

**Inclusionary Practices for Elementary Students with Disabilities**

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### **Abstract**

This research explores inclusionary practices for elementary-aged students with individualized education plans (IEP) for special education. Three themes were identified: academic achievement through push-in services, secondary benefits of special education services in the general education setting, and power dynamics of stakeholders of inclusion. The paper goes on to examine how practices at Western Washington School District could be aligned with research and then explores implications for future research and transform practice. The paper concludes with a call to action and a positive outlook for the future of special education.

*Keywords:* inclusionary practices, special education, elementary education, co-teaching, push-in services

### **Inclusionary Practices for Elementary Students with Disabilities**

The literature review for my culminating Master of Teaching seminar explores research on inclusionary practices for students with individualized education plans (IEP) through push-in and co-teaching models. The push-in model includes special education educators providing special education services in the general education classroom. The co-teaching model in this research is a general education class being taught by both a general education teacher and a special education teacher. I will focus on students with academic, adaptive, and social IEP goals in the k-5 public general education setting.

When students with disabilities are pulled from their general education classroom to receive direct instruction related to their educational deficiencies, they do not receive grade-level instruction with their general education peers. Over half of the students with IEPs (62.34% in 2021) spend the majority of their learning time (80-100%) in the general education classroom with nondisabled peers (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2021). By law students are not able to be pulled during specialist (P.E., art, and library), lunch, or recess, which leaves time during grade level curriculum for direct instruction. The Western Washington School District in WA is encouraging resource room special education teachers to provide push-in services to students with individualized education plans but does not provide guidelines nor recommendations for which service areas, grade levels, or amount of time. This push-in service model follows a larger nationwide trend to provide more inclusion for students with disabilities as well as the adoption of Universal Design for Learning for all educators in the state of Washington. The research examined in this literature review will compare special education services being provided in a resource room (pull-out model) and services being provided in the general education setting (push-in direct instruction and general educator and special educator

co-teaching models) to determine when each model is most effective. The days of segregation of students with disabilities are coming to an end, but how does that impact direct instruction?

Should all special education services be provided in the general education setting? Or are there specific grade levels or service areas that lend themselves to be served in a pull-out service model? Additionally, if students are not performing at grade level standards in Washington state, they are still pushed into the next grade level, increasing knowledge gaps year after year. With limited guidelines given to special education educators, interventions vary greatly even within the same school district.

The purpose of special education and Individualized Education Plans (IEP) is to close knowledge gaps for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities have legal and ethical rights to access grade-level curricula. Barriers to general education for students with disabilities can be mitigated with accommodations and direct instruction, yet knowledge gaps created by disabilities can take many years to close. When students receive an IEP, the areas of instruction are determined by the evaluation, but the amount of time and setting for specially designed instruction is dependent on the special education teacher. Special education staff members are asked to make judgment calls without scientifically backed guidelines. For students, this may mean that they have little access to grade-level curriculum while receiving services for knowledge deficiencies for many years. This is even more important as general education teachers are asked to weave many subjects into one. Students with IEPs will not just miss grade-level reading instruction, they may also miss the social-emotional lesson or science lesson integrated into the grade-level reading. This leaves students with IEPs in a constant state of catching up on knowledge they are missing. As educators across the nation are increasing their

focus on equity and inclusion, particular attention needs to be given to students receiving special education.

The purpose of this project is to review research done on specially designed instruction service locations and duration for students with individualized education plans with support from a resource room special education teacher in the elementary general education setting. By looking through research on this topic, I hope to be able to provide more scientifically backed recommendations to resource room educators and general educators on service settings and amount of time for specially designed instruction for students with disabilities to close knowledge gaps and mitigate the loss of grade level instructional time.

**Focal questions:**

- What special education settings are shown to be effective to close knowledge gaps for students with individualized education plans?
- Are there benefits to special education services provided in the general education classroom rather than the resource room?
- Are there barriers to successful inclusionary practices?

**Literature Review**

The literature review for this culminating Master of Teaching seminar explores research on the impacts for students with individualized education plans (IEP) in inclusive and co-taught classroom programs in elementary grades. Students who qualify for special education programs receive an IEP to help them reach grade-level achievement. These plans outline service areas (i.e. reading, writing, mathematics, social-emotional), and individual goals and outline where special education services will occur. Since IEPs are individualized to meet the needs of each student, the location of the special education services varies. Over half of the students with IEPs

(62.34% in 2021) spend the majority of their learning time (80-100%) in the general education classroom with nondisabled peers (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2021). The IEP services can then be delivered by pulling a student out into a special education classroom, often called a resource room, or they can be delivered in the general education classroom by a special educator, often called push-in services or a co-taught classroom with a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Historically, children with disabilities were excluded from engaging with nondisabled peers. A movement brought upon by people with disabilities and their families encouraged less segregation of students with disabilities and more inclusion into general education classrooms. This movement has led to special educators being encouraged to provide services alongside their general education teachers (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2023). This literature review specifically focuses on students with academic IEP goals in the K-5 public general education setting who have access to both the general education classroom and resource room settings and outcomes of inclusionary practices.

The first section of this review explores the research on the impact and academic outcomes of inclusion models such as time spent in classrooms, co-teaching, and general background of inclusionary practices. Research has been done measuring the impact of inclusion on reading, writing, mathematics, and science for both students with IEPs and those without. Though much of the existing body of research focuses on middle and high school students, the focus of this literature review is on elementary students. The articles that include older students compare the academic achievement gains of older students to those in elementary school. Although the focus is outcomes for students with IEPs, the literature notes there are positive outcomes for students without IEPs as well.

The second theme that emerged from the literature is the social and emotional impacts of the inclusion model on all students. Many of the studies go beyond academic achievement and highlight the positive impacts of social-emotional learning on students with and without disabilities. Although it is hard to measure, many of the researchers were compelled to include the impact on social-emotional learning in their papers. This led to a further investigation of specific studies on the impact of social-emotional learning in inclusion and co-taught classrooms.

The last theme found in the existing literature is the perceptions of the inclusion model among members of the IEP team (educators, families, administrators, and students). The last section will discuss the perceptions and experiences in inclusion classrooms. The research discussed here highlights the impact educators' perceptions have on the outcomes of co-taught classrooms. The two most impactful elements of education according to Hattie are teacher estimates of achievement and collective teacher efficacy (Hattie, 1992). It reasons to conclude that the perceptions teachers have of inclusion and of each other have an impact on the efficacy of push-in services, especially on students with disabilities. Furthermore, the perceptions students and their families have on inclusion could indicate the future of inclusion advocacy.

### **Academic Achievement Through Push-in Services**

This section reviews research and meta-analyses on the academic impact of inclusive education for students in grades kindergarten through 5. Independent variables explored include time spent in the classroom, co-teaching, and grade levels that are most impacted in the US and internationally.

Volonino and Zigmond outlined the historical background of the inclusion model for students with disabilities in their article from 2007. As far back as 1986, researchers have argued that students with disabilities should be served in the general education classroom

alongside their peers. Volonino and Zigmond highlight that many meta-analysis papers have been published including the first in 2001. The research previous to 2007 only identified six studies on co-teaching and of those, the results were moderately positive. Although this article is more than a decade old, the research has not progressed very far in establishing that co-teaching is a significant improvement for students with disabilities. This article highlights that caution for push-in models has been raised since the beginning of the discussion of the inclusion model.

