Elementary Teachers' and Principals' Concerns in the Implementation of Inclusion in a South Texas School District

Lauren Y. Arce
Jim Hogg County Independent School District

Velma D. Menchaca
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Hilda Silva
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Karen Watt
Consultant

The purpose of this study was to examine the concerns that elementary education teachers, special education teachers and campus administrators in one South Texas school district have regarding the use or non-use of inclusionary practices as a means of educating students with special needs. It is important to examine these concerns as they can influence the practice of inclusion, accountability, and campus leadership. This qualitative study explored the concerns of campus administrators who do and do not utilize inclusionary practices in their respective campuses. This study addressed the concerns to determine what suggestions could improve the education of special education students that are and are not participating in inclusionary practices as a method of education. The results of this study revealed that the delivery of inclusion required great support from all individuals within a school setting, especially school administrators.

Keywords: inclusionary practices, accountability, leadership, teachers

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, students with disabilities have been part of the regular education classrooms for decades. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA) (2004) mandates that as long as disability allows, special needs learners be given equal opportunity just as their general education peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). To provide the best experience for students with disabilities, the general education classroom offers the least restrictive environment to maximize social relationships with general education peers and maintains the goal of closing achievement gaps (Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009).

Schaffner and Buswell (1998) found that "the presence of students with disabilities in general education classrooms and their successes or failures can serve as a barometer for how well all children are being

educated in the classrooms" (p. 63). It is therefore of high importance that schools embrace students with special needs and provide the best quality of services to ensure their success in the general or inclusion classrooms.

The power of administration to address needs for support plays a key role in changing teacher perception about their ability to serve students with special needs (Fuchs, 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2012). Collaboration and the opportunity to share with peers increases the likelihood that teachers remain motivated to employ best practices in their inclusion classrooms (Hepner & Newman, 2010; Nicholas & Sheffield, 2014). Sage (1996) emphasized the importance of the role of campus administration in the practice of inclusion by stating, "we should recognize that school administrators carry an ambiguous role expectation because, although they are expected to lead, they are also expected to maintain stability in the system" (p. 105). Boyle et al. (2011) stated, "Including children with special needs in the classroom allows them the opportunity to learn in a culture that is supportive and conducive to their needs" (p. 73).

Glazzard (2011) found that educators must be totally committed to implementing inclusionary practices with fidelity. Should this not occur, "it is clear that inclusion will remain a significant challenge if practitioners fail to embrace their responsibilities for the education of all children" (Glazzard, 2011, p. 56). The role of campus leadership in the implementation of inclusion is crucial to determine the various concerns that should be addressed towards inclusionary practices.

Statement of the Problem

This study examined the concerns that elementary education teachers, special education teachers and campus administrators in one South Texas school district have regarding the use or non-use of inclusionary practices as a means of educating students with special needs. It is important to examine these concerns as they can influence the practice of inclusion.

Successful inclusionary practices may be dependent first upon teachers' attitudes towards its implementation and, second upon their perceived competence to deliver this important education initiative (Hodkinson, 2006). Monje (2017) found that professional development on inclusionary practices would prepare teachers to be supportive of students with disabilities. The effective implementation of inclusive education is seemingly dependent, among other factors, upon how individual teachers define it (Hodkinson, 2006). Hwang and Evans (2011) stressed that "educational professionals accept the educational rights of children with disabilities and the principle of inclusion; there remain significant barriers to achieving those ideals" (p. 140).

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the beginning of the 20th century, the majority of the states had enacted compulsory education laws; however, very little effort was made to educate children with disabilities (Huefner, 2000, 2010). The landmark United States Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) helped pave the way for different sub-groups to advocate for equal opportunities, especially those representing disabled children (Winzer, 2009). Separate but equal was deemed a violation in the 1950s. This basic truth was considered by many to be equally applicable to those denied equal opportunity to an education because of a disability. Thus, *Brown v. Board of Education* became a catalyst for the efforts to ensure educational rights for all children and youth with disabilities because if segregation by race was a denial of educational opportunities for black and Hispanic children, then certainly the total exclusion of children and youth with disabilities was also a denial of equal educational opportunities (Huefner, 2000; 2010).

