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**JOURNEY TO INCLUSION: A SCHOOL'S PERSPECTIVE FROM SELF-
CONTAINED ECSE CLASSROOMS TO INCLUSIVE PRESCHOOL
PROGRAMS**

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

December 2015

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My capstone is dedicated to my husband Robert and my supportive family and friends.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A Success Story

Aaron (name changed) was identified as a child with a disability, Autism Spectrum Disorders, in June of 2012. He was 2 ½ years old at the time. He transitioned into my self-contained (only special education student class) in the fall of 2012. At that time, he had no language and little interaction with peers or adults in the classroom. For the next two years, Aaron made progress but it was very slow. At the end of the 2013-2014 school year, Aaron continued to work on increasing his functional language skills.

He had been using a Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) book during snack to request his desired food. He was very independent with this and able to make a four-word sentence and verbalize each word when using the pictures. He was able to label many objects and was starting to initiate and point out pictures in books. He liked to imitate actions, especially if they were silly. Occasionally he would protest if a peer interfered with his play. He did so by making loud/angry noises that were not real words. When prompted, Aaron would imitate the correct words to use. He did not spontaneously ask for help or request desired objects. Any functional language that Aaron used had been learned and patterned. His social skills were limited. He preferred to play by himself and would routinely pick out his favorite toy and move to a part of a room with no other children.

In the fall of 2014, Aaron's team (Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) teacher, Speech/Language Pathologist, Occupational Therapist, and Parents) determined

that an inclusive classroom with typical-developing peers and special education peers would be the best placement for Aaron. This proved to be the right choice. Aaron was placed in a school readiness preschool program three days a week and in a Head Start preschool program four mornings a week. During his time in these classrooms, his special education team supported him. By Christmas break there was a huge improvement in Aaron's communication and social skills. This was attributed to his ability to have typical developing peers in his class as models. He would watch the other children play and eventually imitate them and even began using his own imaginative play. In four months, Aaron's communication skills had moved from a level of imitation to using four or more word phrases to request, protest, and have conversations with peers and adults. This is just one of many success stories that I have personally witnessed since implementing inclusion preschools in our school district.

ECSE and Me

I began my love for the Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) profession when I was in high school. As a student teacher for my former Kindergarten teacher, I worked very closely with a few children in the classroom who had disabilities. I really enjoyed working with these children and formed a bond with them. At that time in my life I was looking for a college to attend and trying to figure out what I wanted to do. My mother, a former preschool teacher, noticed my love for working with children with special needs so we searched for schools that offered that degree. I graduated from the University of Wisconsin- Stout with a Bachelors of Science degree in Early Childhood Education with a concentration in Early Childhood Special Education in April of 2009.

During my time at Stout, I worked in an inner city second grade classroom, a suburban Kindergarten classroom and an ECSE classroom in a large city. I loved both my Kindergarten and ECSE placements but was still unsure of what area I would like to teach. I applied to many positions in the state of Minnesota, from ECSE all the way up to third grade. I interviewed at a few places and was offered a job in a small rural town as an ECSE teacher. I accepted the position very unsure if it was what I wanted to do with my life. But have quickly learned that it is exactly what I am supposed to do. I love everything about ECSE; from individual and small group work, working with parents, working with the children and watching them grow to paperwork (I do not always love this) and working with a variety of teachers in the building.

Having taught as an Early Childhood Special Education teacher for the past six years, I have started to notice that within a year or two of qualifying for special education services, many children have mastered all their goals and exit the program. Like Aaron, many other children have increased their skills dramatically after being a part of an inclusion preschool program. This makes me believe that many times it is not disposition or genetics but instead environmental factors that determine a learner's progress.

Capstone

My capstone purpose is to define key components to help schools help students transition from a self-contained Early Childhood Special Education classroom to a full inclusion preschool program. While defining the transition, I will note strengths and barriers that come along with this huge paradigm shift in preschool programming.

When I began teaching in 2009, my building principal and I spent time visiting other preschools in the area who were starting to implement inclusion preschools. For the next four years, nothing was done in terms of making our preschool programs more inclusive. I took it upon myself to approach our new special education director to push for more inclusion opportunities for our preschool students. She informed me that I could begin to offer these opportunities to some students.

In the fall of 2014, 88% of our students with special needs were attending a regular education classroom. Of those students 62% were only attending a preschool for regular education students. I had two students who did not attend a regular education classroom because both of those students transitioned to the ECSE classroom as two year olds and had no option for regular education programming. All of my students for the 2015-2016 school year will be in inclusion classrooms with the support of special education staff.

During the 2014-2015 school year, I have seen huge progress in my students who are attending the regular education classroom. The two areas in which I have seen the most progress are communication and social skills. I believe communication and social skills to be affected the most because my ECSE students now have typical peers in the classroom to model play and conversation skills for them. This change has proven to be effective not just for students with special needs but also for the other students. The other students in the classroom are sometimes pulled for small group instruction with the special education staff and therefore are getting more one-on-one attention as well.

Last year, a parent came to me worrying about how their child might not do well in a regular education preschool. She was worried that the other children would make fun of her daughter due to her small size and limited communication skills. After the first day of school, I was able to tell the mother that not only did her daughter fit in with the class but the other children sought her out to play with them and wanted to help her when she could not do something independently.

Conclusion

The next few chapters will encompass my journey; defining what is a successful inclusive preschool program, the best strategies for these programs, the benefits and barriers to the programs, and how to best implement these programs into other schools.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

The following literature review seeks to answer the question: How can a school effectively transition from a self-contained Early Childhood Special Education classroom to a full inclusion preschool program; and what are the strengths and barriers that accompany this huge paradigm shift in preschool programming.

The research defines inclusion and explores the history of inclusion. It looks at strengths and barriers that may be found when trying to implement inclusion into a school's preschool programs. The research incorporates information from field experts who explain how inclusion may look and the types of supports that will be needed in order to sustain a program.

History of Inclusion

Special Education is defined as “special designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (Including Children with Disabilities in State Pre-K Programs, 2010, p.2).” Children ages 3-5 qualify for special education services under the 2004 Part B of The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These children can qualify under multiple ways, the most prevalent being a developmental delay, meaning they have a delay (scoring 1.5 standard deviations below the mean) in two or more areas- (cognitive, motor, communication, adaptive, or social/emotional) of development. Once a child qualifies for special education services, they are now known

as a child with a disability. This is “defined in IDEA as a child with at least one of ten specifically defined physical, emotional, learning or cognitive disabilities and who, by reason of the condition, needs special education and related services.” (Including Children with Disabilities in State Pre-K Programs, 2010, p. 2).”

As soon as a child qualifies for services, the child’s “team” must develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for the child. A child’s team consists of their parents, a school district representative, a general education teacher (if they have one), their case manager, a special education teacher who has a license in the disability area, as well as any related services (speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy etc.) that the child may receive. This document is a plan containing goals and objectives specific to that individual child. Also, included in the document are the child’s present levels of performance, service time, adaptations and modifications needed to help the child access the general education curriculum, and the least restrictive environment (LRE) for the child to receive their education. “Part B of IDEA requires schools to support inclusion for children with disabilities from ages 3-21 through the LRE (Gupta, Henninger & Vinh, 2014, p. 23).”

Another major component to qualifying for special education services is making sure to provide free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all children. This can become tricky when looking at services for children not yet in Kindergarten. “An insufficient number of inclusive programs explains, at least in part, why states are not meeting their obligation to educate pre-K children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment” (Including Children with Disabilities in State Pre-K Programs, 2010, p.6).”

Due to a lack of preschool programs, many children with special needs are not always able to be serviced in the most advantageous inclusive environment.

