6-21-2019

Perceptions of teachers regarding the efficacy of inclusion in primary classroom settings

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PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS REGARDING THE EFFICACY OF INCLUSION IN PRIMARY CLASSROOM SETTINGS

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A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Special Education
at
Rowan University
June 5, 2019

Thesis Advisor: S. Jay Kuder, Ed.D.

Abstract

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PRIMARY CLASSROOM SETTINGS
2018-2019
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Master of Arts in Special Education

Students in the Brick Township School District in Brick, New Jersey are taught in

inclusive classrooms, meaning that students with special needs learn alongside their

typically developing peers. The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of

teachers and their attitudes toward inclusion practices and to examine the factors that

influence those attitudes. Brick School District teachers were invited to respond to an

online questionnaire to share their views on inclusive education. Teachers' attitudes were

discovered to be related to their beliefs regarding school factors, including support from

administration and access to adequate professional development opportunities.

Furthermore, teachers' attitudes were found to be more positive when they had greater

knowledge and training.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In an educational setting, inclusion refers to the practice in which disabled students participate in the normal schooling programs side-by-side with their non-disabled counterparts (Ross-Hill, 2009). Over the last hundred years, however, there has been a lot of controversy around education for disabled children – also referred to as special education. As a result, inclusion has been one of the most debated topics amongst, parents, administrators, policymakers, as well as teachers. Thus, various states and school districts have come up with different programs and practices for inclusion, especially at the elementary level. These practices, apparently, vary not only from one school to the other, but also from one school district or division to the other. Nevertheless, there are a number of attributes that seem to be constantly manifested in classrooms that have successfully implemented inclusion programs. These attributes range from resources availability, training and the quality of educators, as well as the manner in which special and regular education teachers are paired. Previous studies have unanimously suggested that, for inclusion to be effectively and successful implemented, there must be enough resources, planning time must be structured, and teachers, both special and regular, must undergo additional training especially on inclusive practices and programs.

Numerous other studies have been carried out to understanding the perceptions of teachers involved in inclusion programs and practices. Most of these studies seem to argue that teachers' perceptions with regards to inclusion, impacts whether or not implementation and outcome of inclusion are effective and successful. According to De

Boer, Jan Pijl, and Minnaert (2011), educators with the most experience in all-encompassing settings possess more positive assertiveness compared to those teachers with little or no experience in classrooms that are inclusive. Several other studies also seem to assert that inclusive classroom settings often increase academic development and progress of disabled students (Rea & Walther-Thomas, 2002). Undoubtedly, individual schools, as well as school districts vary both in terms of implementation and success of inclusion programs. Furthermore, the amount and level of professional development and training received by teachers with regards to handling and teaching disabled students tend to impact teachers' perception towards inclusion.

To-date, defining the significant components of inclusion programs for disabled students remains an issue of discussion. Education professionals' viewpoints vary in the same way that perceptions regarding the essential features of inclusion programs vary in individual schools and school districts. Those pushing for pullout programs seem to suggest that disabled students need specialized instruction; thus, they assert that special educators should utilize specific knowledge in teaching students (Wang, 2009). On the other hand, those championing inclusion argue that students need not be considered as either being regular or special needs students. Instead, they assert, all students need to be taught based on their learning needs and styles (Sapon-Shevin, 2007). Further, certain education professionals assert that all-encompassing classroom setting is only necessary for certain students and as such, argues that all school settings, especially classroom settings, need to be looked at on the basis of each individual student's needs (Richmond, Aberasturi, Abernathy, Aberasturi, & DelVecchio, 2009).

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Over the last three decades, or thereabout, the number of disabled students participating in inclusion settings has considerably increased. At the onset, this increase in inclusion was considered to be an effort aimed at offering more opportunities for socialization on the part of students with disability. Nevertheless, the continued growth that is still being witnessed today is being attributed to the legislative efforts and requirements that advocate for the reduction of the success gap between non-disabled and students with special needs.

As a result of the consequences of whether or not disabled students show measurable and comparable academic progress, inclusion, which has seen as the most favorable academic setting, continues to be a controversial issue of discussion. In this regard, it is necessary to examine the insights with regards to effectiveness of inclusion, especially in elementary settings, of both general and special education teachers, as well as that of administrators recently or who are currently involved in inclusion programs. While special needs students have a wide variety and quality of services available to them, in this essay, the aim was to examine the elementary classroom and the perceptions of teachers with regards to working in inclusive education settings (Peacock, 2016). This significance of understanding the perceptions of teachers with regards to inclusion is due to the fact that these perceptions, as earlier intimated, influence the quality of teaching, the efficiency of teachers in inclusive classroom settings, as well as the teachers' attitudes towards the students they teach (Gotshall & Stefanou, 2011). When the perceptions of teachers in inclusive classroom settings are understood, individual schools, as well as school districts can offer teachers better opportunities to comprehend joint-teaching, as well as back them when they implement inclusive practices. Additionally, it can be

important in assisting those who want to address shortages in terms of staff, particularly in the special education sector.

How students act, the way they perform in class, reflects on their individual attitudes. This fundamental, and often minimalist attitude can influence how a person relates in a group environment, such as a classroom setting. The attitudes of individual students might be impacted or created by the encounters they have with their educators. As a result, the attributes of an educator, as well as his or her attitude towards the ability or work of their students might affect students themselves, thereby affecting their learning outcomes. In inclusive settings in particular, the attitudes of educators have been targeted mainly due to the association with not only the behavior of students, but also their academic achievements. These attitudes are clearly complex and differ from one educator to the next, and from one region to the next. Often teacher – general or regular teachers, show bias against special needs students because they feel that they are lacking in terms of ability to adequately cater for the needs of these students in their classroom.

According to Berry (2010), the attitudes of teacher with regards to working with special needs students in an all-encompassing classroom environment are multifaceted. Teachers whose perception is positive are considered to always have confidence in their ability to instruct, as well as their efficacy with special needs students who require a revised curriculum, as well as special comprehension. Further, teachers with an attitude that is less favorable often tend to feel that inclusive classroom settings results in a lot of pressure and demand, and as such, believe that special needs students should not be taught in the same classroom environment as non-disabled students. This will accord them the opportunity to get individual instruction.

Teachers, especially those in elementary classroom settings, are, according to Berry (2010), expected to be effective in terms of instruction for all types of students that they might encounter in their teaching environment regardless of what kind the student is, as well as despite the apparent increase in the diversity in classrooms, particularly the increase in the number of special needs students. Educators who are efficient and successful in inclusive teaching settings are ready to handle and teach disabled students, as well as assist all other students in taking responsibility for their own education. Furthermore, Berry (2010) also argues that educators who have positive attitude towards handling and teaching all students in their classes, take charge with regards to assisting each and every student, and in turn, assist each and every student to understand how to take responsibility of their own education.

In order to comprehend the attitudes of teaches towards classrooms that are inclusive, Berry (2010) looked at how pre-service, as well as how new teachers view and consider working with special needs students. He found out that teachers who are in pre-service believed in fair treatment of students, and that new teachers were quite pragmatic. As a result, he recommended academic opportunities that can address the concerns of teachers, as well as the idea of impartiality and objectivity in developing more progressive attitudes with regards to inclusion. Similarly, Fuchs (2010) asserted that the perceptions of general teachers with regards to their teaching duties were impacted by their past duties, expectations, as well as the practices of administrators, with regards to special education. Further, a sizable number of teachers also felt that the duties and expectation resulting from inclusion were not reasonable. They felt that school administrators did not back their efforts in various roles as providers of special learning

services. School administrators can thus play a significant role in ensuring that teachers feel effective, particularly, when they are teaching in inclusive classroom settings. In fact, Waldron, McLeskey, and Redd (2011) has argued that school administrators who offered adequate support to teachers, as well as present them with opportunities for growth and development, assisted such teachers to work better, not only with regular students, but also with special needs students.

According to Ross-Hill (2009) both regular and special educators have positive and attitudes towards inclusive classroom settings. For instance, regular teachers are very confident to work in inclusive settings when offered professional development training that would enable them work with special needs students. In fact, Ross-Hill (2009) noted that elementary educators who had acquired specialized training, more readily welcomed special needs students in their regular classrooms.

