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PERCEPTION OF RURAL GENERAL EDUCATORS ON THE INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES

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PERCEPTION OF RURAL GENERAL EDUCATORS
ON THE INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION OF
STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education
in the College of Education
at the University of Kentucky

By

Rachel L. Crouch

Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

PERCEPTION OF RURAL GENERAL EDUCATORS ON THE INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES

The purpose of the study was to question rural general education teachers' perceptions and attitudes on the inclusion of students with significant disabilities. The investigator surveyed rural general education teachers on their perceptions of what should be occurring in terms of inclusion and on what they saw as occurring in terms of inclusion of students with significant disabilities. The results yielded mixed perceptions and were generally positive in terms of the inclusion occurring within that school district.

KEYWORDS: Significant disabilities, teacher perceptions, inclusive education, rural special education, modifying instruction for students with disabilities

Rachel L. Crouch

June 27, 2019

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Section 1: Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires that educators include students with disabilities in the general education classroom setting to the greatest extent possible. Hammond and Ingalls (2003) described inclusion as “an attempt to establish collaborative, supportive, and nurturing communities of learners that are based on giving all students the services and accommodations they need to learn, as well as respecting and learning from each other’s individual differences,” (p. 24). Researchers have demonstrated that students with disabilities do as well, and often better, on academics in inclusive settings as compared to special education settings (Freeman & Alkin, 2000). Other benefits of inclusion are improved work habits, increased self-confidence (Dore, Dion, Wagner, & Brunet, 2002); increased interactions with other students, improved social status, and the development of richer and more long-lasting friendships (Boutot & Bryant, 2005). Given these benefits, it is important that professionals are trained and feel confident in inclusive practices. It also is important that they have positive attitudes about including students with disabilities, which can be a contributing factor to its success or failure. McKeating (2013) cited the importance of teacher attitude when working with students with disabilities stating that, “Attitudinal barriers can take the form of misconceptions, stereotypes, fear, labeling, misunderstanding individual rights, and isolation of children with disabilities” (p. 8). She emphasized that successful inclusion in general education classrooms is affected dramatically by positive teacher attitudes.

In inclusive general education settings, although the special education teacher plays a central role with students with disabilities, the general education teacher shares in

the responsibility for providing instruction to these students (McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling, 2010). It is important that general and special education teachers work together to maximize the benefits of inclusionary settings because when done properly, it can be beneficial for everyone involved. McLeskey et al. (2010) refers to collaboration as “on-going participation of two or more individuals who are committed to working together to achieve common goals” (p. 211). There are many models or methods that teachers can use to make teaching practices more effective for students in inclusive settings.

One model for teaching students in inclusive settings is the collaborative team approach. This occurs when various individuals work together to develop a school-wide plan for inclusion, and work as a team to address the needs of an individual student or to provide direct support for teachers in an inclusive classroom (McLeskey et al., 2010).

Another collaborative model is the co-teaching model. Co-teaching occurs when the general education teacher and special education teacher share responsibility for teaching in a general education classroom. Co-teaching can be effective because the expertise of both the general education teacher and the special education teacher are utilized. When co-teaching, the teachers may decide to share the role of lead teacher or one teacher may take the lead role with the other taking on the role of support. However, two teachers of equal parity work together in the same physical space to serve the needs of all students. “They each make a unique contribution to instruction and together, ensure that a rigorous curriculum is delivered in a general education classroom with specially designed instruction embedded based on student needs and Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals.” (Friend, 2015).

A final teaching model used in inclusive practices is consultation. The special educator serves in a consultative capacity and may consult with the general education teachers to help find solutions to problems or issues that may be occurring in the inclusive classroom (McKleskey et al., 2010). The special education teacher also may make recommendations for the modification for instruction or materials for students with significant disabilities (SWSD). For an inclusive classroom to be successful, collaboration must occur between general education teachers, special education teachers, paraeducators, families, administrators, and related services personnel. Professionals working together with a common goal is key to the success of any inclusive program.