The history of inclusion for students with special needs begins with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and also Part B of IDEA 2004. Both of these laws required that schools consider providing services to children with disabilities in settings where they would be included with their typical developing peers (Gupta, Henninger, & Vinh, 2014). For the United States, “the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975” paved the way to more inclusive services in the school setting and pushed the focus away from separate classrooms for children with disabilities (Hamaidi, Homidi, & Reyes, 2012, p.94). Federal regulations and many state laws require that children with disabilities be included side by side with their typically developing peers. The legal mandate of this was “extended to preschool age children in the United States with the reauthorization of IDEA in 1990” (Hernandez, 2013, p.481). According to Horn and Sandall (2000),

The requirements in PL 99-457, that all states provide public education for three to five year old children with disabilities beginning in the 1991/1992 school year resulted in increased pressure on many local school systems to find age appropriate early education settings. Most public school systems do not have readily available, typical preschool settings because they do not regularly provide services to three and four year old children without disabilities. Even those systems that may provide some preschool services frequently have separate

administrative structures and service standards for these and the special education programs. p. 49-50

Since the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, there has been an increase in the number of children ages 3-5 with disabilities who attend a typical early childhood preschool for at least 10 hours a week. According to Gupta, Henninger, & Vinh (2014), in 2005, 34% of children served under Part B of IDEA were attending a typical early childhood program. Since the creation of IDEA and No Child Left Behind, there has been great progress in the amount of inclusion being offered to 3-5 year old students with disabilities.

Although there have been many regulations put into place for educating children with disabilities, there have been no laws created to mandate inclusion. The support for inclusion from federal and state laws is clear, but without mandates, the process has been slow. “The purpose of the law is to discourage settings that separate children with disabilities and their families from places and activities that are used if the children did not have disabilities.”(McWilliam, 2000, p.17) Preschool programs are not allowed to deny placement to children based on their disability or the severity of the disability, but many programs will deny these children if there is not special education support for them. One program that does mandate entry for children with disabilities into their classes is Head Start. A unique feature of this program is that 10% of the program’s enrollment is dedicated or reserved for children with disabilities (Gupta, Henninger, & Vinh, 2014). This is a rare circumstance. Head Start is one of very few programs that mandate a percentage of enrollments for children with special needs.

According to Diamond and Stacey (2000), there are more than 1.5 million children in a preschool setting attending school with a child identified with a disability. “The percentage of preschoolers with special needs in each state who receive services in their inclusive settings range from as low as 9% to as high as nearly 90%” (Richardson-Gibbs & Klein, 2014, p.4). Gupta, Henninger, & Vinh (2014) reported that,

In 2011, 464,720 or 62% of children served under part B of IDEA attended a typical early childhood program. However, only 41% of all children with disabilities ages 3-5 received their special education and related services in a typical early childhood program. This means that most children are enrolled in typical early childhood programs but are not receiving their services within that program. (p.25)

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) has set a target goal for children with disabilities who are serviced in self-contained (special education only) classes to be at 19% or lower (Griebel, LaFramboise, Mercado, & Meyer, 2015). This means that MDE’s target is for 81% of preschool students to be attending a regular education preschool program. Although there is a goal of 81%, the current rate is 36% involved in regular preschool programming (Including Children with Disabilities in State Pre-K Programs, 2010). There is definitely room for improvement. In order to increase these numbers, one must first define “what is inclusion?”\

What is Inclusion?

Inclusion can be defined in many ways. First, it is not “simply placing students with special needs in a general education setting”(Spaulding & Flannagan, 2012, p.14). According to Hernandez (2013), “Inclusion is the placement and education of every student with disabilities in the general education classroom.” (p.480) Gupta, Hemminger, & Vinh (2014), reported that “Inclusion is the right that values the membership and participation of children with disabilities in typical settings.” (p.9) The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children Position on Inclusion states, “Inclusion, as a value, supports the right of all children, regardless of abilities, to participate actively in natural settings within their communities.” (Sandall & Ostrosky, 2000, p.1)Diamond & Stacey (2000), stated, “Inclusion is a life-long process that has the goal of full participation for children and adults within education, community, activities, and work.”(p.59) Another definition by Spaulding and Flannagan (2012), said, “Inclusion is educating students alongside their general education peers.” (p.14) Lastly, Catlett (2009) reported,

Early Childhood inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships, and friendships and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining feature of

inclusion that can be used to identify high quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports. p.2

It has been reported by Cate, Diefendorf, McCullough, Peters, & Whaley (2010), Catlett (2009), and Hanline & Correa-Torres (2012), that access, participation and supports are all needed for inclusion. Accessibility in a regular education preschool program means that “all children can interact with materials, activities, teachers, and peers to the fullest extent possible and with equal frequency and enjoyment”(Watson & McCathren, 2009, p.2). This may involve altering or modifying items in the environment so that all children can access them.

Supports have been defined as infrastructure of a system. These supports must be available in order to provide inclusion services for children and families. According to Cate, Diefendorf, McCullough, Peters, & Whaley (2010), “Participation” is defined as accommodating and providing supports so that all children are able to participate in the general education classroom with both peers and adults.

Gupta, Henninger, & Vinh (2014) discuss many elements of inclusion but specifically focus on key points from their research that they deemed beneficial to making inclusion work.

- Inclusion can benefit children with and without disabilities.
- Factors such as child characteristics, policies, resources, and attitudes influence the acceptance and implementation of inclusion.

- Specialized instruction is an important component of inclusion and a factor affecting child outcomes.
- Collaboration among parents, teachers, and specialists is a cornerstone of high-quality inclusion. (p. 72)

Now that we understand what inclusion is, we need to take a closer look at how to implement inclusion and what it might look like.

What does Inclusion Look Like?

There are many ways that inclusion can be achieved. What is chosen for each individual program is dependent on the children being serviced, the staffing, parent input, and how to best serve all children in the classroom. When setting up the inclusive environment, “strategies such as adapting instruction, modifying tasks, using different materials, and making changes to classroom structures” (McKinley & Stormont, 2008, p.14-15) will all need to be considered. The special education staff will have to work closely with the regular education staff to make a smooth transition into inclusive programming.

When looking at inclusion preschool options, collaboration is essential. Hernandez (2013) stated that all teachers need to “possess skills that contribute to collaboration.” He views collaboration as a beneficial tool for helping teachers and other staff work with children with disabilities. One “key principle to effective collaboration was having professionals within a school combine their expertise to create a multitude of options for students with special needs (Hernandez, 2013, p.490).” When learning new

plans and resolving challenges practitioners need to be able to collaborate. “Key ingredients for successful collaboration include the following: time, trust, flexibility, a shared goal and understanding, and anticipation and management” (Gupta, Henninger & Vinh, 2014, p. 130) When professionals are able to work together and collaborate it is shown to produce better outcomes for children in early childhood settings.

Cate, Diefendorf, McCullough, Peters, & Whaley (2010) put it best when they stated,

Collaboration is the cornerstone to effective inclusive programs. Forming partnerships between professionals and parents with children of special needs is like learning a new dance. The real dance of partnership occurs when all listen to each other’s music, try out each other’s dance steps, and work toward a new dance that involves the contributions of partners! (p.27)

It is clear that collaboration is a huge piece to the success of starting an inclusion preschool process.

There are also many different ways in which that collaboration may happen. One way to collaborate is by co-teaching, cooperative teaching or collaborative teaching. In this model the general education teacher and the special education teacher deliver the instruction content together in an inclusive setting (Hernandez, 2013). Another model would be bringing typical children into an ECSE setting. This is also called reverse mainstreaming and would not be a preferred outcome if the goal is to move towards an inclusion model.

Another setting would be an itinerant teacher model where children with special needs are placed in a typical preschool setting and provided special education services during certain parts of their day (Horn & Sandall, 2000). In the itinerant teacher model, children may receive services through pull-out (small group work outside of the regular education classroom) or push-in (embedding goals/objectives into the student's daily schedule).

Another method would be parallel teaching. In this model, the inclusion class would be divided into two sections and both the special education teacher and the regular education teacher would teach the same content at the same time, just to smaller groups. Station teaching is also another method. It occurs when the teachers develop learning centers or stations and both the special education teacher and regular education teacher monitor and facilitate the learning (Spaulding & Flannagan, 2012). Lastly, is what Richardson-Gibbs & Klein (2014) referred to as the "dump and hope method." Here children with special needs are placed in a regular education classroom with no support from special education staff. Again, this would not be the best practice.

