

2013

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### Recommended Citation

Ridarick, Tara and Ringlaben, Ravic (2013) "Elementary Special Education Teachers' Attitudes Regarding Inclusion," *LC Journal of Special Education*: Vol. 8, Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalshowcase.lynchburg.edu/lc-journal-of-special-education/vol8/iss1/10>

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Elementary Special Education Teachers' Attitudes Regarding Inclusion

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### Overview

In the past 30 years, the number of students with disabilities served in a general education classroom has increased. This movement, previously called mainstreaming, is now more frequently referred to as inclusion. Historically, most students with disabilities were served in segregated special education classes (Snyder, 1999). More recently, the majority of students with disabilities receive a portion of their education in a general education classroom. Nationally, as much as 80% of students with disabilities are served through inclusion (Shade & Stewart, 2001). One reason for the increase in the number of students being served in an inclusion setting can be attributed to legislation, including the passage of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA mandates students with disabilities receive a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The term LRE has become synonymous with general education (Kavale, 2002).

The primary goal of legislation in regards to inclusion has been to ensure educational equality for students with disabilities. Although legislation can set guidelines for the placement and services of students with disabilities, it cannot force acceptance of those involved. Numerous research studies have focused on the attitude of teachers toward the inclusion of students with disabilities. Since the early days of mainstreaming, teachers have been shown to have generally negative attitudes toward inclusion (Alghazo, Dodeen, & Algaryouti, 2003; Campbell & Gilmore, 2003; Kavale, 2002; Ringlaben & Price, 1981). They have demonstrated uncertainty about the benefits of inclusion (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003). More recent research, however, has indicated a shift in teacher attitudes toward a more favorable view of inclusion. Most of this

research has focused on the ways the negative attitudes of teachers can be barriers to successful inclusion (Ringlaben & Griffith, 2008).

Overall, teachers agree with the concept of inclusion. While general education and special education teachers accept the theory of inclusion, they are less willing to include students with disabilities in their classrooms (Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2001; Kavale, 2002). The attitude of the teachers who are expected to implement inclusive practices is one of the most important determining factors of successful inclusion. A teacher's attitude and beliefs will influence his or her expectations and instructional decisions for students with disabilities (Sze, 2006; Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2000; Winzer, Altieri, & Larsson, 2000). Research suggests teachers' attitudes could be more important for successful inclusion than student skills, curriculum adaptations, or experiences (Winzer et al., 2000). If the teachers expected to include students with disabilities do not have positive attitudes, inclusion will not work. Teacher attitudes have a direct impact on the educational experiences of students. If attitudes are negative, students may not be given the necessary educational opportunities (Campbell & Gilmore, 2003; Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000). Negative attitudes have also been shown to lead to less frequent use of effective instructional strategies (Bender, Vail, & Scott, 1995; Campbell & Gilmore, 2003).

Research has documented that general education teachers are largely against having students with disabilities in the classroom. According to Cook, Semmel, and Gerber (1999), 40 years of research shows that although approximately 65% of general education teachers have favorable attitudes toward the theory of inclusion, when asked more specific questions about inclusion, only 40.5% had positive responses. Inclusion may be seen as interfering with their current teaching duties and responsibilities. General education teachers may also believe

including students with disabilities would have an adverse effect on the learning atmosphere of their classrooms (Van Reusen et al, 2000). Special education teachers appear to have more positive attitudes toward inclusion (Jobe & Rust, 1996). Studies have shown regular education teachers perceive more problems with inclusion than special education teachers (Rheams & Bain, 2005). Even so, general education and special education teachers share similar concerns about students with disabilities being served in an inclusive setting. Both general education and special education teachers believe students with disabilities will not receive effective instruction in an inclusion classroom. Research has shown both groups feel a combination of pull-out services and inclusion is more appropriate (Daane et al., 2001; Shade & Stewart, 2001; Winzer et al., 2000). Therefore, it is important to determine the attitudes of both general education and special education students before implementing inclusive programs.