Although researchers and other professionals have disseminated various models of collaboration to facilitate inclusion of special education students in general education classrooms, general educators have various perceptions of including individuals with disabilities in their classrooms. For example, Martin, Ireland, and Claxton (2003) reported that general education teachers do not share special education teachers' beliefs that students with special needs have a basic right to receive their education in general education classrooms. These authors examined four areas in their study about teacher perceptions of inclusion: teachers' perceived support of inclusion, perceived role of responsibilities in inclusion, perceived effect of inclusion on students with disabilities, and the perceived effect training had on these perceptions. The authors surveyed a random group of 100 general education teachers and 50 special education teachers from four Midwest rural school districts. These teachers collectively taught students in kindergarten through 12th grades. The survey instrument was composed of 22 Likert-type questions "clustered according to four descriptors: teacher support, teacher role,

perceived effect of inclusion on students, and perceived effect of training on teachers' attitudes" (p. 6). The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The authors first analyzed the area of teacher support and inclusion. Here, the authors found that special educators had more positive views of inclusion than general educators. General educators were less receptive to making modifications to the environment or the curriculum necessary to support students with disabilities in their classrooms. They found the "two teacher groups differed on their perception regarding the basic right of disabled children to receive their education in a regular classroom, and that while regular education teachers might support the concept of inclusion in theory, most did not want the special needs student in their classrooms" (p. 7). The next area the authors examined was the perceived responsibility of the teacher in inclusion. The authors found that each teacher group was confused as to their role in the implementation of inclusion. The third area analyzed was the perceived effect of inclusion on special needs students. The authors found that the special education teachers saw more positive outcomes as a result of inclusion while the regular education teachers saw few advantages for those students. Finally, the authors looked at the perceived effect of training on teacher attitudes. The results showed that the more training a teacher had, the more likely they were to be willing to implement inclusion as part of their classrooms. The findings of this study support prior findings and suggest that when regular education teachers and special education teachers can have an opportunity for collaboration, decision-making, and participation in the modification of instructional goals, an inclusion program can be successful.

A study by Cook (2001) suggested that general educators and special educators having opportunities for collaborative decision-making and participating in the modification of instructional goals is critical to the success of an inclusion program. Cook analyzed data from 70 inclusive classroom teachers in the state of Ohio. In his study, he asked teachers to complete a form on which they were to nominate three of their students in four attitudinal categories (attachment or those students they wanted to include, concern or those students that made them uncomfortable to teach, indifference or a feeling of not caring one way or the other, and rejection of students they did not want in their classroom). They were to consider any students for whom they had included for any part of the day in their classrooms. The data were collected during faculty meetings during which teachers brought their classroom rosters. Teachers nominated students in each of the four attitudinal categories by code number. The demographic information was then collected. "Of the 173 included students with hidden disabilities in participating classrooms, 55 (31.8%) were nominated by their teachers in the rejection category. Because students with obvious disabilities were recognized by teachers who expected and excused their atypical behaviors, those students were not rejected by the teachers. According to Cook, SWSD brought out feelings of nurturing from their teachers. Cook's work showed that even though there were low rates of teacher objection to SWSD being included, that did not necessarily mean positive outcomes in the inclusive environments for SWSD. The teachers in his study admitted they were least prepared to talk to the parents of their students with disabilities. He found that many inclusive teachers of SWSD did not appear likely to have the requisite knowledge and training to deliver appropriate instruction for these challenging students. Cook's study also revealed that

inclusive teachers for SWSD not only felt less prepared to meet their needs, but at the same time had lower expectations for them than they had for other students.

Cook's (2001) findings correspond to the results in a study conducted by Khlem (2014). Khlem surveyed general and special education teachers in 52 Rhode Island public middle schools. She sought to question teacher attitudes specifically in relationship to students with disabilities and high-stakes testing, the relationship between the attitudes and practices of general and special education teachers, and the relationship between teacher attitudes and practices and the achievement of students with disabilities (SWD). Her study revealed that most of the teachers believed the SWD could learn the subject matter and engage in higher order thinking. Most of them did not believe, however, that SWD were capable of receiving a proficient score on high-stakes testing. Results also indicated that special education teachers had more positive attitudes about SWD ability to benefit from inclusive education than general education teachers. Results showed that a higher percentage of proficient achievement scores of SWD was significantly related to more positive teacher attitudes toward SWD's ability to learn and achieve higher level thinking. Finally, Khlem's study revealed that some teachers have lower expectations for students if they felt they could not meet their needs. They also were less willing to accept SWD if they felt they could not teach them to a level of proficiency because this would pull down their overall class test scores.

