Inclusion or Special School? Effects on Self-Concept in Middle School Students with Intellectual Disabilities: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract
Perceptions of inclusive and special schools teachers on the self-concepts of their students with intellectual disabilities were compared to explore the research question: What is the effect of an inclusive setting versus a special school setting on the self-concept of middle school students with intellectual disabilities?Teachers emphasized the individuality and variety of struggles with self-concept in their students.Further research is needed to study middle school students with intellectual disabilities about aspects of their own self-concept in order to raise awareness about self-concept issues in this population.Self-concept can be positively developed (Yusop et al., 2015), so this research may lead to areas teachers can target in their social-emotional teaching across settings for middle school students with intellectual disabilities.
Keywords: inclusion, intellectual disability, middle school, self-concept, special schools.

Introduction

When educating students with disabilities, inclusion is a right that isregarded as the most favourable option; it should be considered first by special education teams, as it isa less restrictive environment than resource rooms, self-contained classrooms, or special schools (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Dessemontet et al, 2012; Doyle &Giangreco, 2013; Jorgensen & Lambert, 2012). The LRE (Least Restrictive Environment) is where students with disabilities participate as much as possible with their typically-developing peers in a setting where their needs can be met with modifications (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2004). Studies have shown that inclusive education has a more significant positive effect on literacy achievement in students with disabilities than education in a self-contained or more restrictive setting (Dessemontet et al.; Kleinert et al., 2015). While these studies focused on academic achievement differences, the effects of inclusion versus special school settings on the self-concept of students with intellectual disabilities needs to be analyzed as well.

Self-concept is important for students to develop because it is associated with higher motivation, fewer involvements in disciplinary issues, and more prominence in academics (Yusop et al., 2015). Yusop et al. define self-concept as a subjective, multi-dimensional representation of a person about themselves as a whole. The early years of adolescence are crucial to students' social and brain development, and the environment plays a role in these formative middle school years (Gestsdottir& Lerner, 2008; Sebastian et al., 2010). It is plausible that the community experienced by middle school students with intellectual disabilities in an inclusive or special school setting impacts their self-concept.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities often face stigma from society about their disability. Discrimination can include teasing or direct insult, assumption that those with intellectual disabilities cannot do certain tasks, and humiliation due to lack of privacy because

of needs that a caregiver fills (Werner et al., 2012). This stigma attached to disability and the resulting discrimination is harmful to both individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families (Ali et al., 2012; Werner et al.). However, many individuals with intellectual disabilities are unaware of their own diagnoses or have not internalized the label of intellectual disability (Ali et al.). Ali et al. also found that individuals with intellectual disabilities could explain stigma and its negative effects, yet still reported high self-esteem.

As far as involvement in the community, children with intellectual disabilities participate less often in physical or skills-based activities, which could also be related to lower fitness levels and challenges with weight control (King et al., 2013). Individuals with intellectual disabilities have small social networks, consisting of mainly caregivers, and contact with these social networks is infrequent (Kamstra et al., 2015).

Middle school students with intellectual disabilities are already facing the challenges and crucial years of adolescence(Gestsdottir& Lerner, 2008; Sebastian et al., 2010), and they may also have factors such as stigma, awareness and internalization of their diagnoses, social networks, health, and community participation influencing their self-concept (Ali et al., 2012; Kamstra et al., 2015; King et al., 2013; Werner et al., 2012). Variables related to school setting, however restrictive, could also play into self-concept. For example, students with intellectual disabilities can be placed with similar peers, part of a neurologically diverse student body, or exposed to students with other types of disabilities depending on their education placement. The students' perceptions of others and peers' perceptions of them are likely to affect self-concept.

Students with intellectual disabilities, like students with other types of disabilities, are placed in a variety of settings, two of which are inclusive settings and special schools. According to the Annual Report to Congress, 17.1% of students with intellectual disabilities are included in the general education setting for 80% or more of the school day, while 7.6% are educated in "other environments" such asspecial schools, residential facilities, the home, and hospital environments (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). While there is evidence that inclusive schools may produce higher achievement results for students with intellectual disabilities, studies have shown no difference in adaptive behavior scores for students with intellectual disabilities whether they attended an inclusive program or self-contained program (Dessemontet et al., 2012). However, special schools may be better than inclusive settings at reaching out to students with intellectual disabilities and their families to help them utilize resources and services (Olsson et al., 2015). For a more detailed review of related literature on stigma, community participation, social networks, inclusion and self-contained programs, and intellectual disabilities, see Table 1.

