

Teachers' Knowledge of Special Education Policies and Practices

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Abstract

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) greatly improved the educational opportunities for students with disabilities. Teachers require knowledge of the law to deliver necessary and appropriate services to students with disabilities. The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine teachers' knowledge of special education policies and procedures as outlined in IDEA, possible factors associated with teachers' accurate knowledge, and whether or not teachers accurately perceive their knowledge. A sample of 111 Missouri public school teachers completed an online survey. Overall, the findings revealed that teachers lack knowledge of special education policies and procedures; however, special education teachers demonstrated more accurate knowledge than general education teachers. The most significant predictors of accurate knowledge were completing more special education courses and having positive attitudes toward inclusion. Discussion of these findings and implications for training are provided in terms of improving teachers' knowledge and implementation of IDEA.

Teachers' Knowledge of Special Education Policies and Practices

In 1975, Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), Public Law (P.L.) 94-142. In the 1990 amendments to EAHCA, the title of the law changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The law ensures that children with an eligible disability receive a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) and related services designed to meet their unique needs. It also protects the rights of students and their parents and assists states and localities in their efforts to provide education of all children with disabilities.

Although several laws impact the education of individuals with disabilities, IDEA greatly increased the educational responsibility placed on states to educate students with disabilities by combining a bill of rights for children with disabilities with federal funding (Murdick, Gartin, & Crabtree, 2007). According to several scholars, the subchapters of IDEA contain six major principles; these principles assist with facilitating a thorough understanding of the law (Murdick et al., 2007; Yell, 2012). The six principles include: zero reject, nondiscriminatory evaluation, program development, least restrictive environment, procedural due process, and parental participation (Murdick et al, 2007).

According to the principle of zero reject, all students with disabilities are eligible for services to a free and appropriate education. The principle of nondiscriminatory evaluation requires school testing procedures to be racially or culturally nondiscriminatory and that trained and knowledgeable people administer the assessments in all areas of suspected disability. The program development principle comprises the collaborative process between the school and parents to develop a written document designating the individualized educational services for a

student with a disability in order for that student to receive a beneficial education. The fourth principle, Least Restrictive Environment, focuses on the assumption that the preferred placement for students with disabilities is in the general education classroom with supplementary aids and services. Another principle, procedural due process, guarantees the rights of all persons involved in the provision of educational services for children with disabilities. Lastly, the principle of parental participation mandates that schools provide parents with the opportunity to participate in issues pertaining to their child's evaluation, placement, and IEP development

Prior to the passage of IDEA, schools limited access for students with disabilities to educational opportunities in two major ways. First, many public schools excluded students (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2010b; Yell, Katsiyannis, & Hazelkorn, 2007). For example, congressional findings in 1974 indicated that more than 1.75 million students with disabilities did not receive educational services (Katsiyannis et al., 2001; Yell et al., 2007). Secondly, in the 1970s, millions of children with disabilities received inadequate or inappropriate educational services from public schools (Katsiyannis et al., 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Yell et al., 2007). For instance, before IDEA, students with disabilities who enrolled in public schools seldom interacted with students without disabilities and often received educational services inconsistently (Kober, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

Overall, IDEA granted students with disabilities an enforceable substantive right to a FAPE in the least restrictive environment (Katsiyannis et al., 2001). Eventually, the legal rights provided by IDEA led to inclusion or the push for educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms to the greatest extent possible. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010b), the conditions for children with disabilities greatly improved following the passage of IDEA. Over the past few decades, the number of children with disabilities accessing the general education curriculum increased (U. S. Department of Education, 2011a, Table A-7-2). In addition, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) demonstrate increased reading and mathematics proficiency among fourth-grade students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b; U.S. Department of Education, 2011c). High school and post-secondary outcomes also improved for students with disabilities following the passage of IDEA with an increase in the high school graduation rate (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, Table 22-1), and an increase in the post-secondary enrollment rate and young adult employment rate (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b).

Due to the crucial importance of IDEA to the educational outcomes for students with disabilities, school personnel require awareness of the core principles of IDEA and of the amendments to the law. Knowledge of the law is essential for educators because they must provide students with disabilities with a meaningful education in order to comply with the law, avoid litigation, and produce successful outcomes for children with disabilities. Disagreements between parents and school districts regarding whether a child is eligible under IDEA for services or whether proposed services are appropriate for a child often lead to written complaints, mediations, and due process complaints (Zeller, 2011; Zirkel & Scala, 2010). These disagreements, in turn, cause school districts to spend time and money in order to resolve them. Knowledge of the law is not only necessary for special education teachers but it is also necessary for general education teachers, especially since the percentage of students with disabilities receiving educational services in the general education setting increased.

Unfortunately, many teachers may lack complete knowledge of IDEA and interpretation of IDEA due to the lack of adequate teacher preparation regarding students with disabilities, lack of knowledge among teachers regarding students with disabilities, the complexity of IDEA and federal regulations, the continuous changes and updates made to IDEA, and the complexity of state statutes and regulations. Nevertheless, having adequate knowledge of IDEA is pertinent for general and special education teachers because they are held accountable for proper implementation of that law. By sampling public school teachers, this research attempts to contribute to the question: what knowledge do teachers hold of special education policies and procedures as outlined in IDEA?

The researcher hypothesized that teachers lack sufficient knowledge of special education policies and procedures. Research questions included:

- Do teachers have accurate knowledge of IDEA?
- Is there a significant difference in the knowledge of IDEA between general education teachers versus special education teachers?
- Do teachers have accurate perceptions of their knowledge of IDEA?
- Does a positive correlation exist between teachers' knowledge of IDEA and the amount of training they completed in the field of special education?
- Do teachers' attitudes toward including students with disabilities in the general education classroom, amount of training they completed, and perception of their knowledge predict their actual knowledge of IDEA?

