

## **Behaviors and Peer Acceptance in Inclusive Classrooms**

**By Elizabeth Luna, B.A. Candidate in Psychology**

### **Research Question**

For many years, students with disabilities have been able to be a part of the general education classroom along with many of their peers with normal development, thus called the inclusive classroom. But just how inclusive is the classroom? The purpose of this study is to determine if students with disabilities are truly given an equal opportunity to learn and participate in their daily classroom activities and most importantly, how this can impact if they are treated in a welcoming manner or not. *Is there a relationship between inclusive classrooms behaviors and the level of peer acceptance of students with disabilities?*

### **Definitions**

- **Inclusive Classroom:** Classroom settings in which at least one student has an intellectual disability, physical disability or developmental delay. In this learning environment these students learn besides their peers with normal development.
- **Behaviors:** The positive and negative actions towards others or the way one conducts oneself. The in-classroom conduct, and actions will be collected from both teachers and students in the inclusive classrooms. This includes behaviors such as student praise, verbal and non-verbal signs of approval and disapproval, class participation, engagement, hand raising, verbal or non-verbal responses, and disruptive behaviors.
- **Peer Acceptance:** The likeability of students with normal development for their classmates with disabilities, and the level of popularity determining whether they are socially accepted by their peers or not.

## Background

A study by Avcioglu (2017) reports that, “teachers’ in-class interactive, verbal, and non-verbal behaviors towards their students affect students’ behavior”. Avcioglu’s findings indicate that peer acceptance from normally developing students of those with intellectual disabilities, is directly related to the behaviors of their teacher (Avcioglu, 2017). Peer acceptance and relationships can have a major effect on one’s emotional, social and mental health. As a result, academic development of those with normal development and their peers with special needs can also be affected. Therefore, a teacher’s behavior will likely affect their student’s behavior and motivation in the classroom, as well as the way they are treated by their peers (Avcioglu, 2017).

In addition, previous studies suggests that by using strategies, modifications, and materials, teachers can learn to use developmentally appropriate practices while taking into consideration the abilities of all their students (Gartin et al., 2002). Moreover, previous research suggests that students, with and without disabilities, who were provided “response cards” (such as white boards) to answer and participate in class, showed an increase of 100% in participation in the inclusive classroom (Clarke et al., 2016).

Similarly, a study by Morcom and MacCallum (2012) discusses the importance of participation and inclusion in the classroom, and the difference that feeling included in the classroom activities can have on a child with disabilities (2012). Furthermore, their study suggests that teachers modeling inclusive values for their students, made a positive impact in the way that students behave towards their peers with disabilities (Marcom & MacCallum, 2012). As a result of this positive role modeling from their teachers, the students with disabilities in this

study reported feeling accepted by their peers and even claimed to have made new friends (Marcom & MacCallum, 2012).

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants for this study will include students and teachers in inclusive classrooms in Stanislaus County. Of those students, some will have disabilities, but most will be students with normal development. The participants will consist of elementary school children and teachers (kindergarten through sixth grade).

### **Materials**

To record and measure behaviors, data will be collected through observations. Peer acceptance will be measured by having students write on a piece of paper a list of the three classmates whom they prefer to hang out with. Then, a survey will be used to analyze teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education, their preparedness and the techniques used by them to help motivate peer acceptance during classroom activities.

### **Procedure**

First, observations will be conducted in the inclusive classroom measuring and recording both teachers' and students' positive and negative behaviors. Then, peer acceptance within each classroom will be measured by asking students to write on a piece of paper a list of the three people in their class whom they like to hang out with, study with, and/or play with the most. Finally, a survey will be given to teachers to gather their thoughts on teaching in inclusive classrooms and how they ensure to influence peer acceptance within their classrooms.

### **Anticipated Outcomes**

I believe my results will support my hypothesis that the more positive behaviors that are expressed in the inclusive classrooms, the higher the level of peer acceptance will be for students with disabilities. Therefore, those classrooms in which more negative behaviors are expressed will have a lower level of peer acceptance for students with disabilities.

### **Significance**

This topic is important to study because we can help determine if teachers feel supported and prepared to truly implement inclusion in their daily classroom activities. Additionally, we can determine if students with disabilities or developmental delays are being accepted by their peers and if they are being provided with the best learning opportunities possible for them. In addition, we can bring awareness to the impact certain behaviors in the classroom have on students. Most importantly, so that students with disabilities can be provided opportunities in the inclusive classroom from which they can feel included and welcomed, and therefore learn from the most. If there is a relationship between the level of peer acceptance and the behaviors of teachers and students in these classrooms, then knowing the teachers' reported views on this topic and the techniques used to ensure inclusion, can be beneficial to other inclusive classrooms with students with disabilities. Likewise, the behaviors of teachers and students in inclusive classrooms observed by the experimenter can be of significance, since most of us are aware that bullying has become a big issue in our communities and unfortunately often seems to target individuals with disabilities. If we can help teachers, parents and other professionals find ways to increase the acceptance of special needs students, then our communities will greatly benefit from research such as this one.

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