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“I Just See All Children as Children”: Teachers’ Perceptions About Inclusion

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Abstract

This narrative study examined teachers’ perceptions of their inclusive classrooms. Eight early childhood teachers responded to open-ended interview questions about their experiences teaching children with and without disabilities in the same classroom environment. The social constructivist view of teaching and learning is highlighted as the teachers construct their knowledge of inclusion and how it meets the needs of children with disabilities in the inclusive environment. The following themes emerged from interview analysis: the inclusive classroom is a great place for children, the teacher needs additional education, the teacher needs support from administrators and to be included in decisions about the inclusive classroom, and positive experiences foster successful inclusive classrooms. Suggestions are offered for successful inclusive programs and future research.

Keywords

Teachers’ Perceptions of Inclusion, and Support

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“I Just See All Children as Children”: Teachers’ Perceptions About Inclusion

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This narrative study examined teachers’ perceptions of their inclusive classrooms. Eight early childhood teachers responded to open-ended interview questions about their experiences teaching children with and without disabilities in the same classroom environment. The social constructivist view of teaching and learning is highlighted as the teachers construct their knowledge of inclusion and how it meets the needs of children with disabilities in the inclusive environment. The following themes emerged from interview analysis: the inclusive classroom is a great place for children, the teacher needs additional education, the teacher needs support from administrators and to be included in decisions about the inclusive classroom, and positive experiences foster successful inclusive classrooms. Suggestions are offered for successful inclusive programs and future research. Key Words: Teachers’ Perceptions of Inclusion, and Support

Approximately fifty percent of preschool-aged children with disabilities receive services in full-time or part-time inclusive settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). An inclusive setting refers to the full-time placement of children with disabilities in a classroom with typically developing peers. Within the inclusive setting, children with disabilities are participating in the same activities and routines as typically developing children (Odom, 2000). This definition implies that young children with disabilities are fully included in all classroom activities. Children with disabilities have a right to an appropriate education and to be involved in the classroom community (Hornby, 1999). As more programs are inclusive, teachers need to be facilitators in the classroom to provide the environment that is appropriate for each child. However, there are factors that impact the inclusive environment, and these factors can affect how teachers perceive their classrooms.

Previous research studies have investigated factors of inclusion (e.g., support services, adequate resources, administrator support, appropriately trained personnel, and the teachers’ positive attitudes toward inclusion). The availability of support services was a factor that teachers perceived as important in order to have a successful inclusive classroom (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003). The types of services considered beneficial are consultation with speech and language therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and special educators. The adequacies of resources, such as materials, equipment, and physical accommodations, were also factors to successful inclusion (Wolery et al., 1993). Teachers felt they needed space and materials to meet the various needs of children with disabilities. The administrator's attitude toward inclusion and the types of support offered the teacher were also major factors that affect inclusive programs

(Kohanek & Buka, 1999). The program policies and the ways in which the administrators implemented those policies influence the success of the inclusive program.

Additionally, personnel issues were a major concern to the success of inclusion. One area of concern was too many children in each teacher's classroom (Wolery et al., 1994). Teachers in early childhood inclusive programs strongly indicated that an adequate number of staff was important to a successful inclusive program. A second personnel issue was appropriate teacher preparation, which included coursework and inclusive practicum experiences. Two studies (Dinnebeil, McInerney, Fox, & Juchartz-Pendry, 1998; Niemeyer & Proctor, 2002) reported that teachers need coursework on strategies for working with children who have disabilities. Additionally, they need to have practical hands-on experiences in inclusive classrooms to feel comfortable to teach all children.

Another issue that influenced the effectiveness of inclusion was the teacher's attitude toward children with disabilities. Overall, early childhood teachers felt children with disabilities should be in inclusive classrooms (Eiserman, Shisler, & Healey, 1995). This would suggest that teachers' attitudes play a part in inclusion. According to Stafford and Green (1996), the attitude of the program personnel was critical to planning and implementing a successful preschool inclusion program. In a similar finding, Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) concluded that teachers who had positive attitudes toward children with disabilities included those children in all aspects of their inclusive classrooms.

