The Benefits and Drawbacks of Mainstreaming Students with Autism
Abstract

The issue of mainstreaming students with autism into general education settings has become a major source of controversy. Many educators view mainstreaming as beneficial for students with autism, as it allows them access to neurotypical peers who can serve as role models for acceptable social behavior and it teaches their neurotypical peers to be receptive to those who are different from them. In contrast, others believe that mainstreaming will cause students with autism to be socially excluded given their atypical behavior and they will lose out on the necessary individualized instruction they would receive in a special education classroom. The benefits and drawbacks to inclusion will be discussed in this paper. The paper will also address the ethical considerations regarding the role of regular education teachers in accommodating students with autism in general education settings and proposed classroom modifications. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the need for further research.

In education settings today, there is an increasing trend towards mainstreaming students with autism. There are numerous government provisions in place today in order to maximize the opportunities for students with autism to be taught in a general education setting. For instance, it is required that special education teams develop IEP’s for all students receiving special education services, whether they are included in general education or instructed in special education settings (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010). IEP’s allow these students to “obtain access to participation in an appropriate education program in the least restrictive
environment” (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010). The IEP must contain the following components: a description of what kind of special education program a student will receive, what related services a school district will provide to the student with disabilities, and measureable annual goals and objectives (Drasgrow et al., 2001). IEP’s allow students with disabilities to receive the services they need in order to assimilate these students into general education classes. Ultimately, and if possible, students with disabilities will receive their education in an inclusive classroom. Full inclusion entails the following elements: there are no separate education classes because all students, regardless of their disability, attend only general education classes, all students attend their neighborhood schools, and general education is primarily responsible for the students with disabilities, not special education (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006).

In addition to providing students with disabilities IEP’s, there are government regulations in place, which enable the student with disabilities to receive, to the maximum extent possible, an education in the general education environment. Hedeen & Ayres (2002) define the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as “to the maximum extent appropriate, each child with a disability participates with children without disabilities in nonacademic and extracurricular services and activities.” In addition, IDEA emphasizes the significance of involving students with disabilities in the general education curriculum as well as in general education environments (Hedeen & Ayres, 2002). According to these authors, IDEA has also strengthened the role of the general educator as an active member in developing and implementing the IEP. Part B of
IDEA includes the least restrictive environment (LRE) principle which states the following: children with disabilities are to be educated with children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate, a child with a disability is to be removed from the general education environment only when the nature or severity of the child’s disability is such that education with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be demonstrated satisfactorily in a general education classroom (Hedeen & Ayres 2002). More recently, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) was implemented in order to serve two purposes: to enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum and to meet the child’s other educational needs that result from his or her disability (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010).

Research has shown that inclusion provides benefits for both students with autism and their neurotypical peers. Firstly, students with autism who are taught in general education settings can engage in observational learning. Egel et al. (1981) found that observing peers perform tasks improves the performance of students with autism because they are imitating their peers’ responses. Furthermore, students with disabilities will imitate the skills of their neurotypically-developing peers. Kellegrew (1995) found that students with disabilities are able to learn acceptable behaviors that are modeled by their neurotypical peers. In addition to the benefits of students with autism being exposed to more socially acceptable behavior, neurotypically-developing students learn to be acceptant of those who are different from them. Kellegrew (1995) found that both students with disabilities
and neurotically-developing students would learn acceptance of people who are different from them.

Similarly, students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers engage in the opportunity for social interaction, which would otherwise not be possible had students with autism been taught in a separate special education classroom. Guralnick & Groom (1988) found that mildly developmentally delayed students engaged in a much higher rate of peer-related social interactions when participating in mainstreamed playgroups in comparison to specialized classroom programs. In addition, they found that although the mildly delayed students in playgroups were not selected as play partners as frequently as were other nonhandicapped students, social interactions between delayed and nonhandicapped children were nevertheless common occurrences. Interestingly, Guralnick & Groom (1988) found that mildly delayed children actually chose to interact more often with nonhandicapped students similar in chronological age to themselves than any other group, including other handicapped students.

