Examining Teachers' Perceived Barriers Associated with Inclusion

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This qualitative study examined general education teachers' beliefs and attitudes about current mainstreaming practices. Data were collected using focus groups and individual interviews. The following research questions were the basis for the interviews and observations: 1) What are teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward mainstreaming? The researcher made contact three times with each of the five participants. Each teacher participated in one focus group discussion, one individual interview, and one classroom observation. As the interviewer and observer, the researcher used constant comparison analysis to ensure that the themes in this naturalistic study emerged from the data itself. Major themes that emerged are as follows: 1) The teachers generally agreed that responsibilities and expectations of regular education teachers were unreasonable. The teachers had little formal education or training with regard to mainstreaming practices. 2) The teachers felt there was a lack of support from school administrators in the areas of inservice education and training, class size, collaboration and planning time, and shared duties with the special education staff.

More than ever before, teachers are required to educate a broad range of learners in the general classroom setting. However, the push for the inclusion of diverse learners into the general classroom setting has not always been echoed by increased knowledge, collaboration, and preservice experiences for future teachers. While Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and its amendments have enabled students with disabilities to be more included, general classroom teachers still sometimes feel inadequately prepared to successfully meet the needs of diverse students in the classroom.

Teachers' beliefs about inclusion influence their beliefs about their own ability to educate diverse learners in the general education setting. Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, and Scheer (1999) found a positive relationship between teachers' understanding of inclusion and the belief that one can successfully educate a child with disabilities. Another study recognized that teachers' attitudes about inclusion influence their educational choices and behavior (Kamens, Loprete, & Slostad, 2000). For example, teachers' negative feelings about the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting have an negative effect on teacher behaviors, student learning and the overall success of inclusive practices.

Numerous studies have reported that as many as 75% of the teacher participants believed that inclusion would not succeed and were not in favor of inclusion (Monahan, 1997; Ross & Wax, 1993; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Other studies have surveyed teachers regarding inservice training needs. Consistently, teachers report the need for more training in accommodating and adapting instruction/assignments, assessment

techniques, variety of instructional strategies to meet the needs of children with disabilities (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Buell et al., 1999; Kamens et al., 2000). In addition to communicating the need for further training, general educators also reported the need for more administrative support and collegiality among general and special educators. The majority of research conducted in the past 20 years related to teacher perceptions of inclusion has primarily used likert scales to acquire information from teachers. While this information is convenient, inexpensive, and lends itself to reaching larger populations, it is limited in scope. By conducting focus groups and interviews researchers can gain a better understanding of the teachers' context, their perceptions and feelings reported in their own words. It is clear from the research that further qualitative investigation of the perceived barriers associated with inclusion is paramount.

Teachers' beliefs and attitudes about educating students with disabilities in the general classroom setting require examination so that schools and teacher preparation programs may start to understand the current challenges within the context of the teachers' classrooms and begin to improve preservice and inservice education. Decades after federal mandates requiring students to be educated in the least restrictive environment, general classroom teachers continue to express frustration with their perceived lack of support from administrators and special education staff, as well as concern for their inadequate teacher preparation with regard to including students with disabilities in the general classroom setting. This study examines general educators' perceptions about the current barriers associated with successful implementation of inclusion.

Methods

Participants

This qualitative study focused on the experiences of general educators in a suburban area of a major Midwestern City. All five participants were practicing elementary school teachers and were also members of a Master's Degree cohort in Teacher Leadership in a major research university in the Midwest. Ten teachers taking a summer course in their master's degree cohort initially volunteered to participate. The volunteers were divided into two focus groups. Each focus group was interviewed using a standard set of open-ended questions were derived from the research question: What are general educators' beliefs about current mainstreaming practices? After the initial focus group was conducted, five teachers were selected to participate in follow up interviews and classroom observations. Each of the five teachers met this criteria: 1) currently teaching in a general classroom setting, 2) had experience with students with disabilities in the general classroom setting, and 3) were willing to participate in all subsequent portions of the study. The five teachers selected for the follow-up interviews and classroom observations also represented a range in years of experiences and teaching assignments (see Table 1).

Data Collection

This study was conducted using group interviews (focus groups) and individual interviews. The group interviews focused on general beliefs and attitudes about current practices related to inclusion. For the purpose of this study, the definition of inclusion was any instructional time when students with disabilities were present in the general classroom setting. The open-ended questions included general thoughts and feelings about: 1) inclusion; 2) their level of preparedness related to their teacher education programs; 3) their perceived level of success in educating children with disabilities in the general classroom setting; and 4) their recommendations for improving current practices.

