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Attitude accessibility and education: Students' reported attitudes toward peers with disabilities in parochial and public schools.

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ATTITUDE ACCESSIBILITY AND EDUCATION: STUDENTS' REPORTED
ATTITUDES TOWARD PEERS WITH DISABILITIES IN PAROCHIAL AND
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

An EdS Field Project

Presented to the

Department of Psychology

and the

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Janet Miller

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ATTITUDE ACCESSIBILITY AND EDUCATION: STUDENTS' REPORTED

ATTITUDES TOWARD PEERS WITH DISABILITIES IN PAROCHIAL AND

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Janet L. Miller, Ed.S.

University of Nebraska, 2007

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Students' attitudes toward peers with disabilities may be influenced by a variety of factors. Two potential factors are curriculum of the school and integration of students with disabilities with nondisabled peers. Inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular classroom will increase experience and exposure. Further, a religious aspect of a curriculum may positively or negatively affect the reported attitudes of students in parochial schools. The purpose of the present study was to describe possible differences in curriculum and students' attitudes toward peers with disabilities in parochial and public schools. Elementary school children from parochial and public schools were interviewed to determine attitudes toward peers with disabilities. Students from the schools did not differ in their attitude accessibility, suggesting that parochial and public school students have similar attitude strength toward peers with disabilities. Differences in how the schools approached the topic of disabilities emerged, with public schools emphasizing equality and parochial schools stressing empathy. Further, the students expressed these differences in values through their responses. Overall, the students did

not have a firm understanding of the definition of a disability, and neglected to consider non-visible differences such as learning disabilities. Obtained responses suggest that students need more education and knowledge on individuals with disabilities.

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Attitude Accessibility and Education: Students' Reported Attitudes Toward Peers with

Disabilities in Parochial and Public Schools

Attitudes are an eminent aspect of the individual and encompass aspects of affect,

cognition, and behavior (Cafferty,1992). Attitudes toward individuals with disabilities

are a topic that has received much attention (Diamond, 2001; Horne, 1985; McQuilken,

Freitag, & Harris, 1990; Meyer, Gouvier, Duke, & Advokat, 2001; Okagaki, Diamond,

Kontos, & Hestenes, 1998; Rosenbaum, Armstrong, & King, 1988; Shapiro, 1999).

Specifically, educators must consider these attitudes in the context of the school. Due to

the requirement of Least Restrictive Environment and a recent push for inclusion, interest

in this area has been revived. As a result, individuals with disabilities are being included

in the regular classroom more frequently and prereferral interventions are becoming more

common (Allbritten, Mainzer, & Ziegler, 2004; Mamlin & Harris, 1998). Students'

attitudes toward individuals with disabilities may impact the success of inclusion (Horne,

1985). Knowledge of these attitudes and the factors that influence them may help

educators develop plans for positive classroom interaction and the ultimate successful

inclusion of students with disabilities. Research in this area is necessary to continue to

understand how to improve successful education of students with disabilities.

Many factors contribute to an individual's attitude toward individuals with

disabilities. In a review of research, Rosenbaum, Armstrong, and King (1988) explored

factors such as parental beliefs, exposure to disabilities, and gender. Parental values were

determined to have a moderate effect on children's attitudes. Young children's values were different from those of adults around them such as family and teachers, but over time the attitudes shifted gradually to match those of the same sex parent by the age of 18. Frequent exposure and interactions were found to be related to more positive evaluations of peers with disabilities. Finally, gender of the child was related to attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Girls expressed more positive general attitudes toward peers with disabilities than boys. Specifically, girls were more accepting of children with functional disabilities rather than cosmetic disabilities. Boys displayed the opposite trend, preferring peers with cosmetic disabilities.

One factor that has not received much attention is the nature and moral context of education. As an example, parochial schools that incorporate religion in the curriculum may impact held attitudes differently when compared to public schools that lack a religious aspect. The purpose of the present study is to describe possible differences in curriculum and students' attitudes toward peers with disabilities in parochial and public schools.

Attitude Accessibility Theory

Generally, an attitude can be defined as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998, p 269). Preferences, likes, dislikes, and attractions are expressed through attitudes. A wide range of concepts is encompassed by the construct of an

attitude; evaluations of peers with disabilities are the area of interest in this study.

Numerous theories have been proposed to explain attitude formation and expression. For example, the theory of attitude accessibility has received much attention. This theory proposes that the accessibility of an attitude influences the probability that it is activated. A stronger attitude is reflected by high accessibility. Fazio and Williams (1986) further proposed that the accessibility of an attitude determines whether it is activated and subsequently influences behavior. If an attitude is automatically activated upon presentation of a stimulus, the evaluation becomes more salient at that point in time. Consequently, that attitude is believed to be more likely to influence the perception and behavior toward that object. Research conducted by Fazio and Williams found that the accessibility of an attitude toward a presidential candidate impacted an individual's perceptions during a debate and ultimate voting behavior. Selective processing of information that was congruent with the activated attitude during the debate was common. Individuals with high accessibility interpreted the presented information to support their beliefs, but the individuals without strong, preformed attitudes were more accurate in their interpretation. Further, individuals with less salient attitudes were more likely to change their attitude after receiving information.

In addition, attitude accessibility moderates consistency between evaluation of the attitude object and behavior. A highly accessible attitude will be activated upon the perceived presence of the object and this evaluation will result in consistent processing of

information and resulting actions. Dickerson, Thibodeau, Aronson, and Miller (1992) found that increasing the salience of attitudes by approaching individuals and creating awareness toward water conservation with fliers increased behavior consistent with that attitude in swimmers. Further, adding a commitment component of signing a flier increased water conservation behaviors even more. Salience and commitment to an attitude promote consistency between that attitude and behavior. Therefore, students with more experience and exposure to individuals with disabilities may act in a manner congruent with their attitude (Cafferty, 1992).

However, conscious awareness of the attitude is not necessary for this consistency to occur because unconscious evaluations may be expressed without explicit motives (Schuette & Fazio, 1995). Attitude strength is reflected through the accessibility and certainty of an attitude; greater accessibility of an attitude is believed to reflect strongly held evaluations. Attitude retrieval is faster when individuals feel confident in their belief (Holland, Verplanken, & Knippenberg, 2003). Repeated expression of attitudes in an experimental setting resulted in greater certainty than when the attitude was only expressed once. Therefore, highly accessible attitudes are perceived by the holder as more certain and results in greater confidence in subsequent actions.

