

Summer 2004

If it Takes a Village, Then We'd Better Educate the Villagers: Preservice Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs about the Inclusion of Students with Severe Disabilities

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If it Takes a Village, Then We'd Better Educate the Villagers: Preservice Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs
about the Inclusion of Students with Severe Disabilities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes and beliefs of preservice teachers concerning inclusive education for students with severe disabilities. Individual interviews were conducted with 35 preservice teachers to determine their attitudes and beliefs concerning inclusion of students with severe disabilities and to examine the factors that influenced these attitudes and beliefs. Following qualitative data analysis procedures, findings indicated that the preservice teachers were relatively evenly divided on their opinions about where students with severe disabilities should receive educational services. The most significant finding of this study was that the preservice teachers attributed the underlying basis of their beliefs about inclusive education to prior experiences in their schools, families, and communities. These findings suggested that teacher educators should consider the far-reaching impact of the training they provide. The future of inclusion may depend upon preparing thoughtful practitioners whose positive attitudes and beliefs are modeled in their classrooms and in their communities. These teachers will have the power to influence the attitudes and beliefs of the members of the "villages" in which they teach.

During the last two decades, increasing numbers of students with mild disabilities have been included in general education classrooms (McLeskey, Henry, & Hodges, 1999). Many special educators concur that inclusive placements provide both academic and social benefits for students with mild learning and behavioral problems (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Waldron, McLeskey & Pacchiano, 1999; Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1994). During the past decade, however, there has been growing support for inclusive placements for students with severe disabilities as well (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloniger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993; Downing, Eichinger, & Williams, 1997; Janney & Snell, 1997; Rainforth, 2000; Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline, & Morrison, 1995). Further, a number of studies describe inclusion programs that appear to be appropriate and effective in educating students with severe disabilities (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloniger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993; Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, & Goetz, 1994; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Jackson, L., Ryndak, D.L., & Billingsley, F., 2000; LeRoy, 1994; McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998).

Despite growing support for inclusive education for students with severe disabilities and numerous instances of effective inclusive programs, progress appears to be slow. McLeskey, Henry, and Hodges (1999) found an overall trend toward inclusive education across all disability categories, but reported less progress for students with more substantial disabilities. Similarly, D'Alonzo, Giordano, and Vanleeuwen (1997) found that students with mental retardation, autism, and multiple disabilities were most often placed in separate classrooms.

Rainforth (2000) contended that, despite the fact that both litigation (*Oberti v. Clementon School District*) and legislation (IDEA Amendments of 1997) specified a clear preference for educating all children in inclusive settings with supplemental supports, resistance to the practice continues, predominantly in the area of severe disabilities. Rainforth maintained that parallel resistance was reflected in teacher preparation programs. She strongly suggested that IDEA requires that institutions

of higher education adequately prepare personnel “to use the promising practices associated with educating students with severe disabilities in inclusive settings” (p. 84).

Moberg, Zumberg, and Reinmaa (1997) stated that many factors impact the development of inclusive education. They contended that teachers’ attitudes toward students with disabilities and inclusive education were one of the most important determinants. In a similar vein, D’Alonzo, Giordano, and Vanleeuwen (1997) maintained that a complex interrelationship exists between supportive attitudes of teachers and effective learning by students with disabilities in inclusive regular education programs. Further, Simpson and Myles (1993) concluded that positive attitudes of teachers are an essential component in determining the success of inclusive education.

Numerous studies have investigated the attitudes of administrators, practicing teachers, parents, and students concerning inclusive education (Bennett, Lee, & Lueke, 1998; Downing, Eichinger, & Williams; Fisher, Pumpian, & Sax, 1998; Giangreco, Dennis, Cloniger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993; Ryndak, Downing, Morrison, & Williams, 1996; Snyder, Garriott, & Aylor, 2001; Werts, Wolery, Snyder, & Caldwell, 1996; York & Tundidor, 1995). However, limited research appears in the literature that investigates the attitudes and beliefs of preservice teachers toward inclusive education. Brantlinger (1996) analyzed the written documents and discussions of 182 junior and senior special education majors and minors at varying stages of their undergraduate teacher education programs. She found numerous instances of beliefs that were determined to be detrimental to effective inclusive education. Brantlinger concluded that teacher education personnel “must consider the beliefs of their students in preparing them to teach, and, more particularly, must seek antidotes for pervasive anti-inclusive beliefs” (p. 31).

