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Inclusive Education in the United States of America: A Glimpse into Perceptions, Policy, and Structure

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion is conceptualized differently around the globe but undoubtedly the word inclusion brings to mind students with disabilities. The notion of inclusion has evolved over time as the fight for the education for all people has evolved over the last fifty years. As populations around the globe become more diverse, the term has been expanded to the inclusion of immigrants, various races and ethnicities, and diverse cultures in America. This article explores the structure of schools in America including the legislation around students with disabilities. Insight is shared about how inclusion is conceptualized in the United States and, in some cases, how it is hindered in public schools in America. There is some discussion on the topic issues of racial disparities in special education. In addition, information on how inclusion applies to immigrants and some issues of educating "newcomers" to America is also included. Teacher and parent perceptions of inclusion of students with disabilities are explored as well.

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Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde Kapsayıcı Eğitim: Algı, Politika ve Yapıya Bir Bakış

ÖZ

Kapsayıcı eğitim tüm dünyada farklı şekilde kavramsallaştırılır, ancak kuşkusuz "dâhil etme/kapsama" kelimesi ilk olarak engelli öğrencileri aklımıza getirir. Son elli yıl içerisinde "Herkes için Eğitim" mücadelesi geliştikçe, kapsayıcılık kavramı da zaman içerisinde gelişmiştir. Dünyadaki nüfus daha çeşitli hale geldikçe, terim Amerika'daki göçmenleri, çeşitli ırkları ve etnik kökenleri ve farklı kültürleri kapsayacak şekilde genişletilmiştir. Bu makale, engelli öğrencilerle ilgili mevzuat da dâhil olmak üzere Amerika'daki okulların yapısını incelemektedir. Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde kapsayıcılığın nasıl kavramsallaştırıldığı ve bazı durumlarda Amerika'daki devlet okullarında nasıl engellendiği hakkında paylaşımları içermektedir. Özel eğitimde ırksal eşitsizlikler konusunda bazı tartışmalar bulunmaktadır. Buna ek olarak, kapsayıcılığın göçmenler için nasıl geçerli olduğu ve Amerika'ya "yeni gelenleri" eğitilmeleri hakkında bazı bilgiler de dâhil edilmiştir. Engeli olan öğrencilerin eğitimde kapsanmasına ilişkin öğretmen ve ebeveyn algıları da ele alınmıştır.

Makale Bilgileri

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School structure in America

In the United States of America anything that is not specifically addressed in the United States Constitution is considered a state right rather than a constitutional right. One of the systems left out of the Constitution is the education of the American public. Therefore, as a state's right, the educational systems in America vary from state to state. Each system does, however, mirror the

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structure of other states. The education of students typically begins with Kindergarten at age 5-6. There are six years of elementary education, three years in middle school and four in a high school setting (www.justlanded.com). Typically students with disabilities can remain in school until their twenty-second birthday according to FAPE 22 of the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA).

Even though education is designed by the states, this is not to say that the federal government is not involved in education, it simply means that the states are in charge of establishing the structure and are responsible for the funding of public schools. Florida's educational system will be used in this article as a microcosm of the American Public-School System. Even though there are differences in each state, the foundation and structure are similar. Schools are established and maintained through taxes that are paid by those who live in the surrounding area. This very basic concept of funding schools creates a disparity at the base of the funding structure. This basic way of funding creates an unbalanced funding system allowing for wealthier neighborhoods to have schools with more funding than poorer communities with less funding to educate students. Funding for schools come from real estate taxes. The higher the property value, the higher the revenue generated for the schools. This structure creates the quality of education commiserate to the socio-economic status of the surrounding area. All public schools are responsible for educating all students i.e. students with disabilities, students of single parents, students who are homeless, students who are refugees, students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, and students whose first language is not English. In addition to public schools, private schools pepper the state along with charter schools as alternate means of educating the youth in America. In addition, there are classrooms outside of the brick and mortar schools. These classrooms are virtual and take place wherever the student decides to engage in the school experience. Some parents choose to homeschool children using curriculum that is approved by the state. There are many options for parents who have the means to seek beyond the public education system.