Hammond and Ingalls (2003) recognized that rural educators are uniquely challenged when it comes to inclusion of SWSD. Some examples may include a high number of emergency-certified teachers in special education, a lack of access to teacher training programs, poor teacher retention, and problems that come from serving a higher

population of children living at the poverty level with increased exposure to violence, drug abuse, and a higher rate of student drop-out. To gain insight into the perspectives of rural educators, the authors surveyed elementary teachers in 13 rural schools in the southwestern region of the United States. They implemented two questionnaires for the purpose of determining if teachers were supportive or non-supportive of inclusive programs, if there were general patterns of response evident in teachers' attitudes, and to make recommendations based on the responses. A total of 343 surveys (75%) were completed and returned. These surveys first indicated that general teachers were not fully committed to the concept of inclusion. A second result was general educators felt they had inadequate levels of collaboration and support from fellow teachers. Finally, it was found that teachers did not feel adequately trained for inclusion.

A commitment to inclusion, support for inclusion, and proper training for inclusion are all important factors in making a program beneficial for SWSD. An interesting concept brought up by Hammond and Ingalls (2003) as a result of their study "suggest that in these rural communities where inclusion is being implemented without the support of teachers, the concept of inclusion may in the end be viewed as a poor concept. In fact, the option of using pull-out programs and segregated classrooms might likely increase in the school settings as the old system may be viewed by educators as having more merit than the new system" (p. 28).

For students to be effectively included in general education classrooms, it is necessary to understand the perceptions of general education teachers so that training and resources can be provided to maximize inclusion efforts. There is clearly a need for more research related to the perceptions of rural general education teachers on inclusion and

participation of SWSD. The purpose of this study is to survey general education teachers in a rural school district.

Section 2: Research Questions

The research questions ask the following:

1. What are the perceptions of general education teachers of SWSD participation and inclusion in general education classrooms in a rural school district?
2. What do teachers report is happening in terms of inclusive practices in the district?

Section 3: Methods

Participants

Survey participants. To be included in the study, participants had to be general education teachers (elementary - high school) employed in one rural school district in Kentucky, which is the same school district in which the investigator was employed. Participants also must have had either currently, or at one time in their teaching career, SWSD included in their classrooms for at least a portion of the school day. Gender, ethnic background, and age were not criteria for inclusion or exclusion in the study, so these data were not gathered.

Investigator. The investigator in the study was a licensed educator who taught special education at a rural elementary school in Kentucky. She held a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education and a Master of Arts degree in Instructional Technology and was enrolled in a teacher leader master's program in special education with a focus in moderate and severe disabilities. She had worked in the district in which the survey was conducted for 13 years.

Survey Instrument

The instrument for this project was a survey created using online survey software (i.e., Qualtrics). The investigator developed the survey questions relating to general educators' perceptions of students with severe disabilities. A total of 30 questions were developed. Six questions related to teacher perception and 16 related to current practice. The remaining questions were of a demographic nature. The investigator had the questions reviewed by three professors of special education at the University of Kentucky and by six general education teachers at elementary, middle, and high school levels for

clarity. One teacher found a grammatical error in the questioning and that was changed by the investigator. The questions were developed to focus on various aspects of including SWSD in the general education classroom and how general educators felt about inclusion. The respondents were also asked to report what was actually occurring related to inclusive practices in their schools. The survey consisted of 21 forced choice questions that used a Likert scale for response options (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure), 7 demographic questions, and 4 open-ended questions. The survey included a variety of questions relating to the inclusion of SWSD across the entire school day. For example, some questions focused on the grade-level curriculum and modifications for SWSD. It also attempted to gain insight on how teachers felt about being prepared to meet the needs of SWSD. Some questions focused on the social aspects of inclusion of SWSD such as student interactions during mealtimes, specials classes, and at recess. Some questions were designed to gauge how general education teachers felt in terms of support from administration. The complete survey is shown in Appendix A.

Procedures

Prior to distributing the survey to educators in the district, several procedures were followed. First, I contacted the Superintendent of the school district to ask for permission to distribute the survey. I asked that a letter of support be written on school letterhead so that I could submit it along with an application to the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) at the University of Kentucky (UK). Second, I submitted an exempt application to the ORI. After approval was granted from UK's IRB, I obtained a listing of all general education teachers in the district and their e-mail addresses from the district

technology coordinator. I then sent out an initial recruitment e-mail to ask for their participation in the study and provided them with a link to an online survey through UK using Qualtrics online survey software. The recruitment e-mail is shown in Appendix B. I included a cover letter at the beginning of the survey that described the survey and explained to respondents that if they proceed with the survey, they were consenting to participate. The cover letter is shown in Appendix C. The survey took 15 - 20 minutes to complete. Two weeks after the initial recruitment e-mail; I followed up with a reminder e-mail. The reminder e-mail is shown in Appendix D. I allowed 2 more weeks for respondents to submit their surveys, then I closed the survey and began analyzing responses.

