Factors Influencing Teacher Behavior with Students with Diverse Learning and Behavioral Needs

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, inclusion has become a critical part of the reform efforts to improve the delivery of services to students with disabilities. As general education teachers are asked to assume greater responsibility for students with diverse learning and behavior needs, it is important to examine factors that influence their teaching behavior while instructing students identified at risk or with specific learning disabilities. Factors influencing teacher behavior with students who have diverse learning and behavioral needs being served in inclusive environments are addressed, including: (a) teacher expectations of student behavior, (b) attribution patterns, (c) teacher attitudes toward inclusion, (d) personal teacher efficacy, and (e) teacher qualities.

Factors that Influence Teacher Behavior with Students with Diverse Learning and Behavioral Needs in Inclusive Classrooms

Over the last two decades, inclusion has become a critical part of the reform efforts to improve the delivery of services to students with disabilities. Inclusive schools are characterized by a shared service delivery model in which general and special education teachers work collaboratively to provide quality services to students with disabilities (Praisner, 2003). Recent legislative acts such as the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have increased the level of shared responsibility between special educators and general educators in providing services for students with disabilities. As general education teachers assume greater responsibility for students with diverse learning and behavior needs, it is important to examine factors that influence their teaching behavior when instructing students with disabilities.

The authors examine factors that influence teacher behavior with students who have diverse learning and behavioral needs served in inclusive environments, including: (a) teacher expectations of student behavior, (b) attribution patterns, (c) teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, (d) personal teacher efficacy, and (e) teacher qualities. While these factors will be discussed separately, it is important to note that these factors are interrelated.

Teacher Expectations

Teacher expectations are critical in developing student's self-expectations and self-efficacy (Good, 1981; Rumain, 2010). Teacher and student behavior is reciprocal in its exchanges, which often leads teachers to modify their behavior toward students who do not display expected age or grade level behavior. Of course, students enter each grade level with varying levels of academic and social abilities. Teachers must have realistic expectations and a repertoire of skills to respond appropriately to these challenges. If challenges are not addressed teacher and peer judgment of students who do not display prosocial behavior may become cemented resulting in a reputational bias (Beebe-Frankenbeger, Lane, Bocian, Gresham, & MacMillan, 2005).

Upon school entry, students are expected to demonstrate specific skills and competencies which will enable them to meet the academic and social task demands of the school environment (Whitted, 2011). Students who lack these prerequisite skills are at risk for a host of negative educational outcomes including academic underachievement, poor relationships, peer and teacher rejection, and increased likelihood of being referred for special education (Dunlap et al., 2005). Understanding the social and behavioral expectations teachers hold for students allow for the development of more effective interventions and to improve outcomes for students with disabilities..

In examining such behaviors, elementary school teachers' were asked to identify which social skills they viewed as critical for students to posses to be successful in their classrooms. Teachers viewed self-control and cooperation skills as equally important for success but perceive assertion skills as less important (Lane, Givner, & Pierson, 2004). Specifically, the majority of teachers identified seven social skills to be critical for success in their classrooms:

      (1) follows directions,
      (2) attends to instruction,
      (3) controls temper with peers,
      (4) controls temper with adults,
      (5) gets along with people who are different,
      (6) responds appropriately when hit, and
      (7) uses free time in an acceptable way. (Lane, Givner, & Pierson, 2004, p. 421).

High school and middle school teachers indicated relatively similar expectations of student behavior; however, a majority of teachers identified only five skills as essential for success in school: (1) attend to your instruction, (2) controls temper in conflict situation with peers, (3) controls conflict situations with adults, (4) follows directions, and (5) responds appropriately to physical aggression from peers (Lane, Givner, & Pierson,2003, p. 421). While teachers held similar expectations of student behavior essential for success, studies have indicated differences of degree of importance of essential skills among general education and special education teachers as well as degree of importance between grade levels. For example, elementary general educators viewed

cooperation skills as more essential for success than did special education teachers (Lane, Givner, & Pierson, 2004).