While special schools and inclusive settings can both be cited for their advantages, there is also evidence of potential poor implementation of each type of special education settings. Causton-Theoharis et al.(2011) found that self-contained settings had increased distractions for students, while curriculum was not connected between grade-levels or to general education state standards. On the other hand, teachers in inclusive settings sometimes give students with disabilities functional tasks that are less meaningful and still separate from typical peers, rather than providing appropriate access to the general education curriculum with peers (Doyle &Giangreco, 2013). Teachers need training and preparation to ensure that accommodations contribute to student learning in the context of the general education

classroom (Jorgensen & Lambert,2012). If not, there is a danger that inclusive settings are not really "including" students with intellectual disabilities and other disabilities in meaningful learning experiences.

Even though the inclusive setting is the LRE for many students with disabilities, it may not have the best impact on students' self-concept. There are benefits and potential drawbacks to both settings for students with disabilities including intellectual disability. However, it is unclear which setting has a more positive effect on students' self-concept, if setting is related to self-concept at all.

Research Question:

What is the effect of an inclusive setting versus a special school setting on the self-concept of middle school students with intellectual disabilities?

Table 1

Review of Relevant Literature

Authors	Participants	Methods	Results and Conclusions
Ali, Hassiotis, Strydom, and King (2012)	Analysis of 37 papers 618 individuals with intellectual disabilities 1415 family members	Boolean search for studies of individuals with intellectual disabilities and families Assessment and analysis of quality of studies	Stigma negatively impacts individuals with intellectual disability and their families Many individuals with intellectual disabilities report high self-esteem, are unaware of label of intellectual disability, and can describe stigma but don't attribute it to intellectual disability
Dessemontet, Bless, and Morin (2012)	68 students 7-8 years old with intellectual disabilities 34 in inclusive general education classrooms 34 in special schools	Academic achievement tests in literacy and math yearly for 2 years ABAS-II (adaptive behavior surveys) from teachers and parents yearly for 2 years	Included children showed slightly more progress that students in special schools in literacy No difference in progress of two groups in math or adaptive behavior Both included and special school groups showed progress in literacy, math, and adaptive behavior
Kamstra, van der Putten, and Vlaskamp (2014)	205 adolescents and adults with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities in residential settings	Survey from direct support persons	Individuals with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities averaged contact with 5 informal contact persons yearly, mean frequency of 24.4 times per year Social networks consist mostly of staff and are small Discussion of whose responsibility it is to organize social networks

King, Shields, Imms, Black, and Ardern (2013)	78 school-aged children 34 with intellectual disabilities 34 typically developing	Surveys (Children's Assessment of Participation and Enjoyment (CAPE) and Preferences for Activities of Children (PAC))	Children with intellectual disabilities participated less frequently in skills-based or physically active activities than typically developing peers
Olsson, Andersson, Granlund, and Huus (2015)	84 school-aged children with mild intellectual disability in Switzerland 56 in self-contained 28 in mainstreamed	Data collected from social service records to determine types and number of services received by family and student	Self-contained students and families utilized more services than included students Social services must reach out to schools and families to educate about available services, especially for families of mainstreamed students
Werner, Corrigan, Ditchman, and Sokol (2012)	56 manuscripts describing 24 scales of attitudes and stigma towards those with intellectual disability	Scales assessed for validity, reliability, multidimensionality, and appropriateness	Scales measuring stigma about intellectual disability are lacking Scales need to be developed for public, family, and self-stigma

Methods

A questionnaire was developed (see Appendix A) asking special education teachers to think about the self-concept of students with intellectual disabilities at their schools. Results between two groups of special education teachers were compared.

Participants

Participants were special education teachers in New York State. The first group (Teachers 1 through 5) consisted of middle school teachers in public schools who taught students in inclusive settings. The second group (Teachers 6 through 10) consisted of teachers at special schools for students with disabilities. Full demographic information is provided in Appendix B.

Procedures

Participants were emailed a link to the Google Forms questionnaire. Participants remained anonymous because they did not need to provide an email to access the survey. The following results are not representative of all teachers or students with intellectual disabilities because a convenience sample was used, by selecting teachers whose emails could be obtained on a school website. Teachers were asked to respond with Likert scales to statementsreflecting aspects of positive self-concept about their students with intellectual disabilities.

Results

More inclusive teachers agreed that their students with intellectual disabilities have high self-esteem and are social, while teachers from special schools reported their students as viewing themselves with skills and talents more often (see Fig. 1). Twenty to 100% of teachers in both groups were undecided about the positive self-concept aspects of their

students. Eighty percent of teachers in both groups disagreed with the statement that their students had a calm demeanour (i.e., not anxious), and 80% of inclusive and 60% of special schools teachers disagreed with the statement that their students had high self-esteem.

