


2016

A Study of Teachers' Challenges with the Inclusion of Middle and High School Students with Autism

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Walden University

College of Education

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Marcie Goodrow

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2016

Abstract

A Study of Teachers' Challenges with the Inclusion of Middle and High School Students

with Autism

by

Marcie Goodrow

MA, Walden University, 2006

BS, Plattsburgh State University, 2001

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

October 2016

Abstract

Middle and high school general education teachers in the school district in this bounded case study were facing challenges with meeting the needs of students who have autism in the current inclusion program. The purpose of this study was to understand teachers' challenges with components of the inclusion program and serving students with autism in the general education classroom. The conceptual framework was Villa and Thousand's 5 system-level best practices for successful inclusive education. A purposeful sampling procedure was used to select 4 general education teachers who were teaching autistic students in an inclusive setting; this sample included 2 middle school level and 2 high school level teachers from 2 schools in the small rural district. The data collected through classroom observations and semi structured interviews were coded based on Villa and Thousand's best practices of leadership, redefined roles, collaboration, adult support, and promotion as each related to inclusion of autistic students. Results were used to identify challenges teachers were facing that prevented the 5 system-level best practices from being implemented. Key challenges were collaboration between general and special education teachers and lack of professional development for all teachers on inclusion. Findings were used to provide recommendations for how to address challenges in middle and high school inclusion programs and for conducting future studies in different settings. The results of this study could be used by school leaders and other stakeholders to make informed decisions about system level implementation of inclusion program components and for enhancing the learning of students who have autism in the inclusive setting.

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Dedication

This publication is dedicated to my husband, Adam who has always accepted me as I am, supported me and believed in me. He never complains about having to take care of things at home while I am writing and writing and writing. I truly do not know what I would do without him. My daughters, Madeline and Mia, who are my inspiration and encourage me to be the best that I can be. I want them to know that they can achieve anything they want to and hope that I inspire them to do so. My mother who has always encouraged me to do my best. Lastly, my students who have taught me to keep an open mind and an open heart... I cannot ever thank any of you enough.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Although inclusion may be beneficial for many students, students with autism pose specific challenges and exceptions in the inclusive classroom. Highly complex behavioral, social, and educational needs accompanied with sensory processing difficulties can make inclusion challenging (McLaren, 2013). Addressing these challenges requires valuable time for training and resources to implement inclusion programs correctly and it is critical to make sure that these programs are meeting the needs of the students they are intended to serve. “Everyone benefits from changes in teaching and learning needed for teachers to work successfully with a mixed group of students” (McLaren, 2013, p. 30). It is when education meets with innovation that all stake holders benefit.

The purpose of this study was better understand general education teachers’ described challenges with implementing best practices for inclusion and what challenges are present with meeting the needs of students who are autistic in an inclusive setting at the middle and high school level. Current research states that many teachers are not receptive to the inclusion because of their lack of understanding how to provide the appropriate supports for students with disabilities (Cassady, 2011). Challenges that are preventing teachers from meeting the needs of students who have autism in the inclusion program were identified so that data could be compared and contrasted. These data were analyzed to provide recommendations for helping teachers address the needs of the student with autism in the inclusion setting. A complete review of the challenges teachers

face when including students with autism in the general education setting is provided in the literature review.

Problem Statement

The general education teachers at this research setting are facing challenges with meeting the needs of students who have autism in the inclusion setting. Within the inclusive setting research needs to be completed in order to further investigate whether or not there are best practices that should be addressed in order to make inclusion successful for students. A seventh grade general education English teacher at the junior high school noted that she has had difficulty with inclusion of students who have autism in her classroom (A. Charleson, personal communication, April 28, 2014). Including students with autism in the general education is a problem that was compounded by increasing regulations placed on classroom teachers to meet state requirements. It has been found that chronic neurodevelopmental disabilities, including autism, are independently associated with low school performance (Crump et al. 2013). Education is increasingly relying on standardized testing scores to evaluate both teachers and students which can create a stressed environment for both parties

The challenge with including students with autism in the general education setting is not just a problem in this research setting, but also a problem in the larger educational context. In educational settings, both academic and social complexities within the environment increase from primary to secondary classroom (The Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, [CSESA], 2014). The grade 8 English Language Arts (ELA) teacher at the research setting felt unprepared to help meet

the needs of her students with autism in an inclusion setting. She described how a student with autism struggles in her classroom due to his inability to read social cues from his peers. In turn, she feels unprepared to help the student with this difficulty which impacts his learning and the learning of others in the inclusive environment (A. Charleson, personal communication, March 2014). Teachers would benefit from training in specific interventions and strategies used to teach social skills to students with autism spectrum disorders.

It is common for people with autism to have difficulty with interpreting social signals and cues, along with self-management and coping skills which can lead to behavioral difficulties. These difficulties can lead to negative experiences in both social and academic areas in their educational career. Recent research states, “As a number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder increases, schools must ensure that general and special educators are prepared to teach these students effectively and to respond to their behavioral issues” (Hart, 2013, p. 24). There is a need to identify the barriers teachers are facing in inclusion classrooms so those challenges can be better understood and addressed is essential to both student and teacher success. The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges that teachers are facing when including students with autism in the inclusion program. As more students with autism are placed in inclusive classrooms educators are facing new challenges despite the best practice, clear guidelines, and training being provided (Lindsay, Proulx, Scott, & Thomson, 2014).

There are several levels to the autism spectrum, which presents teachers with complexities of challenges within the inclusion program different from those of students

with other developmental differences. Students who have autism present with challenges including lack of “theory of mind, weak central coherence, and impaired executive function” which affects their reading, writing and social skills (Constable, Grossi, Moniz, & Ryan, 2013). These learning differences make meeting state standards challenging for general education teachers within the inclusion program. It was critical to continuously examine challenges, such as these, that teachers face in these inclusions settings so school leaders can make informed decisions to address the barriers.

Research Questions

My research was guided by the following research questions to better understand middle and high school teachers’ challenges related to students who have autism in the inclusion research setting and provide recommendations for overcoming these challenges.

1. 1.What are the general education teachers’ challenges with implementing Villa and Thousand’s (2003) system level best practices in the inclusion program in order to meet the needs of students who have autism in an inclusion classroom at the middle and high school research setting?
2. Which of Villa and Thousand’s (2003) best practices of inclusive programming were used in the inclusion classrooms at the research setting?
3. Which of Villa and Thousand’s (2003) best practices of inclusive programming were not used in the inclusion classrooms at the research setting?

Nature of the Study

A case study research design was used to answer the research questions. The case study research method could be used to enhance understanding of an individual group or phenomena (Yin, 2009). This case study allowed for unique viewpoints of general education teachers' challenges with the current inclusive program for middle and high school students who have autism in one school district.

Teachers were asked to volunteer to take part in the study. The first two teachers that responded from each level, two at the middle school level and two at the high school level with experiences in inclusive settings with students who have autism were chosen to be participants in the study. These teachers currently work in a rural, northern New York school district, with children in grades 7 to 12.

Data Collection

Four teachers participated in one semi-structured interview biweekly, over a 4-week period, each lasting 30 minutes with a total of two interviews with each teacher. By using interviews as a method of data collection, I sought to learn more about the approach to inclusion in the research setting. Interviews allowed for identification of challenges that teachers are facing from various viewpoints. During the four weeks of data collection, I observed in the inclusive general education classroom one time per week with a total of four observations with each teacher, one time per week for 30- 40 minutes. The observations were used to identify observed challenges in the inclusion setting and these data were compared and contrasted with the interview data to provide more in depth recommendations for change. The use of observation as a method of data collection

helped to provide an objective and in depth view of the perceived challenges that teachers may report in their interviews (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). All of the data was analyzed based on Villa and Thousand's (2003) conceptual framework regarding best practices with inclusion programming and research regarding the challenges general education teachers face with inclusion and to develop common themes, as well as contrasting themes that unfolded from the data analysis.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to determine what challenges are present within the inclusive setting preventing the general education teachers from implementing an inclusion model based on Villa and Thousand's (2003) conceptual framework regarding best practices within inclusion programming. The case study approach enabled "how" and "why" type questions to be answered while also considering how this specific phenomenon is influenced by the situational context (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 556). It was beneficial to better understand the challenges of general education teachers in inclusive settings with students who have autism so that recommendations based on these data and best practices can be introduced to the school administrators for possible improvements to address the problem in the research setting. The recommendations allowed school leaders to have a detailed picture of what the general education teachers' experiences are in the inclusion setting in order to address any challenges and provide recommendations for overcoming the challenges.

Conceptual Framework

This section describes a model for successful inclusion that will provide the framework for this study and define best practices within inclusion programming. “Since the 1975 implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), federal law has stated that children with disabilities have the right to an education in the least restrictive environment (LRE)” (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p. 19). The term least restrictive environment can be interpreted in many ways, however, as the number of students with disabilities in general education continues to increase, inclusive practices continue to be an important piece to the educational experiences of all students in these settings. As explained by Villa and Thousand (2003), successful implementation of inclusive education varies from state to state and among districts in the same states, however, in all of these cases, systems-level practices need to be in place in order to promote best practice within the inclusion program being offered. The conceptual framework for best practice within inclusion programming is provided by Villa and Thousand’s (2003) article as a guide to help schools follow these best practices within their own inclusion program.

According to Villa and Thousand (2003) the successful implementation of inclusive education “requires the five following system-level practices: visionary leadership and administrative support; redefined roles; collaboration; and additional adult support when needed; and promoting inclusion in the classroom” (p.20). These practices aid in the development and maintenance of successful inclusionary programs and provide frameworks for which schools could guide their approach to inclusive education. These

five best practices guided the study and observations and interviews determined which of the best practices were not evident in the current inclusive program due to barriers teachers were facing and why they are not present. These results were used to make recommendations that could possibly increase the use of this model at the research setting. Through observation and interviews, I could determine if these conditions are being met or not met by identifying the barriers that teachers are facing in the inclusive setting.

This conceptual framework of Villa and Thousand's five systems-level practices (2003) served as the guide for data collection and analysis in this case study. Villa and Thousand's five systems-level practices were presented in the literature review to connect them to current research regarding inclusionary practice. The analyzed data collected during this study determined what barriers are preventing these conditions from being met at the research setting and recommendations for future inclusionary practice.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are essential to this study and are defined below:

Alternative Teaching: This method involves two teachers taking different roles in the classroom setting. One teacher will manage the majority of the class while the other teacher will pull a small group of students from the majority and work with them alternatively either inside or outside of the general education classroom setting (Friend & Cook, 1996).

Coteaching: This strategy is most common within an inclusive classroom. This involves both the special and general education teacher taking on a partnership role in the

classroom. Both teachers are responsible for delivering instruction and delivering any necessary modifications to the material for students with disabilities (Magiera & Zigmond, 2005).

Coteaching Professional Development (CoPD) model: “Process of co-teaching which allows the special education teacher to share knowledge and skills with the general education teacher in the how to of accommodating students with disabilities and the general education teacher sharing knowledge of the specific content being taught and strategies to help students learn the content” (Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015).

Inclusion: The educational practice, which integrates special education students into the general education setting. This is done in conjunction with providing the students with specialized instruction as deemed by their individualized education programs (IEP’s) (Abner, 2013). In this study the terms inclusion, inclusive setting and mainstream are used interchangeably.

Least Restrictive Environment-LRE: To the maximum extent possible that a student with disabilities is included in private or public institutions are educated with their non-disabled peers (Douvani & Hulse, 2002).

Assumptions

Assumptions made in educational research are facts made regarding participants, circumstances, and anything outside of your control within the study without concrete proof (Levy & Ellis, 2011). The following assumptions were made regarding the participants in this study: participants were honest when answering interview questions and I received an accurate picture of the challenges during the observational period.

Qualitative research lends itself to the subjective viewpoints of the participants given that reality is socially constructed by each person involved (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

These subjective viewpoints, in qualitative research, were expressed through interviews regarding the phenomena being studied.