Each of these factors affected the experiences of the teacher and children in the inclusive classroom. The teachers' perceptions of the inclusive classroom are shaped by many factors (i.e., children's abilities and disabilities, and support from various adults in the classroom). One aspect of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory states that our knowledge is shaped or constructed through the social influences and interactions within our environment. In other words, we understand our environment through social interactions and how we interpret those interactions with others. Udvari-Solner (1996) suggests that the social constructivist view of teaching is a way to grow and develop as a teacher because the interactions with students shape how she/he sees her/his classroom. For example, if a teacher has positive experiences and interactions with a child who has a disability and with that child's family, then she/he may see that classroom as a positive inclusive experience.

Social constructivist theory entails an interpretation of the role of the teacher as one who is capable of and responsible for learning about children within his or her care, and utilizing this knowledge to construct practices that are developmentally appropriate for particular children in particular context. (Mallory & New, 1994, p. 334)

These teachers are taking an active role in learning about each child's individual needs in the classroom. Children with special needs in an inclusive classroom may need specialized strategies to participate, and the teacher in the inclusive classroom has to make those accommodations as a part of how she/he constructs her/his classroom. In order to make these accommodations in the classroom the teacher needs support from, and collaboration with, the other adults (therapists and special education teachers) who can make the inclusive classroom successful (Skrtic & Sailor, 1996). The social

constructivist theory supports how the teacher views her/his inclusive classroom as a place to learn, grow, interact, and form relationships.

As related previously, there are a sufficient number of quantitative studies (e.g., see Hammond & Ingalls, 2003) that address the factors associated with successful inclusive classrooms. However, there is limited research on how teachers perceive their classroom and the factors influencing inclusion (Niemeyer & Proctor, 2002). This qualitative research did not prescribe the factors of successful inclusion and then quantify them. Instead, the qualitative methods allowed the teachers to reflect on their own experiences and express the factors of success for their individual situation. One of the advantages of narrative research, through the lens of a social constructivist theory, is to hear how the teachers understand and construct their own experiences. This qualitative study shares teachers' understandings of the inclusive classroom in their words. The specific research questions for this study are as follows: How does a teacher perceive her inclusive classroom? What are the factors or resources associated with a successful inclusive classroom from the teacher's point-of-view?

Methods

Narrative research is a way to represent how someone interacts and interprets his/her view of life (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Based on Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, a qualitative design was used to discover insights and interpretations rather than to control a set of variables or to test a hypothesis (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994). Qualitative research allows the investigator to interpret and bring to light an understanding of particular subjects and events (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Narrative research includes a variety of approaches (i.e., interviews, observations, focus groups, and field notes) to bring to light the voices of the participants. For this study, the individual interview was used to hear the stories of the teachers.

Participants

For this study eight teachers of inclusive early childhood classrooms shared stories of their experiences. These eight participants were a part of a two phase study approved by the Institutional Review Board at a university in the southeastern part of the United States. For Phase One, the participants were interviewed once to gain their insights into the inclusive classroom. Phase Two of the project included different participants and compared and contrasted preservice teachers' and inservice teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Phase Two included four participants and the methods included multiple interviews, observations, and field notes. The findings from Phase Two are presented in an article by Leatherman and Neimeyer (2005). The findings derived in Phase One that are presented in this paper include the voices of inservice teachers about their inclusive classroom.

These participants were chosen according to convenience and purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). All of the participants worked in either a university or community college early childhood program or in a pre-kindergarten classroom of the state's public school system. The early childhood programs of the participants were within a twenty mile radius of the researcher's university. The researcher was familiar

with each participant through previous (one year earlier) associations with the university, community college, and public school classrooms because of interactions as a graduate teaching assistant/university supervisor with the approving university. The participants may have felt more comfortable to share their stories because of this previous association.

Additionally, the common characteristics of the participants included the following: (a) the teachers had taught for at least 1 year in an inclusive classroom and they did not have a formal degree in special education, (b) the teachers expressed a feeling that they had been successful in including young children with disabilities into their classroom, and (c) the teachers expressed they had positive experiences in the inclusive classroom. This study was designed to address only teachers who had expressed positive views about the inclusive classroom. This may be considered a limitation to the study, but this report wanted to focus on analyzing the positive aspects of the inclusive classroom in order to assist teachers and administrators, to see the value of the inclusive classroom in greater detail.