In another study examining the attitudes of preservice teachers, Moberg, Zumberg, and Reinmaa (1997) compared the perceptions and beliefs about inclusive education in teacher preparation programs in Estonia, Finland, and the United States. Questionnaires were administered to students

during a special education foundation course at universities in each of the aforementioned countries. The researchers found that preservice special education teachers' attitudes and beliefs about inclusion in all three countries were, for the most part, negative. They also determined the differences they found between the countries to be consistent with the existing levels of implementation of inclusive education in those countries. For example, in Estonia, segregated placements continued to be the most prevalent educational setting for students with disabilities. Likewise, the researchers found that preservice teachers in Estonia held less favorable attitudes toward inclusion than did preservice teachers in Finland or in the United States. The researchers also found support for the relationship between a person's perceptions concerning a person with a disability and possible actions taken toward that person. Moberg et al. concluded that greater significance should be placed on the beliefs of preservice teachers in order to ensure their ongoing commitment to inclusion for students with mild disabilities and to change their attitudes toward inclusive education for students with severe disabilities in a more positive direction.

The skills required of teachers are complex, demanding, and ever changing.

Correspondingly, designing and implementing university teacher education programs to prepare teachers to meet the multiple challenges of the 21st century classrooms are continuous concerns faced by teacher education faculty. As the general education classroom increasingly becomes the preferred placement option for many students with disabilities, including students with severe disabilities, teacher educators are faced with the dilemma of how to best prepare general education preservice teachers for inclusive education. To a marked degree, the success of inclusion in meeting the needs of a diverse student population may be dependent upon the beliefs of the teachers providing inclusive services. Richardson (1996) stated that the beliefs of incoming preservice teachers strongly influence what and how they learn. Further, she maintained that these beliefs should be "surfaced and acknowledged during the teacher education program if the program is to make a difference in the deep structure of

knowledge and beliefs held by the students” (p. 104). Only through a deeper understanding of these beliefs can teacher educators provide preservice teachers with experiences that will cultivate positive attitudes and will, in turn, facilitate the implementation of educational best practices.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to surface and understand one critical aspect of inclusive education: the preconceived attitudes and beliefs of entering preservice teachers regarding inclusive education for students with severe disabilities as described by the preservice teachers themselves. The study used a qualitative approach to determine the attitudes and beliefs of preservice teachers toward the inclusion of students with severe disabilities as they entered their teacher preparation programs and to examine the factors that appear to influence their attitudes and beliefs. The findings of this research should help teacher educators better prepare preservice teachers for inclusive education.

Method

Participants

A total of 35 preservice teachers participated in this study. All of these preservice teachers were enrolled in the first course of their teacher education program, Introduction to Education. Five of the preservice teachers were concurrently enrolled in an Introduction to Special Education course. The preservice teachers were composed of a mixture of general and special education majors at a comprehensive mid-sized university in the south central region of the United States. Prior to entering college, the preservice teachers had attended schools in 24 different school districts within the state. Table 1 provides demographic information about the preservice teachers including: (a) gender, (b) year in school, (c) type of student (traditional or nontraditional), and (d) major/level of teaching.

Table 1.
Demographic Information about the Preservice Teachers

Gender		Type of Student	
Male	7	Traditional	33
Female	28	Nontraditional	2
Major/Level of Teaching		Years in School	
Early Childhood	1	Freshman	5
Elementary	10	Sophomore	15
Secondary	7	Junior	12
Special Education	13	Senior	3
K-12 (Music, PE)	1		

Instrumentation and Procedure

Structured, individual interviews were conducted with each of the thirty-five preservice teachers included in this study. The purpose of the individual interview was to attempt to obtain a clearer picture of the preconceived attitudes and beliefs of the preservice teachers toward the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms. The interview also was designed to determine the preservice teachers' knowledge about, and prior experiences with, students with severe disabilities. An individual structured interview format was developed by the researchers based on an earlier study conducted by two of the current researchers (Garriott, Snyder, & Miller, 2002). The interview format can be found in Appendix A.

