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A STUDY OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR
ABILITY TO PROVIDE EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION IN AN
INCLUSIVE MODEL

by
JUDITH A. MYERS

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
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of Rowan College
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Approved by _____

Date Approved May 6, 1996 Professor

ABSTRACT
JUDITH A. MYERS
A STUDY OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR
ABILITY TO PROVIDE EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION IN AN INCLUSIVE MODEL
1996
DR. URBAN
LEARNING DISABILITIES TEACHER CONSULTANT

The purpose of the study was to determine if general educators felt they were meeting the diverse needs of classified students in the mainstream setting. The sample consisted of twenty teachers from an elementary school in an affluent community. The classification of the special education students range from perceptually impaired to emotionally disturbed. A questionnaire consisting of four open ended questions was distributed and content analysis methodology was used to analyze the responses. Fifty-five percent of those surveyed felt they had a positive experience teaching the special education student, while thirty percent expressed negative experiences and fifteen percent of the teachers could not decide if their experience was positive or negative. Those

surveyed expressed the need for more information about the special education children they are to teach as well as staff training and appropriately trained paraprofessionals.

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This study investigated the perception of regular education teachers' ability to meet the needs of mainstreamed students. While many were satisfied many others felt there was a need for extensive staff training.

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To my son, Ryan, my inspiration.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

BACKGROUND

Emphasis is currently being placed on the inclusion of learners with disabilities into general education classes and greater efforts are being made to avoid the stigma of labeling. Instead of placement in special education, interventions are sought within the general education classroom. In order to accomplish successful integration, general and special educators must be willing to collaborate in order to achieve their common goal. While few fail to see the many benefits of cooperative planning and instruction by professionals in general and special education, there is nonetheless increasing concern that the diverse learning needs of students, particularly those with specific learning disabilities, may not be addressed adequately in the general education classroom (Vaughn, Schumm, Klingner & Samurnell 1995).

NEED FOR THE STUDY

It is important to determine the perceptions of the general educators with regards to their ability to meet the diverse educational needs of classified students in the mainstream setting. Often these students are integrated into the general education classroom because it is determined to be the least restrictive environment. In many cases, special modifications or accommodations must be made to ensure success. The question often asked is, who is responsible for making these modifications - the special educator, general educator or both? Do general educators feel comfortable in interpreting the I.E.P.? Is there a need for staff training? The child's educational progress is related, to some extent, to the ability of the general and special educators skill of communication, planning, or collaborating. In order for collaboration to be more than a platitude, it is necessary to determine if time is set aside in their schedules for this to occur.

VALUE OF THE STUDY

This study will be of value to elementary schools in general and Child Study Teams in that the opinions of actual classroom teachers will be solicited. This study will provide information regarding areas that may need improvement and provide positive feedback in areas where the local school administrators and Child Study Team are assisting the teachers in providing quality instruction.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to interview regular education teachers who are responsible for special education children who are mainstreamed in order to determine their perception of the current practices in inclusion as it relates to their ability to provide effective instruction.

RESEARCH QUESTION

In order to accomplish the purpose of this study the overall general research question to be answered follows here:

What are the perceptions of regular class elementary teachers regarding the inclusion of handicapped pupils in their classroom?

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitations of the study are that it is a convenience sample from one elementary school of approximately twenty-five teachers. The responses will be provided in a narrative format, and therefore will have to be content analyzed.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

No one can deny that 'inclusion' is among the most crucial issues in both special and regular education. It is virtually impossible to pick up an education journal without finding at least one article discussing this topic, but few can agree on what inclusion really is (Smeter, Rasch, Yudewitz 1994). In their article, Thinking of Inclusion for all Special Needs Students? Better Think Again, the authors identified some philosophical and legal problems with regard to interpreting the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). IDEA uses the phrase 'least restrictive environment' to describe our obligation as educators to place children with special needs in regular classrooms whenever appropriate. However, if a child's needs can be better served in a pullout program the educators have the legal responsibility to place the child elsewhere. The authors stated that the rush to include all special education students in

regular education is similar to your family physician prescribing, in advance, the same medication for every illness. One student may learn better in a resource center, while another may do better in a regular education setting. They caution educators to also look at potential problems that may arise if a special education teacher is pulled into a classroom to service six special needs students for a subject. What are her exact contact minutes with each student? Are services being given in accordance with the I.E.P.'s? Parents could request due process if they feel services are not being provided as stated in the I.E.P. The authors also debate the use of paraprofessionals to solve such problems, noting that the parents have the right to demand that the aides have the same credentials as the special education teacher. Also, among the topics discussed was the disservice that is done to the regular education students when children with behavior disorders are placed in the mainstream. Their education is disrupted for a student who is mainstreamed only for social reasons.