Several research studies have looked at different background variables and the effect on teacher attitudes. Contrary to what would be expected, Alghazo et al. (2003) found previous experience and contact with persons with disabilities did not influence teacher attitudes toward inclusion. Elementary school teachers tend to have more positive attitudes toward inclusion than secondary teachers (Monsen & Frederickson, 2002; Winzer et al., 2000). This may be attributed to the amount of time primary teachers have with their students or the less strenuous curricular expectations. There have been contradictory findings regarding gender and attitudes toward inclusion. Alghazo et al. (2003) found both male and female teachers had negative attitudes, but a separate study by Jobe and Rust (1996) found males to have more negative attitudes than female teachers about students with disabilities. Although years of teaching experience has not been shown to influence teacher attitudes, the level of education a teacher achieves does appear to have an influence (Jobe & Rust, 1996; Monsen & Frederickson, 2002). The higher the

education level achieved by a teacher, the more negative the attitude towards inclusion (Jobe & Rust, 1996; Stoler, 1992).

Several research studies have focused on why teachers may have negative attitudes toward students with disabilities and inclusion. Lack of information or no previous experiences with inclusion can contribute to a less positive attitude. One factor associated with negative attitudes relates to academic concerns and the impact having students with disabilities in the classroom will have on students without disabilities (Darrow, 2009; Kavale, 2002). Teachers feel they will have more classroom management problems in inclusion classes (Daane et al., 2001). They also feel they do not have the necessary skills or training to address the academic needs of students with disabilities (Darrow, 2009; Kavale, 2002; Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006; Shade & Stewart, 2001; Sze, 2006). Another area that negatively influences teacher attitudes is the perceived lack of administrative support and communication between teachers and administration (Snyder, 1999). Even though collaboration may be occurring, both general education and special education teachers did not feel they were being effective in their efforts (Daane et al., 2001).

Research has shown that teachers' attitudes depend on the type and severity of disability of the student (Campbell & Gilmore, 2003; Jobe & Rust, 1996; Koutrouba, Vamvakari, & Steliou, 2006). Teachers had more negative attitudes toward including students with more severe or obvious disabilities (Winzer et al., 2000). Students with intellectual disabilities, emotional or behavioral disabilities, or multiple disabilities caused the most concern for teachers (Sze, 2006; Winzer et al., 2002). Teachers were more accepting of those students with physical or medical disabilities (Jobe & Rust, 1996; Sze, 2006; Winzer et al., 2000). General education teachers may feel they are not trained to adapt the general education curriculum for students with cognitive

disabilities or equipped to deal with significant behavioral issues. Chhabra, Srivastava, & Srivastava (2010) found special education and general education teachers felt they were unable to meet the needs of students with more severe disabilities in a general education setting.

According to Kemp and Carter (2006), a positive relationship exists between the academic performance of students with disabilities and the teacher's perceptions of the student's academic skills. When it comes to the academic skills of students with disabilities, teachers often rely on their perceptions rather than the actual performance or achievement of those students. Teachers who had more positive attitudes toward inclusion had students with better academic achievement (D'Alonzo et al., 1997; Monsen & Frederickson, 2002). Students with disabilities, like their peers without disabilities, perform better in classrooms where the teacher has high expectations and expects all students to learn. In a study by Koutrouba et al. (2006), 67.76% of teachers felt positively about the social aspects of inclusion. However, in other studies, teachers have expressed concern for the self-esteem of students with disabilities who are included in regular education classrooms (Conte, 1994).

#### Purpose of Study

This study looked at the attitudes of elementary special education teachers in a school district in the Southeastern United States that has been regularly including students with disabilities in general education classrooms for the past ten years. Teacher attitude has been shown to be an important indicator of the success of inclusion. However, students with disabilities as a group continue to not meet expectations on state standardized testing. Clearly, even though schools are practicing inclusion, they may not be experiencing success. The success of inclusion has been linked to the support of the special education teachers (Cook et al., 1999).