In Florida, students can begin school as early as three years old in voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK) programs which are most commonly free to parents. Research shows that the earlier learning takes place, the better the outcomes of the student which is reiterated in IDEIA (2007). The VPK programs are most often housed in areas with lower socio-economic areas. Enrolling students in classes early helps them to learn basic skills to propel students forward, especially those from disadvantaged areas, at least in theory. Another entity designed to assist in this area is a federal program called Head Start. The Florida branch of Head Start is defined it as a Federal program that promotes the school readiness of children from birth to age five from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional development (https://www.benefits.gov/benefit/1904). Services from Head Start can begin as early as birth.

Part C of the IDEA lays out the guidelines for early intervention for babies and toddlers in the physical, cognitive, communication, social/emotional, and self-help areas of development (https://www.parentcenterhub.org/, 2020). Children who are eligible for services are frequently found and referred through regular health checkups with pediatricians. Services will be coordinated through an entity called Child Find available in every state to identify babies and toddlers in need of services (https://www.parentcenterhub.org/, 2020)

There are also classes for very young students with developmental disabilities. These classes are designed to assist students to master skills needed in academic settings and life skills as well. Children who are two years old and will be three during the school year, through six years old in Florida are eligible to participate in the classes (fldoe.org).

Legislation around Students with Disabilities

Legislation that set the expectations for the education of students with disabilities was not introduced until the early 1970s. In 1954 the Supreme Court case, *Brown vs. the Board of Education* of *Topeka,* set the precedent that segregating children by race in public schools is unconstitutional; separate education is not equal education. This landmark case laid the foundation for students with disabilities to also argue for their rights for an equal education. In 1975 the *Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA)* or P.L. 94-142, was passed. The EHA was the first piece of legislation dedicated solely to educating students with disabilities (SWD). It required states to designate part of federal funds for educating students with disabilities between the ages of three and eighteen, providing them with a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). In addition, parent rights in educational decision making are protected and students are to be appropriately assessed for services and placed in the least restrictive environment (FDLRS, 2020).

The next major piece of legislation to impact SWDs was the *Individuals with Disabilities Act,* an amendment to P.L. 94-142 (1990); thus, the name of the law was changed to use person first language. This language puts the noun before the descriptor. Two categories, Autism and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), were added to the law as well. At the time of the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997, implementation of the law was slow due to low expectations for students with disabilities and the lack of research-based teaching practices used to educate SWD. Because of this, six guiding principles were added to the IDEA: a) Zero Reject b) Protection in Evaluation c) Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) d) Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) e) Parent and Student Participation in Decision Making and f) Procedural Due Process. These principles are still included in the legislation, but this version also addressed high expectations for SWDs, increased parent involvement, and increased teacher preparation to work with SWDs in the general education classroom. Education rights were also extended from birth to age two then 3-21 years in different sections of the law.

In 2004, *IDEA Improvement Act* expanded protection of SWDs and addressed students with behaviors, manifestation determination procedures, changes in paperwork, and allowed some Individual Education Plan (IEP) team members to be excused from meetings. The major change that followed the *IDEIA 2004* was how the identification would take place. Up until this point, schools used an IQ and achievement discrepancy model. The discrepancy model is often criticized as a theoretical because there was no theory behind this manner of diagnosing a student for a learning disability (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). In its place, IDEIA stated that districts could use up to 15% of the funds for special education for interventions for struggling students and monitoring their progress over time. The practice was coined Response to Intervention. Using this framework, in theory, would reduce the need to label students with a disability. Implementing a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework may also prove to be a way to reduce the cost of special education as students work

in their general education classes with interventions rather than in special, separate classes (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). This way of thinking solidifies the idea of inclusion.

