

LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: EMPOWERING
STUDENTS

by

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STUDENTS

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Abstract

Students with learning disabilities are taught in a variety of special education environments within the United States. Under federal law, students are required to be taught in an environment that is least restrictive as well as free and appropriate. While many children with learning disabilities are educated within public schools in inclusion classrooms, others receive their education in private schools or in homeschool settings. This study explores the process and findings of a qualitative research study conducted with seven parents and teachers that are associated with either full inclusion classrooms, schools for students with learning disabilities, or homeschool settings. In an attempt to better understand the lived experiences of parents and teachers regarding special education, structured interviews were conducted with the participants and data were examined and coded to uncover overlapping themes. The findings reveal positive and negative themes within and across each of the special education settings studied.

Least Restrictive Environments in Special Education: Empowering Students

Since the beginning of the 20th century, special education has evolved in order to provide students with learning disabilities access to appropriate education. Over the past one hundred years, doctors, teachers, and parents have been a main source of advocacy when it comes to gaining rights for students with learning disabilities. Prior to the 20th century, students with learning disabilities were often banned from public schools, and instead were placed in hospitals and institutions. Many times it was believed that students with learning disabilities could not learn, and that there was no place for these students in the public school system (Gerber, 2011). During the civil rights movement, students of color were granted equal opportunity rights to public education. In response to this, parents began claiming that excluding students with learning disabilities from public school's violated their rights to equal opportunity. The government agreed that this was a violation of their rights, and granted students with learning disabilities the right to public education (Gerber, 2011).

Although students with learning disabilities were granted the right to a public education through the courts, these students often were denied access to schools or were provided inadequate services. Students with learning disabilities were taught in ungraded classrooms or often were ignored in a typical classroom. Teachers did not have the training to teach students with learning disabilities, and resources were not available to schools to help these students succeed in the classroom. It was not until 1975 that the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was passed through federal law, and individuals with special needs gained rights to public education. This act mandated that all public school districts educate students with learning disabilities and that decisions made about these students were fair and appropriate. This act also provided federal funds to special education programs as well as provided grants to

teachers so that they could be trained to teach students with special needs (Yell, Katsiyannis, & Bradley, 2011).

With the passage of EAHCA, special education programs began expanding in public schools, and self-contained classrooms were created specifically to serve students with special needs. Special education teachers started experimenting with how to teach students with learning disabilities and often focused on research based methods in their practice. By 1990, the EAHCA was amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This act was amended to improve special education practices, and to encourage inclusive education within schools (Yell, et al., 2011). Today, IDEA is “a comprehensive law that provides funding to assist states in their efforts to educate students with disabilities, and governs how students with disabilities will be educated” (Yell, et al., 2011). An individual can qualify for special educational services if they have one of 13 types of disabilities that are listed under IDEA. If an individual qualifies for special education services, they are promised a Free and Appropriate Public Education in a Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Yell et al., 2011). Students with learning disabilities represent one of 13 types of disabilities listed under IDEA. IDEA defines learning disabilities as, “A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

A Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) means that special education services are “designed to meet the individual education needs of students with disabilities as adequately as the needs of nondisabled students are met,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This education must be at the public’s expense, and schools are not allowed to refuse special

education services due to cost of the service. FAPE also entails that parents and school personnel collaborate in order to develop a special education plan that best fits the needs of the individual student. FAPE requires that a full and individualized assessment of a student be conducted prior to providing a student with special education services. If a student qualifies for special education services, then measurable annual goals and special education services are discussed and developed for the student (Yell & Crockett, 2011). Along with the annual goals set for the child, it is required that methods be developed to monitor student progress in order to see if the goals are met. Teachers are required to record data on their students, so that they may best ensure that students are progressing toward their developed goals (Yell & Crockett, 2011).

