

A Critical Review of “Behaviours and Interventions of Special Education”

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The article *Behaviours and Interventions of Special Education* by Michelle Calus is an analytical literature review that was submitted as a final thesis for a Masters of Social Work from Southern Connecticut State University (2014). Calus explains that the aim of the review is to analyze the intellectual and behavioral problems of children with disabilities within the school environment, particularly focusing on the differences between self-contained classrooms and inclusive classrooms (2014). Through analyzing the benefits and limitations of these two different types of classroom interventions for children with disabilities, the author aims to determine the most appropriate and least restrictive environment for a student based on their needs and level of functioning (Calus, 2014).

The author is a graduate student who worked as a social work intern in a school. She was involved in the process of determining the best placement for students with disabilities and became very aware of the importance of advocacy for these students throughout her internship (Calus, 2014). This work peaked her interest in the topic and informed her decision to carry out this analytical literature review. As the number of students labeled with a disability entering the special education system is rapidly increasing, it is becoming even more crucial to support these students in the most affective environment (Calus, 2014).

This study was conducted by searching the online EBSCOHost database to find articles containing information on benefits and limitations of self-contained and inclusive services within schools (Calus, 2014). Although the author states that there were more articles available about inclusion classrooms, many of them still discussed both types of classrooms. In total twelve articles were used, seven core articles about inclusion and five about self-contained classrooms (Calus, 2014).

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Calus begins the literature review by providing definitions of a Learning Disability (LD), Emotional Disturbance (ED), and Intellectual Disability (ID) and states that “children with these disabilities are most likely to have problem behaviours that interfere with their learning in schools” (Calus, 2014, p.3). She then continues to discuss how problem behaviours interfere with academic learning in schools and how these determine whether or not a child will receive special education services (Calus, 2014). She defines self-contained classrooms as “made up entirely of students with disabilities and are usually reserved for students with severe learning and physical disabilities” (Calus, 2014, p.1). However she does not provide one definition for the definition of an “inclusive classroom”, instead she mentions various definitions taken from the different literature she reviewed. This is problematic in the way that it affects the conclusions she is drawing between the two types of intervention services.

In four tables that are separated into benefits and limitations of self-contained and inclusion, the author lists her findings and then discusses the inclusion services research studies in a paragraph (Calus, 2014). Calus does not discuss any research studies in regards to self-contained classrooms. She then continues by discussing the potential implications for social work policies and practice and how it can inform her own practice personally (Calus, 2014).

Although this review is of exploratory nature, the results do not provide a cohesive answer as to what is the most appropriate placement for these students as she intended to determine. There are several limitations to her findings such as the negative language she uses throughout the article, the lack of an appropriate definition for inclusion, the lack of discussions surrounding the contradictions she found in the research, as well as the inconsistencies about who is determining the “most appropriate” and “least restrictive” environment. These limitations

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should be considered when interpreting the research, as well as the potential implications from this dissertation.

An important aspect of equality is the use of person first language. This involves putting the individual before their disability, and therefore not letting their disability define them as a person. Throughout the article the author uses negative language to describe students with disabilities that implicates that the issue lies within the child and their disability and not how the school environment could better support them. In the abstract she states that “research has shown that children with disabilities will have problematic classroom behaviours (because of their disabilities)” (Calus, 2014), which in my opinion immediately sets a negative tone for the article. By placing the blame on the student and their disability, society is further establishing a divide between the disabled and non-disabled.

Calus uses the literature she analyzes, as well as her own experiences, to make some very general statements about disabilities. These statements seem to stereotype students and focus only on their aggressive and disruptive behaviours, rather than other areas of difficulty or strengths they experience. She states that “behaviours of children with special needs can be very challenging and hard to control in a school setting” (Calus, 2014, p.5) when discussing the behaviours of special education students. This is a problematic statement because not every child with a disability experiences challenging behaviours that are difficult in the school setting. Although further down in the section she focuses on emotional and behavioral disturbances being the hardest to handle in school settings, it is still segregating students by making the impression that they cannot function in a classroom because of their disabilities (Calus, 2014). This is not the case for every student with a disability, and should not be said as lightly as it is

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said throughout this article in terms of clumping every student with a disability into one “challenging” category.

This negative language brings concern in regards to what different readers will take away from this article. For example, educators who work in the special education field could be very frustrated with this negative language and how articles such as this are affecting their abilities to advocate for their students right to be included in the classroom. Parents of children with disabilities could also be influenced by this negative language in that they could start to see the problem as within their child and their disability and not the education system and how it is working to support students with disabilities.

As previously stated, the author does not provide a definition of what an inclusive classroom is in comparison with the definition she provides for self-contained classrooms. She instead uses various definitions from the articles in which she analyzed for the review. This is concerning because if the goal of her literature review is to determine the most appropriate placement for students with special needs, she should have a level of standard in which she is looking to compare. The different definitions of inclusion used do not describe the same type of classrooms, and therefore could not truly be inclusive. Some of the definitions include terminology such as making “accommodations or modifications for students” (Calus, 2014, p.7) and discuss the inclusion of “all students no matter their ability or disability” (Calus, 2014, p.13). Although these are important aspects of inclusion, it does not provide a clear definition of what an inclusive classroom actually is. It can also be confusing in comparison with other definitions that discuss inclusion such as “integrating students with disabilities into more traditional learning environments”(Calus, 2014, p. 2) and “expecting [students] to abide by rules that are universal throughout the school environment” (Calus, 2014, p. 2). This is because it is unclear what is

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meant by a “traditional learning environment” and as for rules within the school environment; every student should be expected to abide by rules regardless of their disabilities.

