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# Perceived advantages and disadvantages of inclusion versus self-contained classes for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities in high school

Chris Millner

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Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of Inclusion versus Self-Contained Classes  
for Students with Moderate to Severe Cognitive Disabilities in High School

By

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Action Research

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of  
Arts in Special Education At Cardinal Stritch University

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This action research  
Has been approved for  
Cardinal Stritch University by

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## CHAPTER ONE

*Introduction*

The way that students with cognitive disabilities have been supported has evolved in this country over time. Schools and other service facilities that support these students have changed. In the past, students with disabilities were not allowed the same opportunities to learn as students without disabilities. These students were placed in alternative schools or self-contained classrooms. Today, the placement of students in schools varies, as students are either in self-contained classrooms, or placed in inclusive classes with their non-disabled peers for all or part of the school day.

The shift towards a more inclusive classroom setting for students with special needs stems from the desire to educate students with disabilities within the least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE is an important principle of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The intent of IDEA is to provide accommodations or modifications for students with disabilities to help them access the general education curriculum and meet their needs within the LRE which is constantly changing the way classrooms are setup to effectively meet student's needs. The least restrictive environment is the environment in which students with special needs receive their education in general education settings with students of the same age who do not have a disability.

*Purpose of Study*

Schools vary in the services they offer their students with cognitive disabilities. Whether it supports self-contained classes, inclusive classes or a

combination, each school perceives its program to offer the students the greatest chance for success. The purpose of this study was to determine whether fully inclusive or self-contained classes were perceived by the students and their parents to be the most beneficial.

The study examined the perceived advantages and disadvantages of two different educational settings based on student and parent surveys. The participants were two current high school students, one who was in a self-contained school environment and one in a fully inclusive environment, and their parents.

#### *Scope and Limitations*

Limitations of the research study were the limited time in which the students and parents had to complete the survey and the small sample size.

#### *Definitions*

**Cognitive Disabilities:** Significantly sub-average intellectual functioning that exists concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and that adversely affects educational performance.

**Inclusion:** A strategy in which students with disabilities are supported in chronologically age-appropriate general education classrooms in their home schools and receive specialized instruction based on the IEP but within context to the general education course (Halvorsen & Neary, 2001).

**Individualized Educational Plan (IEP):** A plan that documents a student's strengths and weaknesses, abilities, disabilities, goals, objectives, and how those goals and objectives will be measured and met. A transition plan is included in the IEP for students 14 years and older in Wisconsin. IEPs are reviewed and revised on an

annual basis as students develop and their needs change.

Self-contained: A classroom placement where students with disabilities have goals and expectations that are considerably different than peers without disabilities of similar grade/age level and require more comprehensive services to achieve them (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2009). The students placed in a self-contained classroom remain within this classroom for more than 60% of the school day.

All definitions were taken from Lookatch (2011).

### *Summary*

Whether or not a school chooses to offer self-contained or inclusive school programs for its students, it believes that the classroom setting will allow students the greatest possible chance for achievement and success. This research examined which classroom setting two students with mild to severe cognitive disabilities and their parents believed to be more beneficial. Surveys were administered to the students and their parents through email or in person contact to gather data on their perceptions about the advantages and disadvantages of inclusive and self-contained classes.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Problem Statement

Schools throughout the country offer special education services for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities that range from self-contained to fully inclusive classroom environments, and the claim is that one classroom environment is more beneficial than the other.

*Historical Framework of Special Education*

For thousands of years, people with disabilities throughout the world have been academically discriminated against through targeted patterns of isolation and exclusion. Governments began treating people with disabilities by institutionalizing them within asylums, and only recently have governments throughout the world found ways to include these people into the educational system, community and workplace (Martin, Martin & Terman, 1996). In the United States, students with special needs were given minimal services, provided at the discretion of the school districts in which they lived until the passage of PL 94-142.

Very few choices existed for students to receive the services they needed to be successful in the classroom, community and the workplace. According to Martin et al (1996), "Until the mid-1970s, laws in most states allowed school districts to refuse to enroll any student considered "uneducable," a term generally defined by local school administrators" (p. 26). Students might be enrolled within a public school, but thrown into the mainstream population with no expectation of receiving services or entirely segregated from the mainstream.

In 1837, education reformer Horace Mann came up with a solution to a societal problem that faced the country at that time; namely the waves of non-English speaking Catholic and Jewish immigrants into the United States. According to Wright and Wright (2007) there was a fear that these new immigrants would bring, “class hatreds, religious intolerance, crime, and violence to America” (p. 7). In Mann’s solution communities would establish schools funded by tax dollars. Mann believed that, “when children from different social, religious and economic backgrounds were educated together, they would learn to accept and respect each other” (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 7). The hope was that these schools could teach common values like self-discipline and tolerance for others, while also socializing the children, improving their interpersonal relationships, and improving their social conditions.