Successful Inclusion Practices

Successful inclusion practices start with placing children with disabilities in a regular education classroom. It is important to include students with diverse disabilities into each inclusion classroom (Blanton, 2009). According to Nylander (2009), inclusive settings should be the first option when considering placement for children with special needs. Although this placement may be best for most children with special needs, it is not "the ideal placement for every child with special needs at every moment of their

educational life” (Richardson-Gibbs & Klein, 2014, p.4). Both special education and regular education teachers need to be a part of the decision making in order to have a buy-in to the inclusion program.

When making the decision to place a child in an inclusion setting, one must look at many factors. Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, & Connor (2008) reported that “program quality, specific child characteristics, family goals, professional advice, and receptivity and experience of the educational and program staff” (p.238) are some of the main factors a team must look at when placing children into inclusion programs in order to make them successful.

Cate, Diefendorf, McCullough, Peters, & Whaley (2010) look at ten things when judging the success of an inclusion program. These are:

1. Having a philosophy/mission for inclusive practices.
2. Having administrators and staff with an inclusive attitude and spirit.
3. Having a consistent and ongoing system for family involvement.
4. Incorporating team planning into a research-based curriculum.
5. Collaborating and communicating with agencies and other community partners.
6. Using the IEP to drive instruction.
7. Integrating service delivery into the daily schedule.
8. Implementing a consistent and ongoing system for staff development.
9. Creating tools and strategies to help teachers address issues of disability and inclusion.
10. Creating a comprehensive system for evaluating program effectiveness. (p.10-11)

Before starting up an inclusion program, a team can study the elements listed above to see how prepared they are for starting this paradigm shift in preschool programming. This list will open up important discussions to have before final decision-making. This list will also help teams decide what kind of supports will be needed in the regular education classroom.

Supports Needed

There are many supports needed for successful inclusive schools that serve students with a variety of disabilities (Hamaidi, Homidi, & Reyes, 2012). One of a school's greatest supports are the parents. According to Blanton, parents are valuable not only at the school level but also at the classroom level. They are the experts on their children and are able to teach valuable lessons and skills to the staff and other parents. But it is also important for those parents of children with typical development (Gupta, Hemminger, & Vinh, 2014). The school district needs support not only from the families of children with disabilities but also from the families of typical developing children. The inclusion model affects both children in positive ways and in order to have a successfully program, support is needed from all parents involved. Working together with families makes for a much more successful classroom environment.

Another support needed when implementing inclusion is flexibility. "Practitioners must be flexible in their thinking/practice, and be willing to try new approaches and take pride in solving problems "(Blanton, 2009, p.30). One way to be flexible is to look at a school district's spending streams. Groups that are working together can look at braiding and blending funding streams in order to make all programs

more successful. Technical support for this can be provided by state departments of education and human services. Some states even have local inclusion support for such tasks (Including Children with Disabilities in State Pre-K Programs, 2010).

Many of the supports will be needed directly in the classroom and will be provided by the teacher. General education and special education staff will need time to plan, reflect, and analyze data (Spaulding & Flannagan, 2012). At the onset, a lot of work must go into making sure that the environment is accessible for all students, that all students can participate in all activities, and adaptations and modifications are made to help students with special needs access the general education curriculum. After the initial setup, teachers will be relieved to have “the knowledge that ALL students can benefit from the same tool chest of instructional methods and strategies” (Spaulding & Flannagan, 2012, p.6).

Depending on staff’s comfort, education level and amount of training, there may need to be opportunities for continued education and instruction on how to make inclusion successful in the regular education preschool program. Richardson-Gibbs & Klein (2014) reported that “for inclusion to be successful, program quality must be high and appropriate services must be provided. A lack of needed supports and services deprive not only the students with special needs but also the rest of the class.” (p.13) This just shows how important it is to make sure the proper supports are in place.

Benefits to Inclusion

There are many benefits to inclusion, benefits for both children with disabilities and children with typical development. “Research shows that high-quality inclusion can

help young children make gains that are not only visible during preschool but also realized much later in life” (Gupta, Henninger, & Vinh, 2014, p.35).

Inclusion benefits children with disabilities in a multitude of ways; they are more likely to generalize their skills than in a pull-out method (Griebel, LaFamboise, Mercado, & Meyer, 2015). When learning with typical developing peers, children with disabilities learn at a higher level (Blanton, 2009). Surprisingly, when looking at progress in a one-year period, children with severe disabilities in an inclusive classroom showed greater developmental gains than children with more mild disabilities in an inclusive setting (Hanline & Correa-Torres, 2012 and Richardson-Gibbs & Klein, 2014). This rapid increase occurs in part because there is reported to be four times more communication in an inclusive classroom than in a self-contained preschool program. St. Paul Public Schools in Minnesota reported that students with disabilities learn from peer models and increased their social skills. They have also seen improvement in generalizing skills to other students and to other classes (Griebel, LaFramboise, Mercado & Meyer, 2015).

Ruppar (2013) reported an increase in student socialization when in a regular education preschool program. Students with disabilities were “more likely to be engaged in learning the general education curriculum in general education classrooms than in special education classrooms.” (p.45) Overall, children with disabilities are more likely to exhibit positive social/emotional behaviors and an increase in communication skills.

Specific examples show that children who are deaf or hard of hearing have engaged in more advanced play skills when in a classroom with typical developing peers, and children with autism are more likely to generalize their skills while in inclusive

settings with peer models. Lastly, the research show that children with special needs in inclusive environments demonstrated higher academic gains, including high school graduation and higher scores on achievement tests (Gupta, Henninger, & Vinh, 2014).

Typical developing students also showed many benefits to being in an inclusive preschool program with children with disabilities. Blanton (2009) reported that all students benefit from an inclusive setting; “to a typical developing child, a child with special needs is just a friend.”(p.30) Students in inclusion programs showed an increase in their self-esteem, confidence, autonomy, and leadership skills. These children are more likely to “approach their decisions to include children with disabilities in play based on fairness and equality” (Gupta, Henninger & Vinh, 2014, p.51) Diamond & Stacey (2000) stated that,

According to parents, preschool children become more accepting of human differences, more aware of the needs of others, show less discomfort with people with disabilities, are less prejudiced, have fewer stereotypes about people who are different, and are more responsive and helpful to other children after their enrollment in an inclusive program. p.62

Overall, it is noted that “best practices for general education students are effective with students with special needs.” (Spaulding & Flannagan, 2012, p.6) It is reported that the earlier typical developing children are exposed to inclusion “the more likely they are to approach children with disabilities with acceptance.”(Spaulding & Flannagan, 2012 p.6) There is now significant evidence that suggests that “typical peers are not harmed by or disadvantaged in inclusive classrooms; rather, they grow and develop as a result of the

relationships they cultivate and sustain with their diverse counterparts” (Gupta, Henninger & Vinh, 2014, p.50).

One family reported that their “inclusive education experience has been enlightening and life changing.” Their typically developing son attended a preschool program that implemented inclusion. The mother wanted her son “to have experiences that would enable him to understand and accept differences, as well as similarities, of people with special needs.” The family saw an improvement in their son’s behavior. He became more “kind, more compassionate, and does not limit his friendships to children with abilities similar to his” (Sedlack, 2009,p.12).

There are also benefits for administrators, which can even save money when they “create joint training opportunities, centralize technical assistance, and collaborate on strategic planning” (Including Children with Disabilities in State Pre-K Programs, 2010, p.11). Ultimately, as more research is done in this area, additional benefits will be shown for all children attending inclusion programs.

Barriers to Inclusion

Although there are many benefits to an inclusive preschool program, there are also many barriers that come up along the journey. “Welcoming a young child with special needs into your classroom can raise many concerns or relatively few, depending on the child’s abilities” (Watson & McCathren, 2009,p.1). Being able to identify the barriers that will come into play in a classroom will help make inclusion effective. Teachers need to be able to discuss the barriers and find ways to work around them for

the greater good of all. By identifying the barriers, educators are able to “adjust the physical environment, programming, and teaching methods as needed and to seek related supports” (Watson & McCathren, 2009, p.2).