Literature Review

The increase of students with disabilities receiving services under IDEA and the increase of students with disabilities receiving services in the general education classroom creates various challenges for school officials and teachers. Much prior research addresses issues regarding students with disabilities, spanning from the study of attitudes toward students with disabilities to successful instructional techniques (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Chmiliar, 2009; Vaughn, Wanzek, Murray, & Roberts, 2012). Yet, little research explores educators' knowledge of special education policies and procedures and its application in the classroom.

Overall, the large body of legal knowledge produced by IDEA suggests that teachers may lack a complete understanding of special education law. The frequency of disputes regarding the education of students with disabilities is one indication of their lack of complete understanding. In a study on the characteristics of the state-by-state hearing officer system under IDEA, Zirkel and Scala (2010) surveyed special education directors of every state and the District of Columbia. From 2008 to 2009, special education directors reported the occurrence of 2,033 completed hearings that resulted in written decisions. The largest volume occurred in the District of Columbia, New York, California, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Zirkel and Scala's findings do have limitations since their study relied on self-reporting and results may vary depending on which representative from the state education agency completed the survey.

In a federally funded study, Zeller (2011) reported national dispute resolution data submitted by states, the District of Columbia, and territories of the United States. For the 2008- 2009 school year, jurisdictions reported the filing of 5,008 written complaints with 2,378 resulting in findings, the holding of 6,054 mediations with 2,011 resulting in agreements, and 18,020 due process complaints with 2,090 resulting in a written settlement agreements. Clearly, school districts and parents disagree, at times, about whether a child is eligible under IDEA for services or whether proposed services are appropriate for a child. Moreover, in the past, these disagreements frequently led individuals to seek legal action.

In addition to the amount of legal knowledge teachers require and the frequency of disputes, research also suggests that teachers may lack adequate preparation to instruct students with disabilities. In order to improve educators' knowledge of special education issues, legislation, researchers, and government officials emphasize the importance of teacher preparation as a means to achieve the goals of federal policy (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). In a study on teacher preparation curricula, Cooper et al. (2008) examined one teacher education program on its ability to instruct teacher candidates on how to teach students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings. They surveyed instructors of courses required for general and special education teacher licensure. In the study, 62.4% of the faculty members surveyed described their knowledge and skill base for preparing teacher candidates to work with students with disabilities in general education settings as generally adequate, somewhat limited, or extremely limited.

In a report compiled by the Institute of Education Sciences (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a), researchers used publicly available data and interviews with state certification officials to determine general education teacher certification requirements in the nine Northeast and Islands Region jurisdictions. They found that four of the jurisdictions required teacher candidates to take a prescribed number of credit hours focused on special education. Another four jurisdictions required approved professional preparation programs to demonstrate that teacher candidates develop knowledge and skills in the area of special education but did not specify how to meet the requirements. Lastly, only two of the jurisdictions, New York and Vermont, required that general education teachers understand the legal and historical foundations of special education.

In another study regarding teacher certification, Geiger (2002) surveyed and interviewed 51 directors of licensure in state departments of education and the District of Columbia. Geiger found that 90% of the jurisdictions required or soon planned to require some preparation of general education teachers to teach students with disabilities; however, only 17 of those jurisdictions reported requiring course work in teaching students with disabilities. Geiger did not inquire about the specific state standards or course content relating to students with disabilities; therefore, it is unknown if standards incorporated IDEA. Geiger did find that 27% of the jurisdictions lacked requirements that special education teachers receive preparation in general education curriculum or pedagogy. This omission raises the concern that special education teachers may lack preparation to implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) related to the general education curriculum. Finally, while most jurisdictions required assessment in areas of basic skills, they did not assess candidates' knowledge and instructional expertise to instruct students with disabilities.

Not only does research indicate that teacher education programs inadequately prepare teacher candidates for educating students with disabilities, it also indicates that general education teachers possess inadequate knowledge of educating students with disabilities. After administering a needs assessment to general and special education teachers, Buell et al. (1999) found that general education teachers reported a lack of confidence with adapting materials and curriculum for students with disabilities, managing behavior problems, giving individual assistance, and writing behavioral objectives. Furthermore, in a qualitative study on middle school mathematics inclusion classrooms, DeSimone and Parmar (2006) conducted classroom observations, interviews, and surveys with seven general education teachers. After applying a constant comparative method to analyze data, they found that teachers were unclear about their responsibilities toward students with disabilities and about effective mathematics teaching strategies. In addition, teachers reported that preservice and inservice programs failed to prepare them adequately for teaching in the inclusion setting.

In another study on general education teachers' ability to teach students with physical disabilities, Singh (2001) surveyed general education teachers enrolled in the graduate special education program. Half of the teachers reported feeling incompetent and inadequately prepared to include students with physical disabilities in their classrooms. Furthermore, 94% of the teachers reported needing training in assistive and adaptive equipment for educating students with physical disabilities, and 66% of the teachers reported not receiving any inservice training for the inclusion of students with disabilities in the classroom. Despite the limitations of this study's focus on a small unrepresentative sample from one university and on self-reported data, it does raise concern regarding the ability of general education teachers to instruct students with disabilities in their classrooms.

