Review

A Thematic Review of Current Literature Examining Evidence-Based Practices and Inclusion

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Abstract: The purpose of this article was to provide a thematic summary of current literature combining the topics of evidence-based practices (EBPs) and inclusive settings. We summarized findings from 27 peer-reviewed articles written in English and published between 2012–2022. A systematic, thematic literature review yielded four broad categories addressed in recent publications: using specific evidence-based practices with PK-12 students, teacher education, teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward including students with disabilities, and collaboration. Within two of those four broad categories, sub-categories also emerged. We discuss the importance of our results and implications for researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: evidence-based; inclusion; teacher education; professional development; attitudes; collaboration

1. Introduction

Since passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, and with continued supported through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '04), the emphasis on using evidence-based practices in education settings has been recognized for its potential to support students with and without disabilities. Access to individualized accommodations and modifications are usually required in students' individualized education programs (IEPs) so they can access general education content, but all students stand to benefit academically and socially from educators' use of globally implemented evidence-based practices. Thus, general and special education teachers should be prepared to implement EBPs with a goal of supporting all students in inclusive classrooms.

Even so, educators may not be familiar with or prepared to implement evidence-based practices. Fowler et al. [1] found that only 34% of nearly 1500 survey respondents reported having high confidence levels to employ High-Leverage Practices when teaching students with special needs. What needs to change? Slavin [2] suggests three conditions for evidence-based reform to prevail: a range of research-supported programs across subjects and grade levels, practitioner-friendly access to evidence-supported programs and practices, and government policies that encourage adopting research-based approaches.

If children with special needs are taught in general education settings, all children in those classrooms should receive research-based instruction suited to their needs. Although barriers to instructional equality remain in inclusive classrooms (e.g., [3,4]); the field of education has progressed substantially in the past few decades (e.g., [5]). We set out to examine current issues and trends regarding educating students in general education classrooms, using evidence-based approaches.

1.1. Objective and Rationale

The objective of our review was to examine recent literature regarding the combined topics of inclusion and evidence-based practices to determine current issues related to providing effective instruction in inclusive settings. Our rationale for selecting these topics

and conducting the work in the manner we did was as follows. Including children with disabilities in general education settings not only allows students direct access to the general education curriculum, but it also provides opportunities to mimic what is possible in non-school settings, preparing students with and without disabilities to interact with greater confidence and willingness as they tackle academic content and navigate social interactions.

Achieving scholarly and social benefits from inclusion requires using evidence-based practices. Educators providing special education programs, interventions, and instruction need to integrate research-based teaching approaches for their students when delivering interventions. Thus, combining the two topics of inclusion and evidence-based practices provided an opportunity to examine current issues and trends that could shed light on next steps for educators and researchers.

1.2. Definitions

Evidence-based practices may be defined differently across countries, educational settings, and by materials or curriculum providers. Similarly, inclusion in public school settings may vary depending on students served, country or federal requirements, state or local laws, and other factors. Therefore, we provide definitions for these constructs as used to conduct our review.

1.2.1. Evidence-Based Practices

For purposes of this thematic review, evidence-based practices is defined as a teaching approach, curriculum, or materials, that must be supported by multiple, high-quality, experimental studies demonstrating that the practice has a meaningful impact on student outcomes [6]. The logic in the application of EBPs is that identifying and applying effective instructional practices leads to improved student learning and, ultimately, improved outcomes [7].

Further, educators selecting EBPs integrate the best available research with a consideration of their customers' and clients' specific characteristics, culture, and preferences, according to users' clinical or professional experience [8–10].

1.2.2. Inclusion

Inclusion has frequently been operationalized as being primarily dependent on children with and without disabilities physically being placed in the same classroom [11]. In addition to physical inclusion, articles in our analysis may address social and/or academic inclusion, as long as students with and without identified disabilities were together in a general education classroom.

2. Methods

All three authors conducted separate searches using the same parameters and search approaches. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the process we used.