The study included two African American teachers and six Caucasian teachers. All of the teachers were female and their ages varied from 26 years to 61 years; five teachers were between 26 and 35, and three teachers were between 36 and 61 years. The years of teaching experience (non-inclusive and inclusive classrooms) ranged from 6 to 25 years. Five teachers had a four-year degree in early childhood education, one teacher had a 2-year community college degree in early childhood education, and two teachers had a high school degree and community college coursework. The current teaching setting for three teachers was a university lab program, the setting for one teacher was the public school pre-kindergarten classroom, and the work setting for three teachers was a community college early childhood program. One teacher was not employed at the time of the interview because she was on maternity leave; her most recent position had been in a university lab setting. All teachers began their teaching careers in a non-inclusive classroom. Throughout the teachers' careers they had children with disabilities in their classrooms with a variety of special needs; autism spectrum, speech and language delays, preschool developmentally-delayed, and physical limitations. Additionally, the teachers had taught a variety of ages from toddlers (18 months) to six-year-olds. For this study, specific classroom statistics of children's ages (i.e., toddler, pre-kindergartener) and disability (i.e., physical disability, speech delays) were not obtained. Each teacher had expressed at the beginning of the interview that she had children with disabilities in her classroom currently (except the teacher on maternity leave who stated that the most recent prior classroom had children with disabilities). The questions asked the participants to relate to their teaching experiences, not just to the current classroom. So the researcher did not focus on specifics of the current teaching experience, rather the focus was on the overall experiences of the teacher.

Researcher Perspective

Qualitative research allows the researcher to draw on his/her experiences and conclusions, to ask questions, and interpret data within her own set of parameters. As the researcher for this study, I have been an early childhood inclusion teacher of children six-months-old through ten-years-old (after-school program). I was also an administrator for three different programs; university-based inclusive program for five years, community

college based program for two years and a community-based program for one year. Additionally, I have an advanced degree in early childhood special education. My education and experiences provide a distinct perspective to allow insight into the issues of inclusion. As the researcher, I had experienced very positive inclusive classrooms, yet had worked with other teachers who had expressed negative experiences in the inclusive classroom. Therefore, in selecting the participants for this study, I purposively selected teachers who expressed positive experiences about the inclusive classroom. I wanted these teachers to share their successes with inclusion.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

As Riessman (1993) stated, “The study of narrative research does not fit neatly within the boundaries of any single scholarly field” (p. 1). By recording the stories of people who may not normally be heard through research, we are opening up a whole new experience and way of looking at events. There is no one method of how to do narrative research; they are as diverse as the narrators and researchers themselves (Riessman). This study utilized interviews as the method to record the stories. Quantitative studies address the pre-selected factors of successful inclusion, but they have limited voices behind the numbers. Qualitative research describes how those factors look in actual inclusive classrooms, as depicted in the teachers’ words. According to Brantlinger et al. (2005) interviews should have purposeful selection of participants and reasonable open-ended interview questions. Given the purpose of this study, which is to hear the voices of the teachers, the interview process was the method used to capture the words of the teachers.

Open-ended interviews were used to provide insight into the teachers’ inclusive classrooms. Guiding statements were used to help identify possible factors related to the teachers’ experiences with inclusion. The following prompts were used to start the participants’ narratives: (a) Tell me about working with the children in your classroom, (b) Tell me how you have made the classroom successful for all children, and (c) Whom do you turn to for support? (What resources exist to help you?). These open-ended statements and questions allowed the participants to talk about the issues and areas that were most important to them. The participants were asked for clarification regarding any comments that were vague or unclear. For example, one participant said she had a hard time with her boss understanding what she did in the classroom, and the prompt used was, “Can you tell me more about that?” This question encouraged the participant to share more information about the situation.

The individual interviews ranged in length from thirty minutes to one and one-half hours, and were conducted at each participant’s work place; university or community college program or pre-kindergarten state public school program. One interview was conducted in the participant’s home because she was on maternity leave. Each interview was audio taped to allow for typed transcriptions of the narratives.

Data Analysis Procedures

This study is framed in a qualitative fashion to provide an informative analysis about teachers’ perceptions of inclusion, and the factors and resources that influence the inclusive classroom. Audio tapes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Then, each

participant was given the transcript to perform a member check. A member check is a way to assure the findings are recognizable and accurate to the participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This member check allowed for reliability and validity of the interviews. By the participants verifying their words, the data is more accurate and also more valid, as it states what the participant wants to say about the topic. They were asked to read the transcript and respond if the information seemed correct as well as what they had remembered from the interview. If they did not feel that the transcript reflected their meaning, they were asked to correct it to be accurate with their views. Each participant edited her transcript by correcting the grammar and expanding her comments as she felt necessary in order to portray her perceptions of the classroom.