Limitations

The limitations in this case study, which include internal threats to validity, affect the transferability of the data collected. The outcomes may not be transferable to a larger population, or another setting. Small sample sizes decrease the transferability of the findings from the study (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010). I addressed transferability by clearly describing the setting so that the results might transfer to similar settings.

However, due to the rural area and the large number of students with autism in the area in reference to the population size, the results may not be transferable to schools with a much larger student body or otherwise different characteristics. The purpose of this case study was to examine specific cases to better understanding the problem at the research setting. By telling a rich, contextual story through the case study design connections can be discovered to allow for learning at the research setting and possibly elicit further research into the phenomena being studied thus helping to alleviate the limitations of the study (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009).

Bounds of Study

The scope of this study included middle and high school general education teachers' challenges with the inclusion of students who have autism in the current inclusion program at the research setting. A need had been expressed for conducting this

type of research that will include students at the middle and high school levels. This study included the perceived challenges of two middle school teachers and two high school teachers with the inclusion of students who have autism into general education setting. The participants took part in two biweekly interviews over a 4-week period, with each being approximately 30 minutes in length. Additionally, I completed one weekly observation each week for 4 weeks in the general education classroom to compare observed data with interviewed data in order to provide recommendations to school leaders.

Delimitations

The delimitations in this study are that only general education teachers were interviewed and not special education teachers. This is due to the type of coteaching that is used, alternative teaching, where the special educator provides support as needed and requested by the general education teacher. In addition, the home district is in a rural area with roughly 3,000 students in grades PK-12 that may affect the transferability of data results.

Significance of the Study

The results of this study could lead to more effective implementation and support of inclusion in schools for middle and high school students who have autism. With this knowledge, the appropriate resources were provided to general education teachers in inclusion settings to promote best practice with regards to inclusion. A question that is recurring in research and is facing educational leaders and staff “is how to build capacity to effectively include and educate students with disabilities in general education settings

so that these students can achieve important educational outcomes” (Crocket, Billingsley, & Boscardin, 2012, p.170). Through the evaluation of current practices with inclusion, the results of this study were presented to the district as well as recommendations for following best practices involved in successful inclusion through a literature review.

By utilizing a case study design, a rich detailed description of the challenges of middle and high school general educators in with inclusion of students who have autism were explored. Qualitative methods of interview and observation allowed for a holistic view of the phenomenon being studied. Through this exploration, inclusionary practices were reviewed and perhaps improved.

Professionally, the results could be used to help fill the gap in daily practice with inclusion of middle and high school students who have autism. As research literature provides strategies for mainstreaming students who have autism, research outlining the process of implementing these strategies is not as likely to be available to teachers and administrators (Davis, 2013). This research outlined strategies that could be utilized in the classroom as well as research on successful implementation of these strategies.

Social Change

Society as a whole, is learning to accept autism as a mainstream diagnosis for many people in our population. Due to this, there is a growing recognition that including students with disabilities in general education can provide them with the opportunity to learn in natural, stimulating settings, which may also lead to increased acceptance and appreciation of differences” (Ajuwon, 2008, p.11) In 1997, the reauthorizations of IDEA and regulations of LRE held schools accountable for implementing the inclusion model

(Russell & Bray, 2013). This created opportunities for all students to learn together regardless of their abilities. Inclusion improves opportunities for social barriers to be improved and for all students to benefit from the inclusionary practices regardless of ability or intellectual challenges (Crosland & Dunlap, 2010). In turn, society as a whole benefits from an environment which promotes acceptance which can be created in a successful inclusive environment.

Effective inclusion that follows best practice of the inclusion process would increase opportunities for appropriate social interactions with peers. Inclusion also allows for increased opportunities for educational achievement and experiences, which may not be available in segregated settings. Students with autism who would normally not have access to general education curriculum due to behavioral or intellectual challenges will now be exposed to a curriculum with age appropriate standards. This allows for these students to possibly develop an educational skill that could benefit later when college or career bound.

Both students who have and not have autism can benefit from inclusive environments. Students who have autism can learn to improve social skills while at the same time their peers can gain tolerance for individuals with differences through cooperation and exposure to those who engage with the world differently (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). This not only benefits the students, but also the community as a whole by creating accepting community members who work together for a common good regardless of differences.

Teachers can benefit as well from this study by allowing for recommendations and best practices to be presented to administration to improve their working environments. It is possible that teachers without proper supports and best practices including visionary leadership, additional adult support, and collaboration may reach a burn-out phase more quickly in their career (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This not only affects teachers, it also affects students and the school culture as a whole. When teachers feel supported, particularly in relation to professional learning communities and collaboration, there is evidence of higher morale among staff, increased effectiveness in the classroom as well as better student outcomes (Harris & Jones, 2010). Effective supports in place for teachers and staff can create an environment more likely to create a successful inclusion program.

In regards to societal change, the benefits to the program can be beneficial both presently and in the long-term. Short-term benefits of inclusion include increased awareness of students and staff (Karten, 2015). Promoting inclusive environments also promotes acceptance and a sense of belonging for all students, making the educational environment and school culture more positive. Society places high value on the importance of interpersonal relationships and by promoting an inclusive environment the skills needed to establish these relationships can be established to help create successful social outcomes (Morrison & Blackburn, 2008). Failure to provide these inclusive opportunities may lead to society losing the possible contributions that these individuals would have made if they had been given inclusive opportunities. Through new research,

positive social change can be created by improving current inclusive practice for students who have autism.

Through the study I sought to understand general education teachers described and observed challenges with inclusion of students who have autism. Research suggests that there are a variety of benefits offered to students with autism in inclusive setting even though the decision to include them still remains a topic of controversy (Sansosti, 2012). Using a case study research design, four general education teachers; including two at the middle school level and two at the high school level from a rural, northern New York School District were interviewed about their experienced challenges with inclusion of students who have autism. These same teachers were observed in the inclusive setting in order to compare interview data to observation data in regards to inclusive practice.

The review of literature is a key component to this new research. This review is completed to determine what research has been done before, identify gaps in the current literature, determine how this research could add to the current knowledge base, and support the need for the study (Randolph, 2009). The literature review is provided in Chapter 2 of this study. The selection of methodology procedures is explained in Chapter 3 for the study. In Chapter 3 the research designs, research methods, research questions, criteria for selecting participants, ethical considerations, the role of the researcher, and data collection and analysis are discussed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Review of Current Literature

Inclusion is supported by the assumption that all learners should be viewed as respected members of the school community (Caustin-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009). Upon this premise, students are appreciated for their unique abilities and differences and are included in the mainstream classroom. A substantial amount of research documents that all students benefit from inclusive services regardless of their varying abilities or disabilities (Olson, Leko & Roberts, 2016). In conjunction, the inclusion of students who have autism presents specific challenges to general education classroom teachers with inclusive classrooms. Teachers have reported difficulties when dealing with the social and emotional behavioral differences that children with autism exhibit, this coupled with lack of training to adequately support these students can create challenges in the inclusive classroom (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). The roles of educational staff in the inclusive environment may also need to be redefined in order to address challenges with inclusion. These challenges are reviewed in this chapter.

This chapter reviews these challenges, as well as best practices in regards to inclusion and its relation to the inclusion of middle and high school students who have autism. The conceptual framework chosen to evaluate this study is Villa and Thousand's systems level approach and best practices in making inclusive education successful, which will also be reviewed in this chapter (2003). The relationship between this study and previous research is presented along with similar and contrasting points of view of previous research regarding inclusion of students who have autism. Discussion of how

challenges faced by general education teachers with inclusion could be addressed and future implications of this study are presented. The last section will describe the research methods chosen to evaluate this problem in order to substantiate the rationale and conceptual framework for this study.

Varieties of search strategies were used to conduct this review of literature. Developing and generating search terms to use in Google Scholar and Library Databases, specifically the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) has been a significant source for literature regarding the chosen study. Key terms included *challenges of inclusion and autism*, *inclusion and autism*, *successful inclusion and autism* with limits set to find sources between 2008 and 2014. Once relevant articles were compiled, cited sources within this literature were used to find additional relevant sources. In addition, tertiary sources including mainly textbooks were also used.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used to define the aspects of successful inclusion practices presented by Villa and Thousand (2003) provide a necessary structure for which to study the predetermined themes in regards to what is best practice in order to determine the barriers that may be preventing these practices from being implemented. The systems level best practices defined by Villa and Thousand may support the maintenance of inclusive education (2003). These practices include: visionary leader and administrative support, redefined roles, collaboration, adult support, promoting inclusion, and responding to diversity (Villa & Thousand, 2016). Each of these components of the framework needs to be present in order for inclusion to be successful.

With a rise in the inclusion of students who have autism and a recent focus on educational philosophical changes to more fully include students with learning and behavioral differences, frameworks such as those presented by Villa and Thousand (2003) may help to make successful application of these ideological changes (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012). This framework connects to best practices regarding inclusion and will be broken down and further explained in the next sections.

Connection with Best Practices

The strategies presented by Villa and Thousand can help to improve the current inclusion programs. As stated by Villa and Thousand in their research, inclusion is most easily introduced in school communities that have already restructured to meet the needs of their increasingly diverse student populations in regular education” (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p. 20). With inclusion of students who have autism more work needs to be done in regards to inclusionary practices in order to create a positive, supportive environment that will allow these students to meet their maximum potential.

Evidence shows that when students who have autism are fully included in general education settings, they can exhibit higher levels of engagement along with loftier educational goals when compared to students in segregated settings (Lindsay et al., 2013). The adoption of organizational best practices can help students to attain the many benefits of inclusion, which include such practices as “block-scheduling, multi-age student grouping and looping, and school wide positive behavior support” (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p.20). Additionally, “the strategies described here can bridge the gap between what schools are doing well and what they can do better to make inclusion part

and parcel of a general education program” (p.22). With strategies such as those mentioned prior, the likelihood of a successful inclusion program is more probable.

Visionary Leadership and Administrative Support

In order for improvements in practice to be made, teachers need the necessary supports and guidelines to follow in order to make inclusion successful. These supports include visionary leadership (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Through visionary leadership, the entire school staff can be provided with training in best practices for inclusive classrooms so that the entire school is supportive of inclusion (Doktor, 2010). It is important for the needs of the students as well as the teachers are met through the inclusion process. It has been well-documented that leadership is critical to the success of inclusive educational environments (Santoli, Sach, Romey, & McClurg, 2008). Receptivity to inclusion and change initiatives begins with a visionary leader that can encourage through a proactive approach with staff members (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012). Administrators can provide general educators with four types of support: personal and emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal (Villa & Thousand, 2003). Administrative support and vision is a key component of successful inclusion.

Resources are made available to educational staff, but are most effective when it is provided from a visionary leader or administrator. Inclusion is a set of values that promotes diversity and acceptance which is most successful when encouraged by the building administration and leadership. Inclusion is most commonly associated with students who have special educational needs, which, unfortunately often has a perceived connection to bad behavior of students in the classroom (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson,

2013). This view of inclusion needs to be addressed and clear frameworks and definitions need to be provided to staff along with the necessary supports in place to address the needs of both students and staff. Frameworks such as the systems approach defined by Villa and Thousand can help to provide this resource.

Redefined Roles

In order for inclusion to be successful educators need to begin to eliminate the isolated way of thinking of my students versus your students mentality (Villa & Thousand, 2003). In order to support successful inclusion, the traditional roles of the educational staff have to be retired, so that the visionary view of role redefinition can be adopted. Therefore, special educators need to be fully integrated in the classroom and school community not only in those times when they support general education teachers in order to model best inclusive practices (Doktor, 2010).