Many barriers come from administration. Some administrators may feel that only those teachers who would be interested in a challenge should be working in an inclusion classroom (Blanton, 2009). Administrators are generally the ones who find placements for children with disabilities. A huge barrier can be finding or creating appropriate general education programs for children with special needs (Richardson-Gibbs & Klein, 2014). Many schools do not have many options for regular education preschool programming. With limited preschool programming, there are generally a limited number of slots for children with special needs because it is important not to overwhelm classes with too many children on IEP’s. With limited preschool programming, “school district administration may wonder if a community placement for preschool children with or at risk for disabilities will be able to effectively meet the needs of these children and provide support and instruction that leads to improved outcomes” (Gupta, Henninger, & Vinh, 2014, p.173) The biggest concerns from administrators seems to be a lack of available preschool programs.

There are also barriers that come from parents in the community, both parents of children with special needs and also parents of typical developing children. Some families believe that “inclusion benefits only some groups of children.” Parents may not see the benefits for typical developing children or the benefits for children with special needs. Parents might express hesitation about the inclusion process due to not

understanding what inclusion is. Another barrier is that “parents of children without disabilities [may] support inclusion but are using inappropriate terminology to describe children with disabilities” (Gupta, Henninger & Vinh, 2014, p.168) Although these parents support inclusion, it may come across as if they do not when they use terms that are offensive to parents of children with special needs. Lastly, Sedlack (2009) reports that “one common misconception in an inclusive classroom setting is that students with IEPs absorb more of the teachers’ time to the detriment of students without IEPs.”(p.12) Generally, this is the opposite of what is happening in an inclusion classroom. There is usually more support in an inclusion program, which means more one-on-one time for every child.

Most of the barriers that come up with inclusion classrooms derive from the way the staff is involved. According to Hernandez (2013), collaboration can be a huge barrier. Some professionals resist efforts to collaborate; others struggle with the time and effort needed to put into collaboration, and others prefer to work independently and do not see collaboration as important to their teaching process.

Finding time for planning is also a common concern. Many regular education preschool teachers are not on school district contracts. Also, it is difficult for the teachers to find the time to collaborate when their hours are shorter and they generally do not get paid for planning portions of the day. Another challenge is making sure all classrooms have enough resources to support all children and also that all staff have the training to feel confident in working with all children in their classroom (Gupta, Henninger, & Vinh, 2014). Negative attitudes from any staff member in the process can limit the potential for

growth. Also, teachers who have low expectations or see a limited capacity for growth for children with special needs can be a huge barrier (Gupta, Henninger, & Vinh, 2014).

Lastly children with special needs can need a lot of support in the general education classroom. Making sure there is the proper amount of staffing for each classroom can take a huge weight off everyone when going through the process of starting inclusion. Although there are many barriers during the inclusion process, there are definitely more benefits. If the process is done with an intentional plan and support, a successful inclusion program is possible!

Conclusion

In the next chapter, I will discuss the characteristics of quantitative and qualitative research methods. I will explain which method I will be using along with the setting for my action research and data analysis. I will also briefly describe the project itself.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Methods

My literature review provides research on how to successfully implement inclusion into preschool programming. It identifies benefits and barriers to inclusion along with how inclusion may look in different settings. In the following chapter, I will describe my action research methods that I plan to use when I conduct my parent, teacher and paraprofessional questionnaire/interviews. This action research was designed to address the following question: Can a school effectively transition from a self-contained Early Childhood Special Education classroom to a full inclusion preschool program?

Research Setting and Subjects

The following action research will take place in a small southern Minnesota community. The school involved is a primary building for students aged 3 to 6. In September of 2015, there were 56 students enrolled in Kindergarten and 51 enrolled in first grade. The demographic of the community is 21% Hispanic, 77% Caucasian, 1% Asian, .2% American Indian, .2% Black, and .2% two or more races. The school demographic is similar to that of the community with a majority of students being of Hispanic and Caucasian decent. There is a large population of English Language Learners at the school as well. The school has a large number of free and reduced lunch participants and is a Title One School.

The Early Childhood Special Education students will be the students involved in the study. The population involves 16 students. Of those students, eight are Hispanic,

six are Caucasian, and two are bi-racial (Hispanic/Caucasian). Fifty percent of all children in the study live at home with a single parent. The other fifty percent have two parents at home. Many parents in this study work up to twelve hours at a factory and the children are mainly cared for by their mother or an aunt. Eighty seven percent of the families I work with qualify for free and reduced lunch. Staff included in the study will include the Early Childhood Special Education Teacher, Paraprofessionals, Head Start Teacher, School Readiness Teachers, Speech/Language Pathologist and Parents.

The inclusion model has been in the works at this specific school for six years. The inclusion model started taking place during the 2014-2015 school year in all sites of the school. The main teachers involved in creating the model were the special education teachers and a speech and language pathologist. Their goal was to create regular education programming that all children could access. The special education teachers reserved slots in regular education preschool programs for children with special needs. The children were put in different programs based on their needs and how much support they would need from special education staff.

Children with more severe disabilities were placed in a class co-taught by a regular education teacher and a special education teacher. Children with mild disabilities were placed in classes with minimal support from a special education teacher. This meant that a special education teacher was not in the classroom at all times but instead would either pull the students out to work with them or deliver their special education services in the regular education classroom. Most classes also had support from a special education paraprofessional. The occupational therapist and speech and language

pathologist would work with the children in these classes as well. All the teachers in the building had students with special needs in their classroom. Some teachers had children with special needs in only the morning, some only in the afternoon and some had these children in both morning and afternoon programming.

Research

For my action research I will be using a mixed methods procedure, including both quantitative and qualitative methods in my research. According to Creswell (2009), mixed methods research is “an approach to inquiry that combines or associates both qualitative and quantitative forms of research. It involves philosophical assumptions, the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches and the mixes of both approaches in a study” (p. 230). I think it is important to clarify the differences between qualitative and quantitative research and why it is important to my research to use both methods.

Qualitative research is defined as,

A means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures; collecting data in the participants’ setting; analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2009 p. 232).

Quantitative research is defined as “a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. These variables can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures” (Creswell, 2009, p. 233). Both quantitative and qualitative research is used to better

understand the research problem. I will be doing this by using statistics as well as parent responses, surveys, observations, and interviews. I will have a stronger emphasis on qualitative research but both will use both methods throughout the action research.

There will be one main research procedure used during my action research project. A questionnaire/interview will be given to parents, teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff to obtain information, strengths, barriers, concerns, and supports that were found during the first year of full inclusion in the preschool programs. The goal is to collaborate with Head Start and the School Readiness program to make strong inclusion programs for the future. All data will be collected concurrently throughout the action research project.

The time frame for the research is three months. I will interview teachers and parents over the span of a three-month period. This will allow me enough time to schedule the interviews, complete the interview, and transcribe the data received. I will use an interpreter for two of the interviews. The parents will have a copy of the interview in Spanish and the interpreter will interpret their answers to me and I will transcribe their answers.

Data Analysis

Once the data is collected, the writer will analyze it. Parent, teacher, and paraprofessional questionnaires will be analyzed to determine if implementing an inclusive preschool program was found to be a success. Data will also be retrieved to look at barriers and how to eliminate some of the challenges as the group goes into the second year of full inclusion preschool. It will also be looked at to see if parents,

teachers, and staff are more confident in children with special needs attending an inclusive preschool program than they were at the start

Conclusion

Chapter three has laid out the plan and tools for completing the action research project. The study was explained and research methods were identified. Specific tools will be shown in the following pages. The results of the project will be shared in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Results

Introduction

I interviewed the parents of four students with disabilities. One parent had a child that was in inclusion all day long. Her child's main language was Spanish. This parent is a stay-at-home mother. Her husband works at a factory in the town. He works twelve-hour days. She also has two other children in the school district. Another parent had two children in a morning inclusion program. Her children's main language was also in Spanish. Her and her husband both work factory jobs. They work 10-12 hour days. Their children attend school and daycare by a family member. They have three other children in the school district. The last parent I interviewed was a parent who had a child in an afternoon inclusion program and a morning self-contained (special education only) class. This parent is a single mom. She works at an assisted living home as a nurse's aide. She works evening hours. The grandmother cares for her child when she is not at school. She has two other children who attend a different school district. I used an interpreter during the interviews with the Spanish-speaking mothers. The parents had a copy of the interview in front of them. The questions were asked in Spanish and they responded in Spanish. The interpreter would translate their responses to me and I would transcribe the interview.