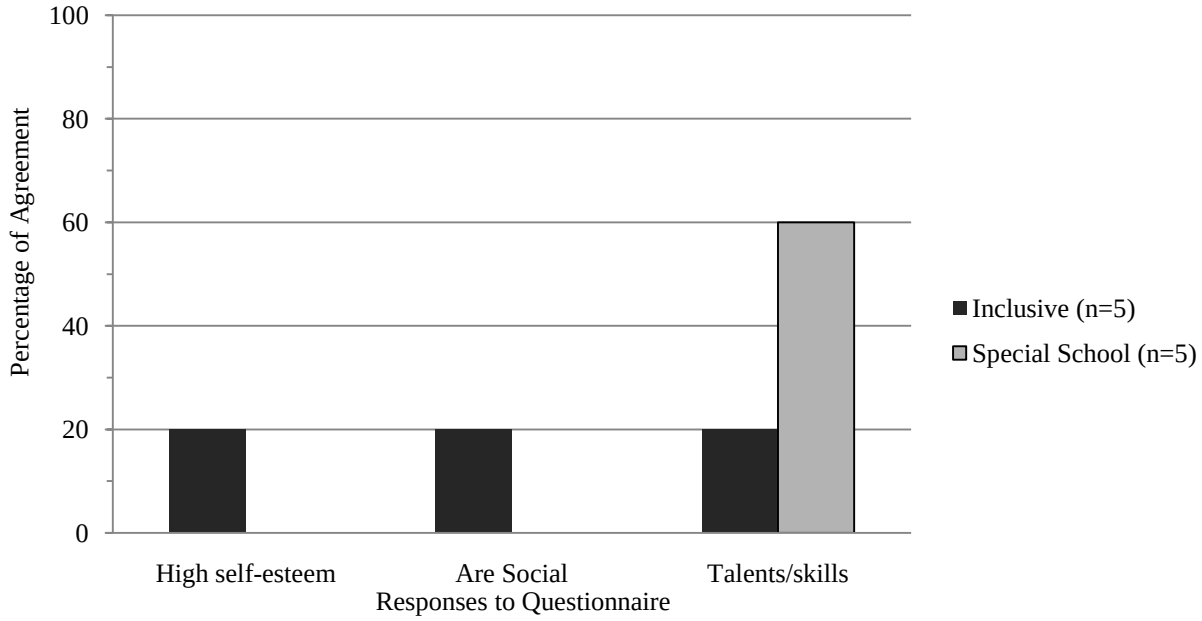

Fig. 1: **Teachers in agreement on positive self-concept aspects of students with intellectual disabilities**

Emerging themes from inclusive teachers were that students with intellectual disabilities struggle socially and academically and often view themselves as incapable. For example, Teacher 1 said, "Many [students with intellectual disabilities] lack self-esteem because school is hard. When they compare themselves to other students, they often don't see themselves as being as capable as their gen ed peers." Teachers in the special schools group emphasized that students with intellectual disabilities need to feel valued as equal members of a community. Teacher 7 stated, "Being surrounded by peers with similar learning needs is something that should be afforded to all students. This happens for [students without intellectual disabilities] at traditional schools, but is often not provided for non-traditional learners." Teachers from both groups mentioned that students with intellectual disabilities are varied in their self-concept and other traits, although only three responses from inclusive teachers contained these comments while seven responses from special schools teachers did. See Appendix C for all coded responses.

Teachers were also asked directly about how school setting affects self-concept in students with intellectual disabilities. Three special schools teachers believed the setting they taught in to be correlated to highest student self-concept, compared to only one inclusive teacher (see Fig. 2). All five teachers who selected "other" indicated that school setting depends on the student.

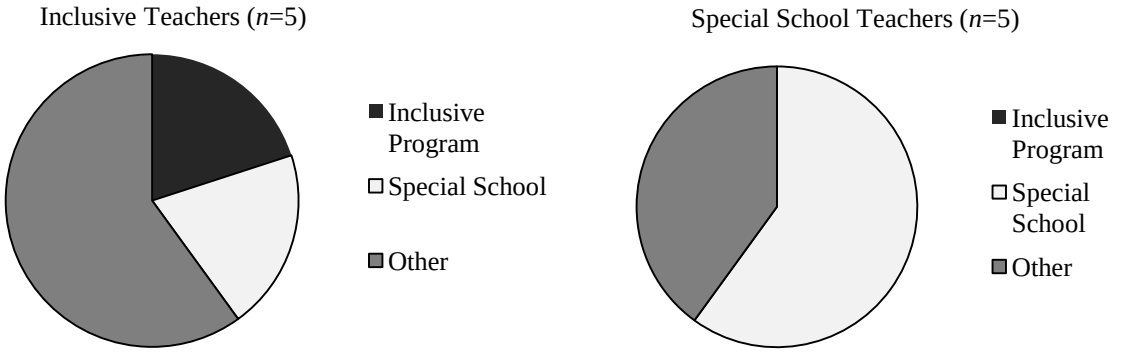

Fig. 2: **Teachers' opinions on setting where students with intellectual disabilities have highest self-concept**

