

Tracing inclusion: Determining teacher attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Though there appears to be an onslaught of No Child Left Behind, there is still more emphasis on testing than ever before. With the new implementation of national common-core standards, many school districts have moved towards full inclusive classrooms. However, it is rare that teachers have any input on whether such major decisions are apropos for their classrooms. Ergo, the purpose of this study was to investigate teacher attitudes towards inclusion. The study was controlled by three major points of inquiry to determine statistical significance: 1.) Would years of experience matter in teacher attitudes? 2.) Would sex make a difference? 3.) Would the school level matter? A total of 203 southeast Georgia teachers agreed to respond to an 8-item survey pertaining to beliefs about inclusion, benefits of inclusion, preparation for teaching, and availability of materials and assistance. The data from middle, k-4, and high school teachers held some surprising results.

Keywords: teacher attitudes, inclusion, attitudes on inclusion, research on teacher attitudes, studies on the impact of inclusion

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INTRODUCTION

Trouble is brewing in today's public schools. Whose side will you support? Total inclusion is revered as the panacea for combining special needs kids with general populations into our regular classrooms (Wright, 1999, p.11). Advocates support the supposition that special needs children can gain acceptance and more academic skills if placed in the traditional classroom environment.

The word inclusion has different meanings for various communities. Inclusive programs are interpreted differently depending on the school district one lives in and is carried out in schools differently (Hines, 2001). Inclusion is not about any consistent rule but about what seems to be the fair thing to do for students with disabilities in the classroom (Hines, 2001 p. 2).

With the Individual with Disabilities Education Act and No Child Left Behind Act, a large number of students with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms (McHatton & McCray, 2007). Therefore, it is essential that a differentiation is made between full inclusion and mainstreaming. Full inclusion is about teaching students in their regular class but with support services. Mainstreaming pertains to teaching children with disabilities only part of the day, but usually during nonacademic time (Wright, 1999, p.12).

THE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The remaining sections will examine the essential literature relevant to inclusion. The first section will trace a brief background of how services for special education have evolved. The second section will examine what research studies have concluded about the efficacy of inclusive classrooms. The third section catapults into what we know about teacher attitudes on inclusive classrooms. The final section of the paper will culminate with a teacher survey on inclusive classrooms.

Background

Services for disabled children began in the late 19th century. In 1896, the first classes were conducted in Rhode Island (Wright, 1999 p. 13).

The method of teaching in the 1890s was based on moral education. Morals were considered as lacking in these children. If a teacher could teach them and help them socially, this was "the teacher." However, when special needs kids did poorly on intelligence tests, the teacher was labeled as a poor teacher and the students were considered incapable of learning.

During the late 19th century, there was a need to determine why mental retardation occurred. Faulty genetic research associated mental retardation with criminality, being poor, and illegitimate (Wright, 1999p 13). Stereotypes were manifested- feeble-minded, not self-sufficient or able to do for self.

The beginning of the 20th century represented the mental institutions where people lived in both public and private facilities. As we see the end of the 20th century, a new attitude emerges, these children could be educated. Later, there is social change with Brown vs. Board of Education where separate but equal is examined. Thus, there was a call for policy change. This resulted in the drafting of Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA) which ultimately came under the title of Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA).

Inclusion Research

Proponents of full inclusion tend to believe that students have more commonalities than differences and can learn in the regular classroom (Mock & Kauffman, 2002). The studies below reveal some sense of what we generally know about the impact of inclusive classrooms.

Salend (2001) reported that some students with disabilities saw social benefits while others felt isolated and frustrated. Kochhar, West, & Taymens (2000) discussed more positives across grades in achievement, support, and ability to be more flexible. Cole & Meyer (1991) examined 43 classes from 14 schools and found no significance between students in inclusive classrooms and non-inclusive classrooms.