Therefore, it is important to determine special education teachers' attitudes toward inclusion in order to determine where change is needed.

### Participants

The participants of this study were elementary special education teachers in the school district. Permission was obtained from the school district and principals to distribute the survey to 17 of 20 elementary schools. Three principals did not respond to the request to participate. The survey was given to the Lead Special Education teacher for each school who then distributed the surveys to a total of 87 special education teachers. A return envelope was provided with each survey.

### Instrument

An anonymous survey was constructed to measure teacher attitude toward the inclusion of students with disabilities. The first part of the survey consisted of demographic information including a) gender, b) age, c) years of teaching experience, d) years of special education teaching experience, e) area of certification, f) level of education, and g) type of certification obtainment (traditional or alternative). For the purpose of this study, traditional certification referred to completion of a four year college preparation program, and alternative certification referred to all other means of certification, including provisional certification and completion of state certification programs. The second part of the survey consisted of fourteen questions regarding inclusion using a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).



## Results

Of the 87 surveys distributed, 58 were returned resulting in a 67% response rate. One respondent was currently working in the school as a Speech and Language Pathologist and was excluded from the study. Demographic information is presented in Table I. Five of the 58 respondents were male. A majority of the participants (63.8%) were between the ages of 20 and 40 years, and 65.5% had less than 10 years of teaching experience. Twenty-nine of the respondents were certified to teach both general education and special education. Interestingly, over half (51.7%) of the teachers obtained certification through alternative means.

*Table I: Demographic Factors*

<b>Demographic Factors</b>	<b>Subgroups</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>Gender</i>	Males	5	9
	Females	53	91
<i>Age</i>	20-30	12	21
	31-40	25	44
	41-50	12	21
	51-60	7	12
	61+	1	2
<i>Years teaching</i>	<5	17	29
	5-10	21	36
	11-15	10	17
	16-20	5	9
	20+	5	9
<i>Years teaching special education</i>	<5	26	45
	5-10	19	33
	11-15	6	10
	16-20	3	5
	20+	4	7
<i>Area of certification</i>	ECE	7	13
	Special education	18	32
	ECE/Special education	29	53
	Other (Speech/language)	1	2

<i>Level of education</i>	Bachelors	28	49
	Masters	24	42
	Specialist	4	7
	Doctorate	1	2
<i>Obtainment of special education certification</i>	Traditional	26	46
	Alternative	30	54

Teacher attitudes were slightly favorable towards inclusion with an overall mean score of 4.32. A mean score over 3.00 suggests a positive view of including students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Mean scores for each test item is presented in Table II. The results show participants felt students with disabilities could receive effective instruction in an inclusive setting. Most participants agreed they had the necessary skills to teach in inclusive settings (M = 5.09). However, they only slightly agreed the school district had provided sufficient training for teachers (M = 3.51). While overall attitude was favorable, participants did feel including students with disabilities in general education settings created additional classroom management problems. Inclusion was not seen to have a negative impact on students without disabilities (M = 2.35).

