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WHAT ARE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR COMPETENCE IN
TEACHING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES?

by
Tara Wessel

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
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at
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Approved by _____
Professor

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ABSTRACT

Tara Wessel

WHAT ARE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR COMPETENCE IN EDUCATING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES?

2005/06

Dr. Joy Xin

Master of Arts in Special Education

The purpose of this study was to investigate special and regular education teachers' perspectives on issues such as training, experience, and education in teaching students with learning disabilities in inclusive settings. Twenty, kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade teachers employed in an urban school district participated in the study. Of those, 13 are regular education teachers, and 7 are special education teachers. They responded to ten survey questions. Five teachers were randomly selected to participate in an interview in school. The results showed that special education teachers demonstrated a greater deal of competence in teaching students with disabilities than regular education teachers, while half of the regular education teachers in the study did not feel confident in teaching students with disabilities due to lack of training and education in the field of special education. Teachers' competence and their training for teaching students with disabilities were discussed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of Problems

Since the 1990s, inclusion has become a popular movement focusing on integration of students with disabilities into regular education settings (Drew, Egan, & Hardman, 2002). However, reactions to the inclusion movement are varied. Inclusion is advocated by families and advocacy groups, but questioned by teachers and administrators for its possibility and feasibility of effective implementation (McLaughlin, Rea, & Walter-Thomas, 2002).

Although many teachers instruct students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, they do not feel comfortable or confident because they are unprepared (Hardin & Hardin, 2002). In the study conducted by Hardin & Hardin (2002), regular education teachers were asked about their feelings of teaching in inclusive environments. It was found that approximately two-thirds of the 10,560 general educators who participated in the study agreed with the concept of inclusion, but their degree of enthusiasm decreased when asked, "Are you prepared to teach students with disabilities in your classroom?" Their confidence decreased even further when questions addressed teacher readiness to make curricular or instructional modifications for individual students with special needs (Hardin & Hardin, 2002). Their major concerns included a lack of expertise in accounting for individual differences when they designed and implemented their

instructional strategies. It seems that general education teachers have not been adequately trained for teaching in inclusive environments. Even though this training may be provided, the training programs did not prepare teachers enough to provide instruction for such a diverse school population. As a result, most teachers to learn how to deal with students with disabilities received a maximum of one class in their collegiate training. Over 93 % of the regular education teachers participated in the study indicated that they did not receive any hands-on experience to teach students with disabilities in their training programs (Hardin & Hardin, 2002).

Laflamme, McComas, and Pivik (2002) examined barriers and facilitators to inclusive education. The most frequently reported barriers were attitudinal and social (Laflamme, McComas, & Pivik, 2002). Unintentional attitudinal barriers are related to a lack of knowledge, education, understanding, or effort on the part of the educational system or staff (Laflamme, McComas, & Pivik, 2002). The teachers who did not understand their students with disabilities tended to simply ignore them, or constantly lecture them the proper behaviors. Some teachers did not understand that their students with disabilities were simply not capable of doing what was being asked of them. These teachers tended to expect the same behavior of their special need students as they did for non-disabled students. Thus, these teachers would give simple assignments and tasks, extremely below the ability levels of the students to keep them occupied (Laflamme, McComas, & Pivik, 2002). It appears that students with disabilities were either being over or under stimulated, and that none of those were actually taught at their instructional levels. Facilitating inclusive environments requires appropriate physical access, opportunities for optimal learning and social experiences, and a nurturing climate.

Without these elements in place, students with disabilities would be denied from full participation and an equitable educational experience (Laflamme, Mccomas, & Pivik, 2002).

Background

In the United States, education of children with disabilities began in the early 1900s with the efforts of many dedicated professionals (Drew, Egan, & Hardman, 2002). Those efforts consisted of programs that were usually separate from the public schools, established mainly for children with learning disabilities, hearing impairment or visual impairment (Drew, Egan, & Hardman, 2002). According to Drew, Egan, and Hardman (2002), these students were usually placed in segregated classrooms in public schools or in separate schools. Special education meant segregated education at that time. During the 1940s, special school versus general school placement for students with disabilities emerged as an important policy issue. The number of public schools for students with mild mental retardation and those with behavior disorders increased in the late 1950s. From 1920 to 1960, the availability of public school programs for children with disabilities continued to be sporadic and selective (Drew, Egan, & Hardman, 2002). Under the leadership of President John F. Kennedy, the federal government took an expanded role in the education of children with exceptional needs in the 1960s. Some demonstration projects were funded nationwide to establish a research base for the education of students with disabilities in public schools.

The 1970s have often been described as a decade of revolution in the field of special education (Drew, Egan, & Hardman, 2002). Many of the landmark cases addressing the right to educating students with disabilities were brought to the courts

during this period. In addition, major pieces of state and federal legislations were enacted to reaffirm the right of students with disabilities to a free public education. Education was reaffirmed as a right and not a privilege by the U. S. Supreme Court in the landmark case of *Brown v. Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education* (1954). In its decision, the court ruled that education must be available to everyone on an equal basis (Richey & Wheeler, 2000). This decision also established a major precedent for the education of students with disabilities. Unfortunately, it was nearly 20 years before federal courts were confronted of the issue of a free and appropriate public education for these students (Drew, Egan, & Hardman, 2002).

