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## Aspiring Elementary Teacher's Inclusion Conclusion Prior to Coursework

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Aspiring Elementary Teacher's Inclusion Conclusion Prior to Coursework  
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**Abstract**

By determining preservice teachers' prior knowledge, concerns, and preconceptions regarding the inclusion of students with special needs prior to beginning their first college course in Teaching Elementary Students with Special Needs, professors can better determine what to include in the university curriculum. The "Inclusion Conclusion" was based on surveys that were completed by 53 future elementary teachers. A general inductive approach to categorizing and reporting the qualitative data was utilized. Prior knowledge of people with special needs, based on experience and coursework, was examined. The students highlighted concerns about inclusion that included fear and intimidation, lack of experience, meeting the students' needs, level of patience, peer reaction, and empathy. In this qualitative article, the preservice teachers also outlined their coursework needs as: observations/field experiences, understanding laws and IEPs, practical strategies, and preservice curriculum.

**Aspiring Elementary Teacher's Inclusion Conclusion Prior to Coursework**

Salend (2001) explains that inclusion is an attempt to "establish collaborative, supportive, and nurturing communities of learners that are based on giving all students the services and accommodations they need to learn, as well as respecting and learning from each other's individual differences" (p. 5). A mainstreamed student with special needs is educated partially in a special

education program. Inclusion is full placement in general education to the maximum extent possible (Idol, 1997).

Kavale and Forness (2000) emphasized that "inclusion is not something that simply happens, but something that requires careful thought and preparation . . . implemented with proper attitudes, accommodations, and adaptations in place" (p. 287).

In 1994, the American Federation of Teachers reported that only 22% of teachers in inclusive classrooms said that they had received special training, and only half of those teachers felt that their training was "good". There is some evidence to support the notion that general education teachers have a lack of training and insufficient skills to adequately serve students with exceptional needs (Houck & Rogers, 1994; Lieber et al., 2000; Schumm et al., 1995; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000; Salend, 2001; Sprague & Pennell, 2000). Typically, preservice teachers had only one course focused on exceptional children (Tomlinson, 1999). Future teachers need more opportunities to work with exceptional learners in their field experiences so that the skills learned during coursework can be practiced in a real world setting.

There is a positive correlation between special education training and attitudes toward disability (Leyser & Tappendorf, 2001). If new teachers finish preservice education programs without developing a positive attitude toward people with disabilities, their attitude will be difficult to change and experiences as teachers in inclusive schooling will not be as successful (Tait & Purdie, 2000).

### **Legal Basis for a Need for an Understanding of Inclusion**

In 1975 when President Ford signed into law PL 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act did more than provide that a free public education in the least restrictive environment for children with exceptionalities. PL 94-142 (which is now referred to as IDEA) explains that consultations among parents, teachers, psychologists, and physicians are required to set up an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) for each child which, taking into consideration the child's needs, potential, and disabilities, include a statement of goals and the services to be provided to help reach those goals

(Snyder, 1999). There are many cases that cite the law's preference for the education of students working along side their peers through inclusion (Honig v. Doe, 1988; Sacramento City Unified School District Board of Education v. Rachel H., 1994; Taylor v. Board of Education, 1986). Inclusion practices are continuing to grow, with approximately 75% of students with disabilities educated in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

### **Preservice Teachers Views of Inclusion**

Common concerns of most first-year teachers include: pedagogical issues, lack of administrative support, and the need for both materials and appropriate planning times are regardless if they are trained for regular or special education (Renick, 1996; Holloway, 2002). "Teacher education programs are in a position to ensure that preservice teachers acquire the knowledge, dispositions, and performances required to succeed in educating students with disabilities before they get to the classroom" (Turner, 2003, p. 492).

### **Studies of Aspiring and Current Teachers and their Views of**

#### **Preservice Special Education Training**

Ivey and Reinke (2002) surveyed 52 preservice teachers about their attitudes towards inclusion of students with special needs prior to and following their participation in a sixth grade outdoor education program. Ivey and Reinke stated that, "Exposure to special needs children has been limited for many of the pre-service teachers. Anxiety and apprehension are common feelings for those who have not worked with this population prior." After working with the students with disabilities the preservice teacher's concerns decreased and confidence increased regarding inclusion.