Data Analysis

The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. I calculated the response rate by determining the number of responses that were returned compared to the number of surveys that were sent out. I sent out 110 surveys and received 22 responses. I analyzed each question using frequency counts and percentages of responses. I also analyzed and compared each question based on the grade level that the teacher taught. I analyzed the data using descriptive statistics to determine differences and similarities between what respondents reported of what *should be* happening as compared to practices that *are* happening in their school. I rounded percentages to the nearest whole number. To analyze the open-ended responses, I used a constant comparative method (Lincoln, 1995) to categorize where teachers received preparation for teaching, strategies that respondents have found useful in inclusive education, and what they found was positive and negative about teaching students with disabilities in a rural setting. To do

this, I placed comments into categories as I read them. For example, I read one comment and placed it in a category or multiple categories if needed. Then I read a second comment, placing it in a similar category if it could be grouped with a previous response or making a new category if it could not be grouped with an existing category.

Section 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to survey general education teachers in a rural school district to answer the following:

1. What are the perceptions of rural general education teachers of SWSD participation and inclusion in general education classrooms in a rural school district?
2. What do teachers report is happening in terms of inclusive practices in the district?

The overall response rate was 20%, n=22; however, data from 19 respondents were used as these respondents had answered they had taught a SWSD in the past.

Research Question 1

To answer research question one, I pulled data from demographic questions 4, 5, and 6; Likert questions 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 18; and open response questions 2, 3, and 4. Teachers' opinions could differ based on various factors such as whether or not he/she has ever taught a SWSD, how long ago the teacher taught a SWSD, and the grade-level that was taught. Responses of individuals who indicated that they had never taught a SWSD were deleted from the results. Out of survey respondents, 79% have now or have had in the past a SWSD in their classrooms. Out of those 79% who have taught a SWSD, 90% of them have done so within the past 5 years. Also, out of the teachers who have taught SWSD, 53% were at the elementary level; 27% were at the middle school; and 20% were at the high school level.

Overall, teachers who responded to the survey had generally positive attitudes towards including SWSD in general education classes. For example, 71% of respondents

agreed or strongly agreed that SWSD should be in the general education setting as much as possible. However, their opinions were quite different when it came to the kind of curriculum that SWSD should be taught. When asked if SWSD should be taught the same grade-level curriculum as their peers, but with modifications, only half agreed or strongly agreed, while 44% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Six percent of respondents were unsure. There were 16 respondents to this question. These are the responses by grade-level: elementary had 5 agree, 2 disagree, and 1 unsure; middle had 2 agree and 2 disagree; high school had 1 agree and 3 disagree.

Various teaching models were used when including SWSD in general education classrooms. In this survey, respondents were asked about the co-teaching model. Of the 16 responses received, 59% agreed or strongly agreed that SWSD should be taught in co-taught classrooms where the special educator and the general educator teach students with and without disabilities in the same classroom most of the day. Five percent were unsure. These are the responses by grade-level: elementary had 6 agree, 3 disagree; middle had 3 agree; high school had 1 agree and 2 disagree, and 1 unsure.

Teachers felt strongly about SWSD attending less structured activities such as specials (e.g., physical education and art) and lunch. When asked about inclusion of SWSD in specials classes, 81% felt they should, while only 19% disagreed. There were 16 respondents to this question. These are the responses by grade-level: elementary had 8 agree; middle had 3 agree and 1 disagree; high school had 2 agree and 2 disagree. Eighteen people responded to the question asking if SWSD should eat lunch with their non-disabled peers, 70% agreed, 12% disagreed, and 18% were unsure of where they

should eat lunch. These are the responses by grade-level: elementary had 7 agree and 2 disagree; middle had 4 agree and 1 unsure; high school had 2 agree and 2 unsure.