Some of the first special education programs were designed for “at risk” students who lived in urban slums. The urban schools districts designed manual labor training classes to supplement their general education programs, and by 1890, “hundreds of thousands of children were learning carpentry, metal work, sewing, cooking and drawing in manual classes. Children were also taught social values in these classes” (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 7).

Around the same time the special education movement showed signs of what it would eventually become over 100 years later. In 1896, under the leadership of Horace S. Tarbell, the superintendent of the Providence School District and Rhode Island School of Design, the first self-contained class was created for students with cognitive disabilities. The self-contained design was unheard of at the time, but self-

contained classes became the norm in schools throughout the country (Bahadourian, Hittie, Peterson, Ross & Wilson, 2010).

The Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II in the 1940's saw the funds that supported special education programs around the country dry up. Throughout the country institutions for children with cognitive disabilities began to experience a lack of trained staff while the number of children in the programs rose and overcrowding became a serious issue. New York State schools reported housing over 15,000 students, well over the planned census for just under 12,000 students (Goode, 1998).

In the 1940s and 50s, the curriculum for students with cognitive disabilities began to change as educators went away from basic curriculum stressing repetitive drill and towards manual training skills like carpentry and sewing. According to Winzer (1993), "parents were now more willing to admit publicly to the presence and the needs of their exceptional children (p. 374). On the other hand, teachers and parents began to create learning environments around reading and mathematics curriculum, as well as social participation for students with special needs. Winzer reports that Boston began to use books that had, "content of an interest level two or three grades above the vocabulary level, . . . a vocabulary burden well controlled and characterized by simplicity and frequent repetition . . . print and illustrations--attractive to Special Class children" (p. 374). Teachers were also beginning to receive education and training enabling them to provide students individualized job training and job placement.

Special education continued to grow throughout the 50s and 60s thanks in part to the 1954 civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Supreme Court found that “segregation of schools is illegal because it denies equal protection and equal opportunity” (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 2006 p. 3). This ruling allowed the parents of students with special needs to use it as a basis to file lawsuits enabling their children to receive equal access to education.

With the *Brown v. Board of Education* to guide them, parents continued to fight for the rights of their children, resulting in students who were formally receiving special education services to double, “from just under 976,000 to more than 2,106,000” (Osgood, 2005, p. 5). Even while the number of students surged, advocates stressed that there were still large numbers of students who needed special education services but were not receiving them.

In the 1950s, parents throughout the country met to organize the National Association for Retarded Children (NARC), the largest “community-based organization advocating for and serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families” (Who We Are, 2015, p. 1). Today the Arc has over 140,000 members. In the 1950s it became the first organization to put money into research on intellectual and developmental disabilities. By the 1970s it played a key role in the creation of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act that guarantees free and appropriate public education for all children with disabilities.

President John F. Kennedy played a role in advancing special education services throughout the United States during the 1960s. President Kennedy brought

the federal government into the fray and his involvement helped shape education laws throughout the country. President Dwight D. Eisenhower laid the framework for Kennedy by enacting Public Law 85-926 which used federal support to train teachers so that they could educate students with mental retardation (Martin et al, 1968 p. 26). Kennedy took an interest in special education due to his sister Rosemary who had an intellectual disability. He was proactive in the movement to help those with intellectual disabilities by creating the President's Committee on Mental Retardation (PCMR). According to Osgood (2005),

The centerpiece of Kennedy's legislative initiatives was both PL 88-156, which focused on supporting state initiatives, and its companion PL 88-164. This was a comprehensive act that established a Division of Handicapped Children and Youth within the U.S. Office of Education; authorized funding for continued and expanded training of special education personnel; and provided support for more research, research facilities, demonstration projects, and dissemination activities in mental retardation and other areas of exceptionality (p. 3).

Following the assassination of President Kennedy, President Lyndon Johnson established the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities (PCPID) which was formerly (PCMR) "to ensure the right of a 'decent, dignified place in society' for people with intellectual disabilities (Karimi, 2014). The PCPID continues to serve as a "federal advisory committee to the President and the Secretary of Health and Human Services on matters relating to persons with intellectual disabilities" (Karimi, 2014, p. 23).

Johnson also played a role in PL 89-750, the amended Title VI of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which established the Bureau of Education of the Handicapped and provided grants to states for special education at the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels” (Osgood, 2005).

