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Best Practices for Inclusion of Special Education Students in Elementary Classrooms

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Master of Arts in Education- Differentiated Instruction

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DEDICATION

To my children: Ethan and Rowan, I envision for you a better life than what our current world offers. When we know better, we do better, so I am setting an example of learning to improve myself. I want you to know the importance of pushing to be the very best version of yourselves. You have the capacity to make positive changes in our world, and I will be your biggest cheerleader when you do so. You have seen me through the stress and hard work of this accomplishment as well as the successes and pride. Know when you go through life's ups and downs, I will be there to hold your hand or cheer you on. My love for you is deeper than any I have known and I hope through furthering my own education I am teaching you the importance of going after your dreams. I love you so much and so much!

To my students past, present, and future: you are the reason I began this work. You deserve a teacher who will be your champion and work to ensure you receive the very best education. I will be that educator. I will support you when there are challenges and I will cheer with you when you experience successes. You are worthy. You are important. You are loved.

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Abstract

Inclusion in elementary education has been gaining momentum in research and implementation over the past two to three decades. Best practices are becoming more well documented and research is mounting surrounding the benefits of inclusionary practices in elementary classrooms. Several themes surrounding inclusion have become evident as necessary for understanding inclusion such as classroom community, nonexamples of inclusion, relationships, student choice, and teacher training. In order to best support young students with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds, educators must first understand what inclusion is and is not. Then teachers can better implement inclusionary practices in their classrooms to support all learners. Educators must establish classroom communities built on respect and acceptance. Educators must also study nonexamples of inclusion to better determine their own areas of strength and areas where they can fortify teaching. Next, teachers need to spend time fostering and building relationships among staff, students, and between those two groups. Student choice is another key theme in implementing best inclusive practices in elementary classrooms. Finally, educators must be given ample training and on the job experience on inclusive practices. When all of the above themes are addressed, elementary students benefit from more inclusive educational experiences. Better inclusive practices lead to students of all ability levels receiving equitable access to grade level content with peers in their age group.

Keywords: Inclusion, collaboration, isolation

Best Practices for Inclusion of Special Education Students in Elementary Classrooms

Chapter One: Introduction

On a bright fall day, a young student named James enters his elementary school for the first time. He starts out in a general education classroom with his peers before he is diagnosed with an emotional behavioral disability. James knows he is different but he is unsure how to act like his peers. When he gets upset, he yells and throws things. He never wants to scare anyone or hurt them; his body just does not know how else to handle his big emotions. After his diagnosis, James is removed from the general education classroom. He believes he is being punished for being different, bad. He works with a new teacher in a small group setting for the entirety of the school day. His classroom does not have windows or a library of books. There are only two to three students in the room with him throughout the day. James does not learn the same material as his nondisabled peers. He loses out on interacting with his peers, access to equitable content, and misses out on shared experiences. He learns to believe he does not belong with his nondisabled peers and believes he is separate and less than them. James experiences isolation, exclusion. Is there a better way for James and other children with disabilities to learn in elementary schools? What happens when students receiving special education (SPED) services are placed in inclusive classrooms rather than isolated from their nondisabled classmates?

While there is plenty of research surrounding inclusion, it can feel overwhelming to dissect it, especially considering there is not a universal definition for inclusion. This paper aims to determine best practices of inclusion in classroom settings by compiling research and analyzing what worked and did not work in other educational settings.

It is necessary for educators to differentiate their instruction in order to meet the needs of all their learners, regardless of ability level. This was highlighted in a study done by van den

Berg & Stoltz (2018) where students' attitudes towards peers with behavioral challenges were monitored. The researchers found students to have a more positive impression of their peers when they had spent more time with them. This happens when effective inclusionary practices are present in schools.

SPED services for students have changed drastically over time (Francisco et al., 2020). Inclusion has become a more widely used term despite its lack of a universal definition. Because the term does not have a legal definition, states and school districts within them can have their own beliefs about what inclusion should look like in a school setting (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013). This has led to discrepancy of SPED services for students with disabilities across the nation (Francisco et al., 2020). The following section of this paper will describe the importance of inclusion as a topic of discussion.

Importance of Topic

Inclusion of special education students in the elementary classroom is vital to students' academic and social needs. Inclusion can be thought of as a set of values and beliefs, meaning it can be focused on any member of the school community who faces adversity to receive full and meaningful participation in the general education classroom (McMaster, 2014). Inclusion is not an end destination for which educators strive to arrive but rather a way of thinking in order to continually offer attainable, high quality instruction to all students in their classrooms.

With educators facing increasingly diverse learners in their classrooms each year, it is essential for them to know how to best educate the students in their care. Inclusion offers a solution for educators regarding how to meet learners' needs, but also raises more questions. In order for teachers to successfully implement inclusive practices in their classrooms, educators need to have a thorough understanding of inclusion. Teachers who have a better understanding of

inclusion have a more positive attitude about it and are more likely to successfully implement inclusive practices within their classrooms (Hernandez et al., 2016). Therefore, it is essential for educators to have the information needed to provide inclusive classroom environments for students of all abilities.

According to Solone et al. (2020), inclusion only occurs when every child in a school is in their age-appropriate classroom with access to the same curriculum along with needed accommodations and modifications. This means no child is excluded from the content or experiences of the general education classroom. Furthermore, McMaster (2014) found lack of advocacy for students resulted in lack of student participation as well as lack of student voice, leading to exclusion rather than inclusion. Educators must be one of each child's biggest advocates. According to this study, if teachers do not know how to advocate for their students' educational needs, they are less likely to provide an inclusive classroom learning environment (McMaster, 2014).