In 1975, the U.S. Congress brought together various pieces of state and federal legislations into one comprehensive national law, Public Law 94-142 (PL 94-142), to provide a free and appropriate public education to nearly 4 million school-age students with disabilities in the United States between the ages of 3 and 21 (Richey & Wheeler, 2000). The law was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990. It is referred to by many as the single most important piece of legislation in the advancement of education for students with disabilities. This law mandates the zero-exclusion principal in schools, which requires public schools to provide special education and related services to meet the individual needs of all eligible students, regardless of the extent or type of their disability. IDEA (1990) also elaborates classification measures, eligibility requirements, related services, and the individualized education program (IEP). The advocate for students with disabilities attending a same school with their age appropriate peers has been promoted since 1990s. This inclusion movement brings challenges to both regular and special education teachers. How do teachers educate a

diverse group of students at different levels, especially those with special needs? This question seems critical.

Significance of the Study

The inclusion movement in present days is to mainstream students with disabilities in the general education classroom to the maximum extent possible. Resource rooms and pullout programs seem to become past experiences in some districts, and they are replaced by an in-class support approach. This change is not only new for students, but also for many teachers to adapt to the situation. It is unknown what type of academic outcome this inclusive placement may impact on students with and without disabilities.

There were many studies to investigate teachers' perceptions on inclusion (e.g. Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Austin, 2001; Laflamme, McComas, & Pivik, 2002), however, these studies did not examine to a detailed extent the variables of which teachers are lacking when working with students with disabilities. This present study has investigated the competence of the regular and special education teachers when working in an inclusive classroom.

Personally, this present study is important to me because I work in a district that has implemented a full-inclusion program this year. It has been 3 weeks since the program started in our school and many staff members are already voicing their concerns. Teachers are challenged by the instructional environment with a diverse student population. Some teachers are falling behind in their lesson implementation due to distractions from students with disabilities as well as the lack of knowledge of students at different levels. Whether I overhear a teacher complaining in the hallway, or they are

coming to me for guidance, I recognize that this is a major problem in my school.

Therefore, the objective of my study is to investigate the competence of the regular and special education teachers when working in an inclusive classroom with students with disabilities.

Statement of the Purpose

The purposes of this study are to: (a) investigate special and regular education teachers' perspectives on issues such as training, experience, and education in teaching students with disabilities in inclusive settings; and (b) interview and survey a selected group of teachers to obtain details about their competence in teaching students with disabilities.

Research Questions

1. What are the special education teachers' perceptions on instructional modifications, co-teaching practice, and behavior management of students with disabilities?

2. What are the regular education teachers' perceptions on instructional modifications, co-teaching practice, and behavior management of students with disabilities?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Public Law 94-142 (PL 94-142) mandates a free and appropriate public education to nearly 4 million school-age students with disabilities in the United States (Richey & Wheeler, 2000). This law has been re-authorized in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990), becoming the most important legislation in the advancement of education for students with disabilities.

Least restrictive environment (LRE) is required to mandate appropriate environments to mainstream students with disabilities into regular education settings with their non-disabled peers. Inclusive education as a movement has challenged the educational system since the 1990s, and become the most controversial issue in the field of education (Richey & Wheeler, 2000). Currently, over 70% of students with disabilities are served in general education classrooms, and this number continues to increase. Teachers are now facing many challenges in instructing diverse students, especially those with disabilities. This chapter reviews research articles on inclusive education and its impact on teachers regarding their competence in the areas of instructional modifications, collaborative instructional practice, and behavior management of students with disabilities.

Inclusive Education and Its Impact on Teachers

The movement toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms has raised numerous questions about the roles and responsibilities

of school personnel in providing appropriate education for all students enrolled in public schools (Beirne-Smith, Daane, & Latham, 2000). More specifically, recent literature on the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education has focused on the preparation of educators to develop and implement inclusive models that address the social and academic needs of all students in general education classrooms (Beirne-Smith, Daane, & Latham, 2000). Educators and researchers have identified many benefits for students with disabilities as a result of inclusive opportunities (Dowing & Eichinger, 2003). For example, these students benefit from having two teachers with different teaching styles and experiences in one classroom (Dowing & Eichinger, 2003). Students may have a greater opportunity to be exposed to a cooperative learning environment preparing them for life in the workplace. These benefits, however, do not simply emerge from sharing the same physical space (Dowing & Eichinger, 2003).

