

Voices of the Students From a Fully Inclusive Classroom

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Abstract : Introduction: Inclusive education for all is a multifaceted approach that requires system thinking and the promotion of a "Culture of Inclusion." Such can only be achieved through the collaboration of multiple stakeholders at the community, regional, state, national, and international levels. Researchers have found effective practices used in inclusive general classrooms are beneficial to all students, including students with disabilities, those who experience challenges academically and socially, and students without disabilities as well. However, to date, no statistically significant effects on the academic performance of students without disabilities in the presence of students with disabilities have been revealed. Therefore, proponents against inclusive education practices, based solely on their beliefs regarding the detrimental effects of students without disabilities, appears to have unfounded perceptions. This qualitative case study examines students' perspectives and beliefs about inclusive education in a middle school in South Texas. More specifically, this study examined students understanding of how inclusive education practices intersect with the classroom community. The data was collected from the students attending fully inclusive classrooms through interviews and focus groups. The findings suggest that peer integration and friendships built during classes are an essential part of schooling for both disabled and non-disabled students. Research Methodology: This qualitative case study used observations and focus group interviews with 12 middle school students attending an inclusive classroom at a public school located in South Texas. The participant of this study includes eight females and five males. All the study participants attend a fully inclusive middle school with special needs peers. Five of the students had disabilities. The focus groups and interviews were conducted during for entire academic year, with an average of one focus group and observation each month. The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. The data from the focus group and observation were continuously compared for emerging codes during the data collection process. Codes were further refined and merged. Themes emerged as a result of the interpretation at the end of the data analysis process. Findings and discussion: This study was conducted to examine disabled and non-disabled students' perspectives on the inclusion of disabled students. The study revealed that non-disabled students generally have positive attitudes toward their disabled peers. The students in the study did not perceive inclusion as a special provision; rather, they perceived inclusion as a way of instructional practice. Most of the participants in the study spoke about the multiple benefits of inclusion. They emphasized that peer integration and friendships built during classes are an essential part of their schooling. Students believed that it was part of their responsibility to assist their peers in the ways possible. This finding is in line with the literature that the personality of children with disabilities is not determined by their disability but rather by their social environment and its interaction with the child. Interactions with peers are one of the most important socio-cultural conditions for the development of children with disabilities.

Keywords : inclusion, special education, k-12 education, student voices

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