Teacher Behavior Expectations

It is important for general and special educators to have self-awareness of their own behavior expectations in order to prepare students for the social demands of each specific setting. Research indicates significant differences in teachers perspectives about the importance of self-control, cooperation, and assertion skills across levels (Lane, Pierson and Giver, 2003). Findings also indicated that while skills in the area of cooperation and self-control are viewed as necessary by teachers across the kindergarten through twelfth-grade span, these skills are viewed as more necessary from middle school teachers' perspectives. Elementary and middle school teachers rated assertion skills, as a whole, as significantly more important for success in comparison to high school teachers. Teachers at all grade levels all placed similar importance on cooperation skills (Lane, Pierson and Giver, 2003).

Organizational Behavior

Middle school is a time when students make numerous classroom transitions throughout the day and have the added responsibility of managing a locker. In addition to social competence, teachers hold expectations regarding the construct of organizational behavior. Students with disabilities often have difficulties with organization, especially students with learning disabilities and ADHD. McMullen, Shippen, and Dangel (2005) reported work completion as the highest ranking behavior when surveying science and social studies teachers. In addition, bringing supplies to class were ranked nearly as high. Teachers with a greater understanding of these disabilities will be able to have reasonable expectations and be able to provide targeted instruction in areas of deficit.

Attribution Patterns

Behavioral expectations of students by teachers are inextricably tied to what the teacher attributes to the cause of the behavior. Attribution theory explains how individuals interpret events and its relationship to their thinking and behavior. Teachers responses to student behavior are dictated by the casual attributions they attached to the behavior. Once teachers attribute an outcome to a causal factor, an emotional response such as anger or pity, will influence the teacher response behavior in response to the student behavior (Morin, 2001). These causal factors possess three underlying psychological properties:

> a) locus (whether the cause originates within the person or the environment), b) stability (whether the cause is stable or unstable), and c) controllability (whether the cause is under the volitional control of the person. Moreover, controllability is linked to responsibility. A controllable cause results in the perception that the student is responsible for the outcome; likewise uncontrollable cause leads to the perception of no responsibility (Clark & Artiles, 2000, p.77).

Teachers can find themselves trapped in a dysfunctional attribution cycle (Morin, 2001). This can be described as a teacher observing the misbehavior, followed by the teacher applying inaccurate causal factors to explain the cause of the behavior (i.e., the student is willfully refusing to work rather than not working due to not understanding), and then responding inappropriately due to the perceived misbehavior. Using the prior example, a teacher may give the student a "conduct cut" for not working instead of providing additional instruction. These faulty interpretations can lead to a cycle of frustration for both the student and teacher (Morin, 2001).

Teacher can also get trapped in a dysfunctional attribution cycle when responding to academic behavior displayed by students with learning disabilities. Clark and Artiles (2000) summarized the attribution research literature conducted in the United States and concluded that

> (a) teachers make attributions based on the locus, stability, and controllability of perceived causes of an outcome; (b) student ability, effort, and learning disability designation seem to have causal properties; and (c) perceived causal factors influence teacher emotional and behavioral responses to student performance, and these responses may have an effect on future student behaviors and self-perceptions (p. 78).

Students receive messages concerning their social competence throughout the day with teachers serving as a primary source of information. While teachers no doubt wish to build children's self-esteem and a sense of personal competence, they may inadvertently do the opposite via the attribution messages sent to students with learning disabilities (Clark, 1997). For example, a teacher may attribute a student failing a test due to a disability and not make him/her correct the test, when in fact the student simply did not study. This phenomenon is illustrated in the often-cited work of Graham and Weiner (1986) that established a link between anger/pity and rewards/punishment.