Despite the inclusive classrooms providing students with autism the opportunity to engage in observational learning and imitation skills while their neurotypical classmates learned acceptance, most of the research shows that there are more drawbacks than there are benefits. In inclusive classrooms there is a risk of students with disabilities being rejected from their neurotypical classmates. Ochs et al. (2001) found that in all the inclusive classrooms in the study, a form of neglect occurred in which others sometimes disregarded or paid no attention to a child with special needs. In addition and contrary to Guralnick and Groom’s 1988 findings,
Myles et al. (1993) found that neurotypical students and students with autism did not spontaneously interact just because they happened to be in the same classroom. Furthermore, students with autism did not interact with others regardless of whether they were surrounded by their peers or not. Part of the reasoning behind students with autism not engaging in social interaction could be because the general education classroom overstimulates students with autism. Students with autism may find the noise of the regular classroom to be distracting or painful, the colorful materials being distributed throughout the class to be overstimulating, and the physical organization of the classroom to be inadequate for identifying where to go and what to do (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). Ochs et al. (2001) hypothesized that in order to cope with their overstimulating environment students with autism are focusing on how to restore their equilibrium rather than interacting with their peers. The overwhelming sensation and overstimulation could be a reason why students with autism are not only unwilling but are also unable to engage in activities with their peers.

In addition to the overstimulating environment and rejection students with autism experience in a general education setting, there also seems to be a cognitive disparity between students with autism and neurotypical students. There are curricular and experimental limitations for students with autism (Stainback & Stainback, 1984). As a result, students with autism require individualized instruction (Odom & Bailey, 2001). As a way to remedy their cognitive deficits, students with autism require individually designed settings that minimize this discrepancy and present information in ways they comprehend (Mesibov & Shea,
Mesibov and Shea (1996) found three major areas that are part of a traditional education that is appropriate for typically developing students but is ineffective for students with autism. Firstly, certain students with autism who have language deficits are unable to comprehend verbal explanations of material. Secondly and contrary to Kellegrew’s 1995 finding, students with autism have relatively poor imitation skills which makes it hard to imitate the behavior of their neurotypical peers. Thirdly, most students with autism find social rewards incomprehensible and meaningless. For example, a neurotypical student will be reinforced by their teachers praise, such as “I am proud of you,” whereas students with autism require more of a tangible reinforcer.

Similar to the cognitive differences between neurotypical students and students with autism, there are also individual differences among students with autism. For instance students with autism range in IQ from profoundly mentally retarded to gifted, in behavior from passive to hyperactive, and in personality from gentle to explosive (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). This makes a single classroom model unable to meet the individualized needs of all students with autism (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). As a result, having generic approaches leads to decreasing specialized programs geared towards accommodating needs of students with autism and the particular unique needs of individual students. Not only are these generic approaches in a general education setting ineffective for neurotypical students but it is also unsuccessful for meeting the needs of a wide range of students with autism.

Many of the concerns teachers have for students with autism causes students without disabilities to be limited in their academic progression. Myles et al. (1993)
found that teachers and aids were more prone to assist the students with autism when their normally developing peers were in the classroom. The study showed that teachers and paraprofessionals used prompts and cues more frequently with students with autism to assist them in performing tasks, some of which may have been beyond their ability and skills (Myles et al., 1993). The motivation behind teachers and paraprofessionals assisting students with autism is because they want them to compare favorably to their neurotypical peers. Myles et al. (1993) also found that educators’ concern over the need for students with autism to come in contact with nondisabled peers can overshadow students’ need for skill development; therefore, skill development occurs most efficiently and effectively in segregated environments.