Kamens & Casale-Giannola's (2004) qualitative study focused on the impact of the role of student teachers and the implications of the inclusion experience for teacher education programs. They explored the experiences of general education and special education preservice student teachers as they began to encounter the changing roles of teachers in inclusive classrooms. Kamens and Casale-

Giannola learned that providing opportunities to student teachers to practice co-teaching and experience both general and special education roles increased confidence related to inclusive practice.

Alghazo and colleagues (2003) used a demographic survey and the Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons (ATDP) scale to assess the attitudes of Arab preservice educators towards persons with disabilities. The results indicated that the overall attitudes of educators towards students with exceptionalities were negative.

Lanier and Lanier (1996) studied effects of twenty-eight teachers' classroom experiences on their perceived ability to include exceptional needs students in the regular classroom. The survey required the individual scoring of 60 separate classroom scenarios involving special needs students. It was taken both prior to a preservice teacher college class on including exceptional students in the regular education class, and also after three years of teaching. 88% of the teachers that were surveyed revealed that inclusion was acceptable in the classroom. The study revealed that as long as future teachers complete adequate introductory education courses their views on the possible inclusion of special students into the regular classroom will remain stable as they gain experience over time.

Andrews (2002) examined the use of Web-enhanced instruction and an inclusion model case study to teach 40 preservice teachers to adapt inclusive instruction for included students with disabilities and limited proficiency in English. The study acknowledged that feedback by the field from a teacher who was experiencing inclusion issues made it possible to use a real-life case and to provide mentoring feedback from the actual case teacher on the Web.

Carrington and Brownlee (2001) studied ten preservice teachers from a large university in Australia and their development regarding attitudes toward people with disabilities during a semester-long unit. Semi-structured interviews and journals indicated that the students developed a more positive attitude and became more comfortable after interacting with the teaching assistant who had a

physical disability during the semester and the learning experience improved their knowledge about disability issues.

Burke and Sutherland (2004) established that there is a statistically significant relationship difference in beliefs about preparation depending on the point that the students are in during their training. The preservice teachers assumed that their preparation programs really prepared them to work with the disabled whereas inservice teachers who are in the actual classroom did not deem that they had been well prepared.

Shade and Stewart's (2001) study stated that teachers report frustration, fear, and inadequacies towards inclusive practices in the classroom. However they also stated that a single course could significantly change preservice teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of children with mild disabilities in the general education classroom.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Preparation of Aspiring Teachers for Inclusion**

By examining the prior studies of preservice teachers through a constructivist lens such as Vygotsky's (1978), one can see that in order to help students to advance beyond their present level of development and understanding of inclusion the future teachers need to be able to interact with more experienced peers, professors, and teachers in the field. These constructivist underpinnings are reflected by Harrington's (1994), statement that, "Teaching education is not about knowledge but, rather, about knowing" (p. 190). Preservice education programs preparing for inclusion must go beyond just knowledge from text to helping to guide the future educators to truly know that they can successfully meet the needs of students with disabilities. As Dewey wrote, books interpret and expand upon experience they do not substitute for it (Smith, 2001). In order for future teachers to feel self-efficacy in relation to being prepared to teach students with special needs in their classrooms, they need to have a variety of experiences learning about this population and techniques that will guide their

practice. The following study explores what aspiring teachers concerns and needs are regarding inclusion and will help to guide the practice of preservice education courses.

## Methodology

### Participants

The literature review guided the creation of the survey. The findings of the study were based on the responses from the surveys presented to fifty-three preservice undergraduate teachers (six were male and forty-seven female). The students attend Robert Morris University in Moon Township, PA. The study was conducted prior to a course titled Teaching Students with Special Needs in the Elementary Classroom to assess their initial response to inclusion.

## Instrumentation

An author-created survey was presented to students via email and the responses were returned through email directly to the researcher. The questions that were presented in the survey were:

1. What experiences prior to this course have prepared you to teach students with special needs in your future classroom?
2. What concerns you about the idea of having students with disabilities in your class?
3. What would help to prepare you for an inclusive classroom?
4. Elaborate on the common education saying... "All students can learn."
5. What are you looking forward to about the course *Teaching Students with Special Needs in the Elementary Classroom*?