First, we conducted searches of three databases, PsycInfo, ERIC, and Education Research Complete, using the EBSCO search engine, including all three databases in a single search. We used ERIC Thesaurus search terms of "inclusion" and "evidence-based practices," using Boolean phrases, specifying peer-reviewed articles written in English, published between 2012–2022 in scholarly/academic journals. Although the study was conducted in the United States, articles were not limited to U.S. contexts as long as they were written in English. Each author conducted separate searches then we convened to discuss our results. One author obtained 117 results and two of us found 119. We met to compare our results and discovered that one article was a duplicate. The remaining difference was an article that appeared relevant so, jointly, we made the decision to screen 118 articles.
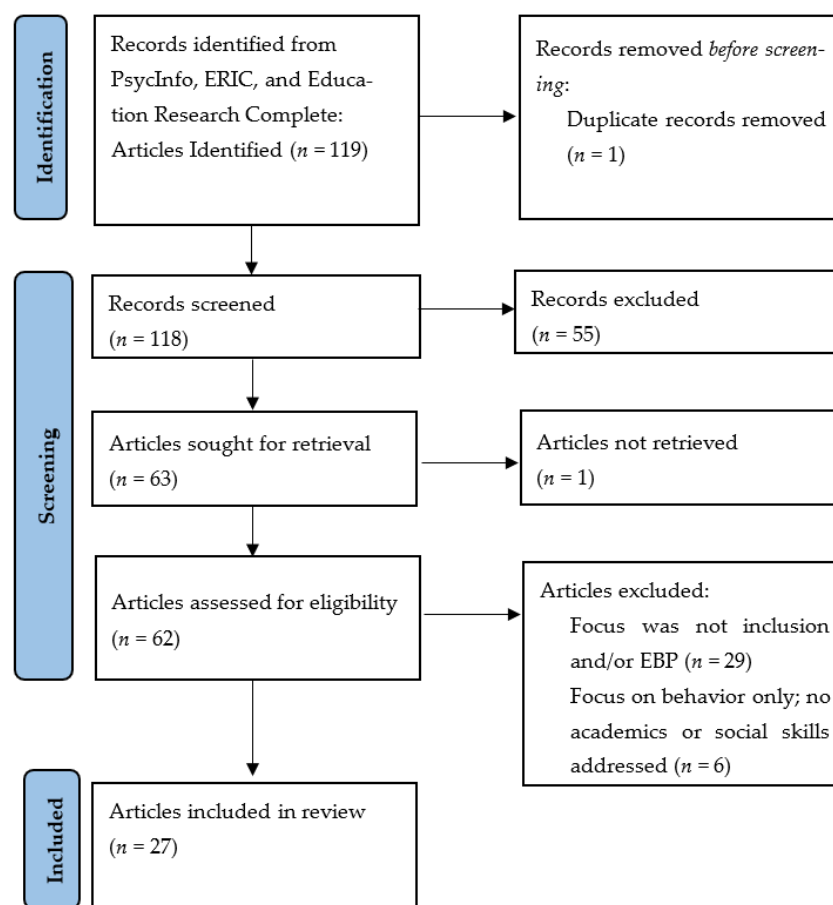
Figure 1. Flow Diagram.

Our second step involved initial screening based on title and abstract, referring to the inclusion and exclusion criteria described below. All three authors met at the same time and, using a shared computer screen, examined each article based on title and abstract, collaboratively including those that met our criteria and eliminating those that did not.

Inclusion criteria included: (a) addressed both inclusion and evidence-based practices (EBPs), (b) pertinent to PK-12 education, (c) written in English, (d) published between 2012–2022, (e) peer-reviewed.

Exclusion criteria included: (a) referred to only EBP or inclusion but not both; (b) did not relate to education (e.g., a few were from health and nursing education), (c) did not address PK-12 education (e.g., a few were targeted to higher education faculty only, and (d) only addressed behavior.

We eliminated articles if they *only* addressed behavior issues in inclusive settings. If behavioral interventions were part of a package that also included academic and/or social skills interventions, we included the article. This decision was made because of the extensive literature addressing behavior issues in inclusive settings with no presence of academic or social skills interventions. Our goal was to emphasize access to general education settings for students with disabilities that focused not only on behavioral interventions, but if those approaches were used, to also include replacement behaviors that addressed academic and/or social skills outcomes designed to help students be accepted in inclusive settings for reasons other than simply agreeable behavior.

At the end of this screening, 62 accessible articles met our criteria for final review.

Our third step was to identify initial themes. At this stage, we identified initial themes based on article titles, abstracts, and keywords. We arrived at these themes by coding content together, on a shared screen, identifying and refining themes as we reviewed

articles. Initial themes were: implementation of evidence-based practices, professional development, and teacher perspectives and attitudes.

In the final step, each author selected a theme and the articles that initially best fit that theme. Separately, we read and coded our assigned articles. As we read, we applied the same inclusion and exclusion criteria as in step two. We each hand coded themes in the final article list, referring to title, abstract, major headings, and conclusion sections. We also noted articles that addressed more than one theme and we refined our themes as we worked, meeting several times to present and discuss emerging themes and review article content. In this process, we eliminated 35 articles that did not meet our criteria.