The literature indicates concerns on limited professional preparation or training teachers received for appropriate instruction to students with disabilities (Duff, Keefe, & Moore, 2004). They are often apprehensive and unsure how to provide modifications and strategies for students with disabilities (Duff, Keefe, & Moore, 2004). It is found that the most frequently reported barriers to activity and participation for students with disabilities were attitudinal (Laflamme, McComas, & Pivik, 2002). Attitudinal barriers related to educational staff's lack of knowledge, education, understanding, or effort. This took the form of "busy" work, when teachers stated that they were too busy to adapt the curriculum, excluding students with disabilities from certain classes without a reason, or without understanding their physical capabilities or limitations (Laflamme, McComas, & Pivik, 2002). Some solutions to the above problems would be to provide all teachers

training on disability awareness, and methods for making school subjects more inclusive (Laflamme, McComas, & Pivik, 2002). In addition, teachers must be thoroughly trained in the areas of curriculum modification and behavior management (Laflamme, McComas, & Pivik, 2002).

Teacher Competence of Instructional Modifications

To control, coordinate, and increase the predictability of classroom life, teachers typically rely on “routines,” or sets of established procedures (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). As early as the fourth week of school, teachers usually have established these routines that persist throughout the school year and serve as a framework for planning instructional activities and lessons (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). Routines, therefore, represent highly functional organizers to structure classroom life. At the same time, a longstanding assumption in educational psychology is the need to introduce regular adaptations to establish teaching plans in order to address individual learner’s differences and promote achievement (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). With instructional adaptation, the teacher formulates judgments about the success of previous lessons for individual students, and based on those judgments, adjusts subsequent teaching strategies or goals to enhance learning (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). Masten, Scott, and Vitale (1998) define instructional adaptations as a process which requires teachers to implement alternative teaching actions such as modifying materials, assignments, testing procedures, and grading criteria or varying presentation styles, group sizes and feedback techniques in order to enhance the success of students with disabilities in general classroom settings. Unfortunately, the two features of successful classrooms—the use of routines and regular instructional adaptation—may represent competing forces (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). Although

instructional routines facilitate order, efficiency, and predictability, they simultaneously may limit the ongoing change and flexibility necessary for instructional adaptation (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). Over the past decade, the tension between classroom routines and instructional adaptations has increased (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). With the full inclusion movement, the number of students with disabilities is increasing in general education classrooms (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). In the typical classroom in the United States today, there is an average of 27 children whose academic performance levels range more than five grade levels. The corresponding range of needs within single classrooms highlights the importance of identifying the conditions that prompt teachers to disrupt routines for the purpose of adapting their teaching to students with disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998).

Research addressing teacher adaptations for diverse student needs in inclusive settings has found that teachers vary significantly in their ability or willingness to make adaptations (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002). It is found that teachers taught single or large groups seldom differentiated instruction or made adaptations based on student needs. In a similar investigation, it is also found that teachers were willing to make adaptations that were associated with interactive planning (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002). This means that the adaptations should be matched with their lesson plan.

More recently, a study by Duhaney, Whittaker and Spencer (2001) revealed that general education teachers were more willing to make specialized adaptations for students if they were provided prompting and special support. For example, teachers involved in an Inclusive School Program (ISP) (2002) were in an agreement that, with adaptations, the needs of all elementary students with mild disabilities could be met by

modifying the curriculum to enhance the relevancy for each student. These modifications were often in keeping with effective instructional methods or differentiated instruction (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002).

According to DeBettencourt (1999), many general education teachers were expected to implement strategies of differentiated instruction in their classroom, yet 40% reported that they occasionally varied instructional materials. There is a positive correlation to the amount of special education courses taken by the general educators and the amount of time they spent to make instructional modifications. In another study, general educators have indicated that alterations necessary to meet the needs of students with disabilities are often not feasible (DeBettencourt, 1999). It is noted that another frequently mentioned concern by general educators is that provision of adaptations for students with disabilities will be at the expense of students without disabilities.

According to Masten, Scott, and Vitale (1998), general educators were found to be positive about the desirability/effectiveness and reasonability/feasibility of making instructional adaptations for students with disabilities. However, research also revealed that when these students are included in general education classrooms, their teachers are unlikely to alter their traditional whole-group instructional strategies in favor of specific individualized adaptations (Masten, Scott & Vitale, 1998). Reasons include ineffective instructional skill, insufficient school support, time constraints and their philosophical resistance. It is identified that lack of teacher training and school support are barriers to classroom teachers' ability to accommodate the individual needs of students in inclusive settings. Clearly, if inclusive programs are to be successful, changes must be made in general education classrooms to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities

(McLeskey & Waldron, 2002). Many general educators questioned their knowledge and skills for adequately planning and teaching students with special needs in their classrooms (DeBettencourt, 1999).