The individual interviews were conducted over a three-week period at the beginning of the semester with preservice teachers enrolled in an Introduction to Education course prior to any instruction regarding inclusive education or students with special needs. Three researchers from the Department of Special Education conducted the interviews. Of the 36 students enrolled in the course, 35 voluntarily participated in the study. One student opted to complete an alternate assignment. The preservice teachers were encouraged to respond freely and honestly to the interviewers' questions and were assured that their participation in the study, or lack thereof, would not affect their grade in the

course. The initial interview questions were posed to elicit demographic data and information about their program of study. The remainder of the interview focused on their knowledge levels about, and prior experiences with, students with disabilities and their preconceived attitudes and beliefs about inclusion.

All of the individual interviews were conducted in the private offices of the researchers. Only the preservice teacher and one researcher were present in the room during the interview. Each researcher followed the interview format during the sessions. The duration of the individual interviews ranged from 15 to 30 minutes. All of the individual interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. A member check was conducted by returning a copy of the transcribed interview to each preservice teacher, asking him or her to identify any discrepancies. One interview required that minor corrections be made.

Data Coding and Analysis

The interview format used in this research included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. For example, one of the closed-ended questions was: "Have you thought about the fact that you will most likely have students with special needs in your classroom?" Responses to the closed-ended questions were simply tallied.

The method of data analysis of the open-ended questions was based on procedures developed by Vaughn, Schumm, and Singagub (1996). These authors adapted their procedures from the constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) and naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researchers, all with previous experience coding qualitative data, conducted the data analysis. All three researchers independently read through each interview. Each interview question was analyzed in isolation. Small units of information in each question, with the size of the unit being a phrase, sentence or paragraph, were extracted and sorted according to major themes by two of the researchers. Themes were defined and the criteria for organizing the units of information under the respective themes were

described. After the initial analysis, the two researchers discussed the units and themes, looked for agreements, and checked for similarities and discrepancies. Discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached. For the purpose of inter-coder reliability, the third researcher independently verified the initial categories established by the first two researchers.

Results

Perceptions about Inclusive Education

The first question asked of the 35 preservice teachers was, “As a preservice general educator, have you thought about the fact that you will most likely have students with special needs in your classroom?” or “As a preservice special educator, have you thought about the fact that your students will most likely be included in general education classrooms?” Thirty-four of the 35 preservice teachers stated that they were aware of this. When asked how they felt about students with disabilities being educated in general education classrooms, the responses of twenty-nine of the preservice teachers (85%) indicated that they considered themselves to be open and receptive to including students with disabilities and had no reservations about these students being educated in general education classrooms. For example, one preservice teacher said, “I don’t think it will be a problem. I am comfortable. I know kids who have autism and other kids who have other special needs. I am pretty comfortable around special education.” Another stated, “I think it’s great. I think that special education is something that should just go along with regular education.” Two of the preservice teachers (6%) indicated that they would be comfortable including students with disabilities in general education only if they were provided with adequate training about these students. One of these preservice teachers stated, “I have no problem with that [inclusion] as long as I know how to deal with them and teach them a certain way, ‘cause they’ll need special treatment – as long as I was taught to teach them.” Two other preservice teachers (6%) seemed to hold positive beliefs about inclusion, but thought that the practice might be difficult to implement. One of these preservice teachers commented, “I kinda like the idea.

It's just going to be a challenge for me, and what is a class without a challenge? I would love to better the life of a child who is more unfortunate than other kids." Only one preservice teacher expressed a reservation about including students with disabilities in his class. This preservice teacher stated, "As long as they want to learn, that's no problem – I'll help them. But when they don't want to learn or they act stupid is when I have a problem with it."

Prior Experience with Individuals with Disabilities

The preservice teachers then were asked if they had prior experience with individuals with any type of disability. Twenty-nine of the preservice teachers stated that they had prior experience, while six reported no previous experience with individuals with disabilities. The experiences mentioned by the majority of "yes" respondents involved family ($n = 8$), school ($n = 8$), work ($n = 4$), friends ($n = 4$), or church ($n = 1$).

Perceptions About the Definition of Inclusion

When the preservice teachers were asked whether or not they were familiar with the term "inclusion," 13 of the 35 preservice teachers provided only a cursory definition. The majority of the preservice teachers ($n = 8$) who answered this question said simply that inclusion was special education students with general education students. Two preservice teachers responded that inclusion was everyone having a chance to participate. One preservice teacher stated that inclusion was not discriminating, while another said that inclusion was including students with disabilities in the school system, but in separate classes. Twenty-two of the preservice teachers responded that they were not familiar with the term "inclusion."

