusion might change the working lives of classroom teachers, and to explore how teachers made sense of these changes. The findings revealed that there were conflicting understandings about their teaching purposes in their use of time, space, and curriculum. Organizational and personal obstacles to communication were also discovered.

In another ethnographic study, the perceptions of fifth and sixth grade students with learning disabilities who were participating in an inclusion special education program were addressed (Ritter, Michel, & Irby, 1999). The study also examined the perspectives of their parents, as well as their regular education teachers, in order to gain an understanding of the effects of this inclusion program upon the students. The analysis of transcribed parent and student interviews uncovered five themes. They were: (a) increased self confidence, (b) camaraderie, (c) support of the teachers, (d) poor self-esteem in the special education classes, and (e) high expectations. The study also analyzed the focus group transcriptions. The themes revealed were (a) increased student confidence, (b) interventions to accommodate learning and teaching, and (c) improved academic progress of students with special needs.

Methodology

Research Approach

I chose a phenomenological approach to understand the meanings of full inclusion from the regular education teachers' perspective. "Researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to

understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 23).

Urban Elementary School

This qualitative study was undertaken in a metropolitan public elementary school, Urban Elementary School. The school was located in a low socio-economic community of a southern state. It served about 470 students from Pre-Kindergarten through second grade. The student population was 100% African Americans. At the time of my research, Urban Elementary was in the second school semester of adopting full inclusion practice.

This was my third year teaching at Urban Elementary as a second grade special education teacher. I was a resource teacher for the first two years where the students with disabilities were pulled out from the regular education settings to the resource room on a daily basis. These students with disabilities would join their peers in the homeroom for social studies, science, physical education, music, library, computer lab, and science lab. When the students with disabilities were included in their homeroom for social studies and science, the regular education teacher and I would co-teach the lesson. In addition, those students with exceptionalities which were able to keep up with the general education curriculum were placed in the regular education classroom on a full time basis. They were classified as students under monitoring.

Our principal was informed about the decision of full inclusion by the Central Office of the School System near the end of the last school year (2004-2005). In May 2005, I had an opportunity to share my concerns with the Director of Division of Student Support Services. She informed me that full inclusion could be implemented even with one special education teacher and one para-professional. She suggested placing the low functioning students with disabilities in two regular education classrooms while evenly distributing the students who were under monitoring in the other three regular education classrooms.

At the beginning of school year 2005-2006, I was involved in making suggestions to place students with disabilities in the two designated regular education classrooms. At that time, each classroom room had six students with disabilities; and four students who were under monitoring were placed in the other three classrooms. My para-professional and I assisted in the two regular education classrooms for English Language Arts and Math. We also rotated among the five classrooms for Social Studies and Science.

The situation changed rapidly when more and more students were qualified for special education services. In October, 2005, there were 22 students with disabilities in the second grade. One of the three regular education classrooms, which were not designated for full inclusion, had six students with disabilities. My para-professional and I had to rotate among four regular education classrooms. Because there were only two special education personnel in the second grade, the regular education teachers were left in their classroom without assistance from time to time. I earnestly called for help. Finally, the decision was made that a pre-kindergarten special education teacher would have the IEP authority of these six students. The arrangement released me from rotating to the fourth classroom. In this way, more instructional time could be allocated to the students with disabilities in the three regular education classrooms. During the time of the study, there were five second grade regular education classes with 22 students in each classroom.

Participants

The participants in this study were 3 second grade regular education teachers. Their average years of teaching experience were 7.7. All three teachers had 3 years of partial inclusive education experience. Teacher A and Teacher B were the two teachers who were chosen at the beginning of the school year to have full inclusive education in their classrooms. Teacher C was the teacher who later also had six students with disabilities in her classroom. Teacher C received assistance from the Pre-K special education teacher and her two para-professionals since November, 2005. All of these teachers have

students with diverse disabilities in their inclusive classrooms. There were students with specific learning disabilities and some with mild mental impairment. Some students with disabilities were very high functioning, but some were having behavior problems.

Data Collection

The research method of this study employed classroom observation, participant observation, and the audio-taping of semi-structured interviews. As a special education teacher involved in the study, informal participant observation was an ongoing process. I conducted 4 hours of classroom observation and participation observation and nearly 2 hours of in-depth interview with the participants. The questions in the interviews focused on the participants' perspectives about the implementation of full inclusion in Urban Elementary, full inclusion and student learning, and their stress in teaching inclusive classes.

Data Analysis

In the process of data analysis, I handled the data mechanically. The data were analyzed inductively. I went through all the data and marked each unit with the appropriate coding category. I looked for words and phrases. From the field notes drawn from the classroom observations and participant observations, four coding categories were developed. These categories were: (a) setting/context codes, (b) activity codes, (c) event codes, (d) process codes, and (e) strategy codes. From the interview transcripts, eight coding categories were identified. They were: (a) participants' way of thinking about training and in-services, (b) participants' perspectives of full inclusion, (c) participants' frustrations about full inclusion, (d) advantages of full inclusion, (e) disadvantages of full inclusion, (f) participants' coping strategies, (g) student learning, and (h) suggestions to administrators. These codes were then clustered into concepts. The concepts were organized by themes.

