

## Academic Leadership: The Online Journal

---

Volume 6  
Issue 1 *Winter 2008*

Article 2

---

1-1-2008

# A Consideration of the Influences that Predict Middle School Principal Attitudes

Edward Cod

Jesse Washington

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj>

 Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Cod, Edward and Washington, Jesse (2008) "A Consideration of the Influences that Predict Middle School Principal Attitudes," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol6/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository.

# Academic Leadership Journal

## Introduction

Today's successful school systems have certainly evolved into "heroic learning organizations" (Brown & Moffett, 1999). Competing for such prestigious titles as

National

Blue Ribbon Schools and

Carolina First Palmetto's Finest Award Schools, additional pressures are placed on everyone involved.

The person held most accountable for problem solving is the principal. Two of the most prominent pressures are the challenges of

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and schools meeting

Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements for all students. As the instructional leader, the principal influences every aspect of the school and each of its participants. In the process he or she becomes a cheerleader, team captain, nurse, psychologist, visionary, disciplinarian, diplomat, utilitarian, chaplain, judge, prosecutor, negotiator, and clairvoyant. The principal creates, drives, inspires, establishes the culture, engenders the school's spirit, dreams the vision, and serves as a role model to ensure everyone is integrated into the all-inclusive learning environment.

Four aspects of special education require clarification and discussion.

Inclusion is a term that is difficult to define because it varies from school to school. Generally, inclusion is the placement of students with disabilities into the regular education classroom. "It has been defined as the meaningful participation of students with disabilities in general education classrooms and programs" (Bateman and Bateman, 2001, p.73). In 1975 Congress passed the

Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which was later renamed the

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), in an effort to provide an equal educational opportunity for all students. Inclusion is a complex concept often associated with terms, such as

mainstreaming, the

Regular Education Initiative (REI), and

full inclusion. These terms are not synonymous, however, "although they are often used interchangeably.

Each signifies a period in the development of inclusion. Each also signifies a philosophical stance concerning where students with disabilities should be educated" (Bateman & Bateman, 2001, p.73).

During the 1970s and early 1980s, mainstreaming was introduced to provide an equal educational opportunity for students with mild disabilities. Because the law required that students with special needs be provided an opportunity to be educated in the least restrictive environment, mainstreaming was "to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms for at least part of the school day" (Bateman & Bateman, 2001, p.74). An educational misnomer of the time was the belief "that students with mild disabilities had to 'earn' their place...in the general education setting" (Bateman and Bateman, 2001, p.74).

During the mid-1980s the United States Assistant Secretary of Education, Madeline Will, recommended closer involvement of general education teachers in the role of educating

“mainstreamed” students with disabilities. “This might seem like a subtle shift, but it was a major philosophical shift in the provision of services to meet the needs of students with disabilities” (Bateman & Bateman, 2001, pp.74-75). Mainstreaming later became a part of the Regular Education Initiative (REI) causing the education of special education students to be the responsibility of the special and general education teacher. Ultimately, REI led to greater collaboration between general and special education teachers that would lead to full inclusion.

Yell (1998) defined

inclusion as the educational placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Later this concept developed into the idea of full inclusion. The practice “focuses on dismantling the continuum of placements and educating ALL students in the mainstream” (Praisner, 2000, p.9). Under the practice of full inclusion, the general education teacher assumes full educational responsibility, differentiating his or her instruction, with the periodic support of special education teachers, to meet the needs of all learners and provide opportunities for all students to participate fully both “academically and socially” (Bateman and Bateman, 2001).

Full inclusion is not intended as a placement of students with disabilities, the discontinuance of labeling, or the conclusion of special education classes; it is a supportive collaboration by general and special education teachers to assist students with disabilities in the general classroom (Praisner, 2000).

