

Inclusion and Challenging Behaviors: Greek General Educators' Perspectives

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Abstract

Research evidence from several educational systems indicates that students with developmental disabilities who exhibit challenging behaviors are in the bottom of the agenda as candidates for inclusion. The present investigation of the perspectives of 85 Greek teachers in primary education indicates that they are in need of training that it will enable them to deal with the presence of a student with challenging behaviors in their classroom and that it will assist them to overcome their concerns about the impact of inclusion of students with challenging behaviors on their time and emotional well-being, the routine of the class, the peer acceptance and the educational progress of the student with challenging behaviors. The implications for training are briefly discussed.

Key words: inclusion, challenging behaviors, self-management.

In the last decade the trend towards inclusion became vigorous on an international scale (Forlin, 1997; Yuen & Westwood, 2001). The implication of this is that more inexperienced and unprepared general education teachers are coming into contact with challenging behaviors (Hastings, Remington, & Hopper, 1995), which impede the flow of learning in the classroom and require considerable amount of teachers' time, while they have to focus on the achievement of good academic results (Daniels, 1998).

In many instances, inclusion has occurred without an adequate understanding of the implications for the general education teachers (Evans, & Lunt, 2002; Goodfellow, 1990), since the primary focus was on promoting the principles and the ideals related with inclusion (Evans & Lunt, 2002) and not on scrutinizing the teachers' concerns about the presence of students with challenging behaviors in their classrooms.

General teachers' attitudes

It is widely accepted that the success of inclusion schemes depends on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (e.g. Chow & Winzer, 1992; Hayes & Gunn, 1988; Hastings & Oakford, 2003; Minke, Baer, Deemer, & Griffin, 1996; Olson, Chalmers & Hoover, 1997; Williams & Algozine, 1977; Wood, 1995) and on the sophistication of their skills (Koegel, Harrower, & Koegel, 1999; Rock, Rosenberg & Carran, 1995; Wood, 1995).

Although teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are positive (e.g. European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2001; Evans, & Lunt, 2002; Katz & Mirenda, 2001; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Yuen & Westwood, 2001) research evidence from Australia (Forlin, 1997), E. U. (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2001; Evans, & Lunt, 2002), Honk Kong (Yuen & Westwood, 2001) and US (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Semmel, Abernathy, Butera, & Lesar, 1991) indicates that teachers feel insecure and ill-equipped¹ (Kennedy,

¹ The lack of relevant skills drives teachers to emotion focusing rather than to behavior focusing interventions. Characteristic are the statements of Australian teachers (Forlin, 1997) who report that in order to cope with the stress associated with challenging behaviors they try to maintain a sense of humour, develop other interests outside the school, and look on the bright side of the things.

Shukla & Fryxell, 1997; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Shinn, Powell-Smith, Good & Baker, 1997; Smith, 2000; Vaughn, Schumm, Jallard, Slusher, & Saumell, 1996) to cope with the prospect of having a student with challenging behaviors in their own classrooms.

Thus, students with special needs who are less demanding in terms of teachers' time and skills are generally viewed more positively as candidates for inclusion than students with challenging behaviors who are typically rated less positively by samples of teachers (e.g., Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Evans & Lunt, 2002; Forlin, 1997; Soodak, Podell, & Lehman 1998; Yuen & Westwood, 2001) and student-teachers (Hastings & Oakford, 2003). This is understandable if it is taken into account that general teachers are under pressure for the delivery of good academic results.

