

GENERAL EDUCATION PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUDING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN THEIR CLASSROOMS**Paul M. Ajuwon***Missouri State University***DeAnn Lechtenberger****Nora Griffin-Shirley****Stephanie Sokolosky***Texas Tech University***Li Zhou***Mississippi State***Frank E. Mullins***University of Texas*

In this empirical study, the authors compare the perceptions of future general educators on two dichotomous scales (hostility/receptivity and anxiety/calmness) regarding the teaching of students with exceptionalities in their classrooms. A total of 116 teacher candidates from one southwestern and two Midwestern universities in the United States completed a modified version of the Pre-Service Inclusion Survey (PSIS) during the first and last class sessions of the semester in an introductory course on disabilities. The authors reported an increase in a positive attitude in the overall PSIS, and in both the anxiety/calmness and the hostility-receptivity subcategories. The researchers noted that knowledge of how to accommodate students with disabilities and fostering positive attitudes when working with these students are necessary for pre-service teachers. Recommendations are advanced for enhancing inclusive practices in pre-service teacher education programs.

Inclusive education is now recognized as a global, developmental process to address the learning needs of all children and youth, especially those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. The fundamental principle of inclusive schooling anchors on the notion that all children are best educated together in age-appropriate, heterogeneous classrooms in public schools, wherever possible, with necessary supports and services (Forlin, Loreman, Sharma, & Earle, 2009; Lindsay, 2003; Peterson & Beloin, 1998; Pijl, Meijer, & Hegarty, 1997; UNESCO, 1994).

In the fall of 2007, 95% of 6-to-21-year-old students with disabilities were served in regular schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). Cortiella (2009) found that three out of five students with learning disabilities spend the majority of their time in the general education classroom. The U.S. Department of Education (2005) further reported that 80% of all students identified as having emotional and behavior problems are educated in regular schools. Today's general education classroom teachers are increasingly being confronted with students who demonstrate emotional and behavior problems more than any other disability group besides learning disabilities. Additionally, 18% of students with intellectual disabilities spend a significant portion of their day in the regular education classroom (Marchand, 2009).

Inclusive classroom settings should be strengthened and supported by a cadre of specially trained personnel and other appropriate supportive practices according to the individual needs of the child. Researchers have long contended that inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the myriad needs of their learners (Bowe, 2005; Shade & Stewart, 2001), accommodating both different styles and rates of

learning (Roberts, 1982), and offering quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource utilization and partnerships with their communities (Bender, Boon, Hinrichs, & Lawson, 2008; Bennett, DeLuca, & Bruns, 1997). More importantly, schools should foster favorable attitudes and increased self-efficacy among general and special education teachers (Romi & Leyser, 2006). To assist in promoting policies and practices to improve educational performance of students with disabilities, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) recommended that "teachers in general education learn about special education" (p. 55).

In recent years, the widespread practice of inclusion has established the urgency for reform in teacher education. The movement has been strengthened by the federal requirements of IDEA that students be educated in the least restrictive environment that is reasonable and which further reinforces educating students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Accordingly, universities are beginning to infuse into their programs practices to sensitize pre-service teachers to foster understanding and improve attitudes toward inclusive education.

Researchers have concluded that pre-service training may be the optimum time to address educators' concerns and change any negative attitudes about inclusive education (Forlin, et al., 2009; Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, & Merbler 2010). Harvey et al. (2010) reported a number of advantages in current practice in teacher preparation at the pre-service level concerning inclusion. First, they noted significant agreement that institutions were offering coursework to pre-service candidates regarding exceptional children and/or special education across all departments and program areas. Second, they found that students were taking introductory courses in this area. Third, the respondents indicated that field experiences provided opportunities for pre-service teachers to collaborate across disciplines and major fields of study. In general, research has shown that when teachers have positive mindsets toward inclusion, they more readily adapt their teaching methods to meet a variety of student learning needs. This conclusion suggests that the inclusion movement would benefit from research that identifies effective ways to assist teachers in the formation of positive attitudes and beliefs toward inclusion (Leyser & Tappendorf, 2001; Voltz, Brazil, & Ford, 2008). Consequently, pre-service training may be viewed as the appropriate time to examine teachers' feelings and modify any negative attitudes about inclusion or individuals with disabilities.

Reynolds & Birch (1977) noted that teachers will benefit from training prior to receiving students with disabilities in their classrooms. They recognized that such training should occur at the pre-service level, where future teachers receive instruction in special education, strategies for teaching and strengthening the skills of such students, and developing collaboration and behavior management techniques. Therefore, the most direct action for pre-service administrators is to incorporate a course into the future teachers' training curricula in which they are taught about different aspects of disabilities, children's learning challenges, and ways to identify such challenges and modify teaching techniques to optimize children's opportunities for learning.

