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Changes in Preservice Teachers' Observations of Middle Georgia Schools
and Teacher Practice in the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities from 1998 to 2006

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Abstract

This mixed method study found that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion practices in the middle Georgia area in the past six years have become more inclusive. The study also showed that teachers' attitudes about inclusion varied from elementary, middle and high schools; and those teachers' attitudes do affect the implementation of inclusion. The participants were preservice teachers in elementary, middle, high school and special education classrooms. They completed a questionnaire to evaluate their field placements by rating their experiences and noting their observations of inclusive education in local schools where they were required to volunteer 20 hours weekly for about six weeks. The responses over the years show that attitudes toward inclusion have become more favorable among teachers and that understanding of the meaning of inclusion improved in the preservice teachers. The percent responding positively about inclusion varied from 84% to 87% over the years. The results also show the differences between host teachers' attitudes toward inclusion--elementary teachers' attitudes were more positive than teachers of older students.

Changes in Preservice Teachers' Observations of Middle Georgia Schools
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For decades educators, researchers, parents, and policymakers have tried to agree upon the most effective way to educate children with physical, academic and emotional disabilities. Inclusion is a model that many schools are implementing in order to educate special education students in the general education classes and fulfill the requirements of the state and federal mandates. The traditional settings in which special education students had been instructed have changed from previous years. Since the passage of the 1975 Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its 1997 amendments, special education students are no longer being taught in a segregated environment. This landmark legislation has moved children with special needs from segregated classrooms into regular classrooms through mainstreaming and inclusion. Inclusion implies accommodating the learning environment and curriculum to meet the needs of all students and ensuring that all learners belong to a community. Inclusion, or the lack of it, is also about equity access to quality education and can be related to aspects of social disadvantage, oppression and discrimination (Bradshaw & Lawrence, 2006).

The Regular Education Initiative (REI) movement of 1980, Individual Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, and PL 94-142 have resulted in the current programming model in many areas of the country which brings about full inclusion of students with disabilities into general education programs. In 1997, the U.S. Department of Education indicated that 95% of students with disabilities were educated in regular schools (Turner, 2003). However, inclusion is far from universally accepted among educators and educational policy makers. For example, as of the 1990-91 school-year, only 7.4% of students ages 6-21 with mental retardation were placed in general education classes for 79% or more of their school day (Fox & Ysseldyke, 1997).

Inclusion refers to the process whereby students with disabilities receive their education with necessary special education support, primarily in general education classes alongside students who do not have special education designation (Rox & Ysseldyke, 1997).

Mainstreaming refers to a process whereby students with disabilities receive a portion of their day in the regular classroom with other non-disabled students. The remainder of the day is spent in the resource (segregated) classroom with the special education teacher. The student with disabilities receives instruction in the general education classroom for subject areas that are considered his or her strengths while receiving instruction in the resource class in areas of weakness.

Factors Influencing Inclusion Implementation

Shader and Stewart (2000) commented, "One of the main factors influencing the successful implementation of any inclusive policy is the positive attitudes of teachers. Teachers' acceptance of the policy of inclusion is likely to affect their commitment to implementing it" (Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006, p. 35). Hipp and Huffman (2000, p.135) states, "For such whole school reform, a principal's leadership is seen as a key factor to success." Therefore, to ensure the success of inclusion, it is important that principals exhibit behaviors that advance the integration, acceptance and success of students with disabilities in general education classes (Praisner, 2003, p. 135). Australian national and state educational authorities now advocate for the inclusion of children with special needs into regular classrooms. Such advocacy alone cannot ensure that this policy is favorably accepted by the one most responsible for its effective implementation, namely the classroom teacher. It has long been accepted that teachers' attitudes and expectations impact upon their students' educational outcomes, and this is of particular concern where teachers hold less than positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities or the educational policy of inclusion (Campbell & Gilmore, 2003).