Through careful planning, teachers can address many of the learning goals of students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Reisberg, 1998). To effectively educate students with disabilities, the match between the student's learning characteristics and the demands of the class should be a key consideration (Hogan, 2005). According to Hogan (2005), effective instruction and modifications for a student with disabilities requires not only considering the student's academic levels, but also, and more importantly, how the student learns. Yet, when considering the amount of differentiating learning styles in one classroom, one must wonder what Hogan (2005) requests, as a necessity is feasible in a general education setting. It is suggested that educators use instructional rubrics to assess process, performance, and progress by delineating the various categories associated with assessment tasks and learning activities, the different levels of performance, and the indicators describing each level and then rating the student performance on products that show their learning (Duhaney, Whittaker, & Spencer, 2001). It is also suggested that awareness training for all teachers, and instructional methods for making content subjects more inclusive greatly facilitate a more equitable learning environment. If training of general education teachers to modify or implement teaching methods to be inclusive is focused, the program would be successful (Pivik, Laflamme, & McComas, 2002).

Teacher Competence of Behavior Management Skills

In recent years, more and more students with disabilities are included in general education classrooms (Soodak, 2003). This movement makes classrooms become a diverse environment that demands effective organization and management (Lopez, Monteiro, Sil, Rutherford, & Quinn, 2004). Teachers must place more attention on students with disabilities than others, and teachers' efforts to cope with students' learning and/or behavior problems may not work as readily as teachers wish (Lopez et al., 2004). It is identified that presenting appropriate behavior is a high priority for the success of students with disabilities, and is often more seriously considered than their academic performance (Carpenter & McKee-Higgins, 1996). Student behaviors may impact the classroom climate and other students' engagement in instruction (Carpenter & McKee-Higgins, 1996).

One of these issues focuses on student behavioral management and the provision of appropriate behavioral interventions (Studer & Quigney, 1999). Inclusion requires teachers adjust their conceptualization of behavior management to a broader range of students, including those with serious learning and behavioral problems (Studer & Quigney, 1999). Consequently, educators may need to extend their knowledge beyond what they have traditionally used as behavioral management techniques, to ensure a repertoire of available options (Studer & Quigney, 1999). It is found that many school or classroom management procedures are reactive, punitive, or control oriented (Carpenter & McKee-Higgins, 1996). The assumption is that punishment will change behavior in desirable directions (Carpenter & McKee-Higgins, 1996).

Generally, behavior modification strategies can be categorized according to procedures that increase appropriate behaviors and decrease the inappropriate (Studer & Quigney, 1999). A major concern of the implementation of behavior management techniques is that they are often very lengthy, involved, rigorous, and time-consuming (Studer & Quigney, 1999). In an inclusive classroom, the teacher may not always have the time or resources to prepare for and implement multiple long-term, sometimes quite intricate experimental designs (Studer & Quigney, 1999). There are also some questions as to whether or not teachers have received sufficient training in behavior modification to be competent in the implementation (Studer & Quigney, 1999). While it is clear that a great deal of skills and practice is required to achieve the desired outcomes in behavior modification, many general educators do not appear to have sufficient training in behavior management to deal with disruptive behaviors (Studer & Quigney, 1999).

In a study, the relationship between teachers' perceptions about their own self-efficacy and their willingness to include students with disabilities was examined (Baker, 2005). It is noted that teachers often reported specific behaviors that would negatively impact their willingness to include such a student in class. When teachers felt supported and confident they were willing to accommodate for a greater variety of students' needs, including behavior support (Baker, 2005). Yet, teachers tended to consider to use techniques they could implement on their own and be easier to use requiring consultation (Baker, 2005).

Teachers reported being most confident in their ability to use a variety of non-aversive techniques such as voice modulation, facial expressions, planned ignoring, proximity control, and tension release (Baker, 2005). They also reported being very

willing to use such strategies (Baker, 2005). They were able to implement a consistent classroom routine and clearly stated classroom rules describing what students are expected to do and a means for enforcing these rules (Baker, 2005).

Teachers were least confident in their ability to develop and implement a reinforcement hierarchy for each student or to use different reinforcement schedules (Baker, 2005). Teachers were, however, not willing to implement a systematic Behavior Improvement Plan and crisis management techniques (Baker, 2005). The results of Baker's study (2005) shows that as teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy for managing a classroom environment increases so does their overall readiness for utilizing specific behavior intervention techniques (Baker, 2005). It is also found that when using an instructional approach to addressing behaviors of students with disabilities, teachers ensure that students understand not only what behaviors are desirable within a classroom learning environment but also how to perform the behaviors within the context of instructional activities and interactions within the classroom (Carpenter & McKee-Higgins, 1996). In addition, creating a positive classroom environment can be achieved by redesigning behavior management programs to create environments that become more desirable places in which student motivation to participate in school programs should be promoted (Carpenter & McKee-Higgins, 1996).

Effective behavior management programs have dynamic processes whereby teachers adjust interventions in response to student behaviors (Carpenter & McKee-Higgins, 1996). It is incumbent upon administrators to find ways to help teachers become more confident in their own ability to meet the needs of their students (Baker, 2005). By establishing partnerships among higher education, regional special education

resource centers, and local education agencies, the potential for creating more effective learning environments for all learners could be enhanced (Baker, 2005). Having experienced individuals actually model specific behavioral techniques to address challenging situations may help teaches add skills in a non-threatening environment.

