

WHAT DOES TEACHERS' PERCEPTION HAVE TO DO WITH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A BAHAMIAN CONTEXT

Dr. Yvonne Hunter-Johnson
The College of the Bahamas

Norissa G. L. Newton
Janelle Cambridge-Johnson

Bahamian classrooms are comprised of students with varying disabilities (emotional, physical, mental, and learning), and these students are failing to meet the requirements of their various grade levels due to inadequate interventions critical to addressing their individual needs. For these needs to be met in mainstream classrooms, Inclusive Education is inevitable. Consequently, a qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to survey perceptions of primary school teachers towards this practice. The sample included teachers from various schools within New Providence, The Bahamas. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Responses were qualitatively analyzed for themes and main concepts through open-coding. The study emphasizes the need to recognize teachers' perceptions towards inclusive education as a fundamental aspect of the practice's success in primary schools. Findings indicated that ninety percent of the teachers interviewed expressed negative perceptions of inclusive education. It was also revealed that the most prevalent influencing factors of the teachers' negative perceptions were lack of training in special education and inclusive education, and lack of resources. Twenty percent of the teachers expressed positive perceptions of inclusive education, stating however, that the success of such a practice depends greatly upon a myriad of elements.

If the right to education for all is to become a reality, it is imperative that all learners have access to quality education that meets every student's individual learning needs. Still, today, millions of children continue to experience exclusion within education around the world, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1994). Education should be effective, therefore, education should not be about making schools available to whom it is easily accessible. It should be about being proactive in identifying the obstacles which learners encounter while attempting to access Inclusive Education opportunities. Additionally, effective education should seek to remove those obstacles which result in students' exclusion.

The implementation of the principle of Inclusive Education depends primarily upon a fundamental change of the mainstream school system; Inclusive Education advocates that children with special needs have to be educated along their normal peers in the regular classrooms. According to Foreman (2008), schools should provide for the needs of all the children in their communities, regardless of ability and disability. In order to achieve this undertaking, teachers in inclusive classrooms play a major part through their attitudes. The practice of Inclusive Education requires the involvement of and collaboration between educational professionals.

At present in The Bahamas there are students within general education classrooms who are unsuccessfully meeting grade level requirements because their needs are not met in their respective educational environments (Ministry of Education National Commission on Special Education, 2005). Coupled with low achievement, is the fact that many of the Bahamian public schools are comprised of a large number of foreign nationals, for whom language and cultural barriers exist, preventing academic success for these students. Consequently, this study was conducted to ascertain teachers' perceptions of Inclusive Education, and the influences of their perceptions.

In addition to the students' frustration resulting from low achievement, teachers are also frustrated because they lack the means and knowledge of instructional methods for educating Special Needs students (Ali, Mustapha, & Jelas, 2006). In contrast, some teachers refuse to instruct the students who are characterized as *slow* or *struggling* and would rather focus on the more independent workers often referred to as the *high flyers*. The role of teachers in Inclusive Education is a crucial one; it is imperative that their perceptions towards this practice are assessed so that necessary elements are implemented in an effort to address both the students' and teachers' needs. The preceding factors are the rationale behind the decision to conduct this study on teachers' perceptions of Inclusive Education. While many teachers welcome the change, some may feel challenged, even confused, about the expectations of their new role as an Inclusive Educator. This study is crucial in determining reasons for teachers' apprehensions towards including special needs students into their classrooms. Through this study, best practices for the implementation of inclusive Education within a Bahamian context have also been explored.

Inclusive education is a reality in The Bahamas; not in terms of the actual instructional practice, but in terms of the composition of the primary schools' classrooms. These classrooms are comprised of students with mixed abilities as well as special needs (a diverse range of needs often caused by a medical, physical, mental or developmental condition or disability).

DeBoer, Pijil, & Minnaert (2011) suggest that the successful implementation of inclusive policies is greatly dependent upon the educators' acceptance of them. Therefore, teachers' perceptions of inclusive education must be evaluated in an effort to improve the deficiencies within the education system which negatively influence their perceptions and attitudes. Inclusion implies accommodating the learning environment and curriculum to meet the needs of all students and ensuring that all learners belong to a community (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012).

Unfortunately, many educators have reservations about Inclusive Education and the thought of supporting the wide spread placement of students with special needs in general classrooms. According to Shade and Stewart (2001), one of the main factors influencing the successful implementation of any inclusive policy is the positive attitude of teachers; teachers' acceptance of the policy of inclusion is likely to affect their commitment to implementing it (Bradshaw, 2003; 2004).

Over the years, inclusive education research has yielded varied results. Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden's (2000) study suggests attitudes towards inclusive education are strongly influenced by the nature of disabilities. In contrast, Blackman, Conrad, and Brown (2012) found that teachers were positive about including only those children whose characteristics were not likely to require extra instructional or management skills on the part of the teacher. (David & Kuyini, 2012) indicate that some change in attitude has occurred over the past 10 years, partly as a result of teachers experiencing working with students with special needs. Although it is important to evaluate teachers' perceptions of Inclusive Education, it is even more critical to determine the factors that influence these perceptions because it is these factors which serve as obstacles to the success of any Inclusive Education program.

The purpose of this present study is to ascertain what perceptions primary teachers have toward Inclusive Education, and the factors that influence their perceptions. As a result of this study, the Government of The Bahamas will be well-informed as to the areas that need to be improved upon within the public primary schools, in an effort to make Inclusive Education an effective practice.

In the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), it is clear that students with disabilities must be educated in regular education settings to the maximum extent appropriate in light of their needs, and prohibit their exclusion unless education there cannot be achieved satisfactorily even with appropriate supplementary aids and services. Therefore, it is imperative to ascertain primary teachers' perceptions about Inclusive Education because they are the persons who will be required to effectively execute this practice. Through ascertaining the reasons behind teachers' perceptions towards Inclusive Education, the Department of Education would be better able to accommodate teachers through the provision of the necessary tools that would make them more accepting of Inclusive Education.