We also refined themes and discovered a fourth theme: collaboration. Our refined themes were: using specific EBPs with PK-12 students, teacher education, teacher perceptions and experiences, and collaboration. With those themes as anchors, the final 27 articles are included in this review.

3. Results

In this section we present the thematic results of our article search and review. Tables provide a visual overview of the articles within each theme and, where relevant, subthemes.

We examined themes within and between the 27 articles selected for final inclusion, finding that four consistent themes emerged. In some articles, only one theme was addressed; in others, two or more themes were included. Therefore, articles may be represented in more than one theme.

3.1. Using Specific Evidence-Based Practices with PK-12 Students

Fourteen articles addressed specific EBPs for PK-12 students in inclusive settings. Table 1 provides a list of all articles and Tables 2–5 indicate sub-themes regarding the educators, disability categories, grade ranges, and content/subject areas included in those articles.

Table 1. All Articles Using Specific Evidence-Based Practices with PK-12 Students.

Al-Shammari (2019) [12]
Barnett, Frankel, & Fisher (2018) [13]
Curtis & Green (2021) [14]
Jackson, Willis, Giles, Lastrapes, & Mooney (2017) [15]
Lauterbach, Benedict, Yakut, & Garcias (2020) [16]
Locke, Kang-Yi, Pellecchia, & Mandell (2019) [17]
Mahoney (2020) [18]
McCollow & Hoffman (2019) [19]
McKenna, Garwood, & Parenti (2021) [20]
Oliver-Kerrigan, Christy, & Stahmer (2021) [21]
Rivera & McKeithan (2019) [22]
Ruppar, Afacan, Yang, & Pickett (2017) [23]
Smith, Cheatham, & Mosher (2020) [24]
Storie, Coogle, Rahn, & Ottley (2017) [25]

Table 2. Target Educators.

Special Educators	General Educators
Al-Shammari (2019) [12]	Lauterbach, Benedict, Yakut, & Garcias (2020) [16]
Locke, Kang-Yi, Pellecchia, & Mandell (2019) [17]	Oliver-Kerrigan, Christy, & Stahmer (2021) [21]

Table 3. Target Disability Categories.

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD)	Students with Learning Disabilities (LD)
Barnett, Frankel, & Fisher (2018) [13]	Jackson, Willis, Giles, Lastrapes, & Mooney (2017) [15]	Curtis & Green (2021) [14]
Oliver-Kerrigan, Christy, & Stahmer (2021) [21]	McKenna, Garwood, & Parenti (2021) [20]	

Table 4. Target Grade Levels.

PK	Elementary	Middle School	High School
McCollow & Hoffman (2019) [19]	Locke, Kang-Yi, Pellecchia, & Mandell (2019) [17]	Jackson, Willis, Giles, Lastrapes, & Mooney (2017) [15]	Lauterbach, Benedict, Yakut, & Garcias (2020) [16]
Storie, Coogle, Rahn, & Ottley (2017) [25]	Oliver-Kerrigan, Christy, & Stahmer (2021) [21]	Mahoney (2020) [18] (Secondary)	

Table 5. Target Content Areas.

Science	Social Studies	English Language Arts	Social Skills
Barnett, Frankel, & Fisher (2018) [13]	Curtis & Green (2021) [14]	Ruppar, Afacan, Yang, & Pickett (2017) [23]	Locke, Kang-Yi, Pellecchia, & Mandell (2019) [17]
Lauterbach, Benedict, Yakut, & Garcias (2020) [16]			McCollow & Hoffman (2019) [19]
			Rivera & McKeithan (2019) [22]
			Storie, Coogle, Rahn, & Ottley (2017) [25]

Most articles were written about or for educators as a broad group, but four of the fourteen articles specifically targeted certain educators, as Table 2 shows. Thus, the majority of articles represented in this theme targeted teachers and other educators, indicating that all educators are responsible for supporting EBPs and the onus does not fall solely on teachers.

In many cases, authors provided discussions or summarized research regarding evidence-based practices that could be used in inclusive settings, designed to support students with and without disabilities. In five articles, though, students with specific identified disabilities were the focus of the work, including students with ASD, EBD, and LD, as described in Table 3.

Half of the fourteen articles were written for certain grade-level audiences, ranging from PK through high school. Table 4 provides details. The other seven articles discussed EBPs more generally, with no focus on a specific grade level.

Four articles addressed specific subject areas and four others focused on social skills EBPs, as Table 5 illustrates. The articles not included in this table discussed EBPs without focusing on particular content areas.