Baker, Wang, & Walberg (1994/95) saw small to moderate effects of inclusion on social or academics of special needs students from three meta-analyses. Lipsky & Gartner (1995), in a national study on inclusion, cited generally positive academic, behavioral, and social outcomes for students with disabilities. Baker & Zigmond (1995) found a small to moderate positive impact of inclusion on academics and social aspects of elementary students.

Walter-Thomas, Bryant & Land (1996) discussed benefits such as social skills, personal skills, and more value in self and others for both special and general education students in a three-year study in an elementary environment. Ritter, Michael & Irby (1999) reported that middle-level students with mild disabilities in a general education classroom expressed increased self-confidence, camaraderie, support of teachers, higher expectations, and no low self-esteem.

According to Macmillan, Greshan & Forness (1996), there is little empirical information based on reliable research to support the efficacy of inclusion. Few studies have addressed actual gains made in regular education environments in basic skills, social abilities, or knowledge in content courses. Most are reports that deal with the social aspect and are not observable.

Research on Teacher Attitudes

Teacher attitudes matter in the classroom. Attitudes impact how teachers communicate with students as well as how curricular decisions are determined in the classroom. The studies that follow offer a snapshot of teacher attitudes from pre-service to in-service directly alluding to teaching in inclusive classroom settings. The studies will review teacher attitudes relevant to 1.) training/preparation for inclusive setting, 2.) challenging issues surfacing from inclusive classrooms, 3.) the importance of teacher beliefs, and finally 3.) other studies with different findings.

Attitudes on teacher training and preparation produced a proliferation of studies. Scruggs & Mastropieri (1996) found from a synthesis of research from 10, 560 general education teachers that they did not view themselves as prepared to teach or handle modifications for special need learners. Gallagher, Malone, Cleghorne & Helms (1997) revealed from interviewing 115 teachers low confidence in their training in working with special needs children. Goodlad & Field (1993) interviewed pre-service teachers, university personnel, and school district personnel who perceived themselves as ill-prepared to teach students with disabilities.

Rojewski & Pollard (1990) found from a national survey of secondary teachers that undergraduate programs did not prepare them to teach students with disabilities. Campbell, Gilmore, Cuskelly (2003) found pre-service teachers' attitudes were more positive immediately after completing course work. Lyon, Vaasen & Toomey (1989) surveyed 440 teachers who

agreed that their training did not prepare them to instruct special needs students. They reported very little hands-on training.

There have been some challenging issues surfacing from inclusive classrooms. Frolin, Hattie, & Douglas (1996) reported correlation between teacher attitudes and stress when a disabled student was in the classroom. Schulte, Osborne & Erchul (1998) delineated issues in inclusive classrooms such as, teachers' skill levels, time available for instructional planning, and difficulty in utilizing individualized and small group instruction. Huefner (2000) went on to discuss increased paperwork, lack of financial compensation for teachers, decreased funding for special education programs, and time for training and outreach. Martinez (2004) noted teacher experience, gender, and teachers' experiences with disabled children.

Two studies investigated teacher beliefs. Parajares (1992) discussed a correlation between beliefs, knowledge, and the pedagogy of a teacher. Kochlar, West & Tayman (2000) reported that teacher negative beliefs and feelings disrupt successful inclusion in the classroom.

There were other studies indicating different findings. Tiner (1995) surveyed 120 teachers in Colorado who were concerned that other middle grade students were neglected because of the time spent with special needs students. Janney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes (1995), contended that the more positive the teacher attitude the more experienced they were with teaching students with disabilities. Cook (2001) revealed that teacher attitudes and expectations differed depending on the seriousness of the student's disability.

METHOD

The purpose of this survey was to determine teacher attitudes on inclusion. Questions on the survey pertained to teacher basic beliefs about concept of inclusion, the benefits of sufficient time in the classroom, preparation/training, assistance, and sufficient materials.