Current literature reviews the similarities and differences between mainstreaming and inclusionary practices. Inclusionary practices and mainstreaming were grounded in the struggle for the extension of civil rights; furthermore, both were directed at placement of students with disabilities in general education settings with their normally developing peers (Yell, 2012). Inclusionary practices differ from mainstreaming in that students did not belong to any specialized environment based on ability but were members of the regular education class (Halvorsen and Neary (2001)

To date, there have been numerous acts of legislation that have ordered special education students out of isolated educational settings and into classrooms with their regular education counterparts. When the IDEA was passed in 1974, the definition for the term inclusion was introduced, thus becoming the turning point for the placement of students with disabilities. All schools that received federal funding, were required by law, to make provisions for a free and appropriate education for all students regardless of their handicap.

Research has shown that inclusion had a positive academic impact on all students. Students with disabilities educated in inclusive settings received higher grades and achieved higher scores on standardized tests than students with disabilities placed in separate classrooms (Rea et al., 2002). The academic accomplishments of students with severe disabilities increased through interaction with typically developing peers in an integrated environment, and they met the goals of the individualized education programs (Westling & Fox, 2009). Also, inclusion provided an opportunity for students with severe disabilities to build social skills in terms of establishing relationships with their peers. Students with disabilities in inclusive education classrooms experienced a higher level of interaction with peers than students with disabilities placed in separate classrooms (Hunt et al., 2003; Katz & Mirenda, 2002; Westling & Fox, 2009).

The literature suggested that administrators provided support through collaboration of staff members through "joint problem solving, maintaining data, facilitating staff development programs, providing emotional support in tough times, modeling collaborative traits and communication, providing resources, providing advocacy, providing time for staff to engage in collaboration, and assessing program efforts" (Bartlett et al., 2002, p. 242). Special education teachers have been the vessel by which administrators can reach general education teachers with continued support for inclusive education classrooms.

Arguments against inclusion include the possibility that students with special needs may be tormented or ridiculed by classmates, that teachers may not be prepared for inclusive education, or that teachers may not be capable of appropriately servicing special needs students. Another argument is that every classroom may not be equipped with the proper services for children with disabilities (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2004; Zionts & Callicott, 2002). Odom (2002) found that inclusive settings supported engagement of children with and without disabilities; however, teacher and administrative support were needed and helped children with disabilities engage in certain activities.

Since the practice of inclusion implies that students will be educated in the least restrictive environment, understanding how the regular education teacher perceives this practice was critical. One of the main benefits and goals of inclusive education was to promote social integration. Including students with disabilities in general education classrooms has been found to be beneficial for the educational and social outcomes of these students (Rea et al., 2002). This goal could be achieved at all levels, from the administration down to the classroom teachers and students. McDonnell et al., (2003) found that school leaders made it clear that disabled students were embraced and were an integral part of the school.

The role of campus leadership is crucial in the implementation of inclusion to determine the various concerns that should be addressed towards inclusionary practices (Riehl, 2000). Sage (1996) found that school administrators "carry an ambiguous role expectation because, although they are expected to lead, they are also expected to maintain stability in the system" (p. 105). The process is supported through providing successful implementation plans of inclusionary practices and allowing the staff to contribute during the planning phase of inclusionary practice implementation (Rodriguez & Tompkins, 1994). As school leaders, campus administrators play a vital role in the success of inclusionary programs and must therefore take the lead in ensuring teachers are provided with the necessary skills (Khaleel et al., 2021; Geleta, 2019; Cohne, 2015).

METHODS

This study utilized a qualitative approach to explore in depth the concerns of elementary regular education teachers, elementary special education teachers, and elementary campus principals in regard to the implementation of inclusion (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 2011).

The following research question guided the study:

What are the levels of concern and suggestions for improvement of elementary regular teachers, special education teachers, and administrators in one South Texas school district have for the use or non-use of inclusionary practices as a means of educating students with disabilities?