3.2. Teacher Education

Thirteen articles addressed education for future or current educators. Six articles addressed preservice education, six others focused on professional development for practicing educators, and one article included both pre- and in- service education. Table 6 provides a summary of the articles that fell within and across the two categories. This topic was one of the two most prominent in our search, demonstrating the need for effective teacher education focused on supporting teachers to learn about and use evidence-based practices that could benefit all students in inclusive settings.

Table 6. Teacher Education Articles.

Preservice Education	Professional Development
D'Agostino & Douglas (2021) [26]	Blanks (2013) [27]
Donegan-Ritter & Kohler (2017) [28]	Kennedy, Rodgers, Romig, Lloyd & Brownell (2017) [29]
Lancaster & Bain (2019) [30]	Lauterbach, Benedict, Yakut & Garcias (2020) [16]
Lancaster & Bain (2021) [31]	Locke, Kang-Yi, Pellecchia, & Mandell (2019) [17]
Powell (2015) [32]	Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis (2019) [33]
Storie, Coogle, Rahn & Ottley (2017) [25]	Zundans-Fraser & Auhl (2016) [34]
	Shepherd, Fowler, McCormick, WiIson, & Morgan (2016) [35]

3.3. Teacher Perceptions and Experiences

Table 7 contains the four articles that addressed teacher perceptions and/or experiences. Findings across the four articles indicated that educators generally expressed positive attitudes toward inclusion for students with various disabilities, especially as they gained experience in inclusive settings. Barriers to inclusion included a need for more professional development, opportunities for teachers to collaborate, changing school culture to support inclusion, no administrative support, and lack of communication, training, materials, staff, time, and funding.

Table 7. Teacher Perceptions and Experiences Articles.

Alharthi & Evans (2017) [36]
D'Agostino & Douglas (2021) [26]
Oliver-Kerrigan, Christy, & Stahmer (2021) [21]
Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis (2019) [33]

3.4. Collaboration

Five articles included extensive discussions about educator collaboration, as presented in Table 8. Collaboration was mentioned in several other articles, but these four incorporated collaboration as a key theme. Cross-disciplinary collaboration, co-teaching, and teachers' attitudes were sub-themes that emerged across these articles.

Table 8. Collaboration Articles.

Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration.	Co-Teaching	Teachers' Attitudes toward Collaboration
Donegan-Ritter & Kohler (2017) [28]	Jackson, Willis, Giles, Lastrapes, & Mooney (2017) [15]	Alharthi & Evans (2017) [36]
Rausch, Bold, & Strain (2021) [37]	Leach & Helf (2016) [38]	

4. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to examine recent peer-reviewed literature combining inclusion and evidence-based practices (EBPs), with a goal of presenting current themes related to providing evidence-based, inclusive instruction as defined in the introduction section. Our thematic analysis of the 27 articles meeting our criteria revealed four broad themes: using EBPs with PK-12 students, teacher education, educators' perceptions and experiences, and collaboration. Thus, the actual practice of implementing EBPs, effective approaches for training teachers to locate and use EBPs with fidelity, understanding educators' perceptions of and experiences with inclusion and EBPs, and their collaborative approaches to combining EBPs with inclusion appear to be the most pressing concerns regarding effective instruction for students with and without disabilities who are taught together.

In the following sections, we discuss the importance, limitations, and implications of our findings. First, we examine the importance of the four topics and their subgroupings, then we consider the outcome as a whole. Next, we present limitations of our work. Finally, we provide implications for researchers and practitioners.

4.1. Using Specific Evidence-Based Practices with PK-12 Students

Although the 27 articles addressed evidence-based practices (EBPs), a subset dealt directly with specific practices for PK-12 students. Most articles pointed out the need for a reliably consistent source for finding EBPs. One [24] provided a list of web resources for identifying EBPs.

Though a few authors conducted studies with special or general educators, most articles did not focus on a certain population of educators, instead promulgating an understanding that all educators are responsible for supporting the use of EBPs in inclusive education. The three most commonly addressed disability categories (autism, emotional/behavioral disorders, and learning disabilities) are those most frequently represented in inclusive settings. Three of the seven articles targeting specific grade levels were focused at the secondary level. Further, science and social studies were the content areas addressed in three articles. Perhaps this indicates an emerging understanding that EBPs are important in all grades, across content areas.

4.2. Teacher Education

The second-most prevalent topic to emerge was the need for effective teacher education, to train pre- and in-service educators to use evidence-based practices in inclusive classrooms. High-quality teacher education and training programming is regarded as an effective way to prepare teachers skilled at working in inclusive environments, such as appropriately using theories or pedagogies based on the diversity of inclusive classrooms. Therefore, combining knowledge of teaching practices, content, and application are key points in these articles. Several authors pointed out the need for evidence-based teacher training designed to help future and current teachers locate and use EBPs with their students.