The responsibility in inclusive classrooms is often shared between special and regular education teachers. Therefore, there is need for ensuring that no noticeable difference is apparent between a special education, as well as regular education teacher since they not only work in the same classroom, but also work with the same students. A truly inclusive classroom needs to look flawless to the extent that anyone looking in form the outside cannot tell the difference between the two educators. In fact, both teachers have the responsibility of together pulling the students with special needs to the level of the non-disabled students (Nel et al., 2011). In order for this to be achieved, there must be collaboration between these teachers, particularly because it is crucial when lessons for the inclusive class are being planned. It is up to both teachers to master content and be ready and able to teach such an inclusive class as though they were doing it on their own.

It is apparent those sharing instruction duties, as well as collaborating, are efficient practices that ensure success in inclusion settings.

De Boer, Jan Pijl, & Minnaert (2011) asserts that in a setting where there is skepticism and accountability with regards to student outcomes, it is important for there to be positive attitudes. The willingness and attitude of educators, particularly general education teachers, to work not only with special needs students, but also with special needs educations, greatly impacts the role and responsibilities of special needs educators in an inclusion setting. Furthermore, these teacher attitudes, both of regular, as well as special needs teachers, are noticeable, not only to a fellow teacher, but also to students in the inclusive classroom. Therefore, in the event that the teacher displays a positive attitude, Titone asserts that students will be inspired and would most likely be interested in learning.

The main aim of inclusive learning environment is to ensure and guarantee that the needs of students are met, and that they become successful. In fact, this is the daily focus of both special and regular education teachers; their role is to always fulfill the needs of students in the best way possible. Their desire to assist students pushes them to establish relationships with students, which is key in assisting students become successful (Peacock, 2016). This is because by better knowing ones students, the better placed one is with regards to assisting as teachers. However, establishing such relationships, as well as being effective in handling and teaching students is affected or limited by the constraint of time. Therefore, in order for special education and general education teachers to be effective in their instruction, they must be aware of their student's needs and must look for ways and means of satisfying those needs.

The main reason behind the development of inclusion classrooms was to, as

Bauer & Kroeger (2004) assert, was to satisfy the requirements stipulated in the least

restrictive setting regulation. As earlier intimated, settings in inclusion classrooms are

quite different, from one school to another, as well as from one school district to the next.

In fact, some environments are successful, while others are not. At least one reason exists

that explains why some environments are unsuccessful. In most cases however, failure or

ineffectiveness of an inclusion classroom, was due to lack of a clear direction with

regards to who was in charge and of what. Such unpreparedness and confusion makes it

difficult to teach all students, both special needs and general education students (Peacock,

2016).

Research Questions

In order to guide my study, I developed the research questions listed below, which

form the basis for this thesis. Inspiration for the research questions came from different

sources. The main research question was one that I have been reflecting on personally

during my years as a teacher and even more so once I became a special education teacher.

Once I had decided on the focus of my thesis project, I began to review the available

literature in order to learn what other researchers had examined during the course of their

studies. I thought that it was likely that school-related factors, such as time pressures,

would influence teacher attitudes. The literature confirmed this idea and led me to other

factors that also impact teacher attitudes, which was helpful in designing the items on the

questionnaire associated with this question. I also speculated that teachers' experience in

the classroom and knowledge, derived from professional development and pre-service

training, might contribute to the establishment of views regarding inclusion. On that

basis, I developed a research question on that issue. I was also particularly intrigued by the question of whether gender might play a role in the establishment of such attitudes since existing research offered inconsistent findings on this issue. I therefore formulated a research question to that effect. Ultimately, I performed data collection and analysis with a view to answering the principal question and the five associated questions, as listed below:

What are the attitudes of teachers toward inclusion practices?

(a) To what extent does a relationship exist between teacher factors (experience and knowledge) and teacher attitudes toward inclusion practices?

(b) To what extent does a relationship exist between teacher beliefs regarding school factors (school climate, resources, supports) and teacher attitudes toward inclusion practices?

(c) To what extent does a relationship exist between teachers' personal experiences and teacher attitudes toward inclusion practices?

(d) To what extent do teacher attitudes toward inclusion practices differ based on the gender of the teacher?

(e) To what extent do teacher attitudes toward inclusion practices differ based on the school structure (i.e. elementary school, high school or middle school)?

The perceptions and attitudes identified in this study could be beneficial in terms of social influence on teachers, as well as others involved in instructing special needs students. In fact, these findings are important in directing administrators to decisions regarding the most appropriate and effective professional development program for inclusion teachers. Furthermore, it is up to teachers, and other involved stakeholders, to

continue looking for other ways in which schools can address prospects for personal

advancement and social development of students with special needs, is they are to

achieve and realize successful inclusive classroom setting. Furthermore, this study has

helped in finding out the best professional advancement training, which could be used in

facilitating positive teaching settings, teamwork, as well as auspicious outcomes for

students. Institutions of higher learning such as colleges and universities can also benefit

from the findings of this study, especially with regards to enhancing their pre-service

practices, which are crucial in readying such teachers for work altogether. This study also

adds to the education knowledge base, particularly inclusion procedures in elementary

classroom settings. It has offered data that relates to the viewpoints and perceptions of

both special and general educators in an inclusive classroom. Further, by addressing the

self-effectiveness of both teachers – special and general education, in inclusive classroom

environments, this study suggests various best practices. A comprehension of teacher

perspective and understanding with regards to inclusion might result in the development

of schemes that school administrators, as well as for both types of educators, with regards

to collaborating and working together.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

This section reviews past studies on the perceptions of teachers on inclusive

teaching including the factors that influence their attitudes towards it. In an educational

setting, inclusion refers to the practice in which students with disabilities participate in

the regular schooling programs side-by-side with their non-disabled counterparts (Ross-

Hill, 2009). However, there has been a lot of controversy around education for disabled

children – also referred to as special education. Various states and school districts have

come up with different programs and practices for inclusion, especially at the elementary

level. These practices vary not only from one school to the other but from one school

district or division to the other. Nevertheless, some attributes manifest in classrooms that

have successfully implemented inclusion programs. These attributes range from resources

availability, training and the quality of educators, as well as the manner in which special

and regular education teachers are paired. Thus, this section provides a comprehensive

overview of the past findings regarding the inclusive teaching and its effects in education

outcomes and policies aimed at promoting inclusive education.

Numerous studies argue that teachers' perceptions with regards to inclusion

impact whether or not implementation and outcomes of inclusion are effective and

successful. According to De Boer, Jan Pijl, and Minnaert (2011), educators with the most

experience in all-encompassing settings demonstrate positive attitudes towards inclusive

education compared to those with little or no experience in classrooms that are inclusive.

The exploratory study, which that entailed an analysis of 26 studies on the attitudes of

teachers towards inclusive education showed that a majority of teachers hold negative

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views towards inclusive learning in primary schools. The perceptions were attributed to lack of training on how to manage inclusive education programs and little experience with students with learning disabilities. Thus, De Boer, Jan Pijl, and Minnaert (2011) concluded that stakeholders should develop support programs that will equip teachers with adequate skills to manage inclusive learning models to improve their perceptions towards it.

Rea and Walther-Thomas (2002) investigated the outcomes of inclusive education on the performance of students with disabilities. The study entailed the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods to describe the outcome in pullout and inclusive schools. It revealed that the two programs differed significantly with students in inclusive classrooms having higher grades than those in pullout schools. Besides, the students in inclusive education programs committed no behavioral infractions and attended more days of schools than those in pullout programs. It also illustrated that individual schools, as well as school districts, vary regarding both implementation and success of inclusion programs. Furthermore, the amount and level of professional development and training received by teachers concerning handling and teaching disabled students tend to impact teachers' perception towards inclusion. Thus, the authors concluded that with adequate support students with disabilities could achieve academic and social success in inclusive classrooms.

Gotshall and Stefanou (2011) studied the perceptions of teachers towards inclusive learning and their abilities to manage students with learning disabilities. The quantitative study, which was based in interviewing teachers, showed that the significance of understanding the perceptions of teachers is because it determines the

quality of teaching, the efficiency of teachers in inclusive classroom settings, as well as the teachers' attitudes towards the students they teach (Gotshall & Stefanou, 2011). The authors explained that when the perceptions of teachers in inclusive classroom settings are understood, individual schools, as well as school districts can offer teachers better opportunities to comprehend joint-teaching, as well as back them when they implement inclusive practices. Additionally, it can be important in assisting those who want to address shortages in terms of staff, particularly in the special education sector. The study also revealed that how students act, the way they perform in class reflects on their individual attitudes. Gotshall and Stefanou (2011) explained that this fundamental and often minimalist attitude could influence how a person relates in a group environment, such as a classroom setting. In this respect, the views of individual students might be impacted or created by the encounters they have with their educators. As a result, the attributes of an educator, as well as his or her attitude towards the ability or work of their students might affect students themselves, thereby changing their learning outcomes. These attitudes are undoubtedly complex and differ from one educator to the next and from one region to the next. The authors concluded that often teacher – general or regular teachers, show bias against special needs students because they feel that they are lacking in terms of ability to adequately cater for the needs of these students in their classroom. Thus, they recommended that stakeholders should develop support mechanisms such as training and the provision of adequate resources to help teachers adopt inclusive education models.