Often times what is free and appropriate under the law is decided through the development of an individual's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). It is required that each student who qualifies under IDEA has an IEP, which is generally developed by collaboration between school faculty and the parents of the child being discussed. An IEP is a unique plan for each student with a diagnosed disability, and is used to develop goals that can be measured for that child (Bateman, 2011). The IEP begins by recognizing the child's present level of academic achievement, and then works towards deciding goals, accommodations, and services for the student. This IEP is reviewed annually and revised as the child develops; it also includes information on transitions for years to come (Bateman, 2011).

In addition to providing students with FAPE, IDEA requires that students with learning disabilities are educated in the LRE. This means that students with special needs are to be educated with their peers without learning disabilities to the greatest extent possible while still being in an appropriate educational setting. LRE is not a specific placement, but rather a placement deemed appropriate for the education of each particular child (Rozalski, Miller, &

Stewart, 2011). For instance, schools often implement various types of special education environments such as self-contained classrooms, resource classrooms, and inclusion classrooms. Student placement must be the least restrictive, while also being the most appropriate environment for each specific child.

Deciding what educational setting is appropriate for a child often times creates controversy, because there are different opinions on what is appropriate. While certain people feel that some academic improvement is enough, others feel that more improvement is necessary. For this reason, multiple types of special education environments for students with learning disabilities exist, and parents and teachers tend to differ in opinion as to which environment is the most appropriate. Scholarly research has shown that there are distinct benefits and drawbacks to different special education environments (Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2000). While much research has been conducted on the perceived benefits and drawbacks of different educational environments in special education, this study focuses on studying the lived experiences of teachers and parents who represent these different environments.

Review of Literature

Literature states that full inclusion classrooms, schools for children with learning disabilities, and homeschooling have become increasingly popular forms of education for students with learning disabilities (Rozalski et al., 2011). Though each of these settings involves more individualized attention, each is different in how instruction is provided to students.

In full inclusion classrooms, students with learning disabilities are fully included in a classroom with typically developing students. These types of classrooms have a general education teacher and a special education teacher co-teaching the class. These teachers work together to provide a curriculum for typically developing students as well as for students with

learning disabilities. This setting allows students with learning disabilities to learn with their peers in a typical classroom setting. In schools for children with learning disabilities, students typically attend a smaller private school with other students that have learning disabilities. Classroom sizes are traditionally smaller so that special education teachers can provide more individualized attention towards each student. In homeschool settings, a parent generally teaches students with special needs at home. This parent may or may not receive additional training and help from outside professionals and are able to work with their child in a more individualized setting. Often parents of homeschooled children with disabilities use books, magazines, other homeschool parents, and trial and error when learning to teach their child (American Education Association, 1998).

According to research, full inclusion classrooms have led to controversies amongst elementary schools in the United States. Full inclusion classrooms have been labeled the least restrictive environment in special education, because they most closely align with a typical classroom. For this matter, parents often favor their students with learning disabilities being placed in a full inclusion classroom, because it allows their child to be included with typically developing students. Parents have expressed that this inclusion allows children with learning disabilities to develop better social skills as well as have the same opportunities as other students (Daane, et al., 2000).

While many parents feel that full inclusion is the least restrictive environment for students with learning disabilities, studies have shown that teachers often feel negatively towards full inclusion classrooms. Teachers express that they are inadequately prepared to teach children with learning disabilities and that strategies used for appropriately including children with learning disabilities are not used enough. Teachers also state that inclusion often leads to

overcrowded classrooms and that children with learning disabilities benefit more from individualized instruction (Sadioglu, Bilgin, Batu, & Oksal, 2013). In addition, teachers express that difficulty exists with co-teaching between general education teachers and special education teachers. Teachers often disagree on who takes the primary role in teaching students with learning disabilities in full inclusion classrooms, and they perceive a lack of planning time (Daane, et al., 2000).

According to prior research, schools for students with learning disabilities are known to be successful because of the resources available to the students. Students in these schools have the benefit of a smaller class sizes and more personal attention from a teacher trained in special education. Having smaller class sizes not only allows the teacher to cater to the particular needs of each student, but also helps with behavior management (Weicker, 2011). Additionally, literature states that teachers at schools for students with learning disabilities are more patient with students with learning disabilities, because they are trained in how to teach these types of learners (Weicker, 2011). Often, public school teachers are not trained in special education and attempt to teach a child with a learning disability along with a typical class. (Weicker, 2011).