The steps of analysis of the data are as follows: (a) Read individual interviews several times to become familiar with the overall data, (b) Distinguish answers to each posed question: Tell me about working with the children in your classroom, tell me how you have made the classroom successful for all children, and whom do you turn to for support? (what resources exist to help you?), (c) Separate interview information into meaningful units of data, (d) Label units for a specific category (i.e., administration was one category under one of the three questions), (d) Place each labeled segment with other similar labeled segments, and (e) Connect the units into coherent text as presented within the themes/categories in the results section. Each step will be explained in more detail with an example of the raw data and how it is presented in context.

The words presented in this paper are in the teachers' voices as spoken in the interviews and in the teachers' editing of their own interviews. For each transcript, the interview was read several times to obtain a sense of the overall information of the participant narratives. Then the data were broken down into the answers to the three main statements/questions and the supporting questions as listed previously. For each of the three statements the data was broken down according to meaningful units of data, which were segments of one or more sentences or a paragraph that focused on one topic. These units were assigned a one or two word label or category (for example, regarding the question "Whom do you turn to for support?" one category was "administration"). As the interviews were read and labeled, the same types of words/phrases started to emerge such as "administrators were of support for the teachers" (Patton, 1990). These labeled segments were placed in the appropriate category, for example "administration." After all units/segments were categorized, the words that were similar were woven together as presented in the results section.

The example presented is for support for the inclusive classroom and the categories derived from the data were administration, peers, therapists/special education teachers, agency, and assistive technology. This specific example is taken from a participant's response when asked, "Whom do you turn to for support?" The participant replied,

I really liked the special needs teacher (who was there everyday). Each year the speech therapists changed. If you are going to have special needs children you need to have someone at each of the areas stationed at the place. We were told that those people would be available to help normal children that may be missing something, but we did not get that help. But we had a really good special needs teacher when she here.

This segment was listed under the category of “therapists/special education teacher” as included in the text under the theme of “support from administrator, peers, and therapist” in the results section. The following was taken from the statement above that represents this teacher’s view of support. “If you are going to have special needs children you need to have someone at each of the areas stationed at the place. We had a real good special needs teacher when she was here.” This statement is part of the overall question that asked for factors or resources associated with a successful inclusive classroom. The data were finally collated as to the themes presented in the findings section.

The richness of the narratives will be presented in the form described by Casey (1993) as “a publication of direct quotations with minimal introduction or connecting by the researcher” (p. 24). The common perspectives, which were revealed throughout the stories, will be related based on the five patterns/themes which emerged from the data. In the discussion section, there are additional details about the themes and connections to prior research.

Results

This study examined teachers' perceptions of inclusion and the factors and resources that influence their inclusive classrooms. The content of each of the interviews was analyzed for each case individually and were then categorized by themes or patterns across cases. The research questions were: How does a teacher perceive her inclusive classroom? What are the factors or resources associated with a successful inclusive classroom from the teachers' points-of-view? The following themes were identified by the participants: (a) great places for children and teachers (b) the need for training or workshops, (c) positive experiences foster success, (d) support from administrators, peers, and therapists, and (e) decision to make classrooms inclusive. For each theme, participants' statements in their words will illustrate the patterns of successful inclusive classrooms.

Great Places for Children and Teachers

Overall, the teachers felt having an inclusive classroom was positive and they agreed they would do it again. “There were times it was challenging, [but] I never wished I didn’t have them.” From another teacher, “Yes, I think I learned as much as they or their parents did. I think it was positive.” A different teacher said, “I’m glad I had the opportunity to work in an inclusive class. When I do go back to teaching [she was on maternity leave] I want to go to a classroom that is inclusive.” These teachers felt the inclusive classroom was great for the children as well as themselves to learn and grow together.

A different teacher expressed her concern for all the children and the rewards for their efforts.

You have challenges but you have 10 times more rewards. And there is just something about a child with special needs being accepted for them; it is the best situation. And seeing them grow and develop alongside other

kids and knowing that those kids are going to grow up being accepted and understood. That's why they should do it. Even though it is challenging at the time, the long term effects are worth it.

One teacher spoke very fondly of a specific child. "He did really well. I was really happy. I'm still in touch with that family. He was a special guy. He had a beautiful smile." She suggests that this child made a difference in her classroom. Another teacher expressed how she grew as a teacher.

