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Teachers' Attitudes Toward Inclusion

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to (a) investigate current teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, and to (b) explore possible difference in the general and special education teachers' attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities in the integrated education classroom. A total of 10 participants from a large mid-western state university participated in this study. All ten participants were in-service teachers enrolled in graduate classes. The findings of this study indicated that teachers had positive attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classroom. Some differences, however, were found between the attitudes of special and regular education teachers. Special educators were more supportive to full inclusion than the general educators. The integration of information concerning teachers' beliefs/points of view about inclusion may help practitioners to design educational settings that enhance all students' academic performance.

Recent research indicated that the success of inclusion programs is dependent on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999; Salend, 2005; Van Reusen, Shoho, and Barker 2001). Since there is well-established literature on the link between teachers' beliefs and their actions (Lieber, Capbell, Sandall, Wolfberg, Horn, & Beckman, 1998), there is a recent focus on the attitude that teachers have toward inclusion (see for example, Shade & Stewart, 2001). Much of this research revealed that experienced teachers or teachers who have prior experience with individual with disabilities hold more positive attitudes toward inclusion than those who have no prior experience with individual with disabilities. For example, in examining special and general education teachers' perceptions of inclusion, Taylor, Richards, Goldstein, and Schilit (1997) found significant differences between general and special educators; general educators disagreed with the placement of students with mental and behavioral or emotional disabilities in the general classroom. In a most recent study with high school teachers Van Reusen et al., (2001) found that positive teachers attitude about including and teaching students with disabilities in general education classroom was related to the levels of special education training and experience in working with students with disabilities. In another study that used a survey instrument to compare the perspectives of teachers who were currently teaching in inclusive school programs with teachers who were not teaching in this setting, McLeskey, Waldron, So, Swanson, and Loveland (2001) found that the inclusion teachers have more positive attitude toward inclusion than those who were not teaching in inclusive school programs.

It seems beyond dispute that past research has generally indicated that the amount of training or experience the teachers had in teaching students with disabilities is related to teachers' attitude toward inclusion. However, the findings from those studies designed to

compare special and regular educators attitude toward inclusion are limited to quantitative data (i.e., survey, inventory, questionnaire...etc). The use of attitudinal scales and quantitative data only may limit our ability to explore the subjectivity involved in teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. This study, therefore, was designed to examine the issues raised by these investigators (Taylor, Richards, Goldstein, and Schilit, 1997; Van Reusen, Shoho, and Barker, 2001) by using the Q-methodology, a combined quantitative and qualitative approach to explore teachers' attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom and to explore possible differences in the general and special education teachers' attitudes toward inclusion.

Method

Investigation of the attitudes of educators concerning inclusive educational classrooms was accomplished by using the Q-methodology. Q-method is a dependable way to address individual's unique points of view (Brown, 1996). The instrumental basis of Q-methodology is the Q-sort technique, which conventionally involves the rank ordering of a set of statements from agree to disagree (Brown, 1996). In this particular study, respondents were asked to rank all items in the concourse from most like my view to most unlike my view. A concourse is the set of opinion statements representing all possible statements related to the study (Brown, 1980). In this study, the population of items was drawn from the relevant literature review on inclusion. The Q - sample in this study is represented by 39 statements, concerning academic aspects, socialization aspects, and legal right issues of including students with disabilities in the general education classrooms.

Participants

A total of ten participants representing an equal mix of both general and special educators agreed to participate in this study. Participants were recruited from in-service teachers enrolled in graduate classes in the college of education at a large mid-western state university in the U.S. Six of the participants enrolled in doctoral program and four of the participants enrolled in masters program. Nine of the participants were females and one was a male. Participants of this study had either elementary, middle, or high schools experiences or a combination of more than one experience.

Procedure

The ten participants were asked if they would spend approximately twenty minutes sorting 39 statements about their beliefs about inclusion. All participants who were asked agreed to participate in this study. Prior to the Q-sorting participants were asked to complete a demographic data sheet concerning their race, sex, experiences in education, highest degree earned, and to indicate if they are general or special educator. In the Q-sorting, respondents completed the Q - sort under one condition of instruction: (1) what is your belief about inclusion? In the Q-sorting respondents were asked first to read the instruction and then to rank all items in the concourse from most like my view to most unlike my view based upon each respondent's belief about inclusion. During the Q-sorting the respondents were also given an opportunity to comment on the statements and to explain verbally how do they feel about each statement.

The Q-sort data obtained was factored by a statistical computer program called PQ Method 2.09 (Schmolck, 1997). This program first correlates each of the sorts to each of the other sorts, and then a principle components factor analysis was conducted, followed by varimax rotation to respond to the research questions.

