

Down Syndrome Students and their School Placement

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Abstract

Introduction

Down syndrome is one of the most common genetic disorders with reports of one infant in every 600-800 live births. Parents are faced with two options for their child with Down syndrome when considering school placement, mainstream or special education. A mainstream classroom is described as, "integration or inclusion in a regular school, often in a regular class, for part or all of a student's instructional time". A special education school or classroom is the education of students with disabilities, learning difficulties, or mental health problems in a way that addresses the students' individual differences and needs.

Question: What is the difference in the academic success rate of placing a child with Down syndrome in a mainstream classroom compared to a special education classroom?

Discussion

Mainstream: Receiving a mainstreamed education should mean that the student will have:

- more diverse group of friends
- better social lives
- better social independence skills for living in society
- more involvement in school
- improvement in their speech, language, behavior and social development

Research was done looking at three areas, daily living, socialization, and communication. Research shows that the majority of the children in mainstream scored higher in communication skills, especially reading and writing. There was a large difference for receptive and expressive language, students that were mainstreamed score significantly higher.

Special education: Children in special schools achieve higher scores for daily life skills and socialization skills. Students in special schools tend to be taught in a "trainable" class where the focus isn't on academic subjects but more on self-care and independence. Special schools limit the academic expectations of their students. Students tend to score higher on interpersonal relationships with other students than when they are enrolled in a mainstream classroom. Down syndrome students in special education have more opportunities to develop friendships with children who have similar abilities and interests.

Conclusion

According to several research studies, enrolling a child with Down syndrome in a mainstream school will be the most beneficial to them in the long run. Children that were engaging with students that developed at a normal pace tended to gain more from the situation than the students that were enrolled in special education school. Students that were mainstreamed had greater communication skills and overall higher satisfaction from their parents.

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Introduction

Down syndrome is one of the most common genetic disorders with reports of one infant in every 600-800 live births (Alton, 1998). Down syndrome is considered to be one of the easiest neurodevelopmental genetic disorders to detect because of the physical and mental abnormality and genetic testing. There are also prominent neurocognitive deficits associated with Down syndrome such as communication, language, and memory impairments (Davis, 2008). Down syndrome is a genetic disorder that is predetermined before conception, it is caused by the fertilized egg having three Chromosome 21s instead of the normal two (Davis, 2008). Children with Down syndrome are capable of learning in the mainstream classroom but they often advance at a slower level. While biology undeniably restricts the development of communication, language, and memory, it is important to identify educational factors which may influence the course of development.

Parents are faced with two options for their child with Down syndrome when considering school placement, mainstream or special education. A mainstream classroom is described as, “integration or inclusion in a regular school, often in a regular class, for part or all of a student’s instructional time” (Rydners, 2005). A special education school or classroom is the teaching of students with disabilities, learning difficulties, or mental health problems in a way that addresses the students' individual differences and needs (Wikipedia). Placing a child in a mainstream classroom could enhance their language, literacy, and social skills, but they could be missing out on special attention due to low student-teacher ratio, they would receive in the special education class. Considering the two options, which school placement is more appropriate for children with Down syndrome?

There were two remarkable laws that set standards for students with disabilities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, “mandated that all children, regardless of

the type of severity of disabilities, have a right to a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment” (Rynders, 2005) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was modified in 2004 providing early intervention, special education, and related services to children with disabilities (Wikipedia). Since these two laws were passed more children with Down syndrome are being transferred into mainstream classrooms. The proportion of children with Down's syndrome in mainstream schools varies by location. A study by Leeds University in 1997, “showed that in some areas of the UK, 67% of five- and six-year-olds with Down's syndrome, and 25% of 14- to 16-year-olds, were in mainstream schools, while in others, 28% of five- and six-year-olds and no 14- to 16-year-olds were” (Shepherd, 2009). These differences can be due to availability of special education classes or the parent’s desire to enroll their child into mainstream school.

Down syndrome is a very common disorder and almost everyone knows somebody that has been affected by the genetic disorder. While working at a daycare, I got very attached to a little boy named Noah, who had Down syndrome. I didn’t know how to work with a child with a disability or deal with other children’s views about Noah. To my surprise, Noah was a very well behaved, happy, and intelligent little boy. Every child at the daycare absolutely adored him and fully accepted him. Noah just started attending a public preschool and I was curious if other students would judge him and how he would progress and develop being in a mainstream classroom. Thinking further ahead, I would like to know the difference of the performance level of children with Down syndrome attending a mainstream school versus a special education school or class.