Additionally, Hernandez et al. (2016) conducted a study and found SPED teachers had significantly higher attitudes towards inclusion as well as towards the advantages of inclusion than general education teachers. The study also noted the higher teachers' self-efficacy surrounding inclusion, the more favorable their attitudes towards inclusion were. Stated more specifically, special education teachers had a mean score of about 80 out of 100 when it came to their attitudes towards inclusion whereas general educators had a mean score of about 67 out of 100 (Hernandez et al., 2016). The study discovered SPED teachers to have had more training and on-site experience with inclusion so concluded there was a correlation between the knowledge/experience and the SPED teachers' more favorable attitudes towards inclusion of students receiving SPED services in the general education classroom.

Overall, the previously mentioned studies, along with the studies discussed in chapter two determined the importance of implementing inclusive practices for elementary students. Students receiving SPED services have the right to access equitable education through curriculum and shared peer experiences. Inclusion is a topic which educators must understand in order to best educate all learners in their classrooms. The next section of this paper will review the scope of the researched literature.

Scope of Research

This research study examines qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies surrounding the importance of inclusive education for special education students in elementary classrooms. This paper will discuss five themes throughout the literature review in chapter two. The first theme will discuss the need for educators to offer a positive classroom community in order to foster inclusive practices. The second theme will analyze the need to understand nonexamples of inclusion in order to better understand and implement inclusive practices. The third theme will go into detail about the need for developing and fostering positive and authentic relationships among staff, students, and between the two groups. Next, this research study will delve into utilizing student choice to support inclusive practices. The final theme to be discussed is the need to provide educators with ample teacher training in order to best provide quality inclusive education for all students.

This paper did not investigate inclusion in middle school or high school classrooms. It also did not address groups of students other than those receiving special education services. For example, students learning English as a second language, students of diverse cultural backgrounds, and students of different socioeconomic statuses were not studied in depth to determine the impact of their diversity on their learning.

Research Question

Inclusion directly relates to Concordia St. Paul's Differentiated Instruction Essential Question, "In light of what is known about differentiated instruction, how shall professional educators effectively teach every student?" because successful inclusive classrooms meet the needs of all learners. In order to do so educators must tailor instruction to fit their students' needs and abilities. Therefore, this paper aims to answer the following question: In light of what is known about differentiated instruction, what are best practices for applying and maintaining inclusion of special education students in an elementary classroom?

Definition of Terms

Inclusion does not have a legal definition, but the following is a widely accepted definition. Inclusion can be defined as educating all students, regardless of ability, in the regular classroom setting (Thompkins & Deloney, 1995).

Collaboration in education is when the educational team works together toward common goals for the student(s) they serve, including students with disabilities. The educational team may include classroom teachers, case managers, paraprofessionals, family members, and sometimes the students themselves (Solone et al., 2020).

Isolation refers to the separation of students with disabilities from their peers in the general education setting (Francisco et al., 2020).

Summary

The way students in special education have received services has changed throughout the course of history (Francisco et al., 2020). Educators have tailored their instruction to follow best practices for their students as those changes have occurred. In more recent years inclusion has come to the forefront of studies surrounding best practices for serving students with disabilities.

The following literature review will examine best practices for creating an inclusive classroom environment to best service all students in an elementary setting. The literature review will focus on classroom community, nonexamples, relationships, student choice, and training educators. Following the literature review, a summary of findings will be given and related back to the above research question.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

As previously mentioned, inclusion in elementary schools is essential for providing all students, regardless of ability level, access to equitable content and experiences. In order for educators to provide inclusive classroom environments, the following literature review will dissect research on best practices. Literature on inclusion in elementary classrooms was found to have multiple concepts continually arise. Five common themes were noted throughout the literature reviewed for this paper and each will be discussed in detail through the sections of this review. The following themes will be addressed: classroom community, non-examples of inclusion, relationships, student choice, and teacher training.

The first section of the literature review will focus on the theme of classroom community as an important factor of effective inclusive practices in elementary classrooms. Classroom community refers to the established routines and expectations set by classroom teachers. Classroom community impacts the way classrooms are run and how students interact with one another, as evidenced by the studies discussed below.

Following the discussion of classroom community, this literature review will analyze information gained from studying non-examples of inclusion in classrooms. Non-examples are illustrations of what inclusion does not look like and how it impacts students. It is vital to determine what is and is not effective to inform educators of best practices.

The third theme this literature review will discuss is relationships. Relationships have many layers in an educational setting. There is plentiful research supporting the importance of positive relationships among adults, among students, and between those two groups to dissect and connect to inclusive practices.

The next theme from the selected literature is student choice. Student choice is when educators provide opportunities for students to have a say in either the topic learned or the way in which they demonstrate their understanding of a given topic. The selected research showed a correlation between student choice and inclusive practices in elementary settings. This will be discussed further in the literature review.

The final theme this literature review will analyze is teacher training. Teacher training, or professional development, is when educators receive professional training on a specific topic, such as inclusion or inclusive practices. The reviewed literature was in agreement with the importance of teachers receiving appropriate professional training about inclusion in order to best provide inclusive strategies within their classrooms.

Classroom Community

The first theme to be discussed is the need for establishing and maintaining a sense of classroom community as a vital inclusive practice in elementary classrooms. What does it mean to establish classroom community in an elementary classroom? How is it connected to inclusive educational practices? There is a plethora of research surrounding the benefits of building classroom community both with and without regard to inclusive practices. This section will focus on how classroom community connects to and improves inclusive practices in elementary classrooms.