Most researchers agree that the most important condition for successful inclusion of students with special needs in the regular classroom is a change from negative to positive attitudes. Regular education teachers must be more accepting of students with special needs and their inclusion in the regular school and the regular class (Guralnick, 1982; Hanline, 1985; Odem & McEvoy, 1990; Samuel et al., 1991). Another necessary condition for the successful implementation of inclusion is continuous support and assistance to teachers by others such as the school counselor, the school principal, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and the school psychologist (Talmor, Reiter, Feigin, 2005). Successful implementation of an inclusion program depends on the attitudes of those who will work most closely with the students involved. These attitudes are influenced by the teachers' experiences and knowledge of the disabled (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Ayramidis and Norwich (2000) offered, "Teachers attitudes are crucial to the success of inclusion programs for children with special needs since their acceptance of the policy would affect their commitment to implementing it" (Burke & Sutherland, 2004, p. 164). Buell et al (1999) reported a positive relationship between teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and their belief that they could influence the educational outcomes of children with special needs. Teachers with more positive views of inclusion had more confidence in their ability to support students in inclusive setting, and to adapt classroom materials and procedures to accommodate their needs (Campbell & Gilmore, 2003). Teachers' negative attitudes toward disability lead to low expectations for a person with a disability, this in turn could lead to reduced learning opportunities which a cycle of impaired performance and further lower expectations by both the teacher and the child (Idol, 2006).

Some general education teachers have negative attitudes toward inclusion because they feel that they do not have the skills to teach disabled students. Teacher burnout is linked to teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. These teachers felt that inclusion caused more disciplinary

problems in class and social problems among students. The teachers had problems with planning their time between the students with special needs and the rest of the class. There were difficulties evaluating the academic work of the students with special needs, and these teachers felt they had a heavier workload because of the necessity to contact the parents of the students with special needs. These general education teachers felt a greater sense of burn out than those who had not worked with special need students (Talmor, Reiter, Feigin, 2005). Teachers' concerns about inclusion also include the amount of individualized time children with special needs will require, possibly to the detriment of the other students. They had apprehension as to the quality of work produced by children with special needs. Lack of adequate support services and teachers' concerns about deficiencies in their own training and preparation in the skills required to support inclusive educational practice added additional stress to general education teachers (Campbell & Gilmore, 2003). Teachers' attitudes were additionally influenced by the level of the disability they are asked to accommodate within their classroom. Center and Ward (1987) found that while a majority of teachers expressed a generalized agreement with the policy of inclusion, when they were asked specifically about their own willingness to include students with particular disabilities within their classroom, they were only willing to accept the inclusion of students with mild disabilities. They were reluctant to include students with more severe physical disabilities or students with intellectual disabilities (Campbell & Gilmore, 2003).

Attitudes toward Inclusion

Elementary teachers' attitudes toward inclusion were generally positive and reflected acceptance of students with disabilities. Several educators indicated that they liked having instructional assistants. They valued their special education teachers and speech pathologists. They were proud of their program and felt that statewide test scores of general education

students were not affected. The elementary teachers did not like pullout programs and did like inclusion. Several teachers recommended that certain practices and policies be implemented, such as offering more professional development on inclusion, offering opportunities to visit schools that were further along with inclusion, respecting the special challenges presented to the classroom teacher, providing support, making the special education assessment process more relative to classroom application, providing better training for instructional assistance, identifying reading problems earlier, and using mainstreaming rather than inclusion with students with more serious emotional problems (Idol, 2006).

Middle school mathematics teachers felt that they had limited understanding of the mathematics learning needs of students of with Learning Disabilities (LD). They did not feel that teacher education programs at the preservice level and professional development at the inservice level were adequate in preparing them for teaching students with disabilities in inclusive mathematics classrooms. Teachers felt that teacher collaboration was most beneficial and an essential resource for general educators teaching students with learning disabled students in inclusive mathematics classrooms (DeSimone & Parmar, 2006).

Secondary educators' attitudes toward inclusion tended to vary from being willing to accept and try inclusion to being very much in favor of it. Across all four secondary schools, very few educators thought that students with special needs should be taught in general education classrooms without some form of supportive assistance. In contrast there were two individuals who thought that students with disabilities should be taught in self-contained special education classes. No one thought that students with disabilities should be educated in separate, special education schools (Idol, 2006).

Resources for Successful Implementation

The new, more direct role of the general education teacher has demanded an increase understanding of various types of disabilities, types of appropriate curricular and instructional modification, and interactions with students with disabilities in the classroom. Collegial coaching and staff development programs in these areas are vital and must be implemented as secondary schools move to an inclusive model (Turner, 2003). Tait and Purdie (2000) argued the importance of preservice teachers developing positive attitudes toward disability early in their profession development (Campbell & Gilmore, 2003). Reynolds and Birch (1977) documented that teachers' desire training prior to receiving students with disabilities in their classrooms, and, therefore, such training should occur at the preservice level. Inclusion practices may be defeated if general education teachers do not have a positive attitude toward those practices (Shade & Stewart, 2001). Teacher education programs must incorporate leadership, public relations, change agency, collaboration, communication and time management skills into existing programs if future secondary, special, and regular educators are to be prepared to meet the demands of their jobs and to provide transition services to students to assist them in meeting their futures (Turner, 2003).