This study explored the feelings of future general education pre-service teacher candidates, using the modified Pre-Service Inclusion Survey (Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey, & Simon, 2005), hereafter referred to as the PSIS. We felt there was a strong need to explore disability-specific perspectives. Hence, we modified the original PSIS scenario to measure the degrees of hostility-receptivity and anxiety-calmness of educators toward inclusion of students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), autism, learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disorders, or intellectual disabilities. Thus, the focus of the study was to provide future general education teachers an opportunity to reflect on their feelings regarding the philosophy and practice of educating students with disabilities within the milieu of general education. Specifically, the research questions for this study were:

1. To assess the effects of a few variables on the attitudes of respondents toward inclusive education, including geographic locations of the universities, self-report of a documented disability, prior significant interaction with people with disabilities; prior training on educating students with disabilities; prior experience teaching students with disabilities; prior knowledge of legislation or policy pertaining to students with disabilities; and prior confidence in teaching students with disabilities.
2. To determine if participants' attitudes toward inclusion of students with certain disabilities could be positively affected through a single course in special education.

Method

Instrumentation

For this project, the researchers obtained permission from the original authors of the PSIS (Shippen et al., 2005). The PSIS presents a hypothetical scenario in which a general education teacher is informed that several new students with disabilities will be in his/her class in the coming school year. The scenario in the original PSIS was modified to reflect new directions in the measurement of attitudes of pre-service general education teacher candidates toward students with ADHD, autism, learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disorders, and intellectual disabilities (see the Appendix for the modified scenario).

The scenario was followed by 17 adjective pairs which respondents rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale to indicate their feelings toward the scenario. These adjective pairs were grouped into two categories including anxiety/calmness (fearless/scared, relaxed/anxious, comfortable/uncomfortable, confident/insecure, calm/nervous, powerful/weak, & prepared/unprepared) and hostility/receptivity (enthusiastic/unenthusiastic, not angry/angry, willing/unwilling, interested/disinterested, pleased/displeased, indifferent/annoyed, accepting/opposing, cooperative/resistant, happy/unhappy, & optimistic/pessimistic).

Additional questions were included to collect information on: participants' age, gender, ethnicity, class ranking, level of certification sought, documented disabilities, prior significant interaction with people with disabilities, prior training on educating students with disabilities, prior experience teaching students with disabilities, prior knowledge of legislation or policy pertaining to children with disabilities, and confidence in teaching students with disabilities.

Participants

The participants in this study were 116 general education students enrolled in an introductory special education course in fall 2010 in one southwestern ($n=41$) and two Midwestern ($n=30$ and $n=45$) universities in the United States. The majority of participants were undergraduates [90.5% ($n = 105$)] and were primarily females [84.5% ($n = 98$)]. The majority reported their race/ethnicity as white [87.9% ($n = 102$)]. The mean age of participants was 23.45 ($SD = 6.14$) and the range was 29 (19 to 48). Three students (2.6%) did not provide an age. The level of certification sought was distributed by elementary, middle, and secondary education [42.2% ($n = 49$); 31.0% ($n = 36$); and 37.1% ($n = 43$), respectively]. (*Note: The total of the percentages is larger than 100% since participants could choose more than one category of certification.*)

A majority [94% ($n = 109$)] of participants did not report any kind of documented disability. About half [48.3% ($n=56$)] of the students reported having prior significant interaction with a disabled person. More than half [62.1% ($n=72$)] of the students reported having received prior training on educating disabled students, while less than half [41.4% (48)] reported having any prior experience teaching disabled students. Slightly more than half [54.4% ($n=63$)] of participants reported an average or better prior knowledge of legislation or policy regarding disabled children. Nearly two-thirds [62.9% ($n=73$)] of participants reported having an average or better confidence in teaching disabled students.

Procedure

Informed consent was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of two of the participating universities. (*Informed consent was not required by the third university.*) Following the modification of the original PSIS instrument, the researchers piloted the revised instrument with selected students (including those with disabilities) in online and traditional face-to-face classes. Consequently, some minor changes were effected which enhanced the clarity of some of the survey items. Based on the number of enrollees, hard copy surveys were distributed to instructors who conducted face-to-face instruction. A doctoral student assisted with placing the survey on *Survey Monkey* for all other courses that were offered via online-course delivery system in the three participating universities.

The researchers ascertained that general education pre-service teachers in each of the three universities' teacher education programs were required to take an introductory special education course for their certification/degree plan. All surveys were distributed in the fall semester of 2010. Thus, given the requirement to complete the survey at both pre- and post- levels in the two types of course formats - traditional and online courses, it was not relevant to determine the return rate of survey completers.

The survey contained a cover letter which explained the research, and requested each participant to complete the survey twice in the semester, the first and last week of the course, to compare possible

changes in attitudes. Participants were assured of utmost confidentiality of their responses. Finally, information on how to contact the researchers was indicated at the bottom of the cover letter of the survey.