Furthermore, Berry (2010) studied the attitudes of teachers working with special needs students in an inclusive classroom environment. The qualitative study, which

comprised of sixty graduate students taking a survey, entailed an analysis of how pre-service, as well as how new teachers view and consider working with special needs students. He found out that teachers who are in pre-service believed in fair treatment of students, and that new teachers were quite pragmatic. Moreover, the study showed that teachers whose perceptions are positive are considered always to have confidence in their ability to instruct, as well as their efficacy with special needs students who require a revised curriculum. On the other hand, teachers with an attitude that is less favorable often tend to feel that inclusive classroom settings result in a lot of pressure and demand, and as such, believe that special needs students should not be taught in the same classroom environment as non-disabled students to accord them the opportunity to get individual instruction. The research also revealed that educators who are efficient and successful in inclusive teaching settings are ready to handle and teach students with disabilities, as well as assist all other students in taking responsibility for their own education. Thus, Berry (2010) concluded that educators who have a positive attitude towards handling and teaching all students in their classes, take charge with regards to assisting every student, and in turn, help every student to understand how to take responsibility of their own education. He also recommended the implementation of training opportunities that can address the concerns of teachers to change the negative perceptions towards co-teaching and inclusive teaching.

A study by Fuchs (2010) on the barriers associated with inclusion revealed that asserted that the perceptions of general teachers with regards to their teaching duties with regards to special education were impacted by their past responsibilities, expectations, as well as the practices of administrators. The assertions follow the responses gathered from

the qualitative study that comprised five participants who were interviewed on their views on inclusive teaching. Further, some of the teachers felt that the duties and expectation resulting from inclusion were not reasonable. They felt that school administrators did not back their efforts in various roles as providers of special learning services. The author concluded that there is a need for teacher preparation programs that will equip teachers with the skills that will successfully meet the needs of students in an inclusive classroom setting. Besides, Fuchs (2010) asserted that school administrators could play a significant role in ensuring that teachers feel effective, mainly when they are teaching in inclusive classroom settings. The recommendation corroborates findings by Waldron, McLeskey, and Redd (2011) that showed that school administrators who offered adequate support to teachers, as well as present them with opportunities for growth and development, assisted such teachers to work better, not only with regular students but also with special needs students.

Ross-Hill (2009) studied the perceptions of regular educators towards inclusive teaching. To this end, the researcher conducted a qualitative study that comprised of 73 teachers completing the scale of Teachers Attitudes Towards Inclusive Classrooms (STATIC). The analysis revealed that most teachers support the idea of inclusive teaching or have a neutral consensus towards it. For instance, regular teachers are very confident to work in inclusive settings when offered professional development training that would enable them to work with special needs students. In fact, Ross-Hill (2009) noted that elementary educators who had acquired specialized training, more readily welcomed special needs students in their regular classrooms. The responsibilities in inclusive classrooms are often shared between special and regular education teachers.

The author concluded that there is a need for ensuring that no noticeable difference is apparent between a special education, as well as regular education teacher since they not only work in the same classroom, but also work with the same students.

Other studies show that despite the perceived benefits of inclusive teachings, educators face several challenges that hinder the realization of the fruits of this education model. The study by Hofmann and Kilimo (2014) which was conducted in a Tanzanian school in Africa reveals that teachers face some challenges in implementing inclusive education more so with children with learning disabilities. The qualitative study conducted in Tanzania comprised of 100 teachers from 10 inclusive schools in Dar es Salaam. The researchers revealed that the challenges stemmed from the lack of adequate skills by teachers to enable them to deal with the complexities of inclusive education. Most of the teachers lacked special education training, which had adverse effects on their perception towards the inclusive learning and co-teaching model. The researchers concluded that stakeholders in the educations sector should develop mechanisms such as training that will improve teachers' perceptions towards inclusive learning. The process also includes providing adequate learning materials and improving the ratio of teachers to students to manageable levels. Teachers' self-efficacy promotes students' efficacy and fosters students' involvement in class activities.

A study by Emam and Mohamed (2011) also corroborates the findings by Hofmann and Kilimo (2014) regarding the factors that affect teacher's perceptions towards inclusive teaching. The study by Emam and Mohamed (2011) investigated the association between teachers' perception of self-efficacy and their attitudes towards the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) at preschool and primary

settings in Egypt. The qualitative study, which comprised of 71 pre-school teachers and 95 primary school teachers, revealed that teachers who were more experienced with the management of students with learning disabilities had a positive attitude towards the education model. Moreover, there were no differences between pre-school and primary school teachers' attitudes towards inclusive learning although the latter showed a higher sense of self-efficacy. The scholars concluded that teachers' low efficacy might hinder learning outcomes while positive attitudes helped improve the inclusion of students and consequently their performances. As such, Emam and Mohamed (2011) recommended the development of programs for teacher preparation concerning integrating learning systems.

Furthermore, a study by Mngo and Mngo (1022) in North West Cameroon revealed that most teachers prefer separate special education systems to inclusive ones. The study participants included 346 full-time state-licensed general education teachers from seven bilingual secondary schools. It revealed that the perceptions were primarily influenced by the lack of training on managing inclusive education models. Notably, the quantitative non-experimental descriptive survey research study showed that teachers with some training on teaching students with disabilities and more experienced and highly educated ones were supportive of inclusive teaching and learning models. The younger, less experienced teachers with no training did not show enthusiasm for such a model of education. The study also showed that perceptions towards inclusive teaching and learning systems were determined by factors such as age, gender, level of education, and experience. Younger teachers were not receptive to the model. Furthermore, male teachers had a positive perception to the model unlike female counterparts. Thus, the

researchers concluded that teachers should be provided with all the support needed to enable them to embrace inclusive teaching and learning methods.

A quantitative study by Pritchard (2013) that was conducted in North Carolina revealed no significant differences in teachers' perceptions as related to teaching assignment gender, years of teaching experience with inclusion. In fact, elective teachers were more accommodating for students in inclusive settings. Furthermore, teachers with at least 16 years of experience with students with learning disabilities had a positive attitude towards inclusive learning and co-teaching models compare to those without such experience. Besides, the study, which comprised of 150 teachers from local public elementary and secondary schools in North Carolina, revealed that professional development concerning disabilities increased the degree of positive attitudes towards inclusive learning. However, an increase in the number of hours of academic coursework for teachers made them prefer separate classrooms. The author concluded that co-teachers should be placed in inclusive settings to enable them to acquire the required skillset. Furthermore, stakeholders should provide professional development opportunities and opportunities for collaboration.

A qualitative phenomenological study by Carbrig (2014) revealed conflicting perceptions towards inclusive education at a primary and secondary level. The study, which comprised of 18 teachers, showed that primary school teachers demonstrated negative attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive education within primary schools. However, teachers at secondary level showed positive attitudes towards inclusive education because it helped students learn from each other and allow teachers to exchange ideas. The study also revealed that negative perceptions were caused by a lack

of teacher training, insufficient resources, limited administrative support, and poor infrastructure. Thus, the authors recommended the development of training programs and the provision of support systems that will change the negative attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education.

The perceptions and attitudes identified in the reviewed studies could be beneficial in terms of social influence on teachers, as well as others involved in instructing students with special needs. In fact, the findings are essential in directing administrators to decisions regarding the most appropriate and effective professional development program for inclusion teachers. Furthermore, it is up to teachers, and other involved stakeholders, to continue looking for different ways in which schools can address prospects for personal advancement and social development of students with special needs if they are to achieve and realize successful inclusive classroom setting. Furthermore, the findings of the review can help in identifying the best professional advancement training, which could be used in facilitating positive teaching settings, teamwork, as well as auspicious outcomes for students. Institutions of higher learning such as colleges and universities can also benefit from the findings of this study, especially with regards to enhancing their pre-service practices, which are crucial in readying such teachers for work altogether. This review also adds to the education knowledge base, particularly inclusion procedures in elementary classroom settings. It has offered data that relates to the viewpoints and perceptions of both special and general educators in an inclusive classroom as well as the challenges faced by educators in adopting inclusive learning. Thus, a comprehension of teacher perspective and understanding with regards to inclusion might result in the development of schemes that

school administrators, as well as for both types of educators, with regards to collaborating

and working together.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This section describes the qualitative descriptive case study design that was used to collect and analyze the data for this study. The nature and purpose of the study required that a detailed interview was conducted followed by an in-depth analysis of the responses to understand these attitudes towards education. It also ensured validity by a process of rigorous clarification, definition, or by use of pilot experiment. The setting was also important because it influenced human behavior. As such, since this study focused on inclusion and the attitude of educators, it was based on a case study to understand the perceptions of teachers in inclusion classrooms. The purpose of this study met all the criteria for a case study because teachers were the primary participants and the patterns of their responses when interacting with students were under examination.