Finally, the survey included a question on how prepared the respondents felt to modify instruction for SWSD. Of the responses received, 65% agreed or strongly agreed that they have been prepared, while 35% felt they have not been prepared to modify instruction for SWSD. There were a total of 17 responses to this question. The responses by grade-level were: elementary had 6 agree and 3 disagree; middle had 4 agree; and high school had 1 agree and 3 disagree.

In an open-ended question, teachers were asked what additional support or resources would be helpful in including SWSD if available. The responses were categorized as more technology, more manipulatives, smaller class sizes, additional para educators, and professional development.

The respondents' perspectives on perceived rewards and challenges from including SWSD in a rural setting were gleaned from open-ended questions. Their responses were categorized as positive and negative. Positive statements about working in a rural setting included getting to know students on a more personal level, students and staff are able to make lasting relationships in a rural setting. One respondent stated that "the students without disabilities are very welcoming and helpful towards those who have disabilities and we can trust our students to be kind and helpful." The most frequently noted negative statement was the lack of funding to provide needed resources in a rural district. For example, sometimes a SWSD must attend an elementary school that is farther away from their home, because there are not enough special educators to have one

at both elementary schools. Other responses included the need for more para educators and assistive technology in the rural district.

Research Question 2

The second aspect examined in this study was “What do teachers report is happening in terms of inclusive practices in the district?” To answer this question, I pulled data from Likert questions 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and questions 11 – 17. The first survey questions asked teachers if SWSD in their school are included in general education settings as much as possible. Of responses received, 76% agreed or strongly agreed and only 12% disagreed. Twelve percent of respondents were unsure.

When asked if SWSD are taught the same grade-level curriculum as their same-age peers, 53% said they agreed or strongly agreed, while 24% disagreed and 23% were unsure.

Next, respondents were asked if SWSD were being taught in co-taught classrooms. The responses were 59% agreed/strongly agreed, 29% disagreed and 12% were unsure of what was happening.

Next, teachers were asked if SWSD are included in same-age specials classes (i.e., physical education and art). Eighty-two percent agreed or strongly agreed and 18% were unsure. The results indicated that 42% of respondents reported SWSD eat lunch with their same-age peers. Thirty-five percent of the respondents disagreed and 23% were not sure.

The respondents were asked if special educators in their building give the general education teachers the support they need. Of the responses, 71% agreed or strongly agreed, 6% disagreed, and 23% were unsure.

Questions 13, 14, and 15 queried if general education teachers have any negative experiences related to the inclusion of SWSD in their classes, by asking if they felt SWSD cause more disruptions than their other students. Teachers were divided nearly in half on this with 44% agreeing, 44% disagreeing, and 12% being unsure. The survey also asked about interruptions caused by related services personnel (i.e., speech, physical therapy) on behalf of SWSD. Thirty-seven percent agreed that they cause interruptions in class, while 51% disagreed and 12% were unsure. Finally, I asked if the students who do not have disabilities are distracted by those SWSD during class time. Seventy-one percent disagreed with this statement, only 24% agreed, and 5% were unsure.

Next, I focused on the social interactions between SWSD and those who did not have disabilities. One question asked if in the lunchroom, SWSD were interacting in conversations with students who do not have a disability. Only 35% reported this happening while 41% reported this as not happening. Twenty-four percent of respondents said they were not sure. Another question asked respondents if their SWSD have friendships with students who do not have disabilities. Seventy-five percent agreed/strongly agreed, only 6% disagreed and 19% were not sure. Finally, respondents were asked if SWSD are invited to join peer groups and to this 77% agree, 6% disagreed and 17% were unsure.

The survey also sought to determine what general educators reported as actually happening in their schools versus their perceptions of what should be happening in their schools. Table 1 shows the similarities and differences in what general educators felt should occur and what they reported as occurring. The data demonstrates that teacher perceptions were nearly the same as what they reported as occurring in all areas except

one. Seventy percent of respondents felt SWSD should eat lunch with their non-disabled peers (at the same table and same time); whereas, only 42% reported this is occurring.

