

Chapter 5

Exploring the Perspectives of Teachers, Parents, and Students in an Inclusive Education Setting

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ABSTRACT

Autism spectrum disorder or autism is a disorder that affects the people living with it in different ways. The outcome of a person living with autism's life is affected by recent federal law and available support. Inclusion is an educational practice designed to provide support and opportunities for students to increase their functionality in all areas of their life. This chapter focuses on the perspectives of the student living with autism and the stakeholders in their lives as they participate in the inclusive education setting. It explores the perspectives of teachers, parents, and students, through research and first-hand experience, as they navigate autistic behaviors and offers strategies and solutions for challenging behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder or Autism “refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech, and nonverbal communication” (Autism Speaks, 2022). People who live with these challenges display a “persistent deficit in reciprocal social communication and interaction, including responding inappropriately to conversations, misreading nonverbal interbehaviors and experiencing difficulties in building age-appropriate friendships” (Anglim, Prendeville, Kinsella, 2017). Although there are benefits, which will be discussed later, the challenges that the person living with Autism faces and the strategies that can be employed to minimize them often take precedence in discussions centered on Autism.

The challenges can outweigh the benefits if strategies are not implemented early in the person's life (Autism Speaks, 2022). As a researcher, an educator, and the parent of a child with Autism, I can attest that the challenges and the benefits of Autism affect all areas of the life of the individual who has it and

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the stakeholders in the person's life. It affects their level of communication, ability to function daily, and academic abilities. This chapter focuses on the challenges of Autism through many different lenses. It will explore the perspectives and perceptions of the stakeholders involved in the student living with Autism's life with a focus on Inclusion a strategy used to educate students with special needs, including Autism. The researcher will explore these perspectives and perceptions by sharing research on these topics as well as sharing her own experiences both as a mother to a child with Autism and as a teacher of students living with Autism.

BACKGROUND

Society's perception of people with special needs has changed greatly over the years. In the early 1800s, the perception of society was that people with special needs were and would continue to be dependent on another person, so institutions were built to teach the skills needed in order for them to become more independent (Francisco et al., 2020). In 1837 public education was invented "with the goal of 'Americanization' of students" (Francisco et al., 2020, p. 2) and students with disabilities were educated, but due to the perceptions of the capacity for learning, "the curriculum in institutions that housed individuals with disabilities was differentiated from that of 'normal' public schools" (Francisco et al., 2020, p. 2).

Throughout the 1800s, society's perception of students with disabilities changed from a sense of it being necessary for society to have a hand in teaching them to be independent to several court cases deciding that the new compulsory education laws did not apply to students with special needs (Francisco et al., 2020). "The trend shifted from isolation to integration in the early 1900s as society's perceptions of disability changed" (Francisco et al., 2020, p. 3). Although this did not mean the integration of students with special needs into general education classrooms, it did mean that the students were "transferred to special classes with a smaller teacher-to-student ratio, which allowed for individualized instruction and was seen to be more beneficial to individuals with disabilities" (Francisco et al., 2020, p. 3).

However, during the 1930s and 40s, society's perception of students with special needs began to change negatively due to labeling and segregation within schools (Francisco et al., 2020). This lack of support led to a "watered-down curriculum and inadequate resources for special education classrooms" (Francisco et al., 2020, p. 3). Due to society's negative perceptions of students with special needs, parents and educators began to advocate for them, creating over ten groups and organizations dedicated to fighting for their needs (Francisco et al., 2020). The government and other federal entities became involved later and states began to enact laws that gave additional support to students with special needs; this included the court case *Brown vs. The Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Movement (Francisco et al., 2020). These monumental movements led people to "begin to consider that segregation denied equal opportunity for those with disabilities and that individuals with disabilities had the same rights as their peers in public schools" (Francisco et al., 2020, p. 3).

The term Inclusion in the special education context wasn't used until 1994 in the Salamanca Statement, which argued that the integration of students with special needs was different from the previous special education system because it "provid[ed] them with similar opportunities and quality education as their mainstream peers" (Francisco et al., 2020, p. 2) instead of the modified curriculum they had access to before. The National Center in Educational Restructuring and Inclusion took their definition further and "defined inclusion as 'providing to all students, including those with severe disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services, with supplementary aids and support services as

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