Furthermore, in a random sample of secondary school principals, Militello, Schimmel, and Eberwein (2009) conducted a survey on legal knowledge and practices. They found that principals reported special education as an area where they received frequent threats of lawsuits. Principals also indicated special education as a law category on which they advised general and special education teachers and claimed they wanted their teachers knowledgeable about it. Hence, administrators not only expressed that special education law is vital knowledge for teachers, they also indicated it as an area of insufficient knowledge for teachers; however, Militello et al. did not directly research teachers' knowledge.

Brookshire and Klotz (2002), on the other hand, did survey general education and special education teachers on their knowledge of special education laws. The survey contained questions involving situations in which teachers chose whether a scenario met compliance or violated compliance in accordance with IDEA. They found that although special education teachers scored higher on their knowledge of special education law than general education teachers, they both lacked knowledge on the topic. Brookshire and Klotz also found that most special education teachers indicated that they had sufficient knowledge of special education law; however, they did not demonstrate that knowledge on the survey. On the other hand, most general education teachers indicated that they did not have sufficient knowledge of special education law, which was supported by their performance on the survey. Although these findings offer insight into educators' knowledge of special education law, the survey contained questions involving situations in which teachers chose whether it met compliance or violated

compliance. This format offers participants a 50% chance of guessing an answer correctly. In addition, the situation-based questions may cause confusion in comparison to more direct questions on the laws.

This combined information provides a basis for the present research. IDEA, the IDEA Regulations, and court interpretations of IDEA cover a great deal of information that teachers need to know in order to provide a legally compliant education to students with disabilities. While some research suggests teachers lack accurate knowledge of special education policies and procedures, these findings require additional support. In addition, since a multitude of factors may associate with having accurate knowledge of special education policies and procedures, this study explores possible predictors of knowledge.

Research Methods

Data Collection

For the purposes of this research, it was necessary to collect quantitative data. An online questionnaire provided data on teachers' knowledge of special education policies and procedures. Since every state in the United States has slightly different statutes, regulations, and requirements for teacher certification, the present research focused on one state, Missouri. According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.), general education and special education teachers must complete coursework on topics related to special education and school organization for their certification; however, none of the listed courses specifically address special education law. Although the Missouri State Board of Education establishes a minimum criterion for certification, many institutions require additional coursework. Thus, some institutions may require teacher candidates to complete a course addressing special education law.

Sampling

The sample for the proposed study was Missouri public school teachers. As of the 2010-2011 school year, Missouri had 67,362 teachers employed as public school teachers in 522 school districts (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011). The researcher employed a chain-referral method of sampling by contacting colleagues who were currently employed teachers in the St. Louis area. The researcher made contact in person or over the phone. These teachers were the seed participants for this study and were asked to recruit their peers for the present study. After explaining the purpose of the research to the seed participants, the researcher asked them to participate in an anonymous online survey and to forward that survey to four other teachers they know who work in Missouri, creating the first wave of participants. After receiving agreement from the seed participants, the researcher sent an email with a description of the study and a link to the online survey.

When additional teachers completed the survey, they were also asked to forward the email they received to four other teachers they know who work in Missouri, creating the second wave of participants. Waves continued until participation ceased for seven days. At that time, the researcher closed the survey due to the unlikelihood that further teachers would participate. The researcher chose to ask participants to forward the email to other teachers in order to improve the likelihood that teachers would participate in the study. Receiving an email from an acquaintance

may encourage participation in the study. The researcher requested that participants forward the email to four other teachers in order to minimize the burden on the participant and also to ensure that every participant had an equal opportunity to recruit peers; thereby, minimizing the potentially biasing impact of participants with very large social networks.

Chain-referral sampling was the preferred sampling method because it allowed for easy access to a large portion of the target population. Although the target population was not a rare population, it was a difficult population to access. Surveying an entire school district requires superintendent and/or school board approval which is unlikely to be approved without a personal connection to the superintendent or school board. Surveying an entire school district also poses a bias since it only includes teachers working in that school district. Some districts may offer more professional development pertaining to special education than other districts. Likewise, surveying teachers through a professional organization also poses difficulty since it requires approval of the organization. In addition, it would offer bias because those teachers chose to join the organization and may participate in more professional development activities than other teachers.

While the chain-referral method risked introducing bias since the technique reduces the likelihood that the sample will represent an adequate cross section from the population, the researcher attempted to reduce this likelihood by recruiting specific participants. The recruited teachers represented a mixture of urban, suburban, and rural school districts surrounding St. Louis. They also represented a mixture of general education teachers, special education teachers, early childhood teachers, elementary teachers, and secondary teachers.

Survey Instrument

In order to assess teachers' knowledge of IDEA, perceived knowledge of IDEA, attitudes toward inclusion, and past training on special education policies and practices, the researcher created an online survey. The survey settings did not include barriers to prevent participants from completing the survey on multiple occasions. Altogether the survey contained 24 questions addressing knowledge of IDEA, two questions addressing participants' perception of that knowledge, two questions addressing attitudes toward inclusion, and eight demographic questions. The researcher initially addressed content validity by asking professionals in the field of special education and in the field of survey design to review questions. Questions were altered based on recommendations.

The researcher also addressed content validity by conducting a pilot study with teacher candidates enrolled at Saint Louis University (Sanders, 2011) in Missouri. Results from the pilot study indicated that teacher candidates lacked accurate knowledge of special education policies and procedures as outlined in IDEA and misperceived their lack of knowledge. The most significant predictors of accurate knowledge were completing more special education courses and having a positive attitude toward inclusion. Additionally, the study revealed no differences in knowledge between general education teacher candidates versus special education teacher candidates. Based on the pilot study results, the researcher removed or reworded several questions in order to address potential confusion and in order to more accurately assess teachers versus teacher candidates. Six questions were also added to the survey to improve the accuracy of survey results.

