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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted of 174 certified school personnel (including special education teachers, administrators, regular classroom teachers, vocational teachers, counselors, and aides) in the Mississippi Delta concerning their attitudes toward special education and toward students with disabilities. Overall, the educators expressed slightly positive attitudes, with attitudes ranging from highly negative to highly positive. A significant difference in attitudes was related to position, with special education teachers expressing the most positive attitudes and regular classroom teachers and vocational teachers expressing the least positive attitudes. Educators in grades 3 through 6 expressed more positive attitudes than educators in other grades. Positive attitudes were related to working with special students when special education teachers were included in the analysis, but not when they were excluded from the analysis. Only 21 percent of respondents believed that teachers were responsible for making modifications for a special education student in their classroom. No difference in attitudes was present by years of experience in schools. Several hypotheses are proposed to explain why regular education teachers express less positive attitudes, and more teacher training is recommended.

(JDD)

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Attitudes of School Personnel

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Attitudes of School Personnel Toward Special Education as a
Function of Position, Years of Experience, and Contact With
Students with Disabilities

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Mid-South Educational
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Abstract

Surveyed 174 certified school personnel regarding their attitudes
toward special education and toward students with disabilities.
Overall, the educators expressed slightly positive attitudes
toward special education and special students. A significant
difference in attitudes was related to position with special
education teachers expressing the most positive attitudes and
regular classroom teachers and vocational teachers expressing the
least positive attitudes. Moreover, educators in grades 3 through
6 expressed more positive attitudes than educators in grades K-2
and 7-12. Positive attitudes were related to working with special
students when special education teachers were included in the
analysis but not when they were excluded from the analysis. No
difference in attitudes was present by years of experience in
schools. Implications are discussed.

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Attitudes of School Personnel Toward Special Education as a
Function of Position, Years of Experience, and Contact With
Students with Disabilities

Although Public Law 94-142 was passed in 1975, many school personnel lack adequate knowledge of special education procedures and their responsibilities under this federal legislation and related laws. For example, Slate, Jones, and Hickin (1992), in a survey of 306 school personnel, found limited knowledge and extensive misunderstanding of both Public Law 94-142 and Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. Inadequate and/or inaccurate knowledge of legislation related to education of students with disabilities can cause educators inadvertently to deny students with disabilities services to which they are legally entitled. Knowledge of relevant legislation, however, is not the only factor that will affect the quality of services received by students with disabilities. The attitudes school personnel hold toward special education play an important role in the services received by students with disabilities. For example, Salvia and Ysseldyke (1991) report that classroom teachers comprise the group that refers the most students for academic and/or behavioral difficulties to special education. In addition, with roughly 10% of students in public education now meeting the criteria for special services, the emphasis on educating these students in the least restrictive environment guarantees that almost all regular classroom teachers will have students with disabilities in their classrooms at one time or another. Because the attitudes of

regular classroom teachers toward special education should affect their willingness both to make referrals for special education evaluation and to make necessary classroom modifications for students with disabilities, positive attitudes are crucial in order for students to receive needed services.

The purpose for conducting this study was to investigate the following research questions. (1) What are the attitudes of school personnel toward special education and students who qualify for special services under PL 94-142 or Section 504? (2) How do these attitudes vary as a function of position, years of experience in schools, and the number of students with disabilities with whom school personnel work?

Method

A 25-item questionnaire was completed by 174 school personnel from school districts in the Mississippi Delta. These educators consisted of 111 regular classroom teachers, 16 special education teachers, 4 counselors, 7 vocational teachers, 7 administrators, 26 others (e.g., aides in elementary and secondary schools), and 3 who did report their position. Educators' number of years in education averaged 11.9 years ($SD = 8.1$). There were 37 persons who taught at the K-2nd grade level, 61 at the 3rd-6th grade levels, 52 at the 7th-12th grade levels, 14 who taught across these grade levels, and 10 persons who did not provide this information. The number of special education students with whom these educators worked on a daily basis averaged 6.6 ($SD = 11.2$).

The educators completed demographic questions used to obtain their position, grade level, years of experience, and number of special education students taught. They then indicated their opinion toward special education and students who qualify for special assistance by responding to 25 attitude statements on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly). There were 21 items phrased to express positive attitudes and 4 items phrased to express negative attitudes. The four negatively phrased items were reverse scored and the responses summed to provide an index of favorability toward special education and special students. Thus, high scores indicate more positive attitudes than do low scores. The internal consistency (i.e., coefficient alpha) of this scale was +.89 indicating very high reliability.

Results

Overall the educators expressed slightly positive attitudes toward special education and special students with a mean score on the attitude items of 76.0 ($SD = 14.4$) out of a possible 125 points. Individual scores, however, ranged from 40 to 111. Thus, some of the educators held highly negative attitudes and some held highly positive attitudes. The questionnaire items and percent of respondents answering in a supportive manner are presented in Table 1. Slightly over three-fourths of these educators agreed that some students, even though not placed in special education, require modifications in order to be successful at school. Roughly two-thirds believed that vocational preparation is very

important for special education students in high school, and that educational modifications that work with students with learning disabilities are different from those that work with average students. Only 14.3%, however, had received recent training in the area of mental retardation and only 22.4% had received recent training in learning disabilities. In addition, only 16% believed that the education modifications that work with students with mental retardation are different from those that work with average students, and only 21.2 percent believed that teachers were responsible for making modifications for a special education student in their classroom. Instead, they saw this as the responsibility of the special education teacher.