The framework of full inclusion and best inclusive practices should be encouraged and created by school administration so that all students will have increased positive outcomes for learning (Angelides, Antoniou, & Charalambous, 2012). “To facilitate this role redefinition, some schools have developed a single job description for all professional educators that clearly articulates expected job functions, collaboration and shared responsibility for educating all of a community’s children and youth” (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p. 20). Coteaching needs to be looked at as actually coteaching. This means that general education teachers need to be willing to collaborate with their special education colleagues in an inclusive way where roles in the classroom are shared rather than delegated which establishes a climate of acceptance (Angelides et al., 2012). In

order for this redefining of roles to occur school leaders must clarify the new roles and facilitate the change.

Collaboration

Collaboration by definition is working together with another person or group to achieve or do something. Collaboration is viewed as essential to successful inclusion where leaders work to foster collaboration among general and special educators (Crockett et al., 2012). In their research regarding inclusion, Villa and Thousand found that, “in a study of more than 600 educators, collaboration emerged as the only variable that predicted positive attitudes toward inclusion among general and special educators as well as administrators” (2003, p. 21). When looking at inclusion, collaboration among the educational staff is necessary, along with the time allotted for staff to collaborate. In conjunction, “schools should emphasize teamwork to address the needs of children who have autism to develop effective solutions of enhancing their inclusion” (Lindsay et al., 2013, p. 360). In order for a team approach to take place, staff needs to have scheduled times that they can collaborate with their peers to facilitate the inclusion process.

When staff members have inflexible or negative responses to the idea of collaboration, the principal should be willing to be a part of the collaborative team meetings and promote the many roles that special education teachers play each day, to bring a greater awareness to their colleagues (Harding, 2009). “For inclusive education to work, educators must become effective and efficient collaborative team members” (Harding, 2009, p. 21). In order to bridge the gap between general education and special education settings all staff should understand and be made aware of how a special

education class runs and what kinds of services are delivered. There is too little known about what a special education teacher does and with awareness and an effort to promote staff through visionary leadership and support, collaboration will be better received and consequently more successful (Harding, 2009). Collaboration is a key component for creating an effective inclusion program, being that inclusion is a team effort among all staff and students.

Adult Support

In the education of students with autism in the inclusion setting, a variety of teaching models where additional adult support is needed is often necessary. However, it is important to only provide as much support as needed to follow best practice in regards to providing additional support in the inclusive classroom (Villa & Thousand, 2003).

When introducing paraprofessionals to the educational team, there should be an agreement among staff that this person is an additional part of the educational team, not intended to be velcroed to particular students (Villa & Thousand, 2003. p. 21).

Teacher aides or assistants can be effective in the inclusion of students with autism by providing the student with consistency when moving from one teacher or subject to another. This is a key component for students who have autism giving their preference for routine and predictability in their environments (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Additionally, there are teaching models in which general and special educators work together to meet the individual needs of students. As shown in Figure 1, these models include: one teach, one assist; parallel teaching; alternative teaching; one teach, one observe; station teaching; and coteaching (Graziano & Navarrete, 2012).

Including the teacher aide or assistant in these models as a valued member of the group can further improve consistency among the student's day and among staff when responding to specific behaviors or expectations of the student receiving the service (Topper, 1994). It is important, however, to note that the training the aide receives is often indicative of the support they provide (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Training needs to be provided to meet the individual needs of the student to allow for the right amount of support to be provided to avoid invasive adult support, which may lead to further isolation and dependent behaviors for the student (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009). When these supports are used in an effective manner, students in inclusion settings may be more likely to find success.

Promoting Inclusion in the Classroom

With inclusive practices becoming more common within schools, due to the rise in students presenting with learning differences, promoting inclusion in the classroom is necessary. "At the heart of inclusion are the opportunities that students with disabilities have to participate in school and classroom life and achieve valued educational goals" (Crocket et al., 2012, p. 181). Successful inclusion starts with a clear and defined vision of what inclusion looks like and how all students are accepted and seen as an "essential member of the classroom and school community" (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009, p. 44). "Several curricular, instructional and assessment practices benefit all students in the classroom and help ensure successful inclusion" (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p. 21). Cooperative learning, use of technology for access, and differentiated instruction

are among the strategies and theories that can be used to help promote inclusion in the classroom.

Through on-going professional development opportunities, teachers are more likely to find success in the inclusion process. It has been reported that “43% of teachers involved in inclusive change discussed the importance of professional development” (p. 180) being held throughout the year and through the summer months (Crockett et al., 2012). Even though inclusive practices are considered best practices there are barriers to inclusive education including lack of effective administrative leadership and supports and professional development opportunities (Doktor, 2010). Promoting inclusion in the classroom begins with a strong foundation of strategies and theories that can be utilized by staff, along with a school climate that is supportive of inclusion in all aspects.

Responding to Diversity

General education teachers and special education teachers who view students as ‘our’ students vs. ‘your’ students provide a positive inclusion environment more likely to elicit successful results for all students. “As an educator, you are philosophically committed to student diversity. You appreciate that learning differences are natural and positive” (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p. 19). Furthermore, administration is responsible for promoting this way of thinking and celebrating differences by capitalizing on a students’ interests and strengths (2003). Understanding how to handle these differences in the classroom and how to respond to them in an educationally sound way is the responsibility of all members of the school community within an inclusive environment. When looking at the inclusion of students who have autism, it is important for members of this

community to take some time to consider any pre-conceived ideas or expectations about student who have autism (Humphrey, 2008) . Educators need to be able to make adjustments when a student’s abilities do not match the expectations in the inclusion setting.

Inclusion requires that general and special education teachers are committed to working together in order to create success for students in the inclusion setting. General education teachers need supports from administration and effective strategies to make this happen, along with a willingness to accept differences from students. Administrators along with all educational staff have to be committed to inclusion and all of the benefits it has to offer in order for students who have disabilities such as autism to flourish in this environment.

Bridging the Gap

Inclusion incorporates best practice, redefinition of roles, and collaborative practice among educators. “Inclusive education is a general education initiative, not another add- on school reform unrelated to other general education initiatives” (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p.22). The framework presented by Villa and Thousand can help to bridge the gap between what schools are doing well and what they need to improve on in the inclusive classroom setting. Identifying what barriers are preventing this framework from being employed at the research setting will help to understand why inclusion is not successful. The recommendation could help to bridge the gap between what the research setting’s current inclusion program is doing well and what it is not doing to improve the inclusion setting.

Challenges to Inclusion

Challenges to inclusion need to be determined in order for best practices to be put into place successfully. Challenges with collaboration, leadership, appropriate supports, defining inclusion and understanding the roles of personnel in the inclusive classroom all impact best practice within an inclusive program. “While Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and its amendments have enabled students with disabilities to be more included, general classroom teachers still sometimes feel inadequately prepared to successfully meet the needs of diverse students in the classroom” (Fuchs, 2010, p. 30).

Inclusive schools are schools where all students are valued members of the general education classrooms regardless of their abilities or disabilities and are included in the general education classrooms to the utmost extent (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009) . “Collaboration, the interaction style between school professionals, is defined as two or more equally certified or licensed professionals implementing shared teaching, decision-making, goal setting, and accountability for a diverse student body” (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2013, p. 76). Additionally, this means redefining the roles of teachers so that true collaboration can take place is important for successful inclusion. General educators need to understand and accept that the curriculum is not theirs alone to decide how it is presented while special education teachers have to let go of the idea that students may not be successful without them. “Both general and special education teachers must adopt a new roles and participate in common professional development” (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009, p. 47). Without this being a clear expectation for

staff to accept these roles and understand that general education is for all students, this barrier can be a hard one to overcome within the inclusive process.

Inclusive environments need visionary leadership with clear expectations for staff and students in the environment. The idea of inclusion is often not understood fully by educational staff and must be explained and encouraged by leadership in the educational setting. Best practice of inclusive education requires developing an inclusive student placement process. The commitment to student membership should not be contingent on behavioral or academic readiness, rather it should provide supports to create a full inclusive society, eliminating separate spaces for students. Finally, providing teachers with explicit training to expand on their knowledge of accommodations and strategies to help support every student in the inclusive classroom (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009). Reform is challenging and demanding and requires strong visionary leadership with a clear understanding of what inclusion is and how to achieve it successfully.

Another challenge is lack of fully understanding what inclusion means within the educational environment. “Access to the general curriculum is interpreted in many school districts as simply a student with disabilities being placed in a general education classroom” (Moores-Abdool, 2010, p. 157). “Unfortunately, according to an investigation by the U.S. DE OSERS (2002), most general education teachers did not feel they were adequately prepared to work with or provide instructional accommodations for students who have disabilities” (Moores-Abdool, 2010, p. 155).

Furthermore, students who have autism present with a unique set of barriers of their own that affect the successfulness of an inclusive program. Additionally, “with the

prevalence of autism increasing exponentially in today's classrooms, general education teachers face a broad range of challenges within inclusive settings” (Busby, Ingram, Bowron, Oliver, & Lyons, 2012, p. 27). Specifically, in secondary education, the ability to be creative and think in a more creative way versus literal approaches to work is necessary which is a challenge for students who have autism (Harbinson & Alexander, 2009). This can cause issues within the general education curriculum expectations. These students often require additional adult support in the classroom which can be extremely helpful or extremely detrimental, depending on the quality of the support provided. Even with strategies in place, some students still may struggle with limited vocabulary, recalling words, and general difficulty expressing ideas (Casey, Williamson, Black, & Casey, 2014). As Lindsay et al., (2013) indicates:

Challenges in including children with ASD, as reported by the teachers interviewed, are as follows: understanding and managing behaviour; socio-structural barriers (i.e., school policy, lack of training and resources); and creating an inclusive environment (i.e., lack of understanding from other teachers, students and parents). (p. 354)

With these unique challenges, the inclusion of students who have autism is something that needs to be explored further in order to overcome specific challenges that may be presented in the inclusive classroom.

Resolving Challenges

Much of the research previously done has focused on effective or successful inclusion of students with a primary focus on elementary age students. “Widening the age

of range from mainly elementary education students to secondary-level (middle and high school) students is needed to determine if strategies are effective and feasible for students of all ages and grades” (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012, p. 36). Additionally, a small number of studies have been conducted in a classroom within typical settings and contexts (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012). This study would employ classroom observational data paired with narrative data from semi-structured interviews in order to gain a better understanding of the perceived challenges of inclusion in middle and high school settings of students who have autism. With knowledge of which challenges are most prevalent in the inclusive classroom setting, recommendations can be provided to overcome these challenges and support educational staff in successful inclusion of students who have autism.

Current research suggests that teachers need additional support in understanding and managing the behavior of students with autism within the context of the general education setting (Lindsay et al., 2013). School systems need to work on greater receptivity to the inclusion process, which starts with a proactive approach to improve practices in the inclusive program (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012). Strong site leadership is essential in facilitating a successful inclusive model through having a clear understanding of what inclusion is and how to work with all key stakeholders including parents, teachers, support staff and students to make inclusion a positive experience for those involved (Harding, 2009). Teachers that accepted their role as a teacher to all students in the classroom and viewed every student in the classroom as a student they feel can succeed saw more success with inclusion (Lindsay et al., 2014). The traditional roles of

teachers being general versus special education teachers needs to be redefined when it comes to making inclusion work. All students as well as staff need to be part of the inclusive community.

In addition, time is still a key factor in successful inclusion of students and is a significant area of concern for teachers. They need time to collaborate, time to attend meetings that include all stakeholders, to attend trainings that could provide them with the strategies needed to educate all students including those students who have autism (Santoli, Sach, Romey, & McClurg, 2008).

The diagnosis of autism continues to increase creating a need for further training for educational staff. “The Centers for Disease Control have reported that autism affects 1 in 88 children and 1 in 54 boys” (Autism Speaks, Inc., 2013, p. 8). “Given the social and behavioral impairments of children with ASD, teachers often face considerable obstacles in appropriately managing their needs” (Lindsay et al., 2013, p. 348). Additionally, Davis (2013) indicates:

Due to major laws such as PL 94-192, students with disabilities are to be placed in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Most often, this school setting is a general education classroom with a teacher that has had no training in working with students with any kind of disability. (p. 9)

Students who have autism may present with very specific challenges including sensory processing difficulties and obsessive-compulsive behaviors, which could pose a challenge with inclusion (McClaren, 2013). The responses to auditory and visual stimuli can be hyposensitive or hypersensitive depending on the specific student’s needs. These

responses may impede with learning in the inclusive environment due to overstimulation of the senses and an inability to attend to the lecture being presented by the general education teacher (McLaren, 2013).