While schools for students with learning disabilities have proven to benefit many students, advocates believe that many students struggle to develop socially within these schools. Many schools for students with learning disabilities have students who struggle with socializing long before they enter the school (Weicker, 2011). When attending this type of school, students become isolated within a private setting and receive less practice socializing in everyday society (Weicker, 2011). Though students usually thrive within the school, transitions from the school into the real world are often difficult for the students (Weicker, 2011). In addition, schools for students with learning disabilities are usually private institutions and cost more than many can

afford. Though many schools offer scholarships to students, many families cannot afford to send their children to these types of schools (Weicker, 2011).

Literature reveals that many students with high incidence learning disabilities have benefited from a homeschool setting due to the one-on-one instruction from a parent. Rather than attempting to catch up to peers, homeschooling allows students and parents to work at a rate that is appropriate for that child. Though students with learning disabilities often fall behind in more traditional school settings, studies show that many are able to catch up to grade level and excel with more individualized attention (American Education Association, 1998). Through provision of individualized attention, homeschooled students typically score higher than the national average on achievement tests (Duvall, Delquadri, & Ward, 2004). Advocates also believe that there is an overall decrease in behavioral problems when children with learning disabilities are taught at home. Children are not at risk of having conflicts with other students, and parents can more closely monitor their child's actions (Duvall et al., 2004). Additionally, children with learning disabilities have shown to be less aware of their disability when homeschooled, because they are treated as an ordinary student. Students are less likely to be labeled by others, and in turn, self-esteem is generally higher (American Education Association, 1998).

While there are many perceived benefits to homeschooling, literature also has highlighted controversy over homeschooling students with learning disabilities. Most parents do not have a degree in teaching, and rarely do parents have training in teaching children with learning disabilities. Advocates say that many parents choose to teach without professional assistance, and are therefore unprepared to properly teach their child (Duvall, et al., 2004). Additionally, homeschooling has been known to limit social interactions with others, because homeschooled children have fewer or no classmates outside the family. Homeschooled children have fewer

opportunities to learn social cues from their peers or to form bonds with others (Duvall, et al., 2004).

Though research has shown differing opinions and ideas on what constitutes the least restrictive environment in special education, there is a lack of qualitative research from the viewpoints of parents and educators of students with special needs. For that reason, the following study qualitatively analyzes the opinions and ideas of parents and teachers of students with learning disabilities and/or other high incidence disabilities.

The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experiences of teachers and parents who work in different special education environments. This study focuses on the environments in which students with high incidence learning disabilities were educated and the viewpoints of the parents and teachers affiliated with these settings. Three types of special education environments were selected based on different levels of restrictiveness. These environments included full inclusion classrooms, schools for students with special needs, and homeschooling. After the selection of these three environments, structured interviews were conducted with parents and teachers in order to gather information about their lived experiences within a certain special education environment. This information was then used to qualitatively analyze each setting and later compare these environments. Interview questions were created to promote open-ended responses and to avoid influencing the participants. Following the interviews, themes were found within each special education setting and across all three of the settings.

Method

This qualitative study uses a phenomenological research approach. Phenomenological

research focuses on the experiences of a person based on that person's perspective (Shwandt, 2007). When a researcher is applying phenomenology, they are looking into the lived experiences of the participants involved with the topic that is being investigated (Groenewald, 2004). This research project is looking into the lived experiences of participants amongst three different special education settings. This research is not concerned with finding specific answers, but rather collecting general information and ideas about an experience within a specific environment. According to Welman and Kruger (1999, p. 189) "the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved." For this reason, I used eight open-ended questions about special education environments in my semi-scripted interviews in order to gain unbiased, honest responses.