According to Hobbs and Wrestling (1998), the success of inclusion is related to several factors with teacher preparation, attitudes, and opportunity for collaboration being perhaps the most important. Inclusion is now a major education trend, and research has shown that a single course in special education is beneficial (Shade & Stewart, 2001). Powers (1991) states, "The good news is that even one required course appears to yield significant differences in attitudes and instructional competencies among preservice teachers (Turner, 2003, p. 493). Through course development, teacher education providers must ensure graduates have the necessary attitudes and competence to design and deliver inclusive curriculum to a diverse range of

learners to improve their individual outcomes for schooling. "If we are to bring about real change in our education system and create a model that is more closely aligned to inclusive ideals, then universities must work in close partnership with the teaching profession to formulate and integrate new knowledge about inclusive learning management, particularly in the hearts and minds of those entering the profession" (Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006, p.38).

As schools across the country move toward inclusive models of education, both preservice and inservice teachers must be ready to meet this challenge through a sound knowledge base and development of appropriate dispositions and performance. School administrators and teacher education personnel must search for new avenues to pursue this goal and establish field study or practicum situations which meet the needs of the teacher whether elementary or secondary in focus (Turner, 2003).

Many school systems are making efforts to implement inclusion in their schools. Because many special education students are expected to pass state mandate tests in order for the school to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), school systems are encouraging the implementation of inclusion. If inclusion is implemented effectively in all schools teachers' attitudes toward disabled students must change in the elementary and secondary schools. When it is implemented effectively, it can be beneficial to all who are involved.

The purpose of the following study was to examine preservice teachers' responses to questions that asked them to assess teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities and the implementation of special education practices such as mainstreaming and inclusion. Many schools are implementing inclusion practices in order to fulfill federal and state mandates. Therefore, it was hypothesized that host teachers' attitudes toward inclusion has changed over the years. In addition, there might be a difference in attitudes among elementary, middle, and

secondary teachers. Finally, host teachers' attitudes toward collaboration may affect the effective implementation of inclusion in the schools.

Methods

Participants & Setting The participants in the study were preservice teachers of Georgia College & State University (GCSU). GCSU is a small liberal arts university (undergraduate enrollment limited to about 4,000). Students become preservice teachers at the beginning of their junior year after being accepted into the School of Education. These preservice teachers were enrolled in the initial teacher preparation programs in the Departments of Early Childhood, Middle Grades, Special Education and Secondary Education cohorts. As part of their training, the preservice teachers were assigned 20 hours weekly for about six weeks for three consecutive semesters to six different host teachers in local schools in order to get a variety of field experiences in their area of concentration. The preservice teachers completed their field experiences in the central Georgia area in urban, rural and suburban schools. The surveys were conducted beginning in the Fall of 1998 and continued through the Spring of 2006. There were 157 responses in 2000-2001 (spring semester), 317 in 2001-2002, 356 responses in 2002-2003, 299 responses in 2003-2004, 251 responses in 2004-2005, and 399 responses in 2005-2006. The total number of field placements rated for the six year period was 1,779.

Instrumentation

The measurement instrument used in this study was a committee-designed questionnaire for the purpose of evaluating various aspects of their field placements. After the preservice teachers completed each field experience, they were asked to complete the field experience questionnaire on line. A paper and pencil version was used in the earliest years. The preservice teachers rated their host teacher on cooperation, communication, behavior management, use of technology, accommodating diverse students, and efforts toward high

levels of learning. They also rated the principal's involvement in the school, collaboration observed in the school, the overall acceptance of students with disabilities in the school in as many activities as possible (inclusion, mainstreaming, after school programs and special events), and were asked if they observed the isolation of students with disabilities. Consent for the use of their online responses by GCSU was obtained from all participants using a check-off yes/no question. Most question responses required the use of a modified Likert Scale. There were three questions with open-ended, follow-up questions designed for research purposes. For this study, only the responses to two questions (a) "rate the school's overall acceptance of students with disabilities" using a scale of Poor, OK, Good, and Excellent and (b) a follow-up open-ended question "Are the special education staff and classes isolated from the rest of the school? Please explain" were evaluated.

Procedures

The data used in this study was obtained from Georgia College & State University's Education Department. Permission to use the data was granted by the Dean of Education at Georgia College & State University. The university's Institutional Review Board approved the study. The data was available from the Fall of 1998 through the Spring of 2006. There were approximately 1779 surveys completed paper and pencil or (mostly) online at a university website using Test Pilot software. The survey results were exported to Excel where they were tabulated and organized in a table for analysis. SPSS software was used for the statistical analyses.