Lavine, Borgida, and Sullivan (2000) investigated the accessibility of attitudes and its relation to an individual's goals, values, and social identity and involvement. A phone interview was implemented to gain information on each of these areas. Participants were

presented a question with fixed alternatives and instructed to respond as promptly as possible while remaining accurate. Attitude accessibility was measured by the time required to begin responding after each question was stated. Highly accessible attitudes were reflected by a shorter responding times perhaps because the relevant belief was salient and easier to retrieve. Results indicated that attitude accessibility was related to greater involvement and extreme attitudes in political issues.

Therefore, children's values and social identity may be reflected by a highly accessible attitude. In the present study, a similar method of measuring response latency during interviews was utilized. Students were read statements and asked to respond "true" or "false." Time (in hundredths of seconds) was measured from the finish of the statement until the beginning of the participant's response. Faster responding times during an interview about peers with disabilities would indicate that a child has a highly accessible attitude and stronger values related to this topic.

Inclusion and Attitudes

Much research has been done to examine the effects of inclusion on students' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Conflicting results have been found on the effects of inclusion, with some research supporting positive effects, while others found deleterious effects. Okagaki, Diamond, Kontos, and Hestenes (1998) found that children in an inclusive preschool program interacted with peers with disabilities about the same amount of time as peers without disabilities. Further, children rated hypothetical children

with disabilities to be as likely as those without disabilities to have many friends. This

suggests that contact increases positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.

Another study also concluded that children enrolled in a preschool that included students

with disabilities reported more positive attitudes when they interacted with these students

(Diamond, 2001). Contact with students with disabilities was related to higher scores on

measures of emotion, understanding, and acceptance of individuals with disabilities. In

addition, students view different types of disabilities as more or less deserving of

accommodations in the school (Upton, Harper, & Wadsworth, 2005). Students with less

visible disabilities were found to be perceived as less deserving of accommodations or

extra support.

Therefore, inclusion of a student with a disability in the regular classroom will

increase the accessibility of the relevant attitudes held by students in that class. Presence

of a student with a disability causes the attitude toward individuals with disabilities to be

more salient, and consequently result in behaviors consistent with the held evaluation.

According to attitude accessibility theory, reported attitudes toward individuals with

disabilities are more extreme in either the positive or negative direction when inclusion

occurs.

Research on university students supports the same relationship between attitudes

and contact. Meyer, Gouvier, Duke, and Advokat (2001) performed a study on university

students. Students with disabilities and without disabilities filled out the Attitude Toward

Disabled Persons Scale (ATDP) in the presence of a peer with or without a disability. Results supported that the presence of an individual with a disability improved reported attitudes of students of an individual without a disability. Again, contact with an individual with a disability was related to higher reported attitudes.

In contrast, some theorize that contact has a negative effect. Shapiro (1999) proposed that mere inclusion of students with disabilities is meaningless and sometimes increases negative attitudes. Addressing the issues related to disabilities and promoting positive interactions are necessary for successful inclusion and positive attitudes toward peers with disabilities. Therefore, students can learn to understand and become more comfortable with individual differences and similarities among peers through facilitated interactions and communication (Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

Further, Rosenbaum, Armstrong, and King (1988) found that school structure influences students' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Relationships between students' reported attitudes and school structure suggest that placement of a special education classroom may influence the attitudes. Physical separation of the special education classroom, such as being located in a different wing of the building, was related to less positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.

Collectively, these findings can be interpreted as support that attitude accessibility theory describes the effects of inclusion on students' attitudes toward peers with disabilities. Theoretically, contact with students with disabilities seems to be related to a

stronger attitude toward individuals with disabilities in either the positive or negative direction. Inclusion increases the salience of the attitudes so evaluations and related behaviors become more extreme. In addition, the degree of separation of special education classes is related to attitudes. Being farther away, and therefore having increased perceptions of differences, increases negative attitudes toward students with disabilities.

One goal of the present study is to examine differences in structure of parochial and public schools. Parochial schools typically do not have the full range of special education resources as public schools, and children with disabilities may be included in the regular classroom more often. However, if a parochial school offers special services such as Title 1, the physical placement of this resource may differ from public schools. For example, the resource room may be located closer to regular education classrooms in parochial schools than in public schools. Alternatively, parochial schools may send students with disabilities to public schools to receive appropriate services such as special education as set out by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Katsiyannis & Maag, 1998). In this case, extreme separation of special services may influence the attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. In addition, it is possible that parochial schools accept fewer students with disabilities into their program because of a lack of services and resources. Therefore, non-disabled students may experience differing amounts of contact with students with disabilities depending on school structure, and

consequently have more or less accessible attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.

Religion and Values

At the present, very little research has been done to determine the effects of religious beliefs on attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Students who attend parochial schools are instilled with knowledge of religion. However, it can be argued that public schools imbue a comparable component of equality. Silvino (2001) found significant differences in reported values on the Social Values Inventory between students in parochial and public schools. In particular, parochial students often stressed religion and service; public students more often stressed equality and education. Therefore, it is questionable what, if any, difference exists between the educational components of religion or equality in parochial and public schools.

Religious beliefs may be a factor that influences students' attitudes toward peers with disabilities. Some research does support that students enrolled in parochial schools do report more positive attitudes toward peers with disabilities. Religion has been found to correlate positively with reported attitudes toward disabilities in college students (McQuilken, Freitag, & Harris, 1990). Further, students enrolled in a religious teacher training college in Israel were found to differ in their beliefs toward students with disabilities when compared to those enrolled in a secular program (Lifshitz & Glaubman, 2002). Results from a questionnaire indicated that religious teachers in training exhibited a greater willingness for inclusion and a greater sense of self-efficacy in teaching these

students. Therefore, religious following may improve expressed attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.

