Do Teachers Have a Negative Attitude Towards the Inclusion of Students with Special needs?

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Abstract

This study looked at teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion and students with special needs. General and special educators were emailed a questionnaire regarding their perceptions of inclusion and students with special needs. Eight general education teachers and two special education teachers responded to the questionnaire. Although the response rate was small, it was found that most general education teachers surveyed had a negative attitude towards students with special needs. They did not use person-first language, and did not seem to perceive these students were part of their classrooms. They were also more willing than the special education teachers to advocate for resource and self-contained classrooms.
Introduction

Do general education teachers have a negative attitude towards students with special needs and the idea of inclusion? This is a question that was investigated throughout this study. The predicted answer to this question is that teachers who do not have adequate training about inclusion or students with special needs will have a more negative attitude. This research is being conducted because the attitude a teacher has towards students can be helpful or harmful to them academically and socially. Students who do not have the support of their teachers are less likely to grow in their strengths. In order for teachers to help students succeed, they must be aware of their attitudes towards each student and how it may affect each student’s performance.

Review of Literature

Information regarding the topic of inclusion was obtained using the Ohio University Library website. Using the library search engine, “Education Full Text” was utilized and two different types of searches were made. The first search included the words: “teacher”, “attitude”, and “inclusion”. The second search included the words: “inclusion” and “classroom”. Current research using these search terms was gathered to provide more extensive research on inclusion and more specifically teacher’s attitudes toward and understanding of inclusion.

As the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) states, students with disabilities are to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). They are to be educated with their non-disabled peers, and only separated from the regular education classes when all accommodations, the use of aides and other services have not been successful in benefiting the student with disabilities. Wischnowski, Salmon and Eaton (2004) reviewed
literature that indicated one major issue is that general education teachers believe the presence of students with special needs will negatively affect the dynamics of the classroom. The authors indicated general education teachers feel that typically, developing students will be exposed to inappropriate social behaviors, but other data suggests that students with special needs have fewer incidents of misconduct than expected. In their own study they found students with special needs that are taught in a co-teaching environment, are no less successful than in more restrictive environments (Wichnowski et al., 2004). Paine (1990, as cited in Tomlinson, 2003) stated that, “when teachers see differences as deficits in students, rather than as classroom characteristics, this may lead teachers to relinquish responsibility for the academic success of each learner” (p. 124). Students with or without special needs are all individuals with different learning styles. This should be taken into consideration for all students, and therefore all students should have the same opportunities to learn in an environment that will promote the most success.

It is important for teachers in all classrooms to recognize differences in each student, and teach students in ways they learn best. Differentiation is key to helping students become successful in their academic settings, as stated by Tomlinson (2003),

The goal of effective instruction seems to be adequate flexibility in a teacher’s mode of presentation and in a student’s options for learning and expressing learning so that an individual can generally find a match for his or her learning-profile preferences. (p. 131)

She goes on to say, “It appears more important for teachers to consistently, defensibly, and vigorously adjust curriculum and instruction in response to student
readiness, interest, and learning profile” (p. 131). Students should be considered as individual learners who need several different modes for learning, who have different interests. Students with special needs are no different from students in regular education in this instance. Therefore, why are teachers excluding students with special needs from their classrooms?

**Inclusion**

Inclusion is allowing all students, typically developing and those with special needs, to learn in the same environment with fair but not equal opportunities. What is meant by “fair” in this statement is that each child should have the opportunity to learn at their own level, and modifications should be available to those who need them. This is different from Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), which is a requirement of the law. LRE requires students to be educated in the environment most suitable for them and their needs.

Inclusion has many benefits for students with and without special needs (Berry 2006). Research also demonstrates benefits for teachers that work in inclusive environments (Boling, 2007 & D’Alonzo, Giordano, & Cross, 1996).

**Benefits to students.** Among the benefits to students, is the fact that students with special needs are able to be included with their non-disabled peers, which can result in a greater confidence and sense of acceptance among others (Wiener, 2009). Typically developing students have the opportunity to get to know their peers with disabilities. They are able to confront and dismiss stereotypes they may hold by engaging in social activities with their peers, and form positive friendships (Berry, 2006; Dixon 2005).
**Benefits to teachers.** In an inclusive setting, teachers are able to successfully work in collaboration with other professionals, and have a greater opportunity to extend their knowledge of students with special needs and services available (Vakil, 2009). Vakil, Welton, O’Connor and Kline (2008) state, “Inclusion provides a supportive environment in which young children can grow and learn side by side with their peers” (p. 322). Students do not just learn from their teachers. They also learn a lot from each other. Rice states, “We all stand to learn from others who are different from ourselves, and peers are often among our best teachers” (p. 459).