Coakley-Fields (2018) conducted a qualitative ethnographic case study of a fourth-grade teacher and two focal students in her classroom over the course of a school year on the effects of peer relationships and engagement in reading. The purpose of the study was to determine the extent of focal students' engagement in informal reading as well as the impact of participation on their reading abilities. The students were studied over the 2011-2012 school year to determine whether they would increase academic discourse during reading workshop time when provided with the time to discuss their reading. Coakley-Fields (2018) found the classroom teacher's inclusive classroom practices to have a positive impact on the focal students' engagement and participation whether the teacher was present or not. Limitations of the study were the small sample size, the lack of comparable classrooms as well as a lack of contrasting classrooms and data points. It is unclear whether similar results would happen in another classroom. This study is an example of how one teacher established a sense of community in her classroom which allowed all students to be engaged in the learning and feel successful, even if they struggled academically.

Similarly, Krull et al. (2014) conducted a quantitative study in Germany in order to determine the effects behavior problems and learning disabilities have on first grade students and whether improved social status in children caused an increase in academic achievement. The researchers used sociometric interviews as well as a questionnaire given to 2,839 first grade students in 64 inclusive schools. Students were about six years old and about half were male and half female. Of this group, about one third of the students were immigrants, and 285 students had classroom problems and/or disabilities. The purpose of the study was to ascertain whether students with perceived learning disabilities, behavioral problems, or both were treated differently than their peers as well as to determine the extent to which their disabilities affected

their self-concept. While the overall sample size had an even distribution of gender, the students with behavior problems or behavior problems and learning disabilities had a much higher percentage of boys than girls. The authors found students with behavioral problems, learning disabilities, or a combination of the two were more likely to be rejected by their peers (especially students with a behavioral issue) and had less self-confidence. Students with learning disabilities had a lower academic self-concept. The limitations of the study were the teachers' subjective assumptions about students' perceived disabilities and the fact it focused solely on classroom behaviors of students. This study was another example which highlighted how establishing a strong sense of community in a classroom can increase social acceptance of all students.

Coakley-Fields (2018) and Krull et al. (2014) had similar findings on the importance of establishing classroom community due to its connection to inclusive practices as well as academic gains. When educators foster a community of respectful relationships within their classrooms, students are more accepting of one another and more comfortable taking academic risks. It can then be concluded students with shared experiences are more likely to be accepted by their peers and increase their academic achievement over the course of a school year.

Another study, done by van den Berg and Stoltz (2018), conducted a quantitative study of 1,569 fourth to sixth grade students in 64 classrooms from 28 different schools in the Netherlands. The study was coordinated to determine whether seating arrangements can positively impact students with emotional and behavioral disorders and their peer relationships. Of the 1,569 students, 221 had elevated externalizing behaviors noted by their teachers. Gender was evenly distributed among the participants. The researchers used questionnaires to gather data from both student and teacher participants. Teachers were asked to implement and maintain new seating arrangements for the duration of the study. The study found students were more

positively perceived by a preferred classmate who sat by them. Researchers also found target students had fewer behavioral problems within the classroom setting over time. The researchers noted there were limitations to the study such as internal consistency from the utilized questionnaire and the small sample size. This study solidified the findings in the previously mentioned studies about the importance of classroom community. When students share experiences, they are more likely to have positive feelings regarding one another.

While van den Berg and Stoltz (2018) focused solely on behaviors, Krull et al. (2014) studied the impacts of classroom community on behaviors as well as academic achievement. These studies both showed positive growth in the areas of behavior and Krull et al. (2014) showed positive growth in academic achievement as well. Similarly, Coakley-Fields (2018) found positive changes in student engagement and participation. While achievement was not specifically measured in the study, increased engagement often leads to increased achievement.

The above studies showcase the importance of educators establishing an inclusive and respectful classroom community. This is one way to effectively incorporate inclusionary practices into educators' classrooms. When students feel accepted, they are more likely to participate in academic activities and be more engaged in content. The next section of this literature review will focus on the importance of understanding non-examples of inclusion in elementary classrooms.

Non-Examples of Inclusion

The second theme this literature review will discuss is non-examples of inclusion. It is equally important to determine what inclusion is as what it is not. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) conducted a qualitative multi-case study to determine the extent to which a Texas school district implemented inclusionary initiatives for five elementary schools. The school district

studied was considered urban and had a diverse population of learners with a history of segregating students receiving SPED services. The district had had multiple compliance issues in regard to SPED mandates. The researchers used observations and interviews of principals, teachers, and staff. The researchers found the district's definitions of inclusion as well as how they choose to focus their funds and time played a crucial role in implementing policies. They found this particular district to be successful in increasing inclusionary practices. The researchers noted two limitations in their study: data collection and reporting, both due to the political and legal nature of the case study. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) discussed how this school district had a history of segregating students who received SPED services. The authors also noted the lack of a universal definition of inclusion within the district made it difficult for schools to successfully implement policies. The researchers noted prior to the district's implementation of inclusionary practices, most students receiving SPED services were pulled out for instruction. This meant students were removed from the general education classrooms in order to receive their SPED services. The implementation of the new policies in the district resulted in more inclusive classrooms where students receiving SPED services stayed in the classroom and received support alongside their peers.

Comparably, Naraian et al. (2020) completed a qualitative study by interviewing three school administrators, seven teachers, and 23 families in urban schools in the northeastern part of the United States. The purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which inclusive educational opportunities were offered to students with disabilities. The researchers used purposeful sampling to conduct interviews with school leaders, led focus group meetings for families with and without students with disabilities, and interviewed teachers from various school buildings. The sample group was highly female but did accurately represent the

socioeconomic status and race of school families. The researchers found teachers and families

had differing thoughts on inclusion and communication, with families feeling more positively

about schools' efforts and teachers finding parents' participation to be lacking. The small number

of schools studied was a limitation of the study because it is unclear whether the results would be

an accurate representation of other schools or areas. Naraian et al. (2020) found the schools

studied struggled with implementing inclusion successfully. Many students receiving SPED

services were removed from their classrooms and received direct instruction from a special

education teacher. These students lost out on grade level content with their peers.

