Check for updates

Journal of Applied Social Science
2019, Vol. 13(1) 74–88
© The Author(s) 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1936724419826254
journals.sagepub.com/home/jax

Inclusion for All? An Exploration of Teacher's Reflections on Inclusion in Two Elementary Schools

Michelle Bemiller[1]

Abstract

Teachers face numerous challenges. Pressure exists to meet Common Core Standards and increase state test scores while operating on shoestring budgets. In addition, public schools have seen an increase in students with disabilities—individuals with unique academic and social needs. Due to the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, inclusion in general education classrooms is the right of children with disabilities. Disability advocates applaud this act for ensuring equality for all. Yet, equality is not akin to equity. In classrooms where teachers lack proper training, children with special needs may not experience equity, ultimately weakening the intent of inclusive practices. The current study stems from a commissioned needs assessment that explored how teachers at two elementary schools in Northeast Ohio define inclusion, current training related to students with disabilities, and teacher recommendations for training/resources to teach students with special needs effectively. The article ends with policy and future research recommendations.

Keywords

inclusion, resources, special needs, training

Introduction

According to recent data released by the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), in 2013–2014, the number of public school students in the United States between the ages of three and 21 years receiving special education services was 6.4 million (about 13 percent). A total of 35 percent of these children had diagnoses of a specific learning disability.

For more than 35 years, students with disabilities have been educated in classrooms with typically developing peers (National Center for Education Statistics 2016). To continue efforts to support such placements, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) 2004 least restrictive environment (LRE) mandate states the following:

> To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational

[1]Walsh University, North Canton, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:
Michelle Bemiller, Walsh University, 2020 E. Maple St., North Canton, OH 44720, USA.
Email: mbemiller@walsh.edu

> environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in the regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (Disability Rights California 2005)

Options for meeting this mandate vary in scope and meaning (e.g., mainstreaming, inclusion, integration). None of these possibilities have been defined in federal or state statutes. In other words, none are part of special education law (Disability Rights California 2005), leading to confusion regarding educational options for children with special needs, and to debates on these concepts and practices. One example can be seen when discussing the idea of "inclusion." Scholars pose a number of questions—what does inclusion mean? Does it work? Who does it benefit? (Goodfellow 2012; Haug 2016; Keaney 2012; Muega 2016).

To effectively study and implement such practices in educational environments, a clear conceptual understanding of these definitions and their implementation by stakeholders in school districts is imperative. In addition to determining clear definitions, it is also important to understand attitudes toward inclusive practices, as well as how schools can equip educators to better integrate students with special needs into classrooms and schools.

To meet these goals, the current study shares a needs assessment of two elementary schools in Northeast Ohio. The goal of the study was to focus on one group of stakeholders—teachers—to better understand their knowledge of, and attitudes toward, inclusive practices. The study provides both qualitative and quantitative data that explore what teachers want and need to best educate students with special needs. The term "inclusion" is used to discuss school experiences of students with special needs in this study because this is the common term used in the school district investigated.

The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: How do elementary school teachers in Miller and Craft schools define inclusion?
Research Question 2: What learning environment do teachers feel is best for students with special needs?
Research Question 3: What are the wants/needs of K–4 teachers in Miller and Craft schools in terms of school resources to aid in educating children with special needs?
Research Question 4: What trainings would be useful for these teachers who educate children with special needs?

Inclusion: Definition, Policy, and Practice

The definition and practice of inclusion differs between and within schools in the United States (Disability Rights California 2005; Haug 2016). Yet, a prevailing paradigm in inclusive education is that students with disabilities will be fully included in a general education classroom with typical students in their local school district. In this environment, students would be exposed to material that is on their level and related to their interests (Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Di Nuovo 2015; Haug 2016). Such an ideal focuses on structural environment. Contrary to this structural focus, Warnock (2005) argued for the placement of students where they experience the highest likelihood of learning, feeling of belonging, and experience high levels of well-being. The focus is on learning and not necessarily environment in this case.

In a departure from the focus on "full inclusion," Keaney (2012) distinguished between different forms of inclusion. He reiterates the definition of full inclusion stated in Anastasiou et al. (2015)—inclusion is a child with special needs being placed within a general education classroom full time—but then extends the discussion by pointing out that some schools implement what has been termed partial inclusion, or mainstreaming, where children with special needs

spend part of their day in the general education classroom, and part of their day in an intervention/resource room (see also Disability Rights California 2005; Idol 2006). In a different vein, reverse inclusion (or reverse mainstreaming) brings typical children into special education environments to socially engage with students with disabilities (Disability Rights California 2005; Schoger 2006). Globally speaking, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2005) goes beyond an educational definition, encouraging the understanding of inclusion as a process that should take place with families, communities, and schools.