Inclusion Defined

The preservice teachers then were provided with the following definition of inclusion: "Inclusion is educating students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers in general education classes with support or specialized help as needed." After hearing this definition, the preservice

teachers were asked, "After being provided with a definition of inclusion, did you experience inclusion while you were in school?" Sixteen of the preservice teachers responded in the affirmative. Twelve of the sixteen stated that students with disabilities had been in their classes for part of the day. Three preservice teachers said that students with disabilities were in their Home Economics, Music, or Physical Education classes. One preservice teacher stated that a student with disabilities was included in her homeroom. In contrast, nineteen preservice teachers stated that they had not experienced inclusive education during their years in school.

Perceptions about Individuals with Severe Disabilities

When the preservice teachers were asked, "What types of students come to mind when you think of students with severe disabilities?" no adequate definition of severe disabilities emerged. The majority of the preservice teachers equated severe disabilities with being in a wheelchair or having some type of physical disability. A smaller number of preservice teachers stated that they believed that individuals with severe disabilities were mentally retarded or had autism.

Severe Disabilities Defined

The preservice teachers then were provided the following definition: "Individuals with severe disabilities have serious physical, emotional, or mental problems or multiple disabilities such as autism, severe mental retardation, deafblindness, physical disabilities, or a combination of those disabilities." After the definition was provided, the preservice teachers were asked if they had prior experience with individuals with severe disabilities. Fifteen of the preservice teachers stated that they had previous experience, while twenty reported no prior experience.

Perceptions about Preferred Placements for Students with Severe Disabilities

The preservice teachers then were asked where they believed that students with severe disabilities should be educated. Thirty-one of the preservice teachers provided responses without hesitation. One preservice teacher responded only after additional prompting was provided (i.e.,

alternative placement options were given). Three preservice teachers, even with additional prompting, were unable to designate a placement preference. These three interviews were eliminated from the data analysis of the remaining questions.

The data analysis of the responses concerning placement preferences for students with severe disabilities revealed preferences for the following placement options: general education classrooms ($n = 11$), a combination of general education and special education classrooms ($n = 7$), special education classrooms ($n = 11$), and special schools ($n = 3$). The preservice teachers' placement preferences were categorized by gender, type of student (traditional or nontraditional), teaching major, and year in school (see table 2). The data appear to indicate that female preservice teachers may be more receptive to inclusive education than males, and that special education preservice teachers may be more receptive to inclusion than general education preservice teachers.

Table 2.
Placement Preferences by Gender, Major, and Year in School:

Placement Preferences Based on Gender				
	Prefer GE	Prefer GE/SE	Prefer SE	Prefer Special School
Males	1	2	3	0
Females	10	5	8	3
Placement Preferences Based on Major				
	Prefer GE	Prefer GE/SE	Prefer SE	Prefer Special School
ECE	1	0	0	0
Elementary	2	2	3	2
Secondary	2	0	4	0
Special Education	6	2	4	1
K-12	0	3	0	0
Placement Preferences Based on Year in School				
	Prefer GE	Prefer GE/SE	Prefer SE	Prefer Special School
Freshman	1	1	3	0
Sophomore	5	3	4	2
Junior	4	2	4	1
Senior	1	1	0	0

When the placement preferences of preservice teachers were examined based on their prior experience with inclusive education during their school experiences as students, the data suggested that preservice teachers who attended inclusive schools appeared to be more receptive to including students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms. Eight of the eleven students who chose a general education placement stated that they had prior experience with inclusion (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Placement Preferences Based On Prior School Experience

Prior Experience in School Setting?	Prefer GE	Prefer GE/SE	Prefer SE	Prefer Special Schools
YES	8	2	4	2
NO	3	5	7	1

Further, when preservice teachers' placement preferences were examined based on their prior experiences with individuals with severe disabilities, the data suggested that those with previous experience with individuals with severe disabilities were more receptive to inclusive education. Again eight of the eleven students who chose a general education placement had prior experience with individuals with severe disabilities (see Table 4).

Table 4.
Placement Preferences Based On Prior Experience With Individuals Who Have Severe Disabilities

Prior Experience with Individuals with severe disabilities?	Prefer GE	Prefer GE/SE	Prefer SE	Prefer Special Schools
YES	8	1	3	1
NO	3	6	8	2

Reasons Given For Placement Preferences

The preservice teachers were asked to provide an explanation for their stated placement preference. The analysis of their responses were categorized under the following four themes: general education placement, a combination of general and special education placement, special education placement, and special school placement.