I think inclusion is wonderful for all the children. I feel it is a growing and learning experience for everyone. Having children with special needs in the class has made me a better teacher. It's a great experience for everybody, [it is] good to have worked with children who have had all types of special needs.

This teacher described the inclusive classroom as a growing, dynamic experience.

One of the teachers has been teaching for twenty-five years, her narratives are so rich and plentiful that the remainder of this theme is taken from her interview. She felt that her classrooms were the best place for all children. This was her first comment.

I have worked with children with special needs for a long time. Even before it was thought of mainstreaming them into the regular classroom. And I think back then it was no problem. Because we were not really geared in on special needs, where now it is. I have had children who could not walk. I've had children 6-years-old in diapers. Now since the mainstreaming, everybody is looking for the problems in children rather than just treating them like normal children. Which is what it used to be like.

She continued in her description of her classroom.

I really have enjoyed working with special needs children that we've had. We've had some of all special needs; children with crutches, children with breathing machines, children with diabetes, with glasses, children who could not talk. I've had some of all children; it's a great challenge. But I enjoyed it better, I think, before it became mainstreaming. Because everybody [is] looking for special needs. They focus on what the child can't do, instead of what they do. It seems like when you do say the word special needs you have students and others people say, "Is he special needs?" "Is she special needs?" They want to make the whole class special needs, rather than letting that child be a normal child, as much as you can.

When asked to talk about what the children in the classroom were able to do, she expressed this. "It gives children opportunities that they may not have had. Because I didn't look at them as special needs children and they were able to do whatever the other

children did.” Other professionals concern her because she does not feel they can care for and educate the child as she can.

They [other professionals] really looked at the child as being a special needs child and if the child couldn't do it right the first time they would get frustrated. Where it didn't bother me. For instance today, the speech therapist said, “I can't do anything with him, he did not want to pay attention.” This lets me know that she was not doing it right for him.

This participant was the only one to bring the view of parents into the inclusive classroom.

I got a letter from a parent who was very, very particular about her child because he had special needs. But she was so pleased with the care he got here that she didn't have any problems. She appreciated the fact that when I made other children put their coats on I made him put his on. And so that let her see I was working with her child and the others and was not showing differences.

This teacher felt that inclusive classrooms are great for teachers and children, and also parents. This parent validated her inclusive classroom as a “great place for her son.” Her concluding remarks,

Having children with special needs in the class has made me a better teacher. I really have a respect for children, the things they can and can not do. It made me aware that there are so many children out there who need someone to work with them.

As another teacher expressed, this participant felt she was a better teacher because of the children with special needs. Her perspectives on being a teacher of children with special needs can be summed up in one of her final comments. “I just see all children as children.” These words are characteristic of all the participants' views about their inclusive experiences. How they included children, interacted with other adults, and grew as teachers is a very powerful understanding of who we are in our society and how we understand and grow as people. These teachers perceived their inclusive classroom as a growing experience and a great place to interact with others.

The Need for Training or Workshops

In the narratives, six of the teachers felt they needed more in-service training and education to experience more comfort in their jobs. One teacher expressed it like this, “[There are] not really enough workshops for teachers. There needs to be more hands-on.” Another one adds, “But I think if I had more classes or more one-on-one stuff, it would help.” This teacher was very quantitative in her response: “I have had about 10 hours on special needs. They really don't have that many workshops on special needs.” A different teacher felt the way to go was education no matter what the source. “I just think

that having more education and knowledge is always good.” An additional teacher had this to say: "No one told me what to do. Here he is. He and I learned together. There was very little education about what this child could actually do." This teacher had a child with special needs in her class, and learned about him and the education of children with special needs in general at the same time.

Another teacher relates her need for education to when she found out that there would “officially” be children with disabilities in her classroom.

I was told from supervisors that we were going to do inclusion. I didn't really like that because when you say we are including children, I think you need a little education background. I really feel you need to know a little bit about it; even though I think what I have done has worked. Through workshops, I am able to do what I do, and I guess because I like the children. I think that makes a lot of difference.

She feels that she has met the needs of the children, but still needs more education. None of the participants have a formal degree in special education and as their words show, they feel they need more education and training to make their inclusive classrooms more successful.