4.3. Teacher Perceptions and Experiences

Three of the articles [21,26,33] addressed teachers' attitudes toward serving students with autism in inclusive classrooms. Across all four articles in this category, educators held positive attitudes toward including students with special needs in inclusive classrooms, though this optimism did not always result in using EBPs. All four authors pointed out the need for effective teacher training.

4.4. Collaboration

Several of the 27 articles mentioned the need for collaboration, but five included the topic as fundamental. Various forms of collaboration were presented, including co-teaching, cross-disciplinary, and transdisciplinary collaboration. As is typical in collaboration literature, barriers to collaboration were presented. Educators need more time, administrative support, and funding to support their collaborative efforts.

4.5. A Bird's Eye View

Considered together, the four themes indicate that while educators generally have a positive outlook about inclusion, many authors point to the need for effective teacher training that includes instruction in how to identify and/or locate evidence-based practices, and how to implement them with fidelity. Thus, possessing a positive attitude toward inclusion does not necessarily lead to effective teaching practices. All grade levels from PK-12 were represented and while most articles did not address specific content, those that did included science, social studies, English/Language Arts, and social skills instruction.

Collaboration and co-teaching were also important topics and barriers to inclusion and collaboration are continued concerns.

4.6. Limitations

Our search parameters were narrow, so our results may have differed had we expanded our constraints. We also included a wide variety of article types (original qualitative and quantitative research, summaries of research, literature reviews, and "think" pieces), so our results cannot be construed as research supported. Had we narrowed our results to original research, our findings would likely have been different. Instead, we were interested in discovering current issues that could inform the field and that might lead to further research.

Our approach to locating, including, excluding, and discovering themes was collaborative, with each author having equal weight in the decision-making. Thus, we did not collect interobserver agreement data for the three phases of our review. Instead, in the methods section we provided descriptions of our processes at each step.

While we addressed diversity as applied to students with special needs, we did not examine articles for content related to other forms of diversity, such as cultural, racial, or gender identification. Future studies should include analysis of those factors.

4.7. Implication for Researchers

In addition to continued research on evidence-based practices across grades, subjects, and with various student profiles, research on how to teach pre- and in-service teachers to locate and use EBPs with fidelity is necessary. As Ref. [27] points out, professional development itself should be evidence-based. This includes training for administrators, who require knowledge not only in special education law, but also in how to support teachers as they strive to work together and teach effectively.

Despite a growing research base on EBPs, educators do not always adopt these effective approaches. Translating research into practical use for future and current educators may help. This might involve researchers translating their findings into practitioner articles and/or training materials. Further, as Ref. [24] illustrate, there are many sources of EBPs, which can be overwhelming for educators to navigate. Simplifying access to research outcomes and EBPs is necessary.

4.8. Implications for Practitioners

Educators at all levels must take time to evaluate claims that materials or curriculum are truly supported by research. Valid sources of information are available on the web (see [24]). Many favored approaches to instruction lack evidential support and lack of student progress in basic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics should be enough evidence to support adopting approaches that do work, even if unpopular. We must move beyond what we want to teach so we can adopt what is necessary for children to learn.

The barriers to inclusion and collaboration described in several articles are the same barriers that have been cited for decades. Administrators are often centered as people who have the ability to help teachers overcome these barriers, supporting teacher time and autonomy to do so.

Higher education faculty are responsible for preparing future and current educators to teach effectively. Our findings indicate that little evidence exists regarding evidence-based teacher education, but what emerged is the importance of preparing all educators to successfully locate and implement EBPs.

5. Conclusions

If inclusive education is a priority, current practitioners, researchers, and teacher educators are responsible for using effective practices. While educators' attitudes toward inclusion and/or students with disabilities are often positive, this does not translate into using evidence-based practices (EBPs). In fact, many educators continue using preferred

practices that have little or no evidence to support their effectiveness. This may be due, in part, to the wide range of sources for finding EBPs, and in part to publishers claiming that their materials are evidence- or research-based. Another factor is educator training, which has little evidence base. Research on effective teacher training emerged as an important topic.

In sum, implementing evidence-based practices in all classrooms emerged as the most prominent theme, followed closely by educator training to locate and use EBPs with fidelity. Educators' attitudes toward inclusion and/or students with disabilities were generally positive. Collaboration was also a significant theme, varying from teachers' attitudes toward collaboration, to cross disciplinary approaches, to co-teaching. These topics may be helpful as researchers and educators determine next steps in examining and improving inclusive education.

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