On the other hand, some have found that religious individuals convey more negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in comparison to their secular counterparts. For example, Weisel and Zaidman (2003) administered the Sillers Disability Factor Scale - General (DFS-G) to Israeli adolescents. Secular participants reported more positive attitudes than did religious participants. Therefore, religious affiliation may be related to views of segregation and unequal status of individuals with disabilities even though the religion encourages caring for others. Authors of the study concluded that religious individuals may view disability as a punishment rather than a test of faith. Ergo, religion may not instill morals or ethics that encourage individuals to treat all equally and fairly.

A second goal of this study was to describe any impact parochial schooling may have on students' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Parochial schools include a religious component that public schools do not. However, public schools teach a value of equality that parochial schools may not. Therefore, reported attitudes toward peers with disabilities may differ between students enrolled in parochial and public schools.

Goals

The goal of the present study was to describe attitudes toward disabilities in public and parochial schools and the relation of those attitudes to curriculum and

exposure factors. Interviews were utilized to gather qualitative data to describe any differences in these areas. Specifically, the following areas were explored:

1. Structure of the school and curriculum in public and parochial schools were examined. Specifically, location of services was investigated. Differences in curriculum were explored through principal and teacher interviews.

2. The overall attitudes of students toward peers with disabilities were explored. Individual interviews were conducted to consider any possible trends.

3. Accessibility of held attitudes between parochial and public school students was measured through response latency on fixed-alternate items.

Method

Participants

One midwestern Catholic parochial school and one midwestern public elementary school were recruited to participate in the study. Table 1 presents the demographic information for the two schools. Additionally, it should be noted that two children with Down's Syndrome were enrolled in the parochial school. Type of religious affiliation of students was available at the parochial school and composed the following: 56 % of the students were of parish families, 6% were of non-parish families of the Catholic faith, and 38% were of a different faith. The minority rate at the public school had the following breakdown of percentages: 21% Hispanic, 6% African American, and 7% Asian. No children with physical disabilities were currently enrolled in the school.

Principals of the schools were surveyed to explore inclusion trends, the curriculum, and structure of special services in each facility. Teachers of the participating classrooms were also interviewed about teaching and school practices. Eight students from each school were recruited to interview about their attitudes toward peers with disabilities by distributing consent forms to the entire class and utilizing those that returned the completed forms. The final participant pool consisted of three Black and five Caucasian students from the parochial school, and seven Caucasian and one Hispanic student from the public school. Thirty-one percent of the students were male, and 69% were female. Of the student participants attending the parochial school, 100% attended church at least once a week. Of the public school student participants, 38% of the students attended church at least once per week, 38% attended church occasionally, and the remaining 24% did not attend church. Fourth grade students were the desired population of the study because they are mature enough to engage in the interview activity. Informed consent and assent were obtained prior to interviewing any participants. The interviewer addressed each class at a time the teacher selected and explained the study, and students were allowed the opportunity to ask questions. Students were given consent forms to take home for permission to participate in the study. Students who returned the forms were given a pencil and a treat from the teacher as a token of gratitude for participating. A total of 16 students participated because they returned the signed consents and were present at the time of the study. Students were

asked sign assent forms before the interview to ascertain they understand and are comfortable with the material that will be discussed.

Procedures

Principals of the schools were given surveys to complete. Inclusion, curriculum, and structure of special resources in the schools were addressed in the survey. Appendix A provides the principal survey form used in the study. Following this contact with the principal, teachers selected by the principal were also interviewed regarding the atmosphere of the school and services provided for students with disabilities (See Appendix B).

The interviewer was a graduate student enrolled in the school psychology program at a local university. Prior to collecting data with students, the interviewer reviewed the questions and rehearsed with two children. Interviews with students were initially structured, and a list of stem questions was available for the interviewer (see Appendix C). The first eight questions are fixed alternative response, and are used to measure latency of responding to determine the attitude accessibility. The remaining questions are open ended in order to obtain a richer understanding of the attitudes. A review of several existing attitude measurement tools was examined prior to creating the interview (Horne, 1985; Salend, 1994; & Shapiro, 1999). Interview questions were developed with consideration of the objectives of the study. Questions were developed to prompt detailed information about the child's attitude toward and experience with peers with

disabilities.

Following an initial draft of the questions, a fourth grader was presented the questionnaire verbally and provided input on the appropriateness of the interview. Additionally, a teacher reviewed the questions and made suggestions for modifications for the final interview format. An audio recorder was used to record the interviews for later exploration. Further, a stop watch was be utilized to measure the latency of response time for each question.

Students were informed that the purpose of the study was to gain information about their experiences with peers with disabilities. They were told that they can decline to answer any question or decline to participate in the interview. Students were also informed that the interview was audio recorded for accuracy. Interviews were done on an individual basis, and all information remains confidential and anonymous. A separate room with a door was scheduled at each school for the individual interviews to ensure confidentiality.

After obtaining assent and establishing rapport, the interview began. The participant was read standard instructions for the interview. For the first eight questions, the student was instructed to respond 'true' or 'false' to each statement read. In addition, they were told to respond as quickly as possible while remaining accurate. Audiotaping began at the onset of the first interview question. Latency was measured as time (in hundredths of seconds) from the completion of the statement by the investigator until the

student began responding. After the initial eight latency questions, it was a semi-structured format to allow for freedom of direction during the interview. The interviewer included follow-up questions in the interview if it was felt necessary to gather more information on an item. Personal judgment on whether to delve further into the questions was used based on how the student was responding. Each child was thanked for their time and help at the conclusion of the interview process. They were allowed the opportunity to ask any questions that they had about the study. The entire interview process required about 15 minutes from each student.

Data Analysis

Response latency was measured for each question to examine the accessibility of the child's attitude toward peers with disabilities. Using the audiotapes, the amount of time in seconds (and hundredths) was recorded from the completion of the question to the time the students began to answer. If the item had to be repeated, the time was measured from the end of the first time the statement was read until the student began the actual response. A total of four items had to be repeated with the entire sample. Inter-rater reliability for the response latency was taken on two students from each school, and composed 25 percent of the data. Correlations between the investigator's measured times and a second rater were calculated for four of the students. The mean correlation for the four students was .86. Table 2 contains the differences between the investigator's and second rater's measured times for these students. An independent samples t-test was used

to determine if latency differs between the parochial and public school students. Type of school was the independent variable, and time (latency) was the dependent variable. A nonparametric chi-squared test was used to calculate any possible differences on the fixed alternative items.