Teacher Competence of Co-teaching Practice

Initiatives to employ inclusive schooling practices have increased the diversity of general education classrooms and highlight the need for all school professionals in school to work together in collaborative partnerships (Gately & Gately, 2001). To successfully educate students with disabilities in general education classrooms, collaboration between general and special education is essential (Duff, Keefe, & Moore, 2004). Co-teaching between general and special educators has become a common method of service delivery (Gately & Gately, 2001). Co-teaching is defined as the collaboration between general and special education teachers for all of the teaching responsibilities in class (Gately & Gately, 2001). Such a collaborative teaching model is both recommended and used in inclusive classrooms. However, the interaction of co-teachers in the co-teaching practice has not been examined extensively and the criteria for an ideal model have not been designed (Austin, 2001). To date, only a few studies have evaluated this practice.

In a study conducted by Austin (2001), the data revealed that most of the teachers surveyed did not volunteer for the co-teaching assignment. A significant percentage of both general and special educators indicated that they believed the general education teacher did the most in the inclusive classroom (Austin, 2001). A majority of special and general educators agreed that, in theory, they should meet daily to plan lessons, but those

who actually met daily disagreed about the effectiveness of such a practice (Austin, 2001).

Similarly, a majority of special and general educators indicated that whereas they valued shared classroom management and instructional duties, they did not share these responsibilities (Austin, 2001). Furthermore, a higher percentage of special and general educators agreed that co-teachers should establish and maintain specific areas of responsibility than the disagreed, however, when asked whether they actually use this practice, a majority of these co-teachers denied (Austin, 2001). Finally, more special education than general education co-teachers agreed that they were primarily responsible for lesson modification and student learning remediation, whereas more general education than special education co-teachers reported that they were principally responsible for lesson planning and instruction (Austin, 2001). In contrast, Daane, Latham, and Beirne-Smith (2000) found that special education teachers did not agree that the general education teachers should have the primary responsibility for the education of students with disabilities when they were in an inclusive environment, whereas the general educators believed differently. They thought that any child who was included in the general education classroom should be their responsibilities (Daane, Latham, & Beirne-Smith, 2000). Nevertheless, the majority of co-teachers indicated that they shared most of their teaching responsibilities (Austin, 2001). It is also found that the special education teacher is often viewed as an assistant, while the general education teacher is perceived as the “real teacher” (Fennick & Liddy, 2001). Special education and general education teachers disagree about who is responsible for instruction and behavior management in a collaborative classroom. Special education teachers considered

themselves more helpful to students in collaborative classrooms than general education teachers consider special education teachers to be (Fennick & Liddy, 2001) In contrast, Duff, Keefe, and Moore (2004) found that the general education teachers tended to consider themselves the content experts and viewed special education teachers lacking specific knowledge of the curriculum. The findings appear conflicting and contradictory.

In Daane, Latham, and Beirne-Smith's study (2000), teachers agreed that general education and special education teachers cooperatively planned Individual Education Programs (IEPs). For the most part, collaboration appeared to be taking place between special education and general education teachers. When asked if they felt comfortable with collaboration, both regular and special educators denied (Daane, Latham, & Beirne-Smith, 2000). All of the participating teachers indicated the need for more collaborative planning time (Daane, Latham, & Beirne-Smith, 2000). It was reported that almost half of the teachers had no mutual planning time scheduled on a daily basis during school hours, and they had to meet before or after the school day (Fennick & Liddy, 2001).

According to Fennick and Liddy (2001), co-teaching in a general education classroom must take place in a way to provide inclusive instruction to benefit all students, both with and without disabilities. Instructional activities must be planned to promote skill acquisition and create a classroom climate with a sense of belonging for all students (Downing & Eichinger, 2003). Effective interpersonal communication entails the use of verbal, nonverbal, and social skills (Gately & Gately, 2001). Not only is comfort in collaboration needed, but also more training for general education teachers to accommodate students with disabilities (Daane, Latham, & Beirne-Smith, 2000). This

can happen only if they have had the opportunity to have quality fieldwork experiences where collaboration takes place (Daane, Latham, & Beirne-Smith, 2000). Visitations should be made to exemplary inclusion classrooms where they can observe first hand how teachers collaborate and plan effective instruction (Daane, Latham, & Beirne-Smith, 2000). In addition, the administrative support contributes extensively to the possibilities for co-teaching and to an atmosphere of mutual acceptance in school (Fennick, 2001). Administrators must create mutual planning times daily for co-teachers to collaborate if the program is to be successful.

Summary

The inclusion movement advocates for an integration of students with disabilities into regular education settings. Currently, over 70% of students with disabilities are included in general education classrooms, and this number continues to increase (Drew, Egan, & Hardman, 2002). Teachers are now facing many challenges in instructing students in their classroom, especially those with disabilities. It is found that the majority of teachers are not ready for the inclusion movement, lacking the knowledge and training to educate students with disabilities (Daane, Latham, & Beirne-Smith, 2000). Their competence of co-teaching, instructional adaptations, and managing a diverse classroom are questionable. More studies are needed to investigate teacher competence in these areas, so that students with disabilities can be adequately instructed in an inclusive environment. Once we can begin to gain a deeper understanding of the areas in which teachers lack competence, the educational community can then begin to adapt and learn the proper way to educate students with disabilities. The present study has investigated special and regular educators' competence to make instructional modifications, use

behavior management techniques, and engage in co-teaching practice. The attempt was to add information about both general and special education teachers' experiences in teaching students with disabilities to the research in the field of inclusion practice.