Analysis and Interpretation

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of the 3 regular education teachers about full inclusion practice in Urban Elementary. In this study, three themes emerged from the data collected. These themes were related to the participants' emotional reactions in implementing full inclusion, their perceptions about student learning, and their viewpoints about full inclusion.

Theme 1: Frustration about Full Inclusion

All of the three regular education teachers who were teaching in a full inclusive classroom felt frustrated about full inclusion. Their frustrations arose from different aspects concerning full inclusion, from the initial preparation to the implementation of this new education practice in Urban Elementary.

Teacher A was frustrated because she felt that the school district did not provide sufficient training and information for full inclusion. In the words of Teacher A:

I did not feel like it was really in-service. How can you tell me in one hour how to deal with these children?! ... I feel like it wasn't fair because they (school district) had not even given us any instruction on how to get started... it wasn't really organized. I wasn't happy with it. But this is the first year. So, I'm hoping it will get better.

Her frustration was intensified by the introduction of comprehensive curriculum this school year. Teacher A said:

Comprehensive curriculum - I still feel it's almost the same as inclusion. We did not have a good head start. We did not have time to prepare. We didn't know what we were getting into. It's like they just threw it to us at the last minutes right before the school was about to start... I am not prepared to teach the regular children. You know that I wasn't prepared to teach the inclusion children. So, I feel like this year I wasn't able to really give the inclusion children what they needed.

As for Teacher B, her frustration stemmed from planning and testing. In the interview, Teacher B expressed her concerns: "Planning is one because you really have to take them into consideration. How can you teach a lesson so that all of these children can get it? And, testing is another frustration." Teacher B, in fact all regular education teachers, were required to do the test modifications for the students with disabilities in their classrooms. The modifications for testing and assignments were no longer only prepared by the special education teachers.

In addition, Teacher B was frustrated because some of the students could not make enough academic progress. She thought that the students with disabilities and some regular education students who experienced academic difficulties were not getting enough assistance in an inclusive classroom. Teacher B said, "That's really frustrating because I don't think that they are not getting what they should in terms of mastery. I don't feel like they are achieving that."

Moreover, another issue that made Teacher B feel frustrated was that her opinions would not be heard by any administrator or policy maker. She felt that the administrators at the school board office or policy makers would not even ask for the opinion of the teachers. She thought that it was a "lost cause".

As for Teacher C, her frustration came from the lack of collaborative efforts. The Pre-K special education personnel did not want to be engaged in the second grade full inclusion practice. Teacher C shared her concerns candidly:

The Pre-K special ed. (teacher and paraprofessionals)... do not want to be in second grade, and so they do (provide) the minimum help... She (the Pre-K special education teacher) keeps saying that she doesn't want to be there. I believe her work shows and so... that frustrates me... They are not being a team and helping.

Teacher C was also frustrated by the new state-wide policy of comprehensive curriculum. She also had the same feeling as Teacher A, “I think they started too much in one year. Yes, (I) frustrated about that.”

Theme 2: Full Inclusion did not benefit Student Learning

Because of the frustration that Teacher A felt about being un-informed and un-prepared, she considered that her students were not making the expected academic progress. In the interview, Teacher A remarked:

I feel like they are losing out this year because if I am not really prepared to teach that curriculum to the regular children, you know that they are left behind. Or, they didn't get what they needed. And, that's sad.

Teacher A believed that since she had to devote part of her instructional time to help those students who experienced academic difficulties, both students of regular education and special education, she could not spend time with the gifted students in her inclusive classroom. Teacher A believed that, “The most disadvantaged group in the school is the gifted and smart kids because you are holding them back when you don't have time to (teach them).”

Teacher B believed that the academic nature of the general education curriculum hindered the success of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Teacher B said, “The curriculum goes at a faster pace for them. It's too quick for them. So, even with the assistance that you receive, the skills are the harder skills (too hard) for the children to get.”

Teacher C also had similar opinions about student learning as Teacher A. She thought that her regular education students were suffering because she had to spend her instructional time with her special education students. Further, she had not enough time to provide enrichment activities for her high functioning students. She commented, “I have not spent a lot of time with the ones who are high functioning (that) I have this year. I felt really guilty about it.”

Moreover, student behavior was another factor which hindered instruction. Inclusive regular education teachers had to deal with students with behavior problems who are in regular education or special education. Teacher A had a student with behavior difficulties in her room. This student demanded a lot of the instructional time. Teacher A said:

Every time you have to stop and write a referral... send the child out or deal with the discipline problem... we can lose the entire lesson. By the time you finish writing the IEP (referral), getting the child to the office, or whatever, you lost the entire lesson. I do have a para in there. That helps. But still the lesson is stopped...everybody stops and looks at that child.