With the passing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142), all schools that received funding from the federal government were now required to give all children with disabilities equal access to free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. When the EHA went into effect only half of the country’s eight million children with special needs actually received an appropriate education based on their individual needs (Coates, 1985). Schools also were required to start creating individualized education plans (IEP) for the students. IEPs documented the student's disability and stated the services the student would receive as well as the goals the student would be working towards over the course of the school year. “This act was designed to give the parents the exclusive method to seek remedies to any obstacles in a fair education for their disabled child” (Special Education News, 2015. p. 1).

In 1990, the EHA was amended and retitled the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (PL 101-476). This law included early childhood intervention. In 2004, IDEA was amended. It requires transition planning and services that will give students a proper foundation to obtain employment and/or further education and to live an independent life (Special Education News, 2015).

*Research Findings*

Educators have researched the effectiveness of self-contained or fully inclusive classroom settings to find data to help support their argument on which classroom setting gives students the best learning opportunity. Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson (2001) examined written statements from 140 parents of students with severe disabilities. The researchers tried to identify reasons why the parents were supportive of, or resistive to, inclusive classroom settings. Half of the parents involved in the study viewed inclusion positively determined through a Likert scale. Thirteen percent reflected positive perceptions of inclusion through their qualitative responses (p. 473).

Katherine Runswick-Cole (2008) studied parents' attitudes towards inclusion by drawing on the social model of disability to analyze parental school choices. The typology of parental school choice was found to fall broadly within three categories: parents who accept nothing but mainstream schooling for their children; parents who are committed to mainstream schooling for their children, but later change their minds; and parents who never consider mainstream for their children and always wanted them to go to a special school.

LaFlamme, McComas, & Pivik (2002) interviewed students with physical disabilities and their parents to identify barriers for inclusion and to gather suggestions on how to remove those barriers. According to LaFlamme, et al. (2002) "It is our assertion that students are fully capable of identifying and expressing accessibility concerns and should be allowed and encouraged to participate in evaluating inclusive environments" (p. 99).

Ališauskas, Kaffemanienė, Melienė, & Miltenienė, (2011) interviewed 232 parents of students with special needs to assess their thoughts on inclusive mainstream schools versus self-contained special schools. They found that parents of children in special schools reported the school meeting their children's learning needs in all aspects: communication, counseling, resources, etc. whereas the parents of mainstream school students emphasized the need for more specialists such as speech therapists, psychologists, etc. in order to offer more support to the students and more communication with their families. According to the parents in the study, children in special schools, "are less bullied by other children, a child feels they are equal, they feel safer, fewer suffer from learning in a different way than others, parents hear fewer complaints about their child's difficulties, etc." (p. 140). The parents also reported that special school students are more satisfied in their learning and that there is better communication between teachers, assistants and the parents so that everyone involved in the child's learning is constantly in communication with one another

In a study done by Lookatch (2011) she interviewed two students with special needs, one who was in a self-contained school environment, and one who was in a mainstream school environment. The students had already graduated from high school. Their parents, as well as one other parent of a student with special needs were interviewed as well. The goal of the research was to determine the advantages and disadvantages of fully-inclusive and self-contained classes. Lookatch found that student and parent answers varied with some feeling that self-contained classes helped students learn, feel safe and supported while feeling unable to

complete work independently and maintain progress in the mainstream class, even with help from paraprofessionals. Other parents and students found the mainstream class to be more beneficial and felt that it helped prepare the student for life after high school and in finding ways to fit in within the community. Both groups of parents and students believed that students should not spend their entire day in a self-contained class, and that there are times when the students can be in fully-inclusive mainstream classes with their peers (p. 44-45).

## CHAPTER THREE

*Design*

This descriptive research study was designed to survey two current high school students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities in order to determine the perceived advantages and disadvantages of being in self-contained or fully-inclusive classes. (See Appendix A) It surveyed one of each of their parents as well. (See Appendix B) Surveys were adapted from a previous study done by Sara Jean Lookatch in May 2011 that focused on students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities who had already graduated from high school.

Both students who were surveyed attended the same high school, but one student spent the majority of his day in a self-contained class while the other student was in a 100% inclusive setting. Both students were administered the student surveys by the principal investigator at their school after school hours.

The parent survey was administered to one parent of each student. One parent survey was completed via email and the other was filled out on paper before being turned in to the principal investigator.

The principal investigator analyzed the information received through the surveys. (See Appendices C and D) Five categories of response were coded including: (1) accommodations and modifications, (2) advantages and disadvantages of inclusive settings based on personal preference, (3) advantages and disadvantages of self-contained classes based on personal experience, (4) more effective ways to achieve student success, and (5) transition services received.