Data Analysis

To examine the effects of various factors on participants' attitudes toward inclusion, a repeated-measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with time (pre vs. post) as a within-subject factor and six between-subject factors was conducted. The use of MANOVA was to harness its power in analyzing main and interaction effects of independent variables and to seek comparability with previous research findings (Shippen et al., 2005). The six between subjects factors included were as follows: university (university A vs. B vs. C), prior significant interaction with people with disabilities (yes vs. no), prior training on educating students with disabilities (yes vs. no), prior experience teaching students with disabilities [yes (some/high) vs. no (none)], prior knowledge of legislation or policy regarding disabled children (none/poor vs. average/good/very good), and confidence in teaching students with disabilities [low (very low/low) vs. average/high (average/high/very high)]. The remaining variables could not be included in the MANOVA analysis because of significantly unequal data distributions. For example, gender was not included because the vast majority of the participants were females. The dependent variables of the MANOVA were hostility/receptivity and anxiety/calmness (means of the responses of the adjective pairs in each category).

To explore the effects of various factors on the magnitude of participants' attitude change, a between-subject MANOVA was also conducted with the same six between-subject factors used in the repeated-measures MANOVA. The dependent variables were the change in anxiety/calmness and the change in hostility/receptivity, which were defined as participants' post-test responses minus pre-test responses in each category. In both MANOVA analyses, the alpha level was set at 0.05. All the analyses in this study were conducted using SPSS 17.0.

Results

The repeated-measures MANOVA found that overall, the within-subject main effect for time was significant (Wilks' Lambda = 0.47, $F(2, 62) = 35.54, p < 0.001$). The univariate tests associated with the time main effect were significant for both anxiety/calmness ($p < 0.001$) and hostility/receptivity ($p = 0.011$). This indicated that, after taking their introductory special education course, participants' attitude toward working with children with disabilities became significantly more positive. The significant increase in positivity of attitude occurred in both the anxiety/calmness subcategory and the hostility/receptivity subcategory (Table 1).

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Total PSIS

Area Measured (n = 116)	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)
Overall	3.34 (.59)	3.68 (.65)
Anxiety/Calmness	2.47 (.62)	3.07 (.71)
Hostility/Receptivity	3.95 (.70)	4.11 (.75)

The results also indicated significant between-subject effects of university (Wilks' Lambda = 0.85, $F(4, 124) = 2.69, p = 0.034$) and confidence in teaching students with disabilities (Wilks' Lambda = 0.78, $F(2, 62) = 8.69, p = 0.001$). Specifically, it was found that in the hostility/receptivity subcategory, the participants from university A were significantly more positive than the participants from both university B ($p = .001$) and university C ($p = 0.024$) (Table 2).

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations by University

University	N	Pre Overall	Post Overall	Pre Hostility/Receptivity	Post Hostility/Receptivity	Pre Anxiety/Calmness	Post Anxiety/Calmness
University A	41	3.47 (.58)	3.89 (.50)	4.18 (.63)	4.41 (.54)	2.45 (.66)	3.16 (.66)
University B	30	3.07 (.50)	3.63 (.77)	3.59 (.65)	3.93 (.90)	2.34 (.49)	3.20 (.71)
University C	45	3.40 (.60)	3.52 (.64)	3.98 (.72)	3.95 (.74)	2.59 (.65)	2.91 (.73)

Also, participants who had higher prior confidence in teaching students with disabilities showed more positive attitudes in both the anxiety/calmness subcategory ($p < 0.001$) and the hostility/receptivity subcategory ($p = 0.013$) (Table 3).

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations by Prior Confidence Teaching the Disabled

Prior Confidence Teaching the Disabled	N	Pre Overall	Post Overall	Pre Hostility/Receptivity	Post Hostility/Receptivity	Pre Anxiety/Calmness	Post Anxiety/Calmness
Low	43	3.01 (.57)	3.50 (.76)	3.67 (.75)	3.99 (.84)	2.07 (.51)	2.81 (.81)
Average/high	73	3.53 (.50)	3.79 (.55)	4.11 (.62)	4.18 (.69)	2.71 (.55)	3.22 (.59)

The between-subject MANOVA found that overall, the main effect of the factor prior interaction with people with disabilities was significant (Wilks' lambda = 0.87, $F(2, 62) = 4.53$, $p = 0.015$). The univariate tests associated with the main effect of prior interaction were significant for the attitude change in both the anxiety/calmness subcategory ($p = 0.020$) and the hostility/receptivity subcategory ($p = 0.023$). This indicated that overall, the increase in positivity of attitude of participants who had prior interaction with people with disabilities was significantly larger than that of those who had no such interaction, and such significant differences occurred in both the anxiety/calmness and the hostility/receptivity subcategories (Table 4).