Two to three months after the focus groups were conducted, the five selected teachers

were interviewed individually. Interviews were conducted in the teachers' classrooms and lasted 45-60 minutes. Participants were asked to give more in depth responses to similar questions used with the focus groups. Participants willingly added comments and feelings regarding their experiences with inclusion. The participants' additional stories and discussion enhanced the depth of understanding, as well as provided context and clarity.

Data Analysis

Participant responses were analyzed using constant comparison analysis rather than collecting all data before analysis. Constant comparison analysis was used to provide the researcher with emerging themes and notable information during the data collection process. All group and individual interviews were audio recorded. Audio recordings and transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions and to aide in analysis and synthesis of the data collected. Data was triangulated using member checks (verifying information with the participants) for the purpose of accurate documentation of their responses. Participants were not asked to corroborate the researcher's analysis.

Results

The general classroom teachers selected to participate in this qualitative study revealed common challenges within their classroom contexts that inhibited their success in educating children with disabilities in the general classroom setting. Based on patternst that emerged from the data collected, the following themes are examines: 1) lack of administrative support, 2) teachers' perceived lack of support from special educators and support staff, and 3) teachers' lack of sufficient preparation in their preservice programs.

Lack of Administrative Support

The participants in this study were candid regarding their feelings about administrative support related to inclusion. Unanimously, the teachers felt that they lacked adequate planning and collaboration time. Specifically, teachers discussed the lack of planning and collaboration time, as well as a lack of instructional time to cover all the additional requirements in the curriculum. One teacher, who had 19 years of experience, expressed her frustration with the unrealistic expectations for their allotted instructional time. She said, "Through the years, we have to now teach computers, character ed., and manners. The lower ones (students) are so needy. It's hard. It's tough. Never enough time…" Another teacher with six years of teaching experience said he felt like providing the extra accommodations in the classroom was "time-consuming." A sixth grade teacher with 9 years of experience, reported that trying to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the general classroom setting "eats up your time." She felt that there was not adequate time to plan and teach. One teacher reiterated the same sentiment of the other teachers by saying, "More time, less kids."

In addition to feeling that they lacked adequate time to plan and teach, the participants agreed with one another that there was not enough administrative support to successfully teach a wide range of learners. The predominant area of concern was with unrealistic expectations and job responsibilities. The topic of job responsibility triggered strong responses from three of the five teachers. One teacher said that the administrators at her school "expected a lot of us as regular education teachers. I'm trying not to label the kids or anything, but throwing all these kids in our classrooms and expecting us to control our 30 or whatever's in your classroom and add four or five more when we have all this stress already and when you have no idea what their abilities or disabilities are yet…We need the help. People

can't just throw'em in there and leave!" One of the other participants that taught at the same school said that there were "no workshops for the past three years…They (the administrators) don't train us. Central Auditory Processing? No clue what that means!" The teacher with 13 years of experience responded, "No district training. No workshops for mainstreaming. Experience is on-the-job training." The teacher with the most teaching experience said, "No district funding or workshops." She reported that she acquired all of her knowledge and strategies on her own time and budget. The teacher that did have opportunities to go to workshops or inservice training said that they were a waste of time. She described workshops as "expensive, time-consuming, and not worth the hassle."

Lack of Support From Special Education Staff

The teachers were critical of the support they lacked from the administration in their particular schools. Teachers also expressed disappointment with the poor quality of assistance and support they received from special education support staff in their classrooms. Three of the five teachers reported that they felt that most of the burden of planning instructional activities and grading assignments was placed on the general classroom teacher. One teacher reported that the classroom teacher was unfairly responsible for making accommodations in the classroom.

> I had this autistic boy. She [the special education teacher] was giving me things to do. I have 23 other bodies in that room. I can't take this boy out in the hallway and brush him! Which was one of her suggestions. When he has excess energy say, "Here's a stack of books. I need this stack of books transferred over to here." Could you do that for me? No! I can't do that. Maybe one-on-one in your office. I can't, as a classroom teacher, individualize to that degree with that special kid.