Actually, the pressure for good academic results impedes the inclusive attempts because it poses such a strain on teachers' time that it leads to the exclusion of students with challenging behaviors from the inclusive settings. For example, in the UK the Education Reform Act of 1988 (Stillman, 1990), the Education Act of 1993 (Simkins, 1994) and the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (Department for Education, 1994) placed greater emphasis on inclusive education. However, the introduction of the National Curriculum in England and Wales, which increased emphasis on measuring success only in terms of academic performance (Vlachou & Barton, 1994), has had an inhibiting effect on moves towards increased inclusive practice because teachers had to focus increasingly on the students without special needs rather than to those with more specialised and individualised needs (Forlin, 1997). By consequence, in England, in parallel with the increase of the number of included students increased the number of students expelled from school due to their unacceptable behavior (Parsons, 2000). According to Hayden (2000) students with challenging behaviors are six times more likely to be expelled than their peers². Similarly, in the U.S. students with challenging behaviors are at high risk of exclusion from general education settings (Crimmins & Berotti, 1996; National Centre for Educational Statistics, 1997; Riecher, 1990) due to the increase of discipline problems (Daniels, 1998).

Considering all that as well as the lack of relevant training it comes at no surprise that, as Evans & Lunt (2002) suggest, students with challenging behaviors are far away from the top of the agenda as candidates for inclusion.

On the base of that, it was decided to search the general teachers' perspectives in primary schools located in Northern Greece so that training relevant to their perspectives could be devised. For the purpose of the study it has been assumed that the teachers' preferences on categories of special needs and their views towards the impact of inclusion are good predictors of their attitudes towards the inclusion of students with challenging behaviors.

Method

Data were gathered using a self-report questionnaire containing four sections. In the first section, participants were asked for demographic information about themselves, their teaching experience and qualifications and their experience with students with special needs. The second section included five categories of special needs (i.e. movement impairments, developmental disabilities, moderate learning disabilities, challenging behavior, limited self-help and social skills). Participants were asked to classify them in a descending order according to their difficulty for inclusion. The third section included two open questions, which were searching the participants'

² It is worthy to note that all the sixty participants in the survey of Evans & Lunt (2002) unanimously agreed that students with challenging behaviors are the most difficult to include.

views about the major obstacles to inclusion of students with challenging behaviors and the area of special needs, which makes their job more difficult.

The fourth section was based on the Impact of Inclusion Questionnaire (IIQ). This questionnaire, which has been developed by Hastings & Oakford (2003) in order to test the student-teacher attitudes on challenging behavior, is an instrument designed to assess teachers' attitudes across a number of domains towards inclusion of students with challenging behaviours. Its items refer on the following potential impact domains: the Child with Challenging Behavior, Other Children in the classroom, the Teacher, and the School or Classroom Environment. The items in the Child with Challenging Behavior domain include the impact upon: acceptance/rejection by classmates, and their academic development. Items in the Other Children domain include the impact upon: contact time with the teacher, children's behavior problems, and their learning opportunities. Items in the Teacher domain include the impact upon: stress, tiredness, and workload. Finally, items in the School or Classroom Environment domain include the impact upon: classroom routines, parent and community perceptions of the school.

The Greek version was given to a lecturer in English literature, an experienced researcher in behavior analysis and an educational psychologist who concluded that the adaptations made in Greek were consistent with the original text in English.

In the original version of Hastings & Oakford (2003), which was given to student-teachers, each item is rated on a seven points agreement scale ranging from "very strongly agree" to "very strongly disagree". However, considering the pressure on teachers' time two versions were produced in Greek, one with the seven points agreement scale and one in which the range was reduced from seven choices to four (i.e. strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree). Both versions were tested in a pilot scheme with a group of twenty teachers. Each version was given to a group of 10 teachers. Although the distribution of the results was the same the group which replied to the four choices version of the IQQ spent considerably less time than the group which replied to the seven choices version. Thus, it was decided to use the four choices agreement scale.

Sample

One hundred questionnaires were given to teachers in 20 schools of primary education in the area of Northern Greece. There were returned 85 completed. All participants have been trained to work with children of 6-12 years of age while 14 participants have been trained at post-graduated level. Of the total sample, 55 participants were female and 30 were male. Eleven had less than five years of teaching experience, 36 between 6 and 15 years and 38 more than 15. Forty-nine participants had no previous experience of working with children with special needs, and 36 participants had social contact with individuals with special needs (i.e., family members, friends, contacts made through leisure pursuits).