*Table II: Mean Scores per Item*

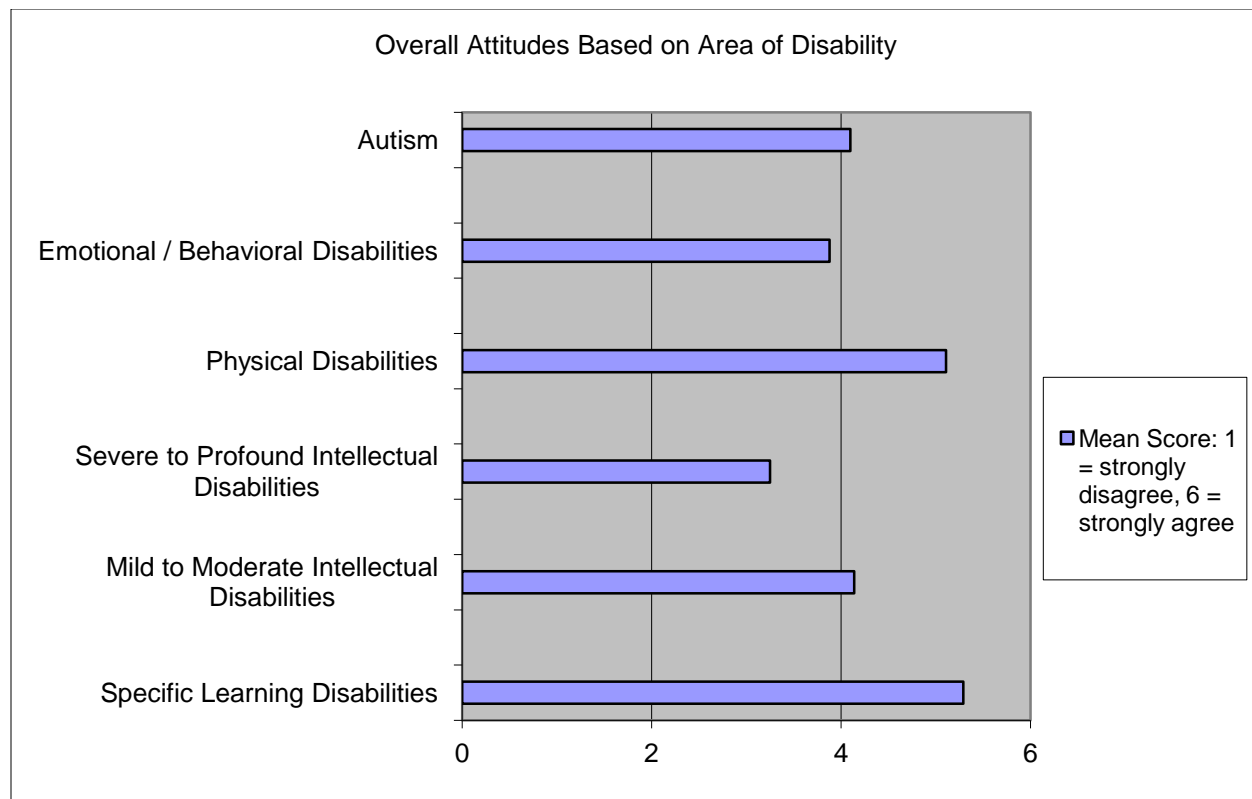
<b>Test Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1 SWD can be provided effective instruction	4.74
2 Inclusion has a negative impact on students without disabilities	2.35
3 Inclusion creates classroom management problems	3.36
4 I have the necessary skills to teach inclusion	5.09
5 Teachers have received the necessary training from the district	3.51
6 Time for collaboration is provided	3.61
7 Students with severe/profound disabilities should be included	3.25

8	Students with mild/moderate intellectual disabilities should be included	4.14
9	Students with emotional/behavior disorders should be included	3.79
10	Students with physical disabilities should be included	5.14
11	Students with learning disabilities should be included	5.19
12	Students with autism should be included	4.00
13	Self-esteem of SWD will be negatively impacted	2.10
14	Inclusion is a positive social experience for SWD	5.09

1 = strongly disagree      6 = strongly agree

Teachers' attitudes on inclusion varied when asked about specific disabilities.

Participants strongly agreed that students with learning disabilities and physical disabilities should be included in general education classrooms. Attitudes were also favorable towards the inclusion of students with autism and intellectual disabilities. The mean score for including students with emotional and behavior disorders was lower although still favorable. Students with severe to profound intellectual disabilities received the lowest mean score from participants (M = 3.25).



