Mainstream vs. Inclusion: Autistic Children

The controversial issue of mainstream versus inclusion within Special Education has always been of interest to me. However, this interest has escalated as I have begun to research autism and its deficits as well as became directly involved with these children and experienced first-hand their different personalities, weaknesses, and strengths. ASD is mainly characterized as a disorder in which an individual displays difficulties in pretend play, social interaction, and verbal and nonverbal communication. It is known that within autism there are very unique cognitive tendencies in which specific parts of the brain function profoundly, as opposed to the parts of the brain which control communication and social interaction. As a result we often see children with Autism rise above those of normal brain functioning in a specific area such as math, history and memorization, or another specific subject. Because school is such a huge social contributor in a child’s life, it is of interest the context in which autistic children will thrive or struggle. From the research found thus far, it seems to be that a huge theme in both mainstream and inclusive approaches is communication and collaboration between the parents and the teachers, as well as the classroom organization. There seems to be a major emphasis on the way the classroom and teaching style is structured and how well parents integrate this into their homes and children’s lives outside of school. Supporters of both mainstreaming and inclusion assert that educating children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled classmates fosters understanding and tolerance and better prepares students of all abilities to function in the world
beyond school, however, there seem to be both positive and negative characteristics for both approaches.

**Mainstreaming**

Mainstreaming, in the context of education, is the practice of educating students with special needs in regular classes during specific time periods based on their skills. This means regular education classes are combined with special education classes. Schools that practice mainstreaming believe that students with special needs who cannot function in a regular classroom to a certain extent "belong" in the special education environment. Access to a special education classroom, often called a "self-contained classroom or resource room," is valuable to the student with a disability. Students have the ability to work one-on-one with special education teachers, addressing any need for correction during the school day. Many researchers, educators, and parents have advocated the importance of these classrooms amongst political environments that favor their elimination.

In the study, *Co-Operative Learning for Children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Mainstream and Special Class Settings: An Exploratory Study*, it was determined that "mere placement in a mainstream classroom does not automatically facilitate children with ASD to engage socially or academically with their peers" (Grey, Brutan, Honan, McGuinness, Daly, 2007). There must be something other than mere placement that engages these students, and researchers have argued that this engaging factor is cooperative learning: an approach to organizing classroom activities into academic and social learning experiences. The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of Cooperative Learning (CL) intervention on the levels
of social and task engagement of a child with ASD conducted in a mainstream class setting and a child with ASD in a special needs class setting. These two eight-year-old boys diagnosed with high functioning autism, were placed in CL groups which included three of their typically developing classmates. Four standard sessions and seven CL intervention sessions based on a theoretical approach took place, the results, showing major gains in social engagement between children with ASD and their typically developing peers. When it came to task engagement, however, no gains were observed, suggesting that CL does not further better school task performance. As the benefits of CL appear to be primarily social, the question must be asked whether CL is worth the effort that teachers go through to use it in the classroom. The teachers reported that much time and effort was required to plan for a CL session as they took into account the children’s abilities and interests as well as the curriculum and time constraints. Also, the teachers reported finding it difficult to designate appropriate roles to each child for each group task. Both teachers agreed that it was difficult to make the curriculum satisfy the conditions of CL and suggested that utilizing this strategy on a daily basis would hinder the students’ overall task progress. When it comes to full inclusion (soon to be defined) versus mainstream approaches, mainstream has the advantage. Because it is so difficult to adapt to each child’s needs, self contained classrooms and pull out programs help to better fulfill these special needs of children with ASD.