Chapter 3

Method

Participants

Teachers Surveyed. Twenty, kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade teachers employed in a small urban school district located in the central area of New Jersey participated in the study.

Of those, 13 are regular education teachers, and 7 are special education teachers. Table 1 presents the general information of participating teachers.

Table 1

General Information of Participating Teachers

Number of Special Educators		Number of Regular Educators	
7		13	
Years of Teaching Experience	Education	Years of Teaching Experience	Education
2 teachers (1-2)	BA=2	10 teachers (1-2)	BA=8 MA=2
3 teachers (3-5)	BA=2 BS=1	1 teacher (3-5)	BA=1
2 teachers (Over 5)	BS=1 MA=1	2 teachers (Over 5)	BA=1 MA=1

Note: All teachers possess a teaching certificate in a subject area.

Teachers Interviewed. Five teachers who completed the survey were randomly selected to be interviewed to gain more in-depth information. Of those, two are regular education teachers, and the other three are special education teachers. Table 2 presents the general information of participating teachers in the interview.

Table 2

General Information of Participating Teachers Interviewed

Teachers	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Teaching Students with Disabilities	Years of working in an Inclusive Classroom	Sp. Ed. Or Reg. Ed. Teacher	Degrees and Certifications
A	3	3	1	Sp. Ed.	B.A., certified in Elementary and Sp.Ed.
B	7	7	4	Reg. Ed.	B.A., certified in Elementary Ed.
C	9	5	3	Sp. Ed.	M.A., certified in Elementary Ed. and Special Ed.
D	18	18	9	Reg. Ed.	B.S., certified in Elementary Ed.
E	37	37	8	Sp. Ed.	B.S in Elementary Ed., M.A. in Special Ed.

Materials

Survey Materials

The teacher competence survey was developed by the researcher according to the research (e.g. Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998, Carpenter & McKee-Higgins, 1996, Austin, 2001) focusing on three areas: instructional modification, co-teaching practice, and behavior management strategies. A total of 10 questions were developed to investigate teachers' views on their competence in these three areas by their self-report. Table 3 presents the survey.

Table 3- A Survey on Teacher Competence in Teaching Students with Disabilities

Directions: Please complete part I, then, mark *yes* or *no* to the following questions on your views on inclusion. If you would like to elaborate on any answers, feel free to do so. Upon completion, please return it to Tara Wessel's mailbox. Please complete this survey by Friday, November 18th. Thank you.

Part I. General Information

1. Name (optional) _____
2. Years of Teaching _____
3. Years of teaching students with disabilities _____
4. Years working in an inclusive classroom _____
5. Special or Regular Education Teacher _____
6. Your Education Degree _____

Questions	Yes	No
1. Do you have students with disabilities in your classroom for a significant part of the school day?		
2. Have you received any formal training in teaching students with disabilities in your undergraduate or graduate studies?		
3. Do you have an in-class support teacher with you for a significant part of the school day? Or if you are the in-class support teacher, do you spend the majority of your day in one classroom?		
4. Do you feel comfortable sharing responsibilities, such as planning, collaborating, and teaching with your co-teacher?		
5. Do you and your co-teacher have similar views on how to teach students with disabilities?		
6. Do you know how to adapt or modify instructional materials, and strategies for students with disabilities?		
7. Do you use instructional modifications on a consistent basis when teaching students with disabilities?		
8. Do you know how to employ behavior management techniques to solve problems of students with disabilities?		
9. Do you use behavior management techniques on a consistent basis when teaching students with disabilities?		
10. Overall, do you feel confident to teach students with disabilities in your classroom?		

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol consists of five questions. These questions were based on the survey questions, but with a more in-depth analysis of the teacher's opinions. Figure 1 presents the interview protocol.

Figure 1-The Interview Protocol on Teacher Competence

1. What percentage of the day would you estimate that you either have a co-teacher, or you are the co-teacher in a classroom with another teacher?

2. Does planning, collaborating, and teaching with your co-teacher often present problems? Which areas do you feel pose the greatest problems? Which areas do you feel benefit students with disabilities?

3. Do you make instructional modifications for students with disabilities in your class on a consistent basis? What are some examples of the modifications you provide?

4. Are you familiar with, and do you use behavior management techniques for students with disabilities on a consistent basis? What are some examples of the behavior management techniques you provide?

5. Do you feel that you have been adequately trained and prepared through your undergraduate, graduate, or other professional development opportunities to teach students with disabilities? What area mentioned above do you feel that you could benefit from more extensive training?