Positive Experiences Foster Success

The majority of the teachers attributed their feelings of success and positive attitudes to the experiences that they have had with children with disabilities. One teacher had this to say, "Experience!! From the classroom teacher, it really has to do with your previous experience with people with disabilities. If those have been very positive experiences, I think you are more willing to try and learn." This teacher expresses great confidence in her administrators' decisions to make the school inclusive. After she experiences her inclusive classroom, she felt it was a success.

The whole philosophy of the school and being inclusive is what is really good for a lot of kids, typical and atypical. In college I remember doing an internship at [a specific school] and I really enjoyed it. And I thought that was a neat place too. I think that helped me be accepting and understanding of different disabilities. My boss said “this is what is good,” and so I did it. Then as I did it, I thought this is great, I saw it worked and felt real proud to work at some place that was inclusive and that it was working out so well.

A different teacher addressed positive experiences when she talked about what it takes to make it successful. She says,

In the last year I think I found out it is going to work. It takes hard work to get there; it takes planning, lots of ingenuity to figure out what to do. The more I do myself, the more I see it can be done. Three years ago you would not have sold me on it. Now, I have decided yeah...It works well.

One teacher described the situation in hypothetical terms.

I think there may be a time when you have to say this child needs to be in another place. When you are to the point where that teacher is not able to efficiently and effectively teach all children. I think that might be a breaking point. I could see where that could push you over the edge. But I think I would handle that professionally. The condition of the child would not totally change my attitude--it might just alter it somewhat – test my limits!

This teacher sees the inclusive classroom experiences as positive. However, she is aware that there may be situations where the classroom is not meeting the needs of the children (with or without special needs) or the needs of the teacher. This teacher expressed that if the classroom where she taught was not “efficient or effective,” then it could have a negative impact on the success of the inclusive classroom.

All four teachers addressed positive experiences as a component of the successful inclusive classroom. Three teachers suggested how previous positive experiences influence the classroom and one narrative suggested how her perception would change if the inclusive experiences were not appropriate for the children. The experiences of the teacher can be a factor as to how the teacher perceives her room. These teachers construct their view of the inclusive classroom as successful for all children.

Support from Administrators, Peers, and Therapists

All eight participants reported that support was a contributing factor to the success of inclusion. A teacher had a brief comment, "But if someone took away all of the supports, yeah, that would change my attitude." Several narratives expressed the need and importance of administrative support. One teacher had a definite opinion of what would make a program not successful.

But make sure you have all the administrative people behind you and who will back you up and are going to be moral support. Who will not just leave you in that room and say, “You need to handle it.”

This teacher states that she needs supportive administrators to make the program successful.

Another teacher had distinct thoughts about how the administrators supported her.

I definitely think administrative support is important and them being able to listen to you and maybe give you strategies and ideas. And observe and do all of those things necessary. When you are in the classroom, and so involved you don't always see the whole picture. It's important to be able to say, “Would you mind coming in and see what is going on here, I think I'm missing something.” It's good to have that other perspective, like it seems to be [a] certain time of the day or this setting or materials or

whatever. To get that outside view. Then to say, "Well what do you think might be done?" [to] come up with strategies and come up with possible solutions. I feel like there has always been that support especially for inclusion.

Another teacher agreed. "My immediate supervisor is very helpful." Each of these teachers felt that the administrative support was a benefit to her inclusive classroom.

An alternative view is of peers as support in the inclusive classroom. From one participant, "In the past the supports were peers more so than administrators. Supervisory it's more of a paperwork level." Another teacher agreed that the supervisor was not a form of support. "I was not able to turn to a supervisor. We had a mental health specialist (as a supervisor), she was more involved in the paperwork." Yet, another teacher felt the peer support. "The supports were peers...Mentors are very important and they need to know that you are comfortable and willing to ask things. I feel more comfortable speaking with another teacher or someone at another school." This issue of supports presented mixed responses from the participants. Some teachers referred to administrators as a source of support and others expressed them as a lack of support. Those who could not turn to administrators for support felt peers were more helpful.

Several narratives used definitive words to describe how the therapists are of benefit in the classroom. One teacher said, "We had a lot of support from his therapists. We had a lot of support and help I think that was crucial." An additional teacher reported, "With all of these kids I think [an agency] was the absolute key, and having the support for the therapist." These two teachers explain why the therapists and special educators are so important.