The world is full of diversity, and students should be prepared for interaction with others who are different from him/herself. What better place to educate students about diversity than in the classroom? Students should be able to have this opportunity from the beginning of their educational career. Salend and Garrick (as cited in Berry, 2006) concluded, “benefits of inclusion for many students with disabilities include gains in academic achievement, increased peer acceptance and richer friendship networks, higher self-esteem, avoidance of stigma attached to pull-out programs, and possible lifetime benefits after leaving school” (p.490). Dixon also states, “In an inclusive setting, participants are not only accepted as equals, they also contribute as equals” (p. 35). She continues, “Inclusion is always reciprocal. Everyone in an inclusive setting contributes for the good of the whole” (p.35) Inclusion is about students participating with all of their peers, not just those without special needs, and working together to create a successful learning environment for all.

Wiener (2009) echoes this belief in the statement, “True inclusion is about the presence, participation, and achievement of all students” (p. 17). In inclusion, no
individual should be excluded from the opportunity of learning in an environment with their peers. Negative attitudes towards the inclusion of select students can hinder their education. In fact, “Students with learning and behavioral difficulties in classrooms with teachers who hold interventionist attitudes have a higher academic self-concept and are better accepted by peers” (Wiener, 2009, p. 18). The attitude of teachers towards their students has a major affect on their success in the classroom, academically and socially.

**Teacher’s Attitudes Toward Inclusion**

Teachers hold a wide range of views when it comes to the topic of inclusion. Some attitudes are optimistic and positive, others are doubtful, and there are those that are highly negative (Bain 2005; Boling, 2007; Bandon, 2006; D’Alonzo, Giordano, Cross, 1996 & Fakolade, 2009; Idol, 2006; Olson, 1997; Zambelli, 2004). Each of these views affects children during their educational career. “Most studies indicate that teachers, like the general public, have a negative view of both students with disabilities and the inclusion of students” (D’Alonzo et al., 1996, date, p. 305). D’Alonzo continues, “the manner in which the general education classroom teacher responds to the student with disabilities may be a far more important variable in ultimately determining the success of inclusion” (p. 305). The teacher’s attitude towards students with special needs can set the tone for the entire classroom. Typically developing students reflect their views onto their peers as well. This sets a negative tone for the classroom, therefore making the learning environment harder to learn in for all students. “Teacher attitudes not only set the tone for the relationship between teachers and students with disabilities, but they also influence the attitudes of non-disabled students” (D’Alonzo, Giordano & Cross, 1996, p. 307).
One reason why attitudes towards students with disabilities may be so negative is the lack of education for teachers about students with special needs. Teachers need to be better educated on how to educate a diverse group of students, including those with special needs, and also how to meet the needs of each individual child. In one study it was found that, “Secondary educators reported a desire to initiate more accommodations, but did not feel equipped to do so” (Olson, 1997, p. 29).

Even if teachers have a positive attitude towards the concept of inclusion in the classroom, they may not feel they have all the knowledge to make it successful. In one study, a professional intern was interviewed throughout the experience of her internship regarding her view of students with special needs. When she began her internship, it was found that, “she did not think it was her responsibility, as a general education teacher, to educate students with disabilities,” it was also found that, “she viewed students who have disabilities “in need of ‘fixing’ so that they could academically perform at the same level as their peers” (Boling, 2007, p. 222). The intern also stated she felt unprepared to teach students with disabilities. As she received more knowledge on how to successfully include students with disabilities, she became more open to teaching students with disabilities.

If this is a view that most general education professional interns possess, then it indicates more education on how to include students with special needs must be incorporated into their educational programs. Fakolade and Adeniyi (2009) state that, “adequate literature search has indicate a negative attitude of teachers and much of the negativity results from lack of knowledge” (p. 63) Ensuring teachers are provided with proper knowledge can be provided by a supportive administration. Villa (2003) claims,
“that the degree of administrative support and vision was the most powerful predictor of general educators’ attitudes towards inclusion” (p. 20-21). Educators need the support of their administration in order to be successful. The success of students does not lie in the hands of one person, but of a collective group who collaborate on how to best educate all students.

In this research, the attitudes of teachers in general and special education towards inclusion were explored. Specifically, this research was designed to determine the attitudes of educators towards students with special needs. How do the attitudes of general education teachers and special education teachers differ? Do teachers believe in the idea of full inclusion?