Procedures

Survey Procedure

Thirty-three teachers in the school were requested to complete a survey. Upon obtaining permission from the school principal, a copy of the survey was placed in each teacher's mailbox. A note was posted on each survey copy to indicate the time frame and location to return the completed survey. A total of 20 teachers completed the survey and returned on time.

Interview procedure

According to each teacher's schedule, an interview was conducted. One interview took place after school, and the remaining four interviews took place during individual teacher's preparation period or lunchtime. The interview ran from 5-15 minutes in length, depending on the individual's responses. Each question in the interview protocol was asked to gain more in-depth information about individual teachers' perceptions of competence when instructing students with disabilities. The researcher recorded their responses by writing down notes on the copy of the interview protocol for each teacher.

Data Analysis

The survey responses were calculated and demonstrated by percentages. The interview data were summarized into themes to present in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Results

Survey Results

The results of the survey were compiled and presented with percentages to indicate responses of regular and special education teachers. Table 4 presents the results.

Table 4- Regular and Special Education Teachers' Responses to Survey Questions

Survey Questions	Percentages of Responses			
	Regular Ed.		Special Ed.	
	Y	N	Y	N
1. Is there a student with disabilities in your room for most of the day?	75%	25%	100%	0%
2. Do you have any formal training in teaching students with disabilities?	75%	25%	100%	0%
3. Is there, or are you an in-class support teacher for majority of day in one class?	33%	57%	50%	50%
4. Do you feel comfortable sharing responsibilities with your co-teacher?	84%	16%	88%	12%
5. Do you and your co-teacher have similar views?	75%	25%	100%	0%
6. Do you know how to make modifications for students with disabilities?	75%	25%	100%	0%
7. Do you use modifications on consistent basis?	84%	16%	100%	0%
8. Do you know how to use behavior management techniques?	92%	8%	100%	0%
9. Do you use behavior management techniques on consistent basis?	92%	8%	100%	0%
10. Do you feel confident overall teaching students with disabilities	50%	50%	100%	0%

In conclusion, by examining the above percentages, there is a difference in opinion of teacher competence between special education and regular education teachers. Some areas that these two groups of teachers differed in the most were overall confidence and co-teaching (50% vs. 100%). Some areas that these two groups seemed to agree in their competence are behavior management (92% vs. 100%), sharing responsibilities (84% vs. 88%), and instructional modifications (84% vs. 100%).

Interview Results

The results of teacher interviews were summarized into the following themes: Time Constraints; Planning, Collaborating and Teaching with Another Teacher; Instructional Modifications; Behavior Management; Training and Preparation for Inclusion.

Time Constraints

When asked the time they had a co-teacher in the classroom, or played the role of a co-teacher in an inclusive classroom, the responses were varied. Some teachers claimed to have a co-teacher for a significant part of the school day, while others complained of rarely having anyone. In actuality, all teachers are supposed to have the same support throughout the day in school. Special education teachers seemed to share the view that they do not spend an ample amount of time with a co-teacher. The following are examples of special education teachers' responses:

“I am a self-contained special education teacher, and I only work with a co-teacher about 10% of the day.”

“I am an in-class support teacher, and I split myself 50/50 between the two classrooms.”

“At least 80% of the day, I am the in-class support teacher in regular education classroom.”

The regular education teachers’ responses were varied. Two teachers, one serving as in-class support, and one regular education teacher are in the same classroom and have different views on how much time they work together. For example, the regular education teacher said, “ About 25% of the day I have another teacher in the room. It’s not working, there should be more in-class support teachers.” Yet, the special education teacher who works with the above teacher said, “Being a teacher in a full inclusion classroom, I have a co-teacher in my classroom about 30% of the day.”

Planning, Collaborating and Teaching with Another Teacher

Teachers were asked if planning, collaborating, and teaching with their co-teacher often presented problems, and if so which areas had the most problems. They all seemed to feel similarly on this issue. The following are examples of special education teachers’ answers:

“There are never any problems.”

Regular education teachers seemed to have more negative views on the topic, feeling that most of the workload is placed upon them due to lack of available time to work with the special education teacher.

The following are examples of regular education teachers’ answers:

“There are time constraints with planning, since the teacher is split between two rooms.”

“The classroom teacher does the most work.”

They were then asked about the benefits of co-teaching for students with disabilities. Of the five participating teachers, four teachers had positive views on co-teaching in an inclusive classroom. They all listed numerous benefits to having two teachers in the room, such as two different personalities with two teaching styles, addressing all students’ needs, monitoring student progress, and modifying lessons together.

Only one teacher indicated some concerns, including insufficient planning time, and lack of time for a special education teacher in the classroom.

Instructional Modifications

Teachers were asked if they made instructional modifications on a constant basis, and requested for some examples. Both special and regular education teachers all claimed that they made instructional modifications for students with disabilities in their classroom. All the teachers had numerous examples they modified for instruction on a daily basis. Some examples included shortening problems, larger print, modified directions, shortened assignments, auditory and visual modifications, such as reading assignments or color-coding print, small group instruction, tutoring, and pairing with a partner.