### *Participants*

The participants in the study were chosen based on a sample of convenience, as they were students currently enrolled at the school where the principal investigator was teaching. Parents were sent a letter inviting them to participate in the study as well as providing information about the study itself.

One student participant was an 18-year-old male senior in a self-contained setting for 80% of his school day. For confidentiality purposes, he is referred to as A1. Participant A1 received small group instruction on a daily basis within his self-contained class setting. His class had eight to ten students with up to seven adults. Participant A1 did not have needs that required one-to-one attention, but did need modified instruction to appropriately address his needs, and an aide or a special educator in any fully inclusive class. The participant's mother is referred to as A2.

The other student was a 16-year-old female junior in a 100% inclusive school setting. The student had been in inclusive classes that were taught by the principal investigator. For confidentiality purposes she is referred to as B1. She had six academic classes that averaged about 25 students per class. Participant B1 did have needs that required one to one attention in class so a special education teacher or a special education paraprofessional went with her to every class to assist her. Her mother is referred to as B2.

### *Procedures*

During a three-week span, the participants completed surveys that dealt with their personal experiences in self-contained and inclusive classes.

The principal investigator sent invitation letters and surveys to potential participants. The parent letters read: "Filling out this survey indicates that I am giving my informed consent to be a participant in this study." The student survey read, "Filling out this survey indicates that I am giving my informed consent to be a participant in this study." Due to the student's moderate to severe cognitive disabilities consent was also obtained verbally to ensure best practice. Since participant B1 was a minor parental consent was also obtained.

When the principal investigator received consent, the survey for parent B2 was sent through email, and was returned within the deadline set by principal investigator. A paper copy of the survey was sent to parent A2 as the parent did not have email access.

Students A1 and B1 were given their surveys at school, but after school hours. The survey for A1 took 40 minutes while the survey for B1 took 25.

### *Materials*

The principal investigator adapted two surveys from a previous study done by Sara Jean Lookatch in May 2011. The parent survey was divided into three sections: personal experience, self-contained classroom settings, and inclusive classroom settings. It asked questions about the settings their children were in and whether their needs were met, as well as requested feedback on how to improve the education their children received and changes they would like to see made to the school setting.

The student survey asked about the student's individual classroom experiences such as what the school setting looked like and courses taken,

transition, and preferred classroom setting. The student survey is found in Appendix A; the parent survey is found in Appendix B.

## CHAPTER IV

*Results*

Two of the four participants, one student in an inclusive environment, B1 and the parent B2, gave feedback through the survey provided that asked whether an inclusive classroom setting is more beneficial to students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities than a self-contained classroom setting. The student was currently in self-contained classes A1 and the parent A2 provided feedback as to whether self-contained class settings were more beneficial to students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. Analysis of the survey responses led to five categories of perceived advantages and disadvantages of fully inclusive or self-contained class settings. The categories were: (1) social and behavioral skill development, (2) accommodations and modifications, (3) advantages and disadvantages of inclusive classroom settings for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities, (4) advantages and disadvantages of self-contained class settings for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities, and (5) transition.

*Social and Behavioral Skill Development*

Participant A1 was enrolled in a self-contained class with peers who had similar disabilities and ability levels. Questions 8 and 9 of the student survey asked, "Are there a lot of other students in your class or classes?" and "Do you have friends in your class or classes?" Participant A1 smiled and said, "Yes about 8," and "Yes!" in reference to him having friends in class. Participant A1's progression through school

over the years saw him remain in small self-contained class settings. The majority of his friendships were with peers from his self-contained class.

Participant A2 reported that Participant A1 developed social and appropriate behavior skills within the self-contained class setting. He attended extra-curricular events like sporting games, dances, and participated in the Best Buddies program. According to Participant A2, Participant A1 had one or two friends within class and one or two friends outside special education. Question 3 of the survey asked, "Is the limited exposure to the peers outside of the self-contained classroom beneficial?" Participant A2 responded, "Yes and no! Kids outside the self-contained class can be cruel." Fear of being teased may have been seen as a hindrance to developing social skills.

Participant B1 had been in fully inclusive settings for her entire school career, accompanied by a paraprofessional to support her in class. According to Participant B1 there were a lot of students in her classes, but she did not have any friends in those classes. Participant B2 reported that Participant B1 had friends in her classes, as well as on the swim team, and outside of special education. Participant B2 explained that Participant B1 has, "had the advantage of learning alongside her peers through the participation of inclusive education." The responses from Participant B2 indicate she felt it necessary for Participant B1 to be enrolled in a fully inclusive setting and to be involved in extra-curriculars so that she could learn appropriate social skills from her peers and develop meaningful relationships.