Design & Data Analysis

This is a descriptive study. Chi -Square test and ANOVA were used to determine the differences in attitudes by major and year. Qualitative data was collected according to major.

The results of the questions were tallied. Comments were analyzed qualitatively according to commonalities, trends and themes from preservice teachers in the different majors.

Results

Two research areas guided the analysis of the results. These included (a) quantitative ratings of the schools' overall support and acceptance of their students with disabilities and inclusion of them in as many activities as possible and (b) qualitative responses to an open-ended question about special education staff and students being isolation from regular education teachers and students. The hypotheses stated that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion have improved over the years; there is a difference between teachers' attitudes at the elementary, middle, and high school levels; and teachers' attitudes do affect the implementation of inclusion.

Acceptance of Students with Disabilities

Over the past six years preservice teachers rated teachers' acceptance of children with disabilities in their classrooms and other activities and the results showed that in the years from 2001-2003, 84% indicated that students with disabilities were being accepted in regular education classrooms, and by 2004-2005 the percentage rate had increased by three percent to 87%. The results showed that the rate of acceptance fluctuated back and forth but never fell below 84%. See figure 1.

Throughout the six years, the preservice teachers felt inclusion was being practiced in the schools. Many of the responses revealed that the preservice teachers did not have a clear understanding of inclusion. Many of them felt the schools were accepting of students with disabilities just because they were mainstreamed with other regular students; they attended the same exploratory classes, lunch, and supervision classes together; and some special education classes were located on the same hallways as the regular classes. The comments revealed these

misunderstandings. One elementary teacher stated, "No, the special education classes were found right when you walked in the front door, they are not isolated," and a middle school teacher commented, "No, we practice inclusion, because the special education classes are spread out through the schools." Many of those preservice teachers surveyed were using *mainstreaming* and *inclusion* synonymously because they believed that if the disabled students were having some contact with regular students, then inclusion was taking place in the schools.

Change Over Time

Another hypothesis stated that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion would change over time. The qualitative research gathered showed that teachers' attitudes were more favorable in 2006 than in 1998. The responses and comments were more positive in recent years. The middle and secondary levels were not as accepting as the elementary. The middle level preservice teachers' responses were 54% favorable in 2000-2001 and gradually rose above 84% but fell below the average of 84% in 2005-2006. The high school preservice teachers' responses were at 68% favorable and did not move above the average of 84%. They fluctuated back and forth the entire period. See figure 2. The results show middle and high school teachers were not as accepting of students with disabilities as elementary and special education teachers. In 2000-2001, at the beginning of the data collection, preservice teachers' comments were "Not all classes are isolated, but some are in trailers and in the Vocational Building, the students were sometimes ignored and put to the side." "In many ways, yes, they are isolated. The special education classes are usually in the trailer or in classrooms at the end of the hallways." "Most special education classes were in trailers." "I was in a self-contained class, but we took PE, music and computers with others. We sat with another special education class at lunch."

Toward the end of the data collection, the preservice teachers' responses revealed that they felt that regular education teachers were more accepting of special education students and

that inclusion was being practiced more frequently than in previous years. A primary preservice teacher responded, "My placement class was an inclusion class on the kindergarten hall mixed in with other regular kindergarten classes, and there was not any difference in the treatment of students." Another preservice teacher said, "The special education staff was not isolated from the rest of the school. This school has many inclusion classrooms, and there are special staff who work collaboratively with the teacher and the students." A high school preservice teacher said, "No, the students are not isolated. The atmosphere surrounding the special education students is very supportive and encouraging. The students are regularly included in regular education classrooms and extracurricular activities." Another teacher responded, "No, I was in an inclusion class, so I regularly saw special education staff." The responses provided by the preservice teachers from different levels of education and from placements in various schools support the hypothesis that teachers' attitudes have improved toward the acceptance of students with special needs.

Perceptions by Major

The hypothesis stated that there is a difference in host teachers' attitudes toward inclusion between the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Preservice teachers who completed their field experience at the elementary level responded more positively about inclusion. These preservice teachers seemed to have more contact with special needs students. Their comments showed that they were more knowledgeable about special education. The word "inclusion" was identified in their responses more often than by the other levels. The preservice teachers were in more collaborative classrooms. A preservice teacher stated, "No, they are not isolated, there are inclusion classes and some special education teachers come into other classes to work with the students." Another preservice teacher stated, "My classroom was an inclusive environment. 12 out of 23 students had special learning disabilities. One student

with severe and profound disabilities comes in for integrated time for two hours per day.” A preschool preservice teacher from a smaller elementary school made this comment, “We had a special education teacher and two special education paraprofessionals in two classrooms at all times. It is easy to collaborate with any of them or with any member of the special education department.”