According to Graham and Weiner (1986), anger or pity is often the teachers' initial response following a negative classroom outcome. This is linked to the controllability of the event. If who a student who is perceived as having high ability fails an important test due to lack of effort (a controllable cause), a teacher feels anger toward that student. In contrast, a student who failed due to his perceived low ability (uncontrollable cause) will evoke pity from his teachers. Consequently, the high ability/poor performer will be more likely to be treated differently than the low ability/poor performer regarding punishments and rewards.

Clark (1997) studied this phenomenon using elementary school teachers (N=97; 84 women, 13 men) by rating responses to vignettes of hypothetical boys with and without learning disabilities who experienced failure. Teachers responded to the vignettes with evaluative feedback, expectations for the students, explanations of the cause of the failures. In addition, teachers rated their anger and pity for each of the vignettes. As expected, teachers had more pity for the low ability/poor performer than the high ability/poor performer. Teachers reported higher ratings for anger for the high ability/poor performer than the low ability/poor performer. Teachers also held expectancy

beliefs that students with learning disabilities were more likely to fail in the future. This finding raises questions about whether general education teachers feel they have the ability to change this trajectory.

Personal Teaching Efficacy

Another factor that influences teacher behavior with students with diverse learning and behavior needs is personal teaching efficacy (PTE; Kosko & Wilkins, 2009). Personal teaching efficacy refers to the perception teachers have of themselves as "able" or "less able" to make an impact a child's education (Morin, 2001). Referral bias can occur often without malevolence toward students from low socioeconomic status (Podell & Soodak, 1993) and from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Sullivan, 2011; Szu-yin Chu, 2011). For example, Podell and Soodak (1993) investigated teachers' sense of efficacy and biases in their decisions to refer students to special education. They identified underlying beliefs and biases that factored into the teacher's decisions to refer students to special education such as the teachers' sense of their own effectiveness. Teachers' willingness to work with more difficult students may depend on their ability to effect change.

The influence of teacher efficacy with student problem type (i.e. behavior, learning, or both) on teachers' placement and referral decisions has been examined. Soodak and Podell (1993) hypothesized that (a) efficacy relates to teachers' placement and referral judgments. Specifically, general education teachers with greater efficacy will be more likely to keep students with problems in the general education classroom, (b) placement and referral decisions are mediated by the nature of the student's problems. For example, students who display both learning and behavior problems are referred more often than students with only learning difficulties. According to Soodak and Podell (1993), the results have both practical and theoretical implications:

1. Teachers' sense of efficacy has a significant influence on their judgments regarding the appropriateness of general education placement for students with learning and/or behavior problems.
2. General educators with a greater sense of personal efficacy were more likely to perceive the general education placement as being appropriate for students having difficulties. In contrast, special educators' judgments of the appropriateness of regular class placement were not related to their sense of efficacy.
3. General educators who do not perceive themselves as being able to influence student outcomes believe that students with learning and behavior challenges should not be placed into general education.
4. Placement decisions are not simply a function of teachers' confidence in their own teaching ability. Instead, when general and special education teachers feel personally able to affect change in their students, but cannot overcome external factors (i.e., poverty, family) in their students' lives, they also are likely to believe that students who display challenging behavior and learning do not belong in general education.

The effects of on-going support and professional development for teachers have implications for increasing PTE. Kosko and Wilkins (2009) found a positive relationship between professional development and teacher perception of the ability to adapt instruction for students with disabilities. Behavior and academic coaching have also been used successfully to increase teachers comfort and use with evidence-based strategies (Duchaine, Jolivette, & Frerick, 2011). As instruction for students with disabilities takes place primarily in the general education classroom, opportunities for special and general educators to learn from each other are daily occurrences and opportunities to increase efficacy.