Insert Table 1 about here

Special education teachers ($\bar{M} = 100.1$) expressed the most positive attitudes with counselors ($\bar{M} = 87$) and administrators ($\bar{M} = 85.6$) second and third highest. The groups that expressed the least positive attitudes were regular classroom teachers ($\bar{M} = 72.0$) and vocational teachers ($\bar{M} = 71.3$). Analysis of variance indicated that statistically significant differences in attitude toward special education and special education students were present by position, $F(4, 117) = 13.803, p < .001$. TukeyB comparisons indicated that special education teachers expressed more positive attitudes than did vocational teachers and regular

classroom teachers. Administrators' attitudes were more positive than those of regular classroom teachers.

A significant correlation, $r(118) = +.31, p < .001$, was found between attitudes expressed by subjects and the number of special education students with whom subjects worked daily. That is, the more special education students an educator came in contact with, the more positive his or her attitude toward special education tended to be. This correlation disappeared, however, when special education teachers were not included in the analysis, $r(107) = .01$. No relationship was found between attitudes and years experience in schools, $r(131) = -.11$.

Analysis of variance indicated a significant difference in attitudes by grade level, $F(2, 123) = 3.83, p < .05$. TukeyB comparisons revealed that teachers in grades 3 through 6 expressed more positive attitudes ($M = 79.2$) than did teachers in K-2 ($M = 71.2$). The attitudes of teachers in grades 7-12 ($M = 73.4$) did not differ significantly from those of teachers at the K-2 and 3-6 grade levels.

Discussion

The two groups that expressed the poorest attitudes toward special education and students with disabilities were regular education and vocational education teachers. The fact that regular education teachers expressed negative attitudes toward special education is of some concern because these teachers must make referrals for special education evaluations and teach students with disabilities who are mainstreamed. Several

hypotheses may explain why regular education teachers expressed less positive attitudes. First, large classes make it hard to give specialized attention as needed. Students with special needs may require more individualized attention through modifications of class activities and/or homework assignments than a teacher is used to providing to most students and, thus, the student is perceived as disrupting the instructional process. This may account for the fact that contact with special education students was not related to more positive attitudes when special education teachers were excluded from the analysis.

Second, because of the current focus on the least restrictive environment and inclusion, many students who formerly would have received services entirely or mostly in the special education classroom are now receiving services in the regular education classroom. Middleton, Morsink, and Cohen (1979) reported that one of the most frequent complaints of regular classroom teachers concerning their responsibility toward special education students is the lack of skill specifically related to making modifications for students with disabilities, and Luckner (1991) found that positive attitudes by educators toward mainstreaming were related to educators' perceived ability to make appropriate modifications for students with disabilities. Even though special education teachers were included in our sample, only 22% and 14% of the respondents had received recent training in learning disabilities and in mental retardation respectively.

More than half (i.e., 52.3%) expressed a desire for additional training/education for working with students with disabilities.

Although mainstreaming has played a major role in the provision of special education services since 1975, many educators remain unconvinced regarding the appropriateness of this practice. Only 47.7% of respondents agreed that special education students should be mainstreamed into regular classes, whereas 56.3% preferred such students be instructed in resource classrooms.

In conclusion, we believe more training is needed to help educators understand and adapt to the many needs of our special education students. Though most institutions of higher education are providing students with information about mainstreaming, few require that teacher education students have experience with students with special needs (Hoover, 1986). We think that teacher preparation programs should require that regular teachers and special education teachers jointly participate in practica, thus, providing all education majors with hands-on experience with special education students. For teachers already working in the classroom, seminars and/or inservice workshops need to be provided by school districts, state departments of education, or professional education organizations to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are met.

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Table 1

Percentage of Respondents Expressing Positive Answers to
Questionnaire Items.

| <u>Questionnaire Item</u> | <u>Percent Expressing Positive Answer</u> |
|---|---|
| Even though they may not be special education students, some students still require assistance/modifications to be successful at school. | 76.5 |
| For high school special education students, vocational preparation is very important. | 67.9 |
| Education modifications that work with students with learning disabilities are different from those that work with average students. | 66.1 |
| I have consulted with the special education teacher regarding a special education student in my class. | 63.2 |
| Whenever a special education student's learning deficits influence his/her classroom success, I am required to make appropriate modifications in my teaching. | 60.3 |
| I would like additional training/education in working with special education students. | 52.3 |
| Special education children should be mainstreamed into regular education classes. | 52.3 |
| Having a special education student in my classroom is disruptive. | 50.2 |
| When I have referred students for special education, my input has been solicited by persons conducting the evaluation. | 48.2 |
| Standardized testing in the special education process is helpful in designing individual educational programs. | 46.6 |
| When I have referred students for special education, I have been involved in the committee meeting regarding eligibility for special education. | 45.9 |
| I have been involved in the educational planning of special education students in my classroom. | 40.2 |

(table continues)

Attitudes of School Personnel

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| Questionnaire Item | Percent Expressing Positive Answer |
|---|------------------------------------|
| I have a good understanding of the special education process for obtaining assistance for students with learning problems. | 39.7 |
| Modifications in the regular classroom are required for students with disabilities such as diabetes and ADHD, or for conditions such as pregnancy when these problems interfere with students' education. | 39.6 |
| The problem of special education students is a lack of motivation rather than a real disability. | 37.3 |
| I understand the meaning of my special education students' standardized test scores. | 36.8 |
| When their disabilities interfere with success in the classroom, special education students should have their grades modified. | 36.7 |
| I have had sufficient preparation for working with special education students in my classroom. | 28.7 |
| Standardized testing in the special education process is helpful in describing students' special learning needs. | 27.0 |
| Special education students should be served primarily through resource classes rather than in regular education classes. | 25.3 |
| I have recently received training/education in the area of learning disabilities. | 22.4 |
| The special education teacher is responsible for modifications for special education students that are in my classroom. | 21.2 |
| Education modifications that work with students with mental retardation are different from those that work with average students. | 16.0 |
| I have recently received training/education in the area of mental retardation. | 14.3 |