Answers to three questions were sought:

1. Would years of experience make a difference?
2. Would sex make a difference?
3. Would school level matter?

PARTICIPANTS

Teachers from middle schools, k-8 schools, and high schools in southeast Georgia comprised this study. A total of 203 teachers participated in the survey. Middle school teachers represented 44 participants (21.6%), K-8 teachers represented 34(16.7%), and high school teachers were 125 (61.5). There were 56 (males-27.5%) and 145 females (71.4%) with 2 (0.98%) not indicating sex. The study was conducted from September to December 2012. The surveys were conducted prior to faculty meetings or after data team meetings or during in-service days.

SURVEY

The survey consisted of Part I. Demographics including, Race, Years of Teaching Experience, Sex, School Level, Grade Level, and Subjects taught. Part II. of the survey consisted of 8 questions with Likert style scale of strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, and strongly disagree. Part III. Was labeled Comments You Wish To Share.

The qualitative survey was located after an extensive review of the literature. The survey was patterned from the work of Terreni, Scruggs, and Mastropieri (1998). The original questions came from a synthesis of 28 surveys of teacher attitudes conducted in the United States by Scruggs & Mastropieri in 1996.

The examiner modified some of the verbiage in questions to say for instance, in Question #1 I believe in the idea of teaching students with disabilities instead of I support the concept of teaching students with learning problems, Question #2, I want to teach instead of I am willing to teach students with learning disabilities. Question #3 Students with disabilities gain from being blended into general education courses instead of students benefit from being integrated into general education classes.

The survey can be divided into five sections: Question #1 and #2 examined teacher beliefs about inclusion. Questions #3 and #4 examined the benefits of inclusion. Questions #5 queried whether sufficient time is provided in the classroom. Question #6 and 7 dealt with preparation for teaching inclusion. Question #8 explored whether teachers had sufficient materials needed for inclusion in the classroom.

The Survey consisted of these questions:

1. I believe in the idea of teaching students with learning disabilities in general education classes.
2. I want to teach students with learning disabilities in my class.
3. Students with learning disabilities gain from being blended into general education courses.
4. Regular achieving students gain from being taught in the same classes with students with learning disabilities.
5. I have enough time for teaching students with learning disabilities in my class.
6. I have enough skills and training to teach students with learning disabilities in my class.
7. I have enough assistance needed for teaching students with learning disabilities in my class.
8. I have enough materials needed for teaching students with learning disabilities in my class.

ANALYSIS & RESULTS OF STATISTICAL FINDINGS

All data was run by assigning numbered values for each of the Likert style choices for the eight questions (i.e., Column I, Column II, Column III, Column IV, Column V, Column VI, through Column VIII for Question 1, Question 2, Question 3, Question 4, Question 5, Question 6, Question 7, and Question 8) with a Likert style number under each. There were also columns for School ID Number, School Level, Sex, Years of Experience, with the final column labeled SUM. There was a sum from 203 subjects for each of the eight questions. The higher the sum was the more supportive of the inclusion ideas. Years of experience were organized in the following groups: 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, 31-35, 36-40, 41-45, and 46-50. For interpreting the data, each of the Likert style choices were assigned a number: Strongly Agree was assigned 5 points, Agree 4 points, Uncertain 3 points, Disagree 2 points, and Strongly Disagree 1 point. The ANOVA was used to test the effect of sex, school level, and years of experience on attitudes on inclusion. Due to a significant interaction effect ($p=0.043$) between school level and years of experience, the effect of each independent variable on attitudes towards

inclusion was tested separately using a one-way ANOVA. The corrected Bonferroni post hoc test was used when significant main effects were detected.

For Sex, using SPSS, the sum of responses for males and females were compared. Out of 203, separate male scores were listed on one side with female scores on the other. There was no effect of sex on attitudes of inclusion ($p=0.86$).

For Years of Experience, which were categorized using 10 groups, the investigator used ANOVA to find out if there was any effect of years of experience on the sum. The P-value was 0.427; which was not significant.