For the school portion, I interviewed two general education classroom teachers. One teacher was part of a team that co-taught with the special education teacher. She has subbed in the district for a year and taught in the district for two years. The other general education teacher had a special education paraprofessional in her afternoon class and pull-out support from a special education teacher in the morning class. This teacher has taught in the district for 8 years. The early childhood special education (ECSE) teacher and speech/language (SLP) pathologist were also interviewed. The ECSE teacher has taught in the district for 6 years and the SLP has taught in the district for three years. All of the teachers have worked with Spanish-speaking families the duration of the time they worked for the district. The ECSE paraprofessional is bilingual and also serves as an interpreter to families on many occasions. The data was collected over the phone or in person depending on what worked best for the individual person.

Parent Interviews

Summarized below are the results from the parent interviews. Writing in *Italics* below are my interpretations.

Q: How do you feel the year went with your child in a regular education classroom?
Why?

A: All parents reported that their child's year went well. They reported that their children learned many new things that they didn't know before. All parents reported that their child's vocabulary increased. Parents of children who are bilingual reported that their children's English skills increased significantly. One parent reported that their child

has started “interacting with other children and learned social skills from being in a regular education classroom.”

All parents were very happy about their children’s progress throughout the school year. It was interesting to note how important it was to the Spanish-speaking families that their children had learned an extensive amount of English during the school year. These children were all in English speaking classrooms throughout the school year, which greatly improved their English skills.

Q: What benefits do you see from your child attending a regular education classroom?

A: One parent reported that her daughter “increased her communication and writing skills by watching the other peers in her classroom.” Another parent reported that her children increased their English skills and learned many “academic skills such as colors, counting and new vocabulary words.” The students learned more self-help skills like using the bathroom and dressing and undressing. Another parent reported that they saw a significant “decrease in their child’s behavior.” This particular child used to yell, scream, and cry when upset. These behaviors are no longer seen in the classroom environment. They reported that before he didn’t understand what to do when he was called on in class and now he does. He is using a wider range of words than he was before and is now using longer phrases to speak.

Social communication and self-help skills seemed to be the biggest benefit of being in the inclusion classroom. The children communicated more with their peers and with their families at home. It was very interesting to hear about the decrease in negative behaviors. This child had major behaviors when in a classroom of children with special

needs but in an inclusion classroom he began using more words and his behaviors decreased. I have to assume that this huge shift is due to peer models in the regular education classroom.

Q: What did not go so well with the regular education classroom this year? Why? What could be changed to make next year go better?

A: All parents reported they liked how programming went this year. They believe their children learned a lot. All parents stated they would like to do more at home to help their children with skills such as writing their name and learning colors. One parent reported that her children “had a difficult time transitioning to pre-school every morning but it was better by the end of the school year.”

I found it interesting that most parents did not report anything they would change with their child’s schooling. All parents reported that they wished they could do more for their children.

Q: What does inclusion mean to you? What would you like to know more about it?

A: Two parents reported that they did not know what inclusion meant but that they would like to know more about it. Another parent reported, “Inclusion means everyone in class is included, even the ones that need extra help.”

When conducting the interviews it seemed very clear that all parents understood the concept of inclusion but not all parents knew what the term “inclusion” meant. They were able to describe the term without knowing the particular word inclusion. I believe that more parent education needs to be done to help parents understand more about inclusion and how it affects their children.

Q: How were you able to be a part of your child's education this school year? What could be improved for next year?

A: Parents reported that they felt they were a part of their child's education during the school year. They felt they knew what was happening at school. All classrooms send home weekly newsletters to parents in both English and Spanish. Since many parents also drop off and pick up their children, they are able to have conversations with their children's teachers at that time. Two parents reported they would like to do more with their children at home. One reported she would like "to make more time" to work with her daughter. She reported she wished she were home more to do puzzles, coloring and work on colors and shapes. Another reported she tries to work with her children at home but many times their negative behaviors get in the way. Many times her children will refuse to do any learning activities while at home.

Interesting, again, that most parents stated ways they would like to change to help their children. All parents seemed very happy with the schooling their children were receiving.

Q: What model of preschool do you prefer: self-contained (in a classroom with only special education students) or inclusion (with regular education and special education peers) or a mix of the both? Why?

A: All parents reported that they prefer the inclusion model. One parent reported they like the "regular education class so their child can learn with many other kids and learn to be social with them." Another parent reported they like the inclusion model because the children can get the help they need and also be with their typical developing peers.

Although they were not able to specifically say they preferred the inclusion model. All parents described the inclusion classroom setting when explaining which classroom they prefer their child to attend.

Teacher Interviews

Summarized below are the results from the teacher interviews.

Q: How do you feel the first year of full inclusion preschool programming went? And Why?

A. Overall, all teachers felt that the first year went well. One general education teacher stated that she believed the school year went well due to the “collaboration between herself and the special education teacher.” She stated that they worked together to plan lessons and activities that were age-appropriate for a variety of skill levels.

Another general education teacher stated that she “did not like that some her students with special needs were pulled out of the classroom.” She said she preferred to have a special education paraprofessional in the classroom instead.

A special education staff reported that she felt the children gained many skills from watching their typically developing peers. She also stated that “the regular education teachers needed a great deal of support learning to adapt materials but were willing and typically open to suggestions.” She also stated that there could be improvement in treating all the students the same and not using the phrases of “your sped kids.”

Another special education staff stated that being in the classroom allowed referrals to happen faster. Children who were not yet identified as having a disability

were brought to evaluation quicker when a special education staff member was already in the general education classroom. General education and special education was a more collaborative pre-k program but there was no real structure set up for our inclusion model and not enough time to collaborate.

When talking with the special education staff, it was reported that it was difficult to have the children in the regular education classroom due to the nature of the activities in the classroom. Many seemed to be more kindergarten level rather than a pre-school classroom, which made it difficult for special education staff to adapt activities for the students with special needs to participate. It has been a huge shift for all the teachers to take responsibility for all the students. It is still a process to move from “your kids” “my kids” to a more inclusive statement of “our kids.” It seems there needs to be more clarification on the model of inclusion used in the classroom and that it needs to be decided by both groups of teachers with input from administration.

Q: What strengths were seen in the program?

A: A special education staff stated that “three students with special needs with mild disabilities were exited from the program because they met all their goals and objectives before entering Kindergarten.” She also stated that it was great to have collaboration among all programs and sites.

Another special education staff stated that students were able to “watch and learn from their typically developing peers especially with their social skills.” She also stated there was more understanding of how each program in the district was run and more collaboration between programs.

A general education teacher stated that she noticed that the “students with special needs were more social and interactive with their peers” as the year went on. She also noticed all the students treating each other respectfully and not teasing anyone for being different.

Another general education teacher stated that she saw an amazing amount of growth with all of her students this year. She stated there was growth with their communication skills, social skills, and self-help skills. She feels students with special needs “need to be in the general education classroom to see modeling from peers.”

All the teachers that were interviewed were very excited about the gains made in their students during the school year. Not only with the students with special needs but also with the students that are typically developing. None of the students treated others differently, and all played and communicated with each other. A major theme seems to be peer modeling. The children with special needs learned so much just from being able to watch their typically developing peers. It helped them understand social norms, communicate more, and become more independent in their daily lives.

Q: What barriers did you and your team meet with?