Table 1: Perceptions Vs. Reality

Topic	Percentage of educators who feel this should occur.	Percentage of educators who say this is occurring.
SWSD inclusion in general education settings	71	76
SWSD being taught same grade-level curriculum	50	53
SWSD taught in co-taught classrooms	59	59
SWSD included in electives classes (i.e., gym and art)	81	82
SWSD eating lunch with non-disabled peers	70	42

Section 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the perspectives of general education teachers regarding the inclusion of SWSD. A survey was sent to 110 elementary, middle and high school general education teachers asking questions related to inclusion. Overall, teachers had positive views of including SWSD in their classes. Elementary teachers were the largest group of respondents and had the greater number of positive responses to questions. The study also aimed to look at practices that are occurring in classrooms. The results show that overall, SWSD are being included and are enjoying many of the same benefits as students who do not have disabilities, such as participation in activities such as lunch or special classes. The survey results also point out the fact that while teachers are mainly supportive of including SWSD in their classrooms, about half are unsure of what curriculum they should be teaching.

Out of the 110 surveys that were sent out, only 22 teachers responded to the survey. This is concerning because this can affect the results. While I do not know what accounted for the low response rate, I can speculate the results may have changed if more teachers had responded. When elementary and high school general education teachers were asked if SWSD should be co-taught, nearly half disagreed. Seemingly, co-teaching is working well for the middle school general educators. But, with such a low response rate, is this the reality? Perhaps the results would be more positive or negative if there were more respondents weighing in with their opinions.

Perhaps the lack of responses, is due to negative perceptions. General educators might not have responded because they are uncomfortable with the subject. Perhaps

face-to-face discussions might lead to more clear results or reaching out to survey multiple school districts, in order to get more responses, might be the answer.

I also looked at the differences in perceptions of teachers across grade levels in the district. In answer to this, I used demographic questions to determine the grade-levels taught by respondents and I compared their responses to find similarities and differences.

Most respondents taught SWSD at the elementary level. Overall, teachers at the elementary level had a more positive view of inclusion of SWSD. For example, 8 elementary-level teachers agreed that SWSD should be included as much as possible, while only one disagreed. Out of middle-school teachers who responded, 3 agreed and 1 disagreed; and of high-school respondents only one agreed while 2 disagreed.

High school respondents were mainly divided on all questions with half being in favor of inclusion of SWSD and half not in favor. For example, when asked if SWSD should be included in specials classes, 2 high-school respondents agreed and 2 disagreed. It is interesting to note that most of the “unsure” responses came from high-school educators.

The middle-school teachers who responded had more positive responses than negative. For example, when asked about co-teaching, middle school respondents agreed 3 to 1 that it should occur. Also, a positive statement was made by a middle school general education teacher when she answered open-response question 3. She stated that her co-teachers were wonderful. Open-response question 4 also noted that their middle school uses co-teaching to include SWSD in regular classes.

Limitations

There were two main factors that limited this study. First, the study was limited due to the response rate being so low. A response rate of only 20% could affect the results by not allowing a full range of peoples' attitudes. Since the response rate was low and the survey focused on only one rural district, the results cannot be generalized across a wider population of people; however, it can provide some insight for this district perhaps.

The study might possibly have been strengthened by including an outside or third-party observer or by including a survey that was completed face-to-face. This could have allowed for participants to expand on their answers.

Practical Implications

As a result of the responses, several recommendations can be made to school districts to improve services received by SWSD in rural regions. Since respondents reported a lack of professional development and previous research reports indicate that training changes practice, districts may explore ways to increase high-quality training opportunities. Some recommendations for rural school districts might include providing professional development opportunities such as webinars to help general education teachers address concerns or questions they may have in the area of inclusion of students with disabilities or, those with significant disabilities. In rural areas, funding for training is often of lower priority when allocating resources and teachers are often isolated and have to travel great distances to go to professional development sessions. Webinars are a possible option as they provide quality learning experiences without having to leave the classroom and they can be done at home when the technology is present.

It also may be beneficial for rural districts to examine and focus on school culture regarding SWSD. School culture is a school's overall attitude and way that staff work together. Fostering a culture that is positive and accepting of the differences in all students could be beneficial in improving inclusionary experiences for SWSD as well as for all involved in the process. According to a study by Vizer-Karni and Reiter (2014), They found that an 'inclusive' culture produces an overall enhancement in 'participation' by all involved. Schools may be able to create a climate more accepting of SWSD by training all staff who work with them, having a school-wide observance of special days such as Student-of-the-Week, and by including special needs students in all activities and special occasions observed by the school.

This study reveals that general educators in this district are unsure what curriculum SWSD are to be taught. This warrants a discussion among educators and administration to determine to what extent and how SWSD are to be taught the general curriculum; or should they be taught an alternate curriculum? This is an issue that warrants training and collaborative discussion among those who work with the students.