Principal surveys were examined for descriptions of school structure and curriculum. The obtained information described any differences between the two schools in these areas and was used to analyze the student responses. Teacher interviews were also examined to investigate any difference in structure and atmosphere in the school and classroom.

Each student interview regarding attitudes toward disabilities was transcribed for data analysis. Each response was separated by question and printed. Questions two and three were combined in the coding system because the responses overlapped and represented the students' experiences better together. The responses were physically sorted into piles that were similar in the expressed attitude and theme. The separate piles were used to define each category; The coder wrote a statement that described each one. Table 3 presents the final coding system for the student interview data. A second rater scored the answers according to the coding system, and inter-rater agreement for student interview responses was 95.5%. Trends between the schools according to the developed coding system were explored in order to describe possible differences in students' attitudes toward peers with disabilities in parochial and public schools.

Results and Discussion

Students' attitudes toward peers with disabilities were explored through

interviews. Qualitative data was gathered through open-ended questions in order to grasp

a richer understanding of attitudes toward disabilities and factors that may influence the

held beliefs. First, the information gained from the teacher and principal interviews were

explored to determine school atmosphere and curriculum structure. The qualitative data

from each student was explored using the coding system with consideration given to the

school atmosphere and structure.

Quantitative data was obtained on the fixed-alternative items. The response

latency time was considered to determine attitude accessibility. In addition, differences

between the schools on these items were explored.

School Atmosphere and Structure

Atmosphere and structure of the schools were explored in the principal and

teacher interviews. These areas are of interest because they may influence students'

attitudes toward peers with disabilities through individual experiences. Table 4 presents

information gathered on the structure and atmosphere of the school obtained from the

principal and teacher interviews. One difference noted between the schools was

availability of resources for students. As predicted, the parochial school did not have as

many resources and services for students. This trend is similar to what Katsiyannis and

Maag (1998) asserted about private schools lacking resources and often sending students

to public schools to receive services. No students in the parochial school were identified as disabled and no students with physical disabilities were enrolled. However, the attitude that all students would be welcomed at the school was expressed by the teacher. In the class that participated in the study, the teacher predicted that two students possibly had a learning disability because they struggles significantly in subject areas. Title 1 teachers were available for pull-out services for students who appeared to struggle in the class. However, neither of the Title 1 teachers possessed a degree in special education. The Title 1 teachers gave more individualized instruction in the areas of need. Students were pulled out of class for the following reasons: extra help, specials such as music, and some attended fifth grade language arts class. The teacher reported that other students do not noticeably react when students are pulled for various reasons, including extra help with academics.

The structure of curriculum in the schools also differed. In the parochial school, Religion class was held daily. Themes of acceptance and caring for all are presented in this class. No formal curriculum was utilized to specifically address the topic of persons with disabilities. However, the theme of acceptance was interwoven throughout the curriculum in all areas.

In the public school, more resources were available for students. The school offered Speech and Language, Special Education, Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and English Language Learner Services. In addition, the school employed 1.5

Learning Disability teachers, one Behavior Disorder teacher, one Speech/Language Pathologist, a School Psychologist/Counselor, a School Social Worker, and a Home-School Liaison. The overall attitude of the school was described as being accepting and viewing students with disabilities as part of the class.

In the public school class that participated in the present study, six students were identified for special education and were receiving services. Five of the students received speech and language services and one received resource services for math and behavior. During the school day, students in the class were pulled from the classroom for the following activities on a regular basis: gifted program, daily resource, or the behavior disordered room. The teacher reported that she did not notice any reactions to students being pulled from the room for these activities. The Second Step curriculum was presented in the class daily to promote respect for others regardless of any differences. Second Step is a violence prevention curriculum that addresses feelings and empathy (Committee for Children, 2002). No other formal curriculum addressed disabilities in the classroom. The teacher reported that themes of disabilities are not very prevalent in the curriculum of the class. Collectively, this evidence supports that the approach to education and resources differ between the schools (Silvino 2001). Both schools in this study do seem to be supportive of students with disabilities and foster positive attitudes; However, the schools differ in how they are supportive.

Student Attitudes

Individual interviews with students were conducted to explore attitudes toward peers with disabilities in parochial and public schools, and the responses are presented in Table 3 and Table 5. The overall attitudes described were similar in the schools. This supports that there was not much difference in the attitudes toward disabilities in these two schools. This contradicts previous research findings that attitudes do differ in either the positive or negative direction in parochial and public schools (McQuilken et al., 1990; Lifshitz & Glaubman, 2002; Wiesel & Zaidman, 2003). It may be that the approach may not matter as much as the overall accepting attitude of the school. As noted earlier, both schools were receptive to discussing the topic of disabilities and expressed a welcoming and open atmosphere.

The first eight fixed-alternative items were categorized as true, false, or no answer, and the responses gained from students in each school are presented in Table 5. In addition, the chi-square values for each item are presented. No significant differences between the schools emerged in these eight items, $p > .05$. However, a slight, non-significant difference emerged in the fixed alternative items. More students from the public school ($n = 3$) than the parochial school ($n = 0$) agreed with the statement that there were many students with disabilities in the school. Public schools generally provide more services and provide education to more students with disabilities because of the resources that are available to them. In addition, parochial schools have the option to

send students with disabilities to a local public school to receive resource services (Katsiyannis & Maag, 1998). Often, parochial and public schools do not accept as many students with disabilities because of the lack of available resources. However, it appears that the school that participated in this study was more than willing to accept students with disabilities.

The absence of a difference in reported attitudes between the parochial and public school in this study contradicts previous research (Lifshitz & Glaubman, 2002; McQuilken et al., 1990; and Wiesel & Zaidman, 2003). Both schools in this study expressed an overall atmosphere that supported positive attitudes toward students with disabilities. This overriding theme of acceptance may be more powerful than any curricular differences.

The open ended questions were coded and the resulting findings were explored for differences between the schools and overall trends. Differences and similarities in the described attitudes emerged between the parochial and public schools. Table 3 presents the number of responses from both schools in each category.