Data Analysis

The present study addressed several major concepts including teachers, knowledge of special education policies and procedures, perception of knowledge, training in special education, teaching area, and attitudes toward inclusion. This study considered teachers to be individuals employed as early childhood through high school teachers in public Missouri school districts.

Perception of knowledge and actual knowledge were measured through survey results from Likert scale questions. Actual knowledge of special education policies was defined as correctly answering questions pertaining to the six principles of IDEA. The survey contained four questions addressing each of the six principles of IDEA with two of the questions containing accurate information and two containing false information. Participants rated their belief in the accuracy of statements on a five point Likert scale (yes, it is accurate; it is probably accurate; uncertain; it is probably not accurate; no, it is not accurate).

The researcher preferred the use of Likert scale questions because it reduced the likelihood of participants guessing correct answers. Each response had a number assigned to it ranging from one to five. The researcher totaled all numbers to obtain a knowledge composite score. The special education knowledge component included 24 questions with 12 containing accurate information and 12 containing false information. Thus, participants had the possibility of scoring between 24 and 120 points with higher scores indicating accurate knowledge.

Perception of knowledge was participants' belief of whether or not they had knowledge of special education policies and procedures. To measure this, participants rated their agreement with having sufficient knowledge of IDEA and with receiving sufficient training on IDEA through coursework and professional development. Participants rated their level of agreement on a five point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, and strongly disagree). Each response had a number assigned to it ranging from one to five. The researcher totaled all numbers to obtain a perception composite score. Accuracy of perceptions was determined by comparing perception composite scores with knowledge composite scores.

The following concepts were also addressed through surveys: training in special education, teaching area, and attitudes toward inclusion. In order to address training in special education, participants choose the number of college courses and professional development activities they completed regarding special education within the past five years. To address teaching area, participants choose the level they teach including early childhood, elementary, middle school, and secondary. They also choose their main teaching assignments. Assignments included early childhood integrated, elementary integrated, special education, English/language arts, reading, social studies, history, math, fine arts, science, physical education/health, foreign language, and other.

Lastly, the researcher measured attitudes toward inclusion by asking participants to rate their level of agreement with the following statements: I believe that I usually have the skills to effectively teach most students with disabilities in the inclusion setting, and I enjoy having students with disabilities in my classroom. The researcher chose these statements in order to covertly analyze participants' attitudes. Participants rated their level of agreement on a five

point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, and strongly disagree). Each response had a number assigned to it ranging from one to five. The researcher totaled all numbers to obtain an attitude composite score.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 displays demographic characteristics of the sample. Female participants accounted for 91% of the sample and male participants accounted for 9% of the sample. The majority of participants indicated their highest level of formal education completed as a Master’s Degree (55.9%) or some graduate work (23.4%). Of the participants, the majority taught in the elementary school setting (55.9%), in a rural (47.7%) or suburban (45.9%) community, and had 10 or less years of experience teaching (53.1%). Lastly, general education teachers accounted for 79.3% of the sample while special education teachers accounted for 20.7% of the sample.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics as a Percentage of the Sample

Descriptive Characteristic	Responses (N = 111)
Sex	
Male	9.0
Female	91.0
Teaching area	
General education	79.3
Special education	20.7
Grade level	
Early childhood	1.8
Elementary	55.9
Middle	18.0
Secondary	24.3
Community type	
Rural	47.7
Urban	6.3
Suburban	45.9
Education level completed	
Bachelor’s degree	10.8
Some graduate work	23.4
Master’s degree	55.9
Specialist degree	7.2
Doctoral degree	2.7

Years teaching	
1-10 years	53.1
11-20 years	30.6
21 or more years	16.2

Responses to Questions

Table 2 presents participants responses to attitude and perception questions. In the second part of the survey, participants answered two questions addressing how they perceive their knowledge of IDEA and two questions addressing their attitude toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Participants answered these questions prior to answering knowledge based questions. The researcher coded responses from one through five with a one indicating a strong disagreement with the statement and a five indicating a strong agreement with the statement. Overall, participants indicated a high level of agreement with the statement that they enjoy having students with disabilities in their classroom ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.88$). They indicated a slightly lower level of agreement with the statement that they believe they have the skills to effectively teach most students with disabilities in the inclusion setting ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.97$). These two questions formed an inclusion attitude composite score ($M = 7.77$, $SD = 1.70$) which resulted in a slightly negative skewness of -0.69 with a range of 3 to 10.

Participants indicated an average level of agreement with having sufficient knowledge of special education policies and procedures as mandated by IDEA ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.02$). They indicated a slightly lower level of agreement with receiving adequate training on IDEA through coursework and professional development courses ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.02$). The answers to these two questions formed a knowledge perception composite score ($M = 7.06$, $SD = 1.89$) which resulted in a slightly negative skewness of -0.34 with a range of 3 to 10.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Percentages for Attitude and Perception Statements

Statement	$M (SD)$	Strongly agree or agree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Strongly disagree or disagree (%)
I enjoy having students with disabilities in my classroom.	4.04 (0.88)	79.3	12.6	8.1
General Education Teachers	3.83 (0.86)	73.9	15.9	10.2
Special Education Teachers	4.83 (0.39)	100.0	0	0
I believe that I have the skills to effectively teach most students with disabilities in the inclusion setting.	3.73 (0.97)	66.7	20.7	12.6
General Education Teachers	3.50 (0.92)	59.1	25.0	15.9