Despite such variation, some commonly mentioned elements of inclusion are as follows: (1) the right to a high-quality education for all students and (2) involvement in fellowship and participation in both school culture and curricula (Booth 1996). Some definitions go beyond these tenets, pointing to the need for provision of specialized interventions and supports that enable students with special needs to meet the core curriculum of typical students (Alquraini and Gut 2012; Bui et al. 2010).

As Haug (2016) pointed out, such conceptualizations are "ideal" but serve as a "masterpiece of rhetoric" that is "easy to accept and difficult to be against or even criticize." As there is no commonly established definition of inclusion, conflicts arise over interpretation of the concept. As a result, individuals and institutional agents avoid conversations about what inclusion means (Haug 2016).

On an institutional level, Hardy and Woodcock (2015) pointed to nonexistent policies related to inclusion that lead to difficulty in understanding and implementing inclusive practices. Similarly, Hossain (2012) stated that "The term inclusion is not mentioned in any U.S. educational legislation. It is a practice that originated by special educators, disability activists, and the parents of children with disabilities" (p. 2) (see also Disability Rights California 2005). Such omissions contribute to the fuzziness that surrounds the idea of inclusion, leading to lack of, or disagreement over, implementation of inclusive educational standards.

Beyond the difficulty of defining inclusion, one might ask, whose responsibility is it to create a definition of inclusion? Teachers? Administrators? Parents? The UNESCO (2005) argued that the answer is "all of the above." Inclusive definitions and practices should be determined by everyone who has a stake in the education of children with disabilities. Such a broad focus, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. The choice to focus on teachers' definitions of inclusion stems from an understanding that teachers are those who are "on the ground"—expected to implement inclusive definitions and practices. As such, we must recognize their understanding of inclusion.

Inclusion in the Classroom

Given the tensions in definitions noted, one can see how inclusion would be a challenge for educators, creating "deep uncertainty about how to create inclusive environments within schools and about how to teach inclusively" (Allan 2008:10). Problems of definition and implementation are exacerbated by bureaucratic decision-making that often comes from a top-down approach. Policies and practices are defined by administrators who do not have to implement decisions in the classroom, creating stress for teachers as they attempt to please their supervisors without necessary resources (Lipsky 1980).

Research indicates that, despite uncertainty about what inclusion is, teachers who have positive attitudes toward the idea of inclusion are more likely to incorporate children with disabilities in classroom activities and are more likely to create a classroom environment conducive to learning for all students (Keaney 2012; Leatherman 2007).

Even so, having a positive attitude toward inclusion can be challenging when teachers do not have basic skills (e.g., ability to modify the curriculum, understanding of student disabilities, managing challenging behaviors) necessary to facilitate inclusion (Allday, Neilsen-Gatti,

and Hudson 2013; Lipsky 1980). Compounding the problem even more is the limited amount of funding many schools provide for special needs curriculum, as well as limited access to necessary collaborations between general and special education teachers (Allday et al. 2013; Lipsky 1980; Wedell 2008). Such findings are reminiscent of theoretical work by Bourdieu (1976) that points to the importance of possessing both social capital (i.e., connections to people with expertise) and cultural capital (i.e., credentials and training)—resources that increase one's standing in their field, as well as their ability to feel a sense of power over their circumstances. Based on this perspective, it seems logical that teachers who have necessary training and credentials to aid them in an inclusive environment may be more open to inclusion (Bourdieu 1976; see also Shogren et al. 2015). Those who do not have the necessary skills, or the want to teach children with special needs, may experience burnout (Nistor and Chillin 2012).

Considering this knowledge, the current study provides teacher data from a needs assessment completed in collaboration with school administrators and teachers in the school district assessed. The research gives a snapshot of what is happening in relationship to inclusion in two elementary schools in Northeast Ohio. The needs assessment shed light on teachers' definitions of inclusion, attitudes toward training, and access to resources. What follows is a discussion of the data and findings, followed by policy recommendations, and recommendations for future research.

Method

A mixed method approach implementing both qualitative and quantitative questions examined teacher attitudes toward inclusion, as well as their preparation to participate in inclusive classrooms, in two elementary schools with high numbers of students with special needs in the state of Ohio. Because of the exploratory, targeted nature of this study, the elementary schools surveyed were determined through conversations with school officials, resulting in a convenience sample. Surveys were administered through SurveyMonkey—an online data collection Web site. Respondents were asked to answer combination questions (i.e., closed-ended questions with open-ended "other" options) as well as one fully open-ended question presented at the end of the survey. Most of the qualitative data came from this question. The question asked respondents to please provide any other information that they felt we should know that was not covered in the survey regarding their experience teaching children with special needs. Other qualitative responses stemmed from "other, please elaborate" options that followed many of the questions to increase ability to identify themes within teacher responses that may have not been captured in closed-ended questions.