In addition, obsessive-compulsive behaviors may lead to maladaptive behaviors in the educational setting that could include physical outbursts or a lack of ability to cooperate with staff and with the information presented. These challenges can be addressed through visionary leadership and effective professional development practices.

Successful teacher professional development includes ongoing support to staff linked directly to teacher practice that involves problem solving practice and modeling and is presented within theoretical frameworks (Higginson & Chatfield, 2012). In addition, environmental and behavioral supports, for example classroom visual schedules, have shown to not only benefit students who have autism but their peers as well (Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012). These types of strategies and interventions have been shown to improve the outcome for students who have autism in the general education setting. Inclusive pedagogy views learning as a professional challenge versus a deficit in the learner (Lindsay et al., 2014).

Successful inclusion begins with advocating for resources and essential training for teachers paired with creative planning, teamwork, building a climate of acceptance for both parents and students, along with tailored teaching methods (Lindsay et al., 2014). Advocating these resources and training “may be of particular challenge to teachers in rural areas where the low incidence of autism results in lower student numbers exhibiting

this trait and teachers who have little experience working with students with autism and also limited access to training, funding and resources” (Busby et al., 2012, p.27).

Research Method

A case study research design was used to collect the perceived challenges of general education teachers’ in the inclusion of middle and high school students with autism. A case study design allows more leeway in finding and determining the influence on the population being studied as opposed to quantitative methods (Balbach,1999). Qualitative methods were chosen to allow for observations in the natural setting with a semi-structured interview that allowed for a detail rich data collection. Direct observation will give me, the researcher, a first-hand direct experience with the phenomena being studied (Pauly, 2010). In addition, by actually being in the researched environment the researcher is able to attain a circumstantial and environmental description of what is being researched (Moores-Abdool, 2012). Through the use of a semi-structured interview, the researcher will have the “opportunity to compare participants’ responses while simultaneously seeking to fully understand their unique experiences” (Barlow, 2010, p.1). Given the small number of participants, qualitative methods are appropriate for this study. The case study design will allow for an opportunity to define necessary questions for developing consecutive studies in the area of inclusion for students with autism at the middle and high school grade levels (Streb, 2010). The use of a case study design allowed me to interpret the data and develop possible future questions or problems concerning inclusion of students with autism at junior and high school levels.

Quantitative designs such as a survey were not selected due to lack of context validity through not providing a holistic view of the context being studied. Based on the research questions presented in this study, the results from a quantitative method would not provide holistic view of the phenomena and may limit the data that could be collected based on viewpoints of the participants. Interviews and observations provide detail rich data in order to create a holistic view of the phenomenon. Additionally, with the small sample of participants, quantitative data may not yield significant results. In a 2014 study, inclusion was the topic of research for students with autism; interviews were used to collect data on teacher's experiences with inclusion (Lindsay et al., 2014). The collection of data based on interviews with a small number of participants, allows the participants views 'to be obtained with flexibility in interpretation of the findings (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, "as a research method, the case study is used in many situations, to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political and related phenomena" (Yin, 2014, p. 4). This study will contribute to the knowledge of group and organizational phenomena through the use of a case study design.

Summary

Inclusion of students who have autism in middle and high school inclusive classrooms has increased over the past decade. With this increase, the challenges faced by general education teachers need to be addressed in order to make improvement in the inclusion of middle and high school students who have autism. There has been minimal research on inclusion of students who have autism beyond the elementary school years.

With this lack of research, the challenges associated with this educational framework have been minimally addressed resulting in a gap in the literature. By using the Villa and Thousand's (2003) contextual framework on best practices for inclusion these challenges can be identified and recommendations can be made to improve the current inclusion program and close the gap in practice. It is evident that more studies are needed to determine the challenges faced by general education teachers when providing instruction to students who have autism in the inclusive setting, so that recommendations based on the framework can be presented at the research setting to promote positive social change.

The next section will present the research methods and considerations for the development of this case study. Research design, research questions, ethical considerations, role of the researcher, data collection and data analysis will be addressed in the following chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In recent years, based on my observations of students in the general education classrooms it is apparent that the inclusion of students with autism at the high school and middle school level in the research setting has increased, thus presenting teachers with new challenges when providing all students with effective instruction in an inclusion setting. As stated by Moores-Abdool (2012):

A major contributing factor to an increase of students taking advantage of inclusive programming is that students with disabilities are required to be in least restrictive environments and given access to the general curriculum. This includes the major subjects like math and science as mandated by federal legislation, in turn posing further challenges for teachers with the inclusive model. (p.1)

In this study, I attempted to understand the general education teachers' individual perceptions and experiences with inclusion within the Northern New York School District and any barriers to inclusion that were present. In order to gain further understanding of this phenomenon, a case study research design was used in order to provide me with a holistic view of the teachers' experiences with the inclusionary approach and environment.

Design

Case study research in education can serve as an effective method of qualitative research due to the ability to fully understand each participant's unique experience in order to further knowledge and understanding of a particular phenomenon in the

educational context of the case. “Case study research is an increasingly popular approach among qualitative researchers, which provides methodological flexibility through the incorporation of different paradigmatic positions, study designs, and methods” (Hyett, Kenny, & Virginia Dickson-Swift, 2014, p. 29). Using the case study design “not only creates knowledge and understanding but also sets a standard for good teaching practices through two main means—development and implementation of policy, and gaining experience through exposure to a particular phenomenon” (Timmons & Cairns, 2010, p. 1). Quantitative methods would not have provided me with detail-rich data that can be collected through qualitative approaches such as interviews and direct observations in the educational program being studied. For example, survey methods which lend themselves to probability sampling from large populations, which in this study, are not possible (Check & Schutt, 2011). Qualitative research is important in making social change possible especially in the educational field involving students with disabilities. Interviews and observations are of key importance in helping to improve upon the educational practices currently being used (Vesico, Ross & Adams, 2008). Qualitative inquiry has enabled researchers, to further understand how successful inclusion can take place for people with autism in this world (Biklen, 2011).

A case study allows for a holistic, complex picture of what occurs in the environment in which the observational data will be collected. In research, using only quantitative methods, for example, surveys methods or outlier cases may be disregarded and deemed statistically irrelevant (Yardley & Bishop, 2008). Additionally, quasi-experimental designs which often compare one group to another, would not provide me

with the answers or data that is being sought in this study (Maxwell, 2012). In the realm of educational research, it is unethical to provide one group of students with effective versus ineffective strategies and in this context, this variable, inclusion, cannot be altered (Campbell & Stanley, 2015). Without the flexibility of a case study approach it would be difficult to accurately capture phenomenon in a holistic way in order to aid in the creation of an appropriate policy or create possible recommendations for improvement (Timmons & Cairns, 2010, p. 1). By interviewing and observing the participants' the complex views and everyday experiences of the participants were analyzed based on the framework in order to support themes within the framework. Due to the type of data that were collected, a case study design was chosen for this qualitative research.

Various other qualitative designs were considered, including ethnography and phenomenology, but these were deemed to be less effective based on the setting, participants, and phenomenon being studied. Ethnography, though has similar data collection strategies including direct observation, was not appropriate for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I was not looking to study a culture; I was more looking to study an experience within a community or institution. A phenomenological approach, though it may include direct observations, and understanding experiences of the participants, is not the design of choice for this study. This research was best suited to a case study design.

Research Questions

Based on the challenges of inclusion of students who have autism in middle and high school in the research setting, and the literature review of this topic, the following research question was developed for this study:

1. What are the general education teachers' challenges with implementing Villa and Thousand's (2003) system level best practices in the inclusion program in order to meet the needs of students who have autism in an inclusion classroom at the middle and high school research setting?
2. Which of Villa and Thousand's (2003) best practices of inclusive programming are presently used in the inclusion classrooms at the research setting?
3. Which of Villa and Thousand's (2003) best practices of inclusive programming are not presently used in the inclusion classrooms at the research setting?

Context

The context of the study, in which the study takes place, is very important. The observations took place in a general education inclusive classroom setting which revealed the working of inclusion in a realistic, meaningful way. According to statistical information provided by the district website, 444 students out of 2793 students receive special education supports. The school district is in a rural area with many of the residents being at low income poverty level. This context will assist in transferability.

Criteria for Selecting Participants

Four general education teachers, two at the middle school level and two at the high school level, with experience in inclusive settings with students who have autism participated in two semistructured interviews biweekly over a 4-week period. During the 4 weeks of data collection, I also conducted classroom observations in the inclusive general education classroom setting once a week in order to identify observed challenges in the inclusion setting. With a small number of participants, such as this small number of 4, I risked the ability to apply the results of the data collection to a larger population; however, with too large of a sample specifically with qualitative methodologies researchers may struggle analyzing such a large amount of data (Lodico et al., 2010). In this rural school district, with a small population of students, the number of participants that would meet the criteria is limited, therefore four participants were a viable sample size. This small sample size also allowed for in depth data collection and analysis.

Marshall, Cardon, Poddar and Fontenot (2013) indicated:

There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources. (p.12)

Additionally, Baker and Edwards (2012) indicated:

Qualitative researchers generally study many fewer people, but delve more deeply into those individuals, settings, subcultures, and scenes, hoping to generate a subjective understanding of how and why people perceive, reflect, role-take,

interpret, and interact (p. 24). The small sample size allowed me to gather both interview and observational data, which allowed me to collect detailed data regarding the current inclusion program.

Case study research, when used in inclusive settings, allows for the contextual situation to be described fully so that the reader can understand the situation (Yin, 2013). This case study specifically took place in a middle and high school general education classroom in a rural high needs school district where there is a 30% population of students with special needs. In order to capture the unique aspects of each situation, the number of participants needed to be small in order for holistic data to be collected. This gathering of detail rich information may contribute to the understanding of the inclusive experience for each participant involved (Timmons & Cairns, 2010). Participants were invited through an emailed letter explaining the study.

Ethical Protection of Participants

As stated in Walden University's (n.d) ethical guidelines in regards to research, "The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is responsible for ensuring that all Walden University research complies with the university's ethical standards as well as U.S. federal regulations" (p.1). In order to remain in compliance with these ethical standards, the necessary steps were completed in order to gain Walden IRB approval before any actions were taken. The IRB approval number is 08-14-15-0020765.

The next step in my research was to gain approval from the district where this study will take place. A consent form was provided to the participants with a summary of

the purpose, scope, and evidence that the proposed study has been approved through the IRB process.

Methods for Protecting Human Subjects

Approval was granted from school district's superintendent along with Walden University's IRB, the teachers that met the criteria for participation were then determined and an email invitation was sent to those teachers requesting participation in the study. The first two teachers from each level that responded with interest were chosen to participate in the study. Additionally, a consent form was provided to the participants and completed confirming a willingness to participate from the district. Participants were given 1 week to review, complete and return the forms to me via email or school mail system. At that point, the 4 general education teachers who volunteered and met the criteria were notified that they were chosen as participants. Two of the general education teachers were middle school teachers currently involved with an inclusive class with students who have autism. The other 2 general education teachers were high school teachers also currently involved with an inclusive class of students that includes students who have autism.

Once the consent forms were completed and returned, research began within one week from disbursement. These forms were returned via email or school mail system. According to the National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research (2011) this included the purpose of the study, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, compensation, contact information, conditions of participation, and the right to refuse or discontinue their participation in the study at any time without consequence. This consent

discussed the ability to opt-out of the process at any time, the participation guidelines, and disclosure.