Joanne Yatvin (1995) is the superintendent of the Cottrell School District in Oregon. She provided a counterpoint to Smelter, Rasch

Yudewitz, saying that her teachers have learned the monumental number of skills required for teachers of inclusion. Her teachers can do the job when numbers are manageable, the curriculum is flexible, and the school provides human and material support. Yatvin claims that with the 'pull out program' students return to their classrooms believing that they've had their daily dose of special education and their teachers feel little need to modify other instruction throughout the day. Yatvin said they use aides extensively because the special education teacher can't be everywhere, but the aide's role is to help students practice, review, and complete assignments for lessons that teachers have introduced. Her aides do not plan instruction, chose materials or present new concepts. "Although most of the aides I see get very good at knowing exactly what the teacher would do in most situations."(Yatvin, p.483). Finally, Yatvin succinctly states her main objection to a pullout program.

"How do special education teachers who work almost exclusively in resource rooms and who are typically busy with students or paper work all day long find time to observe special needs students in regular classrooms? How do they find time to meet with classroom teachers? How can they know what subject matter the students are expected to learn, how it is being taught, or how well they are doing with it? How can they build such knowledge into lessons delivered

in resource rooms and facilitate the transfer of learning back into the regular classroom? Without a strong link to a regular classroom, which I have never seen provided for in the schedule of a resource room teacher, the phrase 'quality pull out program' is a contradiction in terms." (Yatvin 1995)

Lawrence and Colleen Baines with Carol Masterson (1994)

completed an eight month study which surveyed middle school teachers regarding their schedules, years of experience, number of meetings they attend each week, amount of time they spent planning each week, and their certification and number of university or inservice courses they had taken in special education. The most surprising element was that few teachers had received any training, either through district inservice or university courses, and all teachers had special education students in their classrooms. All of the teachers said the special education students took up much more time than regular education students. Two - thirds of the teachers surveyed said they spent more than one hour a week making modifications for these special needs students. In this survey, a reading teacher with many years experience replied, 'mainstreaming was running teachers out of the classroom.' She said she spent eight hours a week putting things on tape, xeroxing notes and giving

retests. When the authors asked teachers to relate some of their experiences with children (good or bad), eighty-five percent recounted verbal abuse, ninety percent recounted mischievous conduct or disobedience, and ninety percent recounted a total disruption of the class.

When asked what administration was doing to help teachers, eighty percent said nothing, fifteen percent mentioned conferences with the disrupters, and five percent said that a special education teacher visited their room on occasion. One veteran teacher said, "No administrator in my eighteen years experience has ever offered training for me on how to deal with these students in the classroom. We have never gone to any meetings, been given any formal or informal workshops, we have been given nothing. It has created a hazardous environment,"(Baines & Baines & Masterson 1994).

To a question concerning whether the effects of mainstreaming had a positive or negative effect on the regular education student, all responded that mainstreaming had a deleterious effect for most students. They wrote that regular education students are missing out with regard to individual assistance from the teacher. The

teachers spend a disproportionate amount of time serving the special needs students. Expectations as a whole have been lowered. Teachers said they needed more support, and that mainstreaming has increased the amount of stress in their lives. Twenty percent of the respondents volunteered that they were reconsidering teaching as a career while one teacher wrote, "....unfortunately I don't feel very successful with the majority of special needs students - and frankly, I don't enjoy or know how to teach them."

Lini S. Kadaba (1994) writes ... "inclusion scares a lot of people. It means that most special education students - those with learning disabilities, borderline mental retardation, emotional and social quagmires - would end up studying in the same classroom as other children." She tells of a judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals already ruling that a NJ elementary school had to make every effort to accommodate a boy with Down Syndrome in regular education, even though he is disruptive.