Both DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) and Naraian et al. (2020) voiced the

importance of studying what has not worked for school districts in order to determine what does.

Segregating students from their peers based on SPED services has its benefits and challenges.

However, DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) noted students of color were more likely to be

separated from their peers for SPED services than their white classmates. Likewise, Naraian et

al. (2020) discussed the disproportionate number of students of color receiving SPED services in

the schools they studied. It is imperative for educators to understand what does not work for

students receiving SPED services as well as analyze any implicit bias impacting the qualification

of students for SPED as well as the ways in which services are provided to students. The next

portion of this literature review will discuss the importance of building relationships among staff,

among students, and between staff and students.

Relationships

Building meaningful relationships in a school setting sets the tone for a successful school

year. Belonging is a basic need for children in schools and when they do not feel as if they

belong, learning becomes more difficult (McMaster, 2014). Developing a strong sense of

classroom community is the foundational step to fostering meaningful relationships among adults, among students, and between students and their teachers. This section of the literature review will dive into the benefits of nurturing positive relationships and the impact relationships have on inclusive classroom practices.

Relationships Among Staff

First, this literature review will discuss the importance of building and maintaining relationships and communication among staff within a school community. Particularly, the discussion will focus around the relationships between general education teachers and special education teachers. These relationships directly affect the students the adults serve in the classroom.

A qualitative study done by Finnerty et al. (2019) used inquiry to analyze adaptations provided by educators to students with severe disabilities in their general education classrooms. The researchers studied three general and special educator teams through observations, photographs of adaptations used, and interviews. The researchers' purpose was to determine how educators adapted learning materials in order to provide students with severe disabilities access to grade level content as well as understand how educators assessed student progress. The researchers also wanted to be cognizant of how educators sustained these adaptations over time and content areas. The study found when general and special education teachers worked together, they had success in implementing adaptations to student work, analyzing student progress, and maintaining adaptations. The researchers noted three limitations to the study. The study was done with purposeful convenience, characteristics of students were not detailed, and interviews were done in teams, which could have skewed some of the interview conversations.

The study's findings support the importance of special education and general education teachers having strong relationships in order to best support students in their classrooms.

Another study highlighting the importance of adults' relationships and communication is one done by LeDoux et al. (2012). They conducted a study on the effectiveness of inclusion meeting the needs of special education students using mixed methods, or a combination of qualitative and quantitative studies. The authors used an online questionnaire to gather quantitative data from 56 staff members from a Texas school regarding their needs in supporting special education students. It was noted the staff accurately represented comparable elementary schools in Texas. The researchers also led a focus group consisting of seven staff members from multiple grade levels in order to gain understanding of the challenges educators faced in supporting special education students in the general education classroom. The study found educators to need more professional development in the area of inclusion as well as better communication between all adults involved in educating students receiving SPED services. While no limitations were directly stated, the study had a small sample size from one school focused on teachers' opinions. It is not clear whether the findings would be similar if the study was conducted again with different educators.

LeDoux et al. (2012) found staff members to have higher rates of success and satisfaction with inclusive practices when they had higher rates of communication and respect between the involved adults. For example, the researchers noted disconnect between general education and SPED teachers created a barrier in developing a plan to which each involved party is working towards the same goals for students. The reviewed literature agreed on the need for staff members to build positive relationships with one another so they can work together to ensure they provide the best education for the students they serve. The next section of this review will

highlight the importance of students having positive relationships with one another in classroom settings.

Relationships Among Students

The next type of relationship to be discussed is the relationship among students. The discussed literature will highlight the importance of students' relationships with one another. The following researchers found benefits to fostering relationships within classrooms for both students receiving SPED services and those who are not.

Kozleski et al. (2021) conducted a randomized control qualitative study of 173 general and special education teachers, principals, and students through the use of focus group interviews. Participants were from three different states. The purpose of this study was to determine the efficacy of a literacy program called Early Literacy Skills Builder (ELSB) in general education classrooms. These classrooms included students with severe disabilities. The researchers found the implementation of ELSB to have high social validity for students. The researchers also concluded students with severe disabilities benefited from learning in the general education classroom. The described limitations were the possibility of the research's structure influencing stakeholders' perspectives and the choice to not interview the students with severe disabilities on their experiences. "This study indicates that teaching students with severe disabilities in general education creates opportunities for students without disabilities to engage in learning relationships with students with severe disabilities" (Kozleski, 2021, pp. 303). Therefore, this body of research expresses the importance of students building relationships with one another through an inclusive classroom environment.

Van den Berg and Stoltz (2018) found students to have fewer behavioral problems when they had more shared experiences with their peers. When students had a preferred seatmate, they

had fewer externalizing behaviors in the classroom. This shows the importance of building relationships between students. Coakley-Fields (2018) also examined peer relationships in her study regarding increasing engagement and achievement in reading through conversations during reading workshops. The children studied had different reading ability levels. One child was an average student while another was labeled a struggling reader. At the end of the study, the author found the struggling reader not only had increased engagement surrounding reading but also had increased his perception of his own reading skills as well as his actual achievement. According to the study, as a result of spending a substantial amount of time with the other subject, a friend, the struggling reader gained interest, confidence, and knowledge. This also supports the idea that building strong relationships among students leads to more success in the classroom, regardless of ability level. The next section of the literature review will discuss the benefits of having strong relationships between staff members and students

Relationships Between Staff and Students

The third type of relationships this review focused on was the relationship between staff and students. While the previous two sections focused on developing and maintaining relationships among peer groups (staff or students), this section will combine the two groups to discuss the importance of building strong relationships between students and the staff members who support them in their education. The researched literature agreed on the importance of these relationships for students to flourish academically, socially, and emotionally.