Inclusion

Initially the word inclusion was directly linked to persons with disabilities, but its meaning has evolved over time (Gause, 2011). According to Polat (2011), the term inclusion has been used for more than twenty years but the struggle for inclusion has been in progress for more than fifty years. As early as 1948 the United Nations (UN) declared inclusion in education as a basic right for all humans. This language is found in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN (Polat, 2011). Other declarations that involve basic education for all are listed by Polat (2011): The World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons (UN, 1982), Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), The World Declaration Education for All (World Conference on Education for All, 1990), Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action on Special Needs Education (World Conference on Special Needs Education, 1994), The Dakar Framework for Action (World Education Forum, 2000), The Education for All (EFA) flagship Education for Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion (UNESCO, 2010) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2007). The Salamanca Statement (1994), for example, states the necessity of inclusive schools with the following words:

> Regular schools with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system. (p. ix)

This statement's 25th anniversary was recently celebrated, and a new commitment was made to ensure equity and inclusion in education in September 2019 at an international forum hosted by UNESCO and the Ministry of Education of Columbia (Ainscow, 2020). According to this statement, there is an educational, social, and economical justification for schools to be inclusive. Schools must be developed rather than students simply integrating into existing systems. Integration is not synonymous with inclusion. Co-existing in a classroom is not a true model of inclusion.

Although there is no universal definition of inclusion (Booth et. al, 2006), Polat (2011) states that inclusion means including "*all* regardless of race, ethnicity disability, gender, sexual orientation, language, socio-economic status, and any other aspect of an individual's identity that might be perceived as different" (p. 51). As the concept of inclusion continues to evolve, how to create environments for allowing for inclusion must also evolve. Cole (2015) argues that inclusion now means reaching all children's needs whether they are students with disabilities, students who live in impoverished conditions, refugees, or students who live with trauma or mental health issues. This is not merely placing students from all backgrounds and ability levels in a room, rather, a school's culture, policies, and practices must be designed to meet the learning needs of all students (Polat, 2011). This shift begins with seeing barriers to education as in the teaching methods and curriculum rather than within the individual child (Polat, 2011). As much as inclusion is conceptualized in America and abroad, the implementation and realization of it is in various stages. In America each

state interprets the meaning of the law and institutes the framework at it sees fit. Then each individual school building and classroom are where inclusion must be realized. The leadership of the school along with the underlying beliefs of the teachers play a large role in helping students realize full inclusion.

According to Edwards (2017) inclusion is "democratic education, as all students are equally important members of the school community, and later contributors to an American democracy" (p. 223). It focuses on fostering connections between diverse students giving voice to all students, including refugees, as they share their stories (Edwards, 2017). Several school districts have professional development for teachers and guidance counselors and allocate federal tax dollars to support districts with large numbers of refugees even though the political climate is not welcoming of refugees (Edwards, 2017). Inclusive practices work against the negative ideology that refugees come from uncivilized and dangerous cultures. Rather inclusive educators see the humanity and unique needs of refugees in American schools. (Edwards, 2017). The idea of inclusion is alive and well in America but will not reach its full potential without support for teachers with diverse students on what inclusion looks and sounds like pragmatically. As the student demographics continue to change, so must the training for teachers who are tasked with reaching all students in their classrooms (Polat, 2011). According to Gregory and Skiba (2019) school districts have increased workshops on implicit bias, institutional racism, and micro-aggressions to increase consciousness of these issues. Raising this awareness will equip staff to interrupt the way White supremacy is perpetuated in American schools creating more equitable experiences for all students.

In the last decade researchers have focused on the affective side of learning in addition to the cognitive and behavioral. This research focuses on the emotional experience of education, or the experience of belonging in the classroom (Gregory & Skiba, 2019). Negative experiences are linked to poor performance and an increase in disciplinary actions. Students who can sense a teacher's negative racial bias may become distrustful of the teacher and less engaged. Creating positive relationships with students from marginalized groups in the classroom is so important. Feeling cared for by the adults at school has a plethora of positive student outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda, Jak, Zee, Oort, & Koomen, 2017; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching can increase outcomes for students by instilling the ethic of care as well. These teaching frames tap into students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences and background to more effectively engage students in the classroom (Gregory & Skiba, 2019). Employing strategies to reach diverse learners in this manner is a form of inclusion for students of all nationalities and race.

