LEARNING DISABILITIES:
THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL INTERACTION ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR LEARNERS WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

The article pursues literature research on the vital question: to what extent does explicit verbal persuasion, consistently provided by a special education teacher, increase the self-efficacy of students with specific learning disabilities receiving testing accommodations in general education classes?   The theoretical framework seeks to highlight the motivational factor of verbal persuasion and its effect on the self-efficacy of students with specific learning disabilities. Additionally, this framework seeks to address the influence of self-regulatory learning on self-efficacy. Finally, recommendations are offered for classroom implementation.

Keywords: learning disability, emotional learning disability, behavioral learning disability, ableism, self-efficacy, inclusivism

Background of the Problem

Ensuring that students with disabilities have access to and make progress in the general education curriculum is a mandatory responsibility in education today. Its significance is underscored by the convergence of two major federal educational laws in the United States: the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002). Historically, special education students have received a different curriculum than their same age peers, and received limited to no exposure to grade appropriate general education content. This has especially been true for students who have the most significant cognitive disabilities. The National Center on Education Outcomes in 2007 reported that students with significant disabilities have been precluded from instruction in academic standards until recently and as a result educators may not have the necessary experience or training to teach the general education curriculum to this population of learners.

In contrast, IDEA and NCLB require that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities receive challenging instruction in core academics from highly qualified teachers. These laws also require that all students be included in state and local assessments and accountability measures. IDEA and NCLB have caused a dramatic shift in the curricular philosophy and framework for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Considerable agreement exists that this population of students can benefit from raised expectations and inclusion in school wide accountability systems, however, educators continue to struggle with what constitutes access to the general education curriculum and how it applies to students who have the most significant cognitive disabilities. Educators need effective strategies and frameworks to link policy with practice for this group of learning disabled students.

In *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983), the National Commission on Excellence in Education released findings from an 18 month long study that revealed alarming evidence of growing mediocrity in America's educational system. The inferior educational performance of America's students compared to foreign counterparts startled the country, political leaders, and education administrators and ultimately triggered increased federal involvement in education. The report also called for numerous reform measures and recommended that states adopt rigorous and measurable standards for academic achievement. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* marked the beginning of the standards based educational reform movement in America (Browder, et al., 2009).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 is arguably the most ambitious education reform law to date. The major goal of NCLB was to close the achievement gap between all school age children by holding schools accountable to 100% student proficiency in reading and mathematics by the year 2013-2014. NCLB is inclusive of students with disabilities, including students who have the most significant cognitive disabilities. At the signing of the NCLB Act, it was estimated that there were over 6 million students with disabilities in America's schools. Previous to the NCLB Act, many of these students were just shuffled through the system with little expectation. One of the purposes of the NCLB Act was to require schools and the American school system to address the education of these learning disabled students.

Individuals with disabilities have a long history of educational "marginalism" and exclusion in the American school systems. Before 1975, over one million children with disabilities were excluded from public school systems throughout the country. This situation was especially true for students who had the most significant cognitive disabilities and comprised less than 1% of the total student population. For example, in 1967 more than 200,000 individuals with severe disabilities lived in institutions with no access to education and only minimal basic necessities. Many were perceived as incapable of learning; a perception that invariably correlated to the severity of the individual's disability (U.S Department of Education, 2007).

Educators recognized a need for a relevant curricular philosophy and began to use mental age as a referent point in planning for the education of individuals with disabilities. This approach was markedly influenced by a Piagetian theoretical framework and resulted in an adapted pre-school curriculum for

students K-12. In these early models social inclusion and adult outcomes were not addressed. Most children continued to receive educational services in highly restrictive settings. By the 1990's the functional learning approach to the education of individuals with disabilities expanded under the development of an inclusion model (Browder, et al., 2007).

Proponents of inclusion argued that functional skills, especially social communication and friendship, were best fostered in same age natural educational contexts. Early inclusion models focused on language and communication development, social skills and friendships. Largely driven by a discourse on social equity, early inclusion models were based on the ideas that inclusion should be considered a civil right for every student (Browder, et al., 2007).

Yet, there has been insufficient progress towards realizing the goals of IDEA and NCLB for students who have the most significant cognitive disabilities (Browder, et al., 2007). Educators need effective and practical approaches to providing students with cognitive disabilities access to the general education curriculum. Students with special needs, whether learning disabilities or physical handicaps, have not been fully considered and included in the education process and the general education curriculum.