*Accommodations and Modifications*

Questions 12 of the student survey asked who helped the students when they needed help, to which Participant A1 responded that Mr. Tommy (his special education teacher) helped him. In answer to question 13 of the student survey, Participant A1 reported that an aide did not always come with him to a class that was not self-contained. Participant A1 did not rely on special education teachers or paraprofessionals for help with schoolwork when an aide was not present in a fully inclusive class. Participant A1 stated, "I don't really like it (referring to an academic class outside his self-contained class assist him) because I don't know all of the stuff for my classes. It makes me mad cause I need the help."

Participant B2 reported that modifications were made to help best meet the student's needs. According to B2, Participant B1's needs were met by the creation of an amazing team of people: professionals, administrators, educators, parents, and student, who were able and willing to think outside the conventional way of teaching and testing. The student required additional support both from her own peers and a paraprofessional along with assistive technology, curriculum differentiation and modifications in order for her to be successful in an inclusive setting. With the help of these supports Participant B1 was able to participate in a fully inclusive setting that met her needs at her present level of performance.

*Advantages and Disadvantages of Inclusive Classroom Settings**Advantages*

*Participants A1 and A2.* One of Participant A1's favorite things about school was the opportunity to come to school to see his teachers and especially his friends.

However, he felt that if he had the choice he would rather be in a school setting where he could move from classroom to classroom throughout the day. Participant A2 indicated that students need to be in many different social settings throughout the day.

*Participants B1 and B2.* Participant B1 stated that she would prefer to be in a school environment where she could move from class to class. She did not share any advantages, only to say that she enjoyed Math class, and having an aide come with her because it was helpful.

According to Participant B2, throughout middle school and high school she has been impressed with how receptive teachers had been to making inclusion work. The teachers' abilities to think outside the box and make sure that Participant B1 was fully included with her peers left Participant B2 feeling that nothing could have been improved regarding her child's fully inclusive classroom placement.

Participant B2 listed skills developed in a fully inclusive classroom setting. Skills highlighted were teaching understanding, empathy, appreciation for diversity and differences, and the ability to work with people different from you. There was also the opportunity to prepare each student to be successful in an ever-changing, diverse world. She reported that fully inclusive classrooms allowed students to learn how to collaborate with one another and taught them how to support or aid in specific circumstances.

#### *Disadvantages*

*Participants A1 and A2.* When Participant A1 had been in a fully inclusive class he said he needed an aide with him. If there wasn't one with him he said, "it

makes me mad cause I need the help.” He reiterated that he believed he needed an aide, and without one would not be successful.

Participant A2 also mentioned in her survey response kids being cruel in the fully inclusive class. Participant A2’s self-contained classmates were seen by her to be more alike and more inviting, making you (the student) feel like one of them. One general concern that Participant A2 shared was that regular education teachers should be taught about special needs because teachers without that background become overwhelmed.

*Participants B1 and B2.* Participant B2 mentioned that she would have liked to see the teachers at the elementary and middle school levels be more equipped to work with students’ special needs. Also she felt regular education teachers should be, “given more training on what inclusion is and how it’s facilitated in the classroom.” She also felt that the commitment to inclusive training and practices should come from the district and the school board.

Although Participant B2 said that Participant B1 did have friends in school and in her extra-curricular activities, Participant B1 stated that she did not have friends in her fully inclusive classes.

#### *Advantages and Disadvantages of Self-Contained Classroom Settings*

##### *Advantages*

*Participants A1 and A2.* Participant A1 stated that he enjoyed his teachers and classmates in the self-contained classroom setting as well as the fact that he got the opportunity to do job training both in the school and in the community.

According to Participant A2 the self-contained classroom setting was able to meet the academic, physical and mental needs of Participant A1 at “great lengths!” That setting allowed Participant A1 to work on social and behavior skills, and allowed her son to be successful. According to Participant A2 depending on the particular student’s needs, the self-contained classroom setting can appropriately develop social and behavioral skills due to the consistency that the teachers and the setting bring to the students.

*Participants B1 and B2.* Due to the fact that Participant B1 had never participated in a self-contained class, Participant B1 and B2 did not provide any advantages of self-contained classroom settings.

#### *Disadvantages*

*Participants A1 and A2.* Participant A1 and A2 did not provide any disadvantages of self-contained classroom settings.

*Participants B1 and B2.* Participant B1 shared that she preferred a school environment where she moved from classroom to classroom instead of staying in just one classroom throughout the school day.