The determination to use both closed and open-ended "other, please elaborate" response options rather than fully open-ended questions was determined the best option to align questions with district classroom options. Questions were created during meetings between myself and school administration. As such, the survey reflects this specific school district's special need's program.

Surveys consisted of roughly 20 questions that ranged from questions about demographic characteristics, to questions related to definitions of inclusion, training needs/wants, and interest in participation in school activities geared toward special needs families.

There are a few limitations to this study. First is the distribution method—teachers received the survey link through the school districts' e-mail server. Although the information sent was through a secure link to a third party, which removed data access from school officials, teachers may not have been forthcoming with their thoughts on inclusion. Second, questions created targeted this specific district, thus would require modification for other districts if they wished to replicate the study.

Table 1. Demographic Information ($n = 33$).

Demographic Variables	Percentages
Education	
Bachelor's	42
Master's	58
Certifications	
Elementary	86
Mild to moderate disability	28
Moderate to severe disability	7
Reading endorsement	41
Other	14
No. of children with disabilities in class	
None	17
Three to five	28
Six to eight	17

Sample

The district. Shore Local Schools[1] services roughly 850 students on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)—an educational document that includes specialized educational programming for students with disabilities designed to assist the student in progressing in the general curriculum (U.S. Department of Education 2018). The two Pilot schools surveyed—Miller and Craft Elementary—service 104 of these students with special needs (12 percent). According to school administration, these two schools are schools targeted to receive most of the students with special needs in grades K–4 in the district.

Miller's students with special needs receive opportunities for inclusion, mainstreaming, or placement in a multiple disability classroom that is in the school building but separate from typical children. Craft provides inclusion and mainstreaming opportunities as well as pull out services with an intervention specialist and/or contracted therapists. In both schools, the placement of the student is dependent on perceptions of student need determined by the teacher, relevant support personnel (e.g., therapists), and parents' wishes. As such, surveying teachers in these schools was important to better serve children with disabilities.

The teachers. Respondents for the study included 33 out of a possible 45 teachers, a 75 percent response rate. One-third of the respondents ($n = 11$) provided open-ended comments regarding their thoughts on inclusion, as well as their needs as instructors.

The education level of teachers surveyed included mostly teachers with master's degrees (58 percent). Most of the educators reported having certification in elementary education. Some also reported specializations in mild to moderate disabilities (28 percent), moderate to severe disabilities (7 percent), reading endorsement (41 percent), and other certifications (e.g., HQT [High Quality Teaching] Math, HQT Reading, Teacher Endorsement, etc.). Teachers who have children with special needs in their classes report having between three and five (28 percent) or six and eight (17 percent) children in their room. When asked what their learning environment looks like, 36 percent of teachers indicated that they teach in a general classroom with children with special needs integrated (see Table 1).

Measures

Inclusion. Two questions measured inclusion. The first question asked teachers to share what inclusion looks like in their school (i.e., the location where students with special needs should

spent their time during the school day). This question reflected a place-based definition of inclusion. The second question asked teachers to reflect on where students with special needs learn the best (i.e., a learning-based definition of inclusion)—what Shore township refers to as "closing the learning gap." Responses for both questions were as follows: (1) a special education classroom/resource room within a public school; (2) a classroom that consists of both typical and students with special needs all day; (3) a classroom that consists of typical children on a full-time basis, with children with special needs on a part-time basis; (4) the provision of "specials" (e.g., art, music, PE [Physical Education]) that include both typical and children with special needs; or (5) schools create programming outside of the classroom that take special needs' children into consideration.

Training. Questions related to training needs asked respondents if they would be receptive to trainings related to sensory challenges, behavior modification, educational needs for mild to moderately children with disabilities, educational needs for profound to severe students, curriculum modification, collaborative teaching, and parent rights. Question responses were ordinal-level Likert-type scales ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Demographics. A battery of demographic questions asked teachers about their classroom environment, age, years of education, certifications, grade they currently teach, as well as current classroom condition (i.e., general education, special education, mixed, etc.). These were all ordinal-level measures with fixed response categories.

Analysis

Data entry and analysis occurred in SPSS. Qualitative comments were analyzed using thematic analysis; these teacher comments reinforced the quantitative research findings. A total of 11 of the 33 teachers (one-third of the sample) who responded to the survey questions opted to provide an open-ended comment at the end of the survey. When reading transcripts of the 11 open-ended comments, I was looking for common words or phrases mentioned by the teachers. When a common word or phrase emerged, it was highlighted and categorized under one of the following focus areas: (1) definitions of inclusion, (2) the need for more staff, and (3) the importance of training—especially in relationship to children with behavioral challenges. Comments related to these themes are woven throughout the quantitative analysis shared below.

