

## HOW TEACHERS' ATTITUDES IMPACT THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reviews several factors impacting a teachers' attitude toward an inclusive classroom. A teacher's attitude is determined to be a major factor in the growth and development of students with disabilities. It is suggested that to support the increase of students with disabilities in the general classroom setting, a shift in the demeanor of teachers is necessary. Educators must examine policy and strive to enforce robust measures. Identifying concerns, providing resources and support are essential factors in improving the success of students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom.

**KEYWORDS:** Inclusion, Disability, Teachers' Attitude

### INTRODUCTION

Learning disabilities in the past amongst school age children was marginalized and education occurred in segregated settings from typical developing peers. Students with disabilities have been excluded from accountability systems and omitted from general education curriculum access, an obligatory requirement. Special education practices have been reviewed for inconsistencies in educational opportunities. Students with disabilities often lag in the areas of postsecondary education, employment, and independent living when compared to their stereotypically developing peers. Research acknowledges that students with defined disabilities who are educated in the general setting, commonly perform better on reading and writing assessments when compared to students who are educated in isolated or special education classrooms. In addition to the academic setting, inclusion can occur in non-academic settings such as physical education and elective classes, the cafeteria, or media center, all of which may assist in the development of social skills for students with disabilities. These settings provide a space for interaction with developing peers.

Research supports that educational inequities may be due to a teachers' negative attitude toward inclusion. This can result in a damaging effect on students. Students with disabilities facing challenges in the classroom due to disparities, may warrant additional support compared to typically developing peers.

### METHODOLOGY/LITERATURE

According to the 41st Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (USDOE, 2019) in fall 2017, 63.1% of public-school students with disabilities ages 6-21 spent at least 80% of their school day in the general education setting, with 18.3% educated in the general education setting between 40% and 79% of the school day. Overall, 13.4% of students with disabilities spend less than 40% of their day in general education, and 5.1% were educated in even more restrictive environments such as private placement, homebound, or hospital settings (USDOE, 2019). Students with multiple-disabilities (MD) and students with an intellectual disability (ID) spend the least amount of time in the general education setting. Nearly 50% of these students spend less than 40% of the school day in the general education setting, with more than 25% of students with MD educated in the most restrictive settings outside of the school. The USDOE calculates the percentage of time students spend in general education by taking the number of hours the student spends inside the general education classroom and dividing by the total number of hours in the school day. This number is then multiplied by 100.

Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) appeals for greater inclusion, as well as more successful postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires students to leave high school college and career ready (USDOE, n.d.). To increase the rate of inclusion, teachers should carefully examine the mandates of ESSA and IDEA. Furthermore, teachers must also determine if students are receiving Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) while being educated in the most appropriate setting with well developing peers to the greatest extent appropriate.

To monitor the implementation of IDEA, the USDOE requires states to report on progress in their special education programs through the State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report. For IDEA part B, there are 20 areas, or indicators, in which states report data on the implementation of components of IDEA. Indicator 5 focuses on LRE and the amount of time students spend in the general education setting. It has three areas of focus:

- Percentage of students who spend at least 80% of the day in the general education setting;
- Percentage of students who spend less than 40% in the general education setting; and,
- Percentage of students who are in other, more restrictive settings.

The goal of Indicator 5 is to increase the rate of inclusion of students in general education and decrease the number of students in more restrictive environments (USDOE, n.d.).

### **Importance of Teachers' Attitude**

Although consensus on a definition has not been reached, many researchers define attitude as one's evaluation, which ranges from positive to negative, towards a psychological object (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007). According to Eagly and Chaiken (2007), attitudes begin in the mind of the individual and cannot exist until an individual encounters the object. Initial negative responses are likely to bring negative responses with the next encounter with the object. Many researchers conclude that attitudes consist of

three components: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. The cognitive component affects the beliefs teachers hold about students with disabilities, while the emotional component shares a teachers' feelings regarding students with disabilities and inclusion. The behavioral component refers to teachers' actions based on their beliefs and feelings (Hutzler et al., 2019).

The demeanors of teachers play a role in the achievement of students with disabilities (Ernest & Rogers, 2009). In order to teach students with diverse learning needs, teachers must be dedicated and capable. Because the student-teacher relationship is an integral part of learning, teacher attitudes are a vital factor in the success of students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Ernest & Rogers, 2009). When teachers have insufficient preservice preparation, in addition to a lack of knowledge of inclusive practices, there is a feeling of inadequacy regarding teaching students in inclusive classrooms (Hernandez et al., 2016). Thus, in order to successfully implement inclusive practices, perspectives of teachers toward inclusion should be reviewed.

Although many teachers understand the benefits of inclusion, inclusive education is not always delivered effectively (Cook et al., 2007). Research shows that there are teachers who do not provide the necessary accommodations and modifications that students with disabilities need in order to be successful, but teachers with greater knowledge of inclusion generally have more positive attitudes and beliefs that they can effectively teach students with disabilities (Cook et al., 2007). When teachers hold negative attitudes toward inclusion, the results can lead to low expectations and poor performance for students with disabilities. In turn, low expectations may result in reduced learning opportunities for students, creating a lack of confidence in their ability, which may lead to lower student achievement. (Cameron & Cook, 2013). There are many factors that determine whether teachers' attitudes are positive or negative, and these attitudes may affect whether students with disabilities are successful in the general education classroom.