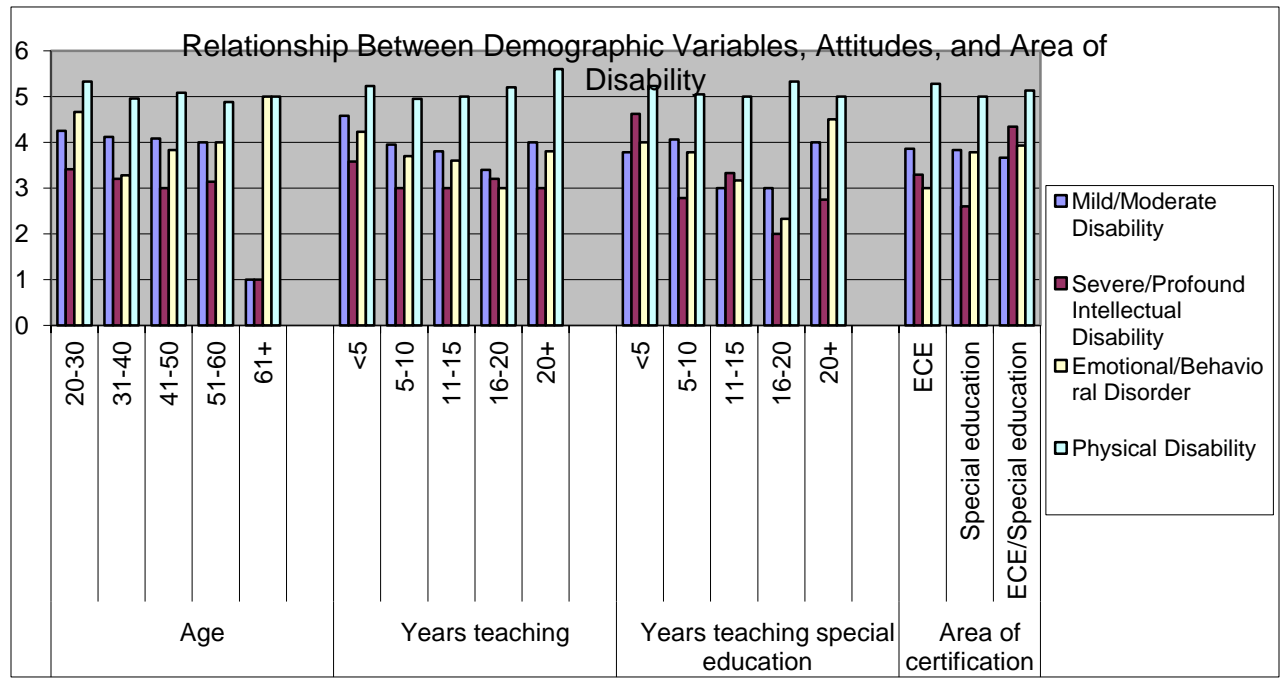
Teacher attitudes varied only slightly when looking at mean scores across demographic variables (Table III). Females had a more favorable attitude than males, but males accounted for only 9% of respondents. While there was no discernible change in attitudes based on teaching experiences, attitudes toward inclusion decreased with the number of years teaching special education, with the exception of those participants who have taught special education for over 20 years. Teachers who are certified to teach both special education and general education have a more favorable attitude toward including students with disabilities in general education classrooms than those teachers certified in only one of the two areas. There were no patterns of increases or decreases based on obtainment or level of special education.