Results

Inclusion: What Does It Mean?

As discussed in the literature, uncertainty exists when defining inclusion. Such uncertainty leads to difficulty implementing policy and practice. Anecdotal conversations with school administrators at Miller and Craft schools illustrate an example of ambiguity as related to the definition and implementation of inclusion. Administrators felt that inclusion could "mean many things." One administrator felt that having classrooms solely for children with disabilities within a public school building constituted inclusion because they exist as stand-alone classrooms within the building[2]—a placement that is in line with a definition of integration but not inclusion (Disability Rights California 2005). Children in this room, however, rarely interact with typical children during the day.

Some scholars would disagree with this definition because it does not represent "full" inclusion (Anastasiou et al. 2015; Idol 2006; Keaney 2012). I highlight this anecdote, not because I am trying to emphasize the importance of "full inclusion" but because it underscores the idea that

there are several definitions of inclusion in use in this school district. This contributes to confusion about definitions of inclusion—and inclusive goals and practices—for teachers who are responsible for teaching children in varied classrooms. Given teachers' role in implementation of inclusion, it is imperative to know what their definition is in these two pilot schools.

The data indicate definitions that incorporate place-based models of inclusion, as well as learning-based models. In terms of a place-based definition of inclusion, teachers' thoughts on inclusion varied. Half of the teachers in the study defined inclusive education as children with special needs in the general education classroom all day. In total, 25 percent of the teachers defined inclusion as children with special needs included in the general education environment for part of the day (25 percent)—also known as mainstreaming (Keaney 2012). The other 25 percent of the teachers defined inclusion as placing children in a resource room for children with special needs that is within the public school. These teachers felt that having the children in the public school building constituted inclusion even though they were not in a typical classroom environment—thoughts reminiscent of the administrator's comment shared above.

When focusing on a learning-based definition of inclusion, teachers felt that resource rooms were the best option (33 percent) for learning curriculum, followed by a regular class that includes children with special needs (22 percent). Twenty percent reported "other" as their choice. In their open-ended comments related to "other," teachers stated that they would like to see children included in the regular education environment if there were more aides in the room, that a combination of a self-contained and regular education model would be suitable, and that it "depends" on the needs of the child.

The variation between teachers' definition of place-based and learning-based inclusion demonstrates the difficulty in providing a clear overarching definition of inclusion but is not surprising given the lack of clear definition provided by administration as well as differences in the teachers' experiences in working with children with disabilities. Because of this lack of clarity, there is difficulty integrating inclusive policies and practices in classrooms (Haug 2016).

Qualitative comments from teachers also illustrate the tensions between placement of children (place-based inclusion) and what is happening in terms of learning (learning-based inclusion). The following quote from an elementary teacher who teaches in a K–2 classroom is illustrative:

> One building provides inclusion/small group pull-outs, while another building provides K-2 inclusion/small group pull-out services but then self-contained classes for 3rd/4th grades. I feel as if the continuum should be consistent at our two mild/moderate intervention specialist supported elementary buildings. All buildings should be aligned regardless of principals/teacher input. Often our students are transient, and they should receive the same education building to building. I also feel that some teachers, not all, feel as if "intervention support" should provide all intervention where general ed teachers only work with on level/above students. A teacher should teach all students regardless of disabilities or struggles. All teachers need to differentiate or "think outside the box" for the needs of their students.

One third-grade teacher expressed frustration due to emphasis placed on academic inclusion, to the exclusion of socioemotional inclusion. She stated that the district is "Pushing inclusive curriculum but not providing students with help with social and emotional issues that are also a part of successful inclusion." This teacher demonstrates support for a multifaceted definition of inclusion, focusing on learning-based definitions of inclusion—taking into consideration academics—but also encouraging focus on the child's socioemotional well-being in the classroom.

In a departure from the last teacher, an instructor in K–2 felt that using a resource room was the best option for many children with special needs, expressing frustration at administrators' wish for educators to be use full inclusion when this may not be the best strategy for all students:

Table 2. Interest in Training and Needs of School (Reported as Percentages) (n = 33).

Reported Teachers' Needs	
Trained to modify curriculum	
Yes	25
No	74
Interested in more training	
Yes	71
No	29
Interested in training in . . .	
Mild to moderate	86
Moderate to severe	68
Sensory	86
Resources needed	
Targeted support staff	50
Social/emotional training	25
Collaborative teaching	19

> We have had overwhelming success with a resource room at the 3/4 level. The students feel comfortable and successful in a smaller group. We are continually asked to differentiate instruction in the classroom when teaching; however, many administers refuse to differentiate the environment for students. Small group/intensive instruction works for IEP students and struggling students not on IEPs. It should be based on the individual students' needs.