#### Problem and the Related Research Questions

Students with disabilities currently make up over ten percent of America’s student population (Salisbury & McGregor, 2002). For the past fifteen years, the number of students with disabilities served in general education classrooms has continued to increase (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). Stanovich and Jordan (2002) contend that there has been an unyielding shift in the way students with disabilities receive services. The number of special education students has been increasing as has their placement in general education classrooms. The authors propose that inclusive education is permanent, proven by the fact that the inclusion movement, emphasizing acceptance and inclusion rather than exclusion, is a trend that has persisted throughout the history of special education.

A substantial amount of research has been conducted regarding inclusion, and information is abundant regarding the principal’s role in incorporating appropriate practices. At this time, however, there is limited literature on current attitudes of middle level principals regarding inclusion, the basis of those attitudes, and the indicators that predict those attitudes contingent upon student disabilities. It is imperative to know the present role of inclusion as a means of determining methods of improving current practices throughout the state. As the instructional leader, the principal must ensure an equitable education for all students.

The purpose of this study was to examine how certain factors contribute to the attitudes of South Carolina middle school principals regarding full inclusion of students with special needs. Praisner (2000) indicated that in order to guarantee successful inclusion programs it is critical that the leadership of the school models actions that will “advance the integration, acceptance, and success of students with disabilities in general education classes” (Praisner, 2000, p.27).

In her study of elementary principals in Pennsylvania to ascertain the attitudes of principals regarding

inclusion, Praisner (2000) explored relationships between principals' personal characteristics, training, experience and/or school characteristics and their attitudes toward inclusion. The study revealed that such attitudes are extremely important: "...when school districts hire and/or evaluate elementary school principals, consideration of their attitude toward inclusion should be an integral part of the process" (Praisner, 2000, p.67). Praisner's (2000) implications for further research are two-fold: (1) "to identify the specific factors in training, actual experiences, and characteristics of disability groups that lead to successful inclusion" and (2) to investigate "the differences that exist between disability categories in relationship to attitude, experiences, and placements would increase our knowledge and improve practices" (Praisner, 2000, pp.70-71). These implications provided a foundation for this study.

The study investigated the following conceptual questions: What factors help to determine principals' attitudes regarding inclusion? What experiences, positive or negative, do principals have with students with disabilities?

This study identified three specific research questions:

1. What are middle school principals' attitudes regarding inclusion in South Carolina?
2. Are middle school principals' attitudes towards inclusion correlated with personal demographics, professional experiences, and special education training?
3. Is there a combination of these factors that best predicts middle level principals' attitude toward inclusion?

Three themes were central to the development of the conceptual framework for this study. Beliefs influenced by professional experiences, beliefs influenced by personal demographics, and beliefs influenced by formal training were all possible factors that may affect the attitudes of middle school principals regarding inclusion.

## Methodology

For purposes of this study, middle schools are defined as public schools in the state of South Carolina with grades six through eight. All middle schools consisting of grades six through eight in South Carolina were invited to participate. All 172 middle school principals were sent an electronic survey that included essential information regarding the research. The principals who returned completed and usable surveys formed the sample group. Sixty percent of the principals returned the survey.

A revised version of the

Principals and Inclusion Survey (PIS) was used to collect the data. Its purpose was to gather information concerning the current attitudes of middle level principals in the state of South Carolina regarding inclusion, the basis of those attitudes, and the indicators that predict those attitudes contingent upon disabilities of the students and the personal characteristics of the principals. After reviewing current and relevant literature, the researcher chose to use two sections of the PIS for this study. The original PIS is divided into four sections: Section I, four questions assessing characteristics about the students and the school; Section II, thirteen questions assessing the training and experience of the principal; Section III, ten questions addressing the attitudes toward special education students; and Section IV, eleven questions measuring the principal's perceptions concerning placement beliefs

of students with special needs. To collect the necessary data for this study, the researcher revised the PIS.

Content validity of the original PIS was determined by expert judgment. After developing the questionnaire, Praisner had it reviewed by a panel of four professors with experience in the area of inclusive education and educational administration from Lehigh University. The validity of the initial instrument rests with the panel of experts that reviewed and piloted the survey as well as the research performed by Praisner.