Study Setting and Sampling

The population of interest for this study was a sampling of the teaching staff employed by the Brick Township School District in Brick, New Jersey. In collaboration with the school board, all teachers working in the Brick Township schools were invited to respond to the online questionnaire. All teachers who are included in the study work in an inclusive classroom setting. The results of this questionnaire represent the attitudes held by teachers working for this school district. The study sample represents the population of interest, but this is limited to teachers employed by the district. However, generalizability beyond such was not a goal for this study rather the purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of the views held by teachers with respect to inclusion practices within this school district.

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The setting chosen for the study facilitated the analysis of the co-teaching model in inclusive classrooms. The study was conducted in a suburban school setting because of the large percentage of students with learning disabilities in those settings. As such, provided an avenue to study the perceptions of teachers towards inclusion and its effects on education outcomes.

A specific sample was selected to ensure the adequate collection of information about a phenomenon of interest, which in this case was the attitude of educators towards inclusive teaching for children with disabilities. This study employed the use of purposeful sampling made it possible to interview all the participants who were typical of the population. To this end, all the teachers that participated were asked to volunteer through an email. The email included a description of the study and its purpose to give them an overview of the project. The use of the purposeful sampling technique also made it possible to achieve a participant mix based on gender, and level of education (Palinkas et al., 2015). The combination is key to understating the difference in perception between male and female educators of different races and the effect of education level on one's attitudes towards inclusive classrooms and co-teaching. Purposeful sampling was ideal because it also increased the range of data exposed and made it possible to identify emerged themes (Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants were chosen based on the location and availability to make it easy to conduct interviews. The logical process promoted the deduction of rich information that enabled the answering of the research questions identified in section one. Thus, purposeful sampling was necessary for this study based on the need for information and understating regarding teachers' perceptions

towards inclusive teaching of children with disability. A total of 38 teachers participated in this study.

Procedure

The data collection method entailed the use of both open-ended questions and face-to-face follow-up and in-depth semi-structured interviews including classroom observations. In preparing the interview questions, a pilot test was conducted to ensure the questions were relevant and ideal in achieving the data collection goals of the study (Driscoll, 2011). In doing this, I sent out a sample set of questions for review and critique to several colleagues and administrators and adjusted the final questions as advised.

The pilot testing assisted in making modifications to the questionnaire based on the feedback from the participants in the pilot test. The pilot testing helped ensure that the questions were relatively easy to understand and helped determine the time one would take to answer all the questions. Open-ended questions were ideal for gathering essential information such as the number of years one has taught, education level, and race. They also helped assess necessary perceptions towards inclusive teaching, the barriers faced in teaching, the skills essential for the proposed teaching model, and attitudes towards the preparation of teachers for such unique roles.

On the other hand, the in-depth semi-structured interviews helped corroborate the data collected using the questionnaires. Interviews required active listening and asking. It helped to create a good rapport that promoted sincerity in providing feedback, thereby minimizing bias responses (Driscoll, 2011; Alshenqeeti, 2014). As such, it was a meaning-making endeavor based on the nature of the partnership between the interviewer and his or her respondent. It was an ideal way of assessing perceptions meanings,

definitions of situations and the construction of realities regarding the phenomena under study. Additionally, it made it possible for the researcher to observe other salient communication features such as facial expression, which enrich the research process (Driscoll, 2011; Alshenqeeti, 2014). The semi-structured interviews allowed the research to proceed in no specific order, which fit the general plan of investigation to confirm the authenticity of the data collected. It entailed specifying the critical themes of the interviews, and afterward formulate them into questions. In this manner, it allowed the researcher to focus on a topic and gain adequate information from respondents. Such a research method was ideal for this study because it aimed to gather information on the perceptions of teachers regarding the efficacy of inclusion in primary classroom settings.

As for the observation method, the process entailed silently observing interactions between teachers and students in a class setting. Observations allow researchers to see participants in their natural environments (Driscoll, 2011). In this manner, it provided a broad viewpoint based on the researcher's interpretation. The process took about 30 minutes and involved taking notes about how the teacher promoted inclusivity between the students with disability and the non-disabled ones. It enabled me to gauge how they fit in their roles and determined their attitudes towards co-teaching. Moreover, it provided an avenue for validating what the participant said in the interview and questionnaire (Driscoll, 2011). Afterward, I used the triangulation method to compare the data collected from all three sources to determine the common themes for analysis. Thus, in this manner, the questionnaires, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and observation methods ensured the validity and trustworthiness of the collected data. With the help of the school board employing the teachers in the population of interest, an invitation to participate in

the survey was sent out via email. All teachers employed by the Brick Township School District were invited to participate. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their questionnaire responses and were informed that participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were further assured that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the questionnaire. (See Appendix B, page 84.)

At the end of the 8-week period during which the questionnaire was available in March and April 2019, online participation ended and the results were analyzed. A reminder of the invitation was sent to all teachers in the district after the survey questionnaire had been available for five weeks. A total of 38 complete responses were received in response to the invitation to participate in the survey. With respect to their level of education, 15 teachers stated they hold a Bachelor's degree in education, while 12 teachers have a Master's degree and 3 have other degrees. Seven teachers chose not to indicate their level of education.

Instrument Design

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire that I developed based on my examination of other similar instruments. I drew on extant surveys on teacher attitudes in order to design a questionnaire, while making sure to use terms familiar to Brick Township teachers. It contained 22 items that were rated on a 4-point Likert-type response format where 1="strongly agree" and 4="strongly disagree" or 1= "all the time" and 4="rarely" or 1="always" and 4="never" and there was no neutral point. Respondents indicated the degree of their agreement with statements such as "Students in my classroom learn at their own pace." The questionnaire contained a further seven items that required either a short answer, i.e. "Your age," or a choice between a small number

of options. The instrument was administered through an online format allowed

participants to answer anonymously. All the responses were reverse-coded for analysis,

such that 4 represents the strongest level of agreement or most frequent, to allow for ease

in interpretation. The questionnaire is provided in Appendix A. In conducting the data

analysis, two constructs were developed to answer the research questions. The first

construct, "Teacher Belief," was based on the items in Table 1 (see below). This

construct related to the beliefs teachers hold with respect to school factors. The individual

items were averaged to develop the Teacher Belief construct.

Table 1

Teacher Belief Items

Q7 The number of students in my classroom is reasonable.
Q14 I have access to the teaching resources I need in order to teach students with
special needs in my classroom.
Q15 The climate at my school supports the inclusion of students with
special needs.
Q17 I receive sufficient support from the administration of my school with respect to
students with diverse needs in my classroom.
Q18 I receive sufficient professional development activities with respect to students
with special needs in my classroom.
Q19 Teachers in my school tend to work by themselves.
Q20 In my school, classroom teachers and resource teachers work together collaboratively.
Q21 I have access to my students' adaptation documents.
Q22 I have access to my students' IPP documents.
Q23 A teaching assistant is available to support students with special needs in my
classroom.
Q24 Teachers in my school work in collaboration with the parents of students with

Table 2

Teacher Attitude Items

Q1 Students with special needs belong in the classroom alongside their typically developing peers.
Q3 Students with special needs belong in learning centers alongside peers with special needs.
Q4 Students with special needs benefit from friendships with students in the classroom.
Q5 Typically developing students benefit from friendships with students with special needs.
Q11 Adaptation documents are useful tools.
Q12 IPP documents are useful tools.

The second was a Teacher Attitude construct based on the items in Table 2 (see above), related to the attitudes of teachers toward inclusion practices. The individual items were averaged to develop the Teacher Attitude construct. The anonymity of the participants was essential to the success of the study. In this respect, the participants were identified using a number system as teacher 1, 2 and so on. Besides, the process entailed asking for permission from the school principal. The letter of consent explained the purpose of the study, why the school was selected for participation, how the interviews would proceed, and to assure the administrators that the identity of the participants would be kept confidential. Besides, the participants are not identified in write-ups or any other future publications of the research. The participation was also based on the consent of individual participants.