Special Education Teachers	4.61 (0.58)	95.7	4.3	0
I believe that I have sufficient knowledge of special education policies and procedures as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).	3.71 (1.02)	67.6	16.2	16.2
General Education Teachers	3.44 (0.96)	59.1	20.5	20.5
Special Education Teachers	4.74 (0.45)	100.0	0	0
I believe that I received adequate training on IDEA through coursework and professional development activities.	3.35 (1.02)	51.4	21.6	27.0
General Education Teachers	3.09 (0.91)	42.0	25.0	33.0
Special Education Teachers	4.35 (0.83)	87.0	8.7	4.3

In order to measure training in special education, participants indicated the number of college courses and professional development courses pertaining to special education they completed within the past five years. On average, teachers completed approximately 4 courses ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 3.66$), resulting in a slightly positive skewness of 0.84 with a range of 0 to 14. Sixteen individuals, all of whom identified themselves as general education teachers, indicated completing zero courses within the past five years. Furthermore, special education teachers claimed completing approximately 8 courses ($M = 8.45$, $SD = 3.00$) on average; whereas, general education teachers claimed completing approximately 3 courses ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 3.00$) on average.

Table 3 displays participants' composite scores for each of the IDEA principles and participants' overall knowledge composite scores. Participants could score between 4 and 16 for each principle with higher scores indicating more accurate knowledge. For overall knowledge of IDEA composite scores, which included all the principles of IDEA combined, participants' scores could range from 24 to 120 with higher scores indicating more accurate knowledge. Results for the knowledge of IDEA composite score ranged from 69 to 108 with a mean of 85.17 and a standard deviation of 7.19 (see Figure 1). The composite score also resulted in a slightly positive skewness of 0.53. Participants' performed most accurately on questions regarding the procedural due process principle ($M = 15.46$, $SD = 2.18$). Conversely, they scored least accurately on questions regarding the parental participation principle ($M = 13.55$, $SD = 2.35$) and the least restrictive environment principle ($M = 13.75$, $SD = 2.31$).

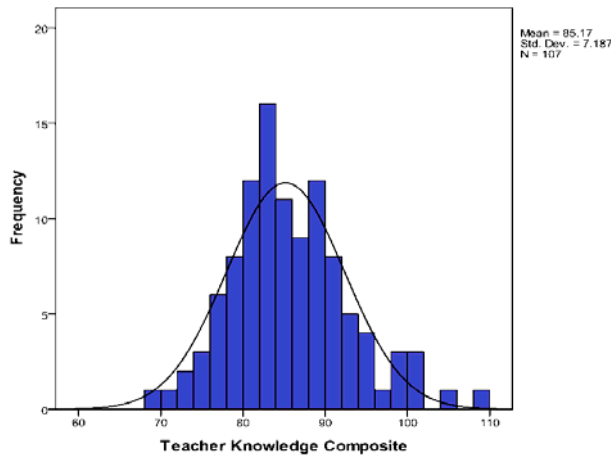


Figure 1: Histogram of knowledge composite scores

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for IDEA Principles

Principle	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Zero reject	14.07	2.36
Nondiscriminatory Evaluation	13.91	2.12
Program Development	14.70	2.54
Least Restrictive Environment	13.75	2.31
Procedural Due Process	15.46	2.18
Parental Participation	13.55	2.35
Knowledge Composite	85.17	7.19

Analysis of Responses

The first research question addressed whether or not teachers have accurate knowledge of IDEA. In order to assess teachers' knowledge, the researcher performed a test of one population mean using a test value of 90 on the knowledge composite score. The test value of 90 was chosen because a score of 90 demonstrates 75% accuracy on the assessment. Therefore, statistically significant results indicate that the group performed significantly different from the test value of

90. The t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between knowledge composite scores and the test value, $t(106) = -6.95, p < .001$ (two tailed). Thus, teachers performed significantly lower than a score of 90 indicating they lack accurate knowledge of special education policies and procedures.

The second research question addressed whether or not there is a significant difference in the knowledge of IDEA between general education teachers versus special education teachers. An independent samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the mean difference between general education teachers and special education teachers on their knowledge, perception of their knowledge, and attitude toward inclusion. The t-test revealed a significant difference for knowledge composite scores for general education teachers ($M = 83.19, SD = 5.56$) and special education teachers ($M = 92.82, SD = 7.74$) between the two groups, $t(105) = -6.65, p < .001$ (two tailed). In addition, a t-test revealed a significant difference for perception of knowledge between general education teachers ($M = 6.53, SD = 1.70$) and special education teachers ($M = 9.09, SD = 1.04$), $t(109) = -6.85, p < .001$ (two tailed). A third t-test revealed a significant difference in attitudes toward inclusion between general education teachers ($M = 7.33, SD = 1.60$) and special education teachers ($M = 9.43, SD = 0.79$), $t(109) = -6.12, p < .001$. Thus, special education teachers have significantly higher knowledge composite scores than general education teachers. Also, special education teachers' perception of their knowledge and their attitude toward inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom are significantly more positive than general education teachers' perceptions and attitudes.

The third research question addressed whether or not teachers have accurate perceptions of their knowledge of IDEA. In order to answer this question, the researcher conducted an ANOVA to explore the difference in knowledge composite scores among different levels of agreement with having sufficient knowledge of IDEA. Due to the few responses in the strongly disagree category, the researcher recoded levels of agreement into three categories (agree, uncertain, and disagree). A statistical difference was found for knowledge between groups, $F_{2,104} = 5.10, p < .01$. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean knowledge score for agreement with having sufficient knowledge ($M = 86.58, SD = 7.64$) was significantly different from the mean score of indicating uncertainty with having sufficient knowledge ($M = 81.00, SD = 5.17$). The disagreement group ($M = 83.78, SD = 5.15$) did not differ statistically from either of the other groups. The statistical difference indicates that teachers may accurately perceive their knowledge of IDEA if they indicate that they believe they have accurate knowledge or if they indicate they are uncertain if they have accurate knowledge.