Results

Thirty-nine percent of participants consider that students with challenging behaviors are the most difficult to include. On the other hand 23% consider so the students with developmental disabilities, 19% the students with limited self-help skills and social skills, 15% the students with moderate learning disabilities and 4% the students with the movement impairments. To the open question, which was searching the participants' perception on categories of special needs that make their job more demanding, 52% reported the challenging behaviors, 33% the developmental disabilities and the remaining 15% the limited self-help skills. To the open question, which was searching the factors that impede inclusive attempts, 50% reported their limited interventional skills,

26% the lack of proper training in behavioral interventions, 18% the students' with challenging behaviors non-acceptance by peers and 6% the lack of cooperation with the parents of students with challenging behaviors.

With reference to participants' replies to the IIQ, relationships between demographic variables and IIQ scores were explored. The effects of gender, teaching experience, qualifications and experience with students with special needs were explored using t-tests. No significant differences were observed for any of the IIQ scores. One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests were used to compare the distributions of IIQ scores to a normal distribution. The results of these tests were non-significant, indicating that the data were reasonably normally distributed. Mean scores for participants, are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 - Mean scores on IIQ domains

Strongly disagree (1), Disagree (2), Agree (3) Strongly Disagree (4).

	The behavior problem	Mean/SD		The behavior problem	Mean/SD		
Impact on teacher	Consumes a lot of my time for other students	3.03/.697	Impact on peers	Upsets and distracts The peers	2.76/.811		
	I feel helpless	2.87/1.009		Reduces their learning opportunities and their performance	2.50/.853		
	I do not feel that I am properly trained	2.85/1.036					
	Poses additional stress	2.85/.818					
	Makes me feel emotionally Exhausted	2.75/.911					
	Increases excessively the workload	2.67/.792					
	Impedes me from paying attention to other children	2.58/.82				Puts them in danger	2.4/.915
	Makes me feel physically exhausted	2.58/.806					
	Makes me feel nervous	2.28/.904					
	Makes me feel incompetent	2.10/.900					
Impact on school/class environment	Disturbs the routine of the class	2.92/.703	Impact on student	Impedes access to learning	2.89/.938		
	Disturbs the normal function of the school	2.30/.845		Leads to his/her rejection from peers	2.82/.847		
	Gives a negative impression for the school	1.80/.842		Gives a show to the audience, which reinforces behavior	2.65/.924		

As shown in Table 1, participants consider the impact of inclusion on time, their emotional well-being, the routine of the class and the availability of learning opportunities for the student with challenging behaviours and his/her acceptance by peers as the most serious problems they have to

face. On the other hand, elements that would show a negative attitude towards inclusion in general (e.g. the impact of inclusion on the community perception of their school) as serious problems.

Implications for training

The evidence gained has important implications for the development of training, which would allow participants to overcome their concerns by enabling them to deal effectively with challenging behaviors. Several researchers (e.g. Koegel, et al., 1999; Pelham et al., 2000; Turnbull, Wilcox, Stowe & Turnbull 2001) suggest that as long as teachers are not assisted to implement appropriate behavioral interventions then the placement of students with challenging behaviors in full-inclusion classrooms will risk to fail. However, following the results of the present investigation, intervention should be as well relevant to the teachers' needs and not just appropriate. Participants need procedures, which are not time-consuming, do not impede the flow of learning in the classroom and on the meantime increase the skills and the social status of the student with challenging behaviors. As the following analysis indicates, self-management, which is an effective strategy of behavioral intervention towards challenging behaviors (Callahan & Rademacher, 1999; Hughes, Korinek, & Gorman, 1991; Koegel, et al., 1999; Todd, Horner, & Sugai, 1999; Todd, Tofflemoyer & Horner, 2003), satisfies these criteria.