Setting and Participants

The setting for the study was in a school district in south Texas. The district is comprised of 17,000 students and 20 campuses, of which 11 are elementary, 4 middle school and 3 high schools and 2 (Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) campuses. The researchers implemented purposive sampling to select the individuals to participate in the focus group interviews (Creswell, 2009). The participants included individuals who practiced inclusion and individuals who did not practice inclusion in their respective classrooms/campuses. All participants were from the 10 of the elementary campuses within the district. The participants included elementary regular education teachers (n = 12), elementary special education teachers (n = 2), and campus administrators (n = 6). Participants were predominantly Hispanic and had between 5 to 30 years of classroom experience.

The researchers administered the same open-ended interview questions to the elementary regular education teachers and to the elementary special education teachers. A different set of open-ended interview questions were administered to the campus administrators. The focus group interviews were conducted at the campuses where the participants would be most comfortable (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Researchers' notes also supported the responses elicited through the interview process. The participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts from the interviews to ensure accuracy. The transcribed interviews were then analyzed.

The collection of information was guided by questions that ensured integrity, and credibility was maintained with the purpose of determining certain concerns related to the implementation of inclusion. Three strategies were utilized to triangulate the data, rich description of notes and recordings, member checking, and an external auditor to cross reference the transcriptions.

Data Analyses

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was used to review and sort the qualitative data (Reid et al., 2005). The qualitative responses from the transcribed documents were sorted and coded in detail, with the focus shifting between the key responses of the focus group participants to the researcher's interpretation of the meaning of those responses (Larkin et al., 2006).

The researchers defined and described the codes, categories, themes, patterns, and pertinent findings. The researchers allowed elementary regular education teachers, elementary special education teachers, and elementary principals to read the completed transcriptions for accuracy of information. Then raw data was analyzed into codes to discover emergent themes related to inclusionary practices. The themes were then cross-referenced with each focus groups' interviews to create a textual structural description of their perception, levels of concern and suggestions.

RESULTS

Eight themes surfaced after the data was analyzed: (1) collaboration, (2) best of both worlds, (3) sense of community, (4) classroom disruption, (5) role ambiguity due to inadequate teacher training, (6) disparity of opinion on the use of IEP's, (7) teacher turnover and (8) transition concerns. The Focus Group 1 (FG1) was comprised of 6 regular elementary teachers and 1 elementary special education teacher. Focus Group 2 (FG2) was comprised of another 6 regular elementary teachers and 1 elementary special education teacher. The six campus administrators were Focus Group 3 (FG3).

Collaboration

Teachers and principals, from all focus groups, mentioned the need for present and constant collaboration between instructors, administration, and parents, in order for inclusion to be effective. However, the majority of the regular education teachers from both focus groups stated they deferred to the

teachers of the special education students for direction on inclusion practices for the classroom. The six principals in Focus Group 3 were well-informed of the laws and processes providing for the needs of special education students but also found that at the classroom level much of the inclusion processes and practices fell onto the special education teacher. But ultimately, the responsibility was on the principal.

When asked if they received help, the majority of the teachers said they did, and mentioned resource teachers (special education teachers). Brianna from FG1, when probed, mentioned that campus administrators were helpful. Ann from FG1 answered, "Not really," when asked if she received help. Gianna (FG1) said, "Sometimes." While administrators felt collaboration was their strong suit, many times teachers did not feel that sense of strong collaboration, especially when discussing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs):

> I would say that I am somewhat familiar [with IEPs]. And have seen that they are effective to what I understand how to use them [sic]. I do have a spreadsheet that I organized, and I use. My students are put on there, their modifications and anything that needs to be done. But I would really want to learn more about everything that is on the paper that they give you. I have attended ARD meetings as a Regular Ed teacher and when I do have questions, I ask the Special Ed teacher on campus. (FG1 Teacher)

Maya (FG2) mentioned that she would like to be more involved with the progress of the special education students in her kindergarten classroom, "I see more that kids are being first identified and tested when they're with us [me and Julissa] so we really don't get to see any of the results, or how anything has changed."