Chapter 4

Results

Attitudes Toward Inclusion Practices

The main research question in this study was: What are the attitudes of teachers toward inclusion practices? A subset of six research questions guided the study in order to provide specific, detailed answers to the main research question. By examining the relationships between teacher attitudes and the experience and knowledge of teachers, as well as between teacher attitudes toward inclusion practices and teacher beliefs regarding school factors, the study offered a window into elements that may influence these attitudes. The relationship between teachers' personal experiences and their attitudes toward inclusion practices was also explored. The attitudes of teachers toward inclusion practices were also examined for differences based on school location (i.e. urban or rural), the teacher's gender and the school structure (i.e. elementary school, high school or Primary to Grade 12).

Teacher Attitudes and Teacher Experience and Knowledge

I conducted analyses in response to research question (a): To what extent does a relationship exist between teacher factors (experience and knowledge) and teacher attitudes toward inclusion practices? The first item addressed related to whether students learn at their own pace in the respondent's classroom. (Q6: "Students in my classroom learn at their own pace.") In response to this item, 5 teachers stated that they do this sometimes, 25 said often and 8 said always. I then compared teachers' responses to this item to the Teacher Attitude construct, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Question 6 in Relation to Teacher Attitudes

Students learn at their own pace	n	Mean	St. Dev.
Always	8	3.11	.88
Often	25	2.96	.61
Sometimes	5	2.65	.28

The Teacher Attitude construct was based on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 representing a very positive attitude towards inclusion. This construct included the questionnaire items designed to determine the attitudes that teachers hold toward inclusion (see Table 1). As the table shows, teachers who stated that students always and often progress at their own pace in their classroom had more positive attitudes towards inclusion than those who indicated that students in their class only sometimes progress at their own pace. The second item addressed in response to research question (a) dealt with the teacher's experience in teaching students with special needs. (Q8: "I have experience teaching students with special needs.") In response to this item, 19 teachers completely agree, 15 agree and 5 disagree. Teachers responses to this item were then compared to the Teacher Attitude construct.

Table 4

Question 8 in Relation to Teacher Attitudes

Experience teaching students with special needs	n	Mean	St. Dev.
Completely Agree	19	2.99	.64
Agree	14	2.70	.66
Disagree	5	3.34	.31

Table 4 above shows that teachers had generally positive attitudes towards inclusion whether they completely agreed, agreed or disagreed with item 8. Teachers' experience teaching students with special needs has no notable relationship with their attitudes toward inclusive practices. Even those respondents who indicated that they had no such teaching experience demonstrated relatively positive attitudes. The third item related to question (a) regarding teacher knowledge and experience focused on the use of differentiation methods in pedagogical practice. (Q13: "I use differentiation methods in my instruction.") In response to this item, 14 teachers completely agreed, 21 agreed and 3 disagreed. Teachers' responses to this item were compared to the Teacher Attitude construct. The following table shows the descriptive statistics related to this item and the teacher attitude construct.

Table 5

Question 13 in Relation to Teacher Attitudes

I use differentiation methods	n	Mean	St. Dev.
Completely Agree	14	2.75	.92
Agree	21	3.03	.38
Disagree	3	3.01	.61

Table 5 above shows that teachers had positive attitudes towards inclusion whether they completely agreed, agreed or disagreed with question 13. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicate that they use differentiation methods in their teaching, a practice that enables teachers to target their students' needs. Only three teachers stated that they do not differentiate their instruction; however, the attitudes of all respondents toward inclusion practices remain generally positive toward inclusion regardless of their response to this item. The fourth item associated with research question (a) dealt with whether respondents offer students in their classrooms at different learning levels a variety of learning activities. (Q16: "I offer students at different learning levels in my classroom a variety of learning activities.") There was a range of responses to this item: 7 teachers completely agreed, 22 agreed, 6 disagreed, and 2 completely disagreed. I compared teachers' responses to this item to the Teacher Attitude construct. The following table shows the descriptive statistics related to this item and the Teacher Attitude construct.

Table 6

Question 16 in Relation to Teacher Attitudes

I use differentiation methods	n	Mean	St. Dev.
Completely Agree	7	2.75	.85
Agree	22	3.12	.42
Disagree	6	2.56	.43
Completely Disagree	2	2.17	1.65

As the table shows, teachers who answered "completely agree" and "agree" to this question had more positive attitudes towards inclusion than those who disagreed. Respondents who indicated that they do not offer a variety of learning activities to students at different learning levels, or only do so rarely, had more negative views of inclusive practices.

The fifth and final item related to research question (a) for which statistical analysis could be performed was on years of experience. Teachers' experience ranged from 2 to 30 years of experience. Years of experience were divided into 4-year groups. Table 7 below illustrates that there is little to no difference between teachers' years of experience and their responses to items in the Teacher Attitudes construct.

Table 7

Years of Experience in Relation to Teacher Attitudes

Years of Experience	n	Mean	St. Dev.
0-5	8	3.02	.41
6-10	8	2.52	.99
11-15	9	3.04	.58
16-20	3	3.07	.21
21-25	7	3.14	.51
26-30	2	2.92	.82

As the table shows, teachers' attitudes toward inclusion varied little based on years of experience. A slight difference was found in the group of teachers who have between 6 and 10 years of experience, who showed slightly less positive attitudes toward inclusion practices than their colleagues with both less and more experience. Overall, attitudes of teachers toward inclusion practices were comparable regardless of years of experience. In the questionnaire, I invited respondents to offer comments on the learning activities they offer to students at different learning levels in their classrooms. Three comments were entered. Comments from respondents will be addressed in the discussion section.

Teacher Attitudes and Teacher Beliefs Regarding School Factors.

I then explored the relationship between teacher attitudes toward inclusion and their beliefs with respect to school factors such as the school climate, in order to answer research question (b): To what extent does a relationship exist between teacher beliefs

regarding school factors (school climate, resources, supports) and teacher attitudes toward inclusion practices?

The correlation between Teacher Beliefs and Teacher Attitudes was significant $r(36)=.70, p<0.001$. This means that there is a correlation between teachers' beliefs regarding school factors, such as support from their administration, and teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. The following scatter plot visually shows the relationship between teacher attitudes and beliefs.
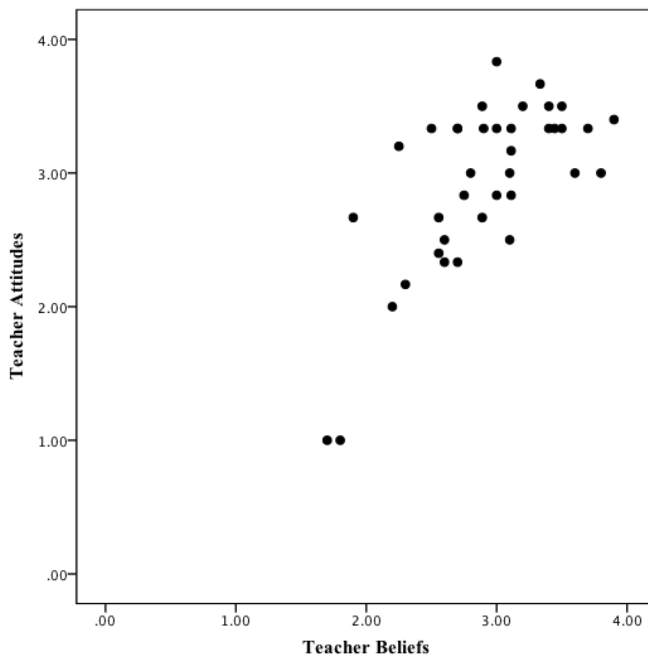

Figure 1: Scatter plot of the relationship between teacher attitudes and beliefs

Respondents were invited to comment on the teaching resources that they find useful and those that they would like to have. Nine comments were entered. Comments

from respondents will be addressed in the discussion section.

Teacher Attitudes and Teachers' Personal Experiences

Another possible relationship that I examined was the connection between teacher attitudes toward inclusion and experiences in their personal lives, in response to research question (c): To what extent does a relationship exist between teachers' personal experiences and teacher attitudes toward inclusion practices?