Participant B2 did not feel the self-contained school setting was appropriate for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. According to Participant B2, not only should inclusion be for all, not just a few, but also the real world is not self-contained so that classroom setting does not prepare students for the real world. Participant B2 further explained,

I am a full believer than nothing is better than participating in every facet of community . . . regardless the disabilities. Full participation in every facet of

community including school, promotes diversity and learning to live in a diverse world and community is best for all.

As reported by Participant B1 and B2 their beliefs led to the choice of a fully inclusive school setting. Participant B2 stated that she had no experience with self-contained settings, but witnessed other students in a self-contained setting who spent their school days, “picking up trash from around school grounds, walking the block during school hours, leaving school before dismissal time,” as a result of their teachers having lower expectations for the students with cognitive disabilities.

#### *Transition*

Participant A1 stated that he did receive some job training. Question 20 asked, “Do you participate in job training?” Participant A1 responded, “Yes at Pick ‘N Save. This year I will be going to the Jewish Community Center (JCC). I will be cleaning tables and washing windows.” Participant A1 also mentioned that he does go to Trader Joe’s as well for some job training, but mostly he goes to Pick ‘N Save. Questions 16 and 17 asked, “Do you learn to do things that will help you once you graduate from high school? What are some examples?” Participant A1 responded, “Counting money, reading, organizing, helping customers find stuff, be nice to customers.” Participant A2 only stated that Participant A2’s post-secondary living skills and transition needs are being met, “very well.”

Participant B1 reported that she did not work on transition or post-secondary living skills while at school, but did work on reading to children. Participant B2 mentioned that she had Participant B1 work on transition skills over the summer including reading to small children. In regards to transition and post-

secondary life skills, Participant B2 stated, “I don’t want the school to be bothered with this, beyond what is required by the curriculum for typically developing students, as we are more than capable of addressing post-secondary living skills.”

The question of whether self-contained or fully inclusive classes are more beneficial can’t be answered definitely by the above reported research findings, but the feedback gained in this study has shown that both classroom settings have strengths and weaknesses making it hard to determine which is more beneficial. Based on the survey feedback some students and their parents prefer a fully inclusive classroom environment, although there are some drawbacks. Some respondents felt that the self-contained setting is a safer environment, but students need to be around their typically aged and developing peers to gain crucial life and social skills needed to be successful in the adult world.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Conclusions and Recommendations*

The question of whether a self-contained or fully-inclusive classroom setting for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities is more beneficial for students has been asked of educators throughout the United States. Parents, administrators, teachers, and students have different opinions on which class has advantages and disadvantages as compared to the other.

As reported in this study self-contained classrooms offer students the opportunity to learn in a safe environment. They offer students the chance to work with their teachers one on one and with much greater attention towards modifications and accommodations. A greater emphasis on transition and job training for after high school takes place throughout the school day.

Participant A2 reported that kids in a fully inclusive environment can be cruel. Participant A1 reported that he didn't like the fully inclusive class because it was harder to learn.

Guralnick (2001) describes inclusion as, "both the philosophy and practice of encouraging the full participation of children with disabilities and their families in everyday activities alongside their typically developing peers" (p. 31). Collaboration between children with disabilities and their typical peers that comes with that particular classroom setting draws families to full inclusion. Odom et al. (1999) (as cited in Guralnick, 2001) concluded that,

positive outcomes are reported both for children with disabilities and for typically developing children in inclusive settings and that, although children

with disabilities engage in social interaction with peers less often than typically developing children do in inclusive classrooms, children with disabilities show increased social interactions when they are in environments with typically developing peers as opposed to specialized settings (p. 32).

This thinking was behind Participant B2's making sure that Participant B1 was fully included for her entire school career. When Participant B2 was asked if social and behavioral skills can be developed in a self-contained classroom, she responded that because the real world is not self-contained, the self-contained setting does not prepare students for the real world. Participant B1 stated that she preferred to move around from classroom to classroom throughout her day.

Based on the data reported above teachers who work with students with cognitive disabilities are tasked with creating a safe and comfortable working environment for students while also providing the appropriate accommodations and modifications based on each student's individual needs. These needs can be met through either a fully inclusive or self-contained classroom setting.

Fully inclusive classroom settings offer students with and without special needs the opportunity to grow with each other and learn how to work cooperatively and they allow students to teach each other social skills. One line of reasoning found in Participant B2's survey response is that because life is not self-contained, the classroom setting should be fully inclusive so as to fully prepare students for what they will face in the real world.

Self-contained classrooms with their lower class sizes, on the other hand, can offer the benefits of more individualized instruction, more opportunities for one to one feedback with a teacher, more attention to skills and more emphasis on transition and job training both in and outside of school throughout the school day. The self-contained classroom can offer safe opportunities for students to interact with peers who have similar skill sets and similar needs.

