

**SPECIAL EDUCATION TRAINING AND PRESERVICE TEACHERS**

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*The role of general education teachers is becoming critical for students with special needs. The purpose of this study was to obtain the perceptions of preservice teachers in order to prepare them for inclusive classrooms. Participants included graduate and undergraduate students (n=248) from two different universities. Results found experiences with students with disabilities did not enhance participants' attitude to support inclusion. However, taking courses in special education did. Recommendations were made on further programming for preparing preservice general education teachers for inclusionary settings.*

Today the inclusion of children with disabilities in the general classroom has progressed from a theoretical argument to widespread phenomena. Underlying the process of inclusion is the assumption that the general classroom teacher has a certain amount of knowledge about special education, its students, teaching techniques, and curriculum strategies. Another assumption is the classroom teacher is willing to change from the old to the new paradigm.

Given the perceived importance of general education teachers, it is critical to prepare the preservice teacher for an inclusive/diverse classroom. In countries such as the United States, provisions of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 requires at least one general education teacher to participate in Individual Education Plan committees for students with disabilities. This demand has created even more urgency for the training of general education teachers. However, many teacher-training programs struggle to add even one special education course into their program.

The inclusion movement occurred at the same time as an enduring school reform. After the publication of *A Nation At Risk in the 1980's*, pressure to integrate children with disabilities in general education can be traced to three general sources: a) published arguments and commentary of professional educators, known as the *Regular Education Initiative* (REI), which dates back to the early 1960's; b) national organizations, particularly the National Association of State Board of Education (NASBE); and, c) legislation and litigation. All of these can be traced back to the *Normalization* trend that began in Scandinavia in the 1950's and spread throughout most western nations, including the US and Canada. This trend also influenced the *deinstitutionalization* movement in the US (Blatt, 1969 cited in Price, Mayfield, McFadden, & Marsh, 2001).

Inclusion is a term which expresses commitment to educate each child to the maximum extent appropriate. It involves bringing the support services to the child rather than moving the child to the services. In the United States the IDEA of 2004 requires children with disabilities be educated *to the maximum extent appropriate in the Least Restrictive Environment* (LRE). The rationale is if we are to allow children with special needs to live ordinary lives, then they need to be placed in a regular education classroom (Arnold & Dodge, 1994).

To date approximately 80% of students with learning disabilities receive the majority of their instruction in the general education classroom. The U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Rehabilitative Services indicates that between 1986 and 1996 the percentage of students with disabilities educated in regular classrooms increased by 19 percent (U. S. Department of

Education, 1996). A number of studies (Buysse, Wesley, Keyes, & Bailey, 1996; Devore & Hanley-Maxwell, 2000) have reported on the relationship among teachers' beliefs, comfort levels, and degree of a child's disability. However, although inclusionary practices assume a high moral purpose, the implementation of the practice frequently goes awry. To give a few examples, services are not provided, resources are not always available, and truly individualized programs are not designed to meet student needs (Zera & Seitsinger, 2000). As a result, despite clear mandates of IDEA, inclusion continues to be a controversial practice and constantly debated among theorists and practitioners (Brantlinger, 1997; Keogh & MacMillan, 1996). Given the critical role of the general education teacher, an understanding of their perceptions is necessary to best prepare them to have active roles in the implementation of their student' IEPs.

### Methodology and Findings

A survey consisting of four parts was developed by these researchers. Part one related to demographical data, second part included 12 Likert Scale questions, section three and four each included one question. The surveys were presented to preservice teachers (n=248) education classes in two colleges. The majors of these students include early childhood (9.7%), elementary education (69.8%), general studies (.8%), special education (5.6%), and other (12%). The following domains were examined with this study: graduate vs. undergraduate, course work in special education, and contact/experience with people with disabilities.

Results of this survey from preservice teachers found experiences with students with special needs did not enhance the participants' disposition toward inclusion. However, coursework in special education did:  $F(3, 236) = 7.77, p = .000$ . Descriptive data indicated learning disabilities (44.4%) as the preferred category of children to teach, for both graduate and undergraduate (44.8%). Deaf/blind category for undergraduate (23.8%) and multiple disabilities for graduate students were the least preferred category (18.8%).