When asked if he received help with IEPs, Rick (FG3) stated: "Most definitely. I have worked at bigger campuses where we've had all kinds of disabilities." Marie (FG3) stated that the role that parents played in the collaborative process. She said, "On the IEPs, I hear that, teachers, teachers, teachers. What about parents? You know you need to educate your parents as well and they need to know because they have the child at home too, they know the disabilities of the child and they need to know which are the goals [sic]. They've [the special education students] got milestones for each grade level just like they do as for each [regular education student's] grade level. So, what I try to do is educate my parents and tell them, you know, okay, what are the attainable goals that you want them to do and it's always in percentages…and hold the teachers accountable for it…And I always say, homework, homework, and all so yeah. But you [the parent] could also help your child at home to reach those goals much faster.

Marie (FG3) also noted, "…it's not just all on the teacher; it's on them [the parents] as well." Marie further commented that she welcomed the parents into the classroom. Martha (FG3) mentioned that she asks for parental input and involvement, but some parents expect the school to handle most of the work, "I do have to agree that sometimes I get parents…they kind of expect us to make it work in some way." Collaboration was a major theme that was supported by all participants.

Best of Both Worlds

Teachers noted that inclusion in the social structure and activities of the traditional classroom provided special needs students the opportunity to expand their environment and experiences. Renee, a teacher in FG1 said, "If inclusion is used the student gets to stay in class with the regular education teacher's lesson and they also get the one-on-one with the inclusion teacher being there. So, they get the best of both worlds."

Nancy (FG1) noted that the inclusion environment allowed the special education students to feel comfortable and to feel that they were not isolated from the instruction and activities of a general education classroom.

Ann (FG1) noted that the inclusion classroom environment allowed for the special education students to function in the classroom and to learn how to handle "real life situations." Marcy, (FG2) the special education teacher elaborated on the benefits to special education students as well as the general education students in the inclusion classroom:

I believe that it's the least restrictive environment for the students to remain in the classroom and partake of the classroom activities as a member of their unit. The advantage as well is that they are with their peers, and they see appropriate role modeling form peers and not just from the General Education teacher, but they also see the Special Education teacher walking in and offering assistance, to not just that one [special education] student, but as well as other students who may need help as well. And that way [the special education students] don't feel as if they are being different in having to leave the classroom.

Both administrators and teachers see the benefit of inclusion for the special education students; it is apparent the special education teachers see the ultimate value of inclusion for special education students, that opinion was not held as strongly by regular education teachers.

Sense of Community

The teachers commented that the example set by the general education and special education teachers working together to help all the students in the inclusion classroom modeled a sense of community to students. Julie, the special education teacher in FG1 stated:

I feel like we get that extra help for the [special education] student. You see them struggling but the other teacher, the inclusion teacher, is right there to help them stay on task and to help break it up where it's easier for them to understand without having to stop the lesson and go for help.

Julie (FG1) also noted that the inclusion environment also fostered a sense of community between the students, saying, "I think that even the [general education] students are able to help the [special education] student. The students are learning from other students, that's one advantage."

Brianna (FG1) stated that the sense of community of inclusion had the added benefit of bolstering the special education students' self-esteem:

> …Because sometimes when they [the special education students] get pulled out for resource they don't want to be labeled. Like, "I'm going out for resource." And second, I think it helps the regular ed teacher. I guess because I had training a few years ago and they spoke about having inclusion where you have a co-teacher. And I think it helps the regular teacher with the other kids also because they are not only there to help the resource kids; they help the other kids. It works both ways.

The teachers of FG2 mentioned the inclusion classroom allowed them to get to know the special education students better and to understand the conditions they need to thrive. Marcy (FG2) mentioned that not only the special education students benefitted, but also general education students who may experience social or learning difficulties:

> The general ed teacher has that extra support from the special ed teacher and not only assisted her with that one student, but with a group of students that may need that help. Your at-risk students that may have been tested but did not qualify, but you know that they are struggling.