General Education Classroom Placement Preference

Eleven preservice teachers (34%) stated that they believed students with disabilities should receive their education in general education classrooms. Three major reasons for their

preferences for general education placement emerged: (a) general education classrooms would provide increased opportunities for socialization ($n = 4$), (b) general education placements would ensure equal treatment for all students ($n = 4$) and (c) general education placements would promote educational benefits ($n = 3$).

Four of the preservice teachers asserted that students with severe disabilities would benefit from increased opportunities for socialization in a general education classroom. They cited factors such as improved self-esteem, increased interactions with typical peers, and more opportunities for typical peers to experience working with students with severe disabilities. One student said, "Because I think that if you seclude them or take them away, they may not be able to experience things that could help them. I think that it is important for them to learn how to interact with other students or other people that may not have the same disability they have. And by taking them away, leaving them with only people like that, they won't be able to experience that as much." Another student responded, "I know how important it is growing up just being included. As the child grows up, the feeling of being included is important, being wanted and part of the group is important. I think that just because someone has a disability, doesn't mean that they can't function as a normal human being. I think it would be a huge learning experience for the traditional students. It would broaden their perspective about people with disabilities."

The same number of preservice teachers ($n = 4$) provided responses that reflected values of social inclusion and equity. Their statements suggested that all students, regardless of ability, have a right to equal opportunities. For these preservice teachers, the "rights" of students appeared to be the major issue. One of the preservice teachers remarked, "I don't think it was right that I never saw those students. They should have had the chance to be with us. It was like, you're in this room; this is where you are going to stay all day." Another simply stated, "I just think everyone should be treated equal if they're able to."

Three preservice teachers indicated that they thought that educational benefits existed for both students with severe disabilities and their general education peers. For example, one preservice teacher stated, "I think they can learn more from children who are not disabled, and I think the children who aren't disabled learn about the disability. They learn to be tolerant."

Combination of General and Special Education Placement Preference

Seven preservice teachers (22%) responded that students with severe disabilities should be included in general education classes for part of the day and be in a special education placement for the remaining portion of the day. Two categories emerged from the analysis of their responses: (a) students with severe disabilities need special education for academics and general education for socialization ($n = 4$) and (b) dual placement would provide increased opportunities for socialization ($n = 3$). Four of the preservice teachers indicated that placement in both general and special education would give students with severe disabilities the best of both settings. The preservice teachers thought that students with severe disabilities needed the expertise of a special teacher to meet their academic needs, but needed to be around typical students to enhance their social skills. For example, one preservice teacher said, "Well, I think that it is good for them to interact with other students that do not have disabilities, but they also need time with the special education teacher to work on their needs. So probably a little bit of both." Similarly, another student stated, "So they can be with typical kids and not be singled out, but they can also get the help they need for their disability or whatever."

Three of the preservice teachers chose a combination of special education and general education for students with severe disabilities, yet seemed to focus primarily on the social opportunities available in a general education classroom. One preservice teacher stated, "Well, some of them may realize that they are separated, and they may want to be with everyone else instead of separated. I had a few of them in my class and saw how they really liked it. Home Ec class – they loved Home Ec and Art, and they were even in a general music class. And it doesn't matter; they loved it 'cause they learned

from it. I can relate. If I was in that position, I would want to be included too.” Along the same lines, another student also mentioned social opportunities, but added that there may be social benefits for typical students as well. “In a special classroom, but in with regular kids so they can learn the social skills and stuff and lunch maybe. And also for the children without disabilities to work and get used to being around.”

Special Education Placement Preference

Eleven preservice teachers (34%) stated that they believed students with severe disabilities should receive their education in a self-contained special education placement. Three major themes emerged from the preservice teachers’ statements about special education placement: (a) special education settings would provide educational benefits and increased attention ($n = 6$), (b) special education settings would ensure equal treatment ($n = 3$) and (c) general education placement for students with severe disabilities would slow the progress of typical students and disrupt the regular classroom ($n = 2$).