The following table represents the descriptive statistics associated with teacher attitudes on inclusion practices and item 9 related to teachers' personal experiences that prepared them to teach students with special needs. (Q9: "Personal experiences in my life, such as experiences with family members or close friends, have helped prepare me to teach students with special needs.") For this item, 5 teachers completely agree, 14 agree, 13 disagree, and 2 completely disagree. I compared teachers responses to this item with the Teacher Attitude construct. The following table shows the descriptive statistics related to this item and the Teacher Attitude construct.

Table 8

Question 9 in Relation to Teacher Attitudes

Personal experiences prepared me	n	Mean	St. Dev.
Completely Agree	5	2.80	1.10
Agree	14	2.87	.75
Disagree	13	2.94	.38
Completely Disagree	2	3.33	0

As the table shows, teachers' attitudes toward inclusion vary little based on personal experience. Respondents who did not report having had personal experiences that prepared them to teach students with special needs were shown to have slightly more positive attitudes toward inclusion.

Teachers were also invited to comment on personal experiences that they felt prepared them for teaching students with special needs. Two respondents chose to offer comments, which will be addressed in the discussion section.

Teacher Attitudes and Gender

I also studied the data in order to determine whether there was a relationship between teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and their gender. This enabled me to answer research question (e). There were more female respondents (27) than male respondents (8). The following table illustrates educators' attitudes disaggregated by gender.

Table 9

Gender in Relation to Teacher Attitudes

Gender	n	Mean	St. Dev.
Female	27	3.06	.45
Male	8	2.37	.96

As Table 9 shows, female respondents were more likely than male respondents to hold positive attitudes toward inclusion practices. However, the large difference between sample sizes violates equal distributions, and the small sample of male

respondents violates the normality assumptions needed to perform a t-test for statistical

significance. As such, no t-test could be performed. Teacher attitudes and school

structure. Another aspect that I analyzed was the possibility of a connection between the

school structure (i.e. elementary school, high school or Primary to Grade 3) and teachers'

attitudes, in response to research question (f). There were a similar number of

respondents from each school structure: 13 teachers were from elementary schools, 12

from secondary schools and 14 from P-3 schools.

Table 10

School Structure in Relation to Teacher Attitudes

School Structure	n	Mean	St. Dev.
Elementary	14	3.13	.45
Secondary	11	2.42	.86
P-3	13	3.14	.31

As seen in Table 10, teachers from secondary schools were less likely than their

colleagues in elementary and P-3 schools to have positive attitudes toward inclusion

practices. Respondents from elementary and P-3 schools showed a mean response of

close to 3 ("agree") on items in the Teacher Attitude construct. However, respondents

from secondary schools had a mean response of 2.42, closer to "disagree," indicating a

more negative view of inclusion practices. I will address this difference in the next

chapter.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The goal of this study was to identify the attitudes of teachers in the Brick Township, New Jersey schools toward inclusion practices. The intent of the research questions and, by extension, the design of the questions, was to determine which factors more than others might contribute to the establishment of these attitudes. Authors Burke and Sutherland (2004) state that the success of inclusive education is contingent upon the attitudes of those who work directly with students. As such, this study exploring the attitudes of teachers toward inclusion has significance, particularly for supporters of inclusive education.

The main purpose of this study was to add to the knowledge base that has already been established regarding teacher attitudes toward inclusive education practices, and therefore also contribute to increased student success in inclusive classrooms, which are found in the Brick Township schools, as well as New Jersey schools.

This study is of particular personal significance to me, as an inclusion classroom teacher of the Brick Township School District. I have experienced many of the situations outlined in the questions presented. Having worked with many students during my years as a teacher, all of whom presented a range of needs and abilities, I can easily understand how teachers' attitudes toward inclusive practices could be influenced by their experiences in such a setting. I can further attest to the powerful effect of support from administration and proper professional development when it comes to meeting the needs of our students. The results of my study reflect that reality as well. As I will discuss in

greater detail in this chapter, I found that when teachers believe they do not have the backing of their administration or the resources, time, and training they require to support their students with special needs, they are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward inclusion. It is that type of situation that I hope to assist through this research study.

Results

Research into inclusive education poses certain challenges, as shown by Kilanowski-Press, Foote and Rinaldo in 2010. The range of meanings attached to the term inclusive education can make it difficult to make definitive interpretations of some results. Authors Salend and Garrick Duhaney (1999) also recommend interpreting results with caution because of the inconsistent definitions of the language of inclusive education. With that in mind, I created statements in my questions that would not require the participant to rely on a personal understanding of the term inclusion, or other similar term. The terminology used in the study is consistent with that which is used in Brick Township Public Schools.

One interesting result of the study was the difference in attitudes toward inclusion practices among the participants. While the findings are consistent with existing research on the topic of inclusive education (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999; Jordan & Stanovich, 2004), the results are interesting because it demonstrates the significance of the conflicting experiences teachers, and therefore students have, in inclusive educational settings. For many reasons, as outlined below and earlier in the review of the literature, teachers experience inclusive education very differently depending on their teacher preparation and their ongoing professional development, as well as the support they receive in their position in terms of time and assistance. Two teachers in inclusive

classrooms in different schools may have significantly different experiences.

Regarding the two items about the best environment for students with special needs, responses were almost evenly split between the attitude that the regular classroom is the best environment for such students and the attitude that a special classroom or school is best. This difference of views was also reflected in other items relating to teacher attitudes toward inclusive practices. However, one interesting exception was the questions regarding friendships. An overwhelming majority of teachers participating to the study indicated that both students with special needs and their typically developing peers mutually benefit from friendships between these two groups. Given the difference of opinion regarding the best learning environment for students with special needs, it seems that the reason for this disagreement is the educational setting rather than the social side of inclusive education. This was an unexpected and an interesting finding. In my view, this finding is in line with other results in this study and in other research studies that suggest that the determining factors in teacher attitudes toward inclusive education are the different supports that they do or do not receive, in order to meet their students' needs (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999; Burke & Sutherland, 2004). By indicating that they believe that both students with special needs and their typically developing peers mutually benefit from friendships, I believe that teachers are saying that students with many various needs should be educated in the same schools as their peers where they can socially interact with them. This leads me to conclude that it is their views on how these students should be educated within that school and in what setting that are different.

Participants were also divided on the issue of the educational documents and plans used to support diverse learners. While the majority of participants for whom it was

applicable indicated that they do consult Individual Education Plans (IEPs), there was no agreement on the significance of these documents as useful tools. However, slightly more participants indicated that they found them useful than not. My questions did not explore the reasons behind teachers' opinions regarding these documents, although it would be an interesting topic for future research, given the widespread nature and potential usefulness of such documents. It would also be worthwhile for the school board to pursue this particular finding among the staff in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of these documents and thereby improve their significance.

Teacher experience and background knowledge. One of my research questions focused on how teachers' experience and knowledge affects their attitudes toward inclusive educational practices. As expected, teachers had a broad range of experiences and knowledge. In general, most participants held fairly positive views of inclusion, regardless of their degree of experience. One question specifically addressed the topic of experience teaching students with special needs. Teachers' responses to this item were not related to any difference in attitude toward inclusion. The majority of participants indicated they have had experience teaching a student with special needs, but there was little difference in attitude between those with experience and those without.

Teachers without experience teaching students with special needs had slightly more positive attitudes toward inclusive education. However, there were so few participants who indicated having no experience that I am hesitant to speculate on this difference. I would be curious to follow up on this finding as well in order to finitely determine if experience teaching students with special needs actually leads teachers to adopt more negative views. In terms of years of experience, teacher attitudes varied

little. Participants had a broad range of experience, from two years to thirty, but this had little impact on their attitudes toward inclusive education. The only exception I found was in the group of teachers with six to ten years of teaching experience. This group had slightly more negative views than their colleagues with both less and more experience. This finding is not consistent with other similar studies, and may be because of the small sample size.

In their 2002 review of multiple studies on teacher attitudes toward inclusion, Avramidis and Norwich wrote that several studies found that younger teachers and teachers with fewer years of experience tended to have more positive attitudes toward inclusion, while their older, more experienced colleagues had more negative attitudes. One study reviewed by Avramidis and Norwich noted a decrease in acceptance of inclusion among teachers with over six years of experience. In another study reviewed by Avramidis and Norwich, authors Soodak, Podell and Lehman (1998) found that teachers' receptivity toward including students with learning disabilities diminishes with experience" (p. 492). They went on to speculate on a possible "powerful negative effect of experience on teachers' response to inclusion" (p. 493).

In regards to the questions that examined teacher knowledge, I found that teachers who used inclusive practices in their instruction regularly were more likely to hold positive views of inclusion. However, this finding was not consistent across all questions related to teacher knowledge. In terms of differentiating instruction based on student needs, a majority of participants indicated that this is part of their practice. Implementing differentiation had no impact on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, which were generally positive in relation to this subject.