The participants viewed the current practices of special education support staff as falling short of what they considered within the job description of the support staff. One teacher reported that it wasn't uncommon for the special education teacher in her room to sit at the back table and work on tasks unrelated to her classroom. She said, "Person comes in and usually sits in back and grades papers from another class or makes out a shopping list." Another teacher expressed her frustration with the special education teacher leaving the classroom for various reasons. She said, "Every day that resource teacher should have something to do. Not just me (general educator) teaching the lesson and her leaving the classroom because there was quote, 'nothing for me to do.'" Later, this same teacher captured the other participants' concerns in one quote:

> The teacher that's in the room with you will just leave you. And you're stuck and you're there. You have to stay in the classroom. You have 35 kids in the class after *they're* (students with disabilities) put in there. And they go. Your hands are full, extremely. Um. You plan everything. I feel like you plan everything. And the teacher, the other teacher…and I'm not saying all resource teachers are this way, but the resource teacher should have to plan with you.

Not only did these general educators feel that there was an unequal distribution of responsibilities and duties, but they also expressed a definite tension between the general and special educators within schools. One teacher reported that it was a "constant power struggle" between the general and special education teachers. Some of the issues associated with the power struggle included unequal distribution of duties, but also ownership of students and access to information. Two teachers compared the special education department at their school to a "secret branch of the government." This comment illuminated the issue of access to information *and* ownership of students. They said the special education

teachers "are privy to so much, but like you said, who's responsible for *their* kids?" There were definite issues with claiming responsibility for certain groups of students while dismissing responsibility for others. Additionally, there was a sense that general education was more important than special education. One teacher said, "*We're* the backbone. *Their* kids are in *our* classrooms. *Their* kids are on field trips with *us*." This issue of ownership of students with disabilities in the general education setting was expressed consistently among participants.

Lack of Preservice Preparation

Aside from the barriers present in their work environments, the participants also voiced serious concern about their insufficient preservice preparation. The teachers unanimously agreed that the "one required course" in special education for general educators was "worthless" and contained "mostly terminology." When asked if the teachers felt prepared to teach diverse learners, one teacher emphatically said, "College did not prepare me in any way, shape, or form." All five participants said that the "one required course" did not teach them how to differentiate instruction, make accommodations in the classroom, or work with special education support staff. This reported lack of requisite skills and knowledge negatively affected their ability to successfully meet the educational needs of students with disabilities in the general classroom setting.

The candid responses from the participants illuminate the continued perceived barriers to educating students with disabilities in the general classroom setting. Not only do general education teachers feel that they lack the needed support from administrators and special education staff, but they also feel ill-prepared to meet the needs of a diverse population. The beliefs about the current challenges of meeting the needs of all students requires attention from the education community.

Discussion

The importance of studying teachers' beliefs about current barriers to successfully including students with disabilities in the general classroom setting rests in the impact of these beliefs on teacher behavior in the classroom. In theory, most of the participants agreed that inclusion was a positive educational placement and that both students with and without disabilities benefited from being in the same classroom. However, the teachers in this study do not favor inclusion, in its current practices, because they feel unprepared to meet the demands and responsibilities.

It is important that the educational community acknowledges the validity of classroom teachers' daily challenges. By increasing the level of support (from administrators and special education staff), available inservice training, and improved preservice preparation, research indicates that teachers' attitudes tend to improve and teacher efficacy increases (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Bender, Vail, & Scott, 1995; Brownell & Pajares, 1996);

Teacher preparation programs carry a significant responsibility to adequately educate future teachers so that they not only have the knowledge and skills, but also the classroom experiences to support successfully meeting the needs of all students in the general classroom setting. At a time when school improvement models are more inclusive approaches to educating all students, the preparation programs of the participants in this study did not adequately prepare these general educators to teach in inclusive classrooms. General education and special education programs have the obligation to improve their preservice programs to address the significant needs of general classroom teachers. The main focus of schools of education should be to provide a more collaborative, diverse preservice experience that directly addresses the important concerns voiced by current classroom teachers.

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Author's Note

Dr. Wendy Fuchs is an assistant professor at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Her research interests include teacher beliefs and attitudes, and improved general and special educator preparation.

Tables

Table 1

Teacher	Grade Taught	Subjects Taught	Years of Experience	Number of Students
Teacher 1	6th grade	Social Studies/Reading	6 years	35 students
Teacher 2	6th grade	Social Studies/Reading	9 years	37 students
Teacher 3	6th grade	Social Studies/Reading	13 years	35 students
Teacher 4	2nd grade	All subjects	19 years	23 students
Teacher 5	2nd grade	Math/Science	22 years	27 students