Sampling

Recruitment. Recruitment began with receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Texas Christian University. This IRB protects participants involved in this study and ensures that their personal information remains secure. Upon approval, I selected seven parents and teachers that were affiliated with a certain special education setting to be interviewed. These participants were all parents of students with high incidence learning disabilities, or teachers of students with high incidence learning disabilities. Each participant was selected based on their affiliation with a special education setting, and was interviewed upon request. Participants were informed about the research project they were participating in and each signed a consent form prior to the interview. Some participants also signed a media release form allowing researcher to use audio and video data in subsequent professional presentations.

Participants. For this study, I chose to interview three teachers, three parents, and one candidate who was both a teacher and a parent. These candidates were selected from within the

states of Texas and California, and were interviewed either in person or over the phone. The first set of participants are affiliated with an inclusion setting. The first participant, “Inclusion Teacher 1” is a special education teacher in an inclusion setting. This teacher works in eight separate classrooms and works to include students with disabilities in a regular classroom. The second participant, “Inclusion Teacher 2,” is a third grade teacher who teaches in an inclusion setting with typically developing students as well as with students with learning disabilities. The third participant, “Inclusion Parent,” is a parent of a student with a learning disability in an inclusion setting.

The next participants are all affiliated with schools for students with learning disabilities. The first participant, “Special School Parent 1” is the parent of a student with a learning disability that goes to a school for students with learning disabilities. The second participant, “Special School Parent and Teacher,” is the parent of a student with a learning disability who goes to a school for students with learning disabilities. “Special School Parent and Teacher” is also a teacher at a school for students with learning disabilities.

The final participants are affiliated with students that are homeschooled. The first participant, “Homeschool Specialist,” is a homeschool specialist who works to guide and instruct parents that homeschool their children with learning disabilities. This specialist works with multiple families that have homeschooled children with learning disabilities, as well as with families that have homeschooled children without disabilities. The last participant, “Homeschool Parent,” is the parent of a homeschooled student that has a learning disability.

Data Collection

In order to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences with a specific special education setting, eight open-ended questions were created as part of a semi-structured interview.

See Appendix A. After the questions were created, five participants were interviewed in person and two participants were interviewed over the telephone. During the interviews, the participants were asked each of the eight interview questions and then were given ample time to answer the questions however they felt necessary. At times, additional questions were asked for clarification or for further explanation. During the interview, written notes were taken, and the conversation was recorded using Quick Time Player. Time was also provided at the conclusion of each interview for the participant to discuss any other topics as related to educating students with learning disabilities.

Coding Strategy

In order to code the findings, each recording was first transcribed. Next, I listened to the recorded interviews multiple times. After the interviews had been read and listened to on multiple accounts, categories were created in order to better uncover common themes within and across the different interviews. By the end, themes were found not only within each setting, but across all settings as well.

Findings

Following coding, themes were found across all of the environments as well as within each special education environment.

Across Group Themes

One-on-one, individualized instruction. Across all three of the environments studied (full inclusion classrooms, schools for students with special needs, and homeschooling), a common theme was the importance and implementation of one-on-one, individualized instruction when working with students with learning disabilities. All parents and teachers interviewed expressed that one-on-one, individualized instruction was provided to their child or

students with learning disabilities to some degree. They also expressed that this instruction was crucial to helping the children progress academically. For instance, the Inclusion Parent explained that their child worked best with a balance of one-on-one attention while still being with a whole group. The Inclusion Parent stated, “My child does need some one-on-one or some intervention of some kind, but I think she does well when she’s still somewhat part of a group.” Similarly, the Homeschool Specialist describes homeschooling as a way for a student to receive individualized instruction by stating, “So to be homeschooled and to have a teacher with you, you know, your entire educational day, giving you instructional strategies that are meant and designed specifically to be tailored towards your learning abilities, it’s wonderful,” and, “Students with special needs need one-on-one attention and there’s now, even in special day classes, there’s now 10-15 kids in there, which is still, for one teacher, you’re not able to give the appropriate on-on-one instruction to these kids.” The Homeschool Parent also said, “With a lot of one-on-one, she was up to grade level.” Additionally, Special School Parent said, “Number one, its small. I think that’s helpful. So it’s small, so you have the individualized attention.” Each parent and teacher agreed that smaller, more individualized environments are what their child or student with learning disabilities needed to be academically successful.