## Procedures

The responses from the survey were transcribed into a database and then analyzed according to General Inductive Approach to qualitative coding (Thomas, 2003). The first step of this approach is to format the raw data files in a common format (e.g., font size, margins, questions or interviewer comments highlighted) if required. The researcher should print and/or make a backup of each raw data

file (e.g., each survey). Once text has been prepared, the raw text should be read in detail so the researcher is familiar with the content and gains an understanding of the "themes" and details in the text.

The researcher then identifies and defines categories or themes. Among the commonly assumed rules that underlie qualitative coding, two are different from the rules typically used in quantitative coding: (a) one segment of text may be coded into more than one category and (b) a considerable amount of the text may not be assigned to any category, as much of the text may not be relevant to the research objectives. Within each category, subtopics are examined, including contradictory points of view and new insights. Appropriate quotes are selected that convey the core theme or essence of a category. (Thomas, 2003, p.5).

The qualitative analysis of the preservice teachers' views of inclusion began by identifying the content of the constructs and arranging them into common themes. The themes were then labeled according to the sense of the meaning of the constructs relating to each theme with a short phrase (i.e. prior knowledge: coursework). Overlapping coding and uncoded text was looked at to see if the information warranted mention in the text. The author chose a key quote(s) to illustrate the main focus of the subtopic.



## Results

The issues that emerged through the surveys of the preservice teachers on inclusive classrooms can be seen in the conclusion chart:

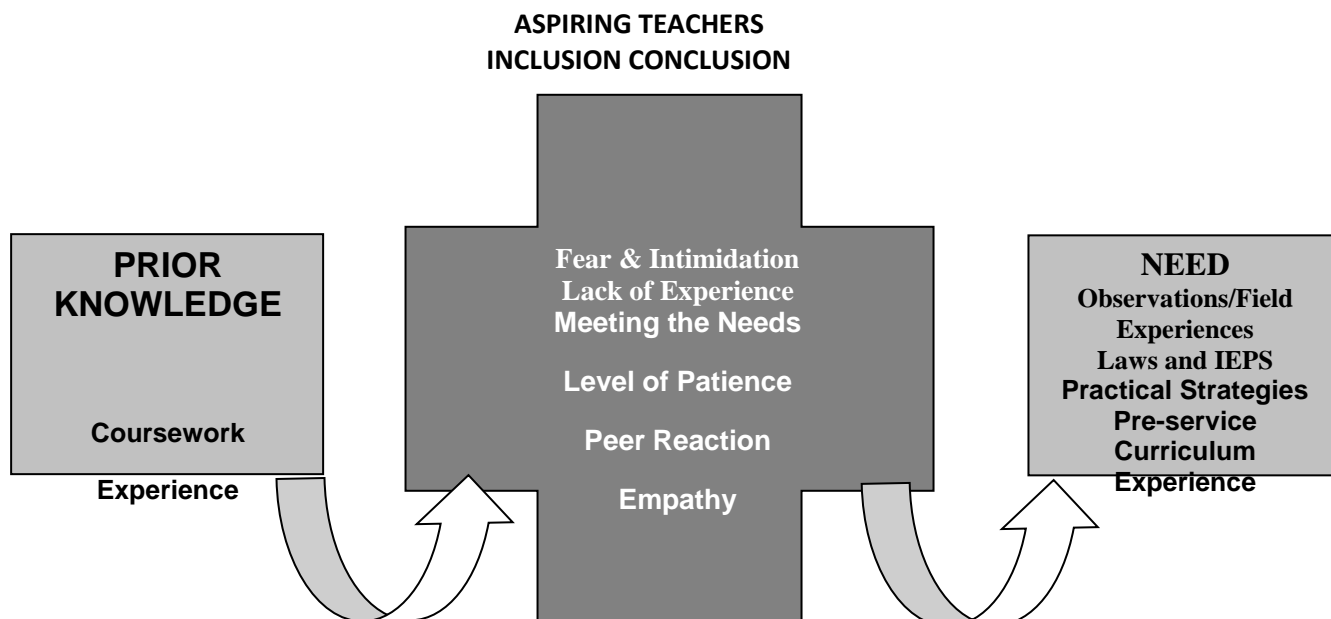


Figure 1. Hipsky's Inclusion Conclusion Chart

## Results and Discussion

Prior Knowledge: Coursework

Kamens & Casale-Giannola (2004) explored the role of the student teacher and recognized some specific areas regarding collaboration in the coursework of aspiring teachers,