Role of the Researcher

Although qualitative research can provide the researcher with unique data-rich accounts and experiences of a particular phenomenon, it can also leave room for bias to potentially influence the data analysis, thus affecting the validity of the study (Lodico et al., 2010). As the researcher, I was aware of my own biases on the problem being studied and will not allow my opinions or experiences to affect my analysis or interpretation of the participants' responses during interviews.

I know the participants in the study due to my current employment as a special education teacher, not in a supervisory role, in the district that the study was being conducted in; however, this relationship with the participants did not influence the participant's view of the problem. Being a special education teacher in this district my biases include my opinion that inclusion is not being provided effectively and may not be following best practice. In order to help ensure my bias did not affect the validity of the study I employed nondirective methods, such as open ended questions during interviews and recording responses so that participants can speak freely while all details from the interviews were collected and analyzed a later point (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I kept field notes for additional data collection. The field notes were kept during my observations and written directly following the interviews. This field journal kept descriptive field notes in order to provide a "word-picture of the setting, people, actions, and conversations being observed" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 120). With the

researcher role I used open-ended questions and probes, as well as verbal and nonverbal encouragers during the interview (Barlow, 2010). Additionally, before the interview, I reminded the participants of the importance of honesty and that their opinions and experiences will remain confidential. I reminded them of how their experiences could potentially benefit future practice in educational protocols. In this role, I ensured that the researcher-participant working relationship remained appropriate and professional.

Data Collection

Interviews allow the researcher to acquire detail rich data in an effort to further research and clearly answer the research question proposed. The type of research interview that is chosen is also important so that the type of data collected is most appropriate to the research question being asked. In this case, I chose to use a semistructured interview with open ended questions so that the complexities of the inclusive environment could be accurately depicted and described while also being mindful of not swaying the participant's view of the inclusion process through the interview. Interviews also gave me freedom to explore topics that arise through the interview that are connected to the study resulting in a more intricate knowledge of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). These interviews yielded findings that I would not have come to the conclusion of with only observational data.

The interview protocols (Appendix A) are divided into two, thirty minute interviews conducted on a biweekly basis over a 4-week period. The data were collected through an audio recording of the interview along with field notes in order to capture nonverbal and observational data so that I can bracket my biases as well. This recording

was transcribed, sorted and categorized according to emergent themes (Lindsay et al., 2013). Additional notes were taken during the interview in the event that the audio equipment not functioning properly and to allow myself to have the notes in order to probe for additional information throughout the interview that may be relevant to the topic. Before the interview begins, the participant and I agreed on a confidential area to meet and we will begin the interview with some informal conversation to create a climate of comfort for the participant. I reviewed all aspects of the informed consent document and also invited the participant to ask any questions he/she may have had before beginning the initial interview. I was aware as well of my own facial expressions and encouragers during the interview in order to encourage the participants to expand on their answers or narratives (Barlow, 2010). This awareness helped me to ensure that I did not in any way sway the participants' answers regarding their responses to the interview questions.

In order to allow for triangulation of data and improve validity of the study I also conducted 30- 40 minute observations of the inclusive setting 1 time per week for 4 consecutive weeks. The observations took place during the same class each week, at the same time. The observations were scheduled ahead of time and announced in order to help the teacher taking part in the observation feel prepared and comfortable. The observations were guided by specific checklists (Appendix B) to allow me to focus on selected behaviors or activities that were the focus of the research. The observations allowed me as the researcher to become integrated into the setting in order to gain sufficient insight into the phenomenon for analysis (Pauly, 2010). The observations along

with the interviews allowed me to gather data with more detail than if each method of data collection would have been used alone.

Data Analysis

Interviews

All of the data were analyzed and categorized based on the chosen conceptual framework. Data collected lead to common and contrasting themes unfolding from the data analysis. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed after the interview for data analysis. By using qualitative methods of interviews and observations, the data were combined in order to take advantage of different opportunities for data collection and gain knowledge regarding the general education teachers' experiences. It also provided evidence to the building principals and teachers so they are aware of their ability to opt out of the participation without consequence along with assurance that I will report the results of the study at the conclusion of the study in regards to experienced challenges of inclusion with students who have autism. In McCray and McHatton's (2007) study, qualitative data methods in the form of interviewing were used to evaluate the perceptions of inclusion among general educators' revealing specific reservations in regards to inclusion. McCray and McHatton's (2007) used observations and interviews as part of their qualitative study on attitudes towards inclusion. A case study design was used to further understand this social phenomenon regarding inclusion of students who have autism, allowing myself as the researcher to investigate this phenomenon within its real-life context in the inclusive setting (Yin, 2009). The conceptual framework as

outlined in Villa & Thousand's (2003) inclusion framework provided a guide to successful inclusion programming with easy to apply guidelines and methods.

Observations

Classroom observations were also used to collect data on challenges in the inclusion of students who have autism in middle and high school settings. "Observations can be a very powerful evaluation tool when conducting an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (e.g., a "case"), set within its' real-world context---especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009a, p. 18). In this case study, observations were conducted one time per week for four weeks for duration of 30-40 minutes in order to observe teachers and students who have autism in a general education inclusion program setting (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The classroom observations gave me further insight into the current inclusion program. They also allowed me to triangulate the data between the interview and observational data.

Triangulation

By using Villa and Thousand's contextual framework to ground my study, I was able to analyze the data to determine what identified challenges there are in relation to the framework. In order to attain credibility from the sources used to collect data triangulation was used. An inductive analysis approach was used to help make useful connections with the data with this ground up approach (Yin, 2014). Triangulation of both the observational and interview data helped to create credibility and trustworthiness of internal data in this study.

Observations allowed me to reflect on concerns or issues raised in the research setting and reflect on how they relate to the observable categories of the framework being used (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I also developed a coding system based on the framework for the study by searching through the data from observations and interviews to find patterns in specific topics related to the framework. This coding system lead to coding categories from units of data collected in the form of observational notes, interview, notes and recordings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The coding allowed for further analysis of collected data from both the interview and observational data that was collected.

Trustworthiness

Through using both interviews and observations in this case study the validity of the study was addressed through triangulation of data from both sources. These data collection methods when analyzed showed clear connections between the teachers' perceptions of inclusion versus the observation of inclusion in the specific settings. This triangulation technique was used to establish or disestablish any plausible relationships between the perceived challenges and observed challenges with inclusion of students in middle and high school who have autism. By using multiple methods including triangulation and member checking a deeper understanding of the phenomena was accomplished. In this study, the challenges based on the framework were supported through data collection in 4 separate classrooms and 4 separate points of view collected through interview and observation.

In order to address one concern with trustworthiness, member checking was used so that the participants had the opportunity to see analyzed themes to review for viability

and to check for accuracy of their own data. “Member checking is primarily used in qualitative inquiry methodology and is defined as a quality control process by which a researcher seeks to improve the accuracy, credibility and validity of what has been recorded during a research interview” (Harper & Cole, 2015, p. 510). Members were provided with the results in terms of the themes after the data were analyzed. These reviews provided an opportunity for the members check their own data for accuracy and review for viability in the setting. This also allowed the participants to provide additional insight into their answers if needed improving credibility of the collected data.

Summary

This qualitative case study addressed two important gaps in current literature. First, research has primarily focused on teachers’ challenges with students with autism at the elementary level versus grades 7-12. Secondly, a focus on the inclusive pedagogy within the mainstream classroom has been defined solely as the placement of a student with a disability in a general education classroom versus an integral part and respected member of the class (Lindsay et al., 2013). “Inclusive pedagogy is defined as an approach intended to promote a culture of accommodating all and ensuring practice based on the use of diverse teaching strategies” (Makoelle, 2014, p. 1260). This research study addressed the challenges that teachers face with inclusion of students who have autism and how these barriers are preventing the fully inclusive model to be implemented at the research setting.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

A case study research design was chosen for this qualitative study so that I could obtain a holistic view of the phenomena being studied. Participants were invited to participate voluntarily through an email invitation sent to participants that met the criteria for the study. Participant criteria included being a high school or a junior high general education teacher whose general education classroom included a student with autism. Once participants were chosen, the process to begin data collection began. The participants took part in biweekly interviews over a 4-week period that were audiotaped by me in addition to field notes being taken during the interviews. Additionally, I completed four 30-40 minute observations once per week for 4 weeks during which field notes were taken.

The initial classroom observations and interviews were scheduled with each participant in order to begin the data collection process before data collection began. I scheduled convenient times for the participants to take part in two biweekly interviews over the 4-week period in conjunction with one observation per week over a 4-week period with each participant. The initial observation was completed with each participant prior to the first interview. Field notes were kept during my observations on a checklist (Appendix B) so that I could collect observational data during the observation regarding the framework of the study in addition to descriptive notes regarding the setting and events happening during the observation in order to give a holistic view of the classroom. The individual interviews ranged from 20-30 minutes. I chose to use a semistructured

interview approach in order to allow the participant to feel at ease and to allow for detail rich information about the phenomena being studied to be collected.

Once all of the interviews were completed, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed so that the data analysis could be completed. This transcription process allowed me to fully reflect on the data collected through the interview process. Furthermore, increased authenticity is an additional benefit to using recorded audio (Markle, West & Rich, 2011). The recorded audio and transcription process helps to decrease bias through interpretation of the data collected by presenting the information in an organic form so that I can have an unbiased recollection of the interview content.

Once the transcription process was complete, analysis and coding of the data began. The interview transcripts along with the observational data were coded based on Villa and Thousand's (2003) conceptual framework through an inductive analysis approach. Triangulation of both the interview and observational data improves credibility of the results derived from the study. Open coding was used to develop themes based on the conceptual framework chosen for the study. The varying themes were highlighted in different colors on each interview transcription and observational collection form, and then they were organized into a chart organized by each theme within the framework while also being given letter codes as well. For example, the theme of collaboration was highlighted in blue and labeled CO. This same coding method was used in both the analysis of the observational data and the interview transcripts.

Findings

This qualitative case study was conducted to further understand the challenges that general education teachers are facing in the inclusion programs at the research setting. A case study approach was used to help develop a deeper understanding of these challenges from the general education teachers' perspectives. Interviews along with observations were conducted in order to provide a holistic view of the current inclusion program. Through the use of both interviews and observations the participants' views of the inclusion program could be both expressed and supported through triangulation of the information expressed in the interviews and supported in the observational data.

The general education teachers at this research setting are facing challenges with meeting the needs of students who have autism in the inclusion setting. Villa and Thousand's 2003 study provided a conceptual framework for successful inclusion, so that the challenges faced by the general education teachers in this research setting with inclusion of students who have autism could be identified. The components of the conceptual framework were used as a guideline for analyzing collected data in regards to the key components of successful inclusion. Villa and Thousand's (2003) framework for successful inclusion was used to guide my research questions and analysis for the case study. These questions are addressed in the subsequent sections.

1. What are the general education teachers' challenges with implementing Villa and Thousand's (2003) system level best practices in the inclusion program in order to meet the needs of students who have autism in an inclusion classroom at the middle and high school research setting?

2. Which of Villa and Thousand's (2003) best practices of inclusive programming were used in the inclusion classrooms at the research setting?
3. Which of Villa and Thousand's (2003) best practices of inclusive programming were not used in the inclusion classrooms at the research setting?

Interviews

A case study approach was utilized so that the unique experiences of the participants in the inclusive program of students with autism could be explored. The findings revealed that the challenges the participants are facing include lack of visionary leadership in the form of ineffective professional development opportunities along with a lack of availability for collaboration among peers. Effective additional adult support, in the form of a paraprofessional, in the classroom is in need of clearer expectations and end goals for both the student and teacher.

Professional Development

Professional development is an area where the participants have stated that they would like more support. "Professional development trainings helps to give teachers a sense of ownership over their teaching and a real commitment to their acquired beliefs with inclusion" (Costley, 2013, p.4) . Each of the interviewees reported there was not available professional development and would like to see more of it offered in the school:

- "I have zero training. I don't remember the last time I had training in inclusion. I have no experience with strategies and supports in regard to

inclusion of student with autism (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 16, 2015).