Previously failed. Prior to receiving an education in a special education environment, participants expressed that their children or students with learning disabilities had previously failed in a general education classroom. For instance, the Special School Parent and Teacher stated, “These are kids that don’t succeed in a normal, oh I hate that word normal, in a traditional learning environment. Their distractibility, their impulse control, they need more individualized attention is what it boils down to,” and “There are a lot of kids coming to us with low self-esteems, the parents have low self-esteems. They’ve been asked to leave a school or they’ve

been constantly in trouble.” Similarly, the Homeschool Parent said, “My child went to private school and in third grade her teacher told me something is wrong with her. I don’t know what but it had always been pegged as disciplinary and she’s not a bad kid at all,” and “I not only felt like I was paying for her education, but I was re-teaching her myself.” Many of the participants had children or students that previously struggled in school without individualized attention.

Positive community, eased home life. Another theme that arose during the coding process was the positive impact that each setting had on the families of students with learning disabilities. Not only did each setting foster a positive community within the educational environment, but each participant said that these environments eased the home lives of the families involved. Parents in each setting expressed that they felt supported by teachers and staff, and teachers explained the open communication that they kept with the families. The Special School Parent and Teacher said, “So it’s brought joy to our lives, our home life. It’s watching our child be a normal kid, living as normal of an experience as we’re entitled to.” Similarly, the Special School Parent said, “It’s kind of an every day peace, and it’s fun to see your kid learn stuff. There’s no one I’d rather be with, there’s no place I’d rather be, there’s nothing I’d rather be doing, and I will remember this well.” The Inclusion Parent said, “I feel it has a positive impact.” The Inclusion Teacher 1 said, “I feel like this open environment, where parents are such an integral part of the daily school experience, makes it really a natural continuation to go home and, or to com back up here rather, and bring in their concerns from home and consult with me about them.” Lastly, the Homeschool Specialist stated, “I am now working in a capacity with families and making more personal relationships.” Though teachers and parents expressed diverse reasons for the positive impacts these settings had on families, it was generally agreed

that each setting provided families with a sense of ease and comfort due to the community they created.

Acceptance. An additional theme discovered across the various groups had to do with the idea of students “fitting in.” Parents from each setting expressed that they placed their child in that particular setting to help their child feel accepted. The Special School Parent stated, “In this school everybody is different, so nobody is different.” The Special School Parent and Teacher said, “My child can go to prom, go to homecoming, do those things in a safe environment where I know he won’t be laughed at, ridiculed, or bullied.” The Inclusion Parent said, “The most important thing is that my child feels a part of a group,” and “I think the real purpose is to try to get her support she needs without making her feel excessively different.” The Homeschool Parent said, “I didn’t want my child to be labeled a Special Ed kid in public school so we chose homeschooling.” Each parent had a different idea of what “being accepted” looked like, but they chose to put their child in a specific setting so their child felt like the norm.

Socializing. Another theme that arose was opportunities for students within these special education environments to be social. Across all of the environments, parents and teachers expressed that their children or students with learning disabilities had sufficient opportunities to be social with their peers. The Homeschool Specialist stated, “They can actually go to a school site, one of our school sites, two to three days a week for an hour or two at a time so that they can get that social piece.” The Special School Parent said, “We see the impact in his self-confidence, the ability for his personality to come through, and he’s got a lot of personality. We see it in his interactions with his friends, you know, this is his social setting, this is his group, this is his tribe.” The Inclusion Parent said, “She feels part of a group.” All in all, the perceptions of parents and teachers interviewed were that these three environments increased the socialization

of students with learning disabilities and provided opportunities for these students to be with peers.