A: One general education teacher stated she couldn't think of any barriers that came up during the school year. Another general education teacher said there was “no time for group planning.” She struggled with the inconsistency of having a special education teacher in the room and having the children pulled out of the classroom. This also changed from day to day, which she didn't feel was consistent for the children.

A special education staff also stated that there was “not enough time to meet.” She also expressed that “not everyone on staff had the same understanding of inclusion.” Another special education staff stated that there was never enough space to place children with special needs into a regular education classroom that was structured and age appropriate.

At this particular school, there is one Head Start class, and four regular education early childhood classes. In order to keep within inclusion ratios (meaning less students with special needs than regular education students) and also staying within classroom ratios (teacher to student ratio) it was difficult at times to find an appropriate placement for all students. It was especially difficult when trying to place a student in a regular education classroom in the middle of the school year. There were definite inconsistencies between each classroom due to staffing, student’s needs, and support available. There needs to be more planning put into place to make sure there are not these inconsistencies in the future.

Q: What supports need to be changed or added for next school year to make the year more successful?

A: All teachers stated that more planning time was needed. A general education teacher stated that she would like all staff and support staff to know that the students are all of ours to work with and not “my students” and “your students.”

Another general education teacher stated that there needs to be “more discussion on how each individual classroom would benefit from inclusion.” A special education staff stated that there needs to be “more direction from administration” as far as support

for inclusion and follow-up at each site. The other special education staff stated that all regular education classroom teachers need to be teaching “age appropriate material” and it needs to be consistent across the entire district.

There is no set curriculum or materials used throughout the district. Each teacher creates his/her own curriculum using the materials available to him or her. Therefore every class is teaching different skills at different times. There was no scope and sequence to the curriculums used in the classrooms and therefore at times some teachers would be teaching skills that were not appropriate for a preschool classroom but more appropriate for an Elementary setting. This was a source of tension between some teachers, and another area that would be important to get administration involved in. There also seemed to be a desire for more guidance from administration when it came to how inclusion should be modeled at each site. Administrators were not very visible throughout the year and therefore the majority of decisions were made by individuals, which did not help with the process.

Q: How much time was given to work collaboratively? What would you change? How much time would be effective for next school year?

A: All staff stated that currently there is a meeting set for one time a month for two hours to discuss inclusion, district-wide, and that there was no extra time set aside for teachers to meet individually with each other. All staff also stated that they need at least “30 minutes a week” to discuss students, curriculum, and planning with each other.

Special education staff and regular education staff are on two completely different contracts. Therefore, special education staff are salaried and regular education

staff work hourly and only get a certain amount of hours to work. Planning time was difficult to find because the only time that was available would be time outside of the work day and then regular education staff would not be paid for their time. It was noted that it would be helpful to have a set day/time that is paid for all staff so that everyone could be able to collaborate.

Q: Does your program have a philosophy/mission for inclusive practices? How does it need to change?

A: Both special education staff stated that there was not a philosophy/mission for inclusive practices. One staff stated that one school felt one way and another felt another way. She also stated that all children with special needs should start in a regular education class until they prove they are unable to learn in that environment. She also said that administration needs to make a decision about inclusion and enforce it at all sites. One general education teacher stated that the program's philosophy was "to have all students do the same work, but to adapt the lesson to meet the specific needs of each student's IEP." She also stated that were exceptions made for some children with more severe disabilities. Another general education teacher stated that the "special education teachers decided how they were going to assist the teachers." She also stated that she thinks both teachers should meet together to make these decisions.

It is clear that when inclusion was set up the special education department had control over how it was run and how it would be implemented. This needs to be a decision made by both the special education teacher along with the regular education

teacher with direction from administration. It also needs to be consistent across the district. These interviews were completed with teachers from one school in the district. There are two other elementary buildings with differing models of inclusion in the district. The other two buildings did not use the full inclusion model this school year as the staff determined that was not how they wanted to run their classrooms. Again, administration needs to make a plan for all teachers, classrooms, and buildings so it is consistent throughout. The site that I used for my study was the only site of three in this particular district that did full inclusion. The other schools did some inclusion but not for all students. There needs to be consistent models throughout the district due to the need to provide all families and children with the same type of programming.

Q: Do you feel supported by your administration during the switch to inclusion? In what ways? How could these be improved?

A: All teachers agreed that administration was not as involved in the process as they would have liked. One general education teacher stated that the early childhood coordinator and special education director liked the switch to inclusion and supported it but didn't start meeting as a group about it until halfway through the school year. The group consisted of all early childhood special education teachers, regular education teachers, speech/language therapists, occupational therapist, special education director, and school readiness coordinator. The meetings with administration were good and "helped unite the early childhood and special education staff so we were all working together to support the students in the best way possible."

Another general education teacher stated that “administration was not involved much in the process.” She felt that each site’s special education teacher had their own idea of how they felt inclusion would work best. She also stated that there were some “general ratio rules set up but they were not followed.”

Both special education staff stated that they felt supported by administration but did not get the guidance or direction they needed from them. One staff stated that many ideas came from one special education teacher that made it difficult for others to follow. Another stated that the special education staff was allowed to make their own decisions on programming.

Both the special education director and the school readiness coordinator were new to the district this year and there had been extensive turn-over in the special education director position in the last four years. Therefore, the administrators seemed to take direction from the staff rather than offering direction to the staff. This made it difficult when some staff felt they were being told how to run their classrooms by their co-workers rather than by the administration. General ratio rules had been set up the previous year. These rules were put into place so that there were not more students with special needs than students that were typically developing in the classroom.. Therefore a rule of three students per classroom was set up. This ratio was hit before school started therefore had to be modified in order to allow more spaces for students with special needs who qualified throughout the school year.

Q: What ongoing staff development did you receive? How often was it offered? Was it effective in helping boost staff confidence? What other kinds of staff development would help you feel more confident? What would you like to change for next year's staff development?

A: All staff stated that currently there is one two-hour "early out" dismissal time every month to allow teachers to meet for staff development. Special education staff reported that some of the staff went to trainings on inclusion but the trainings "were initiated by the staff not administration." A general education teacher reported that it would be helpful to share what works and what doesn't work at the meetings to help out all teachers. Another general education teacher reported that it would be helpful to have the "paraprofessionals involved more in the process" since they are often with the students individually more than the lead teacher. Both special education staff stated that it would be helpful to have "more direction from administration." Another special education staff stated that bringing data to show how inclusion benefits all students might help with the "buy-in" from staff who did not want to have inclusive programs.

All staff were looking for more direction from the administrators. Mostly, staff wanted direction on how inclusion was going to look, what model would they be using, how many students would be in their program, what would be the roles and responsibilities of each staff member, and when would collaboration take place. Once the main components were put into place, training for all staff including all teachers,

paraprofessionals and service providers should take place so that everyone knows what the plan is.

Q: How did your inclusion model look? Was there co-teacher involved? How were IEP goals embedded into the child's daily schedule? How could that be changed for next school year?

A: All teachers stated that the inclusion model looked different in every class. Some classes were "co-taught with a general education teacher and a special education teacher"; others had a special education paraprofessional with "support from the special education teacher", and others had their students with special needs "pulled out for small group work."

A special education staff stated that IEP goals were not embedded. A general education teacher stated that she would like to have the IEP goals more visible and easy to get to so all teachers can work on the goals with the students. Another general education teacher stated that she felt the special education teacher worked on the education goals with the students, and the social/emotional goals were worked on in the general education classroom. She also stated that she would love to see "all goals implemented in the daily schedule without the students getting pulled out of the classroom."

There were very few students that received the pullout method and it seems that this is the method least liked by the regular education teachers. Two to three students would be pulled out from their general education classroom into the hallway or another

room to play a game or activity to work on skills related specifically to their IEP goals and objectives. They would be pulled out of the classroom for about 20 minutes per day. This happened because there was not enough staff to have a special education teacher or paraprofessional in that specific classroom and those students were also the children with more mild disabilities and therefore did not require as much service time from a special educator.