- “No formal training that I can recall for autism” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, October 20, 2015).
- “The last training was seven years ago and I’m not aware of any school wide professional development ever offered” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 22, 2015).
- “Professional development is definitely an area where we could do some improvement” (Interviewee 2, October 22, 2015).
- “I need more training on dealing with expected behaviors with autism” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, November 3, 2015).

The need for professional development opportunities were shared and expressed by all participants.

Collaboration

“For inclusive education to work, educators must become effective and efficient collaborative team members” (Villa and Thousand, 2003, p.21). During observations, there were no signs of collaboration in the inclusive classrooms I observed. In each of the classrooms, there was only the general education teacher present with one classroom having a paraprofessional in the classroom. However, there were reports of the special education teacher collaborating in an adaptive art and science class for one unit throughout the school year. Additionally, collaboration among peers including coteaching

as a model of teaching is an area where the participants feel that the research site is in need of improvement.

In regards to collaboration participants stated:

- “I am very regretful that we have very little of it. I have done it before and it was a wonderful success” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, November 3, 2015).
- “I would like to collaborate more, it is awesome and I love it” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, November 6, 2015).
- “There are a lot of teachers who are resentful and would like more contact with special ed” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, November 6, 2015).
- “I do not like that both the aide and teacher are pulled to read tests instead of offering supports in the classroom. Special Ed teachers need to be given the opportunity for PLC time” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, November 2, 2015).
- “There is no collaboration in regards to inclusion” (Interviewee 4, personal communication, November 9, 2015).

Participants expressed challenges with time to collaborate with their special education peers. Special education teachers are often used to cover study halls, hallway duty, or to read tests to students instead of utilizing their time to arrange for collaboration with general education teachers.

Additional Adult Support

Collaboration is not evident in most cases or to a minimal degree. General and special education teachers are not taking part in a traditional collaborative model where they co-teach in the inclusion setting. Instead, the general education teacher will contact the special education teacher if there are issues within the inclusive setting. The additional adult support present is in the form of a paraprofessional, or 1:1 aide in the inclusive environment I observed. This additional adult support is viewed as beneficial to a degree. The participants reported that they find additional adults support beneficial, but would like clearer guidelines on how to best utilize the support:

- “I like having other adults in the classroom, they’ll give me ideas on what goes well, what isn’t going well...and I always ask and I like that feedback” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, October 20, 2015).
- “I do feel it’s effective, but I do feel that whenever there is a one on one aide involved, the purpose should have an end goal. And, in my opinion that’s where we fall short” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, November 2, 2015).
- “There have been times that the relationship between the aide and student has impacted the class environment negatively” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 22, 2015).
- “I got the feeling the child really wanted a little more hands off...some space” (Interviewee 4, personal communication, October 26, 2015).

In regards to redefined roles among special and general education staff, this is not viewed as lacking, rather it isn't really a topic of discussion. The special education teachers do not attend inclusive classrooms, rather, they are used as a resource if needed.

Visionary Leadership and Administrative Support

Overall, the participants feel that their leadership in the school and district wide has not been very supportive, and they are lacking in guidance and professional development in the inclusion of students who have autism in their general education classrooms. There was a general consensus that there is a lack of interest in the topic and the discussion of inclusion has been tabled for the time being. The participants would like to see more participation and interest in inclusion, so that it can be improved and so they can be trained in effective practices of inclusion.

- “I am sure administration supports the special education teachers, but I don't see it” (Interviewee 4, personal communication, October 26, 2015).
- “They tell us this is for you to deal with, but they don't acknowledge how it is supposed to get done. It's just it's your job you need to do it” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, November 6, 2015).
- “Sometimes administration doesn't understand what it's like to be a regular ed teacher that needs to have support of the other teacher. Some very simple training could help” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, November 2, 2015).

Observations

Collaboration

The observational data revealed some of the challenges expressed by the participants in the study. In each specific situation no collaboration among the special and general education teacher was evident. In one setting, the teacher expressed frustration about not knowing how to handle a situation with a student on the spectrum and then discussed it in the interview with me after the observation. The student did not participate in the way that the teacher was looking for, and she appeared flustered when trying to come up with a solution to help the student participate effectively and appeared in essence to freeze in the moment thus losing that teachable moment with the student. This could have been helped or avoided if there was more collaboration between the special and general education teacher where they were able to share strategies. From the descriptions of the participants I gathered that the general and special education teachers collaborate when needed, briefly. Each participant's experience varies, but collaboration is still an area where improvement is needed based on the interview data and observational data collected.

Additional Adult Support

Additional adult support was evident in one out of the four inclusion settings, where the teacher was provided additional support to assist the student during class with behavioral and educational support. However, the aide support was not utilized to its best degree, thus not providing the student, the teacher or peers with a truly inclusive environment. In fact, the aide's role actually appeared to segregate the student more from

typical peers in the group. In another setting, the presence of additional adult support, utilized well, would have benefited the student, the teacher and the peers to create an inclusion experience based on my own professional experience with inclusion of students.

Teachers did also exhibit frustration when dealing with inclusion expectations during observations when needing to deal with specific behaviors, social mishaps, and how to present information to students who have autism. These frustrations could be due to lack of collaboration with their special education peer educators coupled with the lack of professional development in educating students who have autism in the inclusion setting.

Visionary Leadership and Administrative Support

During my observations in each of the classrooms, I did not observe any administrative presence. However, during the observational sessions, there was no need for additional administrative presence in the specific classrooms. My observations in the building were approved by the administration in each building, but I was never approached during my visits or asked subsequently how the observations went. There seemed to be a lack of interest in the study and with the topic of inclusion during my meetings with the administrative staff. I had to reschedule with administrative staff more than two times due to their lack of availability to meet. One of the four administrators was interested and asked for more information about the study. However, the superintendent did have great interest and was very supportive. He was hopeful that the

results from the study would provide the schools with some viable information to make positive improvements that may be needed.

Evidence of Quality

In order to assure accuracy of the data collected, the participants were provided with the opportunity to see the interview and observation data from their individual data collection processes and analyzed themes in order to employ member checking and address trustworthiness of the data. Once all of the interviews were completed and transcribed, the participants were given the opportunity to review the draft findings for credibility and check their own data for accuracy.

Additionally, triangulation was used to find any differences or similarities between what was observed and the data collected from the participants during the interviews in order gain further insight into the phenomenon of inclusion of students with autism into the general education classroom at the research setting. Triangulation helped to improve credibility of the data collected in this study. By utilizing both interview and observational data to study the same phenomenon, I was able to use cross verification to compare and contrast the two sets of data and further strengthen the credibility of the data collected. Furthermore, along with member checking, the trustworthiness of the data collected was strengthened.

It was evident through the data collection and analysis process that the local research setting is not currently engaging in a fully inclusive model. The general education teachers involved in the study are reporting challenges in this area with commonalities among their collected data, now the research questions can be answered

using the collected qualitative data. The interpretation of these findings is presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This qualitative study was completed so that the challenges that general education teachers face in the inclusion of students who have autism in the research setting could be studied to possibly improve the current inclusion program in the research setting. I sought to answer three research questions in order to provide the district with a view of the challenges that the general education teachers are facing with the inclusion of students who have autism in their general education classroom settings. The following research questions were developed for this study:

1. What are the general education teachers' challenges with implementing Villa and Thousand's (2003) system level best practices in the inclusion program in order to meet the needs of students who have autism in an inclusion classroom at the middle and high school research setting?
2. Which of Villa and Thousand's (2003) best practices of inclusive programming were used in the inclusion classrooms at the research setting?
3. Which of Villa and Thousand's (2003) best practices of inclusive programming were not used in the inclusion classrooms at the research setting?

Through the analysis of the data collected and research completed it was found that collaboration among general and special education teachers in the research setting

needs to be improved. In particular, visionary leadership, in reference to effective professional development opportunities, is lacking, and there is a general opinion among the participants that current practices in regards to inclusion need to be improved.

Interpretation of Findings

Research Question 1

What are the general education teachers' challenges with implementing Villa and Thousand's (2003) system level best practices in the inclusion program in order to meet the needs of students who have autism in an inclusion classroom at the middle and high school research setting?

This case study led to further understanding of the challenges that four general education teachers at the research setting are facing in the inclusion program as it currently is for students who have autism at the middle and high school level. Within Villa and Thousand's (2003) best practices framework for inclusion, the challenges among the participants were evident at both levels. For the two general education teachers who participated at each level, their challenges with inclusion of students who have autism were similar. The system, as it currently exists, is not set up to support the differences of students who display differences in learning to the best degree possible. "Educational systems continue to adhere to the notion that the role of education is to imbue knowledge based on classic ideals" (Braunsteiner and Mariano-Lapidus, 2014, p. 33). General education teachers and general education classrooms need to adapt to the ever changing population of students and their educational needs. This is possible when teachers are provided with a strong framework with supports such as those provided by

Villa and Thousand (2003) that allow both the teacher and student to feel supported within the inclusive program. These supports include visionary leadership, collaboration, adult support and promotion of inclusion.

Visionary Leadership and Administrative Support

All participants expressed a need for more training and a lack of support from administration, which falls under Villa and Thousand's (2003) visionary leadership practice. "For inclusive education to succeed, administrators must take action publicly to articulate the new vision, build consensus for the vision, and lead all stakeholders to active involvement" (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p. 21). This can begin with providing the teaching staff with opportunities for professional development opportunities that address the challenges with inclusion at the research setting. As stated earlier in the literature review, teachers have difficulty dealing with the social and emotional learning differences among students who have autism and when this is paired with lack of training for teachers' further challenges are created in the inclusive classroom (Symes & Humphrey, 2012). Teachers need to feel supported, specifically by administration, and the presence or lack of this support is often "the most powerful predictor of general education teachers' attitudes towards inclusion" (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p.21). In this specific research setting, the participants feel that there is a lack of support in terms of training and time for collaboration. "I don't see a lot of support, we used to, but due to staffing and financial reasons, we have a lack of support" (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 22, 2015). This is further supported by Gut and Alquraini (2012) when they state:

that school administrators be actively involved in the planning and implementation of activities to support the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in terms of a) determining the appropriate number of students with severe disabilities that should be educated in general education settings, b) providing necessary training for the school staff to participate effectively in service delivery for students with severe disabilities in a general education setting, as well as c) providing optional costs, and d) identifying potential sources of support for general education settings. (p. 52)

This is an area of the framework where all participants expressed concerns and a need for improvement within the research setting. It would be beneficial for administration to heed these concerns in regards to the inclusion program.

Redefined Roles

Redefined roles of special and general education teachers, in regards to coteaching is not happening as often as teachers feel it should be, however, the participants made note that when they did have the opportunity to coteach it was highly effective. One participant had never had a coteaching model, while the remaining three participants have had experience, however it has been limited. These limitations were commonly due to lack of time and resources. “The special ed teacher is often taken away from the classroom to read tests instead of supporting students in class” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, November 2, 2015). “There is no coteaching model” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 16, 2015). Through the data collection process, I was able to cross verify that coteaching is not happening in the research setting.

Observational data supports the statements made by the participants in interviews in regards to coteaching.

In one study, the practice of joint professional development and coteaching models were studied and the findings were positive in the education of students in a collaborative or coteaching approach (Friend et al., 2010). “The findings indicated that all teachers showed improvement in the classroom on many elements related to classroom culture, instructional content, and lesson design and implementation, and the ability to adjust instruction” (Brusca-Vega, Alexander, & Kamin, 2014, p.37). Villa and Thousand (2003) indicated in their framework for successful inclusion the importance of redefined roles among general and special education teachers. In order to effectively meet the needs of students in the inclusive program “they must stop thinking and acting in isolated ways: These are my students, and those are your students” (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p. 21).

Traditional roles of general versus special educator responsibilities are replaced with a more encompassing job description that includes all teachers being responsible for the education of all students regardless of a student’s abilities or diagnoses.