Cost. One final theme that arose within schools for students with learning disabilities was the idea of cost. Both the parent and the teacher interviewed from this setting stated their gratitude towards being able to afford this type of education, but stated that not everyone had the means to attend this type of school. For example, the Special School Parent said, “You have to be able to pay for it, right.” Similarly, the Special School Parent and Teacher said, “I’m grateful, I’m so very grateful that we found it, that we were blessed that we were able to do it financially. I know that’s not an option for everybody and that’s sad.” Both participants also explained that if they could change an aspect of this environment that they would make it financially feasible for more families. The Special School Parent and Teacher stated, “What would I change? Let it be free. Let everybody be able to come.” Both teachers and parents agreed that schools for students with learning disabilities were not fiscally practical for every family and wished that more families had access to this type of school.

In addition to these participants, the parent from the full inclusion setting also made a statement about schools for students with learning disabilities. This participant explained that if he sent his child to a school for students with learning disabilities, he would not be able to pay for other expenses for their child. He said, “We decided that the best course of action for us is to have her attend public school, get the support that we’re getting there and use our additional resources to target other things: speech therapy, occupational therapy, and things like that. If we were putting all that into tuition, at some school, then we probably wouldn’t be able to do all those other things and I don’t think the cumulative result would be the same.” Though this parent

had looked into schools for students with learning disabilities, it was not worth losing the ability to pay for other therapies.

Similarly, it was also found that the theme of cost overlapped with the homeschooling environment as well. The Homeschool Specialist discussed that the number one reason families stop homeschooling is due to cost of the program or parents needing to go back to work. This specialist explained that not all families can afford to have a parent stay home and teach their child and that the cost of the program itself is impractical for certain families. The Homeschool Specialist said, “Families that I have lost its because mom had to go back to work, and so therefore there was nobody there that was going to be able to homeschool the student,” and “As long as the parent can afford to do it, these kids are learning leaps and bounds more than they’d be able to in a traditional classroom.” Homeschooling is a costly option and is not always practical for families.

Within Group Themes

Co-teaching communication. Though it was discovered that all three special education environments had overlapping themes, each environment also had within group themes. A theme found in the full inclusion classroom environment involved communication. Within this environment, both of the teachers interviewed discussed the importance of communication between the general education teacher and the special education teacher when developing curriculum for students with learning disabilities. According to Inclusion Teacher 1, very little collaborating or co-teaching actually existed, and the teachers taught separately instead. Inclusion Teacher 1 said, “I have to work in eight or nine classrooms over the course of the day. I get to do very little co-teaching and so in spite of that being a great idea, it’s not an idea that I am pulling off terribly well.” Inclusion Teacher 2 said that without regular collaboration, there is

a “disconnect between the expectations of one and the expectations of another and ultimately that’s going to hurt the child.” Both teachers expressed that co-teaching in a full inclusion classroom poses difficulties when planning and delivering lessons and that further communication was needed in order to ensure student success.

Flexibility. A theme found within homeschooling focused on flexibility. Participants from the homeschooling environment described the benefits of having students or children within a flexible learning environment. When homeschooling, parents have the ability to pick out their child’s curriculum, while the children can choose what order they complete their assignments based on their interest. The Homeschool Parent said, “There is flexibility in my child’s schedule. My child looks through to see what might interest her, and she always saves math for last, and I think that’s because it’s harder than anything.” The Homeschool Parent also explained that outside resources such as the Education Specialist, the IEP Specialist, and the IEP team are flexible and willing to try different approaches. She said, “They’re a very accommodating team in counseling for all kinds of flexibility, and I think that is important.” Additionally, the Homeschool Specialist discussed the process of picking curriculum in this flexible environment. This participant said, “The parents are allowed to choose their curriculum, but if it’s a student with special needs, my job is to work with the resource teacher to make sure that we’re purchasing appropriate curriculum.” Flexibility is a key aspect in making homeschooling a successful learning environment for students with learning disabilities.