Teachers' attitudes are derived from a social constructivist theory, which states that reality is subjective and based on individuals' interactions with society. Based on Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, a teachers' knowledge of disabilities is the result of social interactions and how those interactions are interpreted (Qi et al., 2017). Vygotsky developed his social constructivist view of teaching and learning around the notion that knowledge is constructed through interactions within a person's environment. Vygotsky believed that knowledge is constructed through both individual and social internalization. These attitudes can be a reflection on the individual teacher, the school climate, or the overall societal culture regarding students with disabilities (Carrington, 1999). Social constructivism is a theoretical framework for how teachers develop attitudes toward inclusion. It is through societal influences that teachers develop attitudes toward inclusion, and these attitudes are based on several factors.

## **Factors That Effect Teachers' Attitude Disability and Experience**

Research acknowledges that the more severe the disability, the less willing teachers were to include students (Cook, 2001; Hastings & Logan, 2013). In most cases, teachers held positive attitudes toward teaching students with milder disabilities with more negative attitudes toward students with more significant disabilities (Giffing et al., 2010). For many teachers, the more severe the students' disabilities, the more difficult it was to include the students in general education. Teachers stated that the more the general education curriculum was modified, the less accessible it became. In addition, teachers were less willing to include students with more severe disabilities because of concerns regarding inappropriate behaviors (Pierson & Howell, 2013). However, when teachers have experience in working with individuals with disabilities, they are more likely to have positive attitudes in teaching students with disabilities.

## **Knowledge and Preparation**

Knowledge of student disabilities, along with preparation in inclusive practices, were determining factors in teachers' views of inclusion (Cook, 2001; Fuchs, 2010). Teachers conveyed their lack of knowledge of the characteristics of specific disabilities. According to research, teachers with the least amount of knowledge and preparation in teaching students with disabilities were more likely to hold negative attitudes; however, those with high levels of knowledge and preparation usually reported positive attitudes toward inclusion (Schultz & Simpson, 2013). For example, Fuchs (2010) found that teachers believed they did not have the preservice preparation needed to educate students with disabilities in the general education setting. When teachers received adequate preparation, they were more confident in their abilities to educate students with disabilities (Brownell & Parjares, 1999; Fuchs, 2010). Although research shows that most teachers are open to training, many had limited preparation and were not adequately equipped to teach students with disabilities (Cook, 2001). In a 2006 study by Carter and Hughes, findings indicate that teachers believe there is a need to increase their knowledge and understanding of disability-related issues so they are better prepared to meet the needs of students who need significant supports. When teachers have a lack of knowledge and preparation in inclusive pedagogy, there can be a negative impact on student academic success (Fuchs, 2010).

## **Academics**

Many teachers are concerned with the academic challenges presented by students with disabilities. For example, teachers expressed concerns about whether students with disabilities can pass high-stakes state exams. Including students with disabilities can be perceived by teachers as an infringement on performance of the high performing peers. These teachers stated that it is difficult to differentiate instruction for diverse learners (Fuchs, 2010; Lalvani, 2013). Curriculum and instruction emerged as a relevant factor for teachers. For example, Dymond and colleagues (2007) found that several teachers believe that the general education curriculum would be too challenging for students with disabilities. Teachers believe the curriculum is not appropriate for the cognitive ability of students with disabilities. These concerns regarding students' cognitive ability and teacher self-efficacy led teachers to question whether students with disabilities can be successful when accessing the general education curriculum.

## **Resources and Supports**

Teachers' perceptions of resources and supports they receive from school personnel also impacted their attitudes toward inclusion. A few teachers believed they lack time to address the needs of students with disabilities, and that there was limited support from parents, administrators, and specialists (Carter & Hughes, 2006). A lack of resources and support often leads to teacher frustrations in inclusive classrooms (Fuchs, 2010).

## **Peer Interaction**

Research conveys the importance of inclusion is recognized by teachers; however, some teachers expressed concern over how the inclusion of students with disabilities would affect the social and academic progress of their peers in the classroom (Lalvani, 2013). For example, there were teachers who believed that students with disabilities would be teased or bullied by their peers and would better be served in special education classes. Many teachers questioned whether the needs of diverse learners could be met in general education classes (McHatton & McCray, 2007). Thus, there were teachers who argued that teaching students in special education classes would allow students with disabilities to work at their pace and their academic level (Lalvani, 2013).