More research has been done since Volonino and Zigmond's caution, specifically looking at testing data. One variable the researcher group Cosier et al. (2013) examined in their research is the correlation between the amount of time students spend in the general education classroom and academic achievement. The authors reviewed testing data and time spent in general education classrooms for 1,300 students with disabilities ages 6-9 in the state of Louisiana. Overall, there is a positive correlation between academic achievement both in reading and math with longer amounts of time in the general education classroom, but the authors noted that there are many other factors that impact achievement including social economic status and age. This article, like many of the others related to academic achievement, noted that intervention alone is hard to measure as many factors impact students' achievement. Time spent in the general education classroom is the baseline for a push-in service delivery model. This article indicates that a push-in model could be beneficial for students but note that more factors need to be considered.

Similarly, Walsh (2012) also reviewed statewide testing data. However, Walsh included students in grades three through eight who received special education through a co-teaching model in Maryland. Students spent the entirety of their day in the general

education classroom with a general education teacher and a special education teacher.

Walsh uses a larger time span than previous research of testing data, over six years. The data showed a positive outcome for students with disabilities in the areas of reading and mathematics. The author emphasized the importance of administrator buy-in, teacher professional development, and extensive planning time for co-teaching to be successful and increase student achievement. The limitation of this research, like others that solely look at testing data, is a lack of exploration of best practices and perceptions.

For research done in the younger grades, research from Belgium was the closest to my criteria. Tremblay (2013) used testing data from first and second-grade classrooms in Belgium to measure the outcomes of inclusion classes compared to a self-contained classroom for special education. The author highlighted the lack of research done for this age group up to this point in time. Although this study was conducted in Belgium and concluded a decade ago, it highlights the international push for inclusion and research on the impacts of inclusion.

Another researcher to use testing data, Fuchs et al. (2015), used standardized testing data for fourth-grade students with learning disabilities to measure the impact on knowledge gaps for fractions with inclusive intervention and specialized intervention. The students with learning disabilities were compared to a random group of their peers who scored in the top third of their class at the beginning of the study. This was the only study I found that determined that inclusion had a negative impact on academic achievement. The authors used a long study period (three years) but a very narrow subject (fractions). Although this study highlights potential negative impacts on students, it is in such a narrow subject area that is hard to generalize to other areas of mathematics, let alone other subjects.

The most recent study found by Jones was published in 2023 and examined testing data for the whole state of Massachusetts for a decade. Jones sought to determine if students in co-taught classrooms have higher test scores than students not in co-taught classrooms. The data used in this study was from 2007 to 2017 for students in grades 3 through 8. Although this is slightly out of the age group I am interested in researching, the length of the study and the large sample size makes it an impactful study on the topic of inclusion and co-teaching. Jones determined that the data shows that testing outcomes increased for students with and without disabilities in both reading and math, with a larger increase in math. Although there are positive outcomes, the authors note that they are small and do not match the national enthusiasm for co-taught classrooms as an answer to inclusion. The author also highlights that because the research includes such a large sample size, one limitation is that they were unable to identify if educators were using best practices or not.

The most recent research done in the United States that includes students in elementary grades primarily used testing data as a basis for academic growth. While the research based on testing was broad in its scope, looking at entire districts or states, it was unable to determine how the services were being delivered in the classrooms. All three of these studies noted that there are many variables that could have impacted the data. What I found compelling about these three articles is that they used large amounts of data, large sample sizes, and highlighted limitations of their analyses, but I found myself wondering if this is a trend across most studies done on inclusion or not. Fortunately, there are two recent meta-analyses that include research done not just in the United States, but in other similar countries as well.

The authors King-Sears, Stefanidis, Berkeley, and Strogilos (2021) looked at

research that has been conducted between 1999 and 2019 on academic achievement for students with disabilities placed in co-taught classrooms compared to those in the special education classroom setting. The authors added to the existing literature by including all grade levels, including all published research rather than just dissertations, and including all special education settings. They were able to identify only 26 articles in the twenty-year search period that fit their criteria. The conclusions noted an overall positive impact of co-taught classes, and the authors broke the research down by grade level. The authors calculated that the effect size for middle and high school students (0.56 and 0.52 respectively) is more than double that of students in elementary school (0.25). This could imply that it is more important that students in upper elementary grades receive co-taught special educational services rather than lower elementary students. While broadening the research included in their analysis, they were able to compare outcomes by grade level but may have sacrificed the fidelity of research by not using studies that were direct comparisons.

Alternatively, Dalgaard, Bondebjerg, Viinholt, and Filges 2022 only included international research with randomized studies on academic achievement for students with disabilities. The authors limited their search to research done in the last twenty years (2000-2021) but had a broad geographical search (OECD countries), grade range (kindergarten through 12th grade), and disability categories. Even with the broad search categories, the authors only found 15 articles and determined that “all, except for one, judged to be in serious risk of bias.” This article highlights that even when looking broadly at inclusion, there is limited research, much of which is biased. Therefore, it is not just inclusion that supports academic achievement, but rather very specific interventions that are used at the

school level.

One study offered that one-to-one devices could help students with disabilities be more integrated into the general education classroom. Nieves (2020) used case studies to highlight the impact one-to-one devices can have on students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Benefits listed by the author include reading text aloud, supporting oral responses, and mobility and visual supports for students with disabilities. Although the author uses specific examples of how each student in the case study benefited from using a device, the author does not list the age of the student nor a control group.

When looking at international meta-analyses of inclusion classrooms, the limited amount of research that has been done thus far on this topic shows slight gains in academic achievement for students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms, however much of the literature is identified as biased and states external factors such as socioeconomic status, teacher perceptions, fidelity to the inclusion model and use of research-based interventions. With large bodies of research, however, the authors were able to parse out the effect sizes co-teaching has on different age groups of students. This discrepancy in effect size may be why more research on co-teaching includes students in higher grade levels. One conclusion that all of the studies made was that there were no negative academic impacts of inclusionary practices on students with or without disabilities, aside from one research group Fuch et al. In fact, some even noted secondary outcomes of social-emotional gains for all students in inclusion classrooms.

### **Secondary Impacts of Special Education Support in the General Education Classroom**

The second theme in the literature focuses on impacts beyond academics and testing scores of inclusive education on students and educators. Areas of impact included in this

section are social skills, behavior, self-esteem, and underrepresented students. All of these factors are difficult to measure but add to the complexity that encompasses the experience and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Evans and Bond (2020) review the literature of studies done on the impact of small-group instruction on social skills for students with disabilities. The search criteria used included students in elementary or primary school, who had some exposure to the general education classrooms, had a mix of disabilities included in the study, and were located in the United Kingdom or the United States. They identified eleven articles published between 2001 and 2014 and concluded that studying the impact of social skills services in a pull-out model are hard to measure. All of the studies submitted results that were short-term and complex to report. Although some of the articles showed positive effects, the authors noted that since the studies did not account for all variables, the results could be used to implement programs that are not in fact effective. This article highlights the complexities of special education services related to social skills.

