Abstract

Policies that promote inclusive education have been adopted by provincial governments across Canada to provide students with disabilities access to the general education classroom, its curriculum, and interaction with their peers without disabilities. However, there is debate over the ability of general education classrooms to meet the learning needs of students with learning disabilities. The purpose of this study was to investigate student experiences within a self-contained special education classroom and address the primary research question: What is the lived experience of students with learning disabilities within the Literacy Development Program (LDP)?

This research was guided by self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), that posits human motivation, development, and well-being are impacted by social environments such as classrooms. SDT suggests that when students’ needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy are largely met, they will be self-motivated, curious and eager to succeed. Two sub-questions guided by SDT included: How does the implementation of the LDP support students’ needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy? and, How do supports for relatedness, competence and autonomy within the LDP impact student engagement? Case study methodology provided the opportunity for in-depth analysis of educational practices and student engagement within the classroom.

Findings highlight numerous supports for students’ sense of relatedness to their classmates and the staff. Threats to students’ sense of competence through the process of “othering” that enrolment in a special education classroom entails are discussed. However, within the classroom there was considerable support for students’ sense of competence including minimizing otherness. Minimal supports for autonomy were observed within the LDP. As predicted by SDT, variation in academic engagement of three students selected for in-depth study was found. Implications for educational practice are discussed including ways that special education and regular education classroom contexts may minimize otherness for students with learning disabilities.

Keywords: learning disabilities; self-determination theory; special education; academic engagement; organismic integration theory