To better prepare prospective teachers for these practical experiences, teacher preparation programs should review coursework related to special education. In many cases, courses may not include the development of skills and practices related to co-teaching and collaboration (p. 30).

The students who participated in the survey for the Inclusion Conclusion study explained their own

experiences regarding coursework for regular education teachers and the effort to prepare them for inclusion prior to the Teaching Elementary Students with Special Needs course. The students described classes that spoke about special needs, yet many acknowledged that they needed deeper exposure to the topic through coursework. This quote highlights the need for coursework in special education:

*Many of the education classes that I have taken at RMU prior to this one have touched on the subject of students with special needs but none of them went into enough detail that I feel I have enough preparation to be able to teach a classroom with a diverse group of children.*

*Prior Knowledge: Experience*

Some of the students entered the first special needs course equipped with prior knowledge based on personal experience with people with special needs. The preservice teachers described experiences that will provide a base on which to scaffold the learning about their future students. Two quotes highlighted the students' experiences that ranged from their own history as a labeled student to volunteer work in a variety of settings:

*I have more experience with the "gifted" part of special needs because I was in my district's gifted program since second grade. Since sixth grade, I had a couple mentally handicapped students in my grade but because of my placement never actually had class with them. I have volunteered at the Center for Creative Play a few times which exposed me to some children with special needs, and I also tutor a sophomore in high school that has A.D.D.*

*Last fall, I was a wrap-around aide for a kindergartener who lost her vision due to cancer. I worked with her for a mere month because a custody dispute forced her to leave the district. That month was the most challenging month of my life. Yet, it was also the most rewarding. I learned tolerance, patience, and acceptance from her as well, as her fellow classmates. Who would have thought that a group of five year olds would be more accepting than teachers many years into their careers?*

*This year, I am aiding in a first grade classroom. The school district I am working at is invoking full inclusion this year and there are children with special needs present at times in the classroom.*

*Even though I have been fortunate enough to be in true academic settings and have had the opportunity to observe many situations, I am in no way prepared to teach students with exceptionalities. I feel that I am used wherever the school district feels that I am needed and have not become skilled or advanced in any one area.*

## Aspiring Teachers Inclusion Conclusion: Concerns

### Concerns: Fear & Intimidation

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 (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The fear and intimidation factor of the management of an inclusive classroom, can be debilitating to a new teacher; here the future teachers express their two main concerns (lack of control and juggling multiple responsibilities):

*I am concerned that I will not be able to control all my students in the class. Also, a child with a disability may need more assistance and I may not be able to give that child my full attention every time they need it. A lot of children today have ADD and I am concerned that they will be hyper and I will not know how to control them.*

*I agree with inclusion but I also realize that it is a challenge to adapt the classroom to a person's special needs. Teachers have so many responsibilities already, and having a special needs student will be another huge one. I just hope that I can adhere to a student's needs in the best way possible, so that they can succeed like any other student in the classroom.*

### Concerns: Lack of Experience

Mock and Kauffman (2002) articulated that the regular education teachers of the future will need to have a deep understanding of all disabilities,

Advocates for full inclusion posit that students are more alike than different, and therefore, all students are best instructed in the regular classroom. Preparing teachers for this eventuality would require that they be trained in depth to teach students with specific disabilities effectively and trained in extraordinary breadth as well because they would be required to teach students with many different disabilities (p. 202).