Another ANOVA was conducted to explore the difference in knowledge composite scores among different levels of agreement with receiving adequate training on IDEA through coursework and professional development activities. Level of agreement was again recoded into three categories (agree, uncertain, and disagree) due to the few responses in the strongly disagree category. A statistical difference was found for knowledge between groups, $F_{2,104} = 3.93, p < .05$. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean knowledge score for agreement with having adequate training ($M = 87.04, SD = 8.26$) was significantly different from the mean score of indicating uncertainty with having adequate training ($M = 82.96, SD = 4.91$). The disagreement group ($M = 83.52, SD = 5.72$) did not differ statistically from either of the other groups. The statistical difference indicates that teachers may accurately perceive their

knowledge of IDEA if they indicate they believe they have adequate training on IDEA or if they indicate they are uncertain if they have adequate training.

The fourth research question addressed whether or not a positive correlation exists between teachers' knowledge of IDEA and the amount of training they completed in the field of special education. The researcher explored the relationship between the two variables using the Pearson correlation coefficient. There was a significant positive correlation between knowledge and completing college courses in the area of special education, $r = .35, n = 104, p < .001$, with higher knowledge composite scores associated with the completion of a higher number of special education college courses and professional development activities within the past five years. Interestingly, a significant positive correlation was also found between attitudes toward including students with disabilities in the general education classroom and completing college courses in the area of special education, $r = .48, n = 108, p < .001$, with positive views toward including students with disabilities in the general education classroom associated with the completion of a higher number of courses related to special education.

The last research question addressed whether or not teachers' attitudes toward including students with disabilities in the general education classroom, amount of training they completed, and perception of their knowledge predict their actual knowledge of IDEA. In order to answer this question, the researcher conducted a hierarchical regression analysis using knowledge composite scores as a dependent variable (see Table 4). The analysis incorporated inclusion attitude composite scores and number of completed college courses and professional development activities in the area of special education as independent variables, after controlling for sex, education, and number of years teaching. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. Perception of knowledge was removed from the analysis as an independent variable due to its high correlation with inclusion attitude scores ($r = .65, n = 111, p < .001$). Removal of the variable ensures no violation of multicollinearity.

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Teachers' Knowledge of IDEA (Standardized Coefficient)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Years Teaching	0.07 (0.07)	0.14 (0.15)
Sex Female = 0 Male = 1	-2.33 (-0.10)	-0.89 (-0.04)
Education level completed Bachelor's degree = 0 Some graduate work = 1	3.97 (0.17)	1.88 (0.08)

Teacher attitude		0.89*	(0.21)
Completed college and professional development courses		0.52*	(0.26)
Constant	81.05		72.90
Adjusted R ²	0.017		0.152
Δ R ²	0.046		0.148
F-Statistic	1.60		4.70**
ΔF	1.60		8.97**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

The hierarchical regression analysis produced two models. The first model included sex, number of years teaching, and education. The model failed to indicate a good model fit ($F_{3, 100} = 1.60, p = .19$), suggesting that none of the variables significantly predict knowledge of IDEA. The second model utilized inclusion attitude composite scores and number of college courses and professional development courses completed as independent variables. Model 2 demonstrated a good model fit ($F_{2, 98} = 4.70, p = .001$), explaining 15.2% (adjusted $R^2 = .152$) of the variance in knowledge composite scores. In this model, the number of courses completed ($\beta = .52, p < .05$) and teacher attitude composite scores ($\beta = .89, p < .05$) explained the largest amount of variation of knowledge with the number of completed courses making the greatest unique contribution to knowledge when controlling for the other variables (beta = .26, $p < .05$). These findings indicate that completing more college or professional development courses related to special education and holding a positive attitude toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general classroom predict accurate knowledge of IDEA.

Discussion

Teachers' Knowledge and Perceptions

Overall, teachers' performance on the survey suggests that they lack knowledge on the requirements of IDEA especially in the areas of parental participation and least restrictive environment; however, special education teachers did demonstrate significantly more accurate knowledge than general education teachers. This finding supports the findings of Brookshire and Klotz (2002) who found that teachers lacked knowledge on special education policies and procedures but that special education teachers scored higher on their knowledge than general education teachers. Conversely, this finding conflicts with the pilot study (Sanders, 2011), which found that although teacher candidates lacked accurate knowledge of IDEA, special education teacher candidates did not demonstrate more accurate knowledge than general education teacher candidates. Nevertheless, it is possible that once special education teacher

candidates gain employment, their knowledge of special education policies and procedures increases through district training and/or mentoring, thereby, improving their knowledge.

Of interest is the finding that teachers may accurately perceive their knowledge. While previous studies (Brookshire and Klotz, 2002; Sanders, 2011) suggest that general and special education teachers and teacher candidates lack an accurate perception of their knowledge, the present study suggests that teachers do accurately perceive their knowledge and the adequacy of their training on the requirements of IDEA. Teachers who indicated having adequate knowledge of IDEA and receiving adequate training on IDEA did score higher than teachers indicating disagreement or uncertainty with those statements. Nevertheless, since teachers performed poorly overall on the knowledge component questions, the accuracy of their perceptions may be somewhat misleading. For instance, teachers indicating agreement with having sufficient knowledge of IDEA only averaged 72% accuracy on the knowledge component questions. Accuracy of teacher perceptions is of concern because teachers may take incorrect actions in future situations, believing they are more knowledgeable. A teacher who is aware of his or her poor knowledge may be more likely to seek advice from a knowledgeable colleague or supervisor.