In this case, the instructor feels that a resource room with small group instruction would be the best learning environment for many children, whether they have an Individualized Education Plan or not. The decision should be based on "individual students' needs," not placing students in a room—whether with typical peers or not—without providing the necessary supports. This comment was thought-provoking because of the focus on students who are on IEPs as well as those who are not. The teacher makes a fair point. Students who are not on IEPs may also benefit from small groups/intensive instruction. Such an observation points to the possibility that there are students who do not have IEPs who still have specialized needs, and who may need an IEP but have gone undiagnosed.

Moving beyond definitions of inclusion, this study also sought to better understand what types of trainings would be beneficial for K–4 teachers working with children with special needs. Although previous research states the importance of resources and teacher trainings (Haug 2016; Keaney 2012; Shogren et al. 2015), this study goes one step further in asking teachers what specific resources and types of training would be useful.

Resources and training. To be successful teaching children with special needs, most respondents indicated that more targeted support staff was essential (50 percent). In addition, other staff indicated the need for assistance in better understanding how to work with children who have social and emotional challenges (25 percent), as well as provision of collaborative learning environments where teachers can share information related to teaching strategies and instruction of students (19 percent) (see Table 2).

Out of 11 open-ended comments, six teachers took the opportunity to provide qualitative comments related to working with children who pose behavioral challenges. The frustration is clear in this quote by a teacher who teaches exclusively in a self-contained classroom with students who have mild to moderate learning disabilities,

Table 3. Importance of Training ($n = 33$).

Training	Comfort level (M)	Comfort level (t statistic)
Received training in curriculum modification	3.2	3.5*
Have not received training in curriculum modification	2.2	

Note. 2 = somewhat comfortable; 3 = very comfortable.
*Significant at the .01 level.

> We need more information about how to discipline and help when a behavior happens. So many times, we just overlook things and say, "it's because of their disability." But what is the next step and how can we help the student learn the appropriate behaviors?

Similarly, another educator who chose not to disclose any demographic information about herself stated,

> There are plenty of times when our students are at risk because the identified student is out of control. That's not ok! It puts serious stress and hardship on both the students and the teacher. We tell students that our job is to keep them safe from harm and yet they can see that we are unable to do that at times. So, it is obvious that we are not able to keep our promise. Once that child is put into the classroom there seems to be no recourse when they are out of control. We are to just accept it and try to carry on. I would like to learn about ways to further meet the needs of all students.

Echoing this statement, a third-grade teacher trained to work with children who have mild to moderate disabilities said, "Behavior problems, mixed abilities, too many transitions throughout the day, and less class time can directly affect both teacher's and student's success."

In terms of training, 74 percent of teachers had not received training on how to modify the curriculum for children with special needs. Despite the high number of teachers who have not received training on curriculum modification, 71 percent of teachers reported interest in receiving specialized training, demonstrating interest in working with children with disabilities if they have the proper tools. Five out of 11 open-ended comments extended their quantitative responses on training and resources.

A second-grade teacher who teaches to both typical and children with special needs had this to say:

> I believe that all students graduating with a teaching degree must have a strong background and training to understand how to work with children with special needs. Special Education training should be a part of the regular educational curriculum in terms of training. We have far more students with undiagnosed needs than ever before. There is no such thing as a "regular" classroom anymore. So, a teacher in a "regular" classroom needs just as much training to help children as a "special needs" teacher. Training needs to start at the college level.

Table 3 illustrates the important role of continuous training. The *t* test analyses demonstrated that teachers who were trained in curriculum modification for children with special needs reported feeling more comfortable teaching children with special needs than those with no training ($M = 3.2$ vs. $M = 2.2$). This relationship was statistically significant at the .01 level.

Most teachers would be willing to receive increased training in the following areas: classroom management (78 percent), classroom instruction of children with special needs (74 percent), training on learning strategies for students with mild to moderate disabilities (74 percent), helping students with social skills and integration (52 percent), and collaborative teaching strategies (52 percent) (see Table 4).

Table 4. Specific Trainings of Interest ($n = 33$).

	Yes (percentages)	No (percentages)
Interested in training on learning strategies for students with mild to moderate disabilities	74	26
Interested in training on learning strategies for students profound to severe disabilities	7	93
Classroom management strategies	78	22
Classroom instructional strategies	74	26
Social skills and integration	52	48
Sensory processing training	74	26
Collaborative teaching	52	48
Learning about student rights	19	81

The overwhelming push for training in classroom management aligns with teachers' statements regarding behavioral problems in inclusive classrooms. Beyond training, educators also discussed the need for more support staff to aid with such children, as well as innovative strategies. A K–2 teacher who teaches solely in a resource room discussed this issue in some depth:

> Emotional/Behavioral students are a struggle more and more each day. We need support with behavioral units within our building every day. We need counselors and principals on board to come up with creative plans, be consistent with consequences and not afraid to make these parents accountable when need be. It would be nice if the district had a behavior coach to provide support for those tough cases.