On question one, slight differences between the schools emerged in how students define a disability. Overall, it seems that students did not have a firm understanding of disabilities, and the majority who listed examples only considered physical disabilities. Five students from the parochial school defined a disability generally and did not give any specific examples. Only two students from the public school defined the term in this

manner. Two students from the public school did not answer the question or gave an irrelevant response. Students did not recognize disabilities that are not visible, such as learning disabilities. It is possible that students from the public school relied on the disabilities that they have come in contact with at school as a definition, thus listing specific examples. However, most students from both schools reported having some experience with disabilities outside of the school setting. Perhaps the curriculum had some influence on how students define a disability. The parochial school stressed a general theme of caring for all, so the students may use a more general definition. Educating students on disabilities may increase awareness and improve understanding (Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

Even though most students from both schools reported having at least some contact with individuals with disabilities on questions two and three, they had difficulty defining the term. Further, almost half of the students had a close relationship with an individual with a disability. One possible explanation is that students cannot put their interpretation of a disability into words. Embarrassment or an avoidance of the topic due to discomfort may also contribute to difficulty in defining the concept. If the topic of disabilities is not addressed appropriately in the schools, students may struggle with understanding differences. An inability to define the term may also reflect the accessibility of the held attitude. Students may not hold a very strong attitude towards peers with disabilities due to a lack of education on the topic.

Another difference emerged on question four concerning inclusion. More students from the parochial school (n = 5) suggested that students with disabilities should be included because of feelings and social opportunities when compared to the public school students (n = 1). However, more students from the public school (n = 4) viewed inclusion as a right compared to the parochial school (n = 0). This finding may reflect differences due to the educational approaches of the schools. Students from the parochial school may value altruism and caring since these themes were stressed at school. Therefore, these students would be more cognizant of others' feelings and friendships. This approach may augment students' ability to use empathy. Students from public schools are instilled with the concept of equality for all. Viewing inclusion as a right reflects an attitude favoring equality in the educational setting.

According to Bunch and Valeo (2004), students accept the system of education that is familiar to them. Bunch and Valeo found that students in a special education school preferred that approach to education, while students in an inclusive school felt that inclusion was more appropriate. The current findings further support this idea; Students familiar with a system that emphasized equality stressed this value in the interviews. However, students in the parochial school that stressed caring for all tended to consider individuals feelings.

On question five, most students acknowledged a general need for all students to learn. It is encouraging that students recognize an ability for all to learn and grow in

school. Regardless of an individual's ability level, learning and growth is always possible. Most students in the current study appeared to understand this concept, and supported that students with disabilities should attend school in order to learn. Out of the total 16 students interviewed, few (n = 3) considered how a student with a disability may accommodate for it through education.

Question six explored students' beliefs on grading scales for students with disabilities. Only four of the total 16 interviewed students expressed that students with disabilities should be evaluated on a different grading system. Over half of the students felt that grading should be the same for all students because of learning opportunities or fairness. It appears that most students do not possess the attitude that fair is not always equal. Students with disabilities are often graded on a different scale to create a more equal educational opportunity for success. Upton and others (2005) discovered that students believe that those with less obvious disabilities are less deserving of accommodations. Therefore, since no students with physical disabilities were enrolled in the present schools and those interviewed did not believe there were any students with disabilities in their classrooms, they may be more likely to view grading accommodations this way. Students at this age may not understand this level of reasoning yet, and educating students may increase an awareness of differences.

In addition, most students reported that there were currently not any students with disabilities in their classroom on question seven. A few students did acknowledge that

there could be a student with a disability in their classroom. Since there were students in each class with disabilities, recognizing it appears to be a problem. This would be expected since difficulty in defining disabilities and an emphasis on physical limitations were noted. Again, education on the topic of disabilities may be key in increasing knowledge and awareness.

On question eight, slightly more students from the parochial school (n = 4) stated that they would spend a lot of time with students with disabilities in comparison to public school students (n = 2). Further, more students from the public school (n = 4) reported that they would spend little or no time with a peer with a disability compared to students from the parochial school (n = 0). Since each class interviewed was believe to have a student with a disability in attendance, it is concerning that the students reported they would not interact with a student with a disability. It is possible that the students did not recognize their classmates possess a disability. This may be another reflection of the definitions students provided for disabilities. Since students emphasized physical disabilities, it is likely that they do not consider classmates with learning difficulties to have a disability. Hypothetically, students from the public school may know that they would not spend time with a student with a disability because they have more experience with them in their educational setting. These students may be more aware of their attitude towards individuals with disabilities due to these experiences and exposure. This finding also supports previous research (McQuilken et al., 1990) that religious students

express more positive attitudes toward peers with disabilities.

Students were asked to consider what activities they would do with a student with a disability on question nine. Eleven of the total 16 students interviewed were able to provide some activities while giving consideration to the students' ability. Two from the parochial school (none from the public school) said they would help a student with a disability. Values of altruism and caring for all may influence students to feel that they should help others. This would support that the educational approach of the school does influence how a student would interact with a peer with a disability. As suggested in the past by Stainback and Stainback (1996), facilitating positive interactions with peers with disabilities may help promote positive attitudes.

A difference in comfort around peers with disabilities emerged between the two schools on question ten. More of the public school students (n = 3) than the parochial school students (n = 0) reported a feeling of general discomfort when around others with disabilities. On the contrary, more students from the parochial school (n = 6) than the public school (n = 3) reported no discomfort at all. Amount of contact with individuals with disabilities may influence this area. Students from both schools did not have much experience with noticeable disabilities in the educational setting. As previously mentioned, most did have a relative or friend with a disability. However, positive experiences with peers with disabilities in school may improve interactions and attitudes. One way to promote these positive interactions is through inclusion in the regular

classroom, and both of the schools in this study did use inclusive education as much as possible. Inclusive education has been found to increase positive attitudes in the past (Diamond, 2001; Meyer et al., 2001; Okagaki et al., 1998).

This difference in comfort may also reflect the educational approaches of the schools. The parochial school's emphasis on caring for all that is incorporated throughout the curriculum may promote a more positive outlook. Also, this topic seems to be more prevalent in the parochial school, so the students may be more accustomed to interacting with and discussing individuals with disabilities.