Training in Special Education

Results from the present study indicate that the number of special education college courses and professional development courses a teacher completes not only increases as accurate knowledge of IDEA increases but also predicts whether or not a teacher holds more accurate knowledge of IDEA. This finding highlights the importance of previous research that suggests teachers lack adequate preparation to instruct students with disabilities (Buell et al., 1999; Cooper et al., 2008; DeSimone & Parmar, 2006; Geiger, 2002; Singh, 2001; U. S. Department of Education, 2010a). The finding also supports recommendations from legislation, researchers, and government officials emphasizing the importance of teacher preparation and professional development as a means to improve educators' ability to successfully implement IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Not surprisingly, in the present study, special education teachers completed, on average, more courses pertaining to special education than general education teachers. Although expected, this finding is troubling considering that previous research found that general education teachers reported a lack of confidence with adapting materials and curriculum for students with disabilities (Buell et al., 1999) and reported that preservice and inservice programs failed to prepare them adequately for teaching in the inclusion setting (DeSimone and Parmer, 2006). In addition, many states' teacher certification requirements may lack adequate training for general education teachers to teach students with disabilities (Geiger, 2002; U. S. Department of Education, 2010a). For instance, Missouri requires a minimum of one course specifically addressing the education of students with disabilities for certification of general education elementary school teachers (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.).

Attitudes toward the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

In addition to completing courses in special education, positive views toward inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom also predicted accurate knowledge of IDEA. The teachers in this study reported positive views regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom, similar to findings expressed in the literature

(Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Chmiliar, 2009; Sanders, 2011). Special education teachers did report significantly more positive attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom than general education teachers. A finding reflected in previous research regarding the differences between general education and special education teachers' inclusionary practices (Buell et al., 1999). Since previous research indicates an association between teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and a willingness to implement successful classroom practices for the inclusion of students with disabilities (Chmiliar, 2009; Elliot, 2008; Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013), findings of this study suggest that the teachers in this sample may exhibit a willingness to implement practices benefiting inclusion when teaching.

The results of this study also support earlier findings that positive teacher attitudes toward including students with disabilities in the general education classroom appear related to higher levels of training in special education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; deBettencourt, 1999; Dickens-Smith, 1995; Van-Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2001). Interestingly, Dickens-Smith (1995) found that teachers revealed more favorable attitudes toward inclusion after an inservice training on inclusion than they did before the training, with general education teachers demonstrating stronger positive attitude change than special education teachers. Furthermore, not only do positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion appear related to training in special education, previous research also suggests it is related to implementing instructional strategies that support successful implementation of inclusion for students with disabilities in the classroom (deBettencourt, 1999; King & Youngs, 2003; Van-Reusen et al., 2001). King and Youngs (2003), for example, in a study of secondary schools that included the majority of students with disabilities in the general education classroom for instruction, found that most teachers reported believing inclusion benefited the learning of all students in the classroom. Teachers also reported making instructional accommodations for students with disabilities in their classes. Lastly, many of the teachers reported trying to maintain the curriculum and hold high expectations while providing accommodations. Since past research indicates an association between teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and implementation of inclusion for students with disabilities, the positive attitudes of teachers in the present study may indicate that they are willing to implement instructional strategies benefitting inclusion.

Implications

Based on the results of this study, the researcher suggests several practical implications for schools and policymakers. Overall, the teachers in this study lacked knowledge of special education policies and practices; however, completing courses in the area of special education did predict more accurate knowledge. This finding supports previous recommendations that teachers require quality preparation programs with classes addressing special education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Brookshire and Klotz, 2002; U. S. Department of Education, 2002). Thus, policymakers and school officials should consider requiring teachers to complete inservice training in the area of special education policies and practices. In addition, policymakers should consider altering teacher certification requirements to include policies and practices relevant to special education so that teachers enter the workforce prepared to teach students with disabilities in their classrooms.

Current general and special education teachers require professional development and inservice training addressing instruction of student with disabilities. Training should address laws related

to special education, how to implement those laws, and best practices for educating students with disabilities. However, administrators should consider conducting a needs assessment prior to the professional development in order to address the needs of their teachers.

Limitations

Although the present research provided insight into the knowledge and perspectives of teachers, the conclusions of this research should be interpreted with several cautions. First, it is possible that respondents completed the online survey more than once since no barrier prevented them from completing it multiple times; thereby, altering results. In addition, since no survey tool existed to examine teachers' knowledge of special education policies and procedures as mandated by IDEA, the researcher created an original survey. Results should be interpreted with caution due to statistical limitations such as reliability measurements. Moreover, the generalizability of the findings of this research is limited to certified teachers in Missouri. Results should not be generalized to public school teachers in other states as they may hold different certification and training requirements. The researcher also cautions generalizing results due to sampling bias. Since teachers' self-selected participation in the present study based on whether or not they received a recruitment email, it is likely that the sample differs from the population of all teachers in Missouri. Teachers who chose to participate may hold more positive attitudes toward inclusion and more knowledge of special education policies and procedures than teachers who chose not to participate

Future Research

The results of this study raise several areas for future research. Future research should examine best methods for instructing general and special education teachers and/or teacher candidates on special education policies and procedures. Research is also needed to explore general and special education teachers' knowledge of special education policies and procedures in real-life situations. Lastly, since research suggests a positive association between holding positive attitudes toward inclusion, completing courses in special education, having accurate knowledge of IDEA, and implementing instructional strategies benefiting inclusion, future research should further explore factors influencing positive attitudes, such as specific curriculum of courses and specific classroom experiences.