Other parts of teaching practice were associated with differences in views toward inclusion. Teachers who indicated that their students learn at their own pace at all times or often, were more likely to have positive views of inclusion than those who said that this only happens sometimes. Teachers who stated that they offer a variety of learning activities to students at different learning levels had more positive attitudes toward inclusion than their colleagues who do not. It is possible that teachers who make it part of their teaching practice to differentiate instructional activities based on their students' learning levels may do so because they hold positive views on the differences. This is a value that is at the heart of inclusion.

Impact of school factors on teacher attitudes. In this study, teacher attitudes toward inclusive practices have been shown to differ greatly. Therefore it becomes useful to explore the subset of research questions aimed at breaking down the factors that might impact these attitudes. One important set of elements that other researchers, such as Salend and Garrick Duhaney (1999), have shown to affect teacher attitudes on inclusion practices are teacher beliefs regarding school factors. As noted above, the way teachers feel about inclusion is often tied to the climate at their school and the support they feel that they receive from their administration. A school principal can be a driving force behind the establishment of a school climate that facilitates successful inclusion. In my research, teachers were asked about factors such as pedagogical resources, support from administration, professional development activities and availability of educational assistants, among others. A large majority indicated that their school climate supports inclusion and that they have access to support documents and materials as needed. However, on most other aspects, there was no consensus. There was a significant split in

perceived support from administration, with slightly over half of the participants

indicating that they strongly agree or agree that they have the support of their

administration, while just under half disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement.

A small majority of participants indicated that they do not feel that they have the teaching

resources that they need in order to teach the students with special needs in their

classrooms. Similarly, a slight majority of participants indicated that they do not believe

that they receive enough quality professional development opportunities with respect to

their students with special needs.

Open-ended questions. As part of the questions, I invited participants to share

comments on three items. One question asked teachers about personal experiences, such

as experiences with family members or close friends, that prepared them to teach students

with special needs. In order to find out more about how these experiences may have

shaped their attitudes, I asked participants to explain their answer, if they chose to. I also

wondered about the teaching resources that participants found useful. Therefore I also

invited them to comment on the availability of teaching resources. Finally, one question

asked participants whether they offer students at different academic levels a variety of

learning activities. Teachers had the opportunity to give examples to support their answer

to this question. Comments from some participants demonstrate the challenges faced by

certain teachers with respect to pedagogical resources, both for students with special

needs and typical students. One participant noted that new initiatives introduced in the

district are not always accompanied by the material needed for full successful

implementation or by sufficient training. Another participant commented that there was a

lack of materials for students with special needs and also a shortage of time to prepare

materials sufficiently. One participant points out that teachers who are experiencing time pressures are more likely to offer adaptations only to students who are struggling, to the detriment of strong students who would benefit from more challenging material. In such a situation as described by the participant, the lack of greater support or a more accommodating schedule forces teachers to prioritize their students' needs to the extent that some students' needs simply are not met. Finally, in response to the questions about offering varied activities to students at different learning levels, one participant noted that increased demands and paperwork means less time to prepare a variety of activities. As further support for the importance of appropriate professional development activities to help teachers meet the needs of their students, researchers Burke and Sutherland (2004) found that sufficient training helps promote positive attitudes toward inclusion. They further state that negative attitudes on the part of teachers may stem from a perceived lack of knowledge, which more professional development could mitigate. These findings, along with the results of my research and supported by comments from participants, demonstrate the need for increased training opportunities for teachers to help them effectively teach their students with special needs, as well as more time and materials.

On a related note, one theme that arose from comments added by teachers to their responses was the need for increased training on meeting student needs in teacher preparation courses. Participants noted the difference between what is taught in some teacher preparation classes and the realities of what occurs in the classroom. One participant also commented about the increasing demands on teachers due to the presence of students with special needs in the regular classroom. This participant also noted that, in his or her experience, preparation courses for teachers do not focus adequately on

preparing teachers to meet the diverse range of needs they encounter in the classroom. This was an unexpected finding, and one that was not targeted by any particular question, so it is difficult to generalize further, particularly as it was only revealed through further comments on questions. However, it presented an interesting focus for future study.

Teachers collaborating. Exploring the questions relating to teamwork, collaboration between classroom teachers and resource teachers, as well as between classroom teachers and parents of students with special needs was named as a consistent part in many participants' schools. This stands out when compared with the finding that about half of participants did not feel that they had the support of their administration. It suggests that at times a better working relationship exists among teaching staff members than between teaching staff and their administrators. Another significant finding was that almost 50% of participants indicated that teachers at their schools work alone, suggesting that participants were making the distinction between collaboration between classroom teachers and collaboration between classroom and special education teachers. The slight inconsistency of these findings makes it difficult to make definite conclusions, however, an increased focus on collaboration in Brick Township schools appears that it would be beneficial. This suggestion is consistent with findings by Soodak, Podell and Lehman (1998) who found that when teachers have the opportunity to collaborate with their colleagues, they have more positive views toward inclusion.

When asked whether they have access to educational assistants, or paraprofessionals, where necessary, a small majority of participants indicated that such personnel are not available. This finding suggests a perceived need on the part of teachers for support in their classrooms. Statistical analysis of answers related to teacher beliefs

about school factors showed a strong connection between such beliefs and teacher attitudes toward inclusion practices. In this aspect, the results of the study I conducted are consistent with the results of research conducted by Salend and Garrick Duhaney in 1999, which also found significant relationship between teachers' perception of school factors and their attitudes toward inclusion. One such factor is time. This includes time to collaborate with colleagues and time to prepare the necessary resources to meet student needs. This point is adequately demonstrated by a comment made by a participant to my questions that notes that the limited time available to make adaptations and modifications could lead to teachers being hesitant to implement them. Another comment stated that it is very difficult to find time to develop pedagogical resources adapted to student needs, indicating that such resources are rarely provided and must be created by individual teachers. It is easy to see how such circumstances could lead a teacher to have a more negative feeling toward inclusion practices and how student success could be negatively affected.

Another factor mentioned by participants was training. Sufficient professional development could mean the difference between a teacher who feels comfortable and competent when he or she teaches a student with special needs and a teacher who feels overwhelmed and unprepared when faced with the same student. Once again, there is a clear link between the negative experience of the teacher who feels inadequate to the task before her and a correspondingly negative attitude toward the practice of including such a student in the regular classroom.

Preparation and support. It seems that the way in which teachers are prepared and supported with respect to teaching students with special needs in inclusive

classrooms can impact their attitudes, depending on the quality and adequacy of the preparation and support they receive. Teachers who are given ample time and resources, as well as proper professional development are more likely to have a more positive view toward inclusion and as such, will experience greater success. It has been noted that some studies showed increasingly positive attitudes toward inclusion as teachers received more comprehensive training.

On the other hand, negative expectations that occur from a lack of appropriate training, time pressures, and other such factors can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Teachers who expect that their inclusive practices will be unsuccessful are more likely to see those expectations met. Furthermore, the majority of participants stated that they could only meet the needs of the students in their classrooms sometimes, while over 20% stated that they could rarely meet the needs of their students. This is a shocking finding that demonstrates the importance of making changes. The message to administrators and teachers should be that in order to improve attitudes toward inclusion practices, an important step is to increase support for teachers in several areas, such as a more supportive administration, greater access to teaching resources designed to meet specific student needs, increased professional development to allow teachers to meet their students' needs, increased support for collaboration and greater access to additional support staff. Research such as that conducted by Salend and Garrick Duhaney (1999) has shown that teachers who experience success in inclusive classrooms are more likely to feel positively about inclusion. It would be helpful to base professional development opportunities within the district on needs expressed by teachers, rather than needs identified at the district or state level.

A strong majority of participants indicated that the number of students in their classroom is reasonable. However, seven respondents completely disagreed with the statement that the number of students in their classroom is reasonable, suggesting that, while the challenge is not widespread, certain teachers identify class size as a considerable obstacle.

Teachers' personal experiences and their effects. Another factor that I explored as a possible influence on teachers' attitudes was their own personal experiences. I questioned whether teachers who had or have family members or close friends with special needs might view inclusive education differently.

I originally theorized that such teachers might hold more positive views of inclusion.