Julie (FG1), the special education teacher, mirrored the belief that a great benefit was not removing the special education student from the classroom for instruction in addition to the sense of community modeled between the general education and special education teachers as well as the effects on students:

> I see a lot of advantages [to inclusion]. A very obvious one is that the student is actually allowed to stay in class and participate with the rest of the peers and does not have to be pulled out and miss out on any instruction that the teacher has. I also think that they [both teachers] are able to collaborate with students in their classroom and I think that also helps in cases like a peer instruction, In my class, being a writing teacher, I see that those students that do receive inclusion are able to peer edit the students' work and actually are able to

> help each other. But I think most importantly it's not having time to remove that [special education] student from the classroom for any other instruction.

According to Jane, a teacher in FG1, the sense of community helped to foster empathy in the general education students, "They [general education students] see that the classroom is diverse and that students learn at different rates. I think that they can gain some maturity to help the kids that need help." The strength of including a special education teacher into the regular education class was strong in this theme of the study.

Classroom Disruption

Some teachers and administrators felt that inclusion increased instances of classroom disruption, and that more support was needed from the administration, especially as it relates to the need for added support (teaching assistants, paraprofessionals) and the process for handling disruptive students. When asked about barriers to implementing inclusion teachers, both Focus Groups One and Focus Group Two felt that sometimes two teachers in the classroom, teaching at the same time, talking at the same time, was confusing and interrupted the flow of instruction. Also, a shortage of special education teachers, teaching assistants, and paraprofessionals was noted in both focus groups.

Student behavior sometimes interrupted the instructional process. Emily, a teacher in Focus Group Two, noted that she sometimes encountered students with behavioral problems that disrupted the classroom, but also noted that the problems were "nothing you can't work with."

Two kindergarten teachers in Focus Group Two mentioned that the skill sets and behavior of some students who were in the general education classrooms were worthy of a referral for a special education assessment, and that the lengthy assessment process resulted in disruption to the classroom until the student(s) was placed into special education. Julissa, a kindergarten teacher (FG2) described a student who was in her inclusion classroom for about five months before he was referred into special education:

> I did have a student that was autistic and was misplaced at the beginning of the school year, and he did have other conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. And the barriers that I did encounter with that one student was behavior issues [sic]. Again, it did disrupt class instruction; it did take away, she would throw tantrums. And that kind of behavior was a distraction.

Maya (FG2) offered insight on a current situation in her classroom, and also expressed her feelings of inadequacy and fears in working with the student:

> Wow, my experience is very similar to Julissa's (FG2), and it is actually happening this year. This boy was tested; this is his second year in kindergarten. They tested him but his mom did it outside the district. Nothing came of it; she never went and go results, which I don't understand… He was doing things such as throwing chairs, throwing pencils, crayons, scissors, hitting everyone in the classroom. So, we have gone through the whole year and just this week, we had his ARD meeting. But he was termed "mildly autistic." He is labeled, Emotionally Disturbed. And he has ADHD. And [his] parents are not willing to put him on any meds so that I am having to deal with all of this that I am not familiar with at all, and just trying to keep him safe and keep my students safe.

Some teachers also mentioned that although the special education students were included in the general education classroom instruction, many of them did not wish to use the tools provided to assist in learning due to being self-conscious or not wanting to be labelled as a special education student, especially in the higher grades. Nancy, a teacher in Focus Group 1 said:

> What I see this year in my classroom is the special education students refuse to use the materials that are given. They are either embarrassed to use them or you think they don't want to use them. I had four special education students this year and none of them wanted to use whatever the inclusion teacher gave them. I believe that because even though they are not leaving the classroom, I still think that that they know that the [general education] students know that they [the special education students] are different.

Nancy (FG1) gave an example:

> [The special education students think], 'Well, they're [the general education students] not using the place value chart; why am I going to take mine out?' They are either kind of embarrassed or they don't see it as fair. And they don't use it. And we have to force them to take out all the supplemental aids that they can use. So, this is new to me. It's the first time I see it, but I'm a 4th grade teacher now. Maybe the kids are getting older, and they are feeling kind of embarrassed.

