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# EBD in the General Education Classroom: A Misguided Search for Answers

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# SPED 332: Education and Inclusion of Individuals with Disabilities

# December 7, 2011

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Overwhelming confusion surrounds the decision of whether or not to place children with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) in the general education classroom setting. Since 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) has mandated that all children with disabilities be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE); however, the true meaning of the LRE is muddled in the minds of many special education professionals (Hyatt & Filler, 2011). Many believe the LRE is full inclusion in the general education classroom while others define the term as a specific placement which is most appropriate for the student. Nonetheless, IDEA notes that the LRE is the environment where students with special needs can be included in the same classroom as students without disabilities and still receive an appropriate education (Yell, 2012). With this in mind, the uncertainty surrounding proper placements for students with special needs is not surprising. Moreover, the compelling quantity of reciprocal evidence for placing student with EBD inside or outside the general education classroom makes the haze of confusion into a dense fog of indecision.

The current research falls into two clearly defined collections: those in favor and those against full inclusion of EBD students. On the side promoting inclusion, are arguments promoting the legal necessity as much inclusion as possible (Beare & Torgerson, 2009; Lewis, 1994), data suggesting better educational outcomes for students in inclusive settings (Goodman, Hazelcorn, Bucholtz, Duffy & Yayoi, 2011; Maggin, 2011) and a lower level of bullying behavior for students in general education classrooms (Rose, Espelage & Monda-Amay, 2009). Conversely, data discouraging inclusion suggests that general education teachers are ill-prepared to teach students with EBD (Bradley, Doolittle & Bartolotta, 2008; Kauffman, Bantz & McCullough, 2002; Tiller, Varjax, Meyers & Collins, 2010), that children with EBD are often disruptive to their classmates' learning (Fletcher, 2010) and that students with EBD in the general education classroom are often excluded from academic material based solely on the nature of their disability (Jull, 2008). Both parties have equally compelling points in favor of their respective viewpoints, which makes it vital to give the related research a closer look.

Scholarly research related to the legal requirement of inclusion is rooted in IDEA stating that students with disabilities be educated with children without disabilities to the maximum extent possible. This critical element of IDEA forms the concept of the LRE and is often challenged via due process. For instance, Beare and Torgenson (2009) describe a case where "Wally" is tossed from placement to placement but ultimately is most successful in the general education classroom with proper accommodations. The authors take the position that "Wally" should always have been in this environment since it worked at one point in time; however, the parents in the story are often moving and are coping with environmental changes in the household as well as with the schools. "Wally," being an individual with severe EBD, was quickly placed in a restrictive environment when moved to new school districts and due process was used to return "Wally" to the appropriate placement in the modified general education classroom. The authors suggest that the law requires "Wally" to be accepted into the general education environment from the start as part of the LRE. This argument is valid, but with the possibly dangerous behaviors displayed from "Wally" there is no doubt that the school was trying to be fair as well. The case study solidifies the idea that the LRE may definitely be the general education classroom with proper modifications; however, this is a single case study and further research is necessary to apply such a setting to all students with EBD..

A much stronger component for full inclusion of students with EBD is the clear factual evidence that students in inclusive settings have higher academic success in a variety of areas (Goodman et al., 2011; Maggin, 2011). Goodman and colleagues (2011) present compelling evidence showing a correlation between the increase in inclusion for students with EBD and the graduation rates in the same setting. The results displayed that 8th grade inclusion rose from 24.2% to 33.3% and 12th grade inclusion from 39.0% to 61.8% between 2003 and 2008. This drastic migration was correlated to a lesser but noticeable increase in the graduation rate of students with EBD from 15.6% to 16.6% during the same years. Although the graduation rate figures are alarming, any increase strongly defends general education inclusion of students with EBD. Similarly, Maggin (2011) compared the performance of students with EBD placed in a general education classroom with those in a self-contained classroom in the same school. Results showed that students in the general education classroom has significantly better academic success and displayed fewer problem behaviors as compared to those in the self-contained classrooms. The study continued to discuss that research-based practices were not being implemented in the self-contained classroom to a noticeable extent and that the level of praise in both settings was significantly below the suggested minimums for student success. ?

A final argument in favor of inclusion leaves one with little room to doubt the possible benefits of general education settings: reduced bullying. Research clearly demonstrates that students with special needs are subjected to increased rates of bullying and victimization (Rose et al., 2009; Saylor & Leach, 2008). Moreover, students that are pulled out of class for special instruction or in self-contained special education classes are subject to significantly higher rates of bullying than labeled students in the general education classroom (Rose et al., 2009). With bullying having increasingly horrendous consequences in modern society, the threat involved with placing students outside of the general education classroom is immense. The reasons for general education inclusion are clear and very realistic; however, the arguments dissuading full inclusion are equally convincing.

The largest proponent issue against full inclusion resides in the lack of preparedness of general education teachers to adequately support students with EBD. Teachers in the general education system are unfamiliar the basic behavioral strategies that are used to manage a classroom where problem behaviors may exist such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) and response to intervention (RTI) (Tillery, Varjas, Meyers & Collins, 2010). Without these behavior management skills, teachers are left to simply try their best in whatever way they can. Under these circumstances, teachers are spending instruction time to ineffectively modify theses students' behaviors which is reducing the amount of instruction the students with EBD receive (Bradley et al., 2008). The teachers do not demonstrate a negative bias towards the students; however, the instruction time is reduced and becomes less effective. Further research supports the notion that partial exclusion be used to allow time for highly qualified teachers to instruct the students using proper techniques (Kauffman et al., 2002). Nonetheless, this study does not move forward to investigate the efficacy of this kind of instruction. Clearly, general education teachers are not ready to give students with EBD the appropriate education they deserve; however, academic progress seems to be better in these settings. Even so, further implications for the benefits of at least partial exclusion are evident.