One of the purposes of this article is to provide teachers a conceptual framework for access to the general education curriculum that is appropriate for individual students who possess cognitive learning disabilities and are placed into inclusive classroom settings.

Navigating Emotional and Behavioral Needs of Learning Disabled Students

In addition, studies indicate a relationship between teachers supporting student psychological needs, such as motivation, and student achievement. When analyzing the effect of teachers' motivation on secondary students' homework completion, Katz, Kaplan, and Gueta (2009) identified that teachers have an important role in supporting the psychological needs of students. This study yielded implications for teacher training and suggestions for future study regarding teachers' roles in student psychological processes. Hardré and Sullivan (2009) found teachers, who were internally focused on their motivational approaches towards their students, also placed a greater emphasis on personal teacher-student relationships. Hardré and Sullivan also found that the classroom environment is contributive to student academic achievement. These previous studies demonstrate an interconnection between the teacher, the student, the teacher-established learning environment, and student achievement.

The authors have experience working with students with learning disabilities. In these class settings, students are commonly completing tests and quizzes for general education classes in order to receive the appropriate accommodations as identified within their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). A reoccurring, general statement made by students prior to the acceptance of a test or quiz is, "I don't know this stuff," or "I'm too dumb/stupid to understand this." Unfortunately, the necessity of tests or quizzes is not abolished by the students' negative self-talk. Our research question seeks to determine the effect of a positive and encouraging verbal statement, provided to students with specific learning disabilities, who are preparing for tests in their general education class setting. This question also seeks to further explore the connection between the teacher, the student, and the learning environment, and this connection's influence on student achievement:

To what extent does explicit verbal persuasion, consistently provided by a special education teacher, increase the self-efficacy of high school students with specific learning disabilities receiving testing accommodations in general education classes?

More specifically we wonder: (1) to what degree would special education teachers' explicit verbal statements, representing student's personal agency over the learning process, affect the academic performance of adolescent students with learning disabilities?; (2) how frequently will explicit verbal statements, provided by special educators, encourage the activation of self-regulatory learning practices in adolescent students with learning disabilities?; and (3) to what level of significance does a supportive

teacher-student relationship, yielding verbal persuasion supporting self-efficacy and self-regulated learning, directly impact adolescent student achievement, as demonstrated on assessments for general education courses?

Key Terms

Ableism describes normal assumptions and practices that often lead to unequal treatment of people with apparent or assumed physical, intellectual, or behavioral differences. Ableism is about categorization and exclusion.

Assistive technology is defined as technological tools that allow individuals with special needs reach their goals using their own abilities.

Cognitive disability stems from a substantial limitation in one's capacity to think, including conceptualizing, planning and sequencing thoughts and actions, remembering, and interpreting the meaning of social and emotional cues, and of numbers and symbols (Browder, et al., 2008).

Inclusion in education is an approach to educating students with special educational needs. Under the inclusion theory, students with special needs spend most or all of their time with non-disabled students. Inclusive education differs from previously held notions of 'integration' and 'mainstreaming', which tended to be concerned principally with disability and 'special educational needs' and implied learners changing or becoming 'ready for' or deserving of accommodation by the mainstream. By contrast, inclusion is about the child's right to participate and the school's duty to accept the child (Browder, et al., 2008).

Self-efficacy is a term which is representative of a theory generated by Albert Bandura. Self-efficacy can be defined as the perception of what one believes that they can do with the skills that they have, under various circumstances (Bandura, 1997). Confidence has been informally used interchangeably for self-efficacy. However, the term confidence fails to represent the theoretical basis that has been established for self-efficacy (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). Klassen (2008) describes the findings of three studies which demonstrate that high student self-efficacy is associated with higher academic performance.

Verbal persuasion has proven to be effective in the form of effort feedback for students (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). According to the self-efficacy theory, it is easier for an individual to attain a higher sense of personal efficacy, if another trusted individual expresses confidence in their abilities to perform a certain task or reach a given goal (Bandura, 1997). Also according to Bandura, an individual's allocated effort for a particular task will be likely to increase and be sustained, if they are verbally persuaded by another individual.

Theoretical Framework

The World Health Organization defines disability as "any restriction or lack (resulting from any impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" (2010). Teacher preparation to deliver inclusive services to students with disabilities is increasingly important because of changes in law and policy emphasizing student access to, and achievement in, the general education curriculum. Inclusion of students with disabilities in general education environments has a long history in special education law; however, recent developments have markedly enhanced the implementation of inclusive services as a means to improve the educational achievement and other outcomes of students with disabilities.