Table 1.  
Categories of Children with Disabilities Undergraduates and Graduates Prefer to Work With

Type of Disability	Undergraduate		Graduate	
	Most	Least	Most	Least
Autism	8.8%	4.4%	10.0%	14.0%
Deaf-Blind	0.0%	23.8%	6.0%	10.0%
Hearing Impairment	8.3%	0.8%	13.7%	0.0%
Mental Disability	1.5%	2.3%	6.1%	8.2%
Orthopedic Impairment	10.5%	0.8%	15.1%	3.8%
Traumatic Brain Injury	1.5%	17.7%	0.0%	10.9%
Communication Disorder	7.2%	1.4%	3.8%	0.0%
Emotional Disability	12.4%	4.4%	7.5%	1.9%
Learning Disability	44.4%	2.1%	44.8%	0.0%
Multiple Disabilities	0.0%	17.2%	2.1%	18.8%
Other Health Impairment	3.8%	15.3%	2.0%	20.0%
Visual Impairment	6.7%	6.0%	7.7%	0.0%

Participants were also asked to identify the top three most important areas they needed to learn more about. Through stratifying, six categories emerged: disability categories, teaching methods, laws and regulations, other, resources, and parenting.

Disability categories were identified as the highest frequency area. Within that category autism had the highest frequency for training purposes. However, it was interesting to note that autism was identified as a preferred category by only 8.8 percent of undergraduates and 10 percent of graduates. Participants agreed (95%) to the benefit of inclusion for children with disabilities and the practice of inclusion for children with disabilities (88%).

Given the preliminary results, it seems formal course work in special education has a positive impact on preservice teachers' disposition towards inclusion.

**Table 2.**  
**Participants Perception of their Training Needs**

Clusters	(n=248)	Frequency
Disability Categories		316
Teaching Method		139
Laws and Regulations		46
Other		32
Resources		26
Parenting		13

Note: Participants had identified the top three most important areas, therefore the total does not add up to total number of sample.

**Table 3.**  
**Percent Agreements/Disagreements with Inclusion Related Issues** (n=248)

	Agree*	No Opinion	Disagree**
A. Children with special needs/disabilities should be integrated with children without disabilities.	88.0%	3.7%	8.3%
B. Children with special needs/disabilities who are in integrated programs demonstrate higher levels of social play and more appropriate social interactions.	78.9%	16.1%	4.9%
C. Normally developing children will benefit from observing and interacting with children with special needs/disabilities.	91.4%	5.3%	3.3%
D. Prior experience with children with special needs/disabilities can provide normally developing children a better understanding of disabilities.	95.0%	3.3%	1.6%
E. Parents of normally developing would be concerned if children with special needs/disabilities are placed in their children's classroom.	45.0%	22.5%	32.5%
F. Parents of children with special needs/disabilities would be concerned because their children's needs could be overlooked in a regular child development/childcare center.	57.0%	20.2%	22.7%
G. As a result of integrating children with special needs/disabilities, teachers can become more aware of needs for all children in their program.	85.5%	5.4%	9.1%
H. Children with special needs/disabilities can disrupt the classroom routine for children without disabilities.	55.0%	19.6%	25.5%
I. Children of minority background are more likely to be placed in a special education classroom.	33.7%	30.0%	36.3%
J. General education teachers need to be compensated for their time with children with special needs/disabilities.	24.3%	29.8%	45.8%
K. Integrating children with and without disabilities creates additional burdens for the general education staff.	40.5%	17.8%	41.7%
L. Children with disabilities need to be educated in separate classrooms/schools.	12.5%	14.6%	73.0%

\*Strongly agree and agree are reported together.

\*\*Strongly disagree and disagree are reported together.

### Implications for Practice

Today's educators are working diligently to include students with disabilities in the regular classroom environment. This study indicated that preservice teachers will benefit from formal training and curriculum in special education. Findings of this study support the earlier results in this area (e.g. Gemmell-Crosby & Hanzlik, 1994; Bender, Vail, and Scott, 1995). A study conducted by Bender, Vail, & Scott (1995) also found a positive correlation between teachers' attitudes and the number of courses taken in teaching students with disabilities. Other studies have concluded that inclusion can contribute toward improved academic achievement, social interaction, and behavioral skills for students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers (Gemmell-Crosby & Hanzlik, 1994).

Policy makers need to encourage and support general education teachers to obtain courses relevant to special education. In service training for special education teachers will also assist them to work effectively with general education teachers as well. Both parties: general and special education teachers, need to take the ownership of educating students with disabilities. Policy makers and legislative body can pave the way in reaching the goal of equal access for all.

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