



6-1978

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Recommended Citation

Brodwin, Martin G. and Gardner, Gwendolyn (1978) "Teacher Attitudes Toward the Physically Disabled," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 3 , Article 6. Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol3/iss3/6>

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Teacher Attitudes Toward The Physically Disabled

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Many state legislatures have recently enacted requirements that exceptional and disabled students be admitted to regular classrooms, instead of being educated in special classes or, as is often the case, in separate schools. In response to these changes, new methods of teaching must be instituted for teachers who are unaccustomed to students with special problems (Gearheart, 1976). For example, in teaching students with physical disabilities, Edgington (1976) has pointed out that many teachers and school counselors have a great deal to learn about the medical problems connected with certain physical disabilities and illnesses.

But the change in how the physically disabled are educated will require more than the acquisition of new information by teachers. As this study suggests, classroom teachers who have not been exposed to physically disabled children need help in changing their stereotypes and overcoming certain negative attitudes.

METHOD

In order to measure attitudes toward the disabled, the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP) scale, based on the research of H.E. Yuker (Yuker, 1965; Yuker, Block and Young, 1966), was used. The scale measures attitudes toward the disabled in such areas as work, personal and social characteristics and economic concerns.

Two groups of elementary school teachers were given the ATDP scale, consisting of a thirty-item questionnaire. One group taught in what might be described as a typical, metropolitan elementary school; the other group taught in a school that had a mix of both disabled and non-disabled students. This latter school was located near a large hospital complex for the severely disabled; hence, the elementary school had quite a few disabled and severely disabled individuals attending classes. Both schools were part of the public school system and both were situated in a large metropolitan area.

RESULTS

Teachers with mixed classes (disabled and non-disabled) who were more familiar with the disabled had more positive attitudes on the ATDP instrument. However, teachers of the disabled also had more extreme attitude scores (both positive and negative) than teachers in the classroom situation with no disabled students. A majority of teachers who had no disabled children in their classes expressed the typical stereotypes toward disabled persons. Some of these stereotypes are commonly projected upon other minority groups in the United States; others were exclusively applied toward the physically disabled.

DISCUSSION

The overall finding that those who teach the disabled do have significantly more positive attitudes toward disabled persons than teachers of non-disabled is not particularly surprising. But analysis of individual items on the scale yielded rather disturbing results about teachers who have not worked with disabled individuals. Some of the stereotypes that a large number of "regular" classroom teachers agreed with include:

- X 1. Disabled persons cannot have a normal social life.

- X 2. Disabled workers cannot be as successful as other workers.
- 3. Most people feel uncomfortable when they associate with disabled people.
- 4. Most disabled persons do not get married and have children.
- X 5. Disabled people are not as happy as non-disabled ones.
- X 6. Severely disabled people are harder to get along with than are those with minor disabilities.
- X 7. Disabled persons should not expect to lead normal lives.
- 8. Most disabled people prefer to work with other disabled people.
- 9. Disabled persons are not as self-confident as physically normal persons.
- X 10. It would be best if a disabled person would marry another disabled person.
- 11. Most disabled people need special attention.
- X 12. Most physically disabled persons have different personalities than non-disabled persons.

A comparison was made between the responses of "regular" classroom teachers and the extreme responses by teachers of the disabled. On seven (marked with an "X" above) of the twelve stereotypic items chosen by "regular" classroom teachers, teachers with "mixed" classes answered in a significantly positive manner. In other words, where teachers of non-disabled "agreed" to a significant degree with the item, teachers of the disabled "strongly disagreed" with the item.

It is apparent from these responses that many teachers who do not have regular contact with disabled persons believe many stereotypes and misconceptions about the disabled. There is a danger that these misconceptions, biases and prejudices will be communicated to those they are instructing. The fact that teachers who have contact with disabled individuals do not display standard stereotypes and frequently express positive feelings toward them, is indeed significant and worthy of additional study. These results might be taken as evidence in support of the total integration of disabled within all regular classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study has uncovered some very disturbing results concerning attitudes of elementary school teachers toward physically disabled individuals. The finding that teachers not having contact with the disabled have more negative attitudes toward physical disability than teachers with disabled in their classes, suggests that incorrect and misleading information concerning physical disability is being communicated in and throughout our societal institutions. Such negative attitudes could impede the acceptance of the physically disabled in housing, employment, social and cultural activities, and the school and educational system. Attitudes toward the physically disabled are similar to attitudes toward other minority groups; the disabled are currently being treated as a "minority" in our society, with all the negative implications that have been attached to that status.

If teachers, who are an educated class in our society, have such negative conceptions and attitudes, it can be inferred that the rest of society has many of these same misconceptions, and probably to a much stronger degree. The authors believe that little is presently being done to alleviate or change this situation. Results of this study support the concept of total integration of the physically disabled into the regular classroom situation. Integration of disabled and non-disabled in an accepting, positive environment can lead to greater understanding of one group by

another. The classroom milieu can be one place where this can occur and serve as a first step toward total acceptance of the physically disabled into our society.

Further research in this area is indicated. From the results of the present study, it was unclear whether teachers with positive attitudes chose schools which included disabled within the classroom, or whether positive attitudes, feelings and knowledge came about as a result of the experience of teaching and interacting with disabled individuals.

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