Another meta-analysis of behavioral research for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms published in the same year, 2020, by Lory et al. noted many positive outcomes for students, but in all the studies examined, the sample sizes were less than five. These authors noted that peer influence and preferred adult interventions were the strongest influence on positive outcomes. Regardless of sample size, proving that behaviors have changed over a substantial period has been hard to prove with data alone.

In a 2022 case study, Draper uses the experiences of two students with autism to explore the impact inclusion has on students with autism through their experience in a music class. The study takes place in a small school in the Midwest with less than one-fifth

of the school population receiving special education services. The school is a fully inclusive school, meaning that all special education services are provided in the general education classroom alongside nondisabled peers. The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with the special education team, the principal, the music teacher, the two students, and their families in addition to observations of the students. One outcome for one of the students was using his love of music not just in the music class, but also throughout the day as self-regulation, motivation, and focus. Both students gained pride from their accomplishments in music and the opportunity to be leaders in their peer groups. Being included in the music class created a joy and enthusiasm for being at school that could be extended to other parts of their school day. Although this is a very small study in a very small school, it highlights the power inclusion can have, particularly for students with autism.

A secondary benefit of push-in services is the possibility of serving populations who are underdiagnosed with learning disabilities. Arms, Bickett, and Graf (2008) examine the literature on the overrepresentation of boys in special education and how that relates to the underrepresentation of girls. The literature highlighted in this article outlines the negative outcomes for girls who are undiagnosed with disabilities including an increased dropout rate and further problems in adulthood. In the United States girls are often underdiagnosed and without being provided services are at risk of not graduating putting them at higher risk of being in poverty long term. This aligns with the research that identifies positive academic outcomes for students without disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Although inclusive education is designed to address disparities for students with identified disabilities, this article highlights that co-taught classes could also benefit students who are underdiagnosed by providing special educators in the general education classroom.

Some researchers used their own experiences as a platform for exploring outcomes of inclusion. Wilson (2017) used an autoethnographic research approach to explore the impact of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) on inclusive education. Their personal perspective and experience as a mother navigating the special education system with their daughter offer first-hand experiences of the impact of inclusion for students with autism. Similarly, Boveda, Reyes, and Aronson (2019) use their experiences as educators, disabled, and people of color to examine the impact the educational system had on them. While these points of view are limited, they provided an in-depth experience over the length of time spent in the public school system in the United States. The authors also draw on U.S. law, current research on special education and inclusion, and research on the underrepresentation of certain populations in special education.

The authors highlight that more than just academic achievement is impacted by inclusion. Wilson concluded that there are external forces such as systemic racism, underdiagnosis by gender norming, and disproportional support in the public school system that could be mitigated by inclusive education. Boveda, Reyes, and Aronson have similar conclusions and further state that students of color should be included in the decolonization process through inclusion.

Growth for students is very complex and involves many factors beyond testing scores. In addition to increased testing scores discussed in the previous section, outcomes discussed in this section could also positively impact academic achievement for students with disabilities. All of the studies examined so far repeatedly note that a main factor in the success of students in inclusive classrooms is the role of the educators.

**Perspectives of Stakeholders of Inclusion: Educators, Families, and Students**

This section will give an overview of the perceptions of the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom as a system from the entire IEP team including pre-service and first teachers, general education teachers, special education teachers, families, and students. Although the research is divided and limited on inclusion's impact on social and academic achievement, more and more school districts are encouraging special education teachers to provide services in the general education classroom. Even authors who indicate positive outcomes emphasize the importance of administrator buy-in, teacher professional development, and ample planning time for co-teaching to be successful and increase student achievement (Walsh, 2012). Indeed, one of the highest indicators of student achievement for students includes collective teacher efficacy and teacher estimates of achievement (Hattie, 2018). Additionally, the perspective of the students with and without disabilities and their families cannot be overlooked. All of these perspectives add a richer understanding of the human impact of inclusion.

Many of the studies found focused on the perspectives of educators (11 out of 14) and specifically focused on students with autism spectrum disorder (9 out of 14). The studies involving educator perspectives fell into two categories, perspectives of what is and could happen in terms of inclusion and the change in perspectives of inclusion after an intervention has been put into place.

***Educators' Perspectives without Interventions***

The first two studies chronologically that did not include any interventions involved educators who were thrust into inclusion without much preparation, both in semi-rural and affluent communities. Sansosti and Sansosti (2012) used two focus groups (16 participants

total) in a semi-rural district in western Florida to examine the perspectives of educators who support students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The participants were either administrators or educators of students with ASD in the pre-kindergarten to second-grade age group. This study is helpful as the younger grade levels have limited research around inclusion, particularly for students with ASD. This study provided an older perspective of the special education field that felt that inclusion for students with ASD requires more adult assistance for the student and more special education support for the general education teacher. The research made a distinct claim that students who rely on one-to-one adult support are not truly part of an inclusive classroom as they are highly dependent on adult support.

The second research group without interventions sought to find potential indicators of teachers' perceptions of inclusion. Vaz et al. (2015) used surveys of inclusion with teachers in Australia as part of a larger survey on overall perceptions of students transitioning from elementary school to high school. There were no interventions (i.e., training, coaching, partnerships) but rather a point-in-time survey of educators. The educators completed surveys on their level of experience, class size, age, gender, educational level, and training in inclusion. Many educators who participated in the voluntary survey had been teaching for more than 10 years and had class sizes of over 25 students. Although this study was not conducted in the United States, it does indicate that in countries that have had inclusive practices (89% of the classrooms were co-taught), training can help increase positive perceptions of inclusion. The authors noted that one limitation of their research was that most of the schools had families from middle to high-income backgrounds and did not include schools in rural or in inner-city settings.

Alexander and Byrd (2020) included a more geographically diverse sample group, was more contemporary, and asked educators to indicate what educators need to be successful in inclusion. They interviewed 83 special educators across five states (UT, CA, HI, NV, and AZ) with semi-structured surveys to discern what general educators need in order to support students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom. Of those, 25 were randomly selected. The educators were referred by an initial 20 teachers, therefore the surveys may be biased toward teachers who are eager to be heard. The authors found three common themes, core knowledge, key dispositions, and essential skills. Special educators emphasized the importance of monitoring progress frequently and by multiple means. The key dispositions that were discussed were the ability to meet the student where they are to support their needs and be open and compassionate. The last theme was the ability to adapt the curriculum to support learners with disabilities. While these three themes may ring true for many educators, the sample of educators in this study was small, biased, and one-sided.

The last study that did not include an intervention tracked what special education teachers are already doing with students with ASD in inclusive settings. Bolourian et al. (2022) used a mix-method approach to identify the best way to support students with autism through educator professional development. Two focus groups were held, one in CA and one in MA with a total of 18 educators who teach in inclusive classrooms and/or cotaught classrooms. General educators were asked to provide key terms that came to mind when given a prompt (three in total) regarding the inclusion of students with ASD. The three topics included perceptions of students with ASD, strategies for inclusion, and strategies to build relationships. Then they ranked their key terms and provided explanations. The authors summarized 5 themes for each of the three prompts. The first prompt elicited

themes around emotional regulation, fixation, and disconnect with others. The successful strategies used by educators included providing ASD students with a job, visual aids, and building classroom relationships. The strategies to build relationships outlined by the educators were using topics of interest and specific relationship-building tactics like one-on-one time, patience, and safety.