Results

The analysis of this study yielded a three factors solution. A three factors solution was chosen as the best fit because it accounted for more of the sorts. The three factors accounted for 78 percent of the variance. The participants' attitudes toward inclusion were represented by the three factors and were characterized by the following titles: Legalism, Environmentalism, and Conservatism.

Legalism placed importance on the fairness of inclusion and they viewed inclusion as a legal issue and they also viewed inclusion as beneficial for everybody. For example, they believe that “inclusion is beneficial for student with disabilities”, “inclusion is beneficial for student without disabilities”, and “inclusion is a civil right issue”.

Environmentalism, believed that the environment of the general education classroom could meet the needs of all students. For example, they believed that “special education students can be placed in the general classroom without being academically stigmatized or alienated” and that “special education students can be placed in the general classroom without being behaviorally stigmatized or alienated”.

Conservatism, as their name implies, have some concerns about inclusion. They view inclusion as an inappropriate approach for academic, as well as social success, for all students. For example, they believed that “the responsibility of educating a child with a disability in regular classes has an adverse effect on the education of children without disabilities” and that “children

with mental retardation could not receive an appropriate education in the regular education classroom”.

The results of this study revealed that while eight sorts load significantly on one of the three factors, there are two sorts that did not significantly load on any factor. Of the eight significant Q-sorts from the P-set, three loaded as Legalism, two loaded as Environmentalism, and three loaded as Conservatism. Participants whose Q-sorts had extreme high loadings were interviewed, through a face-to-face arrangement, to determine if the interpretation of the Q-sort accurately reflected their beliefs. Results of these interviews indicated that the Q-sort accurately reflected the participants' beliefs about inclusion.

Discussion

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study. The majority of teachers in the study indicated positive perceptions of inclusion of student with disabilities in the general education classroom. A second conclusion concerning the difference in the attitudes of general education teachers and special education teachers indicated that all special education teachers identified with the “Legalism” and the “Environmentalism” viewpoint, which implies that they are highly supportive of inclusion. While more general education teachers identified with the “Conservatism” point of view, which indicate that general educators are not highly supportive of inclusion, and have strong reservations toward including students with severe disabilities. These findings were consistent with the work of Taylor et al., (1997). In general, the quantitative and qualitative results of this study were consistent with the findings of the previous studies that proposed that the amount of training or experience the teachers had in teaching students with disabilities is related to teachers' attitude toward inclusion.

The attitudes that teachers hold toward inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom are critical for the success of inclusion. Although this study examined the attitudes of in-service teachers toward inclusion, preservice years are a critical period for the modification of teachers' attitude. Therefore, teachers education program must focus on promoting positive teachers attitude toward inclusion. Many strategies can be used in teachers education programs to improve preservice and inservice teachers attitude toward inclusion. First, increasing the knowledge base of educators about students with disabilities and ways to meet their learning needs can be a good strategy to promote positive teachers attitude toward inclusion (Shoho, Katims, & Wilks 1997). Research demonstrated that attitude of preservice teachers can be positively influenced by a course (see for example, Shade & Stewart, 2001). Since not all states required a course of student with disabilities for all education majors, teachers education programs may need to include more alternative learning styles and instructional strategies in all courses of educational pedagogy (Wolpert, 2001). Second, the use of successful inclusive teachers as guest speakers could be a good strategy to prove that inclusion can result in successful outcomes for all children. Successful individual with disabilities can also be invited as guest speakers to talk about their successful experiences and to explain how they compensated for their disability (Salend, 2005). Third, to teach acceptance of individual differences, teacher education programs may need to use "disability simulation" strategy (Salend, 2005, p. 165), which gives preservice and in-service teachers an opportunity to experience how it feels to have a disability. For example, preservice teachers can be asked to write a sentence in backwards. Fourth, teacher education programs may need to use films and videos of successful inclusion programs to promote positive attitudes toward inclusion. And finally, teacher education programs must provide preservice and inservice teachers with an

opportunity to interact with individual with disabilities to make it possible for them to gain an experience with individual with disabilities.

In this study, the beliefs of the participant about inclusion were restricted by the Q sample, which ultimately reflects the prejudice of the researcher. Additionally, the concourse for the Q-sample was collected from the relevant literature on inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classrooms. Future research, therefore, may need to produce the concourse from naturalistic sources.

Table 1

Significant Factor Loadings for a Three-Factor Solution

| <u>Demographic of Q-Sorter</u> | <u>Factor1</u> | <u>Factor2</u> | <u>Factor3</u> |
|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1 General educator female | | | X |
| 2 Special educator female | X | | |
| 3 Special educator female | | X | |
| 4 Special educator female | | X | |
| 5 Special educator female | X | | |
| 6 General educator female | | | |
| 7 General educator female | | | |
| 8 General educator female | | | X |
| 9 General educator female | X | | |
| 10 Special educator male | X | | |

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