**Methods**

The purpose of this research was to determine the general attitude of teachers towards the inclusion of students with special needs in the general education classroom. A selection of general and special educators completed a survey about inclusion to gain insight on their views of the topic.

**Participants**

Participants were gathered from areas in Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. These participants included teachers in regular education classrooms and teachers in special education classrooms. Fifteen teachers were contacted by email. Ten of the fifteen teachers responded to the interview questions. Eight of the participants were teaching in regular education classrooms, and two were teaching students with special needs. The participants were sought out through contacts made throughout the researcher’s different experiences in education.
Procedures

A list of participants was gathered through contacts previously made through substitute teaching and working an after-school program in a school setting, and other contacts known by those teachers. Data was collected from participants through the Internet using email. The participants were contacted through their personal email accounts and asked to participate in the study. They were giving a set of free-response questions to answer on the topic of special education and the inclusion of students with special needs. There was also a consent form emailed to each of the participants. By answering the questions in the email and sending them back, they were agreeing to the conditions in the consent form.

Instrument

A questionnaire was sent to each participant in the study. The questionnaire consisted of questions about the different levels of inclusion and how each teacher felt about these particular levels. They were asked how they felt about included students with special needs in the general education classroom, and if they thought certain students should not be included. They were also asked if they felt comfortable modifying curriculum and accommodating students with special needs in their classrooms.

Additionally, there were several questions on the topic of resource rooms. They were also asked whether students should be in a self-contained room for instruction, and should those students be included in any activities with their typically developing peers. A question was posed to determine how much training each teacher had received on the topic of including students in the general education classroom. Finally, teachers were asked to share an experience they had had with a student with special needs.
Results

Attitudes Towards Students with Special Needs

In 40% of the interview responses received, teachers did not use person-first language. The students were referred to as the “LD”, “CD”, or “ED” kids or students. In 60% of the responses, teachers clearly were aware of the use of person-first language and used it throughout their questionnaire.

Interestingly, those who did not use person-first language tended to have more negative views towards students with special needs. They said things such as, “I taught 6 CD students... Five of the six were behavior problems, which I did not need to have in my room.” This teacher also stated, “Students with special needs should be included with gym and music classes. However, the students also present behavior problems in the activities.” All of this particular teacher’s responses were highly negative toward students with special needs. Throughout her interview she did not have any positive things to say.

By contrast, a teacher who used person-first language seemed to have an attitude of a whole different nature. For example, this teacher said,

A great time to include kids with special needs who are out of the regular classroom for the majority of the day is to include them in specials, lunch, and recess. That way they can get some socialization with kids who don’t have special needs and those kids can get some experience with kids with special needs. It’s a win-win situation.

Each teacher had a slightly different view on students with special needs, but generally there was a more negative attitude coming from those who did not use people first language.
One of the questions asked teachers if they believed certain students should not be included in the regular education classroom. Seventy percent of the teachers stated that students with emotional disturbances or “behavioral issues” should not be included in the general education classroom.

Forty percent of the teachers said that students with multiple disabilities should not be included in the regular education classrooms. One teacher stated, “Most regular education teachers are not trained to handle students with multiple or severe handicaps.” It seems that some teachers are frightened by students that are not the typical students they are used to having in their classrooms. One teacher in particular had a very negative attitude toward including any students with disabilities, “The severe CD and Severe MH students, or other special needs students need their own classrooms all day. Usually these students present behavior problems. If left in the regular classrooms, more time is devoted to solving behavior problems than teaching.” This teacher seemed to blame children with special needs for all the problems in the classroom. This teacher also stated that she had no training on how to include students with special needs, which may contribute to such a negative attitude.

**Differing Attitudes: General and Special Educators**

Both teachers of special education used the person-first language. They were also both very positive about including students in the Least Restrictive Environment. They made comments about all students having the initial placement of trying the regular education classroom, and exhausting all resources before making a decision to change the student’s placement. One of the special educators was particularly negative about how the system of special education was run, but kept a positive attitude towards the students.
The teacher was asked to go to training, but was booked for a mandatory meeting the same day, “The other “optional” in service training was not helpful because I couldn’t attend due to a mandatory meeting required by the special ed department that occurred at the same time (poor planning on their part!).” At no point did the special educators blame the students for any negative behaviors or hindrance to the learning of their typically developing peers learning.

On the other hand, regular education teachers tended to blame students for a lot of the disruptive behaviors in their classrooms. They were also more willing to send students out of their classrooms and into resource or self-contained classrooms. However, one teacher stated, “I do not mind having disabled students in our classroom.”