In future studies on self-contained versus fully inclusive classroom settings, the next progression would be to interview more parents and students, but not limited to one school. The research should study different school districts to gain feedback on different class settings and teacher styles. Research into different teaching styles in both self-contained and fully inclusive settings could be helpful when determining which is more beneficial. Analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of transition education in both self-contained and fully inclusive classroom settings should be looked into as well.

As school districts throughout the country embrace the fully inclusive model, they should review the benefits of that particular setting. Parent and student feedback should be considered when determining whether to support a fully inclusive classroom model. It appears that as long as students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities are provided with the proper aides, resources and services they should be able to benefit both academically and socio-behaviorally, in the fully inclusive classroom.

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## Appendix A

**Student Survey**

Filling out this survey indicates that I am giving my informed consent to be a participant in this study. Please remember, there are no right or wrong answers.

1. How old are you?
2. What grade are you in?
3. Do you like school? What is your favorite thing about school?
4. How many different classes do you take?
5. What classes are you in?
6. Do you move from classroom to classroom or do you stay in the same classroom for the school day?
7. How many teachers do you have?
8. Are there a lot of other students in your class or classes?
9. Do you have friends in your class or classes?
10. What is your favorite subject?
11. Is your class broken up into small learning groups or are all the students in one big learning group?
12. When you need help on your assignments, who usually helps you?
13. Does an aide come with you to all of your classes or some of your classes to support you?
14. How do you feel about that?
15. Do you find him/her helpful to you?

16. Do you learn to do things that will help you once you graduate from high school?
17. What are some examples?
18. Do you take community field trips with your special education class?
19. Do you take community field trips with your classes outside of the special education class?
20. Do you participate in job training?
21. Would you like to be in a classroom where you stayed in the same room for most of the school day or would you rather move from classroom to classroom?

## Appendix B

**Parent Survey**

Filling out this survey indicates that I am giving my informed consent to be a participant in this study. Please keep in mind, there are no correct or incorrect answers. Answer the following questions.

**Personal Experiences**

- . How many children do you have?
- . How many children do you have with a moderate to severe cognitive disabilities?
- . At what age was he/she identified?
- . What type of classroom (self-contained or inclusive) was your child placed in during the primary grades (kindergarten through sixth grade)
  - a. Was your son/daughter in the same type of self-contained or inclusive class for his/her primary years of education?
    - i. If no, what changes were made?
    - ii. What changes (if any) would you have liked to see?
    - iii. How were your child's needs met?
    - iv. If yes, what types of lessons were taught to the students?
    - v. Was the curriculum/lessons modified to meet your son/daughter's individual needs?
    - vi. What changes (if any) would you have liked to see?
- 6. What type of class was your child placed in for the middle/secondary grades (seventh - twelfth grade)?
  - a. Was your son/daughter in the same classroom environment his/her

middle/secondary years of education?

- i. If no, what changes were made?
  - ii. What changes (if any) would you have liked to see? How were your child's needs met?
  - iii. If yes, what types of lessons were taught to the students?
  - iv. Was the class made up of students in various grades? Various functioning levels?
  - v. Was the curriculum/lessons modified to meet your son/daughter's individual needs?
  - vi. What changes (if any) would you have liked to see?
7. In both middle and high school, what do you think was done well regarding the classroom placement for your son/daughter?
8. In both middle and high school, what do you think could have been improved regarding the classroom placement for your son/daughter?
9. Do you believe your son/daughter's needs are being met during high school? Why or why not?
10. How are your son/daughter's social skills being developed?
- a. Appropriate behavioral skills?
  - b. Transition to post-secondary living skills?
11. Does your son/daughter participate in extra- curricular events (i.e. attend basketball games, pep rally, dances, etc)?
- a. Does he/she have friends within his/her class?
  - b. Does your son/daughter have friends outside of special education?

**Self-Contained Classroom Settings**

1. Does the small, structured classroom environment benefit students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities? Why or why not?
2. Do you believe appropriate social and behavioral skills can be developed in a self-contained classroom? Why or why not?
3. Is the limited exposure to the peers outside of the self-contained classroom beneficial? Why or why not?
4. Do you believe there is more consistency in a self-contained environment with discipline, grading, organization, and parent communication? Explain.
5. Do you believe teachers in self-contained classrooms have lower expectations of their students, which work against helping students to achieve their maximum potential? Why or why not?
6. What skills do you believe can be developed in self-contained classroom environments (not within the inclusive classroom environments)?