The majority of the preservice teachers who chose a special education placement contended that students with severe disabilities would do better academically and would receive the special attention and extra help that they needed to be successful. For example, one student said, “They would be able to have more help. The teacher really plays a significant role in any student’s life, whether they’re severely mentally retarded or severely disabled, or whatever the case may be. The teacher can see more and will be able to administer more qualified help for the students, and they will probably be able to progress more.” Along the same lines, another student stated, “They need more special attention, so they need to be put in their own room to be able to get that special attention. Some teachers, they won’t give it like they need to.”

Three preservice teachers determined that placement of students with severe disabilities in a self-contained classroom would equate to fair and equitable treatment. Comments

made by the preservice teachers included, "I think they should be in a regular school like the rest of the kids, but severe disabilities should not necessarily be in with the regular education – maybe even some hallway of their own. I just think so they will not feel left out, and the parents will not think their children are being left out because they are special education," [and] "I think it's easier for them to be with their own peers and their own types because then they're not going to have people looking at them – they're not going to feel they're being treated any different. They are going to be treated just the same as everybody else."

Two preservice teachers suggested that students with severe disabilities in the general education classroom might cause the typical students to fall behind academically. Further, these responses seemed to indicate that students with severe disabilities could be a disruption in a general education classroom. The following comment exemplified this sentiment; "We had this one girl in our school. She would run up and down the halls and disrupt school. In severe cases like that, it's more of a disruption, and the other students don't learn. That's mostly why I believe they should be with somebody who knows how to deal with them in their own room."

Special School Placement Preference

Approximately nine percent of the preservice teachers interviewed (n = 3) stated that they thought students with severe disabilities should receive educational services in a special school. Their responses all indicated that they believed that a special school would be the best environment for students with severe disabilities because they would receive additional assistance and that the special school would better meet their unique needs. The following statement is indicative of this belief: "I am open-minded. I think that everyone should have a fair and equal opportunity to learn. I think if the kids are just so disabled that they shouldn't be set aside, but have their own place and environment where they can go at their own pace and understand and have more assistance. I think that that would be better for them because they would maybe do better with people in their own environment."

Underlying Belief Systems

The final question asked of the thirty-two preservice teachers was, “How do you think you came to form this belief?” This question attempted to investigate the underlying belief systems held by the preservice teachers as they entered the teacher education program. Five distinct themes emerged regarding the origins of their beliefs: prior experiences in school ($n = 14$), influence of family and friends ($n = 8$), a personal belief system that values social inclusion and equity ($n = 5$), special education coursework ($n = 4$), and experiences at work ($n = 1$).

The majority of the preservice teachers (44%) stated that they believed that the basis of their beliefs about inclusive education was their prior experiences with individuals with severe disabilities in their respective schools. Some of the preservice teachers experienced positive instances of inclusive education, while others saw, for the most part, negative examples of inclusive education or observed students with disabilities being educated in segregated settings. It appears that, whether the experiences with students with severe disabilities and/or inclusive education were positive or negative, these prior experiences did impact the beliefs of these future teachers. Preservice teachers who had positive experiences with inclusion in their school settings made the following statements. “I’m a very sensitive person, and I saw kids in my classes that were taken out of the classroom, and they didn’t deserve it. That bothered their self-esteem, and it really affected them. I don’t think that’s right. I think everybody should have a fair chance.” Another student stated, “I know exactly [how I came to this decision]. I went to a high school that was very favored. Their theme is diversity. They push it down your throat from day one, which I think is very excellent.”

Other students, educated in more segregated settings, held opposing viewpoints. One student stated, “We’d walk by the classroom, and you could see they just did different things. I think if they were in one of our classrooms, and they were learning differently, I think it would be hard because I know in some of my classes it was hard for me to keep up. And for somebody else, who has a disability,

it would be even harder for them to keep up.” Another preservice teacher remarked, “From my own experience – from what I’ve seen in my own school. Most of them were in a special education classroom, and that seemed to work out well.”

Twenty-five percent of the preservice teachers reflected that their underlying beliefs about inclusive education had been formed due to the influence of family members or friends. Some of the preservice teachers attributed their positive attitudes about inclusive education to their family members or friends who spoke optimistically about students with disabilities or modeled a positive attitude through their actions. The following statements exemplify this explanation. “I guess it’s just like – I know my Mom, growing up throughout my life, you know. She’s been like everybody deserves what you have. They can be there just as well as I can be there. It’s helping me and helping them too.” “I just think a lot of it had to do with my grandmother – seeing how successful she was with children with some pretty severe things.”