Critics say it's a wonderful theory, but impossible to practice. Will it eliminate special education services and use a watered down curriculum? Kadaba tells of the "Tapestry" program that provides

an opportunity to learn about the world and each other using whole language. Both regular education teachers and special education teachers are in the same classroom all day long. Their program revolves around whole language and cooperative learning. Students of various academic levels are divided into groups that require each child to be patient, follow directions and cooperate. The students are encouraged to problem solve on their own. At the end of each lesson the groups are awarded points for final projects, cooperation, problem solving and teamwork. According to information contained in the article both the regular education and special education teachers say that without whole language it can't work. This enables each student to work at his or her own level while being exposed to students who work at a higher academic level. It enables all students to assist or help others.

Kadaba continues that some critics say inclusion is only about economics and spending less on education, while Professor Douglas Fush says that some children really need the individualized instruction and asks how can one teacher meet the needs of all students. A third grade teacher who has several Tapestry graduates

in her classroom worries that she is not trained to deal with specific disabilities and that she is already stretched to her limits. She says the day isn't long enough for her to figure out all the ways to teach a variety of different students.

The shared responsibility of educating students with disabilities is not without its problems. Whatley and Drakeford (1994) stated that collaborating with other professionals provides unique professional development opportunities with the professional exchange of ideas and problem solving. Teachers are provided with a forum for learning from each other and collaboration opens lines for improved communication regarding learning outcomes, methods and materials of instruction, and student progress. There are many reasons to collaborate, but educators are often reluctant to do so. Some of the reasons cited have been lack of ownership, turfism, and perceived lack of power in decision making. Whatley and Drakeford go on to say that the lack of ownership has been one explanation for unsuccessful attempts to integrate students with disabilities into general education. This has been caused by the past practice of the special education student being referred out of the classroom and

the general educator only being responsible for the students considered 'normal'.

David Majsterk (1994) wants meaningful integration at the professional development level. He says schools need to provide time and opportunity to collaborate, as well as a careful study of programs at both the graduate and undergraduate level. He advocates planned co - teaching so the special educator does not fall into the trap of performing a job that could be done by volunteers or paraprofessionals. Too often with turfism, the special education teacher winds up standing in the back of the room while the general educator teaches. This, he feels, needs to be addressed.

SUMMARY

There is a clear difference of opinion among professional educators with regard to the issue of inclusion. Some schools have been successful because they have taken the time, energy and finances to educate their staff to a point where they feel confident. Other districts have been fortunate to find the perfect blend of personalities needed to team teach in a classroom.

Unfortunately, there are also teachers who feel they are unfairly challenged with special needs children. They feel they should have more inservice training and they lack the essential time element they need to seek out help. Additionally the feeling seems to prevail that the time it takes to modify lessons for a special needs child is too much of a workload and takes away from the other students, as well as the continual classroom attention a special education child can sometimes demand.

CHAPTER 3

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

SAMPLE

The sample consisted of twenty teachers from an elementary school with three hundred eighty students, thirty - four of whom are eligible for special education. The media specialist, physical education, health, music and art teachers were all included in this study. The elementary school is located in an affluent community with two percent of the students receiving reduced lunch rates, while ten percent are in the free lunch program. There are cooperative agreements with surrounding school districts, and special education students are bused in to attend classes in the district. The classification of the special education students range from perceptually impaired to emotionally disturbed. The years of experience of the teaching staff range from two to more than twenty-four. Half of the teaching staff currently hold or are

working towards a Masters degree.

COLLECTION OF DATA

A questionnaire consisting of four open ended questions was given to each teacher. The teachers were verbally asked to participate and return the questionnaire as soon as possible. The questions were as follows:

1. Have you ever had a mainstreamed student?
2. What has made this a positive experience?
3. What advice would you offer other teachers that may soon be teaching mainstreamed students for the first time?
4. If you could improve or change any aspect of mainstreaming what would that be?

DESIGN

The basic purpose of the questionnaire was to gather data on the perceptions of regular class elementary teachers regarding the

inclusion of handicapped pupils in their classroom. The questionnaire was scored using content analysis, which is a method of studying and analyzing information by the frequency of various communications. The two major categories to be analyzed for the purpose of this study are:

Events that led toward successful mainstreaming.

Advice for future mainstreaming success.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

ANALYSIS AND RESPONSES

A total of twenty questionnaires were distributed, fifty-five percent or eleven respondents had positive experiences with mainstreamed children, thirty percent or six teachers had not had positive experiences and fifteen percent or three teachers were undecided. The following information was obtained from the teachers' responses to the questionnaire.