Inclusion

Full inclusion of students with special needs into mainstream classrooms is becoming more popular every day. The difference between mainstreaming and inclusion is that inclusion
would completely eliminate pull-outs and self contained classrooms; special needs for children with ASD would then be included in the regular education classrooms. Students with special needs would still have Individualized Education Programs (IEP’s), however, the efforts to fulfill the IEP’s would be made in the regular mainstream classrooms. Advocators of inclusion believe that children with disabilities should not be segregated from their typically developing peers, and places an emphasis on life preparation and social skills. In saying this, most researchers also found that no matter what environment a child is in, there needs to be support and collaboration between parents and teachers, as well as an integrative strategy the teacher uses in order to fully include and challenge children with special needs and their typically developing peers. The research represented also shows how inclusion provides a supportive environment in which young children can grow and learn side by side with their peers. In the study, *Inclusion Means Everyone! The Role of the Early Childhood Educator when Including Young Children with Autism in the Classroom*, it is stated, “A supportive environment in the early years stimulates learning, and reinforces the synaptic connections which enhance development” (Vakil, S., Welton, E., O’Connor, B., & Kline, L. S, 2009). Supportive environments are based on developmentally appropriate practice where children feel accepted, cared for, and supported not only in their learning, but also in their physical, emotional, and social well-being (Bredekamp, Copple 1997).

Sue Walker and Donna Berthelsen conducted a study in which twelve children from the age of four to five years of age with ASD were enrolled in regular early childhood education programs with a comparison group of thirty typically developing peers. All children were asked to complete the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test to assess their linguistic competence. Two
observations of free play activities were made in the preschool settings both for periods of one hour, where teachers also provided an assessment of children’s peer acceptance and social behavior. Observations made indicated that the “focus children spent proportionally less time than their peers in activities requiring higher levels of social engagement, however, focus children engaged in most types of play but with lower levels of engagement than the comparison group” (Walker, Berthelsen, 2008). The data revealed that the focus children were able to perform the play and social behaviors that were of interest to the observers, however it also indicated the need for greater teacher and parent support to help the interactions of children with ASD and their peers.

The overall effect of full inclusion will be to lose continuous services achieved over years of research, by reducing or totally eliminating special classroom options for students with autism (Mesibov, Shea 1996). Recent statements on full inclusion by the National Learning Disabilities Association and CHADD (Children with Attention Deficit Disorders) have emphasized the importance of the continuance of educational services and individual educational plans for their students; characteristics these organizations see as a threat by the full inclusion movement. A recent report by the Department of Education, stated that learning-disabled students perform better in special classes rather than in full inclusion settings. It is a concern then, that full inclusion hinders the development of specialized programs, while the unique characteristics of students with autism make these programs essential (Mesibov, Shea 1996). This leads researchers to believe that when these programs are unavailable, students with autism may suffer. According to Mesibov and Shea, without specialized programs, teachers of mainstream classrooms may misdiagnose or suggest the wrong techniques because they lack expertise in how
children with autism learn most effectively. Full inclusion encourages more basic strategies by placing students, regardless of their disabilities, with teachers who are required to work with mostly non-handicapped students. Overall, most researchers make the argument that neither the research or analysis of autism and its diverse characteristics supports elimination of smaller, specialized pull-out programs.

**Conclusion**

By the research presented, we can see that both mainstream and inclusive approaches to education, specifically referring to children with ASD, both consist of positive and negative characteristics. Mainstream education benefits children with ASD in the way that it provides separate classrooms and pull-out programs to meet the child’s specific needs and difficulties, as well as integrating them into mainstream classes in an attempt to enhance their social and communicative abilities, which then according to research, leads to greater cognitive abilities. It’s downfall however is that merely physically placing a child into a classroom, but not fully including them in the classroom activities proves not to enhance social and communicative abilities; in comparison, inclusive education seemed to benefit children with autism because it fully integrated them into the classroom and all of its activities where they were able to communicate and have more social relationships with their typically developing peers. The problems with this approach however is that because there is so much diversity on the autistic spectrum, it is almost impossible to meet each child’s individual needs as well as the needs of their typically developing peers. This is why mainstream education is beneficial to students with disabilities, because it addresses the needs of each individual. This research has provided me
with enough information to declare my position in this argument as an advocate of the mainstream approach. In saying this however, it should be more along the lines of an inclusive approach, in which the child is more involved in the classroom. This way, the child has the opportunity for pull-out programs and a classroom or place in which children with disabilities can go to meet their specific individual needs with a teacher that is qualified to do so.
References