Teacher Perceptions

The Pygmalion effect describes the notion that people with achieve and perform in ways that others expect them to. The expectations teachers hold for students in the American classroom is the perfect example. Teachers' expectations may also be a factor in the success of SWD just as it is for students without disabilities (Klehm, 2014). This coupled with Rosenthal's (1997) affect-effort theory may explain why some SWD do well on high stakes tests while others do not. The affect-effect theory states if there is a change in the teacher's expectation for a student it in turn changes the affect of the teacher toward the student and the level of effort exerted in teaching that student will change as well

(Klehm, 2014). Research by Good (1970) also found that students held to high expectations by teachers scored higher on tests than those held to low expectations. Children often become what parents and teachers expect them to. Research has supported this notion throughout several decades (Rist, 1970, Brophy, 1982, Woodrock & Vialle, 2011).

The expectancy effect of teachers on student outcomes is becoming increasingly important in the general education classroom as general education teachers are increasingly responsible for SWD (Klehm, 2014). In a study completed by Cook (2001) it was found that teachers may lower expectations for students who are mildly disabled and are less likely to accommodate for their needs. For students with more severe disabilities, expectations may be lowered if the teacher does not feel they had the capacity to meet the needs. Furthermore, they also felt as though the education of these students was beyond their responsibility. However, if teachers feel they have the tools and resources needed to help students become proficient, the attitude toward inclusion increased (Klehm, 2014). In addition, when supports from district level staff to assist general education teachers with program delivery for SWD, they were in favor of inclusion. This support in turned made a difference in the level of proficiency of the SWD (Klehm, 2014). Research also shows that positive attitudes about inclusion also lead to an increase in using accommodations. Teachers reported that class size and lack of resources were two reasons more research-based practices were not employed. In a study by Klehm (2014) teachers' perceptions about students with disabilities found that 78% of teachers believed SWD are able to benefit from instruction in the general education classroom but two thirds feel they do not have adequate resources to address the needs of SWD. This may explain the finding that special education teachers have a much more positive attitude about inclusion (Klehm, 2014).

Based on the research conducted over the past four decades, it seems that as we empower general education teachers with the tools and support to reach all learners in the classroom, the higher expectations they will have for all students. In addition, teachers will be equipped with evidence-based practices and support to reach SWD and students from diverse backgrounds. Quality inclusive settings must include a high level of support and access to resources such as time to collaborate and materials to plan for SWD, and professional development (Klehm, 2014).

Equity issues: African Americans

As the American education system moves toward total inclusion for students with disabilities, other school policies threaten to marginalize students of color further with exclusionary practices for discipline. In the mid 1990's policies were enacted in public schools surrounding discipline after mass school shootings occurred such as Columbine and Newton (Potter, Boggs, & Dunbar, 2017). Zero tolerance policies were enacted to make schools safer using the language of federal criminal policy surrounding illicit drug use signed into law by President Clinton (Potter et al., 2017). These tougher policies have increased the risk of students who break the code of conduct will encounter the juvenile justice system, have lower test scores, and will increase suspensions for minor infractions (Potter et al., 2017). Exclusionary practices have been shown to lead to an increased substance abuse (United States Department of Justice & United States Department of Education, 2014) and increases the probability of dropping out of school (Losen & Skiba, 2010, & Kamenetz, 2018)) in addition to being disruptive to students' learning (Potter et al., 2017). These policies are already problematic in that the effects of implementation are detrimental, but the

situation is confounded for African American who are most likely at the receiving end of these measures.