Because many teachers do not have training in Special Education, collaborative relationships between experts is imperative, as stated in the above quote, but also mentioned by other teachers in this survey.

Discussion

Findings from this study are a microcosm of greater structural challenges related to inclusion in school districts—teachers' difficulty defining inclusion, as well as a lack of training and resources (Haug 2016; Keaney 2012; Lipsky 1980; Shogren et al. 2015). One of the main goals of the current study was to learn how teachers in Miller and Craft define inclusion. Beyond this, emphasis was placed on what teachers' needs were in terms of training and resources. The goal of the research was not for me, the researcher, to develop a definition of inclusion, but to allow the teachers' voices to be heard. From their input, we learn that 50 percent of the teachers surveyed define inclusion using a place-based definition—full-time inclusion of children with special needs in a general education classroom with typical peers. Other teachers (25 percent) were more supportive of mainstreaming (i.e., part-time inclusion) or integration—placing students in a self-contained resource room within the public school (25 percent).

In terms of learning-based inclusion, findings indicate that most teachers felt that resource rooms (i.e., integration) were the best option (33 percent) for learning curriculum, while 22 percent indicated a regular classroom with typical children was best (i.e., full inclusion).

Pulling these numbers together, 75 percent of teachers in this study feel that inclusion means having both typical and students with special needs spend at least some time together in a standard classroom. In other words, they have common understanding of what "place-based" inclusion would look like, while only 22 percent feel that this would be the best learning environment for

differently abled children (i.e., learning-based inclusion). The disconnect between place-based and learning-based perceptions of inclusion makes sense given the stated need for training in this sample—remember that only 25 percent of teachers reported training in how to modify curriculum for children with special needs. If teachers are expected to include students in typical classroom environments, but do not have the training necessary to modify the curriculum for these students, this inclusion opportunity is lost on students who may not be provided with appropriate materials to help them grow. The student is occupying space in the typical room (i.e., experiencing place-based inclusion), but is not provided the necessary learning opportunities for inclusion.

A total of 71 percent of teachers in Miller and Craft elementary schools did express interest in learning how to better serve students with disabilities. Teachers reported the need for training in classroom management strategies, classroom instructional strategies, learning strategies for children who have mild to moderate disabilities, and training in sensory processing challenges. Findings from this survey shed light on the importance of training for increased knowledge and confidence in teaching differently abled students. Specifically, t test results indicated that teachers trained in curriculum modification for children with special needs reported feeling more comfortable teaching children with special needs than those with no training; yet another argument for continuous education of teachers.

Teachers also expressed that to be effective in their teaching, they need more targeted support staff. Qualitative comments from teachers pointed to a need for personnel to aid with the behavioral needs of many children in their classrooms (e.g., more counselors, more one-on-one aides). Such findings tap into an area of concern that other scholars cite; lack of resources is problematic in many schools (Allday et al. 2013; Keaney 2012; Shogren et al. 2015) and can have a negative impact on teacher's feelings of empowerment within their own classrooms (Bourdieu 1976). This lack of resources, coupled with lack of training, contributes to burnout for teachers, and helps to better understand why teachers may feel that a resource room is the best learning environment for students. If one does not feel equipped to teach differently abled students, we might expect enthusiasm toward inclusion of any type to be low.

Recommendations for Policy

The current study focused solely on the role of teachers in the inclusion process. The primary focus on teachers in this study stemmed from a need to better understand teachers' perspectives on inclusive practices as well as their interest in training geared toward working with children with special needs in such an environment. Administration at the two pilot schools wished to have this information so that they could use available resources in the best way possible to enhance training and inclusion.

The following are action items not only for the schools in question but also for similar schools beyond the Shore School District: (1) develop a commonly used, multifaceted, definition of inclusion; (2) provide continuous training/education; (3) explore alternative educational models.

Develop a Common Definition of Inclusion

Administrators, teachers, and parents of children with special needs should come together in one or more informal meetings to determine what inclusion means for their school district. Districts should discuss common mandates (e.g., LRE) with stakeholders, as well as some commonly used definitions associated with inclusion to aid in the discussion of inclusion in their schools. The definition developed by stakeholders should incorporate place-based and learning-based components, and may be broad in scope, allowing for the possibility of multiple inclusion options. Once a definition is clarified at the district level, all stakeholders must endeavor to apply the policy

toward the same goals. Further discussion of inclusion should be had during IEP meetings to further tailor inclusion to meet the needs of individual children and families.