In a classroom observation in Teacher B's inclusive classroom, Teacher B had to stop teaching to handle a regular education student who did not have his medication.

Teacher B walked up to the seat of Michael and moved him to the back table. Teacher B whispered to me that Michael did not have his medication.

The same scenario happened in Teacher C's classroom. Teacher C was interrupted by two regular education students while she was helping a student to complete the seatwork.

Teacher C worked with Mary, an 8-year-old Black student, sitting next to Student 6 (a student with disabilities). I heard Teacher C saying something like, "Remember 'gh', 'i' is long i." Meanwhile, I noticed that Keith and Marcus were talking. They were sitting on the same row of Johnny and Nadia.

Then, David and Felicia started to argue over a pencil. They were sitting on the right side of the room, next to the wall. David held up the pencil. Felicia said, "The pencil is mine." Teacher C raised her voice and said, "David, if it is not yours, don't touch it." David left the pencil on his desk and Felicia took it back.

Theme 3: Full Inclusion was not "One Size Fits All"

All of the three participants believed that full Inclusion was not for every student with disabilities. Teacher A and Teacher B suggested that full inclusion may benefit high functioning students with disabilities, owing to the pace and the requirements of the general education curriculum. As for Teacher C, she believed that full inclusion might not be appropriate for students of lower elementary grades. She thought that it would be better to build up their academic foundation first before including them in an inclusive classroom. Teacher C said:

I think the younger (students with disabilities), you know, you give them the help they need. They would not need it when they get older... because I had students in the past when I first started teaching second grade that were really low (at) the beginning of the year. And, when they left my class the next year, they would just have to receive monitoring from the special ed. services. And I am not having any of my students this year going to be like that. So, I don't recommend full inclusion next year.

All of the participants suggested going back to the practice of partial inclusion where the students with disabilities would be served in the resource room. They believed that a resource room setting could meet the special needs of the students. The regular education teachers and special education teachers could still co-teach in Science and Social Studies classes.

Findings

Analysis of the data revealed a picture of the attitudes and behavior of the three regular education teachers as they considered full inclusion at Urban Elementary. There were three themes emerged from the data. All of the three teachers felt frustrated about implementing full inclusion practice in their classroom. Their frustrations stemmed from several sources including lack of training, frustrations in planning and test modifications, not being heard, underachievement of students, and lack of collaborative effort from special education staff.

The second theme was full inclusion did not benefit student learning. The academic achievement of students with disabilities was hindered by the pace and the requirements of the general education curriculum. The participants also saw student behavior as an impediment to inclusion. In the past when there was partial inclusion, students with disabilities who also had behavior problems would spend most of the day in the resource room. Now with the full inclusion practice, these students were included in the regular education classrooms. Difficult behaviors overwhelmed teachers, adding to the stress they already felt about making instructional accommodations.

In addition, all of the 3 participants believed that full inclusion was not for every student with disabilities. Because of the nature of the general education curriculum, only high functioning students with disabilities could keep up with the pace of the curriculum and make progress. One teacher even asserted that full inclusion was not appropriate for students of lower elementary grades.

It was noted that the participants could not articulate the advantages of full inclusion regarding student learning. One teacher found that the only advantage was she could receive assistance from the special educator in her classroom more regularly. Two teachers mentioned about improved student self-esteem. Nevertheless, they were not certain because the students with disabilities still would leave the room for tutoring, reinforcement, and attending literacy intervention classes

As far as coping strategies were concerned, two teachers admitted that they did not cope with their frustrations very well. One teacher stated that she sent letters to parents to have teacher-parent conferences to deal with student misbehavior. This strategy helped her to reduce stress tremendously. The same teacher would also ask other teachers for teaching strategies. She conducted Internet research to find skill builder activities for her struggling students.

Implications and Conclusions

For effective inclusion policies to be implemented in schools, teachers and administrators must become partners, actively working together to build a successful program (Hamill, 1999). The

administration needs to show serious interest in creating a structure for implementing inclusion which teachers perceive as supporting their efforts and interests. Administrator enthusiasm would empower the teachers and give them confidence to eagerly address the challenges of inclusion. They also need to provide sufficient resources for hiring support staff and for professional development on inclusion. In addition, parents' role is more important than with traditional education models. Parents should be involved in the planning. Parents, teachers, and administrators need to be involved as a team and share responsibility for various activities.

Moreover, team teaching is an essential characteristic of inclusion program (Brown, 1997). No one person can meet all the needs of a student with disabilities. Team teaching facilitates inclusion. Educators are more likely to support an inclusion program if they have support from other school personnel.

While this study has illuminated the perspectives of the regular education teachers who participate in the full inclusion practice, it does not expose all the other perspectives of school staff. Further research could explore the perspectives of the special education teachers, Lead Inclusion Teacher, and School Principal about full inclusion program. It would be interesting to investigate how to improve full inclusion program in Urban Elementary from their perspectives.

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