Therefore, experience in inclusive settings classrooms will be very important in classroom observations, field sites, and student teaching experiences to fill in these gaps in learning. The future teachers' lack of experience is discussed by the aspiring teachers in this study in response to a question regarding their experiences with special needs students:

*I have never worked with children with special needs. The most that I have experienced is other students in school and my uncle.*

#### Concerns: Meeting the Needs

A quote from Mock and Kauffman (2002) expressed a sentiment that is echoed in the concerns of the future regular education teachers,

What then about teacher preparation? Simply put, there is no way to prepare teachers for the reality of full inclusion. Teachers cannot be prepared to competently instruct every student. Presently teachers are professionals with specific training and expertise. As such, they are well aware of their strengths and limitations. If full inclusion is implemented, they will be asked to declare competence in areas beyond their training and expertise. (p. 212)

These authors have a fatalistic view of the ability to provide preservice teachers with a broad yet deep understanding so that these future teachers can meet the needs of all students. The aspiring teachers expressed the worries regarding meeting the needs of their included in their classrooms. This quote brings to light these concerns:

*The concern I have is being prepared to fulfill all my students' needs, including children with disabilities. I don't think that I have acquired enough information about students with disabilities. I need more knowledge before I go into the classroom.*

#### Concern: Level of Patience

Most special education teachers will tell you that the comment that they receive the most often about their chosen profession is, "You must be so patient to work with that type of child." It is a concern of future regular education teachers that they might not be naturally equipped with the patience for this population of students. One student admitted to this concern regarding an internal level of patience:

*My biggest concern is my own patience. I had the dream of teaching the best and brightest students (not to sound stuck-up/selfish). I'm afraid that I won't have the patience to teach slower children, although I have nothing against children with special needs.*

Another student reflected on patience in other scenarios as a way of determining if he was prepared for the inclusive setting:

*Well I think all of my teaching classes have helped prepare me to teach any student. God has given me patience with people, but not driving or even waiting in line for things! Also I teach three year olds at church every other Sunday at church and I think sometimes small children can create similar situations as special needs students. Lastly I think hearing stories from my friend who is in the classroom helping teach students with special needs has helped prepare me to teach students with special needs.*

#### Concern: Peer Reaction

Some of the responses to the survey questions related to students that do not have special needs and their reactions to the students with exceptional needs. The future teachers are concerned about the other students meeting their own goals and the potential for bullying and teasing of students who are different:

*I am concerned about the other students in the class. They may not know how to react, or they could be distracted. I also hope that I am well prepared to handle difficult situations.*

*I also as a teacher hope that I make sure all the children have complete understanding and compassion for one another. I hope I am able to allow them to see past each other's differences. I know that this is going to be a challenge at times. I just hope I have what it takes.*

#### Concern: Empathy

During the first lesson with the aspiring teachers from the study, the professor held up a picture of a young girl with Down Syndrome playing the piano. The students honed in on the image. They focused not her ability to play the piano. Instead they discussed feelings of empathy, despair, concern, and deep sadness for the child. Those sentiments are expressed in the following description:

*My major concern of having a student with a disability in my class is not knowing how to handle the student and the situation. I am also a very emotional person therefore I get worried that I will get upset. When I was in middle school we would visit a school for children with mental and physical disabilities and all I can remember was trying not to cry.*

Aspiring Teachers Inclusion Conclusion: Need

#### Need: Observations/Field Experiences

The preservice teachers feel that experience is often a better teacher than coursework. The students in the study expressed other needs including immersion into an inclusion setting during their training:

*I feel that the best way to prepare yourself for an inclusive classroom is to be knowledgeable of anything and everything that can be put in front of you. The only way to get to that point is by observing others and carefully absorbing their techniques and methods of operation. As a future teacher I hope to research, observe, and actively participate in all teaching settings. I know from experience in life, I must use what I know to prepare me for all future endeavors. The more I know, the better prepared I will be when a challenge emerges.*

#### Need: Learning about the Laws and IEPs

Future teachers are beginning to understand that they need knowledge of IEPs, special education law, and modification/adaptation techniques. Many of the students remarked on the need to learn more about these specific special education topics. One student remarked:

*I think what would prepare me the most is by learning more about what types of special needs students might have and how to prepare active learning experiences to meet those needs. Also learning about IEPs would be a big help in preparing me for an inclusive classroom.*