Overall, comparing the responses of K-8, middle, and high school teachers, there was a significant effect of school level on teacher attitudes towards inclusion for the sum of questions 1-8 ($P=0.00$). Teacher attitudes towards inclusion were more favorable for high school teachers compared to K-8 ($p=0.04$) and middle school teachers ($p=0.06$). There was no difference in teacher attitudes towards inclusion between middle and K-8 teachers.

There was a significant effect of school level on positive beliefs about inclusion ($p=0.002$). The responses in Questions 1 & 2 were added for the sum. The examiner compared High School vs. K-8, High School vs. Middle, and Middle vs. K-8. When compared with K-8 schoolteachers, high school teachers had more positive beliefs regarding inclusion ($p=0.002$).

There was a significant effect of school level on a teacher's perceived ability to implement inclusion ($p=0.000$). This is tied to question 6 and 7 on the survey. The examiner compared high school teachers and K-8 teachers first. Then high school teachers were compared to middle. The value is higher for high school teachers than middle or K-8, had more positive perceived ability. High school teachers felt more confident in their ability to implement inclusion compared to both K-8 ($p=0.000$) and middle school ($p=0.02$) teachers.

DISCUSSION & REFLECTIONS

Apparently high school teachers took the lead on how they perceive the job of educating special need students in their schools. They were willing to articulate their beliefs in inclusion and are resolved and confident in implementing practices to tap into the knowledge base and strategies appropriate for teaching the content needed for reaching out to students with learning disabilities. It is interesting to note that none of the studies located delineate high school teachers as being better prepared to teach in the inclusive classroom as compared to other grade level teachers. This stance from high school teachers was without a doubt an eye-opener to these examiners.

It was surprising that teachers' levels of experience did not play a more significant factor. Often educators assume that experience gives educators the confidence they need to execute almost any practice in the classroom. Perhaps teachers are implying that not only do they need more hands-on training with teaching inclusive students in the general education classroom but will not try something new if they are not confident in their abilities.

Teaching is a female-dominated profession but yet the dominants are not stepping forth with all the answers for teaching learning disabled students. The reflective comments to the survey proved to be just as informative as the responses to the survey questions. Some of the comments below made the challenges of inclusion more apparent for all to contemplate:

1. It depends on the degree of disability if a student should be placed in a regular education class.
2. Prospective teachers must be trained on how to manage their classrooms.

3. Need refresher course to bring us up to speed
4. Paraprofessionals do not have enough content knowledge.
5. Hard for inclusive students to process math content
6. Smaller classes would help students with inclusive model
7. Difficult concepts to teach in chemistry class
8. Working with sped students-truly a great challenge
9. Can be beneficial if done correctly
10. Do not have enough help in class
11. To teach students with special needs-that's why scores are low
12. Not enough sped teachers and paraprofessionals to accommodate number of students identified
13. Can get more attention in smaller classes
14. Need strong co-teacher relationship and more manipulatives
15. There is no time to plan with co-teacher
16. I have had an amazing inclusion teacher with me this year
17. No Child Left Behind works well on paper
18. Prior system worked better

The previous reflections from educators are indicative of the studies reviewed on teacher attitude studies in this current paper. Future studies should allow teachers to create narratives on their experiences with inclusion including the positives and challenges with suggestions for improving teacher experiences. Classroom teachers have much to tell us if we would but listen, but with the bombarding of local, state, and federal mandates bellowing at our doors constantly, there just doesn't seem to be enough time in the course of year or a semester, though we all want the best for our public school students and teachers. Of course, the other issue is, do teachers possess sufficient valor to implement strategies taught in general special education courses? Are teachers missing the connection between course work and the world of practice? These are other areas vying for clarifications, solutions, and future studies.

It seems that college special education faculty and school administrators must take the time to have open forums to discuss how to improve inclusive classrooms in their schools and how to improve our college preparatory training programs. In spite of the fact that administrators and college faculty are already overburdened with paperwork and ever-changing federal and state-mandated requirements, we must find creative means for addressing these vital issues for our future teacher educators. We must continue the fight, the struggle. It is well worth the benefits and the gains for the generations to come.

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