According to Raffele, Mendez, and Knoff, (2003) of the students suspended from school, 32% were black students even though they only comprised 17% of the population. In 2016 the suspension rate decreased from 2012; however, gaps still exist by race and special education status (Kamenetz, 2018). Kamenetz (2018) reports that black high school students "are still twice as likely (12.8 percent) to be suspended as white (6.1 percent) or Hispanic (6.3 percent) high school students and students with a disability are also twice as likely (12.8 percent) to be suspended as those without a disability (6.9 percent)" (p. 4). This current discipline policy trend has increased the likelihood that these students will come into contact with the criminal justice system hence the term "school to prison" pipeline (United States Department of Justice & United States Department of Education, 2014). In essence, misbehavior has been criminalized. In addition, many schools have school resource officers to assist with discipline issues solidifying the connection between schools and the criminal justice system (Yang, Anyon, Pauline, Wiley, Cash, Downing, Greer, Kelty, Morgan, & Pisciotta, 2018).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework helps to explain the disparities between races in America. One of the tenants of CRT holds that racism is normal. It has been embedded in systems and institutions since their creation. Another tenant central to explaining the disparity is whiteness as property, or the process of protecting the rights of the dominant group at the expense of the marginalized group (Yang et. al, 2018). American schools were originally established to educate wealthy whites and raise up an aristocracy from the masses (Yang et al, 2018). The expectations set forth in the schools based on white norms or policies are set for all students; any deviation from the "norm" results in exclusionary practices (Yang et al, 2018). Students who are most likely to exhibit behaviors outside of these "colorblind" parameters are students with emotional, behavioral, or mental disabilities, categories that African American students are two to three times more likely to be classified as than white peers (Yang et al., 2018). In addition to poor school outcomes, Mowen and Brent (2016) report that students that have been suspended are at a greater risk of being arrested within the next year.

Understanding that schools are a microcosm of American society, it is not difficult to see the parallels between school and the criminal justice system. Both act as a form of social control to keep people of color in a permanent state of second-class status according to Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow* (2012). Sadly in 2006, almost one tenth of black men between the ages of 20 and 35 were incarcerated; this is exponentially greater than white counterparts for similar crimes (Alexander, 2012). This trend is apparent in both the justice system and public schools. For this reason, the school to prison pipeline has become an area of research for academics in search of alternatives and educational reform in this area.

One study using qualitative methods explored how root causes and possible solutions to school to prison pipeline issues was conceived by district and school level staff conducted by (Yang et al., 2018). The staff involved in the study acknowledged that the disproportionalities in discipline existed and minorities were more often disciplined for subjective infractions such as defiance than more objective behaviors such as fighting. One of the major themes to emerge was the extrinsic factors such as cultural differences between students and staff or school practices are what lead to

the racial discipline gaps (Yang, et al., 2018). One of the solutions participants proposed to challenge disparities was building relationships with students. Understanding students and their backgrounds and possible reasons for behavior better equips teachers to create an equitable environment for all learners (Yang et al., 2018). Also, the need for color conscious rather than colorblind approaches was apparent in statements acknowledging the need to get to know students. Unfortunately, the opposite view was also shared. Some participants expressed that behavior of students was an issue for the family to deal with or that "frequent fliers" had some intrinsic factor that caused them to be non-compliant (Yang et al., 2018).

Solutions to the problem of disparate practices include working with staff to reframe their thinking about students of color at the micro level. In addition, creating a Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) implemented through a culturally responsive framework with ideals of restorative justice promotes more equitable discipline procedures. Finally, Yang et. al (2018) suggest that funds be funneled into resources that combat factors contributing to the school to prison pipeline. This includes programs to connect students to their schools, mental health services, in addition to removing security officers and overcrowded classrooms to dismantle the parallels to prisons.

Equity issues: Immigrants

The United States of America has long been seen as a place where immigrants can migrate to seek asylum, pursue the American dream, and find opportunities not afforded in home countries. According to Davidson and Burson (2017) immigrants comprise approximately 13% of the United States, a total 40.8 million people. There are another 11.8 million living in the United States that are undocumented immigrants. Most of the immigrant population is young (Davidson & Burson, 2017). About 16% of the children born in the United States are born to legal immigrants while 7% are born to undocumented immigrants (Passel & Taylor, 2010). There is a higher concentration of immigrants in California (27%) and New York (22%) according to the U.S. Census. It is no surprise that within these groups there is economic hardship and food insecurity coupled with crowded living space (Davidson & Burson, 2017, & Bajaj, Canlas, & Argenal, 2017).