## **Demographics**

Demographics, such as experience teaching, education level, age, gender, and marital status, were included in many studies; however, their associations with teacher attitudes toward inclusion were inconsistent. Female teachers had more positive attitudes toward attending professional development to improve their knowledge; however, other studies show that male teachers were more positive (Ernest & Rogers 2009) or there were no differences (Hastings & Logan, 2013). When age was compared to teachers' attitudes, younger teachers had more positive attitudes toward inclusion and felt more supported than their older colleagues (Giffing et al., 2010). There were teachers who had mixed beliefs regarding the segregation of students with disabilities. Generally, younger teachers had more positive attitudes toward inclusion and were more willing to participate in professional development (Giffing et al., 2010). At times, more experienced teachers displayed positive attitudes; however, they were often less willing to participate in professional development (Giffing et al., 2010). When comparing attitudes of teachers with varying education levels, teachers with less education usually had more favorable attitudes, which may suggest that teachers' attitudes may be related to age (Hernandez et al., 2016).

## **Teacher Type**

General education and special education displayed both similarities and differences in their attitudes toward including students with disabilities in general education. When examining views of general education teachers, results were mixed. Although many teachers were positive toward the inclusion of

students with disabilities, special education teachers were generally more supportive of including students in disabilities in general education (Hernandez et al., 2016). Additionally, special education teachers reported that they were selective in choosing a general education teacher for inclusion. Many special education teachers believed that general education teachers resented having students with disabilities in their classes. Heflin and Bulluck, (1999) shared that both the general and special education teachers listed the following barriers to successful inclusion:

Support/training;

- Classes with inappropriate ratios of special education students;
- Inability to meet the academic needs of students;
- Behavior management;
- Planning time to make curriculum modifications; and,
- Common planning time with the instructional team

Many general education teachers had a lack of self-efficacy, which contributed to their concerns regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities. Like teacher types, there are differences in factors that exist between grade levels.

## **Grade Level**

In examining grade levels and associations with teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, studies involving participants of both elementary and secondary grade levels mentioned student disability as a relevant factor in determining teachers' attitudes (Goyena, 2008). Larrivee and Cook (1979) found that as students increase in grade-level, the attitudes of teachers become increasingly negative. Elementary teachers generally had more positive attitudes toward including students with disabilities in general education (Savage & Winke, 1989). This may be due to many secondary teachers having less contact with students with disabilities (Ernest & Rogers, 2009; Savage & Wienke, 1989). Furthermore, day-to-day demands on secondary teachers may play a role in attitudes toward inclusion. For example, secondary teachers teach several groups of students over the course of the day, whereas, elementary teachers usually have the same group of students for the entire day. This arrangement limits the amount of time secondary teachers spend with any one group of students and limits the amount of time secondary teachers have for differentiated instruction. Furthermore, research shows that secondary teachers had concerns regarding instruction, high stakes testing, and curriculum modifications (Pierson & Howell, 2013).

## **DISCUSSION**

Teachers play an essential role in the success of students with disabilities in the general education setting (Ernest & Rogers, 2009; Goyena, 2008; Rizzo & Vispoel, 1992). The research validates a teacher's attitude motivating students with disabilities. Teachers tend to be more supportive of teaching students with milder disabilities, such as learning disabilities, and less supportive of teaching students with behavioral disabilities (Giffing et al., 2010). These findings are consistent with previous

literature that suggests that teachers have more favorable attitudes toward students who have disabilities that are milder. This reluctance of teachers to include students with disabilities may be attributed to a lack of experience in working with students with specific disabilities. Through knowledge and training, teachers may improve their attitude toward working with students with disabilities.

Many teachers did not have knowledge about the characteristics of specific disabilities or the knowledge of inclusion that would allow them to teach students with disabilities in general education successfully (Schultz & Simpson, 2013). Also, there were teachers who questioned how inclusion would affect the academic success of students with disabilities and typically developing peers (Dymond et al., 2007; Lalvani, 2013). This questioning may be due to a lack of understanding of classroom accommodations and curriculum modifications that allow students to access the general education curriculum (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that teachers with training in disabilities and inclusion are more confident in their abilities and have more positive attitudes toward inclusion (Lowrey, Lowrey, et al., 2017). Providing teachers with a greater knowledge of characteristics of disabilities and pedagogy of inclusion through professional development and training allows teachers to assist students in navigating the general education curriculum. Although teachers may face academic challenges, research indicates that inclusion has benefits for students with disabilities.

Research shows that teachers have expressed concerns regarding the interaction of students within diverse classrooms. Teachers were concerned that including students with disabilities would change the pacing of instruction and affect the rate of learning of typically developing peers (Lalvani, 2013). Furthermore, teachers voiced concerns that students with disabilities would be bullied and rejected by their peers (McHatton & McCray, 2007). These findings are consistent with previous research showing mixed attitudes toward the social impact inclusion has on students with disabilities and their typically developing peers. (Cameron & Cook, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, factors have been identified that prohibit teachers from providing quality instruction to students with disabilities in the general education setting. Schools are encouraged to carefully examine classroom settings and engage in opportunities for inclusiveness. Providing professional development for teachers will increase knowledge on how to incorporate positive practices. This measure will better prepare teachers to assist students with disabilities in the general education classroom, thus preparing students for success.

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