### ***Change in Educators' Perspectives with Interventions***

One way to implement change such as inclusionary practices is to start by introducing the topic and training before educators have finished their teacher preparation programs. Educators who specialize in special education receive such training, but if all educators received preparation for inclusion, it is possible they would be more supportive of inclusive practices. Additionally, once educators are in their first year, receiving the proper support for inclusionary practices could impact the fidelity to which inclusion is implemented. Two studies specifically looked at the outcome of pre-service training and first-year teacher support.

Mchatton & Parker (2013) conducted a longitudinal study on the perspectives of inclusion of pre-service general education (32 educators) and special education (25 educators) teachers in kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup>-grade field placements. All the pre-service educators were provided with an orientation and training and then placed in inclusion classrooms. The authors administered three surveys, one at the beginning of the educators' field experience, one at the end, and a final one a year later. The surveys included questions related to inclusion practices' impacts on students with disabilities, students without disabilities, teachers, and schools. Although this is a small sample size and uses pre-intervention as the control group, the research analyzes the impact training and exposure

can have on educators and the lasting effects. The results indicated that although special education teachers start out with high positive attitudes towards inclusion, the general education teachers made the largest growth in positive attitudes after receiving specific training on inclusionary practices.

King (2022) used qualitative interviews of six first-year teachers in Ireland who have been selected to be leaders in special education and inclusion. The teachers received training in the pre-service program on inclusionary practices. During their first year of teaching the six participants were part of communities of practice to bridge the gap of knowledge of inclusion between research and practice. The author used these experiences to demonstrate how novice teachers can be leaders if given specific training in pre-service programs. Although this is a small sample size, the implications for educators could be widespread. These two studies are small in scope both in sample size and geographical locations, but both show that pre-service training and first-year support positively impact educators' ability to support inclusionary practices.

Another intervention explored by researchers is the inclusion of family support during transitions for students with disabilities from restrictive placements to inclusive settings. Josilowski and Morris (2019) used a qualitative study model to interview 16 teachers to explore the role of teacher-family partnerships during the transition from self-contained placement to general education placement of students with ASD. Both special educators and general educators were selected by word of mouth. This could create a bias towards teachers who feel strongly about their experiences and are compelled to share their experiences. The authors used four opened questions regarding the transition process and then coded the answers. The results showed that the transitions were much smoother when

the families were in close contact and partnership with the teachers. Three themes were identified all related to improved outcomes in the areas of academics, adjusting to a new setting, and adjusting to social differences. While initially, students struggled to adjust, with time, the support of peers and adults, and patience, all the teachers reported successful transitions. The authors recognized the limited sample size and geographic location (one city) as limitations to generalizing their findings.

Ongoing professional development for tenured teachers is a popular intervention for inclusionary practices. Three studies examined the change in educators' perspectives from before training to after training. Kirkpatrick et al. (2020) used the results of questionnaires of a small group of resource teachers and general education teachers (twelve of each) to determine the outcomes of co-teaching. The perceptions of the teachers indicated positive outcomes. The limitations of this study were that the sample size is small, and the data is based on perceptions of the adults rather than testing scores and/or student perceptions. This study demonstrated how co-teaching partnering can have positive impacts if the educators are given enough time and coaching to implement an inclusion model with fidelity.

Similarly in Turkey, Kisbu-Sakarya and Doenyas (2021) provided special education training for educators to support inclusion for students with autism. The research included 763 educators (special and general educators) from eleven cities in Turkey. The researchers assigned about half of the group to be the control group to receive no training. After the training of the intervention group, the researchers interview all of the educators in small groups to measure their comfort level with teaching students with autism in the general education setting. The research took place over several months. The authors were not able to do a second data collection after the teachers returned to their classrooms due to the

limitations of the researchers. The authors did not specify which grade levels the teachers taught but did analyze which teacher had previous experience with students with autism. The authors concluded that while training was helpful, the biggest indicator that educators would feel confident in having students with autism in the general education classroom was the educators' attitudes towards inclusion.

The third study used large-scale data after school district-led training rather than small groups of educators trained by the researchers. Locke et al. (2021) used a mixed method to examine the preparation, implementation, and ongoing fidelity to evidence-based practices (EBP) used to support the inclusion of students with autism. The research started with large-scale data collection of teachers across fifteen schools with a survey of their training in EBP. The authors asked educators to list the training they received. Once the researchers had a list of EBP trainings they then surveyed a larger sample of teachers (360) to measure the impact of those trainings. The educators included general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraeducators. The authors noted that no one EBP works for all students therefore multiple practices must be known by educators to effectively support multifaceted students.

The last intervention is the delivery of tool kits to support students with ASD in an inclusive setting. In Al Jaffal's (2022) mixed methods study used large data collection paired with interviews with general educators, special educators, and paraeducators. They randomly selected 90 educators across 15 schools to complete a survey about training to work with students with autism. Then they gave tool kits to 360 educators across 60 schools and used a survey to capture attitudes toward the use of evidence-based practices, uses self-reflection, and self-reported use.

*Perspectives of Students and Families*

Although the research was limited, the perspectives of those most impacted by special education delivery methods are important to include. Only one study was found that included the perspectives of nondisabled peers in inclusive classrooms. The research done by Mavropoulou & Sideridis (2013) included perspectives from nondisabled peers in inclusive classrooms in grades four, five, and six. The authors had two groups of students: one group who had students with ASD in their classrooms and one group who had no contact with students with ASD. The students in the inclusive classroom had structured interactions with students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) two to three times per day. This is not the full inclusion model that is being advocated by the Office of Public Instruction of Washington, but it gives a small look into how nondisabled peers might feel about students with disabilities being included. Educators in the inclusion classrooms were provided with training for supporting students with ASD prior to the students being integrated into the classroom. Students were asked to complete self-reporting questionnaires at the end of the school year and then again three months later. Students were asked about their knowledge of, attitudes towards, and their level of empathy towards students with ASD. Students in the inclusion group had more knowledge, positive attitudes, and high levels of empathy than the non-inclusive classroom even when surveyed three months after the end of the school year.

One study that included the perspective of families comes from Spain. Simon et al. (2022) used questionnaires to measure the perspectives of students and families on inclusion. This study included all grades of public education from preschool through baccalaureate and families both with and without students with disabilities. The authors did

not use a control group, but rather selected participants from schools who already had established inclusion programs. They classified inclusion as students with ASD in the general education classroom for more than 50% of their day. Of the 323 families, 90 were in elementary school. Of those 90 families, 76 were families without a student with disabilities and 14 were families with a student with disabilities. The questionnaires covered four main topics: 1. Attitude of parents towards inclusion, 2. perceptions of the benefits of inclusion, 3. Power of alliances with families, and 4. Perceptions of the research organization.