Limitations and Need for Further Research

Due to time constraints, preliminary research used teachers of students with intellectual disabilities rather than students themselves, weakening the effectiveness of the study. Teachers frequently selected "Undecided" on the Likert scales about their students' positive self-concept, perhaps in lieu of a "Neutral" or "Sometimes" response choice, or perhaps teachers in both groups were thinking of several students and factors. Students will likely feel more strongly about their own self-concept as positive or negative, and they will only be reflecting on their individual self-concept rather than the self-concept of a group of people. They may tend to agree or disagree more often than selecting "Undecided." Further research should include middle school students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive programs at general education schools and in special schools for students with disabilities. Students could be asked questions about how they view themselves, and asked whether they agree or disagree with "I am…" statements reflecting either a positive or negative self-concept. Self-concept is a characteristic that includes many aspects (Yusop et al.); therefore, a survey should include statements about each aspect, such as personal (Ali et al., 2012), family (Olsson et al., 2014), social (Kamstra et al., 2015; King et al., 2013; Werner et al., 2012), and academic (Dessemontet et al., 2012) areas. Data could be compared for each aspect of self-concept and of the overall self-concept for students in each group.

Each student's experience with their special education program is unique (Doyle &Giangreco, 2013; Jorgensen & Lambert, 2012), so it will be impossible to generalize a conclusion about the self-concept of all middle school students with intellectual disabilities. Using a large sample size from several different schools would make the data and results more reliable.

Discussion

Although there is research supporting inclusive education over separate schools for students with intellectual disabilities in regards to academic achievement (Dessemontet et al., 2012; Kleinert et al., 2015), there is not sufficient research comparing the self-concept of students with intellectual disabilities in these two settings.

Results of the preliminary research varied within groups of teachers, but the strongest theme emerging was that self-concept of students with intellectual disabilities in any setting

differs between each student. It is plausible that teachers were weighing several factors and taking into account their students' individuality, as teachers should when thinking of groups of students. Between 60 and 100% of teachers in both groups were undecided or disagreed with Likert statements on the questionnaire about their students' areas of high self-concept, indicating that self-concept is a concern in middle school students with intellectual disabilities.

Because self-concept can be positively developed in children and adolescents and it is multifaceted (Yusop et al., 2015), the study may lead to the implication that self-concept should be targeted by area. This may include suggestions of areas for teachers in different school settings to target in order to improve the self-concept of middle school students with intellectual disabilities. The goal of the study is to discover which areas of self-concept require the most development for middle school students with intellectual disabilities in each setting.

Classrooms that support students with intellectual disabilities already utilize social skills teaching in their curriculum and in impromptu teachable moments. If teachers and teams of students with intellectual disabilities are aware of specific areas of self-concept that their students need to develop, such as trust or values (Yusop et al., 2015), teachers can target these areas to develop them in their middle school students with intellectual disabilities. The results from this study may lead to further research for social and emotional curriculum development. For example, in the preliminary study, more special schools teachers agreed that their students viewed themselves as having talents and skills than inclusive teachers. This could lead to the application of inclusive teachers planning activities that give students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to experience success so students are more aware of their own talents and skills, consequently increasing their self-concept in this area. Students with intellectual disabilities in special schools might benefit more from their teachers targeting the area of social networks, as indicated in the survey.

Implications also include awareness about the self-concept of this population. It is widely accepted in the education field because of research that middle school students are at a vulnerable age when their social brain development is strongly affected by external factors (Gestsdottir& Lerner, 2008; Sebastian et al., 2010). Further research will be important in raising awareness about middle school students with intellectual disabilities and will potentially demonstrate that there are social and emotional needs related to self-concept that teachers and other professionals need to support their students with. Knowledge and awareness in education have historically led to social change, especially for traditionally oppressed groups, including individuals with disabilities. Increased knowledge in education continues to improve perceptions about students with disabilities and better the practices used to support them.

There is negative stigma regarding individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families (Ali et al., 2012; Werner et al., 2012). Further research can raise awareness about middle school students with intellectual disabilities and expose needs related to their self-concept, with the expectation that greater understanding of these needs will combat stigma and lead to more emotional supports. Keeping social justice in mind, teachers can also look for ways to highlight students' areas of positive self-concept in classes based on this research

by including connections to these social, moral, and personal areas (Yusop et al., 2015) in academic and social-emotional lessons.

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