**Inclusive Classroom Settings**

1. Do you believe that students' individual needs are met in this type of setting?
2. Do you believe there is more consistency with discipline, grading, organization, and parent communication within inclusive classroom environments? Explain.
3. Do you believe general education teachers are able to meet the needs of

students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities within their classrooms?

4. What skills do you believe can be developed in inclusive classroom environments (that cannot be developed within a self-contained classroom)?
5. In your opinion, do you think that academic and behavioral expectations in inclusive classroom environments are often higher than those in a self-contained classroom environment? Why or why not?

Appendix C

Table 1: Advantages vs. Disadvantages – Student Responses  
 Participant A1 completed his study based on experiences within a self-contained classroom setting. Participant B1 completed her study based on her experience within an inclusive setting. This table is a recording of survey feedback.

Area of Focus	Advantages		Disadvantages	
	Participant A1	Participant B1	Participant A1	Participant B1
Social and Behavioral Skill Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendships with peers in self-contained classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report any advantages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report any advantages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Claimed not to have friends in classes</li> </ul>
Accommodations and Modifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constant 1:1 support in self-contained classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constant 1:1 support in fully inclusive classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not always have 1:1 support in the fully inclusive classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report any disadvantages</li> </ul>
Advantages and Disadvantages of Inclusive Classroom Settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report any advantages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likes to move around from class to class throughout the day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes him mad when he doesn't know what to do in class</li> <li>• Feels he needs a 1:1 aide to be successful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report any disadvantages</li> </ul>

Continued Table 1

Area of Focus	Advantages		Disadvantages	
	Participant A1	Participant B1	Participant A1	Participant B1
Advantages and Disadvantages of Self-Contained Classroom Settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More help from special education teacher and aide</li> <li>• Went into the community for job training and to learn</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not participate in self-contained classes and did not report any advantages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He would prefer to go from classroom to classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not participate in self-contained classes and did not report any disadvantages</li> </ul>
Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works on skills like counting money and organization in the self-contained classroom</li> <li>• Goes to several different job training opportunities throughout the school week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report. Works on transition outside the high school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report any disadvantages</li> </ul>	Did not report. Works on transition outside the high school

Appendix D

Table 2: Advantages – Parental Responses

Participant A2 completed this survey based on her son’s experience within a self-contained classroom setting. Participant B2 completed this survey based on her daughter’s experience in a fully inclusive classroom setting.

Area of Focus	Advantages	
	Participant A2	Participant B2
Social and Behavioral Skill Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They worked on social and behavioral skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaches collaboration, understanding, empathy, appreciation for diversity and differences</li> <li>• Communication skills</li> </ul>
Accommodations and Modifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers knew how to meet students needs</li> <li>• Curriculum and lessons were modified to meet his needs</li> <li>• Looked deeper into his needs and how to address them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lessons were modified and differentiated to meet her learning style and skill level</li> <li>• Supports such as assistive technology, paraprofessional support, additional time on tests.</li> </ul>
Advantages of Inclusive Classroom Settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kids need to be in many different social settings</li> <li>• Children can learn from many different environments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full participation in every facet of a community is best for all</li> </ul>
Advantages of Self-Contained Classroom Settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The students are together and you feel like part of the group</li> <li>• Consistency, students know what to expect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report any advantages</li> </ul>
Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• His transition skills are being developed very well</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reported that they don’t use the school to work on transition services, they work on it together at home and as a family</li> </ul>

Appendix E

Table 3: Disadvantages – Parental Responses

Participant A2 completed this survey based on her son’s experience within a self-contained classroom setting. Participant B2 completed this survey based on her daughter’s experience in a fully inclusive classroom setting.

Area of Focus	Disadvantages	
	Participant A2	Participant B2
Social and Behavioral Skill Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kids in inclusive classes can be cruel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report any disadvantages</li> </ul>
Accommodations and Modifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report any disadvantages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers can lack the requisite training to accommodate the students needs</li> </ul>
Disadvantages of Inclusive Classroom Settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kids in inclusive classes can be cruel</li> <li>• Teachers are not always prepared for special education students and become overwhelmed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers can lack the requisite training to accommodate the students needs</li> </ul>
Disadvantages of Self-Contained Classroom Settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report any disadvantages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusion should be for all, not just a few</li> <li>• The real world is not self-contained, does not prepare students for the real world</li> <li>• Full participation in every facet of a community is best for all</li> <li>• More opportunities for abuse or inconsistencies in regards to grading, discipline and parent communication</li> <li>• Does not believe skills can be developed in self-contained environments</li> </ul>
Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not report any disadvantages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reported that they don’t use the school to work on transition services, they work on</li> </ul>

		it together at home and as a family
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