Question eleven considered how students perceive the ability of students with disabilities to get along with others. More students from the parochial school (n = 5) than the public school (n = 2) suggested that getting along with a person with a disability depends on the actual type of person. This may be a reflection of the school's emphasis on caring for all. Considerations of another's feelings may be the result of direct instruction on the importance of empathy and acceptance. Students who are taught these values may be more mindful of a students inner qualities than their outward appearance.

More students from the public school (n = 4) than the parochial school (n = 1) stated that students with disabilities are easy to get along with, yet they reported that they would not spend time with them on question eight. Possibly, the disability, or fear of it, is preventing students from interacting with others. Students do acknowledge that peers with disabilities may be easy to get along with, yet they do not spend much time with

them. Perhaps students do not feel that they would enjoy being around a person because of their disability. It is surprising that students report having experience with individuals with disabilities, yet they still report that they will not spend time with them. As suggested by Shapiro (1999), an increased amount of contact and education combined may help with this issue. Contact alone may not be enough to promote positive attitudes toward students with disabilities. Since the schools did not present much curriculum on individuals with disabilities, this education component was lacking. Talking about differences directly and then facilitating interactions may promote more positive attitudes and behavior congruent with that held belief.

Finally, more students from the public school (n = 3) than the parochial school (n = 0) stated that students with disabilities are different on question twelve. This may be due to the identification and availability of resources in the public school system that is not as prevalent in the parochial schools. The inclusion of students in the regular classroom without classifying them as disabled may provide more social opportunities for students. Students may not be perceived as different if they are included in the room and participating in the same classroom activities as other students. All students would benefit from this educational atmosphere, and greater classroom cooperation may occur. This is similar to Amqvist and Granlund's (2005) findings that students with disabilities who have positive experiences in the classroom are more likely to continue to participate in school activities. Education of all students together would improve with this type of

approach since participation is increased.

Also, the perception of students with disabilities as different may be the result of the education on caring for others in parochial schools. Similar to how several students made reference to social opportunities and feelings of individuals with disabilities, they may consider the person before the disability. On the inside, a student may not seem as different than others than they appear to be on the outside.

Attitude Accessibility

Attitude accessibility was measured by response latency on the first eight items. The mean response time on the eight items for each student are presented in Table 6. The mean latency was 1.94 seconds for the parochial school students and 2.73 seconds for the public school students. No significant difference between the schools was found, $t(14,1) = .82, p>.05.$

Students from parochial and public schools did not differ on this dimension in the current study. This would suggest that students from each school have similar attitude strength and experience with individuals with disabilities. According to Fazio and Williams (1986), individuals who exhibit similar attitude accessibility and strength would also exhibit similar behaviors. Since all students reported having experience with others with disabilities outside of school, it is logical that the accessibility of the disabilities was similar. However, students' experiences in the school may be different because of the presence or absence of disabilities in the building. Neither school in this study had a

student with a physical disability in attendance, so any attitude accessibility difference

would have been due to the presentation of themes of disabilities in the curriculum.

However, themes specific to disabilities were not very prevalent in either school. Perhaps

the educational approaches of religion and equality are similar in this aspect. The overall

atmosphere of the schools was similar, despite the greater availability of resources in the

public school. Future research could further explore attitude accessibility of disabilities

in schools with varying amounts of students with physical disabilities enrolled.

Implications for Educators

Some differences and similarities were noted between parochial and public school

students' attitudes toward peers with disabilities. The described attitudes give insight into

what can be done to improve education and inclusion success. Educators need to be

cognizant of these attitudes in order to provide a successful and supportive school

environment. Not only to teachers need to consider students' attitudes toward disabilities,

but also their own feelings and perceptions. An individuals values may influence how

they teach students.

One theme that emerged in this study is that students do not have much

understanding of non-visible disabilities. This may be reflective of the students'

developmental level. However, improved education on the topic may increase awareness.

Neither school formally addressed the topic of individuals with disabilities, so students

may not understand or feel comfortable with the topic. If educators set an example by

openly discussing the issue, students may have a stronger understanding and more positive attitude.

Additionally, students do not seem to understand that equal does not always mean fair. Most interviewed students did not believe that students with disabilities should be graded differently. Again, this is possibly because the topic has never been formally addressed. Explaining to students that grading may be different so that all students have the opportunity for educational success may improve attitudes towards individuals with disabilities in the school setting.

Both schools utilized a system of inclusion with some pull-out resources. This approach may be a positive step in supporting accepting attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Inclusive schools tend to foster more positive attitudes toward students with disabilities than Special Education schools (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). Type and structure of a school may influence social and academic interactions between students. The welcoming attitude described by the principals and teachers in this study may also set an example for students. The overall atmosphere of the school may be more important than the actual approach used. It may not matter that students are taught differing values, but the actual teaching of the ideals impacts how the feel towards others. Therefore, the importance rests in addressing the topic of disabilities with students in a positive manner.

Promoting positive attitudes and addressing the topic of disabilities may create a stronger educational system. Schools are a first step in changing misconceptions in

society overall. Individuals with disabilities face struggles throughout their lives. Discriminatory attitudes towards disabilities have been found to negatively impact post-secondary education and the workplace (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005). Addressing the issue with children early on in their life may alleviate some of these difficulties.

Analogous to Shapiro's (1999) assertion that an information component must accompany interactions in order to be successful in promoting positive attitudes toward peers with disabilities, it is proposed in this study that educating all students on disabilities may increase knowledge and understanding. Students simply may not have the knowledge about the topic to verbally define what a disability means to them. Neither school had a formal curriculum to address the topic of disabilities, so any knowledge that students have gained came from elsewhere. Further, if parents do not educate their children on the topic, they are left to their own to explore and investigate disabilities.

Many students with disabilities feel negatively about their difficulties in learning (Kelly & Norwich, 2004). No student should feel poorly about themselves, and this may impact later psychological adjustment. Others' attitudes towards students with disabilities may influence this adjustment. Addressing the topic with all in a positive manner may prevent this problem from occurring as often.

The theme of religion versus equality did emerge in the two schools. It does appear that students had more of a sense of caring and acceptance in the parochial school.