In contrast, some of the preservice teachers’ family members or friends influenced their attitudes negatively toward inclusive education. For example, one preservice teacher said, “My brother is a regular education teacher, and he has mentioned that it [including students with disabilities] would take away. Students that he has are just hard to deal with, and they are just regular education, and that takes away time with the regular education students. So I think that students with very severe needs would take away too.”

A number of preservice teachers (16%) explained that the basis of their beliefs about inclusion was related to their own personal belief system. These preservice teachers stated that they believed that everyone deserved an equal chance and that every person had rights. The following statements express this thought. “Oh, I don’t know – I feel you have to give everyone a chance to make it in life and reach whatever goal they can reach,” Another student said, “I think that no matter what type of person

you are, you have a place in society, and everyone needs to learn that you have to deal with these people, no matter what.”

Thirteen percent of the preservice teachers stated that their current attitudes about inclusive education had been influenced by the Introduction to Special Education course in which they were concurrently enrolled. Four of the five preservice teachers enrolled in the Introduction to Education course and the Introduction to Special Education course attributed their attitudes about inclusion to this coursework. One student remarked, “A lot of it was with my special education class. We talked about special education a lot. So, a lot of it, after taking that class, I think that’s why.” Another student commented, “The special education class made me think because before I had never really thought about it. I guess it is just something I never thought of, but now to be fair and not to discriminate, we need togetherness there.”

One preservice teacher stated that a positive work experience in a summer camp for youth with disabilities had shaped her beliefs about inclusive education. She stated, “Well – like with working this summer, I just really loved it. I mean I just like – I’ve never had a job where I actually looked forward to going to work. I couldn’t wait to get there in the morning, and I dreaded leaving and watching them leave. I mean, I don’t know, I just loved it.”

Discussion

This study examined the attitudes and beliefs of preservice teachers, at the earliest point of their teacher preparation program, regarding inclusive education for students with severe disabilities. The findings suggested that the preservice teachers were relatively evenly divided on their opinions about where students with severe disabilities should receive their educational services. Approximately 56% of the preservice teachers stated that either the general education classroom or a combination of general and special education placement was preferable, while 43% preferred the more restrictive settings of either self-contained special education classrooms or special schools. Further, the data

suggested that females held more favorable attitudes about inclusion than did males and more special education preservice teachers preferred inclusive education for students with severe disabilities than did their general education counterparts. In a similar study that investigated preservice teachers' beliefs about inclusive education placement for students with mild disabilities, Garriott, Snyder, and Miller (2002) found that approximately 52% of the preservice teachers favored general education placement for students with mild disabilities, while 48% of the preservice teachers favored special education placement. Further, Garriott, Snyder, and Miller found female preservice teachers to be more receptive to inclusive education than were males and found special education majors more open to inclusive education than general education majors.

The findings of the current study also seemed to indicate that preservice teachers who had prior experience with individuals with severe disabilities and/or had experienced inclusive education in their schools were more likely to choose a general education placement for students with severe disabilities than were their peers with little or no prior experience. Holt-Reynolds (1992) discussed the power of prior school experiences on the belief systems of preservice teachers. Holt-Reynolds stated that preservice teachers come to teacher education programs with powerful, personal history-based lay theories about what they consider to be good teaching. These beliefs about teaching then serve as a basis for evaluating educational practice as these preservice teachers begin to formally study teaching. In a similar vein, Pajares (1992) referred to preservice teachers as "insiders," with built-in expectations of teaching based on their own prior experiences in schools. Pajares contended that the students' commitments to these prior beliefs make accommodating new knowledge difficult, and that their positive identification with past teachers makes them unlikely agents of change.

We believe the most significant finding of this study was the preservice teachers' perspectives regarding the underlying basis of their beliefs about inclusion. Again, the power of the prior experiences of the preservice teachers was evident. The majority of the preservice teachers stated that their

underlying beliefs about inclusion were formed during their school years – in elementary school, middle school, and high school. Those preservice teachers who had a positive experience in school with students with disabilities and/or inclusive education appeared to be more likely to enter the teacher preparation program with a positive view of inclusion than were preservice teachers who had negative experiences in their prior school experiences. This underscores the importance of positive role models or experiences long before entering higher education.