Appropriateness of self-management

In essence, self-management is independent use of appropriate skills across contexts, people, and materials (Todd et al., 2003). It teaches the students to recognize their own behavior and to identify, which behaviors to increase and decrease and recording and reinforcing their own behaviors (Koegel, Koegel & Parks, 1995). It includes self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-delivered prompts and rewards as strategies for improving students' competence (Hughes et al., 1991; Hughes, 1992; Hughes, Harner, Killian, & Niharos, 1995; Hughes, Hugo, & Blatt, 1996; Mank & Horner, 1998) and applies to all areas such as completing a task, monitoring appropriate behavior, and recording events (Hughes et al., 1991; Kanfer & Karoly, 1982; Shimabukuro, Parker, Jenkins, & Edelen-Smith, 1999). It has been tested successfully in inclusive settings (e.g. Falk, Dunlap & Kern, 1996; Koegel, Koegel, Hurley & Frea, 1992; Maag, Rutherford, & DiGangi, 1992) as well as in home, and community settings (Callahan, Rademacher, & Hildreth, 1998; Christian & Poling, 1997) for the remediation of a variety of challenging behaviors like emotional disorders (Dunlap, et al., 1995; Shear & Shapiro, 1993), hyperactivity (Reiber & McLaughlin, 2004) disruptive behavior of autistic students (Barry & Singer, 2001), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Barry & Messer, 2003; Hinsaw & Melnick, 1992; Shapiro, DuPaul & Bradley-Klug, 1998; Shimabukuro, Parker, Jenkins, & Edelen-Smith, 1999; Slusarek, Velling, Bunk, & Eggers, 2001). There are no negative side effects reported and its' only limitation is that it seems applicable mainly to students with some level of communicative ability (Whitaker 2002).

Self-management and the participants' needs

From the search of the relevant literature it emerges that self-management presents a promising response to the participants' needs for the following reasons: First, it poses minimal demands on teacher's time (Frith & Armstrong, 1986; Todd, et al., 2003) it does not interrupt the flow of learning in the classroom, it is relatively simple to implement, and it quickly reaches a point in which little supervision is required (Dunlap, Dunlap, Koegel, & Koegel, 1991). Second, by shifting behavior management responsibility from the teacher to the student enables the teacher to concentrate on the lesson (Dunlap, et al., 1991; King-Sears & Cummings, 1996; Reid, 1996).

Third, it improves peer interactions of students with challenging behaviors (Falk, Dunlap, &

Kern, 1996), and their social and play skills (e.g. Koegel, et al., 1992; Koegel & Frea, 1993; Stahmer & Schreibman, 1992). Finally, the performance of the self-managed behaviors increases desirable behaviors (Todd, et al., 1999) and promotes the self-determination and the academic independence of the student (Barry & Messer, 2003; Dunlap, et al., 1991; Frith & Armstrong, 1986; King-Sears & Cummings, 1996; Reid, 1996).

Discussion

In harmony with previous research, which has been carried out in other countries, students with special needs who are less demanding in terms of teachers' time and skills are viewed more positively as candidates for inclusion than students with challenging behaviors.

Following the results of the present investigation this preference can be attributed to the participants' limited skills and to their concerns about the impact of inclusion on their emotional well-being and time, the flow of learning in the classroom and the restriction of opportunities for learning and peer acceptance for the student with challenging behaviors. Considering too, that participants are not concerned about the impact of inclusion of students with challenging behaviors on the community perception of their school it can be suggested that the promotion of inclusion is not a matter of prejudices but of the development of relevant interventional skills that would enable participants to deal effectively with the presence of a student with challenging behaviors in their classroom.

Furthermore search of the relevant literature indicated that self-management presents a promising response to the participants' needs. Thus, training in self-management should assist them both in overcoming their concerns and in becoming effective inclusionists of students with challenging behaviors. Follow-up research will show whether training in self-management decreased the participants' concerns and successfully promoted full inclusion of students with challenging behaviors.

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