Of the fifty-five percent of the teachers who had positive experiences, factors contributing to this success were identified as follows:

<u>Reasons for a positive experience</u>	<u>% of teachers with this statement</u>
Good communication w/sending special education teacher	20%
Saw student's self esteem enhanced	15%

Regular education students worked well with special education student	15%
Strong parental contact	15%
Well trained paraprofessional	10%

The thirty percent of the teachers who felt that mainstreaming had not been a positive experience provided the following reasons:

<u>Reasons for negative experience</u>	<u>% of teachers responding</u>
Needed to see more of the CST	30%
Felt unprepared to teach mainstreamed students	20%
Team teaching not a team effort	10%
Students were a distraction	5%

In response to question three, asking what advice could be offered to other teachers, ninety-five percent of the teachers offered statements relating to the following:

<u>Advice to teachers w/mainstreamed students</u>	<u>% with this response</u>
Learn as much about the student as you can	35%
Get as much support as possible	30%
See things from the student's eyes	10%

In regards to the question on how to improve the mainstreaming process, ninety-five percent or nineteen of the teachers provided the following responses:

<u>Ideas for improving program</u>	<u>% with this response</u>
Mainstream only those that can function adequately	30%
Provide adequate paraprofessionals	20%
Provide teacher training	15%

Another crucial question addressed in the study was the general educators' perception of the degree to which they are meeting the diverse educational needs of classified students. Fifty-five percent of the general educators' surveyed have had positive experiences within the mainstream setting. Some of the key factors contributing to the feeling of success were communication with the special education teacher, seeing the special needs student's self esteem enhanced, watching regular education students work with classified students, strong parental contact and having a well trained paraprofessional.

Thirty percent of those surveyed reported negative experiences

when classified students were mainstreamed into their classrooms. These teachers felt unprepared to teach special education students, needed to see more of the CST once the child was placed, and thought that the students were a distraction for the rest of the class.

The surveyed teachers also provided recommendations as well as advice for improving the current mainstreaming program. The teachers said to get as much information about the classified child as possible, in addition to seeing the I.E.P., and to get as much support as possible. They also recommend teacher training as well as paraprofessional training. The general educators also felt that only students that can adequately function in their classroom should be mainstreamed.

CONCLUSION

In this data it was concluded that fifty-five percent of those sampled feel they are meeting the needs of mainstreamed students. They advise others to utilize good communication skills with the special education teacher, learn as much about the student as you can and to get as much support as possible. They also recommend

strong parental contact and having a well trained paraprofessional is crucial for success.

This data showed thirty percent of the teachers to have had negative experiences with mainstreamed students. The teachers felt unprepared to teach the special education students and they did not have enough contact with the CST. Those who were team teaching felt it was not a team effort while others felt the special education students were a distraction to the rest of the class. As for the other fifteen percent of the remaining teachers surveyed, they could not decide whether their experience had been positive or negative.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

SUMMARY

The purpose of the study was to determine if general educators felt they were meeting the diverse needs of classified students in the mainstream setting. The sample consisted of twenty teachers from an elementary school in an affluent community. The classification of the special education students range from perceptually impaired to emotionally disturbed. A questionnaire consisting of four open ended questions was distributed and content analysis methodology was used to analyze the responses. Fifty-five percent of those surveyed felt they had a positive experience teaching the special education student, while thirty percent expressed negative experiences and fifteen percent of the teachers could not decide if their experience was positive or negative. Those

Teachers surveyed expressed the need for more information about the special education children they are to teach as well as staff training and appropriately trained paraprofessionals.

DISCUSSION

These results were quite consistent with the general literature on mainstreaming. There seems to be a strongly stated need for inservice training on the subject of the mainstreamed student. In addition to the lack of training that general educators receive, is a lack of support from specialized staff. It seems that once the child is mainstreamed into regular education the visits from the CST case manager are too few and far between. The special education teacher can offer some assistance but still has to plan for and teach her own class. One teacher surveyed offered the intriguing idea of having a building resource person available for help, guidance and program modifications.

Teachers also appreciated working with paraprofessionals that were well trained to deal with behavior problems and with the

ability to be an effective teaching assistant.

It is imperative, based on the literature as well as those who were surveyed, that students who can benefit from mainstreaming be mainstreamed, but it is not appropriate for all students due to behavioral, emotional or social reasons. Each student should be evaluated on an individual basis for mainstreaming.

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