Fletcher (2010) discusses the impact of behavioral disturbances by children with EBD on general education students in the same classroom. His research suggests that in the early elementary years, general education students in classes with students with moderate to severe EBD have significantly decreased test scores in reading and mathematics as compared to their peers in general education classes with no students with EBD. This is a compelling argument and one of the first research-based assertions that full inclusion students with EBD may not be appropriate when the needs of the other students in the general education classroom are considered. It is surprising that with the large amount of anecdotal evidence regarding the questionable safety of other students in the classroom with a child with a severe externalized EBD, that there is little, if any, other research available investigating the effects of these students on their classmates. This is a scary variable that must be considered when investigating the full picture of inclusion for children with EBD. Moreover, this possible behavioral element may be leading to deficits in education for the student with EBD as well.

Jull (2008) discusses the academic disservice children with EBD suffer as a pure result of their disability. This would not be tolerated for any other disability. The author gives the best example:

Consider, for example, a school policy which recommended a punitive response – a detention or some other disciplinary action, for example – for children who indicated repeated difficulty with reading as a function of a known learning difficulty. If this were the case, students identified with SEN (special education needs) that included conditions/contexts such as cognitive impairments like dyslexia, would confront ongoing uncertainty regarding their placement in schools simply because of their SEN. (p. 13)

In other words, if a school gave detentions to a dyslexic student for not being able to read or simply provided a time-out for that student, the practice would be expelled immediately. Children with EBD suffer from these kinds of consequences every day. Acting out as part of a behavioral disorder might mean less instruction time for a student with an externalized EBD. , Missing school due to major depression might lead to poor grades for students with internalized EBD. Students in inclusive settings are missing out on their education based solely on their disabilities when teachers do not intend to limit these students. By being at least partially excluded, students might be in an environment that will allow extra time for them to have the instruction missed due to their disability and have no punitive responses to the students' disorders.

Undoubtedly, there is a checkmate on both sides of the EBD full inclusion argument. With clear evidence suggesting better outcomes and less bullying for students in the general education classroom, it is hard to imagine why full inclusion would not be used. However, a definite level of ill-preparedness among general education teachers as well as concern for the well-being of both the non-disabled child and student with EBD creates a barrier to full inclusion.

Certainly, there is no evident solution or the many individuals who look to enhance the education of students with EBD would hasten to disseminate the proper educational setting to all students with EBD. Nonetheless, there is a clear direction for the future of education for students with EBD. Taking into consideration the research suggesting that students achieve higher levels of academic success (Goodman et al., 2011; Maggin, 2011) and are subjected to less bullying in the general education classroom (Rose et al., 2009; Saylor & Leach, 2009), one must agree that if a proper general education setting was available, it would provide the most appropriate classroom setting for any child with special needs. If research suggests that the major components hindering general education teachers from providing this exceptional service is a lack of preparedness (Bradley et al., 2008; Fletcher, 2010; Jull, 2008; Kauffman et al., 2002; Tiller et al., 2010), then training must be the clear answer to develop a solution for educating children with EBD in the most appropriate, least restrictive and best-fit environment.

Currently, many schools are not using the current research-based practices to educate children with EBD although a large amount of research suggests methods that not only work, but work effectively (Vannest, Temple-Harvey & Mason, 2008). In schools where students with EBD are partially or fully excluded from general education classrooms neither the general education teachers nor the special education teachers are using current research-based practices to best educate students with EBD (Maggin, 2011). Moreover, teachers do not even recognize the research-based methods that have been shown to be effective in educating children with EBD (Tillery, Varjas, Meyers & Collins, 2010). With such a substantial deficit in teacher education, there is no surprise that students with EBD are showing academic insufficiencies as well.

Possibly most disturbing is the amount of research that exists regarding the multitude of extremely promising methods for educating students with EBD (Vannest, Temple-Harvey & Mason, 2008). There are empirically researched methods for teaching specific subjects such as math (Alter, Brown & Pyle, 2011), reading and writing (Lane, 2010) and even self-management skills and social interactions (Blood, Johnson, Ridenour, Simmons & Crouch, 2011). Similarly there are overall classroom management skills that can be used in general education classes with students with EBD (or without) that are highly effective including having clearly posted rules, increasing praise and using peer tutoring (Niesyn, 2009). Unlike most highly debated topics, there is plenty of research available to guide the education of students with EBD. Teachers simply need this information to better serve their students.

Research on both sides of the EBD inclusion argument is valid and strong, but both sides can agree that finding the environment where students with EBD can learn the most and receive the least amount of negative consequences along the way is the correct placement for those children. Those favoring full inclusion of individuals with EBD in the general education classroom cite data reflecting better academic performance, less bullying and legal obligation; while those against full inclusion provide research showing teachers are not prepared and students on both ends are suffering. The academic enhancements can be better and the suffering can be lessened by simply educating teachers about the full arsenal of teaching techniques available for properly education and serving the needs of students with EBD (Vannest, Temple-Harvey & Mason, 2008). The research is readily available and it is time for schools and teachers to take the initiative to spread this knowledge. With valid, evidence-based instructional methods at their disposal, general education teachers and special education teachers alike can provide the free and appropriate education each student is promised. The research is done and it is time for educators to reignite their search for this information and take their educational strategies to the next level by using evidence-based instructional methods for teaching students with EBD now.

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