One study focused on relationships of educators and students is a mixed methods study of 14 staff members, two students, and two parents, conducted by Ostmeyer and Scarpa (2012) through focus groups or individual meetings (participants chose which they preferred). The researchers analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data. The purpose of this study was to use

Participatory Action Research (PAR) to inform development of a social skills program for children with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders (HFASD). The researchers determined a need for a social skills intervention for children with HFASD. While the study provided valuable data, several limitations were noted by the researchers. The study focused on one school and had a small number of participants (and only two were parents). The participants likely viewed the implementation of a social skills intervention as important because they volunteered for the study. This study concluded there is a strong need for SPED and general education teachers to maintain strong relationships with students as well as with their families to aid students in growing academically, socially, and emotionally. The authors noted how the implementation of a social skills program experienced barriers, including stakeholders not understanding the importance of building relationships prior to digging into academics.

LeDoux et al. (2012) also pointed out the importance of students' and educators' relationships. The researchers noted when students were pulled out of the classroom for instruction it was more difficult for educators to build rapport with those students. The researchers discussed the importance of students remaining in an inclusive classroom to not only offer equitable educational and social experiences but also to build strong relationships with the teacher.

Another study reviewed was a quantitative study done by Mikami et al. (2019) which researched whether teachers' behaviors influence peer relationships. Researchers studied 194 kindergarten through fourth grade students from 12 general education classrooms in Canada and the United States. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the use of a program called Making Socially Accepting Inclusive Classrooms (MOSAIC) increases students' perceptions of peers with behavioral problems. Questionnaires were completed by teachers and parents for

students with heightened behavioral problems. This study determined elementary school teachers have influence over peer dynamics in the classroom setting. The researchers noted several limitations of this study including low inter-rater reliability, difference between self-reported information from teachers and observations done by the researchers, and the small sample size of 12 classrooms. This study highlighted the impact educators have on the perceptions students in their classrooms have on one another. Therefore, it is imperative for educators to have purposeful and positive interactions with their students in order to not only foster respectful relationships between the teacher and the students but also among the students within the classroom.

The discussed research was very clear on the importance of building and maintaining strong relationships among staff, among students, and between students and the staff supporting their education. Students will have more opportunities for these relationships to flourish in inclusive classroom environments. The next section of the literature review will discuss the importance of providing students with choice in general education classrooms.

Student Choice

Another theme which arose in the reviewed literature was the positive effect of allowing students to have choice. Student choice can be weaved into classroom culture in many different ways. Student choice provides students with opportunities to have a voice in their education which offers a powerful message to them: your opinion matters.

In the study done by van den Berg and Stoltz (2018), students who were allowed to sit next to a classmate about whom they felt positive, had increased engagement and decreased externalizing behaviors in class. Allowing students to choose their seatmates had a positive effect on the students in this study, specifically for students with frequent behavioral disturbances. It

also impacted the other students in the class positively as their perceptions of students with behavioral disturbance become more accepting.

Comparably, Coakley-Fields (2018) found allowing a struggling reader to work alongside an average reader increased the struggling reader's engagement with reading as well as achievement. This study showcases another instance where allowing students to have choice has a positive effect on their education, despite possible behavioral or academic differences from their peers.

A qualitative study of 23 students in an inclusive fourth grade classroom was done by Goodnight et al. (2021) with the focus on five particular students with behavioral problems. The study was conducted to determine whether the use of preprinted response cards increased student participation, decreased behavior problems, or both. The study found the response cards increased participation and decreased behavior disruptions for all five target students. Despite the positive results, quite a few limitations were noted. The researchers noted there was no measure of academic achievement included, the observational data for disruptive behavior was done over brief periods of time, the researcher selected students with little knowledge of past behavioral disruptions, and data were not collected on the rate of opportunities to respond. Also, the researchers described the preprinted response cards as being too noisy and distracting, which could have affected student engagement. This study highlighted the importance of allowing students different choices in how they respond to teachers in whole group lessons. Students' participation increased with the choice of using response cards which demonstrated the need for educators to implement choice into their whole group lessons.

Offering students choice in different areas of their education will send a message to them about the importance of their opinions. The studied literature is clear on the significance of

positive outcomes. Students from the studied literature increased their engagement and participation and decreased their behavioral disruptions. These findings support inclusion of students receiving SPED services in the general education classroom. When students are provided with choice it offers more opportunities for all learners, regardless of ability levels. The following theme reviewed the need to provide adequate training for educators on inclusion.

Training Educators

The final theme found in the reviewed literature is providing educators adequate training in inclusionary practices. The need for sufficient training for educators on inclusive practices is evident in all of the discussed literature below. Educators must know how to provide equitable access to content for all students in order to do so effectively.

Sadioglu et al. (2013) found educators did not feel sufficiently trained in inclusive teaching. The researchers conducted a qualitative case study of 23 teachers from 16 cities during the 2009-2010 school year. Sadioglu et al. (2013) found 21 of the interviewed educators had negative opinions about applications of inclusionary practices in schools overall. There were varying reasons for these opinions, but the researchers found the most common was teachers did not have enough training. The 23 teachers interviewed offered several suggestions about how to better prepare teachers, such as offering more expert support as well as training for in-service and pre-service teachers (Sadioglu et al., 2013). While this study did not mention any limitations, there are several which could be noted. For instance, this was a small sample of educators. Also, it is unknown how long these teachers had been in the profession. Newer teachers may have had a better insight about how much training pre-service teachers receive surrounding inclusion as they would have completed their collegiate studies in more recent years.

In addition, Coakley-Fields (2018) found the teacher of the students she observed for her research was well-trained, which had a positive impact on the students in her classroom. The researcher described how the teacher's peers identified her as "an excellent fourth-grade teacher and leader." She also went on to describe how this particular teacher had a lot of experience teaching inclusively. Due to the findings from the above literature, it can be noted that adequately training educators in inclusion can have a positive impact on their students.

The flip side of the above study was shown through the following research. Hernandez et al. (2016) conducted quantitative research using a method where the authors collected data from 118 elementary and middle school general and special education teachers in South Carolina through an online survey using convenience sampling. The purpose of the study was to determine whether general and special education teachers' attitudes about inclusion differed and how those differences impacted their use of inclusionary practices. The authors found special education teachers to have a more positive attitude on inclusion than general education teachers. They related this to SPED teachers having more training as well as in the field experience with successfully implementing inclusionary practices. General education teachers also felt inclusion was positive, but their feelings were not as strong. The researchers stated the use of convenience sampling as a limitation of the study as well as the small sample size. The researchers noted that SPED teachers were more positive and had more success in implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms, likely due to having more training as well as more on site experiences. Both Coakley-Fields (2018) and Hernandez et al. (2016) highlight the need for providing educators with adequate training on inclusion in order to offer students equitable education in their classrooms.

Siperstein et al. (2011) offered another viewpoint on the impact of educators not having sufficient training on inclusion. The researchers conducted a quantitative study of 86 children from Boston area schools over two years. The researchers studied children in both low-income and high-income schools who either received special education services for emotional disturbances or were perceived to be at high risk for emotional disturbances through the use of standardized behavioral assessments. Siperstein et al. (2011) found students receiving special education services in high-income schools performed better than students in low-income schools receiving similar services. This did not change over the two years students were observed. The study discussed the lack of services provided to students in low income schools as well. Siperstein et al. (2011) suggested a closer look at which interventions are used for students with emotional disturbances may shed more light on why these particular students did not make academic gains. This study had several limitations. For example, the specific academic and behavioral interventions used were not studied, the sample size was relatively small, and it was contained to the Boston area. The researchers noted lower income schools received less training than higher income schools, leaving those teachers less prepared and less likely to implement inclusive practices in their classrooms. The researchers also found students in low income schools to receive less support in the areas of social and emotional needs which validates the need for educators to receive training on inclusive practices.

LeDoux et al. (2012) found teachers' confidence to predict their ability to effectively implement inclusive practices in their classrooms. They noted when teachers have a lack of confidence in inclusive practices, they are more likely to be negative about implementing them. Therefore, the researchers suggested teachers need additional training to improve their viewpoints on inclusion as well as their confidence in implementing inclusive practices. They

found the increase in training and positive attitudes led to more confidence and more inclusive practices implemented within classrooms. Biamba (2016) determined educators want to offer inclusive classroom experiences to students but often lack the experience or training to do so and therefore do not know where to begin. The researcher found educators struggled with finding strategies to include students with disabilities which aligns with the need for more professional development for teachers.

Klibthong and Agbenyega (2018) conducted a qualitative study of 16 early childhood teachers in Thailand in order to analyze teachers' professional learning experiences related to adjusting their educational practices with inclusion. The researchers conducted interviews with participants prior to their professional development and analyzed the results. Then the early childhood teachers participated in the professional development before a final open forum discussion. The study found professional development to have a substantial impact on teachers' mindsets. Limitations of the study were the sample size, selection process, and unknown classroom impacts. The researchers found teachers were nervous to implement inclusive practices because they had little to no experience or training in how to do so. When educators were given training and offered strategies for inclusive practices, they were more confident in implementing practices within their classrooms.

The above studies all discussed the need for educators to receive ample training on inclusive classroom practices. The studies determined the more training and experience educators have in inclusive practices, the more they implemented them in their own classrooms. When teachers are inclusive, students all benefit from shared experiences and equitable access to grade level content. The following section of this chapter will review the proposed problem investigated.

Review of the Proposed Problem

Education is ever-changing and educators are known for adapting and adjusting their teaching methods to best meet the needs of their students. The studied literature highlighted the need for providing students with inclusive educational experiences. Students come to school with diverse needs and abilities. The studied literature was clear about students needing equitable access to grade level content and shared experiences with peers regardless of their ability level or possible disabilities. The question this literature review aimed to address was: In light of what is known about differentiated instruction, what are best practices for applying and maintaining inclusion of special education students in an elementary classroom?

Review of the Importance of the Topic

Inclusion is an important issue for educators to address because teachers' classrooms are filled with students of diverse needs from diverse backgrounds. Students within current classrooms have varying ability levels and needs. In order for educators to offer equitable education to their students, they need to know how to best differentiate their instruction to fit the needs of all learners. Students receiving SPED services are often removed from the classroom, as discussed in several studies above. This means these students lose out on grade level curriculum with their peers of the same age.

The idea of inclusion lends itself to creating more positive peer relationships due to more shared experiences. This is also highlighted in the included studies. When educators shift their mindsets to think about how to best educate students in one setting it allows for a more inclusive experience for students. While this is not effortless, the efforts are worth the benefits discussed above. All students deserve a quality and equitable education. Cultivating an inclusive classroom environment is one way for educators to do so.

Summary of Findings

The above literature review examined best practices for creating an inclusive classroom environment to best service all students in an elementary setting. The themes of classroom community, non-examples, relationships, student choice, and training educators were analyzed and discussed.

The studies by Coakley-Fields (2018), Krull et al. (2014), and van den Berg and Stoltz (2018) highlighted the need for educators to establish an inclusive classroom community focused on respect. Their research agreed in a positive classroom environment leading to more inclusion and therefore more respect and acceptance among peers.

The literature review also focused on the need to analyze nonexamples of inclusion to determine what does work. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) and Naraian et al. (2020) discussed how observing classrooms which did not practice inclusion impacted views of how to better serve students in a more inclusive manner. This research supports the need to understand what inclusion does not look like in order to best implement effective inclusive practices within elementary classrooms.

The theme of relationships was the most prevalent idea throughout the reviewed literature. Many studies analyzed the importance of developing and maintaining relationships in order to provide inclusive education for students. Kozleski et al. (2021), Van den Berg and Stoltz (2018), and Coakley-Fields (2018) all pointed out the need for students to have positive relationships among their peers in the classroom. Finnerty et al. (2019) and LeDoux et al. (2012) expressed the need for staff involved in students' education to have positive relationships among themselves in order to best support students' education. Ostmeyer and Scarpa (2012) and LeDoux et al. (2012) also focused on the importance of fostering strong, positive relationships

between students and the staff that support them in their education. In addition, Mikami et al. (2019) weighed in on the need for educators to model respectful relationships for students. According to the reviewed research, authentic, positive relationships in schools support inclusive classroom environments.

Student choice was the next theme revealed through the literature. Van den Berg and Stoltz (2018), Coakley-Fields (2018), and Goodnight et al. (2021) all discussed the positive impacts of allowing students to have choice in various aspects of their learning. The reviewed research found providing students opportunities for choice supports inclusive practices.

The final theme in the research was the need to support educators through training. Sadioglu et al. (2013), Coakley-Fields (2018), Hernandez et al. (2016), Siperstein et al. (2011), LeDoux et al. (2012), Biamba (2016), and Klibthong and Agbenyega (2018) all focused on the need for educators to be properly trained in implementation of inclusive classroom practices. All these researchers described the importance of supporting educators so they can provide the best education for their students through inclusive classroom practices.

Conclusion

Overall, the research discussed the need for teachers to provide inclusive education for all learners in their classrooms. The positive impacts of doing so were clearly stated throughout the reviewed literature. Inclusive practices in the studied literature led to higher levels of student engagement, peer acceptances, and academic success. There are various ways educators can move towards more inclusive classrooms. It is important for educators to create a positive classroom community, know what does not work in order to focus on what does, build and foster positive relationships, offer students opportunities for choice, and advocate for the needed training. In the following chapter this paper will discuss the insights gained from the above

research, applications for classrooms, and possible future studies to further enhance understanding of inclusion in elementary classrooms.

Chapter Three: Discussion and Application

Insights Gained from the Research

The above reviewed literature shed light on several insights regarding the importance of implementing inclusive practices in elementary classrooms. The first insight gained was the need for educators to receive adequate training on inclusive practices. The studied literature agreed on the correlation between teachers having training and proper implementation of inclusive practices in classrooms. Educators also had more positive feelings about inclusion when provided with ample training and resources (Hernandez et al., 2016; Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2018; Sadioglu et al., 2013). The research also demonstrated how more teachers experienced success and satisfaction in implementing inclusive practices after being trained in how to do so.

The second insight was students experience higher rates of peer acceptance when they have more shared experience with classmates (Coakley-Fields, 2018; van den Berg & Stoltz, 2018). The studied research showed students to have more social acceptance from peers when they spent the majority of the day in the general education classroom. Students who were pulled out for SPED services did not have as many shared experiences with their same-aged peers.

The third insight gained was students are more engaged in academic content when they are in inclusive classroom settings with their same-aged peers (Finnerty et al., 2019; Goodnight et al., 2021). The reviewed research showed students to have fewer behavioral problems in class when inclusive practices were implemented in general education classrooms. Students also engaged with their peers more often when in inclusive classrooms.

These insights all lead to the need for changes in current educational practices. While the studied literature focused on classrooms which have implemented some degree of inclusionary practices, not all classrooms have done so. There is a need for educators to shift their current practices to offer more inclusive education to all learners, regardless of ability levels. The biggest question educators face is: How? How do teachers shift their classroom practices to include all students while still providing rigorous instruction for students performing at or above grade level? How do educators ensure all students are able to learn when there is such a wide array of needs in one classroom?

Application

In order for educators to successfully implement inclusion in their classrooms, the first step is for them to receive training on effective inclusive classroom practices. It is nearly impossible for teachers to effectively implement strategies of which they have little to no background. It can also be difficult to assess current practices without training on inclusion. The reviewed research was clear on the need for educators to receive ample training on inclusive practices. Educators may think they are using best practices for including all students, but without adequate training it is difficult to ensure. Administration should also set expectations for teachers regarding inclusion in classrooms. Administrators should also provide general and SPED teachers with common planning time. This will allow teachers to work together to plan for how to best meet the needs of students receiving SPED services. The need for training was by far the most prevalent theme in the reviewed literature.

Hernandez et al. (2016) found special education teachers to have more training and experience in inclusive practices. This made those teachers more positive about inclusion and more confident in their abilities to successfully implement inclusive practices in their

classrooms. Therefore, in order for general education teachers to experience similar feelings, they too must be offered more training in inclusive practices.

The next step needed is for educators to advocate for their students to remain in the general education classroom as much as possible. The studied research found special education students to be more accepted by their peers when they spent more time in the general education classroom. If students are pulled out of the general education classroom to receive SPED services, general education teachers should work with the SPED teachers to ensure students stay in the classroom as much as possible.

In research done by Coakley-Fields (2018), a student receiving SPED services for reading remained in the general education classroom during the reader's workshop lessons. This student worked with a peer reading at grade level. The student receiving SPED services increased his participation and engagement in reading by staying in the general education classroom. Therefore, educators should make every effort to include students of all ability levels in grade level instruction. This will allow more opportunities for all students to receive equitable content and experiences with nondisabled peers. Including all students in grade level instruction also gives opportunities for students who do not receive SPED services to learn about peers with whom they may not have had shared experiences prior.