Discussion of Research

Difficulties for Down Syndrome Children

There are certain developmental delays that most people with Down syndrome display. Language development is a weakness for children with Down syndrome (Davis,2008). Along with their delayed language development is their lack of ability to comprehend language and vocabulary assignments (Davis, 2008). Nonverbal communication, sign language and gestures, is a great way to help these children communicate and reduce their frustration (Davis, 2008). Verbal memory is also lacking in many children, rehearsal and repetition are encouraged to address the issue (Davis, 2008). Other issues are social and behavior development (Davis, 2008). Behavior issues could potentially prevent a child with Down syndrome from attending a mainstream classroom. Another issue is hearing loss which plays into language and speech development problems (Davis, 2008). Several would assume that because people with Down syndrome have many delays and developmental issues, special education classes would be more beneficial to avoid judgment and mockery. Looking at the research conducted, many would be surprised by the results.

One of the major issues brought up about placing children with Down syndrome in a mainstream classroom is the affects it will have on the other children in the classroom. According to the video, *Educating Peter*, the children did not initially accept Peter when the school year started. The children immediately judged him and asked why he was in their class because he looked and dressed different. Typical students do not know how to act or interpret the situation when someone who looks or acts differently is placed into their classroom. Not only can children with Down syndrome benefit from mainstreaming, but possibly other children could learn from the experience as well.

Enrolled in Mainstream Education

One would hope that by placing a child with a disability into a mainstream classroom they would receive a better education and become a civilized person in society. Receiving a mainstreamed education should mean that the student will have a more diverse group of friends, better social lives, better social independence skills for living in society, more involvement in school, improvement in their speech, language, behavior, and social development (Archer, 2006). The downside of enrolling a child with Down syndrome into a regular school is the ridicule, judgment, teasing, and lack of acceptance. Many parents choose to overlook the negatives in hopes that their child will receive a well-rounded education that would produce a child ready to actively participate in society with minimal to no assistance.

Looking at study done in the UK, there is an undeniable trend showing that significantly more children with Down syndrome are attending mainstream schools over the last 37 years. This study mentions that the same results are reported worldwide. The main reasons for the influx are the changes of attitude and the acceptance of children with disabilities, along with laws and new enforced policies (Cuckle, 1998). “The 1981 and 1993 Education Acts encouraged local education authorities to integrate pupils with special needs into mainstream schools if the parents so wished” (Alton, 1998). Looking at a study from Los Angeles, out of 291 participants in study, 57 students were enrolled in general education, 80 were enrolled in special education and the majority was enrolled in special education/mainstreaming integrated programs (Alkin, 1999). The increase of integrated education is on the rise, many students attend a special education class on a regular basis but also receive the socialization skills and expressive language skills from participating in a mainstream classroom a few hours a week.

The reason for the initial low enrollment of Down syndrome students in mainstream classroom was based on their evaluation criteria. Children with a higher IQ scoring over 49 and low levels of excitability were more likely to attend a mainstream campus (Cuckle, 1998). According to a study conducted in 1983, due to low levels of acceptance and intervention projects, it was estimated that 70 to 80 percent of children with Down syndrome could have functioned in an ordinary school instead of a special program (Cuckle, 1998). Evidence shows that children enrolled in mainstream school tended to perform better when tested on mental ability, numeracy, and comprehension. Although, factors such as home background, temperament and excitability were not assessed (Cuckle, 1998).

The goal of mainstream school is to allow Down syndrome student to actively participate in activities with minimal support. Several schools supply the student with a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) (Alton, 1998). These LSAs are intended to help the student progress and develop but also encourage independence skills so the student can participate in small groups and whole-class activities (Alton, 1998).

According to several reports, most parents that have their child enrolled in mainstream schools are extremely satisfied with their child's success and progress. These parents feel that their child with disabilities will experience "real world" experiences and benefit from having typical students as role models (Alkin, 1999). Language development improves by socializing with typical students

In a 1999 study, children with Down syndrome attending mainstream and special education schools were compared. The comparisons were based on three categories: daily living (domestic, personal and community), socialization (interpersonal relationships, play and leisure,

and coping skills), and communication (receptive language, expressive language and reading and writing) (Archer, 2006). Research shows that the majority of the children in mainstream schools scored higher in communication skills, especially reading and writing. There was a large difference for receptive and expressive language, students that were mainstreamed score significantly higher. There wasn't a substantial difference between daily living skills, play and leisure time or social coping skills for the mainstream or special school students (Archer, 2005). According to a 1992 study, found that students enrolled in a mainstream school were more advanced in academic attainment (Cuckle, 1998). Due to the more advanced curriculum in mainstream schools, children tend to learn more with the assistance of a LSA than being placed in a slower paced special education classroom setting.