The researcher piloted the revised version of the PIS with five principals. These principals were excluded from the actual study. The pilot principals found the survey instructions clear, the questions comprehensible, and the format amenable. The original PIS has only been piloted and utilized once. To improve reliability and minimize errors, Praisner used the National Computer Systems, Inc. (NCS) to interpret the data. Fowler (2002), in *Survey Research Methods*, writes that to ensure “consistent measurement...each respondent in a sample is asked the same set of questions. Answers to these questions are recorded” (Fowler, 2002, p.78). The revised version of the PIS by the researcher was used by all participants in this study.

The data was downloaded and imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) System. The survey questions were then coded. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were calculated. “Descriptive statistics for surveys include counts (numbers or frequencies); proportions (percentages); measures of central tendency (the mean, median, and mode); and measures of variation (range, standard deviation)” (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998, p.60). The statistical procedures for addressing the research questions were Pearson Product-Moment Correlations and Multiple Linear Regression.

The researcher examined the correlations among the three background variables regarding inclusion, (1) beliefs that were influenced by personal demographics, (2) beliefs that were influenced by formal training, and (3) beliefs that were influenced by professional experiences. Pearson correlations were used for the ordinal variables. Pearson correlations examined the relationship between responses to the survey questions and the attitude portion of the survey. Additionally, the researcher provided descriptive statistics, frequencies and percentages for future research.

A multiple linear regression was used to determine the extent to which the background variables, in combination, predict and account for variability in principals’ attitudes toward the most appropriate placement of special education students. The purpose of multiple regression is to learn more about the relationship between several independent or predictor variables and a dependent or criterion variable (Statsoft, 2003).

The primary point of the data analysis was to determine the relationship between the demographic variables and the total score regarding the most appropriate placement of students with special needs’ and to determine if those attitudes could be predicted.

Research Question One: What are middle school principals’ attitudes regarding inclusion in South Carolina?

Analysis: Section II of the PIS assessed the principals’ attitudes regarding most appropriate placement

for students with special needs. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for Section II of the survey. Descriptive data and a total inclusion score were calculated from this section of the survey by the means of these items.

Research Question Two: Are middle school principals' attitudes towards inclusion related to personal demographics, professional experiences, and formal training?

Analysis: Section I of the PIS inquired about middle level principal's training, professional experience, and personal experience. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for Section I. These items inquired about demographics of the middle level principal. Descriptive statistics were also used on Item 11 in the survey, and a professional experience mean score was calculated. Descriptive statistics were utilized on Item 10 in the survey, and a personal experience mean score was calculated. Descriptive statistics were also used on Item 8 in the survey, and a training experience mean score was calculated. The three mean scores, personal demographics, professional experiences, and formal training, were then correlated with the inclusion mean score for each category that was determined from research question one.

Research Question Three: Is there a combination of these factors that best predict middle level principals' attitude toward inclusion?

Analysis: A multiple linear regression was used to determine if the predictive variables can be predicted separately. Once each section of the PIS had been totaled the researcher calculated a multiple linear regression. Multiple linear regression was used to determine which of the variables were predictive of attitudes regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities and the extent to which they contribute individually and/or collectively to principals' attitudes. To understand the nature of these relationships further, correlations between all of the variables in the study were examined.

## Findings

Middle level principals have a positive attitude regarding the inclusion of students with special needs into general education classrooms. There was little variation among the categories of student disabilities when the middle level principals answered the survey about most appropriate placement of students with special needs. Table I summarizes these findings. The two disabilities that indicated more of a negative attitude regarding inclusion were autism and traumatic brain injury. Principals believed that students with these disabilities should be in special education classes for most or all of the school day. Table II and III illustrate these findings.