Q: Having gone through this school year, what would be your tips/advice for other schools transitioning from a self-contained preschool model to an inclusion model?

A: A special education staff stated that there needs to be a plan for “all kids that teachers know and agree on.” She stated administration needs to make sure all regular education teachers are on board and willing to teach developmentally appropriate early childhood material.

Another special education staff stated that in order to have a successful inclusion program there needs to be lots of “support and direction from administration.” The process needs to be “led by administration not by a teacher.” She also stated that there needs to be more time to meet with other staff to plan and implement programming. Lastly, she urged all teachers to “be open and honest. It’s a process!”

A general education teacher reported that she felt that both the special education and regular education teacher need to meet before school starts to discuss what will work best for each individual class. They also need to meet a few weeks into school to review and adjust programming.

Another general education classroom teacher said her advice to other schools would be to “embrace inclusion.” She stated that it is so great to see students interact with each other and learn from each other.

All teachers were very enthusiastic about inclusion and urge other schools to try it. There are definitely a variety of barriers that may come up along the road including: the amount of staff, administration involvement, teacher involvement, and collaboration time. But there were definitely more benefits than barriers. All teachers saw great improvements with all the children in their class especially in the areas of communication, social skills, and self-help. All teachers enjoyed having a variety of students in their classrooms and stated that they would like to continue implementing inclusion in their classrooms in the future!

Explanation of Results

The study has made clear that all parents involved found that having their children in a regular education preschool greatly helped them increase their skills in multiple areas of development. Improvements were mainly seen in communication, self-help and social skills. Although most parents did not have an exact understanding of inclusion, all parents chose it as the preschool model they prefer.

There were staggering results when it came to the teacher interview results. There seemed to be a discrepancy on many of the topics between the general education staff and the special education staff. It was portrayed by the staff that the special education staff had a bigger role in the planning and implementation of inclusion, which could be a reason why each group had differing opinions.

One of the many themes that emerged during the interviews was that the teachers expressed wanting more direction from administration. The teachers asked for direction and guidance from administration rather than from one or two staff members. I believe a huge shift in programming is more easily accepted from an administrator than from a co-worker. It was also clear that all staff would like to be involved in some of the bigger decisions especially when it comes to specific programming.

It was also stated that there needs to be plenty of time set aside for collaboration. All the teachers stated they enjoyed the two-hour monthly meetings as a district but that they would also benefit from weekly meetings of the special education and regular education staff together.

Another theme that emerged was that all students made great progress. Whether the child was a typically developing student or a child with a disability, all children made progress during the school year. Most of the progress was seen with the children's social-emotional skills. There was an increase in play skills as well as communicative intent when initiating play with other children. It was also noted that the entire staff wanted to implement inclusion into their classrooms, but just needed all the tools to do it.

Connection with Literature Review

The results I received from the interviews directly correlated to the literature review. As stated by Blanton (2009), parent support is a necessity when implementing an inclusion program. The school involved in this study definitely had support from parents of children with special needs. Even if they did not fully understand what inclusion

meant, they all stated the great gains their children made during the year because of peer modeling.

Hernandez (2013) discussed one of the major barriers in inclusion being the teachers having time to collaborate and plan with each other. This was a theme that came up multiple times during the interviews. With support from administration, more discussions, and time for collaboration, inclusion at this school will be an even greater success during the second school year.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Conclusion

Reflection on Learning

During my research many things went as expected and a few things played out differently than what I thought. I received all the information I went looking for. I obtained information from parents and teachers on the strengths of the program, many barriers that are currently in place, concerns, supports and ideas on how to eliminate some of the challenges that arose during the first year of inclusion. Although teachers came up with some ways to eliminate the barriers, the way for many of the barriers to be resolved would involve direct support from administration, which is beyond the control of the teachers and staff. Feedback from parents focused a lot more on how they would like to help their children at home than I had expected. Most of the changes that parents would like to make was with their own interactions with the children. This is important to the research as it shows that parents are looking for more information and advice from teachers on how to help their children with special needs succeed in an inclusion classroom.

The interviews were conducted individually, both with the parents and with the teachers. An interpreter was present during two of the parent interviews. I believe I was able to get a more honest response from parents by conducting the interviews in one-on-one situations. They were more willing to tell me information about their children than they might have been in a group setting. I also believe I received a more honest response

from the teachers by conducting their interviews in a one-on-one manner. I also believe it could be beneficial to hold a group discussion with the teachers to help facilitate some of the more difficult questions and also help them understand each other's thought processes during the last school year.

In many ways, the research agreed with what other researchers have found when looking at inclusion, including in the way of parental support. Both the study and the research showed that high support from parents was usually the case. My study also agreed with the research in stating that students with special needs learn from their peer models. Both parents and teachers noted how much progress students with special needs made just from being able to watch their peers in the general education classroom. Lastly, staff needs to work closely together to make a smooth transition to inclusion. Teachers expressed this many times in the interviews. There was not enough time for planning and working together during the first year of inclusion, and all teachers agreed that more time for working together would be beneficial.

There were also a few ways in which this project added new information. When talking with parents, it was discovered that there was a decrease in negative behaviors in one student after joining the inclusion preschool classroom. The teachers also expressed an overwhelming want for more support and direction from administration. This is shown a little bit in the research but I believe my study really emphasizes this point.

This research is significant because it identifies specific barriers that evolved during the first year of a full inclusion preschool program. It also related directly to the literature with strengths that were seen by parents and educators. Findings from this

study can provide education administrators information about barriers and benefits to inclusion, including many things that they can do to make the process more successful for not only the students but also for the staff and teachers working directly in the classroom.

Specifically, this research will help guide the school in which the research was done. The results will be given to the individual school to be reviewed and used to guide year two of the inclusion efforts. In addition, this research provides an opportunity to gather first-hand knowledge, data, and understanding from specific teachers and parents about their experience with inclusion; all of which will enable the researcher, personally, to be more effective as an educator in the future

Limitations

This study interviewed three parents and four teachers. Therefore, it was a small sample size of interviewees. Another limitation was the community itself. The community has a rural setting, with a small school that has limited resources. Some of the limited resources would be number of staff, budget amounts, and limited preschool programming. I would recommend that future studies be conducted with schools of different sizes socio-economic status, and demographics. I believe that depending on these variables, the benefits and barriers would be different at each site.

Communicating Results

The results of this capstone will be dispersed to the Hamline capstone library and available for the general public to read and gain insight on a school's journey to inclusion. This capstone will also be given to the superintendent of the school in which

the study was done. This information will then be handed to those working directly with the inclusion efforts to help teachers and staff make changes toward progress in the program that is currently being run.

Summary

This study sought to understand the journey of inclusion through the lens of one particular school. The use of interviews offered a unique insight into the world of inclusion.

The researcher gathered information by interviewing parents and teachers. This qualitative research method enabled the researcher to learn directly from the teachers and parents what factors contributed to the success of the inclusion program and what needed to be changed in the future.

There is strong indication that administration needs to be more involved in the implementation and development of this programming. Through this change, inclusion can be more successful and productive at all sites involved in the study.

Although the literature review highlighted many factors about how inclusion works and the great impact it has on all students' learning, there were few examples of research that featured specific school studies of the implementation of inclusion. Therefore, I anticipate that future research can possibly provide educators and school leaders with more first-hand accounts of how inclusion has begun in their school and the trials and tribulations along the way.

Appendix A: Informed Consent Letters

Letter of Informed Consent Requesting Permission of Adults to Take Part in Research

June 9th, 2015

Dear Parents, Teachers, and Service Providers,

I am a graduate student working on an advanced degree in education at Hamline University, St. Paul, Minnesota. As part of my graduate work, I plan to conduct research with parents, teachers, and service providers involved in the preschool inclusion program in our district from July-August 2015. The purpose of this letter is to request your participation. This research is public scholarship the abstract and final product will be cataloged in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository and that it may be published or used in other ways.