Learning Disabilities and Testing Accommodations

Klassen (2008) defines a learning disability as, "…any number of intrinsic disorders that interfere with the acquiring, organizing, retaining, or understanding of information…" (p. 94). Depending on a student's specific learning disability or area(s) of academic weakness, the IEP will identify which testing accommodations must be provided, through special education, in order to meet the unique learning needs of a given student. Lackaye and Margalit (2008) describe that students with learning disabilities have demonstrated lower academic self-efficacy, than their peers without learning disabilities. Feldman, Kim, and Elliott (2011) determined that students with disabilities perform better on tests, and have higher test-taking self-efficacy, when they are provided with individualized testing accommodations.

Social Cognitive Theory

The social cognitive theory ascertains that people have agency over important aspects of their own lives, and through this agency, individuals are able to move themselves closer to the achievement of personal goals (Klassen, 2010). A key element Bandura (1997) identifies is that the individual and self remain one, and thus object and agent are simultaneous. Within this theory are social, behavioral, and cognitive factors that are portrayed as motivators and regulators. According to Bandura, personal efficacy is a key derivative of personal agency. An

additional and relative derivative of the social cognitive theory is self-directed learning or self-regulated learning.

Self-Efficacy

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy, one's perceived ability to perform a task or meet a certain goal, directly influences an individual's performance of a given task. The degree of self-efficacy a person establishes will impact the level of performance demonstrated by that individual. An individual's true level and possession of certain skills can be negated by the level of self-efficacy. The development of self-efficacy has been identified as a metacognitive task (Klassen, 2007). Previous experience, comparison with others, verbal persuasion, and affective and psychological states affect self-efficacy (Feldman et al., 2011). Additionally, Bandura identifies supportive relationships as a factor which will increase personal efficacy.

Self-efficacy has naturally demonstrated a declination upon the onset of adolescence (Klassen, 2007). Additionally, adolescents with learning disabilities are not only faced with the typical developmental tasks and challenges of overcoming this natural decline in self-efficacy, but they are also grappling with specifically identified learning impairments in one or more academic domains. Metacognitive awareness in students with learning disabilities is lower when compared with their peers without learning disabilities (Klassen). With measured lower metacognitive awareness, adolescent students with learning disabilities have a decreased ability to form self-efficacy.

Self-Regulated Learning Theory

Self-efficacy has been identified as a motivational variable of self-regulated learning (Tavakolizadeh & Ebrahimi-Qavam, 2011). Self-regulated learning can be described as, "…capability of active participation in the learning process from the view point of metacognition, motivation, and behavior" (Tavakolizadeh & Ebrahimi-Qavam, p. 1097). Self-regulated learners have the necessary skills in order to manage their own learning processes in the direction of task completion and goal attainment. Gonida and Leondari (2011) claim that in order for self-efficacy to be an effective factor in increasing individual performance, specific skills and knowledge, which may include self-regulatory learning skills, must also accompany accurate self-efficacy stances. Tavakolizadeh and Ebrahimi-Qavam imply that schools should support self-regulated learning practices.

Klassen (2010) reports that students with learning disabilities are less skilled within the two following areas

of metacognition: problem solving and performance monitoring. Klassen emphasizes that remedial instruction for secondary students with learning disabilities should be focused on self-regulatory learning

practices and building confidence to activate these practices when academically necessary. Lastly, a key implication withdrawn from Klassen's study is that verbal persuasion is an effective variable in increasing students' effort allocation when applying self-regulated learning practices.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

Considering the social cognitive theory, self-efficacy theory, and self-regulated learning theory, the following thematic elements can be applied to the stated research question. Through personal agency, students are capable of participating in the learning process and are capable of moving towards their own goals. Moreover, a student's level of self-efficacy does influence academic performance. Lastly, as Bandura (1997) identified, supportive relationships contribute to the formation of personal agency. Lastly, through previous study, students with learning disabilities have shown to have decreased metacognitive abilities, and moreover, have increased difficulty in formulating higher degrees of self-efficacy.

Ableism and Inclusion

Over the past two decades, more and more students with disabilities have been educated for more of the day in regular education classrooms. This movement largely has been positive for most students with cognitive disabilities and has supported the broader goal of societal integration for people with disabilities as all children learn that disability is a natural element of human diversity. The inclusion movement in K-12 education has been supported by research that demonstrates that well-implemented inclusionary approaches are superior to fully segregated placement for most disabled students (Browder, et al., 2008).