The general education teachers’ attitudes tended to exclude students with special needs from their classrooms. Even though the students were in their class, they were still classified as the “disabled students” or “LD”, “CD”, “ED” students. They never seemed to truly state that these students were part of the whole classroom. The teachers’ attitudes suggested they were different and needed to be set apart from the others. The same teacher continued by saying, “I do not have a problem with including students in our classroom as long as the other students are not so distracted that they cannot learn.” Again, this teacher is setting apart the students with special needs from the typically developing students. The fact that she says “our classroom” makes it seem as if the students with special needs are not included as a part of the classroom. A similar belief seemed to be held by all general education teachers who completed the questionnaire. They seemed to have an attitude that typically developing students were a part of the
classroom, and students with special needs were a whole different group of students. In most cases, the general education teacher did not see them as ‘their students.’

**Belief in Full Inclusion**

Ninety percent of the teachers who completed the questionnaires stated that at least some students should not be included in the general education classroom. Some teachers believed it was the students with severe cognitive delays, others believed it was students with emotional disturbances, some teachers believed it was students with multiple disabilities, and one teacher believed that no student with special needs should ever be included in the general education classroom. Only one teacher stated that she believed all students should have the opportunity to learn with their typically developing peers.

**Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions**

From the results of the study, it can be concluded that teachers who do not have any specialized training in including students with special needs tend to have more negative attitude towards those students and including them in the general education inclusive classroom. This confirms the hypothesis that general education teachers have a more negative attitude towards students with special needs than special education teachers.

Many participants in the study stated they did not have enough training, and did not feel they had the knowledge and skills to include students with special needs into their classrooms. As reported in an article by Zambelli and Bonni (2004), “two factors, in particular, are important in the formation of positive attitudes towards inclusion: increased knowledge, and information about school inclusion and disabilities (p. 353). A
recommendation for teachers in the general education classroom would be to attend professional developments involving the inclusion of students with disabilities. The knowledge gained from this professional development could improve attitudes and the overall success of students in the classroom.

The negative attitudes of teachers towards students can affect the way students learn and socialize. Teachers who are not open to students being in their classroom are missing out on very important socialization skills for all of their students. “Students with disabilities lose out on many of the activities of childhood experiences by typical children, typical students lose out on what their fellow students with disabilities have to offer them” (Dixon 2005, p. 37). Each student has something to learn from one another. If students with special needs are included with typically developing students they can be exposed to a diverse classroom, and later be more able to live in a diverse world. Teachers must be willing to be open to this concept and use teachable moments to make this work.

Teachers’ attitudes need to focus more on each student’s abilities rather than their disabilities. In the results of this study, many of the teachers saw students with special needs as having behavior problems, or being a distraction to their typically developing peers. If the teachers were more focused on the students’ abilities it would make for a more functional classroom. “When the attention is focused on students’ disabilities rather than who they are as people, the focus is usually on their deficits, not on their strengths” (Dixon, 2005, p. 37).

When the teachers in this study would make statements, such as, the “LD kids”, the “ED students” and the “CD kids”, they were putting the disability ahead of the
student. They were focusing on each of those children’s deficits rather than their strengths. They did not see them as their students. They saw them as the students that had issues beyond their teaching abilities.

It is clear that the teachers in this study would benefit from becoming more aware and better trained in the area of inclusion and students with special needs. They should be trained to look at the strengths of these students and not just focus on their deficits. They should also use the opportunities they have with students with and without special needs as teachable moments. Teachers need to help make bonds between students across diverse backgrounds, so they may grow as people.

**Implications for Practice**

These findings can benefit all educators and professionals in related fields. It can help those who work with students with special needs become more aware of how they are treating students who may be different from those who are typically developing. Each teacher can reflect on his/her attitude towards inclusion and students with special needs, and see if they need improvement in this area. They can also see how their attitudes truly do affect their students and how they develop and grow.

Teachers and other professionals can improve on services they provide by making sure they have adequate training in teaching students with special needs, and factors that can help make a diverse classroom successful. Also, the support from administration towards educating teachers regarding diverse populations of students would greatly help teachers gain the education needed.

The findings can help improve education by providing support to the idea that teachers’ attitudes affect students academically, socially and emotionally. Students need
the support of their peers and their teachers to learn and grow successfully. A teacher who focuses only on a student’s deficits is only going to focus on those deficits, rather than focusing on each student’s strengths.
References


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