Preservice middle school teachers' responses revealed that they knew far less than their elementary counterparts. When they responded to the question, “Are special education teachers and students isolated from regular education students?” more of their responses were “unsure” or “I don't know.” Other responses showed that more middle grades preservice teachers felt that the special needs students were isolated. The students with disabilities usually interacted with the regular students during exploratory classes and lunch. A middle school preservice teacher commented, “From my observation and inquires, inclusion seemed rare. Most students with special needs seemed confined to resource rooms or even self-contained classrooms. I witnessed two or three special needs children in the regular classroom, but interaction with the teacher and with peers seemed restricted.” Another teacher responded, “No, they are not isolated, they eat lunch with the regular students.”

There were fewer responses from preservice teachers at the high school level. The responses showed that most high school preservice teachers viewed their host teacher and the school as supportive of students with disabilities. They believed that the regular education teacher felt that the students with disabilities should be given the opportunity to integrate with their regular peers, but that they do not feel equipped to teach them. A preservice teacher stated, “The special education program is inclusive, but the special education staff are not supporting the inclusion setting.” Another one stated, “They are not isolated physically but educationally.” Some preservice teachers observed that many high school teachers felt that they

did not have the time to plan with the special education teachers due to scheduling and the lack of common planning time. Many high school teachers felt that students with disabilities could not keep up the pace in the regular class and took away time from the regular students. A preservice teacher commented, "The regular education teacher planned the course of the class and (special education teacher) just helped modify the curriculum. The teaching was somewhat collaborative in two of three classes, but it was still obvious whose classroom it was."

Discussion

The findings of this study support the hypothesis that teachers' attitude toward children with disabilities has improved over the years. The results of the surveys showed that preservice teachers responses revealed that teachers' acceptance of the students with disabilities has improved. At the beginning of the data collection, the survey results showed classes more separate and less inclusive. Ending results showed more teachers were supporting and implementing inclusion practices. Ayramidis and Norwich (2000) state, "Teachers' attitudes are crucial to the success of inclusion program since their acceptance policy would affect their commitment to implementing it". The finding of this study would clearly support the hypothesis that improved teacher attitudes would result in greater support and implementation of inclusion.

Further analysis showed that elementary teachers are more receptive to inclusion. An elementary preservice teacher stated, "The host teacher became very upset when the special needs student was removed from her class when students had to take a test. She wanted him to experience everything in a regular class." This finding agrees with the conclusion of Idol (2006), who says that elementary teachers' attitudes toward inclusion was generally positive and reflected acceptance of students with disabilities. They valued their special education teachers and speech pathologists.

Inclusion requires flexibility, creative scheduling, a mind shift, and training. These tasks may come easier to elementary teachers. Many secondary teachers do not understand how to implement inclusion properly and that may be due to a lack of training. A middle school preservice teacher stated, "There are resource rooms, and my class had two inclusion teachers, but they never taught a lesson, just helped all students if they had a question with a math problem, the same thing I did everyday." The study showed that implementing inclusion at the elementary level appeared to be easier than at the middle and high school levels.

The entire inclusion process can be hindered by the attitudes of teachers (special and regular). Many teachers have a misunderstanding about inclusive education. Some feel that special needs students do not need to be in the regular class due to low cognitive abilities and their inability to maintain the workload. Some teachers feel that students with disabilities interfere with the learning process of brighter students. Others feel that they are not equipped to provide special needs students with the instruction they need. Many teachers fight against inclusion because of the fear of the unknown. According to Hobbs (1998), the success of inclusion is related to several factors with teacher preparation, attitudes, and opportunities for collaboration perhaps being the most important. Teachers agree that if inclusion is to work and work effectively all teachers must be provided with the necessary training.

The results of this study show that teachers' attitudes toward inclusive practices have improved. It also shows that elementary and secondary levels of education view inclusion differently because of their different attitudes and the perceptions. Because inclusion is being mandated in schools, further qualitative research should be continued to identify attitudes of teachers and ways to make the inclusion a smoother transition for students and teachers. Even though this study took place over a six year period, future study should continue with a greater focus on middle and high school levels.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1: Overall rate of acceptance over six years

Figure 2: Difference by preservice major in rates of acceptance