The topic of my master's capstone (thesis) is how to effectively transition from a self-contained Early Childhood Special Education classroom to a full inclusion preschool program. I plan to interview teachers, parents, and service providers about their perspectives and experiences with the inclusion of Early Childhood Special Education students in the regular education classroom. The interviews will be scripted and last about 30 minutes. The interview questions will be provided ahead of time. After completing the capstone, I will summarize the findings in a report to be distributed to interview participants and to our school administrators.

There is little to no risk if you choose to be interviewed. All results will be confidential and anonymous. Pseudonyms for the district, schools, and participants will be used. The interviews will be conducted at a place and time that are convenient for you. The interview recordings will be destroyed after completion of my study.

Participation in the interview is voluntary, and, at any time, you may decline to be interviewed or to have your interview content deleted from the capstone without negative consequences.

I have received approval from the School of Education at Hamline University and from Tri-City United's Special Education Director, Holle Spessard, to conduct this study. The capstone will be catalogued in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository. My results might be included in an article in a professional journal or a session at a professional conference. In all cases, your identity and participation in this study will be confidential.

If you agree to participate, keep this page. Fill out the duplicate agreement to participate on page two and return it to me by mail or copy the form in an email to me no later than August 1st. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Allison Hirsch

4125 CJ Circle SE Prior Lake, MN 55372

952-239-9388

allison.m.hirsch@gmail.com

Keep this full page for your records

**Informed Consent to Participate in Interview
Return this Portion to Allison Hirsch**

I have received the letter about your research study for which you will be interviewing teachers, paraprofessionals, service providers, and parents of children with special needs. I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for me, that my identity will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the interview portion of the project at any time without negative consequences. I also understand that you will use a pseudonym to identify me in your capstone, you will keep my interview material in a locked cabinet and once the capstone is approved for graduation, you will shred the material. I also understand that this project has been approved by the Hamline University's Human Subjects Committee and also by Holle Spessard, Special Education Director for Tri-City United School District.

Signature

Date

Carta de Consentimiento Informado Solicitud de Permiso de adultos a participar en la Investigación

09 de Junio 2015

Estimados Proveedores de Padres, Maestros y de servicios,

Soy un estudiante graduado que trabaja en un grado avanzado en educación en la Universidad de Hamline, St. Paul, Minnesota. Como parte de mi trabajo de graduación, tengo la intención de llevar a cabo la investigación con los padres, los maestros y los proveedores de servicios que participan en el programa de inclusión preescolar en nuestro distrito a partir de julio-agosto de 2015. El propósito de esta carta es para solicitar su participación. Esta investigación es la beca pública el producto abstracta y final será catalogado en Bush Biblioteca Digital Commons de Hamline, un repositorio electrónico y que puede ser publicado o utilizado de otra manera.

El tema de la culminación de mi amo (tesis) es cómo hacer la transición efectiva de un salón de clases Educación Especial Infantil autónomo a un programa preescolar plena inclusión. Tengo la intención de entrevistar a los profesores, los padres y los proveedores de servicios sobre sus perspectivas y experiencias con la inclusión de los estudiantes de la Primera Infancia Educación Especial en el aula de educación regular. Las entrevistas serán con guión y el último cerca de 30 minutos. Las preguntas de la entrevista se proporcionará antes de tiempo.

Después de completar el toque final, voy a resumir las conclusiones de un informe que se distribuirá a entrevistar a los participantes ya nuestros administradores escolares. Hay poco o ningún riesgo si usted elige a ser entrevistado. Todos los resultados serán confidenciales y anónimas. Se utilizarán seudónimos para los distritos, las escuelas y los participantes. Las entrevistas se llevarán a cabo en un lugar y hora que sean convenientes para usted. Las grabaciones de la entrevista serán destruidos después de la finalización de mi estudio.

La participación en la entrevista es voluntaria y, en cualquier momento, usted puede negarse a ser entrevistados o que su contenido entrevista elimina de la culminación sin consecuencias negativas.

He recibido la aprobación de la Escuela de Educación de la Universidad de Hamline y de la Directora de Educación Especial del Tri-City Estados, Holle Spessard, para llevar a cabo este estudio. La culminación será catalogado en Bush Biblioteca Digital Commons de Hamline, un repositorio electrónico. Mis resultados podrían incluirse en un artículo en una revista profesional o una sesión en una conferencia profesional. En todos los casos,

su identidad y su participación en este estudio serán confidenciales.

Si usted acepta participar, mantener esta página. Rellene el acuerdo duplicado para participar en la segunda página y volver a mí por correo o copiar la forma de un correo electrónico a mí no más tarde del 1 de agosto. Si tiene alguna pregunta, por favor póngase en contacto conmigo.

Atentamente,
Allison Hirsch
4125 CJ Circle SE Prior Lake, MN 55372
952-239-9388
allison.m.hirsch@gmail.com
Guarde esta página completa para sus archivos

Consentimiento para Participar en Entrevista Informado
Devuelva esta porción de Allison Hirsch

He recibido la carta sobre su estudio de investigación para el que se entrevistará maestros, auxiliares docentes, proveedores de servicios, y los padres de niños con necesidades especiales. Entiendo que siendo entrevistado plantea poco o ningún riesgo para mí, que mi identidad será protegida, y que puedo retirar de la parte de la entrevista del proyecto en cualquier momento y sin consecuencias negativas. También entiendo que va a utilizar un seudónimo para identificarme en su culminación, guardaréis mi material de la entrevista en un armario cerrado con llave y una vez que la piedra angular es aprobado para la graduación, se le triturar el material. También entiendo que este proyecto ha sido aprobado por Comité de Sujetos Humanos de la Universidad de Hamline y también por Holle Spessard, Director de Educación Especial de Tri-City United School District.

Firma

Fecha

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Parents

1. How do you feel the year went with your child in a regular education classroom?
Why? Give examples please!
 2. What benefits do you see from your child attending a regular education classroom? Give examples please!
 3. What did not go so well with the regular education classroom this year? Why?
What could be changed to make next year go better?
 4. What does inclusion mean to you? What would you like to know more about it?
 5. How were you able to be a part of your child's education this school year? What could be improved for next year?
 6. What model of preschool do you prefer: self-contained (in a classroom with only special education students) or inclusion (with regular education and special education peers) or a mix of the both? Why?
-
1. Cómo se siente el año se fue con su hijo en una clase de educación regular? ¿Por qué? Dar ejemplos por favor!
 2. ¿Qué beneficios que se ve desde que su hijo asiste a una clase de educación regular? Dar ejemplos por favor!
 3. ¿Qué no ir tan bien con la clase de educación regular de este año? ¿Por qué? ¿Qué podría ser cambiado para que el próximo año vaya mejor?
 4. ¿Qué significa la inclusión a usted? ¿Qué te gustaría saber más sobre él?

5. Se siente que se haya podido formar parte de la educación de su hijo este año escolar? Por qué o por qué no?
6. ¿Qué modelo de preescolar preferís: auto-contenida (en un aula con sólo los estudiantes de educación especial) o inclusión (con educación regular y los compañeros de educación especial), o una mezcla de las dos cosas? ¿Por qué?

Appendix C: Interview Questions for Teachers

1. How do you feel the first year of full inclusion preschool programming went? And Why?
2. What strengths were seen in the program? Please share any student examples!
3. What barriers did you and your team meet with? Please share any student examples!
4. What supports need to be changed or added for next school year to make the year more successful?
5. How much time was given to work collaboratively? What would you change? How much time would be effective for next school year?
6. Does your program have a philosophy/mission for inclusive practices? How does it need to change?
7. Do you feel supported by your administration during the switch to inclusion? In what ways? How could these be improved?
8. What ongoing staff development did you receive? How often was it offered? Was it effective in helping boost staff confidence? What other kinds of staff development would help you feel more confident? What would you like to change for next year's staff development?
9. How did your inclusion model look? Was there co-teacher involved? How were IEP goals imbedded into the child's daily schedule? How could that be changed for next school year?
10. Having gone through this school year, what would your tips/advice be for other schools transitioning from a self-contained preschool model to an inclusion model?

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