Participants were anonymous and volunteered to participate online. While this study was not longitudinal, it took place in schools that were already participating in inclusion classrooms. The results showed that all families had positive perceptions of inclusion, with those with students with disabilities having more positive perspectives than the other families. The authors broke down the results by grade level and for all outcomes, the highest positive responses were from families with students in elementary school.

Lastly, the study I found most moving was that included students who had already graduated from the public school system, reflecting on their experiences. Holmes (2022) interviewed six students with ASD with a semi-structured survey to gain a better understanding of their perspective of their time in the general education classroom. Participants were recruited at conferences for people with ASD in NC, SC, and GA. The author asked basic scaled questions but went further to ask why the participants had selected each answer. The survey questions were centered around the climate of the school and how inclusive they felt their experiences were. The participants were also asked to share their IEPs and any other examples of writing they would like to include. The interviews were recorded, and the answers were coded. All the participants felt that their teachers and peers

did not have a basic understanding or acceptance of ASD. Additionally, most (four of six) did not feel they had enough support to advocate for themselves in the classroom. I like that this study directly asks people with ASD for their perspective, however since all the participants were at the end of their public education, their perspectives may be outdated. Additionally, this is a very small sample size, but the author was able to go into great depth with each participant.

### **Summary**

What the research and meta-analyses have shown suggests that there are, little to no negative effects of the inclusion model. Whether that looks like students with autism spending much of their day in a general education classroom with accommodations or students with mild learning disabilities being provided services in a co-teaching model, students in elementary school have the potential to be positively impacted by inclusion. The literature suggests that the amount of impact is dependent on many factors including planning time, training, and educator perspectives. Further research could be conducted around positive impacts for underdiagnosed populations as well as strategies to support foundational knowledge such as phonics and math facts in the co-taught model. As the field of special education continues to move towards every inclusive model, it is important to note that positive outcomes of inclusion are minimal and heavily dependent on those providing services.

### **Action Plan**

The focal questions that guided my research on the topic of inclusionary practices for students with disabilities included “What special education settings are shown to be effective to close knowledge gaps for students with individualized education plans?”, “Are there barriers to

successful inclusionary practices?” and “Are there benefits to special education services provided in the general education classroom rather than the resource room?” With school districts encouraging special education teachers to provide services in the general education setting and general education teachers requesting more support for struggling students, special education teachers are left with little direction and many students to serve. My research looks to see what provides the best outcomes for students and what stands in the way of those outcomes.

There were three main themes that arose from the research. The first was the impact of inclusion on academic achievement for students with disabilities. The research shows that there are slight gains in academic performance from providing special education services in the general education classroom in elementary school. The second theme was that the researchers have found more benefits for students with disabilities than just academic improvements. Some of those benefits include increased social awareness, an increased sense of belonging for students with disabilities, and serving students who are under-identified for disabilities. The third theme from the research is the perceptions of inclusionary practices by general education teachers, special education teachers, students with disabilities, and their families. The perceptions of stakeholders shed light on how inclusionary practices are being implemented (or not) in the classroom. In the sections below, I use tables to outline what the research recommends for students, what is currently being implemented in a midsized school district in western Washington, and what my recommendations are to support the school district to better align with the current research.

The site of practice that will be used to compare to the research is a medium-sized school district in western Washington. This school district is highly diverse in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Almost 75% of the students are students of color and half of the students

qualify for free or reduced lunch. The district is in the top 50 school districts in terms of students enrolled. The district has only two types of self-contained classrooms: one for students with lower-than-average cognitive abilities and one for students with highly unsafe behavior due to their disabilities. Despite not having a self-contained program for students with autism to fully include more students in general education, the district falls below statewide averages for least restrictive environment (LRE) placements. While the statewide data on LRE for students with IEPs shows that Washington State is meeting the goal of 62% of students with IEPs spending 80-100% of their time in the general education classroom, the Western Washington School District is far below this goal at only 52.4% when not counting the students in the hospitalized setting.

**Academic Outcomes of Special Education Inclusionary Practices**

The research was clear in its conclusion that students receiving special education services in the general education setting had positive outcomes, albeit minorly. However, the success of inclusionary practices is dependent on common planning time for teachers, the use of research-based inclusionary practices, and equal partnerships between general and special educators.

**Table 1**

*Academic Outcomes of Special Education Inclusionary Practices*

Research Recommends	Practices in Western WA School District	My Recommendations
<p>The research recommends increased planning time for general and special educators using inclusion models for special education services to produce positive academic outcomes for students. (Jones, 2023; Walsh, 2012; Cosier, 2013)</p>	<p>At the elementary school level, general education teachers are not given more planning time to support inclusion models for students with special education services. Special education teachers are only given more planning time if their caseload is higher than the union agreement.</p>	<p>General and special educators should be given increased planning time for students receiving special education services in the general education classroom.</p>

<p>The research states that educators should use Universal Design for Learning (UDL), co-teaching, and research-based practices such as small group and phonics-based instruction for inclusion for students receiving special education services in the general education setting. (Volonino &amp; Zigmond, 2009; Dalgaard et al., 2022; King-Sears, 2021)</p>	<p>The Western WA School District encourages the use of and provides training for UDL for all educators multiple times throughout the school year. The Western WA School District also recommends special education services be provided in the general education classroom but does not provide guidance on which delivery method to use.</p>	<p>The Western WA School District should provide training and guidance on how to implement UDL as well as other research-based practices for inclusion, specifically on co-teaching, small group instruction, and phonics-based instruction.</p>
<p>The research states that the co-teaching model that is most effective for academic outcomes for students with disabilities occurs when the general education teacher and special education teacher share an equal role in planning and teaching, rather than the special educator solely playing a supportive role. (Jones, 2023; King-Sears, 2021; Walsh, 2012)</p>	<p>Most elementary resource room teachers in the Western WA School District play a supporting role when providing special education services in the general education classroom. Co-teaching and other models of special education services in the general education classroom are encouraged but no minimum is required of any special education teacher.</p>	<p>Western WA School District and building administrators should provide guidance that supports general and special educators sharing education roles in the general education classroom when providing push-in services as well as guidance on how frequent special education services should be given in the general education classroom.</p>

**Secondary Impacts of Special Education Support in the General Education Classroom**

The research outlined many benefits of co-teaching outside of increased academic success for students with disabilities. The ways in which students benefit from a general education teacher and a special education teacher teaching in the same room with equal responsibilities include better social-emotional learning, peer relationships, and support for populations who are under-identified for needing special education services. While the Western Washington School District is providing social-emotional learning to all students, they are doing so in segregated settings. There are slight changes that this school district could implement to

better serve students with disabilities in the general education classroom including partnering with researchers from local universities and increased collaboration between educators.