Transition after school. A theme that arose within the environment of schools for students with learning disabilities had to do with transitioning after school. Parents and teachers expressed that they were slightly worried about their child or students transitioning out of the school. They felt comfortable within the school, but did not know what to expect when their

child or student graduated from the school. The Special School Parent said, “There are two questions that we ask; one is what do we do when we leave and the other is what would we have done if we weren’t here.” Though this parent expressed that this was the best option for their child at the time, the parent was uneasy about eventually having to leave. The Special School Parent and Teacher expressed similar feelings towards her child. This participant said, “I worry when my child is going off into college and leaving this place because we are pretty protective. We’re sheltered. It was the only way I knew my child could have a successful high school career and without high school, college would never happen.” Both participants worried about their child’s future outside of school, but they felt it was worth it to help their child receive a suitable education.

Limitations

Within this study, there were certain limitations presented due to time restraints. For each of the environments studied, only two to three participants were interviewed, which limited the amount of information collected to code and compare data. If more participants had been interviewed, there would have been more information to code and more opportunities to support or not support the findings. Additionally, participants were only selected from the states of Texas and California and were associated with environments that were made up of populations from mid- to high-socio economic backgrounds. The study would have benefitted from studying special education environments within a variety of states and from studying populations from all types of socio economic backgrounds. Finally, this study used participants related to elementary, middle, and high school special education environments. The data may have been better compared if the participants were all related to one age group.

Conclusion

This study has revealed positive and negative themes across and within different special education environments. Overall, each special education environment impacted students with learning disabilities, as well as their families, in a positive light. In each setting, students and children with learning disabilities received some increased amount of individualized instruction and were making academic gains due to their special education environment. Due to this progress and the support of teachers, all parents and teachers interviewed felt that their specific setting had a positive community, which eased family life at home. Additionally, parents and teachers expressed that their children or students with learning disabilities felt accepted by their peers and were given optimal opportunities to be social. Finally, participants shared that many of these children with learning disabilities had failed in previous educational settings but were having more success in their current setting. Within group themes showed that schools for students with learning disabilities and homeschooling were costly options that not every family could afford. Along with being costly, participants related to schools for students with learning disabilities expressed concern about their child or students transitioning out of their current school. Lastly, participants related to homeschooling discussed the benefits of flexibility within their environment.

All in all, the three environments studied have all evolved due to the growth of special education in the United States. Though each setting is unique in its own way, each provides an appropriate source of education for students with learning disabilities under the law. Though a full inclusion classroom is the only environment that is free, certain parents and teachers have chosen to educate their children or students elsewhere; this is because what the law deems free and appropriate is not always appropriate for the child with a learning disability. For this reason,

some parents choose to send their children to schools for students with learning disabilities or to homeschool their children. Similarly, teachers choose to work in settings that they feel best supports students with learning disabilities. Though schools for students with learning disabilities or homeschooling may not be the Least Restrictive Environment under the law, some parents and teachers have deemed these environments more academically suitable for the needs of certain children with learning disabilities. Even if students are not being educated with their non-disabled peers, studies have shown that students in each of these settings have ample opportunities to be social and accepted amongst others. Special education has evolved to provide parents and teachers options when choosing what environment is best for children or students with learning disabilities. Each environment has its benefits and downfalls and may be more appropriate for certain students over others.

Future Research

Future studies should involve interviewing a larger pool of participants in order to collect and compare more data. Studies could also focus in on one specific special education environment rather than comparing three different environments. Lastly, it would be interesting to involve children in the interviewing process to gain a child perspective and then compare that perspective to that of parents and teachers.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about...
 - (a) Your classroom environment
 - (b) The environment in which your child is being educated.
2. What do you perceive is the purpose of this educational setting?
3. Why did you choose to work in this setting?
4. What do you perceive are positive aspects about your classroom/ about educating your child at home?
5. Is there anything you would change about this setting? If so, please describe.
6. What resources and assistance are you given to better aid your students/ your child?
7. How do you feel this setting impacts your home life?
8. Is there any other information you care to share about this setting?

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