Students in the public school viewed education more as a right. These differing values may influence attitudes and views on students with disabilities. Future research may consider how this difference affects education and attitudes in greater detail.

Continued research in this area is necessary to consider how to successfully educate students on the topic of disabilities successfully. Many approaches to education and inclusion exist. The answer to how to successfully include students in the regular classroom may lie in this area of attitudes.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The current study investigated student attitudes toward peers with disabilities in parochial and public schools through individual interviews. Very little research has been done in this area in the past. Future research should consider students' knowledge of and attitudes toward peers with no visible disabilities. Students in this study focused on physical disabilities, so the described attitudes may not generalize to less noticeable differences such as learning disabilities. Future research may consider any differences in attitudes toward different types of disabilities and the origins of disabilities. Exploring any perceptions of these less visible disabilities may lend more insight into children's attitudes.

The methodology in this study was intended to be a starting point to looking at attitudes toward disabilities. A small sample of students was interviewed to gain a deeper and richer understanding of these attitudes. The questions used in the interview format

were developed to begin to understand and describe how students in different schools feel towards peers with disabilities. Differences may emerge with more research and precise methods, such as questionnaire formats. Future research should delve further into themes that emerged. Qualitative research will give more insight into any differences that do exist in the areas that were explored.

In addition, the schools that participated in the study volunteered to do so. This may reflect a willingness and openness to discuss individuals with disabilities. These schools may possess a more accepting attitude overall. Further research may address attitudes towards peers with disabilities in more diverse schools systems. More schools need to be included in research before findings are generalized to the overall school systems because these two schools may represent a select few that are open to discuss the topic.

Students that volunteered to participate in the interview process may also be unrepresentative of the overall student population. Their willingness to discuss the topic of disabilities may be due to a more positive attitude. These students may have had more experience and education on the topic. A desirability effect may have also emerged in the interview format that was utilized. Students may have responded more favorably than they truly felt in an effort to appear positive.

The attitudes that were described about interactions may support a difference due to the educational approach. It is possible that parochial students would be more willing

to spend time with a student with a disability because of the philosophy of caring for all at the school. Future research may consider this possible difference and further explore the possible explanations.

Summary and Conclusions

The present study focused on student attitudes toward peers with disabilities in parochial and public schools. As expected, the curriculum between the schools did differ, and more resources were available at the public school than the parochial school. Some slight differences in expressed attitudes did emerge between the schools; However, the students at both schools described attitudes and experiences were similar. The accessibility of student attitudes did not differ between the schools either.

Overall, it appears that students from the parochial school tended to focus on themes of caring and considering others' feelings. Conversely, public school students tended towards beliefs in equality. This may reflect the curricular differences that are emphasized in each school. Each educational approach may have advantages, and further exploration will continue to consider how these approaches influence student attitudes toward disabilities. The overall atmosphere of the school may be essential in promoting positive attitudes toward peers with disabilities, and, subsequently, the education of all students. Teachers also need to be cognizant of their own values and beliefs towards individuals with disabilities because this may subtly emerge in the classroom. Understanding student attitudes will enable educators to improve the educational

atmosphere in the schools.

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Appendix A

Principal Interview on Students with Disabilities

1. What is the general attitude in the school regarding educating students with disabilities?

2. Approximately how many students with disabilities attend the school?

3. Describe the individuals with disabilities that are served and their particular needs/ accommodations.

4. How often are children with disabilities included in the regular education classroom?

5. What services are available in the school for students with disabilities?

6. Where are these services located (e.g., in or near regular classrooms, in a separate hall)? If possible, please provide a map of the school.

7. What, if any, curriculum is used to address the topic of disabilities?

8. How often and when is this curriculum taught?

9. What is the fourth grade schedule?

10. How prevalent are themes of individuals with disabilities in the regular curriculum?

Appendix B

Teacher interview on Students with Disabilities

1. What is the general attitude in the school regarding educating students with

disabilities?

2. Approximately how many students with disabilities are in your class?

3. Describe the individuals with disabilities that are served and their particular needs/

accommodations.

4. How often are children with disabilities included in the regular education classroom?

5. What services are available in the school for students with disabilities?

6. How often are children pulled from classes and for what reasons (e.g., gifted classes,

band)?

7. What are other children's reactions when students are pulled from class?

8. Do students react differently if the child is pulled for special education services?

9. What, if any, curriculum is used to address the topic of disabilities?

10. How do you promote positive attitudes toward students with disabilities in your

classroom?

11. How often and when is this curriculum taught?

12. What is the fourth grade schedule?

13. How prevalent are themes of individuals with disabilities in the regular curriculum?

Appendix C

Student Attitude Toward Disabilities Interview Questions

Demographic Information

Age: _____   Sex: _____

Ethnicity: _____   Religion: _____

Attend Church regularly? _____

Fixed Alternative Statements(True/False)

1. There are a lot of students with disabilities in my school.

2. Students with disabilities are not like students without disabilities.

3. A person who uses a wheelchair has a disability

4. Students with disabilities don't have many friends

5. A student who has problems reading has a disability.

6. I can tell when a student has a disability.

7. A person with a disability does not have a good life.

8. I am uncomfortable around people with disabilities.

Open-Ended Questions

1. What does the word disability mean to you?

2. Tell me about your experiences with people with disabilities.

3. Do you have any family or friends with disabilities? If so, describe your relationship

with them.