*Table III: Relationship Between Attitudes and Demographic Variables*

<b>Demographic Factors</b>	<b>Subgroups</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<i>Gender</i>	Males	3.40
	Females	4.28
<i>Age</i>	20-30	4.55
	31-40	4.24
	41-50	4.22
	51-60	4.06
	61+	4.55
<i>Years teaching</i>	<5	4.63
	5-10	4.12
	11-15	4.17
	16-20	3.91
	20+	4.36
<i>Years teaching special education</i>	<5	4.57
	5-10	4.00
	11-15	3.86
	16-20	3.78
	20+	4.66
<i>Area of certification</i>	ECE	4.01
	Special education	4.28
	ECE/Special education	4.47
<i>Level of education</i>	Bachelors	4.48
	Masters	4.04
	Specialist	4.23
	Doctorate	3.64
<i>Obtainment of spec ed certification</i>	Traditional	4.33
	Alternative	4.23

1 = strongly disagree      6 = strongly agree

As with overall attitude, when looking at demographic variables, participants were likely to have more favorable attitudes toward the inclusion of students with physical disabilities. Students with severe or profound intellectual disabilities had the lowest mean score indicating teachers were less likely to have a favorable attitude towards including those students in general education classrooms.



### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of elementary special education teachers towards inclusion. Overall, the results indicated participants' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms were favorable, which is consistent with previous research (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Jobe & Rust, 1996). Although overall attitudes were positive, participants felt that inclusion could create additional classroom management problems. Teachers may believe students with disabilities will be disruptive or require too much attention. The participants agreed they had the necessary skills to

successfully teach inclusion. However, they felt less strongly that the district had provided sufficient training. Therefore, the teachers' confidence in their skills must come from the teacher preparation programs or their own innate teaching ability (Scruggs & Mastropeiri, 1996).

Research has been inconsistent regarding the relationship between demographic variables and teacher attitude. Some studies show little to no relationship (Chhabra et al., 2010; Van Reusen et al., 2000). Other studies show more positive attitudes based on levels of special education experience and training (Bender et al., 1995; Idol, 2006; Van Reusen et al, 2000). The results of this study showed no significant differences based on demographic variables with the exception of gender. Males had less favorable attitudes toward inclusion than females. However, it is important to note that only 5 of the 58 respondents were male. Contradictory to studies by Jobe and Rust (1996) and Stoler (1992), higher education levels did not result in more negative attitudes.

Participant attitudes were more negative towards the inclusion of students with more severe disabilities. Including students with severe disabilities in the general education classroom is often viewed as disruptive and time consuming. Previous research has shown one concern of teachers is that students with more severe disabilities will take away from the instructional time of students without disabilities (Chhabra et al., 2010). In this study, the participants had a more negative attitude towards including students with severe or profound intellectual disabilities. Attitudes were more favorable regarding students with physical disabilities.

### Implications

Teacher attitude is critical to the successful implementation of inclusion programs. Negative attitudes towards inclusion correspond to less effective instruction and could lead to lower academic performance of students with disabilities (Cook, Cameron, & Tankersley, 2007). Previous research has shown positive attitudes are dependent upon training, knowledge, and experiences (Van Reusen et al., 2000; Avramidis et al., 2000). In order for inclusion to work, teachers must believe they can affect the education of the students with disabilities in their classrooms. It is important for school districts to provide training on inclusion services. Because teachers with external training have been shown to have more positive attitudes toward inclusion, post-secondary institutions need to ensure teacher preparation programs provide sufficient training regarding students with (Avramidis et al., 2000). This is consistent with the results of this study that showed participants feel they are prepared to teach inclusion, but not as a result of district level training. In addition, teachers who were certified in both general education and special education had more positive attitudes towards inclusion.

Although there is a large body of research on teacher attitudes toward inclusion, there is room for additional studies to add to our current understanding. Most research has only measured the success of inclusion at one point in time (Kemp & Carter, 2006). It would be beneficial to study the success of students with disabilities who have been in inclusion classrooms over a period of time. The focus of most of the research on teacher attitudes toward inclusion has been on the concept of inclusion. Studying teacher attitudes toward individual students with disabilities would also provide important information since the way a teacher responds to a specific student will influence the quantity and quality of instruction (Cook et al., 2007). Successful inclusion depends on the attitudes of teachers towards students with disabilities.





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