**Table 2**

*Secondary Impacts of Special Education Support in the General Education Classroom*

Research Recommends	Practices in Western WA School District	My Recommendations
<p>The research recommends that students with disabilities receive social-emotional education alongside their non-disabled peers as social-emotional gains are highly impacted by preferred adults and peer interactions. (Lory et al., 2020)</p>	<p>In the Western WA School District, social-emotional learning is provided by the general education teacher in the general education classroom and by the resource room teacher in the resource room.</p>	<p>Resource room teachers should collaborate with general education teachers to provide social-emotional learning in the general education setting so students with disabilities are learning alongside and supported by their general education peers.</p>
<p>Providing services in general education classrooms through models like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) could provide support for students who have disabilities but have not yet been identified. (Arms et al., 2008; Boveda et al., 2019; Wilson, 2017)</p>	<p>The Western WA School District relies on the Multi-Tier System of Support (MTSS) to identify students who should be evaluated to qualify for special education services.</p>	<p>All students who are falling behind academically and/or socially should have access to support from a special education teacher in their general education classroom through models like UDL and co-taught classes in addition to the MTSS process to receive services for special education.</p>
<p>School staff should work alongside researchers to conduct research and implement special education and inclusionary practices that have been proven to be effective. (Evans and Bond, 2020)</p>	<p>Teachers are given training on research that has been done many years ago and/or in other regions of the country while local universities do research with large datasets rather than in the classroom.</p>	<p>Administrators should actively seek out partnerships with researchers to conduct research with local special education teachers.</p>

**Perspectives of Stakeholders of Push-in Services: Teachers, Families, and Students**

From the research that examined the perspectives of teachers, families, and students, we know that more collaboration between all stakeholders and more education and awareness will support the success of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The perspectives of teachers, students, and families outline the barriers these stakeholders see to the successful implementation of inclusionary practices. The main barrier seen by all is interpersonal relationships. General education teachers report that they need more support on special educational practices. Special education teachers, especially those new to the profession, wish they had more guidance on how to advocate for students. Research shows that students can transition to inclusive classrooms much better with the support of their families, yet many families are not being invited into the school to lend their support. Students who have gone through the special education process reflect on how they wish they would have been supported in more involved. From the perspectives of stakeholders of the special education program, schools can learn how to better support students with disabilities in an inclusive program by partnering with each other through training, common planning, mentoring, and connections with families and students.

**Table 3**

*Stakeholders of Push-in Services: Teachers, Families, and Students*

Research Recommends	Practices in Western WA School District	My Recommendations
Families and students with disabilities should be included in the transition and support of inclusionary practices for them to be successful. (Josilowski and Morris, 2019; Holmes, 2022)	Families are consulted when Individual Education Plans (IEP) are changed but are rarely asked to be in the classroom or included in problem-solving. Elementary-aged students are not often	When students are transiting into full-inclusion classroom settings, families should be invited to the school to assist with the transition. Student input into the IEP should be mandatory and there should

	included in even IEP meetings. The IEP online program is used as a space for family input but for student input.	be a specific section that captures the wants and concerns of the student.
All general education teachers need training in special education practices to implement inclusion-based education with positive outcomes. (Vaz et al. 2015; Kisbu-Sakarya and Doenyas, 2021; Bolourian et al., 2022; Alexander and Byrd, 2020)	The Western WA School District provides professional development (PD) for all teachers, but only one required training for general education teachers involves inclusionary practices, Universal Design for Learning.	Similar to the minimum STEM PD hours required of all teachers, a minimum special education PD hour should be required of all teachers without a special education endorsement in addition to training in UDL.
Pre-service and new teachers need mentors who specifically outline how to advocate for inclusion for students with disabilities. (King, 2022; Vaz et al. 2015)	All new teachers in the Western Washington School District are provided with a mentor teacher. These teachers meet once a month to answer questions related to current practices and support the new teacher as the new teacher requests. The mentor teacher does not provide explicit guidance on how to advocate for students but rather helps problem-solve day-to-day activities with the new teacher.	The Western Washington School District should create training that specifically outlines the process and strategies for which new teachers can advocate for inclusion for students with disabilities that mentor teachers can review with new teachers.

**Summary**

The Western WA School District has positive intentions of encouraging inclusionary practices for special education, however, the research shows that more guidance, training, and collaboration is needed for inclusionary practices to be effective for students with disabilities. Finding time to plan with partnering educators is always a struggle for educators, but it is essential for general education teachers and special education teachers to have designated time to collaborate to provide meaningful content for students with disabilities. This district works hard

to provide professional development to all teachers and heavily focuses on equity and UDL. For inclusionary practices to be successful, the training must go deeper than just encouraging inclusion. The research also shows that educators are supportive of inclusionary practices but feel unsure of how to support students with disabilities. Educators are eager to learn explicit strategies and evidence-based practices to support the variety of learners in their classrooms. In Western Washington, we are fortunate to have many excellent higher education institutions that could partner with local public school districts to bring research and practice together. Although there are many benefits to inclusionary special education, in practice there are still opportunities to improve the support for teachers and guidance on implementation. I have compared my site to the recommendations found in the literature. In the following section, I will further review the literature and recommendations for school districts and educators by returning to the rationale and questions posed at the beginning of this project. I will also outline implications for teachers, students, families, and school districts.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this project is to determine the impact of inclusionary practices on students with disabilities in elementary schools. As educators are increasingly encouraged to teach students with disabilities in the general education classroom, I wanted to know what impact the location of special education services delivery has on students academically and socially. The early literature claims academic gains, but the few meta-analyses highlight biases (including non-randomized studies, missing data, and confounding impacts) in much of the early research. Overall, the gains in academic performance are slight and have only been studied for students in grade three and above. Students can qualify for special education services in preschool and the Western WA School District encourages inclusive practices for all levels of

schooling, even with minimal research supporting academic outcomes for students in the lower grades. Seeing that inclusion does not negatively impact academic performance, the secondary benefits of increased social and emotional skills for students with disabilities become much more impactful. Researchers who interviewed students with disabilities and their families emphasized the importance of inclusion for the overall educational experience, especially for those most likely to be excluded from the general education classroom, such as students on the autism spectrum.

Although inclusion is beneficial for both students with and without disabilities, it is difficult to implement successfully. Researchers who interviewed both general and special educators found that many barriers prevent inclusion from being adopted universally. Some barriers include a lack of common planning time, a lack of knowledge of specially designed instruction for general education teachers, and a lack of support for how to advocate for inclusion for new teachers with more experienced educators.

The research that looked solely at testing data for large sample sizes showed that testing scores increased for students in co-taught classrooms but were unable to determine best practices. The research that used qualitative data gave perspectives on stakeholders but was limited in the breadth of data. Overall, inclusion for students with disabilities is positive but complicated.

### **Discussion of Findings**

In this section, I will return to the questions that have guided my research. As a special education resource room teacher, I have been encouraged to provide special education services in the general education setting to support a more inclusive model for students with disabilities. Looking at providing services in the general education classroom brought up many questions for

me as an educator. I used three questions related to the topic of inclusionary practices to shape my research for this project. My first question is broad: What special education settings are shown to be effective to close knowledge gaps for students with individualized education plans? I wanted to determine if the special education services provided in the general education classroom are any better, worse, or the same for academic and social-emotional outcomes for students with disabilities. My second question specifically looked at the benefits to inclusionary practices by asking: Are there benefits to special education services provided in the general education classroom rather than the resource room? Finally, for my last question, if inclusionary practices are recommended, why aren't all special education teachers fully embracing this practice? My third question was: Are there barriers to successful inclusionary practices? I will then go on to discuss my speculations of inclusion for students with disabilities.