Ableism provides a useful perspective through which the inclusion issue can be resolved. First, there needs to be a recognition that education plays a central role in integrating disabled people in all aspects of society both by giving children the education they need to compete and by demonstrating to nondisabled children that disability is a natural aspect of life. Central to this role is the need for students with disabilities to have access to the same curriculum provided to nondisabled children. In addition, education plays a vital role in building communities in which disabled children must be included. Therefore, for most children with disabilities, integration into regular classes with appropriate accommodations and support should be the norm (Browder, et al., 2009).

The inclusion movement in education has supported the overall disability movement's goal of promoting societal integration, using integration in schooling as a means to achieve this result. The strong legal preference for placement in regular classes, coupled with the political movement of disability activists and parents, has resulted in significant positive change for students with disabilities, who are moving on to jobs and accessing higher education at unprecedented levels. Virtually, every school has had to confront the issue of inclusion as parents seek integration for their children with disabilities (Turnbull et. al., 2007).

First and foremost, our goal should be to maximize the educational development of all disabled students to enable them to fully participate in all aspects of education and life. We need to also recognize that education plays a central role in changing the society which disabled students live and operate. We also need to realize that all students do not have the capacity to learn through a traditional education curriculum. It is imperative that, coupled with inclusive classrooms, educators adjust and modify classroom curriculum to assist teachers in handling the inclusive classroom (Dymond et. al., 2007).

Teacher Preparedness

Traditional belief regarding learners with disabilities is that they require special teaching and special settings with which to be taught. For them, the special education view is that teaching in ordinary ways and being taught by ordinary teachers is not sufficient. Adequate and appropriate resources, support for both students and teachers, teacher training and planning time, and a commitment to a vision of success for all students is vital to the success of inclusive curriculum development and programming. As the education of all students occurs more frequently within the standard classroom in the inclusion environment, the concepts of teaching and learning that incorporate assistive technology approaches and accommodations become more important (Browder, et al., 2009).

In order to prepare teachers for curriculum development within inclusive classroom settings, the teacher must be a partner in development and implementation of all curricula. The development of inclusive classroom curriculum, along with the collaboration of educators, administrators, and parents, add complexity to educational programs and add additional teacher roles and responsibilities. Collaborative teaching arrangements require a belief that all students can learn, coupled with competent communication and problem-solving skills (Friend & Bursuck, 2006).

Improved integration of students with disabilities into the general education classroom is challenging. Physical presence alone does not lead automatically to effective participation and improved achievement. Genuine access and improved achievement are largely dependent on the relevant competencies of the teachers. The availability of highly qualified teachers with broad competencies to offer diverse instructional strategies is essential to improved results in inclusive services. Improved teacher preparation programs and professional development activities are necessary for realizing the goals of inclusive services, specifically, improving results for students with disabilities (Dymond et. al., 2007).

Separate general and special education teacher preparation programs and services contribute to the barriers experienced with inclusion. A few general and special education teacher preparation programs are unifying the training of general and special educators through overlapping courses and field experiences. Several teacher preparation programs have explored the use of combined general and special education training efforts. Results within these programs suggest a positive influence on the willingness, knowledge, and skills of general and special education teacher candidates (Van Laarhoven et al., 2006).

Teaching Theories

With the difficulties that teachers face in inclusive classrooms, teachers must be aware of their teaching philosophies, styles, and theories and which work best in their particular classroom. Two of the most noted developmental psychologists, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, are credited with developing learning theories that have proven to be successful in inclusive classrooms. "It is widely accepted in the educational field that children must go through the process of learning to think and thinking to learn; therefore, teachers, who can incorporate the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky into their teaching strategies, will be better able to increase student achievement in inclusive classroom settings" (Turnbull et. al., 2007, p. 21).

Piaget advocated learning as construction, and his theory refers to qualitative periods or stages of development and encourages hands-on learning. Conversely, Vygotsky believed in the "activity theory perspective that sees learning as appropriation" (Dahl, 1996, p. 2). Vygotsky's theory promotes gradual changes using social contact and language which gradually changes with development (Utah Education Network, 2005). He believed the learner constructed his or her own knowledge by interacting with other individuals.