Collaboration

Collaboration is lacking within the research setting, therefore not allowing for the general education teachers to access the skills and expertise that special education teachers can offer in the inclusive classroom setting. “The special ed teacher does not have time in schedule to meet with the team” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 22, 2015). Additionally, one participant expressed frustration with not

understanding the specifics of the student's IEP and not knowing where to go for support with this. The interviewee states; "These are written by people who know the field... implementing it isn't as easy as it is with someone with a background so, it can at times be a little bit intimidating" (Interviewee 1, personal communication, November 6, 2015). According to Villa and Thousand (2003), in their study "collaboration emerged as the only variable that predicted positive attitudes toward inclusion among general and special educators as well as administrators" (p.22). Lack of time and resources to collaborate is a challenge that the participants are facing in the research setting inclusion program. In a recent study involving joint professional development opportunities for Science and special education teachers, the outcomes of the study were favorable and support collaboration in regards to inclusion. The results showed "that newly implemented instructional strategies had a favorable impact on academic performance for students with and without disabilities" (Brusca-Vega, Alexander, &Kamin, 2014, p.50). With both teacher attitudes and student performance being impacted positively, collaboration is an important component of successful inclusion programs.

Additional Adult Support

Overall, additional adult support was viewed positively. However, the general education teachers would like more guidance as to how to include the student more when a student has additional adult support and more guidance on how to reduce this support for students over time.

Additional adult support is provided by providing a teacher aide to accompany students to general education classes to assist with educational and behavioral goals,

however, often the end goal of student independence is not defined among all of the educational support staff and teachers working with the student. Ultimately, the additional aide is there to provide enough support to allow the student to eventually exhibit independence skills both educationally and behaviorally. With this said, the plan is often lacking on how this will be accomplished with the student in the inclusive classroom.

The participants had varying views on this practice: “I think it’s definitely beneficial, nice to have someone on board. It sometimes though is a double edged sword, does draw attention to the student that sometimes isn’t necessary” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 16, 2015). A second participant stated that “there have been times that the relationship between the aide and student has impacted the class environment negatively” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 22, 2015). While, a third participant expressed positive views regarding the additional adult support by stating; “I like having other adults in the room, extra set of eyes, give me ideas to what is going well, what isn’t...I like that feedback” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, October 20, 2015).

However, one of the participants felt that the additional adult may have offered too much support for the student. In one case, the interviewee felt that a child would like more independence; “I got the feeling the child really wanted a little more hands off some space” (Interviewee 4, personal communication, October 26, 2015).

This component of the inclusion framework had varying views and appears to need more clarification as to the roles of the additional adult support and how best to

utilize this resource in the inclusion setting. It is important to note however, that the level of training the aide receives is often indicative of their effectiveness in the classroom and the type of support they provide (Symes and Humphrey, 2012). This relates back to professional development through visionary leadership as well as collaboration among team members. In a report recently published on inclusion, the impact of teacher aides or teacher assistants in the inclusive classrooms received both positive and negative views of this type of support in the classroom. There is little support to show improvement in educational outcomes. Additionally, there is a negative impact on the amount of time the students spend with their teachers versus time spent with the paraprofessional, with teacher assistant support being used as an alternative for time spent with the teacher (Ainscow, Dyson, & Weiner, 2013). “There is general agreement that if teaching assistants are to be used within mainstream education they must be provided with relevant training. It is also argued that teachers themselves need training in how to make use of such support within their classrooms” (Ainscow et al., 2013, p.16). These concerns are echoed by the participants in the study about the role of teacher aides and assistants in the classroom and how to reduce the support once it is given.

Promoting Inclusion in the Classroom

The final framework theme, promoting inclusion, is an additional area where the general education teacher participants reported that they are facing challenges with. All of the participants are pro inclusion and want to know more of how to make it more effective for all students in the classroom. “The inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting is a successful approach for ensuring that those students

develop skills in many different areas of academic achievement, social development, and general communication” (Gut and Alquraini, 2012, p.46). Inclusion is also a positive experience for general education peers when the inclusion program is supported from all areas including administration, professional development, and time for collaboration. One of the participants felt so strongly about inclusion that he has fought to maintain the program. He stated, “I have had to fight to keep my adaptive class specifically for 2 years. It’s the most fun I have in education” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, October 20, 2015). Another participant was pro inclusion as well and stated; “they may participate in a different way but I’m ok with that. gen ed or special ed. they all have different ways of learning” (Interviewee 4, personal communication, October 26, 2015). In another viewpoint, there are frustrations with promoting inclusion due to lack of support and collaboration. One participant stated, “implementing supports isn’t easy without a special ed background” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, November 6, 2015). Additionally, another participant expressed specific challenges in relation to inclusion of students who have autism. “Sometimes work that seems so straightforward is more challenging for the students on the spectrum” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, November 2, 2015). Through ongoing professional development opportunities, teachers are more likely to find success in the inclusion process, which relates back to the lack of professional development in the research setting.

“According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2012), students with disabilities are included in the general education classroom at least 80% of the school day. This is a 55% increase since the mid-1980s” (LaShorage &

Thomas-Brown, 2015, p.117). As a result of this increase, general education teachers are finding themselves in need of professional development to provide them with strategies to allow them to provide support for the varying abilities of students in their classrooms.

The observational data revealed many of the challenges reported by the participants. I observed a true desire among the participants to promote inclusion in the classroom along with observation of frustration in situations where they were looking for additional support and training. “General education teachers typically do not feel prepared to instruct students with a variety of disabilities and needs” (Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015, p.117). The participants are looking for training, specifically in relation to dealing with behaviors related to lack of understanding of directions or social cues by students with autism in the inclusion classroom.

Research Question 2

Which of Villa and Thousand's (2003) best practices of inclusive programming are presently used in the inclusion classrooms at the research setting?

The framework for best practice include “visionary leadership and administrative support, redefined roles and relationships among adults and students, collaboration, and additional adult support when needed” (Villa & Thousand, 2003). Through the analysis of the data, it was revealed that in the current research setting's inclusion program the best practice of additional adult support is the current practice being used within the inclusion program. This practice was evident in one of the four classrooms I observed. In one of the classrooms, there was a teacher aide present to help support the student with behavioral redirection and with help completing work in the classroom. In the other three

classrooms, this support was not present and may not have been needed. However, “there is general agreement that if teaching assistants are to be used within mainstream education they must be provided with relevant training. It is also argued that teachers themselves need training in how to make use of such support within their classrooms” (Ainscow et al., 2013, p.16). The participants in the study shared this same view as well.

Research Question 3

Which of Villa and Thousand’s (2003) best practices of inclusive programming are not presently used in the inclusion classrooms at the research setting?

Through the analysis of the transcribed interviews in conjunction with the observational data, the challenges faced by the general education teachers in the research setting in regards to inclusion of students with autism aligns with the lack of best practices of inclusion within the framework provided by Villa and Thousand (2003).

Out of the four best practices, three of them are not presently used in the inclusion program. In regards to visionary leadership and administrative support there was a common theme among the participants of disinterest or lack of support from administration. This lack of support or disinterest in the topic was most commonly referred to as a lack of professional development opportunities and a lack of discussion regarding inclusion.

Redefined roles among adults and students was not present due to the struggle with scheduling to allow for co-teaching opportunities among the educational staff. My observational data was in agreement with the participants’ expressed perceptions and views of the situation, in that I did not observe any co-teaching opportunities in the

classrooms I observed. In each of the four settings, the co-teaching method was not used; general education teachers were teaching their classes independently.

Finally, the best practice of collaboration was also not evident in my observations and was supported by the interview data collected from the participants of the study. This lack of time to collaborate leads to feelings of frustration and feeling unsupported in the education of the students with autism in the inclusion setting. As stated by Interviewee 1; “there are a lot of teachers that are resentful and would like more contact with special ed.” (November 16, 2015). The same feeling of frustration was shared by interviewee 3 when he states; “there is a lot of information that needs to be explained and shared and it just isn’t” (November 3, 2015). “Professional collaboration has been viewed as a beneficial tool for helping teachers and other professionals serve students with disabilities. Conversely, the lack of collaboration by professionals had been shown to negatively impact on the extent and quality of services provided to students with special needs as well as the typical child” (Hernandez, 2013, p.481).

Additionally, “the LRE (Least Restrictive Environment) principle stipulates that students with special needs will be educated in “settings as close to the regular educational classroom as possible in which an appropriate program can be provided and the child can make satisfactory educational progress” (Hernandez, 2013, p. 480). Collaboration, not only provides teachers with the opportunity to work together to use their varying skills and abilities to meet the needs of all students, but also provides students with the education they are legally entitled to.

Limitations of the Study

The transferability of the data collected may be affected due to the small sample size chosen for the case study. The small sample size presented limitations in the case study as far as the ability for transferability to larger populations and school districts. The rural area in which the local research setting is housed influenced the sample size chosen. By utilizing a case study design to create a contextual story of the phenomena studied, the limitations of the study were improved. The case study design allowed detail rich interview data to be collected at the local research setting along with observational data in order to improve the sample size limitations of transferability.

Implications for Social Change

Through the research conducted, the challenges faced by the participants were revealed. The findings may lead to practical applications and improvements to the inclusion program within the research setting.

Teachers

Professionally, the results could lead to more effective implementation and support of inclusion. Administration could offer additional training for general education teachers in regards to inclusion of students who have autism in the middle and high school setting. "Inclusion requires a joint delivery in instruction which requires both professionals coordinating and delivering substantive instruction and ensuring that both teachers have active roles" (Costley, 2013, p. 3). Additional time could be allotted so that collaboration could be improved between general and special education teachers, which may or may not include shared time to meet with paraprofessionals or additional adult

support so that clear goals can be set for the student and roles of additional adult support can be clearly defined. “Collaboration is also defined in the field of education as different workers helping each other and coming up with plans to reach their objectives” (Gut and Alquraini, 2012, p.52). With support from administration, time for collaboration, along with meaningful professional development, teachers will feel supported and abler to create a positive inclusion environment for their students. “Being prepared gives teachers a sense of ownership over their teaching and a real commitment to their acquired beliefs with inclusion” (Costley, 2013, p. 4). With supports in place for teachers, the current inclusion program could be improved.

Collaboration can lead to teachers feeling supported by one another and allow for joint endeavors for the good of all of the students. By allowing teachers to work together towards a common goal, relationships can be established that can promote a positive social change and help to create a positive educational environment for all students to thrive in.

Students

Within the current research setting inclusion program, many students are receiving an effective inclusive experience, however, there appears to be room for improvement given the data collected. “Unfortunately, one common practice is that after the student is identified with a disability and the IEP is written, students are often included in the regular classroom with no IEP modifications at all” (Costley, 2013, p.3). This issue could be addressed through more time for collaboration among the general and

special education teachers so that the IEP could be followed appropriately. In the four classrooms I observed, one student was receiving additional supports.

This additional support was a paraprofessional sitting with the student during class to keep him on task and address behavioral issues. As a result of the way the support was being provided, the student was not truly included in the classroom setting because of seating and proximity arrangements of the aide and student. *However*, the students in the three additional classrooms were not receiving any supports at all, which allowed for difficulties in social situations and understanding directions given by the teacher.

“In many public schools, the general classroom teachers have little or no formal training on the specific needs of special education students” (Costley, 2013, p.6).

Teachers need additional professional development in order to work with students in an inclusive setting effectively along with collaboration within the inclusion program. With any or all of these improvements, the inclusion program at the research setting for middle and high school students who have autism could be improved. These improvements could lead to a more supportive environment for both students and staff alike.

Schools

Inclusion is beneficial to all involved, including the students with disabilities, students without disabilities, the teachers, and the administration. It is also a matter of following educational laws to the utmost degree possible, as stated by Royster and Loski-Sedimo (2014):

“The inclusion of students with disabilities is a matter of law. Although some may view it as an administrative headache, it is also an opportunity--an opportunity to provide a higher level of learning to those students while also increasing socialization with students without disabilities” (p.7).