The principals of Focus Group Three also commented on problems with disruption in the inclusion classroom, and also noted that they were ultimately responsible for any negative ramifications of disruption of the classroom environment. Will (FG3) said:

> My input is from a safety point of view. What a student's needs surpass those that, what a teacher can do for that child at times, because sometimes we have students that are runners and/or cannot use the bathroom by themselves and are what-not. And they have already been included in the classroom…I'm not saying I'm not for inclusion, just stating that, when those safety concerns arise, and they aren't, you know met, we are still accountable.

In conclusion, it is apparent that all participants were concerned with the disruption often associated with the inclusion classroom.

Role Ambiguity Due to Inadequate Teacher Training

Teachers working together in inclusion classrooms found that they sometimes clashed over instruction and disciplinary practices and were unclear of their roles in working together. Teachers and principals felt that this was due to a need for more and better training of staff working in the inclusion environment.

The teachers in Focus Group One felt that the general education teachers did not receive

adequate training for special needs students and the inclusion classroom. Julie (FG1), the special education teacher noted:

> General education teachers don't receive enough training at all. We, the special education teachers, have to go in and tell them, 'Okay, this is what students have to do, what they are able to do, or she is not able to work on.' So I don't think there's enough training for them.

When probed by the researchers, who asked Julie if she felt that the general education teachers on her campus had sufficient training, Julie (FG1) responded, "I give my regular education teachers all the information they need to know. If they follow, it's another thing. They [sometimes] don't follow it; it does vary." Julie continued:

> In my opinion, I need to make sure that each teacher is working with that student. I need to make sure that the student gets the modifications that [he] needs in order for him to be successful in the classroom. Now, if the student is failing, okay, now you [general education teacher] tell me what you are doing and I will help you out too so that student can pass that task, or that assignment, right? Some teachers, sometimes they just don't, you

> know, [the general education teachers will say] they're special education and you give me the grade and that's it.

The general education teachers in Focus Group Two also commented on the lack of proper training for the inclusion classroom environment. Emily said that there was a barrier of training because, "I have not received any training." Marcy (FG2), the special education teacher offered a different perspective to the barrier:

> I believe it's not so much the training, it's just that we don't have the sufficient staff to provide the appropriate inclusion practices AND to support the students in the general education population. We do have students who have behavior problems. They do have meltdowns in the general education classroom. The general education population students are observing these behaviors, melt downs, or inappropriate behaviors that are being displayed. So that takes time away from their [general education students'] education as well.

Maya (FG2) stated that she believed proper resources were available, but felt inadequately trained to work with the behavioral aspects and other needs of the special education students, saying:

> I think more right now with me, since I am kinder-lower level. I would like the help or the training to be able to deal with these kids as they are in the process of being tested because I really don't know, I'm just as lost as the student and the parents. You know, some kind of guidance [would be helpful].

The administrators in Focus Group Three also noted role ambiguity. Joe (FG3) mentioned the different levels of teacher training and involvement in the inclusion process as a problem, while noting that administrators are ultimately accountable for the success of an inclusion program.

Marie (FG3) also noted that general education teachers often felt the special education teacher was more of an assistant than a peer and mentioned the term inclusion-confusion:

> They [general education teachers'] thought the…[special education teacher] was going to come in, and [general education teacher] have an extra set of hands in the classroom. And that's not the way we [administrators] wanted inclusion to be seen. So, I did a training on that. She's not the extra set; you could team teach. She's not the extra set, she's not going to be your helper. She's not going to be your para. She's also a teacher. So, we called [the training] 'Inclusion-Confusion.'

When prompted to elaborate more on 'Inclusion-Confusion' Marie (FG3) continued, "Because [the general education teachers] were saying that they didn't have the training, the students were all going to be confused in the classroom. So, I called my training 'Inclusion-Confusion.'

Of note, the researchers found that the principals appeared to be much better trained than the teachers on inclusion resources, laws, and practices.