Behavior Management

Teachers were asked if they used behavior management techniques for students with disabilities on a consistent basis. Although all participating teachers claimed to use behavior management techniques, they could not come up with many techniques they applied in their classroom. Many answers were generalized and repetitive. For example,

one teacher mentioned positive and negative consequences but did not give specific examples. The following are examples of special education teachers' responses:

“There needs to be consistency of reward for positive behavior and consequence for negative behavior.”

“I set timers and monitor students to make sure they stay on task.”

The following are examples of regular education teachers' responses:

“My classified students are allotted more time to deal with their emotions when their behavior is escalating.”

“I used Individual Behavior Plans and whole class rewards.”

Personal Attitude about Their Training and Preparation

Teachers were asked if they had adequate training and been prepared through undergraduate, graduate college programs, or other professional development opportunities to teach students with disabilities. All teachers but one felt that they have been adequately trained to teach students with disabilities. When asked what area the teachers felt they could benefit from more training, Planning, Collaborating and Teaching with Another Teacher, Instructional Modifications, Behavior Management, or Training and Preparation were mentioned.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate special and regular education teachers' perspectives on issues such as training, experience, and education in teaching students with learning disabilities in inclusive settings.

The findings are limited by various causes. First, participating teachers were from only one school district in the state of New Jersey. This limited number of participants in one regional area might not represent all teachers' perspectives across the country. Second, the research per se was a self-reported survey. The responses provided may not be accurate because some teachers feared to express their true views because they were not sure if administrators were to find out the results of the study. Although I informed participants that their opinions would remain anonymous, some teachers still had reservations. The third limitation was related to teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms. In the school, approximately 20% of the staff have been employed as a teacher for 5 or more years. The majority of teachers are in their first and second years of service. Thus, the participating teachers' limited experience in inclusive classrooms might impact their responses. Lastly, teachers were inconsistent with their responses to similar questions. At times teachers stated they felt competent in one area, when later answering the same question with a different response.

The first research question asked, “What are the special education teachers’ perceptions on instructional modifications, co-teaching practice, and behavior management of students with disabilities?” The results showed that special education teachers have a great deal of competence in teaching students with disabilities. In the areas of formal training, co-teaching, instructional modifications, and behavior management, all participating teachers believe that they have demonstrated competency when teaching students with disabilities. The only area that special educators seemed to disagree in was the issue of the amount of time spent in an in-class support setting. In actuality, all teachers spend less than 40% of their day in one classroom, but spending half the day in one classroom, and half of the day in another.

The second research question asked, “What are the regular education teachers’ perceptions on instructional modifications, co-teaching practice, and behavior management of students with disabilities?” The responses of regular education teachers seem to be more inconsistent and varied than that of special education teachers. The majority of regular educators seemed to be confident in their abilities to use behavior management techniques and work with a co-teacher. Responses were varied in the areas of formal training, instructional modifications, and amount of in-class support time. When stating their overall confidence in teaching students with disabilities, half of the teachers claimed to feel very confident, and the other half claimed to lack confidence in teaching students with disabilities.

These findings may have some implications for education of students with disabilities today. The most alarming finding is that half of regular education teachers do not feel they are competent to teach students with disabilities currently in the classroom,

while all special education teachers feel confident instructing this population. Although a small size of participating teachers in the study, this perception represents most regular education teachers. The main difference between regular and special education teachers' opinion is training. The participating special education teachers are either certified or possess a degree in this field; thus, they carry an extensive amount of background knowledge in special education. The participating regular education teachers claimed that they never took any coursework pertaining to teaching students with disabilities, and were not exposed to the issue until students were placed into their classroom. It seems that schools should assume the responsibilities to train their staff when they are hired to work in inclusive environments. More in-service programs and workshops must be offered to regular education teachers, so that they are confident and knowledgeable to provide services to students with disabilities. Special education teachers were trained in teaching students with disabilities, and would be an asset to share with other educators. Effective collaboration between regular and special education teachers will benefit students with disabilities. Too often, two teachers who have never met are thrown together to teach and are unprepared to work together in teaching students with disabilities. Educators should be effectively trained on the topic of co-teaching to better serve the needs of their students. Once the inclusion program is provided, both regular and special education teachers should be ready to teach students with disabilities. This will guarantee that appropriate education and equal opportunities are provided to these students as the law mandates.

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Appendix - Letter to Staff Regarding Thesis Work

November 3, 2006

Dear Teachers,

I am currently completing my final semester of graduate school to obtain a Master's Degree in Special Education. I am investigating special and regular education teachers' views on their competence when instructing students with disabilities. I would appreciate if you would complete a brief survey regarding your feelings on this issue. You will all be receiving a copy of this survey in your mailbox. Please complete the survey by November 18th, and return it to my mailbox. The results will be confidential, so feel free to answer the questions honestly. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Tara Wessel