### Table I

#### Principals Preference Regarding Most Appropriate Placement

---

#### Disability Mean SD

---

Specific Learning Disabilities 3.95 1.073

Mental Disability 2.77 1.351

Emotional Disability 2.75 1.509

Visual Impairment 4.11 1.114

Deaf and Hard of Hearing 4.09 1.055

Speech and Language Impairment 4.27 .915

Other Health Impairment 3.88 .947

Orthopedic Impairment 4.33 .939

Multiple Disabilities 2.30 1.114

Autism 1.83 1.065

Traumatic Brain Injury 1.75 1.154

---

Inclusion Score 35.79 6.634

---

N=92

1-5 Scale

Table II

Principals Preferred Placement of Children with Autism

---

Placement Percent

---

Special class for most or all of the day 49.0

Part-time Special Education Class 32.6

Regular Classroom Instruction and Resource Room 9.7

Regular Classroom Instruction for Most of the Day 4.3

Full-time Regular Education with Support 4.3

---

Table III

Principals Preferred Placement of Children with Traumatic Brain Injury

---

Placement Percent

---

Special class for most or all of the day 62.0

Part-time Special Education Class 17.3

Regular Classroom Instruction and Resource Room 10.9

Regular Classroom Instruction for Most of the Day 6.5

Full-time Regular Education with Support 4.3

---

The middle school principals with more formal training in special education had a more positive attitude regarding inclusion. There was a significant relationship between the principals training and the principal's attitude toward inclusion as represented by the inclusion score. The more training middle level principals had the more positive their attitude regarding inclusion.

Table IV presents the correlations between the inclusion score and select principal characteristics. Middle level principals that had positive professional experiences with students with special needs had a more positive attitude regarding inclusion. There was a significant relationship between the professional experience and inclusion. Principals perceived their professional experiences working with students with disabilities to be generally positive, with an average mean score of 3.97 on the 5-point scale. The other principal characteristics isolated were not significant when correlations with the inclusion score were calculated.

Table IV

Correlations: Principal Characteristics and Total Inclusion Score

---

Principal Characteristics Correlation to Inclusion Score

---

Age .022

Gender .080

Years of Full-time Regular Education Experience -.028



Years of Full-time Special Education Experience .166

Years as a Middle School Principal -.038

Special Education Degree .152

Training in Inclusive Practices .072

Training Score .324\*\*

Certification in Special Education .015

Personal Experience Score .148

Professional Experience Score .220\*

---

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

The training score indicates formal training such as courses, workshops, and/or significant portions of courses in special education (special education law, crisis intervention, life skills).

The attitudes of middle level principals could not be predicted by any combination of personal characteristics, professional experiences, training, inclusion score, training, personal experience score, or professional experience.

## Conclusions

The middle school principals who participated in the survey generally have a positive attitude regarding inclusion. Principals with formal training have a significantly more positive attitude regarding inclusion of students with special needs in the classroom. Principals felt that students with autism or traumatic brain injury should be in special education classes for most or all of the school day. Fifty-seven percent of the principals surveyed indicated they had no experience with students with traumatic brain injury, and twenty-two percent of the principals had no experience with students with autism. One reason for this finding may be that principals may not have had experience interacting with students that have these disabilities and would rather have them work with special education professionals. Only four percent of the principals were certified in special education. In the other disability categories most principals indicated a positive or somewhat positive experience with students with disabilities.

This study also examined professional experience of middle level principals with students with special needs. There was a significant relationship between professional experience and the attitude of principals toward inclusion. Generally, the more positive professional experiences principals have with students with special needs, the more positive their attitude regarding inclusion. Praisner (2000) reached similar conclusions finding that professional experiences and interactions with students with special needs proved to be important in determining attitudes of principals regarding inclusion.

It is evident that inclusion is increasingly becoming a reality in education. This study assessed what principals think about inclusion and if their attitudes could be predicted based on select contributing factors. The principals have a positive attitude regarding inclusion; however, that attitude may change when inclusion is actually in practice. This is supportive of the work of Collins and White (2001). The authors report that positive attitudes regarding inclusion begin with the principal and his or her professional development opportunities for teachers to work with students with disabilities in inclusive settings. The survey also did not ask principals if professional development was provided on a regular basis to train teachers regarding how to handle students with special needs in inclusive classrooms. Based on the responses of whether principals have had training in preparing teachers to handle inclusion, the number would likely be small. These two indicators may have an effect on principals' attitudes.