Several preservice teachers attributed the basis of their beliefs to the influence of family members and friends. Some of the preservice teachers discussed the impact of the messages they heard as children from parents and grandparents. Others reflected on more current messages from family members or friends who are currently teaching, some in general education settings and others in inclusive settings. Still others watched family members and friends work with students with disabilities and model respect and acceptance of individuals with learning and behavioral differences.

Some of the preservice teachers also indicated that a university special education course helped to shape the concepts and beliefs they held. This is consistent with a recent study conducted by Shade and Stewart (2001) that investigated the effects of an introductory course in special education on the attitudes of preservice teachers. The researchers found that several attitudes about inclusive education were significantly influenced by the course. Unfortunately, preservice teachers' attitudes about class placement (where students would receive their academic instruction) did not significantly change.

Limitations

Generalization of the findings of this study to other settings should be undertaken with caution since this study was conducted at a university whose student population is very limited in geographic area. While many universities attract a diverse student body from many states and countries, the university in which this study was conducted serves a very local and, for the most part, rural population of students.

In addition, it would be wise to remember that the only criterion for participation in this study was that the preservice teacher be enrolled in the initial undergraduate teacher preparation course. Students varied in age, life experience, gender, and exposure to students with severe disabilities. These factors might have a differential effect and be a possible limitation in this study. However, interview questions were general in nature and the attitudes and beliefs expressed by those interviewed seemed to be more dependent on beliefs held prior to university entrance and not specifically related to any one of the previously mentioned factors.

Conclusions

In 1996, Hilary Clinton wrote a book entitled, *It Takes A Village and Other Lessons Children Teach Us*. In this book, she detailed the importance of family, friends, and the community-at-large in shaping the life of a child. Mrs. Clinton states, "Children exist in the world as well as in the family. From the moment they are born, they depend on a host of other "grown-ups" – grandparents, neighbors, teachers, ministers, employers, political leaders, and untold others who touch their lives directly and indirectly . . . Each of us plays a part in every child's life: It takes a village to raise a child" (p. 10).

The findings of the current study, in many ways, embody a similar notion. Many of the experiences that appeared to shape preservice teacher's attitudes and beliefs concerning students with severe disabilities, whether positive or negative, occurred prior to their entry into higher education. These attitudes and beliefs were developed during childhood and adolescence in their schools, in their churches, in their homes, and in their communities. The challenge for teacher educators is to consider the far-reaching impact of the training they provide. Providing preservice teachers with information about students with disabilities and the knowledge and skills required to successfully implement inclusion is very important. However, an even greater challenge for today's teacher educators may be to effect positive attitudinal change. The future of inclusive education may be dependent upon thoughtful practitioners whose beliefs and actions not only are verbalized, but also are demonstrated

and modeled, in their classrooms, their schools, and their communities. These teachers will have the power to influence the attitudes and beliefs of the members of the "villages" in which they teach after graduation. It is important to remember that each new teacher who enters the workforce with a positive attitude about the inclusion of students with severe disabilities becomes a part of the global village. They become the parents, community activists and voters who then influence the next generation of villagers.

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Appendix

Questionnaire Concerning Inclusion for Students with Severe Disabilities

Demographic Information:

What is your gender?

What is your major?

At what level are you seeking teacher certification? (Elementary, middle level, secondary)

In what year of school are you?

Where is your hometown?

Questions Concerning Inclusive Education

1. As a preservice general educator, have you thought about the fact that you will most likely have students with special needs in your classroom?

(or)

As a preservice special educator, have you thought about the fact that your students will most likely be included in general education classrooms?

2. What do you think about this?
3. Have you had prior experience with individuals with any type of disability?
4. Are you familiar with the term inclusion?
5. (If yes) How would you define inclusion?

The preservice teachers were provided the following definition of inclusion:

Inclusion is educating students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers in general education classes with support or specialized help as needed.

6. After being provided with a definition of inclusion, did you experience inclusion while you were in school?
7. What types of students come to mind when you think of students with severe disabilities?

The preservice teachers were provided the following definition: Individuals with severe disabilities have serious physical, emotional, or mental problems or multiple disabilities such as autism, severe mental retardation, deaf blindness, physical disabilities, or a combination of those disabilities.

8. After being provided with a definition of severe disabilities, have you had any prior experience with individuals with severe disabilities?
9. Where do you believe that students with severe disabilities should be educated?
10. Why do you believe that students with severe disabilities should be educated in the placement you selected?
11. How do you think you came to hold this belief?