But you need to have support. You need to work with an agency to help you. Because you don't want to be alone and you don't know everything and there are things that you need to be taught or that are really important.

Along with, "If you are going to have special needs children you need to have someone at each of the areas stationed at the place. We had a real good special needs teacher when she was here."

Additionally, a teacher had this to say about the support, "And then other people who work with him, the therapists, the speech and physical and OT. Not that they come and do those things in private, but to show me." This teacher wanted to learn from the therapists who work with the children in her classroom. A similar view from this teacher,

We work fairly closely with the OT, because we have one on staff this year, which is a first. And our Speech and Language therapist is there. We have a PT on staff for the younger children but I can also go to her about the older children. And then the school system provides PT for the older children to meet their goals. She is quite helpful because what she does is show us how to do things with the children. And she is a real resource person even though she is only there a few days a week she is still available.

Each of these teachers felt the therapists were of great benefit to her inclusive classroom.

Teachers mentioned different resources that they would use. One teacher felt she could turn to other agencies. "I have even gone to outside agencies and reading on my own. I have been drawn to another center. And I can use them as an outside source." A different teacher was very explicit about the resources she had turned to for support.

Assistive technology has been very helpful. The Early Intervention Library which houses a lot of books and articles. We did get some services from places like Children and Youth Services, with kids with behavior problems. And we did have some people come from the Developmental Center and help us. The Family Support Network is great. They have a lot of resources. And they will send it to you. I asked for materials printed in Spanish and they found it for me. They are great.

The teachers were able to present actual experiences of the assistance of the personnel support and the resources. All eight participants shared how personnel (administrators, peers, or therapists/special educators) and resource agencies had been helpful to have a successful classroom for all children.

Decision to Make the Program Inclusive

Two participants shared different issues of administration, not as a support, but as the people who make the decisions about inclusion without input from the staff. This teacher said,

I don't think we were considered but we were told we are doing this. I don't remember being asked, we were just told. I remember it was presented in a positive way, but there was not a discussion. There was some concern, because we had no decision in all this. That was disturbing to the teachers.

In another narrative, this is what she had to say about her experiences with the administration and starting inclusion.

It was kind of discussed. That [name of a center] is going to this and they say we need to go toward this. Common sense will tell you they are trying to prepare me. It's coming here. Then you find out we are going to do this. So why should I reject? I know we are going to do this. All I can do is try this.

These participants were working at the same program and expressed no voice in the process of making the program inclusive, yet they did express other areas of support. The teachers felt they had not been consulted about the initial inclusive decision, but their narratives show they were cooperative with the decision and felt their inclusive classrooms were positive and successful for all children.

Overall, participants expressed their inclusive classrooms as positive learning environments for young children with and without disabilities. Positive attitudes supported by administrators, peers, and therapists/special educators helped make the classroom successful. However, the teachers felt they could benefit from additional training and education on children with disabilities and strategies for the classroom. As expressed by two participants, they wanted to be included in the administrative decisions to “officially” begin accepting children with disabilities.

Discussion

This study examines how teachers perceive their inclusion experiences and the factors that influence them. All eight participants feel the inclusive classroom is the optimal environment for children with and without disabilities and their stories confirm this placement. Each of the five themes identified were supported by the interviews of the participants. The themes presented are (a) great places for children and teachers, (b) the need for training or workshops, (c) positive experiences foster success, (d) support from administrators, peers, and therapists, and (e) decision to make the program inclusive.

The first theme presents that the teachers feel that the inclusive classroom is the best place for children and teachers. Mallory and New (1994) state that social constructivist theory requires the teacher to be capable of learning about the children and constructing knowledge of ways to meet their needs. As part of inclusive classrooms you not only have children of different ages, you also have children with different abilities because of a special need. These teachers exemplified this as they express the concern for the children and the desire for inclusion: “We are trying to meet the children’s needs, all the children’s needs.” These narratives suggest that the inclusive classroom is a very positive community for all children and adults to learn from each other. Teachers shared how they grew as they learned about the children and are better teachers because of the inclusive experiences.

The teachers express positive feelings about the inclusive classroom, but they convey the need for more training or workshops to better meet the individual needs of the children with disabilities. Research by Knight (2002) states that teachers are taking an active role in their own learning and development when they attend workshops and in-service trainings. The trainings allow them to construct their own knowledge and to make sense of their world. Additional studies found that teachers express more positive attitudes and feelings of confidence in the inclusive classroom when provided direct training and education to work with children who have special needs (Hornby, 1999; Siegel & Jausovec, 1994). One suggestion is for inclusive programs to build in avenues to provide in-service training and education to the teachers to meet the needs of children in the inclusive classroom.