Disparity of Opinion on the Use of IEPs

For the most part, teachers felt the use of IEP's was helpful to the inclusionary classroom process, but some principals expressed doubt regarding the effectiveness of IEP's. The principals also noted additional concerns of accountability and inclusion classrooms as being part of a "numbers game." Joe (FG3) mentioned that the IEP was more of a prescriptive tool used to lay the plan, but not useful in monitoring progress or success of a special education student. But the requirements of compliance with laws and

regulations forces inclusion at the expense of general education students, with little accountability for the results achieved:

> …because the big word is FAPE (Free and Appropriate Public Education), are we providing FAPE? And if we are, to some degree, then we're meeting [requirements]; we're being compliant. I think there has to be another method to monitor, and to have, because these are huge accountability points, and my concern would be, you know, who is ultimately responsible, and that's the person who signs off on them [the IEPs] and that's the administrator.

Rick (FG3) agreed with Joe (FG3) and further elaborated more on IEPs, FAPE, and the social-economic aspects of special education and inclusion, and with his frustration of the process:

> I think that one of the things that I've always personally felt was we were being a scapegoat. I say we, as educators in the field, and in school and what-not. For years, when I was a teacher, we heard about crack babies and all, you know, with the influx of the drugs and what-not, and how all these kids were entered into the system. But then the Federal government and the State look at us, "This kid is special ed." Well, if we see an influx of different societal factors coming up creating students that are going to have those needs, okay, how can we be looking at less and less kids in special ed? I think they [governmental agencies] confuse that with racial issues, and saying that they had too many Hispanics, or too many Black kids in special education, so we have to drop those numbers now…I'm not here to point to any kind of race or whatever, but the predominate population that were struggling are the poor in society, are going to be the minorities, so they're going to have more tendencies to have maybe more kids who are falling behind. I think we did a disservice of having to do, you know, least restricted environment and doing the FAPE and making sure the numbers are low. And I think which [sic] forced districts to look at having…we've got to put them in the classroom; that's where we got the inclusion. You know, that was a new way to do it, even though the State, the government, never even recognized that. It was our way of taking those numbers down to meet the percentages that the government said we needed to have in the students that are in resource, and self-contained, and everything else.

Marie (FG3) noted that the IEPs are effective, "depending on how you use them." She also noted that they were just a guide, a foundation, and that the teachers "can always do more" than what is planned in the IEP.

In references to the use of IEPs, the focus group interviews further accented the problem of using IEP's effectively, knowingly and understanding them fully.

Teacher Turnover

Principals expressed frustration with the monetary and temporal costs of training teachers who would leave the district shortly after they completed the program. Rick (FG3) mentioned it was a problem in his smaller district, saying:

> I don't want to jump on a soapbox, but, you know, a turnover of staff always forces us to go back to square one in the training…we can't develop the staff to be proficient, then to mastery, because there is such a turnover. So that's something that a small district like ours are always facing [sic]. I mean…you think you've got a new reading, I mean math teacher, and the year they leave, mid-year, and it's like, "what are you going to do now?"

Other principals mentioned the need for ongoing training throughout the year, not just one training at the beginning of the teacher's employment. Joe (FG3) said that when speaking with the special education teachers, "They [the special education teachers] have spoken to us about needing additional training. They've gone to maybe one training with the focus in the beginning of the year." He noted, and the other principals concurred, that more training was needed throughout the year, especially as relates to modifications and accommodations for the needs of the special education students.

Will (FG3) mentioned that the training for modifications and accommodations needed to be "explicitly spelled out." Yet Joe (FG3) stated, "If we had something in the beginning of the year for those teachers, and middle of the year for the other new teachers…you know, you never know, then I think we'd have a better take on all of this."

Marie (FG3) mentioned that one school district mandated that the special education teacher reviewed the lesson plans, accommodations, and modifications for each special education student. She then provided suggestions and resources to meet the student's needs and provided follow-up support and more planning every three weeks with the general education teacher. Maria (FG2) noted, "We never had to say, "Oh, we need more training." Well, we had the training, she [the special education teacher] would get all the training she needed, she would trickle it down to us."

Rick (FG3) suggested, and Isabel (FG3) agreed, that an individual special education teacher should be assigned to each grade level or subject area to help with training and minimizing the impact of teacher turnover on the inclusion processes.