A high percentage of principals indicated they had no personal experience with anyone outside the school setting with special needs. There was no significant relationship between the principals' personal experience scores and the attitudes toward inclusion. The mean score for personal experience was 0.73 on a scale of 0-6. Some principals may have a positive attitude because they feel every student deserves an educational opportunity or an impartial attitude because they are not sure what special education law requires regarding inclusion. The research of Yell, Katsiyannis, and Bradley (2003) indicated that special education is the most legislated and litigated area of public school law. With such a sensitive and complicated area of public school law, principals simply may not know what is best for students with special needs. If a principal has personal experiences outside the school setting, then his or her attitude regarding inclusion would be more positive.

This study also examined middle school principals' beliefs regarding the most appropriate placement for students with special needs. Generally, principals believed that special education students should be included in the general classroom setting. In two categories of disabilities, autism and traumatic brain injury, a high percentage of principals believed students with these disabilities should be in a more restrictive environment for most or all of the school day. The more positive experiences principals have had with students with disabilities the more they felt the placement of students with disabilities should be in general classroom settings. For schools that are beginning to implement inclusion or for schools that currently practice inclusion, it would be important to establish ongoing professional development opportunities for principals, teachers, parents, and community members so that inclusion would be accepted and meaningful for all students.

The study also analyzed the relationship between possible predictive variables collectively (training, personal experience, and professional experience) to determine if a prediction could be made about middle school principals' attitudes regarding inclusion. There was not a statistically significant relationship between these variables and attitudes about inclusion.

---

Dr. Edward Cox is a former elementary school principal and superintendent of schools. He is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policies at the University of South Carolina. His email address is

coxep@gwm.sc.edu.

Dr. Jesse Washington, III is a former seventh grade math teacher. He is currently an assistant principal in Lexington School District Four of South Carolina. His email address is

[jwashington8@sc.rr.com](mailto:jwashington8@sc.rr.com).

## References

Bateman, D. & Bateman, C.F. (2001).

A principal's guide to special education.

Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Brown, J. & Moffett, C. (1999).

The hero's journey: How educators can transform

schools and improve learning. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and

Curriculum Development.

Collins, L. & White, G. (2001).

Leading inclusive programs for all special education

students: A pre-service training program for principals. U.S. Department of

Education, Washington, D.C., 1-11. (poster presented at the Annual Meeting of

the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA) (ERIC Document

NO. ED470381).

Fink, A. & Kosecoff, J. (1998).

How to conduct surveys. Thousand Oaks, CA:

SAGE Publications.

Fowler, F. J. (2002).

Survey research methods (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA:

SAGE Publications.

Praisner, C. L. (2000).

Attitudes of elementary school principals toward the inclusion of

students with disabilities in general education classes. Doctoral dissertation,

Lehigh University, 2000.

Rea, P.J., McLaughlin, V.L., & Walther-Thomas, C. (2002). Outcomes for students

with learning disabilities in inclusive and pullout programs.

Exceptional

Children,  
68(2), 203-223.

Salisbury, C. & McGregor, G. (2002). The administrative climate and context of  
inclusive elementary schools.  
Exceptional Children, 68(2), 259-274.

Stanovich, P. & Jordan, A. (2002). Preparing general educators to teach in inclusive  
classrooms: Some food for thought.  
The Teacher Educator, 37(3), 173-185.

StatSoft. (2003). [On-line], Available: [www.statsoft.com/textbook/stmulreg.html.com](http://www.statsoft.com/textbook/stmulreg.html.com).

Yell, M. (1998).  
The law and special education. Merrill//Prentice – Hall:  
Upper River Saddle River, NJ.

Yell, M., Katsiyannis, A., & Bradley, R. (2003). A special role.  
Principal Leadership.  
2(4), 1-7. [On-line], Available: <http://www.principals.org/publications>.

VN:R\_U [1.9.11\_1134]