Piaget believed individuals must adapt to their environment. He described two processes for adaptation, which is an organism's ability to fit in with its environment, assimilation and accommodation (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). Assimilation is the process of using or transforming the environment so

that it can be placed in preexisting cognitive structures. Further, it is the process of changing cognitive structures in order to accept something from the environment. It changes the schema, so it can increase its efficiency (Campbell, 2006).

By using Piaget's theory in the inclusive classroom, teachers and students benefit in several ways. Teachers develop a better understanding of their students' thinking; consequently, they can also align their teaching strategies with their students' cognitive level with their ultimate goal being to help the individual construct knowledge. "Educators create, implement, and assess the curriculum being taught, assuming throughout the process that students can conserve constancies. If students lack this ability, they will not benefit academically because they have limited concrete sensory data and literal interpretations, thus, they will experience difficulty in thinking abstractly, problem-solving, planning, and discerning relevance" (Garner, 2008, p. 35).

Vygotsky's theory was that "social interaction plays an important role in student learning. It is through social interaction that students learn from each other" (Woolfolk, 2009, p. 273). Vygotsky explored three different types of speech: social, private, and internal. He referred to social speech as the instructions given by adults to children. Private speech allows children to process what the adult has said and try to apply it to similar situations. Self-control is an example of private speech because children are using for themselves the same "language that adults use to regulate behavior" (Wilhelm, 2001, p. 11). For example, a teacher tells the class to keep their hands to themselves. So, since their teacher has informed the class to keep their hands to themselves, the students do not hit or punch each other in class. Both teacher and student share the responsibility of developing students' private speech. Internal or inner speech takes place "as the student's silent, abbreviated dialogue that they carry on with themselves that is the essence of conscious mental activity" (Wilhelm, 2001, p. 11).

Vygotsky's central topic was the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which uses social interaction with others who are more knowledgeable to move development forward. "A more capable person, such as teacher or peer, provides assistance to the student; the student is able to complete the task with this assistance. Students, who are in the ZPD, need active teaching; therefore, Vygotsky's theory promotes the ideal that "what is learned must be taught" (Wilhelm, 2001, p.8).

In today's classrooms, teachers need to design lessons that empower students to "make meaning through mindful manipulation of input" (Fogarty, 1999, p. 78). Thus, administrators must provide teachers with the effective professional development, resources, and supplies they need to be effective. By successfully incorporating Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories into the inclusive classroom, developmental psychology in education can positively impact student achievement. "When our students have the cognitive foundation to learn how to learn, they can discover what else is "out there" in our world" (Garner, 2008, p. 38).

Recommendations

Inclusion of students with disabilities requires the provision of curriculum and classroom adaptations. But
inclusion does not require that the student with special needs perform at a level comparable to peers without disabilities. If teachers collaborate to employ such options through carefully planned instruction, they can include students with severe disabilities in general education settings in meaningful ways for all students.

Even though Piaget and Vygotsky hold different views concerning developmental psychology, the use of both theories in inclusive classrooms can be advantageous. If teachers have a solid understanding of Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories, develop their teaching philosophy accordingly, and construct their teaching styles to incorporate these theories, students are provided with more opportunities to learn with their peers.

Improved integration of students with disabilities into the general education classroom is challenging. Physical presence alone does not lead automatically to effective participation and improved

achievement. Genuine access and improved achievement are largely dependent on the relevant competencies of the teachers. The availability of highly qualified teachers with broad competencies to offer diverse instructional strategies is essential to improved results in inclusive services. Improved teacher preparation programs and professional development activities are necessary for realizing the goals of inclusive services, specifically, improving results for students with disabilities. Every child has the right to learn the general education curriculum and whenever possible this needs to occur in the inclusive classroom. Students with severe disabilities may receptively understand more than they can expressively communicate.

Conclusion

Within the classroom, teachers have the opportunity to provide the social cognitive motivator of verbal persuasion. From the proposed research question, educators could benefit from implications which emphasize the provision of verbal persuasion to secondary students with learning disabilities. Also, since self-efficacy has proven to directly influence academic performance and students with learning disabilities have demonstrated to have lower metacognitive abilities, the process of enhancing self-efficacy within students with learning disabilities is a critical area which requires further investigation. Relatively, the independent effect of verbal persuasion on the academic performance of students with learning disabilities is an area which requires specific review. Klassen (2010) implies, verbal persuasion, yielding an increase in self-regulatory learning practices, requires further study.

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