Transition Concerns

The principals expressed concern that the laws and regulations of NCLB and inclusion of special education students in the traditional classroom did not help to facilitate transitioning of special education students to traditional classrooms and environments. Many agreed that some one-on-one or sheltered instruction was needed to move the special education student forward in the learning process.

Rick (FG3) noted again how "inclusion" was the current "magic word" in addressing the needs of special education students, and that one must be wary of depending solely on inclusion to address all problems:

> It's not about inclusion, it's about what kind of help can I have to provide for the student to catch him up? I can't just keep including them and then do less, because they're not going to catch up. And so I think we just have to really be careful in looking at the labels, because we're a society full of labels. We have to look at what we're really going to do for those kids and if we do inclusion, we do it with the expectation that kids are going to come to grade level. And if it means pulling them out of inclusion to do some one-on-one, to bring them up, and catch them up because they're bumping their heads against a wall for reducing fractions, guess what? I'm going to pull them aside because they're having problems with multiplication. They're having problems with procedures and processes. It's going to take some one-on-one to catch them up and then bring them back [into the inclusion classroom] so they can keep running. But if they are always trying to keep up with the pack…I think it defeats the purpose in the long run. Again, with fidelity and everything we do with the purpose in mind that the kid is going to be successful, we're going to do, whatever it takes. And we're not limited to just inclusion.

Will (FG3) also mentioned that in addition to buy-in of the teachers for inclusion, sheltered instruction would be useful because, "…then they [the special education students] are able to move about the room. They're able to learn in fun ways and they are able to learn from each other."

Martha (FG3) summed it up nicely, "In the end always do what's best for the student. Not the best, just what's best for the student. Don't look at any[one] program. Don't lay bull. Just do what's best for the child, because the child is going to have to suffer [if he/she is not given the best for him/her].

CONCLUSION

Collaboration was found to be the most prevalent theme of all the eight themes. Both the teachers and principals mentioned the need for ensuring there was constant collaboration and communication between the teachers, the campus administration, and of course, the parents, for inclusion to be effective. However, many of the general education teachers stated they deferred to the special education teachers for direction on inclusion practices for the classroom. They felt the special education teachers had the training needed, whereas they did not. The principals were well-informed of the laws and processes providing for the needs of special education students, but also found that at the classroom level, much of the inclusion processes and practices fell upon the special education teachers. But ultimately, the principals knew they were accountable for their campuses.

This study found the following: (1) regular education teachers and special education teachers want support from their campus administrators, (2) teachers want classroom management support, (3) teachers want staff development support, (4) general education teacher want more time to collaborate with special education teachers, (5) administrators need to take the time to discuss the meaning and importance of IEP's with teachers, (6) administrators need to be readily available to assist teachers when needed, and (7) administrators need to fully understand what inclusion actually entails for it to work effectively, as they are accountable for all that occurs on their campuses (Downing, 2008; Smith and Smith; 2000; Stump, 2000).

The regular education teachers and the special education teachers stated that they need to be supported by the campus administration for the use or non-use of inclusionary practices as a means of educating students with disabilities. Campus administrators must be well informed of special education laws, applications, procedures, and guidelines. According to Frost and Kersten (2001) "…although principals are not necessarily prepared to be the instructional leaders to special education teachers, in the wake of legislation and school reform, it is critical that they assume this responsibility to ensure program effectiveness and student achievement" (p. 6). Administrators must keep abreast of the special education laws, and in turn, provide the support needed so general education teachers are knowledgeable too. Elementary school administrators are the driving force in creating organizational change for school improvement and more equitable practices (Scanlan & Theoharis, 2020). Administrators and teachers need to stay on the same path when it comes to all students' educational successes. Inclusion depends on much collaboration and cooperation of the administrators, regular education teachers, and special education teachers.

This study found that more staff development is needed for elementary regular education teachers, elementary special education teachers, and elementary campus administrators. It is important to note that administrative support was perceived by teachers as crucial in their own perceptions or attitudes of inclusionary practices.

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