According to the goals of enrolling a child with disabilities into a mainstream classroom, most of the goals proved to be achieved through the inclusion education. The only area lacking seems to be social inclusion benefits, which are better received from special education classes.

Enrolled in Special Education

Several parents enroll their child with Down syndrome into special education to provide them with extra support and they believe it is more suitable for their educational needs (Cuckle, 1998). A notable finding was that children attending these special schools did not make more progress than those attending mainstream (Cuckle, 1998). Parents who enroll their children in special schools do not have to worry about rejection, teasing and self-esteem issues or the lack of support and supplemental materials (Alkin, 1999).

According to the 1999 study conducted by Sue Buckley and Ben Sacks, children in special schools achieve higher scores for daily life skills and socialization skills. This is

irrelevant to schooling because life skills are mainly taught at home such as toileting, bathing, changing clothes, and cooking (Archer, 2006). Students in special schools tend to be taught in a “trainable” class where the focus isn’t on academic subjects but more on self-care and independence (Rynders, 2005). Students with Down syndrome have delayed communication skills, they scored significantly lower for expressive language and reading and writing (Archer, 2006). This is believed to happen because special schools do not focus on social and non-verbal cognitive skills and the students are surrounded by students with disabilities so learning by positive examples are extremely limited (Archer, 2006).

There are negative and positive attributes connected with special education. Some negative characteristics special schools possess are that they limit the academic expectations of their students and most have to bus their students out of their neighborhoods in order for them to attend the special classes (Archer, 2006). Another negative attribute is the limited association with typically developed students for assisted language abilities and peer models. Limited positive features prevail from attending a special school. Students tend to score higher on interpersonal relationships with other students than when they are enrolled in a mainstream classroom. According to a 1999 study (Archer, 2006), “Older teenagers in special education were more likely to have a boyfriend or girlfriend, a special friend and to belong to clubs than those from mainstream education”. Down syndrome students in special education have more opportunities to develop friendships with children who have similar abilities and interests (Archer, 2006). Another reason students with disabilities are taught in special education classroom is based off their behavior, 32% of students in special education classes have significant behavior difficulties (Archer, 2006). There is research that shows lack of communication skills is directly related to their behavior. Placing a child in special education

normally reduces their communication skills because they are not actively engaging with typically developed students. Little evidence shows that students actually achieve better academically in special education.

Curriculums are different for special education classes compared to mainstream education. Special education classes are specialized for individual needs. Each student in the classroom may have different mental capabilities and learning abilities, so the teacher reduces the academic level to make sure each student will grasp the concept (Archer, 2006). Students will share stories instead of using a formal literacy lesson, meaning students are not performing at their highest academic level. Some may have higher learning abilities than others, meaning their academic achievement isn't going to rise above the student with the lowest learning ability. It is not possible to achieve a maximally effective learning environment for all students in a special education classroom (Archer, 2006).

Conclusion

According to several research studies, enrolling a child with Down syndrome in a mainstream school will be the most beneficial to them in the long run. Children that were engaging with students that developed at a normal pace tended to gain more from mainstreaming than the students that were enrolled in special education school. Students that were mainstreamed had greater communication skills, academic achievements, and overall higher satisfaction from their parents. There are minimal reasons to not place a child with disabilities into mainstream classroom. Children still receive assistance and support from Learning Support Assistants, who help them function in a normal classroom. Placing a child with disabilities in a special school

will reduce their interaction with typical developed children, meaning social interaction and preparation for the “real world” and independence were limited.

Enrolling a child with Down syndrome into a mainstream education classroom will also help the other students in the classroom. The Down syndrome student will improve their social and academic abilities and those without disabilities will learn to accept people with disabilities and gain a better self-worth (Rynders, 2005). Although, the initial reaction is harsh and cruel, overall most students adapt to the student in the classroom and befriend them. Peter, from *Educating Peter*, is a perfect example. He was unruly and aggressive at the beginning of the school year, students feared him and didn’t socialize with him. By the end of Peter’s year in third grade he was accepted by everyone in the classroom and was actively participating in the classroom. One girl commented, “He changed because we changed. He changed because we helped him” (Goodwin, 1992). This is a huge revelation; a third grader acknowledged that the class helped Peter be successful in his classroom because the students learned to accept him as one of their classmates.

Although, many of these studies were conducted outside the United States, the results are consistent with statistics and research done in the United States. Many of the articles written in America referenced the studies done internationally. The trend of enrolling students with disabilities into mainstream classroom is significantly increasing with the hopes of having more people with disabilities function without assistance in society.

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