Research and communication should be an ongoing process toward creating an infrastructure. This means that ongoing evaluations should occur periodically, and adjustments should be made to the framework based on these evaluations. Such cautionary steps will help to avoid growing pains throughout the implementation of inclusive practices.

Teachers in the present study appear open to the possibility of having (or continuing to have) students with special needs in their classrooms but feel that the best place for them to learn is through a mainstreaming or integrative model. As was noted, part of this issue may be due to lack of training and resources, so this may be part of the conversation had by all stakeholders.

Provide Continuous Training/Education for Teachers

Continuous outreach to teachers is important. Districts should think of ways to implement surveys or other methods of feedback for their teachers and other staff who interact with children with special needs to express their wants and suggestions in relationship to training. Anonymous surveys are a nice option, but informal group or one-on-one conversations with teachers may also prove beneficial to maintain constant contact regarding issues that are of importance as related to educating children with special needs. Optimally, schools would want to reach out to teachers monthly to keep up to date on challenges and successes.

In the Shore School District, teachers indicated a preference for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for training and communication purposes. Their preference was for these to occur during the regular school day (72 percent). PLCs could occur weekly or monthly. If a monthly meeting/training is utilized, teachers could have the full day dedicated to going over children's progress with support staff to determine successes and challenges. Either model provides opportunities for mentoring relationships to develop during trainings, and continue throughout the entire school year, increasing the level of collaboration and emotional support teachers need. Such a model works on a district-wide and state-wide level.

Explore Alternative Educational Models

Even though 71 percent of the sample of surveyed teachers in Shore were interested in increased training, there were 29 percent who did not want training in how to work with children with disabilities—one respondent even noted that she felt this survey was not helpful because "I do not teach special needs children and will never teach special needs children." Given this finding, one might question whether teachers who do not have a willingness and/or passion to work with such children would benefit from increased training. In this school district, administrators felt that everyone should have training because everyone will meet differently abled children at some point in time, even if it is not in the classroom.

Other schools, however, may feel differently. To overcome such an issue, one recommendation is to opt for an alternative educational model. For example, the schools may choose one or two teachers from each grade level who are passionate about inclusion and provide them with intensive training. These teachers would have both children with special needs and typical children in their classes, as well as well-trained support staff. Such a model would guarantee that students get exposure to typical peers for socialization and modeling purposes, while also ensuring a successful integration with well-trained teachers who can appropriately modify the curriculum. The administration wins because resources would be very targeted, cutting down on the amount of special education resources spread throughout all classes (or the lack of resources in some classes), saving money. Using this model also remedies a lack of creativity cited by

scholars regarding implementation of inclusion in mainstream schools (see Wedell 2008) and opens the door for research on a best practice model of inclusion to determine effectiveness of such classrooms in relationship to growth of student knowledge and well-being.

Limitations and Future Research

This project was a needs assessment of two elementary schools in Northeast Ohio. As such, it is not representative of all schools in the district or of similar schools nationwide. The surveys completed were voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Due to the voluntary nature of the study, there was not a 100 percent response rate—such a response rate is quite rare. Typical online survey response rates of employees are around 30 to 40 percent of respondents while response rates for populations outside of work is between 10 and 15 percent (Fryrear 2017). Based on this benchmark, the teacher response rates were quite high. Future research could continue to study this population through online surveys or with face-to-face paper and pencil surveys where response rates may be even higher (Neuman 2009).

This research attempted to help one school district determine their needs. Replication of this study with more school districts is advisable to move in the direction of generalizable findings. Support staff, administrators, and parents are also important populations in need of assessment regarding inclusion practices and attitudes.

On a micro-level, these findings could help modify existing programs and/or create new trainings to enhance the experiences of those working with, and caring for, children with special needs in these two elementary schools. On a larger scale, the data, while exploratory, would be useful for other school districts to enhance their own programming, or replicated to determine if their needs are similar.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The district and school names have been changed to protect the identity of the respondents.
2. Miller Elementary school has two multiple disability classrooms with eight students in each class. These self-contained classrooms operate through a partnership with the local board of developmental disabilities.

Related Resources

U.S. Department of Education. 2018. Retrieved October 22, 2018 (https://www.ed.gov/).

Habib, Dan. 2009. *Including Samuel DVD*. DH Photography.

Habib, Dan. 2018. "Including Samuel." Retrieved October 22, 2018 (https://www.includingsamuel.com/).

Inclusive Schools Network. 2018. "Together We Learn Better: Inclusive Schools Benefit All Children." Retrieved October 22, 2018 (https://inclusiveschools.org/together-we-learn-better-inclusive-schools-benefit-all-children/).

Pacer Center: Champions for Children with Disabilities. 2015. "School Accommodation and Modification Ideas for Students Who Receive Special Education Services." Retrieved October 22, 2018 (https://www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c49a.pdf).