A cyclical relationship between the need of teachers to feel efficacious by using specific strategies and confirmation that using specific strategies will lead to increased efficacy occurs daily in the classroom (Morin & Battalio, 2004). Increased support and greater collaboration between special and regular education may help facilitate the use of best practices and help increase teachers' PTE. Brownwell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron, and Vanhover (2006) studied teacher learning cohorts (TLC) using a collaborative problem solving professional development model over the course of 3 years. Teachers who were considered "high adopters" implemented new strategies readily and experienced success with them and as the authors noted, "success bred success (p. 181)." These teachers went on to try new strategies and trained others.

 School-wide positive behavior support (PBS) initiatives have experienced considerable success when properly implemented. Positive relationships have occurred between the teachers' perceived success with students and the level of consultation and support received (Carter & Van Norman, 2010).   When student behaviors have improved, teachers' attitudes concerning the remediation of misbehavior have become more positive. When teacher practice results on a positive outcome, there is a corresponding increase on PTE (Morin & Battalio, 2004).

Training and Support

Personal teacher efficacy may be related to the level of training and support regular education teachers feel while working with students in inclusive environments. Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick and Scheer (1999) surveyed 289 special and general education teachers to explore the relationship between teacher's feelings of efficacy concerning educating students with disabilities and to identify the training and support needs of teachers. Teachers were asked about successful implementation of inclusion, , beliefs about motivation and home environment, and confidence in adapting classroom materials and procedures to accommodate students with disabilities in inclusive environments. The results indicated a strong negative relationship between teachers believing they can influence students and their beliefs that little can be done to offset environmental factors. This relationship existed for both special education and general education teachers.

Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick and Scheer (1999) reported differences between special and general educators. Overall, the special education teachers in this study

reported that they were more confident and prepared to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom. General educators do not feel as confident in their skills (e.g., adapting materials, managing behavior) needed to support inclusion. Differences in special education and general education certification were reported in the area of needed supports. General educators reported less support and resources than special educators. Teachers' perceived levels of support might affect their confidence in working with students with disabilities. Training topics general education teachers indicated they needed included program modification, assessing academic progress, adapting curriculum, managing student behavior, developing IEPs, and using assistive technology.

The relationship between teacher efficacy and the presence or absence of support via consultation was examined with teachers sharing responsibility for students with disabilities (Gotshell & Stefanou, 2011). A concurrent purpose of this study was to examine the interaction of teacher learned helplessness with efficacy. Teachers who received more support have higher teacher efficacy scores and lower learned helplessness scores. This study was conducted in schools utilizing a response-to-intervention (RTI) instructional framework. As more schools adopt the RTI framework, it is important to emphasize collaboration and consultation as a key component.

In order for students with diverse learning and behavioral needs to succeed in inclusive environments, it is important to design in-service trainings that increase teachers' confidence in their own ability to work with students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 2006). It is also critical that teachers receive on-going consultation and supports (Gotshell and Stefanou, 2011). In order to foster teacher efficacy, schools should include all teachers in decision-making concerning classroom policies, student instructional planning, and the in-service training programs offered (Buell, et al., 1999).

Teacher Attitude

Teacher attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities is perhaps the single most important variable that influences teacher behavior. These attitudes are shaped by experience with students with special needs, levels of education, and training. Van Reusen, Shoho, and Barker, (2001) surveyed 125 high school teachers concerning inclusion. Negative attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities were reported in over half (54%) of the obtained response scores. Teachers with the least amount of special education training, knowledge, or experiences in teaching students with disabilities were more likely to hold a negative attitude. In contrast, teachers who had the highest level of special education training or experiences reported positive attitudes toward inclusion.

Jobe and Rust, (1996) conducted a similar study of teacher attitudes using 162 classroom teachers. Results of their questionnaire reflected almost exactly neutral teacher attitudes when averaged together. The typical responses fell between the extremes of strong agreement and strong disagreement. It was further noted that many unsolicited comments written on the surveys lead the researchers to believe that the results may have been

different if specific disabilities were noted on the questionnaire. For example, students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) invoke attitudes and behaviors from teachers different from other disabilities (e.g., physical disabilities). This supports previous research findings by Coleman and Gilliam (1983) when it was reported that students who do not disrupt the learning environment and do not monopolize teacher time are viewed more favorably by general education teachers.