### *Academic Impacts of Inclusion*

This section will attempt to answer my first question: What special education settings are shown to be effective to close knowledge gaps for students with individualized education plans? Much of the research I found that addressed my first question focused on middle and high school students. Since I work in an elementary school, I wanted to see if the same benefits found in the higher grade levels apply to elementary students as well. In terms of reading and mathematics, the research shows that students in grades three and above see at least slight gains when receiving special education services in the general education classroom in the form of co-teaching (Jones, 2023). King-Sears et al., 2021 specified that for co-teaching to be successful, both general and special educators need to have an equal role in planning and providing instruction. This can be in the form of parallel teaching, station teaching, alternative teaching, and team teaching.

Dalgaard et al. (2022) stated that if the special education teacher is exclusively planning, observing, or assisting while the general education teacher teaches, the outcomes for students were not higher than pulling students out of the classroom for special education services. The benefit of students receiving special education in the general education classroom is that they receive support in the areas where they have deficits while still receiving grade-level content. By intentionally planning together and co-teaching, the special education teacher is able to better align services to grade-level curriculum, so students don't fall behind while trying to master lower-level concepts.

In the Western WA School District, most resource room teachers provide the majority of special education services in the resource room rather than in the general education classroom. The district encourages more inclusion but does not provide guidelines on minimum standards for inclusion, nor which model to follow (i.e., co-teaching, small groups, reteaching). Inclusionary practices are emphasized in training for special educators in the form of differentiation and how to write accommodations and service minutes in an IEP. General education teachers are encouraged to use Universal Design for Learning and to create small intervention groups for students who are at the cusp of being at grade level. The district provides a menu of training during summer institute open for all educators that include special education topics, but requirements are set by the number of hours of training, not on the topic of the training. This means that teachers are not required to take training on inclusion, but rather anything they deem necessary to further their teaching practice.

The Western WA School District has acknowledged that the inclusion of students with disabilities is a priority. It has set goals for inclusion that match the goals of the state of Washington and supports special education teachers who are looking to provide special

education services in the general education setting. To move the learning outcomes of inclusion further, the district could continue to follow the recommendations of the research by providing clear guidelines to special education teachers on best practices of inclusion. Other support the district could include would be providing required training for general education teachers on supporting students with disabilities and increasing planning time for teachers implementing a co-teaching model to support special education services.

### ***Secondary Benefits of Inclusion***

In this section, I will discuss research that answers my second question: Are there benefits to special education services provided in the general education classroom rather than the resource room? While researching my first question, I found articles where the authors highlighted the secondary benefits of having a special education teacher working alongside a general education teacher (Evans, 2020). Students in the study done by Draper (2022) were able to receive support related to their disabilities, build up a feeling of belonging in their classroom community, were more engaged in all areas of the school, and supported the learning of their non-disabled peers. Additionally, researchers pointed out that there are some populations of students who are underdiagnosed and would otherwise not receive special education support without a special education teacher in the general education classroom (Arms et al., 2008). There are social gains that are hard to measure but are still important for the development of students. These types of benefits are not tracked in standardized tests but are evident when interviewing stakeholders in the educational system.

The Western WA School District uses a social-emotional curriculum that encourages the acceptance of students of varying abilities. There is also a system of support for students who are falling below grade level (Multitier System of Support) to prevent missing students who require

specially designed instruction. Next year, the district will have integrated classrooms for all grade levels by starting a new prekindergarten program to support both students with and without disabilities, consolidating self-contained programs, and having a goal of 60% of students with disabilities in the general education classroom for 80-100% of their education.

Rather than having separate social-emotional curricula, special education teachers and general education teachers should collaborate to provide social-emotional learning that supports students with and without disabilities in the general education classroom. Special education teachers could also be included in the MTSS process to recommend specially designed instruction that could support students before they go through the process of receiving an IEP. The continuation of desegregating the classrooms will support the district and statewide goals of inclusion and will need to be supported with increased planning time and special education support in general education classrooms.

### ***Barriers to Implementation of Inclusion***

In this section the research of perceptions addressed my third question: Are there barriers to successful inclusionary practices? If there are all these benefits, then why is inclusion and having special education services in the general education classroom the exception instead of the norm? What are the barriers to inclusion? As with most barriers in education, the barriers center around knowledge, time, and support. The research that explored the perspectives of stakeholders in special education including general education teachers, special education teachers, students receiving special education services, and their families revealed several perceived barriers. Teachers express a lack of specific knowledge on how to support students with disabilities in their classrooms (Bolourian, 2022). Special education teachers identified needing more support on how to advocate for inclusion and how to partner with general

education teachers when starting a career in special education (Alexander and Byrd, 2020; King 2022). The research showed that all parties believe that transitions to inclusive classrooms for students with disabilities work best when the family is heavily involved in the transition process (Josilowski and Morris, 2019). Students who have gone through the public school system with special education support express that they did not feel like their educators understood how to support them and that the students were not involved in decision-making (Homes, 2022).

The school district compared to the research in this paper provides training at the beginning and throughout the year on inclusionary practices such as Universal Design for Learning and the importance of embracing the diversity of students' backgrounds, knowledge levels, and abilities. However, this training takes a high-level perspective, mostly covering the overall theories rather than specific techniques to use in the classroom. Some researchers specifically recommend for inclusion to be successful that all educators have special education training. The allocation of time for teachers to properly plan is the biggest barrier. Trying to create lesson plans that cover the curriculum, that also differentiate for students' knowledge levels, and are engaging takes a lot of time and effort. Even if special education teachers have the knowledge and the planning time, being able to advocate for inclusion with their general education counterparts can be challenging. I have seen this especially difficult for newer special education teachers paired with experienced general education teachers. The Western WA School District does not have a self-contained classroom for students with autism. When a student with autism is transferred into the district, the IEP is reviewed, and placement is discussed with the family. Most often, the student is then placed in the general education classroom with special education resource room support. Students transferring from a self-contained program to the general education classroom setting is a great unmet opportunity for families to be involved in

the transition period for students. Students are encouraged to be included in IEP meetings as well as other benchmark meetings, but it is not yet required. The IEP program is used as a specific section for family input but could be even stronger and more inclusive if it also included a required section on student input.

### *Speculations for the Future of Inclusion of Students with Disabilities*

As more teacher preparation programs offer dual-track programs, I speculate that there will be more teachers who hold certificates in both special education and general education. This will provide a baseline of knowledge for all teachers, but continued education will still need to provide the latest evidence-based practices to move learning forward. Our culture as a whole is becoming less segregated and more inclusive, and I see that echoed in public education. Currently, my district is restructuring the special education department so that more students are pushed out of self-contained classrooms and into general education classrooms. As that trend continues, general education teachers will need more collaboration with special education staff to support students of all abilities. I believe this trend of increasing inclusionary practices for students with disabilities will provide better outcomes for all students when they exit the education system. It is not just students with disabilities who are adapting their learning, but also their nondisabled peers who are learning a larger variety of ways to experience the world. In order for inclusion to be fully supported, research will need to be done on the benefits of inclusion to students without IEPs. Like other civil rights movements, once benefits for the larger collective are highlighted and celebrated, then true equality can be championed.