What I found was that a teacher's personal experiences have little influence on his or her attitude toward inclusive practices. In fact, teachers who reported having no personal experiences that prepared them to teach students with special needs had slightly more positive views toward inclusion. Although it was not a significant difference, this was a shocking discovery. I cannot draw any definitive conclusions from this. I actually believe that there may have been a weakness in the way in which this questions was presented that led to a slight skew of the data that was gathered. It would be very interesting to see further research conducted about this precipitating calendar

Influence of gender on attitudes towards inclusion. This study also examined whether teachers' attitudes were influenced by their gender. Though no statistically significant relationship was found between gender and attitudes toward inclusion practices, a definite conclusion that there is no connection cannot be made with certainty.

While this study did not show a relationship between these factors, the low number of male respondents was a limiting factor, making it impossible to draw any definitive conclusions. When looking at individual responses to questions, there are differences between answers by males and females. However, the small sample size does not allow for identifying gender as the correlating factor. This aspect of the study would be a good area to explore for a future, larger-scale research project. This is particularly the case since evidence in other studies appears inconsistent. In their research synthesis from 2002, Avramidis and Norwich found that some studies showed that female teachers were somewhat more receptive to inclusive education than male teachers, while other studies, such as that of Van Reusen, Shoho and Barker in 2001, found no relationship between gender and attitudes toward inclusive education.

School structure. Brick Township is home to a variety of schools in different areas, which results in different school structures, depending on the number of students. There are two secondary schools (grades 9 through 12), two middle schools (grades 6 through 8), and 8 elementary schools (grades P through 5). When I developed my study, I questioned whether the structure of a teacher's school, be it elementary, middle, or secondary would have an impact on attitudes toward inclusive practices. Indeed, there does appear to be a link. Teachers in elementary schools and middle schools were found to have more positive views of inclusion than their colleagues who teach in secondary schools.

The difference was pretty notable, with the views of elementary and middle school teachers being generally positive and the views of high school teachers generally more negative. There could be a number of reasons that could cause this discrepancy.

Elementary school teachers spend more of the day with their students than their colleagues at the high school level. It may not be appropriate to say that inclusion is easier at the elementary level, but it is true that there are more opportunities to interact with students throughout the course of the day. This enables elementary teachers to develop a closer relationship with their students and learn more about them, becoming more familiar with their needs. This factor is key to successful inclusion. Furthermore, elementary teachers generally teach fewer students than their high school colleagues. It is therefore unremarkable that elementary school teachers would view inclusive practices more positively than high school teachers. In terms of the findings in response to this research question, my results were consistent with other similar studies. A number of studies into teacher attitudes toward inclusion reported that secondary teachers were generally less positive toward inclusive practices than their elementary school colleagues.

Implications for Practice

In their research synthesis conducted in 1996, Scruggs and Mastropieri found that there was no increase in positive attitudes toward inclusive practices over time. They had examined 28 studies conducted over a 20-year period but saw that there was no notable increase in teachers' perceptions of inclusion practices. It seems that there had been no improvement in terms of how teacher education programs prepared teachers to teach students with special needs in the regular classroom. A number of years have passed since these authors published their research synthesis, so hopefully progress has since been made. However, the same topics regarding the challenges faced by teachers are still present in current research, including this study. This suggests that a significant amount of work still has to be done by teacher preparation programs and school districts to

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prepare and support teachers.

Limitations of This Study

The small number of teachers who responded to the invitation to participate in this study limited the generalizability of the results. As a district employee I can attest to the fact that this population is frequently solicited to participate in various questionnaires. Therefore, there may have been a certain degree of reluctance on the part of teachers to devote more time to participating in this research. Furthermore, many teachers carry a heavy workload and may simply not have had the time or energy to devote to activities outside of the requirements of their classroom. Additionally, the fact that such a small number of male teachers responded to the invitation to participate in the study is a limitation, as it became difficult to compare results between male and female participants. A further limitation is the self-selection of participants. It is possible that teachers who are interested in inclusive education were more interested in participating in a study on this topic. The group of participants, therefore, may not have thoroughly represented the population from which they were drawn.

Conclusion

This study has given me an interesting look into the attitudes and beliefs of teachers in the Brick Township School District. In many cases, the results of the study proved to be consistent with existing research, as well as my own experience and anecdotal evidence from my years of teaching. In other areas, the results were surprising and often enlightening or intriguing, offering possibilities for future research. The small number of participants was disappointing, as it means that my results were not as

meaningful as I would have liked. It was my hope to offer some suggestions for improvement to the district. I do believe that this is still possible, that the findings outlined in this study still represent, to a certain degree, the realities of Brick Township classrooms and the corresponding suggestions could certainly benefit both teachers and students. The more I read about teacher attitudes toward inclusion and inclusion in general, the more I found that a discrepancy exists between research and the classroom. From studies dating back twenty years to studies conducted within the past two years, there seem to be recurrent themes. Many recommendations have been made with the goal of increasing teacher satisfaction with inclusive practices and thereby, ultimately, improving the school experience of students in inclusive classrooms. But in many cases, it seems that these recommendations have not been implemented adequately. My review of the literature and my own research study have led me to the conclusion that the best way to improve teacher attitudes toward inclusion is to listen to teachers and to act on the needs they have expressed. After all, teachers speak not only for themselves; they are also the advocates for their students.

Another consideration related to both inclusive education and professional development is financial resources. Finances are a major consideration for administrators in the school district, and proper allocation of financial resources is a constant concern. Therefore, a strong argument could be made that there should be a greater effort to base professional development opportunities on needs identified by teachers, as a means of getting the most value in the classroom for the amount being spent on this training. Teachers who receive the training they have asked for are more likely to implement inclusion practices effectively. This would increase their satisfaction with their inclusive

classrooms and consequently, improve the experience of students, which is the goal of administrators when they plan their financial distributions. Another possibility raised by research on inclusion (Kilanowski-Press, Foote & Rinaldo, 2010) is the potential for coteaching as a means of meeting student needs and supporting teachers. This practice is rare, most likely due to financial costs associated with it, but given the potential to offer strong support to both students and teachers, this is an option worth considering, particularly where there is a drive within school cultures to move toward greater collaboration. Similarly, funding deficiencies can sometimes limit the presence of teaching assistants or paraprofessionals, who could provide another potential area of support for teachers and students in inclusive classrooms.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire on Inclusion Practices

The following statements apply to the inclusion of children with special needs in the classroom. Inclusion refers to the practice of having students with special needs spend all or most of the day learning alongside other students in the regular classroom.

Part 1. The following statements relate to students:

1. Students with special needs belong in the classroom along with their typically developing peers. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

2. I am able to meet the needs of the all the students in my classroom. (all the time, most of the time, sometimes, rarely)

3. Students with special needs belong in special settings along with peers with special needs. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

4. Students with special needs benefit from friendships with students in the classroom. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

5. Typically developing students benefit from friendships with students with special needs. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

6. Students in my classroom learn at their own pace. (all the time, most of the time, sometimes, rarely)

7. The number of students in my classroom is reasonable. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

Part 2. The following statements relate to teaching practices and personal experience:

8. I have experience teaching students with special needs. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

9. Personal experiences in my life, such as experiences with family members or close friends, have helped prepare me to teach students with special needs. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable)

If you would like to explain, please do so here:

10. Regular consultation of IEP documents is part of my teaching practice. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable)

11. IEP documents are useful tools. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable)

12. I use differentiation methods and modifications in my instruction. (all the time, most of the time, sometimes, rarely)

13. I have access to the teaching resources I need in order to teach students with special needs in my classroom. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

Please give examples of some resources you find useful:

What are some resources you would like to have?

Part 3. The following statements relate to school structure and practices:

14. The climate at my school supports the inclusion of students with special needs in the classroom. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

15. I offer students at different learning levels in my classroom a variety of learning

activities. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable)

If possible, could you give examples?

16. I receive sufficient support from the administration of my school with respect to students with diverse needs in my classroom. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable)

17. I receive sufficient professional development activities with respect to students with special needs in my classroom. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable)

18. Teachers in my school tend to work by themselves. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

19. In my school, classroom teachers and special education teachers work together collaboratively. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable)

20. I have access to my students' IEP documents. (always, sometimes, rarely, never, not applicable)

21. A paraprofessional is available to support students with special needs in my classroom. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable)

22. Teachers in my school work in collaboration with the parents of students with special needs. (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable)

Answering the following questions is optional, but very helpful.

23. Your age:

24. Your gender:

25. Please indicate the total number of years you have been teaching:

26. Is your school an elementary school, a high school or a middle school?

27. In what year did you complete your initial teacher training and where?

28. What is the highest degree you hold?