In their narratives, teachers expressed that positive experiences influence them to have positive attitudes toward inclusion. The teachers had positive interactions and support with previous inclusive classrooms, which they felt increased their chances to have those positive experiences again. Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005) found when teachers have positive attitudes toward inclusion, the classroom environment is more conducive to all children learning and being productive members of the classroom community. In the inclusive classroom, teachers are more aware of differences between

children and make accommodations, so all children with special needs can participate just as the children without disabilities. This differentiation of learning and accommodations allows all children (with and without disabilities) the opportunities to learn and develop to their best potential.

The fourth theme supported by the narratives postulates that teachers need interactions with, and support from, administrators, peers, and therapists in order to meet the needs of the children with disabilities. Research from Hammond and Ingalls (2003) confirms what these teachers say; the availability of therapists and special educators affect the teachers' success in the classroom. These participants also suggest the need for administrators to support the classroom. According to Kohanek and Buka (1999) administrators support the inclusive classroom usually through personnel, resources, and their attitudes of the inclusive program, which all of these narratives purport. Therefore, administrators need to find appropriate ways to support inclusion in their schools. This support includes finding appropriate avenues for teachers to be involved in the decision-making processes of the program.

The fifth theme connects to the decision to make the program inclusive. One way administrators can offer support is by including teachers in the important changes to the program. Baumgart and Ferguson (1991) stated that if teachers are not consulted about the inclusion decision, then this can lead to frustrations. These feelings of frustration can be seen in the participants' statement. They expressed initial frustration about inclusion, however they were making the inclusive classroom successful nonetheless.

Throughout these narratives the themes of great places, additional knowledge, positive experiences, support from administrators, and input into decision-making processes are apparent from the words of the teachers. Knight (1999) makes similar claims about the inclusive environment. "Supportive classroom teachers and administrators are critical to the successful teaching of students in inclusive settings. Teachers' behaviour, attitudes, and skill, together with peer acceptance of individual differences are important factors in the successful inclusion of students" (p. 6).

Limitations and Future Research

The findings from this study have implications with regards to inclusive early childhood classrooms, but there are a few limitations to consider. "Qualitative research is not done for purposes of generalization, but rather to produce evidence based on the exploration of specific context and particular individuals" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 203). The stories should be seen as evidence of this group of teachers' perceptions of their inclusive classrooms. A second limitation is that the participants were interviewed individually; no other measures of their inclusive classroom were considered for this study. Further research could enlist focus groups to allow for the interplay of the teachers' perceptions of the inclusive classroom to emerge. A third limitation, considers that the stories of the teachers could be richer and more detailed if additional follow-up questions had been posited. Additional research is needed to investigate the inclusive classroom and the resources needed for success. Furthermore, perceptions of administrators, therapists, parents, and children should be studied to explore how they understand the inclusive classroom and the needed resources. By hearing the stories of all

of the adults and the children in the inclusive classroom, we obtain a more detailed picture of the appropriate environment for all children.

Conclusion

This study investigated early childhood inclusion teachers' perceptions of their classrooms and the factors that influence that success. Views of teachers are supported by Vygotsky's social constructivist theory that states that we construct our world as a result of the social experiences we have had and shapes our reality as we see it. So, each person has a unique perception of his or her world based on the interactions. These participants were chosen based on their self-proclaimed positive view of inclusion. The words presented in this paper are the teachers' views of their classrooms, and the common themes supporting those views: they all feel the inclusive classroom is a great place for children and teachers. When it comes to factors that have influenced their perceptions, one area is the lack of appropriate training for working with children with special needs. The teachers feel they are successful with the inclusive classroom, but still need more training.

The participants feel there are multiple avenues for support from administrators, peers, therapists, and agencies. Additionally, they feel that as a result of the previous positive experiences in the inclusive classroom, they are more likely to encourage or even seek out an inclusive classroom because they see many benefits for themselves as teachers and the children. These teachers believe they make a major contribution to the children in their inclusive classrooms and their narratives ring true to their beliefs. These teachers echo the sentiment, "inclusion means we all belong" (Sapon-Shevin, 1999, p. 4).

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