Whether children of immigrants are documented or not, they have a constitutional right to a free education in America. The Supreme Court decision in *Plyer v. Doe* stated that the cost of excluding children of immigrants from an education is much more costly than educating them (Immigration Policy Center, 2012). Even though this was established in 1982, many states continue to enact policies that inhibit children of immigrants to a free public education (Davidson & Burson, 2017). Education is so important for immigrants as it is key for upward mobility and it is necessary for cultural assimilation in the United States (Davidson & Burson, 2017). California law states any student not in the state legally cannot be registered and immigration should be notified. In Alabama schools are required to determine the immigration status of students before enrolling them (Davidson & Burson, 2017). These types of exclusionary practices further marginalize immigrant populations, many of whom have escaped extreme persecution in their own countries. Davidson and Burson (2017) report that by 2007 almost every state had implemented or proposed some sort of legislation addressing immigration in America.

In some instances, children came to the United States illegally at a very young age. Some have no memory of the country in which they were born and only speak English. This group of

immigrants is unique in that they identify as Americans and were unaware of their status until they were teenagers (ADL, 2020). These children are often called "The DREAMers" after the DREAM Act that would allow a pathway to citizenship to youth who go to college or serve in the military (ADL, 2020). In a recent Politico/Morning Consult Poll, 58% of those polled support undocumented children gaining citizenship and another 18% supported them becoming legal residence; only 15% supported deportation (ADL, 2020).

Despite the findings of this poll, the political climate in America at the time of this article is anti-immigrant. Trump's election platform in 2016 rested on the economy and building a wall between the United States and Mexico. It was no surprise that in 2017 he wrote a memorandum ending DACA which was challenged and reviewed by the United States Supreme Court. On June 18, 2020, the United States Supreme Court, in a 5-4 final vote, blocked the Trump administration's plan to shut down the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. However, the program could come to an end in the future. According Robert Barnes of the Washington Post (2020), the court did not decide whether or not the policy is sound, only whether the Department of Homeland Security complied with the procedural requirement of providing a well-reasoned explanation for ending the program.

During the Co-vid pandemic with American borders closed, Trump decided to announce on April 21, 2020 that immigration to the United States would be halted for 60 days. His rationale was economic according to Miroff, Sacchetti, and Jan (2020). Trump argues he wants Americans to have access to jobs as many are unemployed due to the pandemic. This statement reflects the notion of what researchers call nativism, a concern about how American a person is. Nativism is broken into two types, economic and cultural (Davidson & Burson, 2017). Economic Nativism tends to spike in times of economic hardships or in times of crisis (Davidson & Burson, 2017). Cultural Nativism is concerned with what is seen to be core culture in America. There is a fear that immigrants will threaten the what is seen as a unique American culture. Oftentimes this type of nativism will be expressed through opposition to multicultural education and in support of English only initiatives (Davidson & Burson, 2017). Although the overarching sentiment in America is to include all children in education, some states are more wary of the perceived immigrant problem according to the policies that are in place. However, there are states with tough policies that also have some schools designed just for immigrants and refugees to America. One of these states is California, a state with a higher population of immigrants from around the world. Bajaj et al. (2017) completed a two-year qualitative study within the walls of an urban public high school designated as a "newcomer" school. Bajaj et al (2017) reports that:

> "Newcomer" youth are defined by scholars as those who have immigrated within the last 10 years (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2015) and classified by the numerous public high schools that have emerged nationwide to serve this population as those who have come to the United States within the past four years (p. 124).

In the city of Oakland, California there is a newcomer high school where researchers employed an ethnographic study. There are about 20 schools across the nation that focus on newcomer students (Bajaj et al., 2017). Oakland International High School (OIHS) is a four-year high school where immigrants enter into ninth grade upon arrival. Each student can take up to six years to graduate