This study is imperative to the development of Inclusive Education in primary schools throughout The Bahamas. As a result of this study, it is hoped that training and instruction at the primary (elementary) level may be enhanced so that teachers will be able to enter classrooms confident in their ability to cater to the special needs of all students in their mainstream classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework is based upon Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, which is supportive of the implementation of more Inclusive Education classroom practices. This theory supports that such implementations should be carried out via emphasis on the sociocultural context (of the classrooms), the role of social activity in learning, and the contributions of learners to their own development.

Research Questions

The research questions that guide this research are as follows:

1. What are the positive and negative perceptions of primary school teachers towards Inclusive Education?
2. What are some possible factors that influence teachers' perception towards inclusive education?
3. What are some recommendations for promoting best practices for inclusive education at the primary school level?

Review of Literature

According to Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2012), inclusive education refers to *the practice of including another group of students in regular classrooms: students with physical, developmental, or social-emotional disabilities, and those with chronic health problems* (p. 403). The philosophical basis of Inclusive Education rests on the principles that heterogeneity within a group is both unavoidable and desirable, and that differences in ability are not marks of greater or lesser worth. The idea of Inclusive Education is to provide whatever adaptations are needed (as unobtrusively as possible) in an effort to ensure that all students (regardless of their disability) can participate in all classroom experiences, and as much as possible, in the same manner as everyone else.

The fundamental characteristic of inclusive education is the teachers' willingness to accept students with special needs; their attitudes and knowledge about inclusive education are important as these are indicators of such willingness. The review serves to emphasize and explain the factors that influence these teachers' perceptions. It is crucial to ascertain why teachers perceive Inclusive Education the way in which they do so that policy makers can address the deficiencies in an effort to ensure successful inclusion of all students with special needs. The review of literature comprises three sections: Firstly, it provides a cross section of recent studies that have examined teachers' perceptions of Inclusion and the influencing factors. Secondly, it compares the findings of these interrelated studies. Finally, it presents implications of the research presented in relation to teachers' perceptions of Inclusion, which, if ensued, will consequently enhance the success of Inclusive practices within primary classrooms.

Inclusive Education Research

Extensive research has been conducted in an effort to examine teachers' attitudes on Inclusion (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Ali, Mustapha & Jelas, 2006; Loreman, Forlin, & Sharma, 2007; Jerlinder, Danermark, & Gill, 2010; De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011). Avramidis and Norwich (2002) reviewed a variety of international studies carried out on teachers' perceptions of Inclusive Education, and explored various factors that could possibly have an impact upon teacher acceptance of the Inclusion principle. Their results found evidence of positive attitudes of teachers, but no evidence of acceptance of a total inclusion. Teachers' attitudes were found to be strongly influenced by the nature and severity of the students' disabilities presented (child-related variables) and less influenced by teacher-related variables.

A review of literature compiled by Avramidis and Norwich in 2002, contend that teachers' attitudes could become more positive if more resources and support are provided. This review of literature indicates that a key element in the successful implementation of the Inclusive Education policy is the views of the personnel who have the major responsibility for implementing it - that is, teachers. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes are critical in ensuring the success of inclusive practices since teachers' acceptance of the policy of inclusion is likely to affect their commitment to implementing it (Norwich, 2002). Other researchers (Carrington, S. & Brownlee, J., 2001; David, R., & Kuyini, A.B., 2012) mention that although teachers may agree on a theoretical level with inclusion, they have negative attitudes as far as its implementation is concerned. Teachers' negative attitudes towards disability lead to low expectations from their students which result to decreased learning opportunities and low academic performance (Carrington & Brownlee, 2001). Avramidis and Norwich (2002) also discovered that

teachers who have no direct experience with integration, have very negative attitudes whereas those with more experience with disabled people adopt more positive attitudes towards integration.

De Boer, Pijil, and Minnaert (2011) also show that educational environment-related variables, such as the availability of physical and human support, were consistently found to be associated with attitudes to inclusion. According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), various studies concur that teachers' attitudes towards Inclusion are strongly influenced by the nature of the disabilities and/or educational problems being presented, the professional background of teachers, limited or non-existent training for teachers to acquire integration competencies, teachers' lack of confidence both in their own instructional skills and in the quality of support personnel available to them.

Hwang and Evans (2011) conducted a study which examined thirty-three Korean general education teachers from three primary schools in Seoul regarding their attitudes towards, and willingness to accommodate, the needs of a student with a disability. The study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods of research, and the results revealed that 41.37% of general education teachers had positive attitudes towards inclusion programs, while 55.16% were unwilling to actually participate in the practice of Inclusive Education. Qualitative findings reveal that the teachers' reluctance towards the practice was due to a lack of training in the area of Inclusive Education. Additionally, teachers expressed that they did not have enough time to effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities as well as those without disabilities simultaneously.

As the relationship between general and special education is one of co-equal partnership and mutual support, Muhanna (2010) argues that administrative support and collaboration are powerful predictors of favorable attitudes towards full inclusion. As with previous studies conducted by Subban and Sharma (2001), this study agrees that although many teachers express a willingness to accommodate students with disabilities in their classroom, this willingness varies according to the type and extremity of the students' disability, and the resources provided to support Inclusive Education.

Kilanowski-Press, Foote and Rinaldo (2010) investigated the state of inclusion practices in general education classrooms via a survey of seventy-one inclusion teachers serving as special educators across the state of New York. Small group instruction, co-teaching, one-to-one instruction, and planning support were explored in relationship to class size, number of students with disabilities, and severity of disability. In this study, Kilanowski-Press, Foote, and Rinaldo (2010) suggest that a lack of understanding of what Inclusive Education is, presented an impediment to the process of improving the quality of inclusive special education practices.

Inclusive Education Implementation Strategies

According to Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007), providing educators with greater awareness of the range of inclusion programs in our schools is a first step toward success in inclusive education. This implies, therefore, the teachers must be knowledgeable about all that inclusion entails, if they are to successfully implement the practice.

Several studies which were conducted on best practices of Inclusive Education (Carrington & Brownlee, 2001; Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012) highlight the importance of teacher collaboration. Carpenter and Dyal (2001) assert that inclusion is most effective when proactive principals establish models of effective co-teaching. However, in an effort for collaboration between general classroom teachers and special education teachers to be effective, teachers' perceptions must be positive in this regard. Kilanowski-Press, Foote, and Rinaldo (2010) suggest that, given teacher reports indicating an overall lack of preparation for work with students with disabilities in their training programs, it is plausible that the quality of inclusion programs established in the schools may suffer as a result of both attitudinal and training factors.

David and Kuyini's (2010) study reveals that teachers with more than three students with disabilities in their classrooms displayed the least effective classroom practices. This suggested that the greater the number of students with disabilities in the classroom, the less the evidence was of teachers' effective classroom practices on social inclusion. Correspondingly, Kavoori (2002) in relating the success of inclusive classrooms in New Delhi stressed that it is dependent on the number of students with disabilities in the regular classroom. The need for extra time and additional responsibilities imposed on teachers by the increase in number of students with disabilities in classroom is expected to affect teaching processes and teachers' attitudes as well.

Subban and Sharma (2001) concur with Bradshaw and Mundia (2006) in their study when they state that *It is probable that teachers who received the appropriate training experienced fewer concerns about including students with disabilities into mainstream settings, as the training provided them with some form of preparedness* (p. 50). The increased need for more specialized training and professional support is viewed as critical to the success of inclusive education. Sharma, Ee, & Desai (2003) in a comparative study between Singapore and Australia, found that training in special education appeared to lessen pre-service teacher's concerns regarding inclusive education.

Subban and Sharma (2001) advise that educational planners and policy makers should incorporate practical and effective instructional techniques that would be useful in the inclusive classroom, into teacher preparation programs and professional development programs. This view is supported by the recommendations of the Meyer Report (2001) which acknowledges the need for additional support, training and expertise for general education teachers (Department of Education Victoria, 2001).

Blackman, Conrad, and Brown's (2010) findings suggest that there were significant differences between Barbadian and Trinidadian teachers' attitudes towards integrating special needs students in general education settings. Blackman, Conrad and Brown (2012) admit that more research is required in an effort to understand the basic factors which influence the attitudes of Caribbean teachers towards the integration of students with special needs in mainstream settings.

In accordance with the framework of Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, Brown, Odom, and Conroy (2001) suggest that positive interactions between students with and without disabilities determine the success of Inclusive Education within any given classroom. This theory supports that learning is a social advancement that involves language, real world situations, and interaction and collaboration among learners (Rodina, 2007).

Cook (2001) implies that in order for teachers to effectively facilitate such positive interactions, they need to have a positive disposition or attitudes towards students with disabilities and strong sense of self-efficacy. Blackman, Conrad, and Brown (2012) suggest the use of successful strategies including: continued and varied professional development exercises, single courses and content-infused approaches, and inclusive units of study.

There is sufficient evidence in the literature that suggests that teacher attitudes are a decisive factor in determining the success of Inclusive Education programs and the philosophy of Inclusion (Jerlinder, Danermark & Gill, 2010; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Niemeyer & Proctor, 2002). Teachers determine whether or not the theories associated with the philosophy of inclusive education translate into the actual practice within educational realms.

The increased need for more specialized training and professional support is viewed as critical to the success of Inclusive Education (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Sharma, Ee, & Desai, 2003; Van Reusen et al., 2001). Sharma, Ee and Desai (2003) in a comparative study between Singapore and Australia, found that training in special education appeared to lessen pre-service teacher's concerns regarding Inclusive Education. According to Leatherman (2007), it is reported that teachers need coursework on strategies for working with children who have disabilities. Additionally, practical hands-on experiences in inclusive classrooms are required in an effort for teachers to feel comfortable to teach all children.

In an effort for an Inclusive Education program to be effective, certain resources must also be in place. Without the necessary resources, Inclusive Education would not be very successful (Leatherman, 2007). In this study, findings indicate that the availability of support services was a factor that teachers perceived as important in order to have a successful inclusive classroom. The types of services considered beneficial are consultation with speech and language therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and special educators.

A major factor, as noted in the study by Hwang and Evans (2011), in the success of Inclusive Education is the degree of collaboration between general and special teachers, and their perceptions of their respective roles. This study argues that administrative support and collaboration are powerful predictors of favorable attitudes towards full inclusion.

Kilanowski-Press, Foote, and Rinaldo (2010) explain that when understanding the implementation logistics and success of inclusive practices, including collaborative and consultative teaching models, it is imperative to realize the impact that interpersonal factors may have in terms of the program's overall success.

Cook and Friend (1995) identify the need for mutual understanding between general and special educators in terms of instructional beliefs, time for solid instructional planning, agreement on the establishment of classroom routines, establishment of classroom discipline norms, as well as parity, or the projection of both teachers as equally responsible for instruction, as critical components of strong collaborative teaching programs. However, underlying such efforts is the necessity of both general and special educators to work together in a mutually respectful manner that is devoid of territoriality or power struggle.

The preceding review of literature has emphasized several influencing contributors of teachers' negative perceptions towards inclusive education. Although teachers' perceptions in some studies were less negative than those in other studies, identical negative influences were prominent among all of the studies explored. This review of literature has shown that a lack of resources, inadequate teacher training, lack of knowledge about inclusive education, and the number of students with disabilities within one classroom setting contributed to the teachers' negative perceptions.

Teacher collaboration, student interactions, instructional techniques, and teachers' attitudes were common factors which, according to the findings of the various studies, can affect the successful implementation of inclusive education. If inclusive education is to be a success, all stakeholders must assume responsibility for their role in this practice, and realize that without collaboration, inclusive education will never become a reality.

Method

Study Setting

The Ministry of Education is the governing institution for education in The Bahamas. There are two hundred and six schools in the school system of The Bahamas; one hundred, sixty-one are fully maintained by the government and forty-five are private schools. Of the one hundred and sixty-one public schools, fifty are situated on New Providence and one hundred and eleven are in the Family Islands. Schools are divided into districts. The following are the school districts within the island of New Providence: North Eastern, North Western, South Eastern, and South Western. There are approximately eight hundred primary school teachers within New Providence (Retrieved from Bahamas Education website: <http://www.bahamaseducation.com/teachers.html>).

The primary category caters to preschool and grades one to six (1 - 6), after which pupils transfer to the junior category (grades 7- 9) and later to the secondary category (grades 10-12). These levels are fairly distinct in the Department of Education schools in New Providence with slight variations in Family Island schools, where some All-Age schools remain. The Bahamas, like many Caribbean islands, follows the British educational system therefore, the national examination is the Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education (based on the British equivalent). Teachers are given preference for employment if they possess a Bachelor's Degree and Teachers Certificate from an accredited college or university.

Due to large class sizes within the public schools comprising of students from various ethnicities and ability levels, the practice of inclusive education is critical (Commonwealth of The Bahamas National Census of Special Education Population and Related Services Grades 1-12 Report, 2005). According to this report, of the 5,396 students who were noted as having special needs, a combined total of 3,236 were categorized as slow learners or remedial. It is this reason why the Department of Education has decided to pursue the practice of Inclusive Education within the public schools. This qualitative study took place among public primary schools within the island of New Providence in The Bahamas.

Study Design and Data Collection

The research methodology used in this study was a qualitative phenomenological design which was reflective of semi structured interviews with participants using preset questions outlined by the researcher. Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews conducted with ten public primary school teachers. The interviews were tape-recorded and immediately transcribed. Analysis was conducted through the process of open coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin 2007). Working within the research structure provided by the research objectives and the conceptual framework,

transcribed data was qualitatively analyzed through open coding to establish themes and main concepts. Recurring topics in the text were recognized as themes and sub-themes. A table of central themes and sub-themes was constructed. This process allowed a deeper understanding and explanation of issues that were being studied. To ensure greater validity and reliability a peer reviewer read through the data to ensure themes and categories corresponded with the research questions.

Participants

Utilizing convenience sampling, a group of teachers ($n=10$) were selected, who met the following inclusion criteria: These teachers were all primary school teachers employed by the Ministry of Education, with a minimum of 5 years teaching experience, and currently posted at a school within the island of New Providence, and consisted of males and females. Convenience sampling was utilized, because of feasibility and access to the participants (Andrews & Frankel 2010). The schools used English as the language of instruction and catered mostly to students of families from low income groups. Class sizes across schools ranged from 30-35 (mean = 34 students) (Commonwealth of The Bahamas National Census of Special Education Population and Related Services Grades 1-12 Report, 2005). All participants were informed of their rights as it relates to the Institutional Review Board.

Findings

Results from the study revealed that primary school teachers' perceptions of inclusive education are primarily negative. Upon analysis of the data collected, the following themes emerged as the most prominent among teachers' responses in regards to the factors which influenced their perceptions towards the implementation of inclusive education (a) lack of teacher training, (b) insufficient resources, (c) limited administrative support, (d) teachers' attitudes, (e) large class sizes, and (f) poor building infrastructure. Although rarely identified as a contributing factor of the teachers' negative perceptions, the misunderstanding of what inclusive education meant, was a significant factor for two of the respondents (20%).

The participants within the study were very candid with their responses. While most of the teachers (60%) demonstrated negative attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive education within primary schools, some of the teachers (30%) displayed mixed feelings about the practice, and one teacher (10%) firmly support the practice of inclusive education (see table 1 for teachers' perceptions of inclusive education by gender and teaching experience). In general, the teachers viewed the idea of inclusive education as an extremely difficult feat due to the myriad deficiencies within the public education system, which, in their opinion, would impact the success of inclusive education. Teachers reported that at this present time, *it is not feasible for the government of The Bahamas to venture into such an undertaking because there are too many concerns in dire need of immediate resolution.*

The mean age of teachers was 37 years and the mean number of years of professional experience was 12. With the exception of two participants, all teachers were married and had children. Ninety percent of the teachers within the group ($n = 9$) had completed a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Primary Education, which involved 4 years of teaching training. One male teacher had completed a Doctorate of Education Degree, which involved eight years of training (see table 2 for demographic information about teachers).

Positive and Negative Perceptions of Inclusive Education

Teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in the primary schools were primarily negative. Of the ten teachers interviewed, only one teacher (10%) fully supported the idea of inclusive education. This respondent stated, *I think this [inclusive education] is what education is all about. Students should not be stigmatized; they should be taught in an inclusive environment because we are preparing these children for life.* Similarly, another teacher reported, *It is a great idea; we need it [inclusive education] because the number of students who fall into such category has increased over the years.*

The teachers who expressed mixed feelings towards the implementation of inclusive education agreed that the practice is an excellent idea, and it could work as long as the prerequisites are in place. To this effect, one of the male respondents said, *Inclusion could work, but you can't make teachers accept this practice if they are against it.* Another male respondent reported, *It is a lofty idea but a strong foundation must be built before implementing inclusion.*

The teachers did not perceive inclusive education as being beneficial to students with disabilities. One teacher proposed that the practice should not be implemented in primary schools because the special needs students may feel ostracized, and their non-disabled peers disadvantaged. Many of the teachers felt

that the non-disabled students would be negatively impacted by inclusive education due to classroom teachers spending too much time with the special needs students. The teachers were of the opinion that

Table 1. Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education by Gender and Teaching Experience

		Strongly Disagree with the implementation of Inclusive Education	Somewhat Disagree with the implementation of Inclusive Education	Strongly Agree with the implementation of Inclusive Education
Gender				
	Female	3	2	0
	Male	3	1	1
	Total	6	3	1
Years of Teaching Experience				
	5-10	3		
	11-15	1	2	
	16-20	1	1	1
	>20	1		
	Total	6	3	10

Table 2 Demographic Information About Participants

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Female	5	50
Male	5	50
Age		
20-29	1	10
30-39	6	60
40-50	2	20
>50	1	10
Years of Teaching Experience		
5-10	3	30
11-15	3	30
16-20	3	30
>20	1	10
Current Grade Level		
1	1	10
2	0	0
3	4	40
4	0	0
5	1	10
6	1	10
^a Other	3	30
Professional Qualifications		
Associate's Degree	0	0
Bachelor's Degree	9	90
Master's Degree	0	0
Doctoral Degree	1	10
Total	10	100

Other = Physical Education.

students with disabilities, regardless of the severity, would benefit more from being taught in *special schools* with teachers trained in special education. One teacher stated, *There should be a special education unit attached to every public primary school.*

One of the female teachers, who held a negative perception of inclusive education, stated that she would only reconsider the idea of its implementation if she had a disabled child of her own. Subsequently, another teacher agreed that one factor which would positively influence her perception towards inclusive education is empathy. *If you [the teacher] could put yourself in the parent's or special needs child's position, you would ask yourself, 'What kind of education would you want this child to have?'*

The teacher's defined inclusive education in various ways. Few of the teachers (20%) expressed that their understanding of inclusive education was not clear. When asked about his understanding of inclusive education, one teacher reported, *It is not clear. It needs more clarification.* Similarly, another teacher admitted, *I am not certain of its meaning.* Other teachers (30%) stated their presumed meaning of inclusive education, admitting that they were not sure. *I think it has something to do with slow learners,* one teacher said. Fifty percent of the teachers interviewed, however, explained their understanding of inclusive education without an indication of uncertainty. Within this group of teachers, some individuals stated that inclusive education was defined as teaching special needs students with non-disabled students in regular classroom settings, while others explained it as combining lower level learners with average students in the same classroom. Another teacher described inclusive education as, *The involvement and practice of reaching all children, no matter their mental, physical, social, or financial ability.*

Several teachers suggested that inclusive education would be more practical if classroom teachers were provided with aides. One teacher reported, *Inclusive education would mean a lot more work for classroom teachers; they should be assisted by a teacher's aide.* Another teacher stated, *Teachers' aides should be provided because the large class sizes make it a lot more difficult for only one teacher. I would reconsider [inclusive education] if I had an aide.*

Influencing Factors of Teachers' Perceptions.

Teachers identified a variety of factors that influenced their perceptions of inclusive education. Such factors included (a) teacher training, (b) resources, (c) support, (d) infrastructure, and (e) the understanding of inclusive education.

Teacher training. As seen in table 3, which displays influencing factors of teachers' perceptions, 100% of the teachers identified insufficient, or lack of teacher training as a factor which negatively influenced their perceptions of inclusive education. One teacher explained, *I am not interested in inclusive education because I am not trained to deal with students with disabilities. I cannot cater to their needs.* Another teacher reported, *They [teachers] have to be properly equipped to teach mainstream students.* Teachers were of the perception that in an effort to be an effective and efficient inclusive educator, they had to be trained in special education. One male respondent stated, *I am not trained to teach special needs students; I have a difficult time teaching normal students.* Teachers felt that their lack of training in special education or inclusive education would result in their inability to adequately meet the needs of the students in their class, those with or without a disability.

A respondent said, *If I am not trained to the point of being able to identify various disabilities in students, how can I be expected to adapt my teaching methods to cater to the needs of students with various disabilities?* Teachers believed that if they were sufficiently trained in special education and properly educated as to the intricacies of inclusive education, they would express a more positive perception towards inclusive education, and would more than likely be influenced to participate in the practice.

As a result of these perceptions, the majority of the teachers (90%) suggest that special needs students should be educated at special schools where there are teachers who specialize in special education, and where critical resources and infrastructure are present. According to the teachers, this is only way that special needs students would truly benefit from the inclusive program designed.

Resources. All of the teachers (100%) reported that a lack of resources negatively affected their perceptions of inclusive education. The teachers described resources as being critical to the implementation of any inclusive education program. Many teachers expressed that inclusive education requires many types of resources for both teachers and students. One teacher expressed concern

regarding the provision of assistive technology for special needs students, *Whose responsibility will it be to provide special equipment for these students; the government or the parents?* Another teacher responded, *For a school to be considered inclusive, state of the art facilities must be provided, along with properly designed buildings.*

Table 3. Influencing Factors of Teachers' Perceptions

Factors	n	%
Teacher Training		
Female	5	100
Male	5	100
Resources		
Female	5	100
Male	5	100
Support		
Female	3	60
Male	5	100
Infrastructure		
Female	2	40
Male	2	40
Unclear Understanding of Inclusion		
Female	2	40
Male	0	0

Note. Factors are listed in order of priority.

Several teachers argued that regular classroom teachers currently spend a lot of money on teaching resources each school year without being reimbursed by their school's administration, or the Ministry of Education. Many teachers suggested that their perceptions towards inclusive education would only improve if they were guaranteed by the government or school administration that they would receive the resources needed to enhance inclusive instruction.

This factor has caused several teachers to doubt the success of inclusive education in Bahamian, public primary schools; one teacher justified this position by stating, *If we can't even get enough basal readers for one class, at this present time, how can we expect to get resources for an inclusive education setting, which cost more than basal readers?* Similarly, another teacher responded, *My administrators give teachers a hard time when they ask for dry erase markers. Inclusive education is a joke.* Another teacher stated,

This is why I doubt that inclusion would work, because we're [the regular classroom teachers] not seeing any improvement in the students who attend the resource room every day. So, if a child is being remediated daily by a teacher who is trained in special education, and nothing is

improving, what results could you expect from me, a teacher who is not trained in special education?

Support. Sixty percent of the female teachers ($n = 3$) reported that a lack of support from administrators or Ministry of Education would negatively influence their perceptions towards inclusive education (see table 3, for influencing factors of teachers' perceptions). However, 100% of the male teachers ($n = 5$) indicated that the inconsistent support from administration negatively influenced their perceptions. In total, 80% of all the teachers interviewed reported support as an influencing factor. These teachers also stated that if support was consistent throughout the public primary schools, they would view the practice of inclusive education more positively.

Infrastructure. Two out of five females (40%) indicated the school's physical structure as a negative influencing factor of their inclusive education perception. Forty percent of the male respondents felt the same way ($n = 2$). In total, therefore, four out of a total of ten teachers (40%) felt that the infrastructure of a school has the potential to determine whether or not a teacher would be willing to participate in the practice of inclusive education.

Understanding of inclusive education. Forty percent of the female teachers ($n=2$) reported that they did not completely understand the meaning on inclusive education. One teacher stated, *It [the meaning] is not clear; it needs more clarification.* The other teacher reported, *I'm not certain of its meaning.* This signifies, therefore, 80% of the total number of teachers ($n = 8$) had some knowledge of what inclusive education entailed.

Challenge with Implementing Inclusive Education.

Lack of Support Many teachers mentioned the lack of administrative or government support as a negative influencing factor of their perception of inclusive education. *The administration must be sensitive to the work we would be expected to do in an inclusive setting,* one teacher stated. Another teacher suggested that administrators, as well as teachers may act as obstacles to the successful implementation of inclusive education. She explained, *Teachers and administrators can be obstacles; if teachers and administrators do not buy into it [inclusion], forget it – it won't work.*

Receiving support from the school's administration is not the only source of support which the teachers spoke of; many of the teachers reported that support is also needed from the school's special education teacher and the Ministry of Education as well. Some teachers described the work of the special education or resource teacher as being disjointed when compared to the work that the classroom teachers do with struggling learners. *We [the teachers] need the special education teachers to assist us with strategies for teaching special needs students,* one respondent emphasized.

Teachers indicated that support from the Ministry of Education could be given in a variety ways. *The Ministry should provide the necessary materials and resources needed to operate an inclusive education program, as well as provide free training for teachers,* stated one of the teachers. About 30% of the teachers (three teachers) mentioned that the Ministry of Education should support teachers by increasing salaries. One teacher stated, *I would support inclusion if I got a pay-raise.*

Teachers' Attitudes. Several respondents identified teachers' attitudes as a challenge in implementing inclusive education in the public primary schools. *Developing an intrinsic desire within teachers to willingly participate in such programs is a challenge,* reported one of the male respondents. The majority of the teachers (90%) shared similar, negative attitudes regarding inclusive education. Responses ranged from, *My degree is not in special education,* to, *I don't want to teach special needs students.* Many teachers indicated that teaching struggling readers was more than enough to deal with, without the complexities of inclusive education practices. Some teachers expressed the attitude that it was not in their job description to teacher special needs students.

When asked about the general perceptions of teachers regarding inclusive education, one teacher responded, *They [teachers] think that special needs students should be taught in special education classes because their needs cannot be appropriately met otherwise.* This study revealed that several teachers felt that special needs students should be removed from the regular classroom and taught at *their pace.* Some teachers felt that inclusive education would never be successful in The Bahamas because, *The Bahamas government cannot afford to spend the amount of money that inclusive education programs demand.*

Class Size. Several teachers indicated that class sizes in public primary schools were too overcrowded for inclusive education to be effective. *It is difficult addressing individual needs of thirty-four non-disabled students*, one teacher noted. Several teachers (50%) reported that implementing inclusive education with such large class sizes would result in the special needs students not receiving the level of attention they require. One male respondent reported, *...classrooms are already overcrowded, and we don't know how the parents would react [towards their child being in an inclusive classroom]*.

The need for extra time and additional responsibilities imposed on teachers by the large numbers of students with disabilities in the classroom has been found to affect teaching processes. As indicated by several teachers, this is due to the reality that each student with a disability has different needs and calls for more work, in terms of adapting instruction. Some teachers reported that large class sizes was frustrating, especially without teachers' aides.

Eight out of ten teachers (80%) suggested that inclusive education would be promoted more positively in the primary schools if the class sizes were reduced. One teacher reported, *I might reconsider inclusion if the class sizes were smaller*. In contrast, one teacher stated, *Even if the class sizes weren't reduced, the teachers would react more positively towards inclusion if teachers' aides were provided*.

Infrastructure. Poorly designed infrastructure was another challenge which the teachers identified as a challenge to the success of inclusive education. One teacher noted, *Students are not considered included if they cannot access classrooms and other schools facilities*. In comparison, several teachers mentioned that they viewed inclusive education at their primary school dubiously because the classrooms are too small, and they are not accessible to students who require a wheelchair. One teacher stated, *My school doesn't have any ramps to accommodate students in wheelchairs*. Another teacher reported, *My school has two levels accessible by stairs, and the bathroom stalls are too narrow. Inclusive education can't work here – not like this*.

Many teachers mentioned that reconstructing the buildings would not be sufficient. One female teacher responded, *Students' desks and chairs will have to be replaced as well*. One teacher emphasized that the location of some classes would have to be changed where there is a problem of stairs. *Students have to be able to access their classrooms*, as indicated by one of the female respondents. One of the male respondents stated, *Inclusive education will not be successful without state-of-the-art classrooms*.

Discussion and Implications

Findings of this study implied that there is much preparation required of all stakeholders before The Bahamas can attempt to successfully implement inclusive education practices within its primary schools. This study's findings coincide with those of the review of literature, indicating similar implications as a result of the implementation of inclusive education in the primary school.

In comparison to the literature review, this study has also revealed that one of the primary influencing factors of teachers' negative perceptions is that of the teachers' lack of confidence in their ability to teach special needs students due to a lack of training in the area of special education. This means that the more special education training teachers receive, the more comfortable they would feel teaching in an inclusive environment. In its annual budget, the government of The Bahamas should allot additional funding for international teacher training in the area of special education. Opportunities for training should primarily be offered to teachers who express an interest in special education.

This study revealed that teachers are of the opinion that collaboration should exist between classroom teachers and special education or resource teachers. This finding implies that teacher training should be ongoing both at the school level and off-site. Inclusive education should not be implemented without educating all stakeholders [teachers, parents, students, and community] first. Special education is a very broad area therefore training will take a lot of time. Therefore, it is impossible for training to be done during school hours. This implies, therefore, that teachers will have to participate in after-hours training. Consequently, the Ministry of Education must create incentives for teachers as a way of encouraging them to participate in the training.

Teachers' attitudes play an integral role in the successful implementation of inclusive education program. This implies that if consistent professional development is provided, teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education would tend to be more positive. Since positive teacher attitudes are linked to good teaching

practices, policy makers would also need to provide the school supports and resources that promote positive teacher attitudes, which also enhance inclusive teaching practices.

Findings also imply that changes at the tertiary level of education with regards to teacher education programs in The Bahamas must occur. Teacher education providers, such as local colleges and universities, must ensure that graduates have the necessary attitudes and competencies to design and deliver an inclusive curriculum to a diverse range of learners.

If there is to be a realistic change in the Bahamian educational system, and creation of educational models aligned to those of inclusive education, it is paramount that local colleges and universities work in close partnership with the teaching profession to formulate new knowledge about inclusive learning, especially in the hearts and minds of those entering the profession. Further, if inclusive education is to become a reality in Bahamian public primary schools, it is suggested that the government of The Bahamas will have to readjust its budget for education in an effort to accommodate the costs of teacher training and ensuring the necessary accommodations are implemented.

The teachers' responses would imply that the curriculum currently taught should be reconstructed to accommodate the needs of special needs students. The purpose of a curriculum is to direct instruction. As a result, the content presented within curriculum should be concise and applicable to an inclusive classroom setting. This leads to a domino effect of sorts, in that, curriculum officers at the Ministry of Education will have to collaborate on the production of one integrated curriculum for each grade level inclusive of activities, objectives, and strategies catering to the demands of inclusive education. This then dictates that curriculum and subject officers must also receive professional development training in inclusive education, specifically, in curriculum development for such an instructional model. Once the curriculum has been adapted, teachers will then have to become familiar with the new design, which implies more thorough lesson planning sessions.

Findings within this study, in relation to methods of instruction, imply that classroom teachers must modify their teaching methods in an effort to accommodate the special needs students in their classrooms and facilitate these students' learning in an inclusive environment. One such adaptation would involve the utilization of differentiated instruction. This implies that teachers must become responsible for keeping up-to-date with current trends in inclusive education. Further, in an effort for classroom teachers to learn more about inclusive education strategies, it is crucial that primary schools establish a coaching program as an avenue through which the special education teachers can model instructional practices for the classroom teachers on a daily or weekly basis.

Limitations

There were a few minute limitations to this study. First there was the limited sources from which the data was collected. Data was collected from only 10 participants from only one island of The Bahamas all of which were employed in the public educational system. Data could have also been collected from primary school teachers throughout the family of islands within The Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although some demographic variables were mentioned in this study, teachers' perceptions of inclusive education were not explored in relation to these variables. Therefore, future studies may focus on investigating teachers' perceptions of inclusive education as they relate to specific variables such as age, gender, and years of teaching experience. Additionally, future study may investigate administrators', and parents' perceptions towards inclusive education, which may be followed up with a comparative study of teachers', parents' and administrators' perceptions of inclusive education. Finally, future research efforts should seek to broaden data collection to a greater number of islands within The Bahamas including teachers employed in the private schools.

Conclusion

This study investigated public primary school teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in The Bahamas, and the influencing factors of their perceptions. This study has shown that 90% of the teachers interviewed displayed negative perceptions towards inclusive education and its implementation. Prominent factors which influenced these negative perceptions included insufficient teacher training, lack of resources and support, poor infrastructure, and large class sizes. Teachers also felt that special needs students would not have their needs met in an inclusive setting, and should be education in

specialized schools. Several teachers indicated, however, that the solution of these negative influencing factors would possibly result in more positive perceptions towards the practice of inclusive education.

Implementing inclusive education in Bahamian, public primary schools will indeed yield several implications: The curriculum would have to be re-designed; the government will have to invest a large amount of money for resources, teacher training, reconstruction of schools' physical plant, and salaries; and the teacher preparation programs at the tertiary level will have to developed for teacher education candidates.

As revealed through this study, inclusive education school reform is not only a school-related matter; it is a matter for all stakeholders involved [teachers, administrators, students, and parents], which includes the communities in which these public primary schools are located. It is a social issue, as it is supported by the philosophical framework of Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory. Inclusive education involves cohesion between administrators, parents, and students; it involves the sensitization of all towards the needs of students with special needs. This study has reiterated what other researchers within this review of literature have found, which is the fact that teachers are regarded as the key to change in education, and if not addressed, their feelings of frustration and inadequacy pose as potential barriers to the success of inclusive education.

References

- Agran, M., Alper, S., & Wehmeyer, M. (2002). Access to the general curriculum for students with significant disabilities : What it means to teachers. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 37(2), 123-133.
- Ali, M., Mustapha, R., & Jelas, Z. (2006). An empirical study on teachers' perceptions towards inclusive education in Malaysia. *International Journal of Special Education*, 21 (3), pp. 36-46.
- Andrews, A. , & Frankel, E. (2010). Inclusive education in Guyana: A call for change. *International Journal of Special Education*, 25(1), 126-144.
- Avramidis, E., Bayliss, P., & Burden, R. (2000) A survey into mainstream teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the ordinary school in one local authority, *Educational Psychology*, 20 (2), 191-211.
- Avramidis, E., & Norwich, B. (2002) Mainstream teachers' attitudes towards inclusion/integration: A review of the literature, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 17 (2), 129-147.
- Blackman, S., Conrad, D., & Brown, L. (2012). The attitude of Barbadian and Trinidadian teachers to integration. *International Journal of Special Education*, 27 (3), pp. 1-11.
- Bowman, I. (1986). Teacher training and the integration of handicapped pupils: Some findings from a fourteen nation UNESCO study. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 1, 29-38.
- Bradshaw, L. G. (2003). Brunei SENA teachers speak out. *Studies in Education*, 8(1), pp. 1-10.
- Brownlee, J., & Carrington, S. (2000). Opportunities for authentic experiences and reflection: A teaching programme designed to change attitudes towards disability for pre-service teachers. *Support for Learning*, 15(3), 99-105.
- Carpenter, L. & Dyal, A. (2001). Retaining quality special educators: A prescription for school principals in the 21st century. *Catalyst for Change*, 30(3), 5-8.
- Cushner, K., McClelland, A., & Safford, P. (2012). Creating inclusive classrooms. *Human diversity in education*. New York, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Carrington, S. & Brownlee, J. (2001). Preparing teachers to support inclusion: the benefits of interaction between a group of pre-service teachers and a teaching assistant who is disabled. *Teaching Education*, 12 (3), pp. 347-357.
- David, R. & Kuyini, A. B. (2012). Social inclusion: Teachers as facilitators in peer acceptance of students with disabilities in regular classrooms in Tamil Nadu, India. *International Journal of Special Education*, 27 (2), pp. 157-168.
- De Boer, A., Pijl, S. J. & Minnaert, A. (2011). Regular primary schoolteachers' attitudes towards inclusive education: a review of the literature. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(3), 331-353.
- Foreman. (Ed.) (2008). *Inclusion in action* (2nd ed.). Sydney: Cengage.
- Fisher, D., Roach, V., & Frey, N. (2002). Examining the general programmatic benefits of inclusive schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 6(1), 63-78.
- Hammond, H., & Ingalls, L. (2003). Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion: Survey results from elementary school teachers in three south-western rural school districts. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 22(2), 24-30.

- Heiman, T. (2002). Inclusive schooling: Middle school teachers' perceptions. *School Psychology International*, 23 (1), 174-186.
- Hwang, Y. & Evans, D. (2011). Attitudes towards inclusion: Gaps between belief and practice. *International Journal of Special Education*, 26, (1), pp. 136-146.
- Jerlinder, K., Danermark, B., & Gill, P. (2010). Swedish primary-school teachers' attitudes to inclusion: the case of PE and pupils with physical disabilities. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 25, 45-57.
- Kavoori, P. (2002). Inclusive education experiences. In S. Hegarty & M. Alur (Eds.), *Education and children with special needs: from segregation to inclusion* (pp. 120-124). New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Kilanowski-Press, L., Foote, Chandra., & Rinaldo, V. (2010). Inclusion classrooms and teachers: A survey of current practices. *International Journal of Special Education*, 25(3), 43-56.
- Leatherman, J. M., & Niemeyer, J. A. (2005) Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion: Factors influencing classroom practice, *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Educators*, 26 (1), pp. 23-36.
- Loerman, T., Forlin, C., & Sharma, U. (2007). An international comparison of pre-service teacher attitudes towards inclusive education. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 27(4).
- Meijer, C., Soriano, V., & Watkins, A. (2003). Special needs education in Europe: Inclusive policies and practices. In C. Meijer, V. Soriano, and A. Watkins (Eds.) *Special needs education in Europe*, pp.7-18. Middelbart: European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Sage.
- Ministry of Education National Commission on Special Education. (2005). *Commonwealth of the Bahamas national census of special education population and related services report*. Nassau, The Bahamas: Bahamas Government Printing Office.
- Molto, M. (2003). Mainstream teachers' acceptance of instructional adaptations in Spain. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 18, 311-332.
- Mousouli, M., Kokaridas, D., Angelopoulou-Sakadami, N., & Aristotelous, M. (2009). Knowledge and attitudes towards children with special needs by physical education students. *International Journal of Special Education*, 24 (3), 85-89.
- Muhanna, M. (2010). Investigation of differences in attitudes, beliefs and knowledge of inclusion of students with Autism between special and general primary teachers in Jordan. Unpublished Master of Education (Research) thesis, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney.
- Nakken, H., & Pijl, S. J. (2002). Getting along with classmates in regular schools: a review of the effects of integration on the development of social relationships. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 6(1), 47-61.
- Niemeyer, J. A., & Proctor, R. (2002). The influence of experience on student teachers' beliefs about inclusion. *Journal of Early Childhood Special Education*, 23(1), 49-57.
- Rodina, K. A. (2007). Vygotskys Social Constructionist View on Disability.
- Salvia, J. & Munson, S. (1986). 'Attitudes of regular education teachers toward mainstreaming mildly handicapped students'. In: MEISEL, C. J. (Ed.) *Mainstreaming Handicapped Children: Outcomes, Controversies, and New Directions*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 111-128.
- Scruggs, T., Mastropieri, M., & McDuffie, K. (2007). Co-teaching in inclusive classrooms: A metasynthesis of qualitative research. *Exceptional Children*, 73(4), 392-416.
- Shade, R. A., & Stewart, R. (2001). General education and special education preservice teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. *Preventing School Failure*, 46, (1), 37-41.
- Sharma, U., Ee, J., & Desai, I. (2003). A Comparison of Australian and Singaporean Pre-Service Teachers' Attitudes and Concerns About Inclusive Education. *Teaching and Learning*, 24, (2), pp. 207-217.
- Subban, P. & Sharma, U. (2001). Primary school teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in Victoria, Australia. *International Journal of Special Education*, 21 (1).
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, A. W. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing an elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(7), 783-805.
- UNESCO (1994). Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education. World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and quality, pp 5-43.
- Weddell, K. (2005). Dilemmas in the quest for inclusion. *British Journal of Special Education*, 32 (1), 3-11.