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About the Author

Pamela Sanders was born in St. Louis, Missouri. In 2002, she obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Saint Louis University where she graduated Summa Cum Laude. In the winter of 2006, she graduated with a Masters of Education degree in Special Education from the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, Florida. She taught for two years for Duval County Public Schools in Jacksonville, Florida and currently teaches for Fox School District in Fenton, Missouri. In 2011, Mrs. Sanders published “Teacher Candidates’ Knowledge of Special Education Law” in the *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals*. Mrs. Sanders received the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies in December 2013.

Appendix

Questionnaire

Part 1: Teacher perceptions about special education. Please check the box indicating your response.

Part 2: Please read the statements below. Based on your knowledge of IDEA and its

	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I enjoy having students with disabilities in my classroom.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
2. I believe that I have the skills to effectively teach most students with disabilities in the inclusion setting.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
3. I believe that I have sufficient knowledge of special education policies and procedures as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
4. I believe that I received adequate training on IDEA through coursework and professional development activities.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]

regulations, check the response indicating whether or not you believe the statement is accurate.

	Yes, it is accurate.	It is probably accurate.	Uncertain	It is probably not accurate.	No, it is not accurate.
1. Public school personnel can remove a child with a disability who brings a weapon to school. They may either suspend the student for 10 or less school days or send the student to an alternative educational setting.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
2. If a parent does not respond to a school with consent for reevaluation, the school may reevaluate the child as	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]

long as they take reasonable steps to obtain permission.					
3. An Individual Education Program (IEP) should include a record of a student's past school performance.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
4. Federal law requires mainstreaming in placement decisions for students with disabilities.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
5. If a school and a parent disagree on whether a child should be evaluated for special education services, the parent may request a due process hearing but a school may not request a due process hearing.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
6. Schools are required to notify parents in writing after initiating special education services for their child.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
7. If a parent requests that a certain curriculum be used with his or her child and can produce data demonstrating its effectiveness, the school must implement the curriculum.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
8. If a teacher believes one of his or her students has a disability, he or she reports this to the evaluation team at the school. The team begins testing the student for a disability.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
9. An IEP should include a transition plan for students. Teachers must implement the plan as students' transition from one grade to the next.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
10. School districts must have available placement options	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]

ranging from the general classroom, special classes, special schools, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and other institutions for all students with disabilities.					
11. If a school is not providing a student with the amount of speech therapy as required in the child's IEP, parents may request due process.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
12. An IEP must include suggestions for parental involvement which teachers are required to implement.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
13. If a student is not making progress on his or her IEP goals, teachers should continue to monitor the student's performance, report the student's progress to his or her parents periodically, and address the lack of progress toward the goal at the student's next annual IEP meeting.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
14. A general education teacher should be part of the evaluation process for a child being evaluated for a potential disability.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
15. Only teachers with special education certification are required to implement the accommodations listed in a student's IEP.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
16. The preferred placement option for a student with a disability is full inclusion with supplemental aids.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
17. A teacher can change a student's educational placement from the special education setting to the general education setting	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]

after getting administrative and parental permission.					
18. If a parent requests all records related to their child's education, a school must provide them within 45 days.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
19. A student's IEP goals should be designed to meet his or her needs and enable him or her to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
20. When identifying a child with a learning disability, school districts are required to use a formula that measures the discrepancy between a student's score on an IQ test and an achievement test.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
21. A member of an IEP team is excused from attending the IEP meeting if the parent and school agree to the excusal, and the team member submits written input prior to the meeting.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
22. Due to scheduling difficulties, it is appropriate for service providers to schedule special education services during recess and other recreational activities.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
23. Schools are required to provide parents with a copy of procedural safeguards. The safeguards include parental rights, procedural rights for students with disabilities, dispute resolution mechanisms, and the voluntary mediation process.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]

<p>24. Parents are required members of the IEP team. The team must consider parental concerns for enhancing the education of their child at the IEP meeting.</p>	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
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Part 3: Please complete the following demographic information.

1. Please indicate your main teaching assignment(s).

- Early Childhood Integrated
- Elementary Integrated
- Special Education
- English/Language Arts
- Reading
- Social Studies
- History
- Math
- Fine Arts
- Science
- Physical Education/Health
- Foreign Language
- Other

2. Please indicate your areas of Missouri teacher certification.

- Early Childhood Integrated
- Elementary Integrated
- Special Education
- English/Language Arts
- Reading
- Social Studies
- History
- Math
- Fine Arts
- Science
- Physical Education/Health
- Foreign Language
- Other

3. Please indicate the grades you teach.

- Early Childhood
- Elementary
- Middle School
- Secondary

4. Please indicate the community type of the school where you teach.

- Rural
- Urban
- Suburban

5. How many years have you been teaching? _____

6. How many college courses pertaining to special education have you completed in the past 5 years?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 or more

7. How many professional development activities regarding special education have you completed in the past 5 years?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 or more

8. What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?

- Bachelor's Degree
- Some graduate work
- Master's Degree
- Specialist Degree
- Doctoral Degree

9. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

10. Would you like to participate in a drawing for a \$50 Barnes and Noble gift card?

- Yes
- No

- 11.** Please indicate your email address to participate in the drawing for a \$50 gift card to Barnes and Noble. If your name is selected, an electronic gift card will be emailed to your account.
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