Future Research

More research on factors facing education of SWSD in rural school districts would be beneficial in improving student outcomes. First, further research involving a larger sampling of school districts should be completed to get a better understanding of teacher attitudes toward the inclusion of SWSD in general education settings and pinpoint areas of change that are needed.

Second, future research also might include an investigation of attitudes of a wider range of school personnel in addition to those of teachers, such as administration, related

services staff, and other support staff, as many are involved in the education of children. And third, because the survey results point out that curriculum for SWSD is questioned by general educators, perhaps that would be worth investigating in addition to attitudes and perceptions. Once SWSD are included in the classroom, what then? What do we teach them exactly?

Conclusion

Educators in rural districts face unique challenges, but also have unique perspectives because of their geographic locations in the world. It is important to create a discussion with general and special educators to devise successful ways to include students with SWSD in their general education classes and not just by having them present, but also by having them engaged in the learning process. Growing, learning, friendship: these are things all students should be afforded.

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Demographics:

Are you an elementary, middle or high school teacher?

What subject do you teach?

How many years have you taught?

Do you now, or have you ever had students with severe disabilities in your classroom?

The U.S. Department of Education (2005) describes students with “significant cognitive disabilities” as those who take alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards.

If you **have** taught a SWSD, when was it? Please check all that apply:

Currently

1 – 2 years ago

3 – 5 years ago

More than 5 years ago

When you were teaching a SWSD, what grade level were you teaching? Please check all that apply:

Elementary

Middle

High

When you were teaching a student with severe disabilities, what subject(s) were you teaching? Please check all that apply:

Multiple subjects (e.g. self-contained elementary classroom)

Math

Language Arts

Science

Social Studies

Special or Activity Classes (e.g. art, music, physical education)

1. In my school, SWSD benefit from being in the general education setting as much as possible.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

2. In my school, SWSD are included in general education settings as much as possible.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

3. SWSD **should be** taught the same grade-level curriculum (with appropriate modifications) as their same age peers (language arts, math, science, social studies).

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

4. In my school, SWSD **are** taught the same grade-level curriculum (with appropriate modifications) as their same age peers (language arts, math, science, social studies). For example, if students in general education math are learning algebra, SWSD are also learning algebra with appropriate modifications.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

5. SWSD **should be** taught in co-taught classrooms where the special educator and general educator teach students with and without disabilities in the same classroom most of the day.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

6. In my school, SWSD **are** taught in co-taught classrooms where the special educator and general educator teach students with and without disabilities in the same classroom most of the day.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

7. SWSD **should be** included and receive instruction in the same-age specials/elective classes (PE, art, etc.).

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

8. In my school, SWSD **are** included and receive instruction in the same-age specials/elective classes (PE, art, etc.).

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

9. SWSD **should** eat lunch with their non-disabled peers (at the same table and same time).

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

10. In my school, SWSD **do** eat lunch at the same table and during the same time as their non-disabled peers.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

11. The special educators in my building give the general educators the support they need to successfully include SWSD in their classrooms.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

12. The administration in my building is supportive of inclusion of SWSD.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

13. In my classroom or school, SWSD cause more disruptions than students without disabilities.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

14. In my classroom or school, I think general education classrooms that include SWSD are often interrupted by related service personnel (speech, physical therapy, etc.).

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

15. In my classroom or school, students without disabilities interact with SWSD in the same ways they interact with students that do not have disabilities.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

16. In my classroom or school, students without disabilities are distracted by SWSD.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

17. In the lunchroom, I have noticed that SWSD are interacting in conversations with students that do not have disabilities.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

18. In my classroom or school, SWSD have friendships with students that do not have disabilities.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

19. In my classroom or school, SWSD are invited to join peer groups (e.g. lunch, recess, extracurricular activities).

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

20. I have been prepared to modify instruction for SWSD.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree; 5 = unsure

21. Where did you receive your preparation to modify instruction for SWSD? Please

check all that apply.

college courses

professional developments

other teachers

I was not prepared to modify instruction for SWSD.