“Education is a team effort, and nowhere is this more evident than in the successful implementation of an inclusion program” (Royster, Reglin, & Loski-Sedimo, 2014, p.7).

Inclusion of students encourages acceptance among general education students while allowing for students learning differences to learn skills both socially and academically from their peers. Inclusion promotes a community of acceptance which can in turn help promote a positive, accepting educational environment for all students to thrive.

“Inclusion is built on the principle that all students should be valued for their exceptional abilities and included as members of the school community” (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012, p. 478). When all students are viewed as valued members of the school community and provided equal opportunities within best practice, the entire school can benefit by providing both students and staff with enriching and valuable learning moments.

Society

Inclusion programs that follow best practice of the inclusion process allow for interactions among students with disabilities and students without disabilities. By having students with differences in learning in general education classrooms, students are given opportunities to interact with each other in a positive way and allow for increased interactions. “Disability is a natural part of the human existence and in no way diminishes

the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society” (Menard, 2011, p.27).

This way of thinking is what drives inclusion and promotes equality among students.

When the school community takes an active role in teaching acceptance among their students and staff the larger society as a whole can benefit.

Recommendations for Action

Through the analysis of the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews and the classroom observational data, there were strong similarities among all of the participants about the challenges they face within the current inclusion program with students who have autism in the middle and high school setting.

All of the participants’ report that they have a “lack of specific training and lack of strategies” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 16, 2015). This along with limited time to collaborate with special education teachers increases the challenges the general education teachers are facing in the inclusion program. The additional adult support, although it is generally viewed as a positive aspect of the inclusion program, there are questions about how it could be utilized more effectively with students in order to improve independence while promoting inclusion among peers in the inclusion classroom.

“It is clear that the promotion of an inclusive school culture requires that all school personnel value diversity and view differences as assets” (Braunsteiner and Mariano-Lapidus, 2014, p. 33). This begins with visionary leadership that helps to create an environment that promotes diversity among learners. “The deficit-driven, medical model conceptualizations of disability held by educators and administrators actively

contribute to limiting the growth and support of inclusion” (Braunsteiner and Mariano-Lapidus, 2014, p. 34). However, with professional development opportunities, time for collaboration among teachers, and promotion of acceptance of all students within the general education classroom, this school can create an effective inclusion program that supports both learners and educators.

In order to improve the current inclusion program at the research setting some improvements could be made. Current research suggests that, “in the overall process of school inclusion, principals, in collaborating with their teaching staff, play a key role in building a school culture promoting inclusion” (Urton, Wilbert, & Hennemann, 2014, p. 153). The Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education [MCIE] have also developed *Quality Indicators for Inclusive Building Based Practices* aimed at school leaders and staff team “to assist school teams in determining if their school buildings are inclusive and meeting the needs of their diverse learners. The instrument was developed to reflect evidence-based inclusive practices and is intended to be conducted through a team process, as a self-assessment” (McCaster, 2013, p.10). The team of professionals created to discuss the current inclusion program could complete this self-assessment in order to gauge both where inclusion is working and where improvements could be made. This self-assessment and discussion of the results of the local research setting may be a place to begin improving their current inclusion program and help provide further guidance to administrators as to where to begin with any improvements that may be needed.

The following recommendations for action are listed in an effort to help improve the current inclusion program:

- 1) Teachers and administrators should meet to discuss issues regarding the current inclusion program, specifically related to students with autism. “For inclusive education to succeed, administrators must take action to publicly articulate the new vision, and lead all stakeholders to active involvement” (Villa & Thousand, 2003, p.21).
- 2) Once a list of issues is gathered from the meeting, then *Quality Indicators for Inclusive Building Based Practices* questionnaire could be used to assess where the highest needs in regards to students who have autism are, based on the framework provided. “The instrument was developed to reflect evidence-based inclusive practices and is intended to be conducted through a team process, as a self-assessment” (McCaster, 2013, p. 10).
- 3) Once the areas of highest need are revealed through the *Quality Indicators for Inclusive Building Based Practices* questionnaire, then a panel of special education teachers, general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators should meet to discuss possible solutions to the areas in need of improvement. Collaboration is one of the key components in successful creation and implementation of an inclusive program (Villa & Thousand, 2003).
- 4) Possible areas of professional development should be researched to address the areas in need of improvement, specifically in reference to the inclusion of students with autism, for all classroom personnel including general education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals and administrators so

that a clear understanding of what is expected and needed is established along with consistency among staff and schools. “School leaders must provide explicit training to teachers and staff to build their capacity to support all kids in inclusive settings, to differentiate instruction, and to collaborate” (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009, p.47).

- 5) Opportunities between general and special education teachers for collaboration should be scheduled on a weekly basis so that all team members in the inclusion process can meet regularly to discuss progress and setbacks and establish co-teaching opportunities. “Co-teaching in its most effective form can promote equitable learning opportunities for all students” (Graziano & Navarrette, 2012, p. 109).
- 6) Paraprofessionals should attend training on how to be a successful paraprofessional, strategies and supports for students with autism, and how to be successful in gradual release of students to allow for independence. “Given the role paraprofessionals have in the educational treatment of students with ASD, research examining training gaps in areas of inclusive settings and naturalistic methodologies is of the utmost importance” (Feldman & Matos, 2013, p. 170).

Recommendations

This professional development should include both educational and behavioral strategies that can benefit this population of students. With collaboration and professional development being two of the main challenges reported by the participants, the

professional development that may be offered should address the specific needs and challenges teachers are facing with the inclusion of students with autism.

Scheduling a regular time for special and general education teachers to collaborate in order to discuss plans for students who have autism and are part of the inclusion program is highly recommended. “Highly qualified general education teachers and special education teachers must work alongside each other and support the development of their co-teacher” (Shaffer and Thomas-Brown, 2015, p.118).

The building administrators along with the superintendent of schools need to pay attention to the results from the study so the inclusion program can be improved in order to meet the needs of both the students and the teachers. The results of the study can be disseminated through an initial meeting with the superintendent and me to discuss the outcomes and recommendations for action. This information could then be discussed with the building administrators with both the superintendent and me to outline how the results were found and answer any questions they may have. Once, these meetings have taken place, the curriculum coordinator, could meet with the superintendent to schedule professional development opportunities. Once the dissemination of the results has taken place, professional development along with possible scheduling changes can be discussed and action can be taken at an administrative level.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study gave a holistic view of the general education teachers’ challenges with inclusion of students who have autism in the middle and high school at the research setting and also led to topics that may need closer examination. Gaps in training for

paraprofessionals who work with students who have autism is a theme that continued to emerge throughout the study. A qualitative study should be conducted with paraprofessionals in inclusion programs so that a clear view of gaps in training can be determined.

A clear understanding of what inclusion is another theme that emerged throughout the study. It appears that most professional educators do not have a clear understanding of what inclusion actually is fundamentally. Researchers should consider the impact that this has on the implementation of successful inclusion programs. I recommend conducting additional research that would explore teachers' experiences and understanding of inclusion of students with disabilities particularly in rural school districts.

Understanding both the gaps in training for paraprofessionals and a teacher's understanding of what inclusion fundamentally is are essential to improving inclusion of students with Autism in the long term.

Reflection

As the researcher in this case study my experience with the research process has been an enlightening one. Through the experience I have become more aware of my own biases and preconceived ideas of the problem being studied. I needed to be aware of these biases throughout my data collection, so as to not influence the participants or my data collection. I, personally, felt through my experiences that inclusion needed to be improved in the research setting and had to be sure to keep my biases in check throughout the data collection process and throughout the analysis of the data. In order to avoid my

personal views to affect the data collection process, I made myself aware of these biases so that I would not allow them to interfere with data collection or analysis. I found that triangulation of the data along with coding and graphing of the data collected allowed my personal biases to remain out of the data collection and analysis processes. My hope is through this study, that the current inclusion program at the research setting will improve in order to better meet the needs of all stakeholders involved. So that everyone can work as one cohesive unit in order to promote inclusion, and that all involved benefit from the inclusive experience.

“Inclusive educational environments must address the diverse learning styles of all students, thus requiring schools to support both teachers and students in the context of the classroom” (Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015, p.122). Through this case study, the challenges faced by the general education teachers in the research setting’s current inclusion program were identified. These challenges are lack of collaboration among special and general education teachers, lack of professional development provided to support teachers within the current inclusion program, and lack of administrative support or visionary leadership to support teachers so that they can provide students with the optimal inclusion experience.

Through the use qualitative methods including interviews and observations I was able to obtain a holistic view of the challenges that general education teachers are facing in the current research setting’s inclusion program. “Establishing successful inclusive classrooms in schools requires a clear vision, continued communication and support throughout the period of change, and the continued commitment of all involved in the

change process. Special and general educators must be willing to share, learn, create, fail, and reinvent” (Royster, Reglin, & Losike-Sedimo, 2014, p.7). In addition to this, visionary leadership and administration with a commitment to creating a highly effective inclusion program must be involved as well. My hope is that this study will give school administration and leaders a starting point to develop and maintain a quality inclusion program that benefits all stakeholders.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the qualitative data collected through interviews and observations challenges of inclusion of students with autism in the research setting does present with challenges for the general education teachers who took part in this study. It would be beneficial to address these challenges so that the inclusive program can be improved. The teachers who participated in the study all share one sentiment, that they enjoy inclusion and they would like to have more support when it comes to implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms. The dynamic, dedicated educators I had the opportunity to spend time with enjoy working with students with all abilities and would like to see the current program improved in order to make it more effective for all stakeholders involved, including teachers, students, the school as a whole and the community.

With the recommended actions in the study, the administrators have an opportunity to improve the current program and develop a dynamic, engaging inclusion program that embraces all students with varying abilities within the research setting.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

The purpose of this interview is to further understanding of the experiences you have with the inclusion of students who have autism into your general education class. It will contribute to my study evaluating the challenges and to bridge the gap with inclusive practice in regards to inclusion of students who have autism.

I want to remind you again that this interview is confidential. Your honesty is greatly appreciated and is taken without judgment. Your experiences are valuable and will contribute to this study and the best practices of inclusion which could benefit both general and special education teachers. Finally, your participation is voluntary and you have the right to end the interview at any time. Do you agree to continue?

Interview 1 Questions:

- 1) What are your challenges currently with inclusion of the student(s) who have autism in your general education inclusion classroom?
- 2) How does additional adult support affect the general education inclusion classroom?
- 3) Do you have any specific experiences that you would like to share regarding your experiences with inclusion in the general education classroom?
- 4) In what ways does your administration and leadership support inclusion?
- 5) In regards to roles of staff, how are the roles defined among general and special education teachers within the co-teaching model?

- 6) What training or professional development have you received with regards to the general education inclusion classroom for students with autism in the general education classroom setting?
- 7) What is your experience with the strategies or supports provided from professional development in regards to inclusion of students with autism in the general education classroom setting?

Interview 2 Questions:

- 1) What challenges did you face with the inclusion of the student(s) who have autism in the general education classroom over the past week?
- 2) Do you have any specific experiences you would like to share regarding the inclusive program from the past week in the general education classroom?
- 3) What do you see as areas in need of improvement in regards to inclusion in the general education inclusion classroom?
- 4) Do you have any areas that you feel more support or training is needed regarding inclusion in the general education classroom?
- 5) What supports to you currently receive regarding inclusion in the general education classroom?
- 6) What are your views on administrative support in regards to inclusion in the research setting?
- 7) What are your views on collaboration in regards to inclusion in the research setting?
- 8) What are your views on additional adult support in regards to inclusion in the research setting?

Appendix B: Observation Checklist

Date of Observation: _____ Grade Level: _____

Length of Observation: _____

What aspects of the framework for inclusion are observed support these themes?

Collaboration:

Redefined roles of general and special education teachers:

Additional adult (para pro/teacher aide) support:

