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How can school policies help support inclusion for students with disabilities?

Rationale

The inclusion of special needs students in the general education setting for at least part of the day is considered a best practice in almost all special education programs, and a requirement of most Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Most teachers recognize the importance of inclusion for helping special education students learn important skills, make and maintain relationships with peers, and feel like a member of the school community. However, there are many obstacles that stand in the way of successful inclusion in schools.

Literature Review

I read nine articles related to the inclusion of students with disabilities. All of the articles were written in the last five years. Many of the articles focused on how attitudes regarding inclusion impact the successful implementation of inclusion services. It was widely reported that while most teachers felt inclusion for students with mild disabilities was appropriate, teachers became less accepting of inclusion for students with severe disabilities (DeSimone, Maldonado, & Rodriguez, 2013). It is important that inclusion be addressed on a per-student basis and not as a blanket policy for all students regardless of circumstance (Ford, 2013). The type of disability also impacted the attitudes of teachers with regards to inclusion. Teachers were most concerned about the inclusion of students with severe behavioral disorders (Gal, Schreur, & Engel-Yeger, 2010).

Another obstacle was the increasing reliance on standardized testing for students (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus). Students with high tests scores have always been considered better students; now teachers with students who have high tests scores are considered better teachers. This creates friction between the idea of inclusion and teachers' desires to be considered good teachers. This can lead to General Education Teachers being less open to having special education students in their classes, especially if student test scores are part of their evaluation. Students with low test scores can be seen as detrimental to their employment.

Data Collection and Analysis

I surveyed Special Education Teachers, General Education Teachers, Related Service Providers, and Educational Assistants about what makes a successful inclusion experience and policies that can help or hinder inclusion. I asked educators about (1) their experiences with inclusion, (2) what had the greatest impact on their experiences, and (3) which policies help or hinder the inclusion experience.

The majority of my responses were from intermediate elementary teachers (Grades 3-5), followed by primary elementary teachers (grades K-2). The greatest number of responses were from Special Education Teachers (61%), followed by General Education Teachers (27%). While I sent the survey to Related Service Providers, none completed the survey.

When asked to rate their experience with inclusion, 62% said very positive or somewhat positive and 31% said very negative or somewhat negative. One teacher said “it depends on the teacher” and another said “It is really a challenge sometimes to attempt to meet the needs of general education students along with special education students. The time element and sometimes the distractions that are caused makes it difficult to teach.”

The General Education Teacher was identified as having the greatest impact on the experience by 43% of respondents. The Special Education Teacher and specific policies were cited by 18%, and everything else was at 6%. The importance of collaboration and planning time were first identified in comments supporting the other non-instructional/non-policy options. When asked what has the greatest impact on the success of instruction under the inclusion model, one teacher cited “the ability to determine best time/best fit for integration based on IEP goals and class schedule,” and another “gen ed and sped teacher collaboration.”

When asked about policies, most educators said there were no school policies in place that impacted inclusion (56%). When there were policies in place, responses were divided between school policies having a positive impact (25%) or negative impact (18%) on the experience. Comments about policies included “depends on the administration, could be positive or negative” and “district policies in place for least restrictive environment”.

Next, I asked educators to discuss specific APS policies and how they impact students. Several educators talked about the importance of having a school climate of inclusion, having support from administration, and being able to reduce class sizes so that classrooms were not overcrowded. Time for the General Education Teacher and Special Education Teacher to plan together and collaborate on what would occur in the inclusion setting was mentioned over and over again as something that was very important. People who had positive experiences talked about the importance of that time and people who had negative experiences talked of the lack of this planning time. The state’s new teacher observation system was also cited multiple times as having a negative impact. Teachers felt that they were being required to do more and more, and that having special education students in an inclusion setting added even more to their workload. Some educators felt that some special education students were being sent to classes that were not appropriate for their need levels and others felt they did not have their inclusion students long enough to truly get to know them and their needs.

Finally, I asked educators which policies they wanted to have in place. Most wanted to ensure there were policies in place for collaboration time and that students were being sent to inclusion with the support they needed. One teacher said “All Gen Ed teachers should visit a sped class and see that the students are learning and as curious about the world around them as Gen Ed students. Also, Gen Ed teachers should be able to visit classrooms where inclusion is successful on a day-to-day basis.” Another educator identified the need to establish a policy in support of “collaboration for general education and special education specifically about the special education students” and to “require training for both the regular and Special Education Teachers on how to include all students in a positive and most successful manner, as well as how to work collaboratively together.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

My research found that the most cited obstacle to successful inclusion is a lack of collaboration and planning time between all the educators who are working with students. Policies in school often focus on collaboration between grade levels, but Special Education Teachers are often not able to attend these meetings. Rarely are times established specifically for collaboration between Special Education and General Education Teachers. The lack of inclusion-specific collaboration time has a negative impact on instruction in an inclusion setting. General Education Teachers feel that special needs students are in their classrooms without the proper preparation and skills needed to be successful during inclusion activities. Special Education Teachers feel that their students are not welcome in the general education setting. From this research, it is recommended that policies be established to create dedicated collaboration and planning time between Special Education Teachers and General Education Teachers working together in an inclusion setting. Ensuring teachers have this time could go a long way toward making sure that special needs students are provided with appropriate inclusion experiences.

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