The future of special education will move more toward inclusion. The laws in Washington state are already more in favor of inclusion for students with disabilities than it was even five years ago. Washington State has designated \$37 million dollars to provide training for

inclusionary practices in 2019 - 2023 (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2023). The state has already met its statewide goal to increase the percentage of students with disabilities spending 80-100% of their time in general education to 60% of all students with disabilities and is now looking to set higher goals. Some school districts are eliminating select self-contained programs altogether with the promise of increased inclusion in the future. The Western Washington school district compared to the research in the paper is restructuring its special education programs for next year, consolidating one self-contained program into one school in the district and promising more blended special education and general education classes in the future from preschool through high school.

With the increase of teacher preparation programs offering dual certification tracks, more and more general education teachers will also have special education backgrounds. It may become required for some school districts to have a percentage of their teaching staff have special education certification and/or special education continuing education training similar to science and technology training. At my school in Western Washington, we are receiving a 0.5 full-time employee position to support computer science education in conjunction with a commitment to more inclusive practices through the Special Olympics of Washington program. Our district also heavily emphasizes and provides training for inclusive practices such as Universal Design for Learning and special education services provided in the general education classroom.

### **Implications for Future Teachers and Schools**

This section will outline what I see as how teaching practices will be impacted by the change of the special education service model to include inclusionary practices. More students with disabilities will be served in the general education classroom setting in the future. General

education teachers will be asked to meet students with disabilities where they are and incorporate them into the classroom regardless of their barriers to learning. General education teachers need to improve their inclusionary practices by attending more training around scaffolding for students with disabilities, alternative forms of knowledge demonstration, and classroom management systems for neurodivergent students. Special education teachers need to partner more with general education teachers to provide differentiation and scaffolded support for students with disabilities. Special education teachers need to participate in inclusive education learning groups that will support special education teachers' partnerships with general educators. Special educators also need training on how to create toolkits to support students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

What worked in the past for the general education classroom will not work for the future integrated classroom. Rather than relying on separate spaces for students with disabilities to be served, special education teachers will need to build the capacity of their colleagues to ensure that students will be successful in the general education setting. Rather than having a set caseload, special education teachers will need to look at each class as a whole and support all students rather than just those with IEPs. General education teachers will also need to give up sole control of their classrooms in order to support a co-teaching model and special education services provided in the general education setting.

The shift in service delivery will also need to be supported by each building's administration. Administrators need to create a building schedule that prioritizes common planning for grade levels. Administrators need to reinforce the importance of partnering by coaching their staff, providing explicit guidelines of inclusion at all staff meetings and giving special education teachers the ability to co-teach. Administrators need to outline clear systems of

support for students with disabilities. All schools should include the special education teacher on the MTSS team to provide solutions to support all students.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Although there is already limited research in this area of inclusionary practices, in this section I will outline specific recommendations for future research. The current research focuses heavily on the older grades (grades 3 and above). Of the thirty articles reviewed in this project, only three looked specifically at pre-kindergarten through 2nd grade. It is possible that the research is limited to grades three and above due to country-wide standardized testing. To further the research, studies should look at how inclusion impacts students in the first years of public education. Researchers could partner with school districts to find meaningful ways outside of standardized testing to measure outcomes of inclusion for our youngest students.

The research in this project looked exclusively at data from students with disabilities, but further research could look at non-disabled peer data as well. Perspectives of students with identified disabilities have been documented, but only one study included the perspectives of students and their families in inclusive classrooms who do not have identified disabilities (Mavropoulou and Sideridis, 2014). Perspectives of students without disabilities and their families could support inclusionary policies, particularly with addressing concerns on the impacts of students without disabilities from their families and general education teachers.

Lory et al. and Draper highlighted the difficulty in studying social and emotional impacts and resorted to the perspectives of students and families. A quantitative study on behavioral insurances could help identify interventions that support social-emotional growth. Researchers could partner with special education teachers and online programs used by special education

teachers for progress monitoring (like Goalbook, TeachTown, and Review 360) to conduct this type of research.

### **Limitations of the Project**

The field of special education evolves quickly in response to litigation, cultural shifts, and research. Due to this trait of the field, I focused my research on literature published in the last ten years aside from two articles that provided a historical perspective up to 2010. Anything published earlier is at risk of not even including the most recent updates to the federal policies outlined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act passed in 2004. The most recent study included was published in 2023. Over half of the articles used for this project were published in the past three years as inclusionary practices are becoming more widely accepted and practiced. The search terms used to identify potential articles were “inclusionary practices”, “inclusion”, “special education”, “elementary”, “push in services”, and “co-teaching”.

In my role as a special educator, I serve students in kindergarten through fifth grade, therefore I was most interested in finding research for those grade levels. The research on inclusionary practices for the youngest students is limited. Federal standardized tests are given to students in grades three and above so the research that looks at testing data is restricted to those grade levels. Although I was most interested in the elementary grades, I included research that compared academic outcomes for the higher grades to the lower grades to put into perspective where inclusionary practices are most impactful.

At the beginning of my research, I excluded research that focused solely on the perspectives of stakeholders but soon found that the research that involved testing data only showed part of the whole story of inclusion. Qualitative research added depth to the body of literature to explain barriers to implementation as well as social impacts for students and their

families. I did not include research on students with unsafe behaviors (diagnosis of ODD and placement in self-contained classrooms) as students with ODD are not currently served by resource room teachers until they are ready to exit their self-contained program.

How people with disabilities are treated is not universal internationally. Therefore, most of the literature I used was researched in the United States. Even within the United States, the research is limited, particularly on academic outcomes so I included a handful of articles and one meta-analysis from countries with similar inclusion policies.

### **Conclusions**

Inclusionary practices for students with disabilities go hand in hand with our society's process of dismantling systems of oppression and segregation. The public education system is rapidly moving toward full inclusion, and we have an opportunity to have incredibly positive outcomes for all students with thoughtful planning and educator capacity building. Even without inclusionary practices, there are students whose needs are not being met and students who are struggling due to being underdiagnosed. By integrating the classroom, we can reach all students and dismantle systems that perpetuate oppression and segregation. My intention with this paper was to explore the best practices for resource room educators because I felt that I was given the direction to implement inclusionary practices, but not given guidance or research backing best practices. I now have a better understanding of what the research indicates, how inclusion can impact students beyond academics and how educators, families and students perceive inclusionary practices.

Educators' hesitations lie in uncertainty of academic impacts both on students with and without disabilities. They are also hesitant to take on students with disabilities without the knowledge of best practices and support through partnerships. The research found in this project

indicated that inclusionary practices could have positive impacts on elementary-age students with disabilities. As such, students with disabilities are being included more and more in the general education classroom and they need to be supported by knowledgeable professionals to ensure they have positive outcomes. For districts and educators to wholeheartedly embrace inclusion, they need training and planning time to support students to the best of their abilities. Families and students are powerful stakeholders and partners in the special education inclusion process, and they need to be included at every step of the progress, particularly during transitions.

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