Open-Ended Questions:

Strategies I find useful when including SWSD in my classroom have included:

When it comes to including SWSD in my classroom, I wish I had additional support

or resources in the form of:

Working in a rural school district, these things make including SWSD easier:

Working in a rural school district, these things make including SWSD more

challenging:

Appendix B: Initial Recruitment E-Mail

Dear Teacher,

You are being asked to complete a survey on your perceptions of the inclusion and participation of students with severe disabilities in your general education classrooms. This survey is part of a research study being conducted by Rachel Crouch, a master's student at the University of Kentucky under the direction of faculty advisors, Dr. Margaret Bausch and Dr. Melinda Ault. You have been contacted to participate in this survey because you are a general education teacher. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher at rachel.crouch@bath.kyschools.us.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will complete an online survey via Qualtrics, which will take approximately 20 minutes of your time. You may skip questions that you do not want to answer and stop the survey at anytime. Should you decide to complete the survey, your participation will be anonymous.

There are no risks involved in completing the survey. All data collected in this survey will remain confidential. The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in the researchers' computers and researcher's personal Qualtrics account for six years after the study is over, then will be destroyed. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study. Your responses will NOT be linked to your IP address so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide. It is anticipated that the anonymous data collected from the survey will be used help to help provide information on the perceptions of inclusion to general educators who have students with disabilities included in their classrooms.

If you have questions about the survey, feel free to contact Rachel Crouch at rachel.crouch@bath.kyschools.us or 859-432-0884 for more information. If you have complaints, suggestions, or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the University of Kentucky Office of Research Integrity at 859-257-9428 or toll-free at 1-866-400-9428.

Sincerely,

Rachel Crouch

University of Kentucky

Appendix C: Cover Letter

Dear Teacher,

This survey is about your perceptions of the inclusion and participation of students with severe disabilities in your general education classrooms. It is part of a research study being conducted by Rachel Crouch, a master's student at the University of Kentucky under the direction of faculty advisors, Dr. Margaret Bausch and Dr. Melinda Ault. You have been contacted to participate in this survey because you are a general education teacher. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher at rachel.crouch@bath.kyschools.us.

This survey will take approximately 20 minutes of your time. You may skip questions that you do not want to answer and stop the survey at anytime. Should you decide to complete the survey, your participation will be anonymous.

There are no risks involved in completing the survey. All data collected in this survey will remain confidential. The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in the researchers' computers and researcher's personal Qualtrics account for six years after the study is over, then will be destroyed. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study. Your responses will NOT be linked to your IP address so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide. It is anticipated that the anonymous data collected from the survey will be used help to help provide resources and training to general educators who have students with disabilities included in their classrooms.

If you have questions about the survey, feel free to contact Rachel Crouch at rachel.crouch@bath.kyschools.us or 859-432-0884 for more information. If you have complaints, suggestions, or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the University of Kentucky Office of Research Integrity at 859-257-9428 or toll-free at 1-866-400-9428.

By continuing with the survey, you are indicating your consent to participate.

Sincerely,

Rachel Crouch

University of Kentucky

Appendix D: Recruitment Follow-Up E-Mail

Dear Teacher,

Two weeks ago, I sent you an e-mail requesting your participation in a survey about students with severe disabilities being included in general education classrooms. If you have already responded to the survey, please disregard this message and accept my sincere gratitude. If you have not completed the survey, please take a moment to read this e-mail and consider participating in the survey.

You are being asked to complete a survey on your perceptions of the inclusion and participation of students with severe disabilities in your general education classrooms. This survey is part of a research study being conducted by Rachel Crouch, a master's student at the University of Kentucky under the direction of faculty advisors, Dr. Margaret Bausch and Dr. Melinda Ault. You have been contacted to participate in this survey because you are a general education teacher. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher at rachel.crouch@bath.kyschools.us.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will complete this online survey via Qualtrics, which will take approximately 20 minutes of your time. You may skip questions that you do not want to answer and stop the survey at anytime. Should you decide to complete the survey, your participation will be anonymous.

There are no risks involved in completing the survey. All data collected in this survey will remain confidential. The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in the researchers' computers and researcher's personal Qualtrics account for six years after the study is over, then will be destroyed. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study. Your responses will NOT be linked to your IP address so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide. It is anticipated that the anonymous data collected from the survey will be used help to help provide resources and training to general educators who have students with disabilities included in their classrooms.

If you have questions about the survey, feel free to contact Rachel Crouch at rachel.crouch@bath.kyschools.us or 859-432-0884 for more information. If you have complaints, suggestions, or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the University of Kentucky Office of Research Integrity at 859-257-9428 or toll-free at 1-866-400-9428.

Sincerely,

Rachel Crouch

University of Kentucky

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