#### Need: Practical Strategies

“If all students are to be instructed in the regular classroom, then the regular classroom teacher must be prepared to teach all students” (Mock & Kauffman, 2002). However, to truly be prepared, the future teachers in rooms that have included students will need to be armed with an arsenal of practical strategies to meet the needs of special education students. The students articulated this need in their surveys:

*My main concern would have to involve adaptations and modifications. I am worried that I do not possess the knowledge to adapt my lesson plans and planned activities for all students. I want to incorporate every student and utilize each to his or her individual ability; at this point in my schooling I am not equipped to do that.*

## Need: Preservice Curriculum

Hobbs and Westling (2002) determined specific methodologies for the preservice curricula,

In summary, teacher preparation faculty who instruct general and special educators should employ procedures that mentor their students for inclusive outcomes and that concur with the "best practices" of inclusive education. In particular they should employ in vivo case studies, cooperative learning and collaborative problem-solving activities. By doing so, they will model skills needed by teachers in inclusive classrooms and employ procedures that are efficacious mentoring and teacher preparation tools (p. 186).

The students in this study suggest that preservice curriculum on teaching students with special needs should include: project based learning, guest speakers, materials/resources, activities wherein they garner first hand experience of what it might be like to have a disability, and an experienced professional to guide their learning and answer their questions as they arise. These salient points are elaborated through the words of the students below:

*I am looking forward to learning more about students with special needs, and ways to handle them in the classroom. I have always considered taking up Special Education once I went to grad school. This class should give me a better idea of whether or not I would want to do this. I am also anxious to complete the projects for class. Some of them sound very interesting, and I really think they will be great learning experiences.*

*I'm definitely looking forward to learning how to teach these special children. There seem to be so many interesting topics coming up, and I seem to leave class feeling like I actually learned something and had fun. One thing that I am interested in the most is our guest speakers. I would like to see their views on teaching special needs children, and how they really feel about it. So far this course has been great!*

*To help prepare for an inclusive classroom, I would have materials for children with different disabilities.*

*Experience and lots of advice would probably help me to be better prepared for an inclusive classroom.*

*I am looking forward to completing the projects. I am also looking forward to spending time in the classroom with special needs children.*

*I am really looking forward to learning how I can create a positive learning environment for all types of students in my inclusive classroom. I hope that this class will prepare me to be a wonderful teacher in the future so I might make an impact on my students and inspire them to strive for excellence in all they do.*

### **The Inclusion Conclusion**

The conclusion of this article is that preservice teachers enter into their first teaching students with special needs classroom with prior knowledge based on some experience and a little relevant coursework. Unfortunately, the students revealed that they are also filled with concerns about fear and intimidation, lack of experience, meeting the needs of students, level of patience, peer reaction, and empathy. Luckily, most are truly looking forward to the classroom and the challenge of meeting the needs of their future students as can be witnessed in the following quote from the survey:

*I am looking forward to reaching out to children. As far back as I can remember I have always wanted to be a teacher. I want to be able to make a difference in a child's life. To me, one of the greatest gifts is seeing that spark in a child's eyes when they learn something new. To teach children who have exceptionalities can be even more rewarding. These children in some educational settings tend to get left behind and are sometimes given up on. I feel it will be a wonderful opportunity to help these children feel appreciated and show them that they have the ability to do anything and everything they put their minds to.*

Through the expression of their concerns, the future teachers were given a voice in which to inform the greater body of knowledge their needs and assumptions that they bring into their initial coursework on special needs. By examining their words, teacher educators can formulate ways in which they can deliver the materials that will enhance the construction of knowledge for their students.

The results of this survey provide an affirmation for prior findings by other researchers regarding preservice teachers' concerns about inclusion (Lanier & Lanier, 1996; Ivey & Reinke, 2002). Upon recognizing a gap in the literature, this article takes the data a step further by discussing the need for the constructive approach to teacher education curriculum for inclusive classrooms. To meet the needs of preservice teachers, the curriculum for special needs curriculum must include: multiple appropriate observations and field experiences, training on the laws and IEPs, effective teaching methodologies and



practical classroom strategies taught by an experienced professor. It is through these types of classroom experiences for preservice training which are rooted in constructivist learning that we can begin to tear down the walls of stereotypes and concern so that the classrooms of tomorrow are positive inclusive learning environments.

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