4. Do you think students with disabilities should be in your school? In your class? Why?

5. Do you think students with disabilities benefit from coming to school? How?

6. Should teachers grade easier or expect less from students with disabilities? Why?

7. Are there any students in your class with a disability?

8. If you had a classmate with a disability, how much time would you spend with him/her?

9. What activities would you do with a classmate with a disability?

10. How do you feel when you are around a person with a disability?

11. Are students with disabilities easy or hard to get along with? Why?

12. Are students with disabilities different? How?

Table 1

School and Student Demographics for the Parochial and Public Schools

	Parochial School	Public School
Grades Served	Pre-K through 8	Pre-K through 6
Enrollment	204 Students	318 Students
Minority Rate	54%	34%
Free/Reduced Lunch	55%	46%
Disability/ SPED Rate	Unknown	13%
ELL	Unknown	11%

Table 2

Differences in Means of Response Latency Time in Seconds for Four Students Between

Rater One and Rater Two

Student	Difference
1	.90
2	.15
3	-.36
4	-.20

Table 3

Coding Scheme and Number of Responses from Each School for Each Category on Open-Ended Questions

Question	Number of Responses	
	Parochial	Public
1. What does the word disability mean to you?		
Student gives a vague, general definition of a disability; Does not give any examples.	5	2
Student defines a disability and gives specific example(s). Student focuses on physical disabilities.	2	3
Student defines a disability and gives examples of two separate types (physical and learning).	1	1
Student does not answer question or gives irrelevant response (does not seem to make sense).	0	2
2 & 3. Tell me about your experiences with people with disabilities. Do you have any family or friends with disabilities? If so, describe your relationship with them.		
Student reports knowing somebody with a disability; Student has a close relationship with the person and sees them often.	4	3
Student reports working closely with a person with a disability in a helping relationship outside of home and school.	1	0
Student reports that he/she has a disability.	0	1
Student reports knowing of others with disabilities. Interacts with them very little or not at all.	3	3

Response		
Student does not know anybody with a disability.	0	1
4. Do you think students with disabilities should be in your school? In your class? Why? Student answers that students with disabilities should go to the same school and class; Considers students feelings and/or social opportunities.	5	1
Student views inclusion as a right; Expresses an attitude that they should be treated completely equally and that there is no reason for them not to be there.	0	4
Student gives consideration to accommodations for students in whether they should be included (e.g., accessibility, resources).	3	2
Student does not answer the question or gives an irrelevant response.	0	1
5. Do you think students with disabilities benefit from coming to school? How? Student states that students with disabilities benefit from attending school; Expresses a general need for all to learn.	6	5
Students states a benefit and need to learn; Expresses that students may accommodate their disability through education.	1	2
Student acknowledges both benefits and problems with students with disabilities attending school.	0	1
Student does not answer the question or gives an irrelevant response.	1	0
6. Should teachers grade easier or expect less from students with disabilities? Why? Student states that teachers should give considerations to disability in grading; Emphasizes that it is different/difficult for some.	2	2

Student responds that teachers should not grade easier because of learning experiences/opportunities for students with disabilities; shows understanding that they can learn.	2	2
Student states that teachers should not grade differently to keep it equal or fair.	2	3
Student does not answer question or cannot give reason or gives an irrelevant response.	2	1

7. Are there any students in your class with a disability?

Student reports that there are no students with disabilities in their class.	5	5
Student acknowledges that there are none that he/she is aware of.	2	0
Student acknowledges that there is a student with a disability in his/her class; Lists someone who could be considered to have one.	1	3

8. If you had a classmate with a disability, how much time would you spend with him/her?

Student reports that the/she will spend a lot of time with a student with a disability in order to help them.	2	1
Student reports that he/she would spend a lot of time with a student with a disability.	2	4
Student states that it depends on the person; considers personality or type of disability.	0	1
Student reports that he/she would spend little or no time with them.	4	0
Student does not answer the question or gives an irrelevant response.	0	2

9. What activities would you do with a classmate with a disability?

Statement		
Student reports that he/she could help a student with a disability in some way related to their disability.	2	0
Student lists some activities they could do; Gives consideration to what the student is able to do.	5	6
Student will do the activities that the student with a disability wants to do; Gives consideration to their opinion.	1	1
Student does not indicate any activities; Does not answer question; Irrelevant response.	0	1
10. How do you feel when you are around a person with a disability?		
Student reports feeling sympathy for students with disabilities.	0	1
Student reports a general feeling of discomfort around students with disabilities.	0	3
Student reports nervousness around certain types of disabilities or some apprehension over how the other acts toward them.	2	·1
Student reports no discomfort at all; Reports that it is no different than any other person.	6	3
11. Are students with disabilities easy or hard to get along with? Why?		
Student reports that students with disabilities are easy to get along with; A general sense of wanting to make friends.	1	4
Student states that students with disabilities are the same as everybody else: There is no difference with others.	2	1
Student states that it depends on the type of person or type of disability.	5	2

Student states that students with disabilities are hard to get along with.   0   1

12. Are students with disabilities different? How?

Student reports that students with disabilities are not any different than others.   5   3

Student acknowledges that students with disabilities are different in some ways because of the disability.   3   2

Student believes that students with disabilities are different than students without disabilities.   0   3

Table 4

Descriptions of School Structure and Atmosphere Obtained from Principal and Teacher Interviews for the Parochial and Public Schools

	Parochial	Public
Resources	Title 1 Pull-out 2 Special Teachers	Speech Special Education PT/OT ELL Psych/Counselor Social Worker Home-School Liaison BD Teacher
Frequency of Inclusion	Frequent, but students are not identified	Frequent (majority of time in classroom)
Reasons for Pull-out	Music 5th grade Language Arts Specials Extra Help Title 1	Music Resource BD Specials Gifted
Curriculum	Religion	Second Step
Frequency of Curriculum	Daily	Weekly

Table 5

Number of Responses and Chi-Square Value for Each Fixed Alternative Item According to School

Question	Parochial		Public		Chi-Square Value
	True	False	True	False	
1. There are a lot of students with disabilities in my school.	0	8	3	5	3.69
2. Students with disabilities are not like students without disabilities.	3	5	3	4	.05
3. A person who uses a wheelchair has a disability.	5	2	5	1	.25
4. Students with disabilities don't have many friends.	1	7	2	6	.42
5. A student who has problems reading has a disability.	2	6	2	5	.03
6. I can tell when a student has a disability.	4	2	6	2	.344
7. A person with a disability does not have a good life.	0	7	3	5	3.29
8. I am uncomfortable around people with disabilities.	0	8	1	7	1.06

Note. The Chi-Square critical value was 3.84, p>.05.

Table 6

Mean Response Time in Seconds of the Eight Fixed-Alternate Items for Each Student

Student	Parochial School	Public School
1	4.00	1.37
2	3.26	1.02
3	1.00	8.44
4	1.98	3.90
5	1.05	1.34
6	1.60	1.77
7	1.13.	2.63
8	1.52	1.40