Heflin and Bullock (1999) conducted a study that may give some insight into the underlying reasons why general education teachers have negative attitudes toward students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders (EBD). Three school districts of various sizes were studied (<2000, 10, 000, and 50, 0000). Interviews were conducted with both special and general educators. Patterns in the data emerged as teachers responses were similar across district size.

The responses given by general education teachers illustrate many of the factors that shape attitudes and influence behavior when students with EBD are placed in inclusive environments. General education teachers reported varying degrees of skepticism and fear with including students with EBD and were willing to try including students with disabilities as long as "appropriate support" was in place. They also reported skepticism about the support they would receive and wanted options to send disruptive students to corrective environments. In this study, teacher age appeared to affect willingness to provide inclusionary services: older teachers were more resistant.

Many of the issues identified by Heflin and Bullock (1999) are consistent with other variables that influence teacher behavior such as expectations and efficacy. During the interviews, the teachers were asked about their negative perceptions about inclusion. Both general and special education teachers identified problems as insufficient support and training, nonproportional ratios, behavior management, and time constraints.

One aspect of inclusive practices that shapes teacher efficacy, attributions, and attitudes that influences teacher behavior is that students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) often require accommodations and /or modifications in order to succeed in the general education classrooms. Specific learning disabilities are considered "hidden" disabilities since the disability is not readily perceived by teachers. The perceived similarity between students with SLD and their non-disabled peers may prevent the general education teacher from seeing both the need and appropriateness for more intensive accommodations/modifications (Bryant, Dean, Elrod, & Blackbourn, 1999).

Bryant et al. (1999) examined the rural teachers' attitudes toward accommodations/modifications in inclusive classrooms. They investigated the effectiveness, fairness, and realistic implementation of the top 15 of 63 accommodations/modifications approved by the Mississippi Department of Education.

The results of Bryant et al. (1999) raised additional questions and indicated:

1. Both the elementary and secondary general education teachers indicated that providing individual assistance to the student with SLD was the most effective accommodation/modification. Open book exams were ranked as the least effective by elementary, which is not surprising since most students with SLD have reading problems. Secondary teachers reported having a third party (e.g. a teacher assistant) take notes was least effective.

2. The elementary teachers rated two classroom accommodations/modifications as being most fair: (a) making phone contact with parents when assignments are not completed, and (b) using weekly homework folders that parents must sign to acknowledge receipt. An interesting observation to this finding is that teachers considered a phone call home an accommodations/modification.

3. Secondary teachers reported that providing peer assisted assignments was the fairest accommodation/modification; however this practice can also be labeled a learning strategy rather than an accommodations/modification.

4. Both the elementary and secondary teachers rated the use of a third party to take notes for students with learning disabilities as being most unfair to the non-disabled students in addition to being ineffective and unrealistic.

5. The elementary teachers felt that phone contact with parents when assignments were not completed was the most realistic to implement, while secondary teachers felt that providing the students with learning disabilities with individual assistance was the most efficient. Both levels of teachers agreed that having a third party take notes for the students was the least realistic to implement in the general education classroom.

Principal Influence

The principal's attitude toward inclusion has tremendous impact on the teachers' attitudes and behaviors. Principals influence all phases of a school including allocating resources, supervising personnel, and implementing state and district policy. Both general and special educators indicated that principals have a more favorable view of inclusion than the teachers but indicate that general education teachers do not possess the necessary instructional study (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999). These findings underscore the role of carefully designed in-service programs and proving necessary supports.