Educators should set high expectations for students regarding peer interactions and behaviors. They should model appropriate discourse and behavior. Also, educators should celebrate diversity of all kinds in their classrooms. In the study done by van den Berg and Stoltz (2018), students with behavioral problems were more accepted by their peers when they spent more time in the classroom sitting next to a chosen classmate. The researchers found students had more shared experiences with one another which led to higher peer acceptance and fewer

behavioral problems. Educators should allow space for students to build authentic relationships with one another and practice treating one another with respect. This will take time and will need to be modeled often.

This leads to the final step for educators to take. This step is to foster positive relationships among all students in their classrooms and offer a plethora of shared experiences. The studied research showed students to be more accepting of their peers when they had more shared experiences with them. For this to happen, educators must offer opportunities for students to work together and spend time learning about one another.

Finnerty et al. (2019) suggested SPED and general education teachers work together in order to determine appropriate adaptations for students receiving SPED services in the general education classroom. This will assist general educators in how to best include students receiving SPED services in the general education classroom. This collaboration between teachers will allow for the planning of meaningful instruction for all students, leading to more shared experiences. According to the studied research, these shared experiences will lead to more peer acceptance.

Another facet of this step is for educators to allow students to have choice when appropriate. This may mean allowing students to work with a group to complete a task or to choose how they demonstrate understanding of a skill. The studied research showed students were more engaged when they were learning in an inclusive classroom setting with their same aged peers. Offering choice will create an engaging classroom experience for students.

It is essential for all students to receive equitable access to content and peer relationships/experiences at school. For this to happen, educators must first be trained on inclusive strategies. Once teachers are adequately trained they can advocate for their students and

work with SPED teachers to ensure all students are successful in the general education classroom.

Future Research Recommendations

The studied literature was clear in the need for more training for educators on inclusion. However, this is a broad topic. Future studies should be done on which trainings are most effective. There are a number of ways to train educators on strategies. Research should be conducted to determine what works best to assist teachers in implementing effective inclusive strategies. Also, research should be done to determine how to best offer continued support for educators to further their understanding of inclusion once initial trainings have been completed.

Next, research should be done to analyze how peers' views of classmates with behavioral difficulties change over time. Conducting studies to track peers' acceptance of classmates prior to inclusion through the peers being fully included in the general education classroom would offer further insights on the need for inclusion in classrooms to support social and emotional development of students. Conducting research on the effects inclusion has on general education students would also be beneficial for educators. This would allow educators to address any problems for general education students as well.

Finally, it would be beneficial for research to analyze which strategies are most engaging for students in an inclusive elementary classroom of diverse learners. This would allow educators to spend time using effective teaching strategies that hold students' attention and make learning applicable and relevant to them. Also, when teachers are supplied with resources to provide high-quality instruction, they can spend more time tailoring it to meet the needs of their specific students. Research on which resources are most effective for teachers would assist educators in spending less time determining the best strategies and allowing for more time to be spent

differentiating and analyzing student data. This would also allow teachers to spend more time planning with one another in order to meet the needs of current students.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this paper, a student, James, was introduced. James entered school and quickly learned he was unlike his peers. He was diagnosed with an emotional behavioral disability and was removed from his classroom to receive special education services. He experienced isolation. However, there is hope for a different outcome for James, a brighter school experience.

James is still diagnosed with an emotional behavioral disability; however, his special education team works to implement an individualized learning plan (IEP) to best fit his needs. James spends his entire day with his peers, but is supported with a paraprofessional or his SPED teacher. He is taught how to recognize when he is feeling big emotions and learns a plan for what to do before he begins to yell or throw things. He may leave the classroom to calm his body, but returns when his emotions are regulated and continues learning. James feels supported and knows he belongs, even though he has differences from his peers. The adults at school teach James that different is not bad. In fact, he learns being unique is a positive and his teachers show him he has strengths and important contributions to make to his class.

James learns grade level content with his peers. He makes friends and navigates peer relationships. He struggles sometimes but knows who to ask for help. He learns all children have difficulties from time to time. Most importantly, James learns he belongs. He is accepted for who he is. He is not expected to change so he can "fit in" with his peers. He fits in just as he is. His IEP is addressed yearly and modified to fit his changing needs as he grows older.

Inclusion is the reason James makes academic growth comparable to his peers. It is also responsible for him making friends with his grade level peers. Inclusion makes James' school experience brighter. He believes in himself and knows he has worth as he is. This scenario is vastly different from the one introduced at the beginning of this paper. It is clear James and other children receiving SPED services deserve this outcome. Children deserve to be accepted and included rather than described as different and therefore isolated. When elementary classrooms offer inclusive learning environments, students with diverse needs have the opportunity to learn together in the general education classroom.

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Appendix

Article Tracking Matrix

Articles: Author(s) name and year of publication	Method: Qualitative/ Quantitative/ Meta-Analysis/ Mixed-Methods	Classroom Community	Non-Examples	Relationships	Student Choice	Teacher Training
Biamba (2016)	Qualitative					X
Coakley-Fields (2018)	Qualitative	X		X	X	X
DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013)	Qualitative		X			
Hernandez et al. (2016)	Quantitative					X
Finnerty et al. (2019)	Qualitative			X		
Goodnight et al. (2019)	Qualitative				X	
Klibthong and Agbenyega (2018)	Qualitative					X
Kozleski et al. (2020)	Qualitative			X		
Krull et al. (2014)	Quantitative	X				
LeDoux et al. (2012)	Mixed Methods			X		X
Mikami et al. (2019)	Quantitative			X		
Naraian et al. (2020)	Qualitative		X			
Ostmeyer and Scarpa (2012)	Mixed Methods			X		
Sadioglu et al. (2013)	Qualitative					X
Siperstein et al. (2011)	Quantitative					X
van den Berg and Stoltz (2018)	Quantitative	X		X	X	