Wrights Law. 2018. Retrieved October 22, 2018 (http://www.wrightslaw.com/).

References

Allan, Julie. 2008. *Rethinking Inclusive Education: The Philosophers of Difference in Practice*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

Allday, R. Allan, Shelley Neilsen-Gatti, and Tina M. Hudson. 2013. "Preparation for Inclusion in Teacher Education Pre-service Curricula." *Teacher Education and Special Education* 36:298–311.

Alquraini, Turki and Dianne Gut. 2012. "Critical Components of Successful Inclusion of Students with Severe Disabilities: Literature Review." *International Journal of Special Education* 27:1–18.

Anastasiou, Dimitris, James M. Kauffman, and Santo Di Nuovo. 2015. "Inclusive Education in Italy: Description and Reflections on Full Inclusion." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 30(4):429–43.

Booth, Tony. 1996. "Stories of Exclusion: Natural and Unnatural Selection." Pp. 21–36 in *Exclusion from School: Inter-professional Issues for Policy and Practice*, edited by E. Blyth and J. Milner. London, England: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1976. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Bui, Xuan, Carol Quirk, Selene Almazan, and Michele Valenti. 2010. "Inclusive Education, Research and Practice: Inclusion Works" Retrieved March 7, 2018 (http://www.mcie.org/site/usermedia/application/11/inclusion-works-(2010).pdf.

Disability Rights California. 2005. "Special Education Rights and Responsibilities." Retrieved October 16, 2018 (https://www.disabilityrightsca.org/system/files/file-attachments/504001Ch07.pdf).

Fryrear, Andrea. 2017. "Survey Response Rates." Retrieved May 19, 2017 (https://www.surveygizmo.com/survey-blog/survey-response-rates/).

Goodfellow, Athena. 2012. "Looking through the Learning Disability Lens: Inclusive Education and the Learning Disability Embodiment." *Children's Geographies* 10:67–81.

Hardy, Ian and Stuart Woodcock. 2015. "Inclusive Education Policies: Discourses of Difference, Diversity and Deficit." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 19(2):141–64.

Haug, Peder. 2016. "Understanding Inclusive Education: Ideals and Reality." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 19:206–17.

Hossain, Mokter. 2012. "An Overview of Inclusive Education in the United States." In Judith K. Carlson (Ed.) *Communication Technology for Students in Special Education or Gift ed Programs.* Hershey: IGI Global Publishers.

Idol, Lorna. 2006. "Toward Inclusion of Special Education Students in General Education: A Program Evaluation of Eight Schools." *Remedial and Special Education* 27:77–94.

Keaney, Mark. 2012. "Examining Teacher Attitudes toward Integration: Important Considerations for Legislatures, Courts, and Schools." *Saint Louis University Law Journal* 56:827–56.

Leatherman, Jane M. 2007. "I Just See All Children as Children: Teachers' Perceptions about Inclusion." *The Qualitative Report* 12:1–20.

Lipsky, Michael. 1980. *Street-level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Muega, Michael A. 2016. "Inclusive Education in the Philippines: Through the Eyes of Teachers, Administrators, and Parents of Children with Special Needs." *Social Science Diliman* 12:5–28.

National Center for Education Statistics. 2016. "The Condition of Education." Retrieved May 9, 2017 (https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018144.pdf)

Neuman, W. Laurence. 2009. *Understanding Research*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Nistor, Anamaria A. and Tania F. Chillin. 2012. "Challenging Behaviour of Children with Intellectual Disabilities and Its Relation to Burnout for those Working with Them: A Systematic Review." *The Scientific Journal of Humanistic Studies* 9:119–27.

Schoger, Kimberly. 2006. "Reverse Inclusion: Providing Peer Social Interaction Opportunities to Students Placed in Self-contained Special Education Classrooms." *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus* 2(6):3.

Shogren, Karrie, Amy B. McCart, Kristin J. Lyon, and Wayne S. Sailor. 2015. "All Means All: Building Knowledge for Inclusive School Wide Transformation." *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* 40(3):173–91.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 2005. *Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All*. Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

U.S. Department of Education. 2018. "A Guide to the Individualized Education Program." Retrieved October 22, 2018 (https://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html).

Warnock, Mary. 2005. *Special Educational Needs: A New Look*. IMPACT No. 11, A Series of Policy Discussions. London, England: Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain.

Wedell, Klauss. 2008. "Confusion about Inclusion: Patching up or System Change?" *British Journal of Special Education* 35:127–35.

Author Biography

Michelle Bemiller is professor of sociology at Walsh University in North Canton, Ohio. Her areas of research include inequalities (e.g., disabilities, gender, food insecurity), and crime and delinquency. She teaches general sociology courses as well as courses in disabilities, restorative justice, and criminology.