Praisner, (2003) surveyed 408 elementary school principals to investigate relationships regarding attitudes toward inclusion and reported about 1 in 5 principals' attitudes toward inclusion are positive with the remaining uncertain. Like teachers, the more positive experiences reported with students with disabilities resulted in a more positive attitude toward inclusion. Disability type was a major factor related to placement perceptions of principals with general education settings were chosen less frequently for students with EBD and autism. Less restrictive placements were chosen most often for other categories such a speech and language disabilities, orthopedic impairments, sensory

impairments and specific learning disabilities. A lack of special education training was also cited in this study as influencing attitudes.

Teacher Qualities

The attributes and personality traits of the teacher have a direct impact on their behavior with students with diverse learning and behavioral needs. Although teachers have varying attributes and personality traits, there are certain personality traits some that seem to increase the effectiveness of inclusion of students with disabilities.

Brownell et al. (2006) studied a teacher learning cohort (TLC) for 3-years in order to determine the qualities teachers possess in response to additional training. This cohort was provided professional development and collaborative problem solving supports in the implementation of evidence-based practices in the classroom. Of the eight participants, three were rated as "high adopters," three were rated as "moderate adopters," and two were rated as "low adopters." High adopters were described as interested and willing to try to new things, considered knowledgeable, and student focused. Moderate adopters were similar to high adopters in several qualities but were inconsistent in implementing newly learned strategies. Low adopters were described as needing more support and being less knowledgeable concerning pedagogy and held different beliefs concerning student discipline.

Olson and Chalmers (1997) conducted a study in which school principals and special education teachers identified general education teachers who were the most skilled at including students with disabilities in their classroom. These individuals were interviewed and as a result several themes regarding personality traits and attributes of the teachers emerged. These teachers:
> (a) were described as tolerant, reflective, and flexible,
> (b) accepted responsibility for all students,
> (c) described a positive working relationship with special educators,
> (d) reported adjusting expectations for integrated students, and
> (e) Indicated that their primary inclusionary attitude was showing personal warmth and acceptance (p. 30-31).

Students with disabilities also have opinions on what personality traits they feel define effective teachers. Owens and Dieker (2003) interviewed nine students identified with EBD to understand the qualities teachers who students perceived as effective possess. The qualities the students identified in these teachers were: enthusiastic, hold high expectations, understanding, encouraging, and good at communication. Although the teachers the students were discussing were special educators, it would be reasonable to assume that students with EBD would want all of their teachers to possess these attributes.

Implications for Practice

This review identified five of the underlying factors that influence the behavior of teachers who work with students with diverse learning and behavioral needs. An understanding of these interrelated factors is essential in today's schools where the number of students with diverse needs rises and educating students with disabilities is viewed as a responsibility of all teachers. With this is mind, several recommendations can be made to improve practice.

The need for professional development opportunities using a collaborative and consultative problem-solving approach can address several issues raised in this report. Brownell et al., (2006) showed that the use of this model can effective for some teachers, but not all. The challenge is for teachers and administrators to engage in reflective activities designed to discover underlying factors of behavior. For example, the reciprocal nature of efficacy and support cannot be ignored. A teacher may be competent in content and pedagogy but not feel supported. Conversely, a teacher may have the necessary supports, but is still developing in pedagogy and classroom management skills. An understanding of this may lead to a more tailored approach to providing teacher support and training.

A common theme which emerged from this review is the impact of success on the attitudes and efficacy. Success is highly motivating and reinforcing and efforts need to be made in induction and mentoring programs which will maximize the success of teachers. This knowledge combined with three stages of concerns teaching professionals encounter (Richardson & Placier, 2001) will help move novice teachers from the "survival stage" in their early career to the "results and mastery" stage where teachers have a great deal of expertise. This can be achieved through an approach which provides on-going support, reflection, and effective professional development.

Finally, teacher training programs can use this information to better prepare teachers who enter the field. Prospective teachers need opportunities to examine their attitudes and beliefs prior to teaching. Just as students learn about the characteristics of exceptional students, instruction should also focus on the understanding their counterpoints (i.e., other teachers) who they will be sharing responsibility for teaching students with disabilities.

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