Much of the research done regarding the benefits and drawbacks of inclusion has focused on special education teachers yet, this is a problem considering general education teachers are directly affected by this transition. General education teachers are apprehensive about the idea of inclusion because of their lack of education and experience teaching students with autism. Chang et al. (2005) found that traditional professional development in early childhood education does not prepare teachers and staff to meet the individual learning needs of young children with disabilities. More specifically, Chang et al. (2005) reported that many training programs are not requiring courses or practicum experience in working with children with disabilities, their families, other professionals, or in a home visiting. In addition, a large number of graduates are leaving programs without having had a course or field experience in working with children with disabilities or in related
fields (Chang et al., 2005). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1999), only 49% of public school teachers teaching a child with a disability had participated in a professional development activity related to working with children with disabilities in the past year.

In order to accommodate the needs of both students with autism and their neurotypical peers, general education teachers need to be properly trained and there needs to be classroom modifications. Myles and Simpson (1989) found that the general education teachers’ willingness to mainstream might be strengthened when they are provided with opportunities to select specific mainstreaming-related modifications that meet the needs of individual students. Among the two most desired classroom modifications, reported by general education teachers, are reduced class size and support services (Myles and Simpson, 1989). These findings imply that regular classroom teachers desire information and training in order to become effective instructors for students with autism.

There can also be classroom modifications set up to allow students with autism to have an easier time navigating the general education classroom. Mesibov et al. (1994) suggest that the classroom should be structured in a way that allows students with autism to better understand instruction. These classroom manipulations include the use of extensive soundproofing, isolated and visually bare workspaces, physical barriers that separate play and work areas, predictable routines, very small groups or individual instruction, and reliance on visual and gestural communication (Mesibov et al., 1994).

An additional modification to accommodate the needs of students with autism
is introducing a special education teacher into the classroom. Scruggs (2007) found that administrators, teachers, and students perceive the model of co-teaching to be generally beneficial, to general education and to special education students in both social and academic domains, and to the professional development of teachers. In addition, Scruggs (2007) found that the general education teacher typically employs the whole class while the special education teacher acts largely as the assistant in order to provide the necessary individual attention special education students require. As a result of general education teachers and special education teachers forming a co-teaching partnership, the general education teacher can feel more comfortable knowing that a student with autism can receive the individual instruction he or she may need without interrupting the general lesson plans.

Despite the progress made thus far in promoting the trend towards inclusion there is still a need for further research. Firstly, there is a lack of research on how non special education teachers, who do not have specialized training working with students with autism, feel about inclusion. It is crucial to further investigate how general education teachers would feel more comfortable teaching students with autism in order to introduce additional resources and training to accommodate these teachers. Without the general education teachers understanding of the unique cognitive, social sensory, and behavioral deficits associated with students with autism, these teachers will be unaware of the need to adjust their teaching techniques to accommodate these students.

In addition, there is a lack of research on programs that could be useful in helping both general education teachers learn the necessary skills to teach students
with autism and allow students with autism to have an easier transition into the general education setting. Furthermore, future research should examine helpful exercises that general education teachers can use with neurotypical students in order to avoid the rejection students with autism may encounter; therefore, it would be helpful for further research to be conducted on the role of training neurotypical students on how to be acceptant of students with autism.

Although there is research that provides helpful tips with regards to how general education teachers and students can become more acclimated to inclusion there still needs to be more structured and systematic training in order to successfully integrate neurotypical students with students with autism, such as implementing effective treatment manuals. It would also be important for future research to examine whether students with autism prefer to be taught in an inclusive setting or in a special education classroom. In addition, other features related to students with autism should be investigated in order to determine how certain factors, such as the students' age and severity of the students' autistic characteristics, can effect the ability of the student with autism to learn in an inclusive setting.

To date, research shows that the drawbacks of inclusion outweigh the benefits. The rejection, academic challenges, and lack of general education teachers’ training inhibit students with autism from being able to receive an education in a general education setting. Perhaps additional training for general education teachers, early interventions for neurotypical students on how to be more acceptant of students with autism, and the introduction of a special education teacher into the
general education classroom will provide the means for meeting the needs of both students with autism and neurotypical students in an inclusive classroom. Until then, classrooms should remain segregated in order for students with autism to receive the individual instruction they need and for neurotypical students to avoid interruptions in their academic development.
Works Cited