In the statement of purpose, Calus also says that “students with low to moderate levels of disability may spend part of their day in self-contained classroom and part of their day in inclusion classrooms with non-disabled peers” (Calus, 2014, p.1). This indicates that just being in a classroom with non-disabled peers means that it is an inclusive environment, but that is simply not the case. Inclusion is beyond integrating students and mainstreaming them, it is providing the opportunity for every student to be successful and adopt a universal design for learning (UDL) strategy. Therefore every student will be supported in his or her learning journey in one classroom.

Calus also fails to discuss the contradictions she found within the research. In the tables within the article in which she lists the benefits and limitations of both the self-contained and inclusive classrooms, there are multiple aspects in which contradict each other. In the benefits sections of self-contained classrooms, she states that one article she found describes self-contained classrooms to be a “quiet, limited distraction free learning environment” (Calus, 2014, p. 8), while it is also listed that a limitation of these classrooms are that they also have severe behavioral students who can distract others in the learning environment (Calus, 2014). These two statements depict two different views on self-contained classrooms. I believe that the author neglected the opportunity to question more in-depth why these different types of experiences are occurring.

In regards to the inclusive classroom benefits and limitations, the author lists many benefits of inclusive classrooms that I can agree with. She lists the importance of co-teaching, assisted teaching, alternative teaching and team teaching to the success of the strategy (Calus,

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2014). She also highlights how beneficial inclusion is for both students with and without disabilities as research has shown for it to have a positive effect on students both socially and academically (Calus, 2014). Although the limitations she finds for inclusive classrooms are often one person's opinion or experience and does not generally provide an actual general view of the limitations experienced by everyone implementing inclusive education in classrooms.

Furthermore, when inclusive education is conducted appropriately, most of these limitations experienced by people should be eliminated. Stating that parents feel their child's education is being sacrificed by having students with disabilities in their class, or that these students are receiving a lower academic curriculum because modification are being made for other students, do not apply to every situation (Calus, 2014). These statements add to the negative language and stereotype that this article is depicting about students with disabilities within the education system.

In my opinion, a main limitation of successful inclusion that is not listed in this literature review is the fact that it is often a team effort and therefore needs more than just one teacher for it to be successful. Although this does link to how Calus listed the "lack of qualified staff for diversity of students" (Calus, 2014, p.13) which can contribute to the fact that inclusion cannot be carried out effectively on a broader level. When staff is more qualified and knowledgeable about inclusion, it is able to be carried out effectively and therefore benefit everyone in the classroom.

In the statement of purpose, Calus states that she aims to find the "most appropriate" and "least restrictive" placement for students with disabilities (Calus, 2014, p. 1). While reading the article, I find that there are many inconsistencies in regards to *who* is making the decision about the placement of these students. At the end of her statement of purpose she says the information

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she found can be beneficial for social workers, educators, administrators and any other professional who works with students who have disabilities (Calus, 2014). Although she states later on that “educators can see the benefits and limitations associated with special education services and decide if students are placed in the most appropriate least restrictive environment” (Calus, 2014, p. 17). In my experience as an educator, we are certainly not the ones who make decisions in regards to placements of our students. Through advocating and professional development we aim to be the best resource and support possible, but often that is not enough without the support of other professionals in the field. The information found in this literature review is beneficial for many professionals but it is contradicting in the way that she states that educators can make these decisions.

In analyzing this article thoroughly, it can be determined that it lacked depth and is still far from being a conclusive article for professionals. With only analyzing twelve articles in total for the literature review, the author limited the research size and therefore did not accurately examine all of the facts. From personal experience, there are thousands of articles in online databases discussing inclusive classrooms and self-contained classrooms and to only use twelve from the vast amount out there limits perceptions. It is also important to note that it is only a dissertation and therefore would still need a lot of work in order for it to be considered a peer-reviewed and scholarly article.

Although I did find this dissertation to be concerning in multiple areas, it did allow for some critical thinking about the content. This enabled for more reflection about behaviour intervention in the classroom and what that truly entails for students with disabilities. The ability to self-reflect about what inclusive education truly is, as well as how that compares to self-

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contained classrooms in my experiences opened up the opportunity for further exploration into the “most appropriate” placement for students with disabilities.

I appreciated that someone from a Social Work background took interest in special education, particularly the placement of these students. A social worker is often apart of the team for a child with disabilities and therefore is also responsible for advocating for them in regards to the opportunity for them to be successful. It is important that they are knowledgeable on research in special education in order for them to be a great resource for that child. Interdisciplinary work is necessary for inclusion to be successful and therefore the interest and desire to be a resource for students with disabilities will allow for more professionals to become knowledgeable and therefore contribute to inclusive practices.

In the future, I hope that more research on this topic is completed using a more clear and concise definition of inclusion for comparison. Using a broader scale research method that allows for more articles to be analyzed, and perhaps more personal experience accounts from within these classrooms would also be beneficial for future research.

In summary, it can be determined that although this dissertation was of exploratory nature it is still far from being conclusive about the best placement for students with disabilities. There is a clear need for research in the area, particularly that on a much broader scale. The use of negative language that is disability focused is problematic in both the reliability of the research, as well as the future advocating of students with disabilities. The lack of the appropriately defining the two types of classrooms is also problematic as it can be confusing as to what inclusion actually means for students with disabilities to be equal with other students. This analytical literature review did provide insights into the benefits and limitations of both self-contained and inclusive classrooms, but were limited to only certain people experiences and

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generalizing them. Furthermore, the author missed out on the opportunity to discuss the contradictions she found in the research, which I believe would have provided greater insight into the goal of her review. Finally the issue of there being inconsistencies about who is truly determining the “most appropriate” and “least restrictive” environment for these students is evident. As more research on inclusion is conducted and more professionals experience the possibilities, students with disabilities will be able to feel equal with other students and apart of their learning community.

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