since even at this high school, the students are held to the same high stakes testing standard as citizens of the United States. As students complete high school courses, sometimes they take courses at the community college as they prepare to pass the high stakes tests (Bajaj et al., 2017). Many of the students at OIHS in the study were from Nepal, Burma, Philippines, and Bhutan. These students engaged in Human rights education in an after-school club setting and was described as being aligned with the ethos of the high school (Bajaj et al., 2017). Although this particular high school is not all inclusive, it is an effort to enable inclusion on a larger scale. Its mission is to help students who migrate to the United States to gain the education they need to enjoy upward mobility (Bajaj et al., 2017) just as those immigrants do who have resided in the United States most of their lives (Miroff et al., 2020). 91% of immigrants in the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program are employed with an average hourly pay of $17.46 per hour. In addition, Miroff et al. (2020) report that 72% are pursuing a bachelor's or other graduate degree. Education levels the playing field and enables inclusion in higher education and in society, even if students in newcomer schools are not included in traditional schools.

Parent Perceptions of Inclusion

The Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (2004) clearly states that parents are an integral part of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team. If not for parent advocacy, students with disabilities may not even have rights today. Parents are an important part of the IEP team and possess rights as parents of students with disabilities. Prior notice for meetings pertaining to the SWD must be sent to parents allowing a reasonable amount of time to plan for the meeting. In Florida, the invitation must be sent seven to ten days prior to the meeting. At least two attempts to reach parents must be documented or consent to meet without them must be obtained before holding IEP or Re-evaluation meetings. Parents must also give consent for placement according to thier due process rights in the United States. Due process is a cornerstone of the United States system (Yssel, Engelbrecht, Oswald, Eloff & Swart, 2007). At each IEP meeting, parents are given a parent right handbook which explains in detail the rights afforded to them; rights are also summarized at the beginning of each meeting. In Florida, there is even a special form that must be signed by parents acknowledging the receipt of the handbook. Moving toward full inclusion must include parents because they are the primary stakeholders (Yssel et al., 2007). However, just because parents are in present in the room does not mean they feel they are a part of the team that is educating their child. Yssel et al. (2007) reported that Soodak and Erwin (2000), found " parents become effective partners in the inclusionary process only when they perceive that they and their children are accepted members of the school community (p. 357). Local Education Agency members must make a concerted effort to include parents in their child's education in meaningful ways.

In a study by Yssel et al. (2007) comparing perceptions of parents on two different continents and two countries, the United States and South Africa, similar themes arose around inclusion. The first theme that emerged was an "us" vs. "them" mentality. The concerns revolved around the use of jargon and parents not being educated on the process. One parent described participating in the IEP meeting as having to "feel your way along". Another parent felt that even though a book with parent rights was given during the meeting, parents are still "steamrolled" and those in the meeting are "in charge" (Yssel et al., 2007) This feeling of inadequacy can be avoided if staff develop working relationships with parents.

Another prevalent theme was that parents understand the importance of a supportive relationship with the teachers. Parents in both the United States and South Africa found themselves to be advocates for their children offering support and insight to the teachers. Mothers on both continents voiced concerns that their children fit in. Overall, parents in this study were in support of an inclusive setting for their child with a disability even stating it was good for all kids and even the community (Yssel et al., 2007). This finding supports the research of Peck, Staub, Gallucci, and Schwartz (2004) which found that 80% parents of non-disabled students felt that the social/emotional growth of their child was positively impacted due to an inclusive classroom. When asked about the general attitude toward inclusion, 64% of parents had positive attitudes, 26% were neutral and 10% negative (Peck et al., 2004).

The researchers also found that the students were resilient, did what the rest of the kids did in class and had an aversion to labels and being singled out. This signified both the parents' and students' desire for the student to be included in the classroom (Yssel et al., 2007). This was also a major theme from a much earlier study on the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers (Ritter, Michel, & Irby, 1999). Students found increased self-esteem in the inclusive classroom and also expressed a desire to learn among friends rather than be pulled from the classroom. The inclusive classroom with well trained teachers leads to higher expectations and increased student performance (Ritter et al., 1999).

An area of need that parents pointed out was the need for more teacher preparation for their students however, it seemed the most important factor was teachers who failed to make an effort to get to know the child. Parents appreciated teachers that made a conscious effort to learn about the child and build a relationship with the student (Yssel et al., 2007).

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