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations of Attitude Increase by Prior Interaction with the Disabled

Prior Interaction with the Disabled	Increase of Anxiety/Calmness	Increase of Hostility/Receptivity
No (n = 60)	0.56 (.63)	0.15 (.59)
Yes (n = 56)	0.63 (.72)	0.18 (.51)

Discussion

There have been initiatives across the country to encourage relevant stakeholders to provide equal access to education for students with disabilities. One area of this movement relates to pre-service teacher candidates' attitudes and behaviors. In line with this trend, we decided to further explore the attitudes of pre-service teacher candidates, and to extend the Shippen et al. (2005) research which compared the perceptions of future educators, before and after taking an introductory course in special education. These comparisons were documented using two dichotomous scales (i.e. hostility-receptivity and anxiety-calmness).

As can be inferred from the results of the current study, the attitudes of participants toward instructing children with disabilities significantly improved on completion of a single introductory course in special education. This increase in a positive attitude was observed for the overall PSIS, as well as for both the anxiety-calmness and the hostility-receptivity subcategories. This finding is similar to the outcome obtained by Shippen et al. (2005) who also reported an overall increase in the positivity of attitudes of their study participants after completing an introductory course on exceptionalities. Other research findings in the field point to a generally more positive view held by participants who completed a single course on disabilities regarding the inclusion of student's special needs (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Kuester, 2000; Mc-Leskey & Waldron, 2002; Snyder, 1999).

The current study indicates significant between-subject effects of universities. For example, it was revealed that in the hostility-receptivity subcategory, the participants from University A became significantly more positive than did those from University B and University C. Although it is difficult to conjecture why the increase in positivity of attitude in the hostility-receptivity subcategory was greater for University A, it is plausible that participants who completed coursework in University A had greater exposure to field-based experiences or observations during the introductory course. It is also likely that, to a greater extent, University A had infused into their instruction offerings the use of guest speakers, including those with disabilities, and/or the deployment of pre-service teachers to community schools for observations. These practical assignments in themselves might have resulted in a heightened awareness for participants.

Having prior confidence in teaching students with disabilities appears to positively influence respondents' attitudes toward inclusion. Participants who had higher prior confidence in teaching students with disabilities demonstrated more positive attitudes in the two subcategories measured in this study. Similarly, the between-subject MANOVA found that, overall, the main effect of the factor prior interaction with people with disabilities was significant. In other words, the increase in positivity of attitude of participants who had prior interaction with people with disabilities was significantly larger than the corresponding increase of those who had no such interaction. This significant difference by prior interaction class was seen in both the anxiety-calmness and the hostility-receptivity subcategories. The findings of the current study are similar to study outcomes of Avramidis et al. (2000), Harvey (1985), Jobe, Rust, & Brissie, (1996), and Subban & Sharma (2005). In their study, Subban & Sharma observed that participants whose family members possessed a disability, and who had been involved with people with disabilities in employment situations, seem to show increased awareness, when it came to including learners with disabilities in regular classrooms. It would seem that the variable of prior experience increases the teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusive education. Thus, previous experience with including students with disabilities into regular schools may be an avenue to better prepare pre-service teacher candidates for inclusion. This is justifiable since general education teachers' attitudes about instructing students with disabilities are learned and appear to be shaped by the knowledge and contact the individual teacher has had with regard to a specific person or group.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this research study involve the courses' delivery methods, the course requirements, and the Hawthorne effect. First, some of the courses were delivered in a face-to-face format, whereas others were taught online using Blackboard. This difference in the method of course delivery could have impacted the study results.

Second, the universities had a template for this course but different people taught the courses. The individual faculty members may have approached the teaching of the course content in a different manner from one another. For example, some of the instructors required a field-based experience with children with special needs in a public school setting, while other instructors invited people with disabilities to their class as guest lecturers. This varying experience with individuals with disabilities may have influenced the participants' level of comfort with students with disabilities. If all of the students at the three universities had received the course content in the same way and with the same requirements, then the participants may have responded in an entirely different manner than they did.

Finally, Borg and Gall (1983) define the Hawthorne Effect as "any situation in which the experimental conditions are such that the mere fact the subject is participating in an experiment or is receiving special attention tends to improve performance" (p. 215). The participants of this study were general education students who were enrolled in an introductory course. The majority of the participants were undergraduate students who may not have participated in many research studies prior to this one. The novelty of participation in this project may have influenced how the participants answered the survey items.

Conclusion

Knowledge of how to accommodate for students with disabilities and experiencing a positive attitude when teaching these students is necessary for pre-service teachers. Universities have an obligation to prepare educators who possess these skills together with an attitude of acceptance of students with disabilities. As gleaned from our study and others, one course on teaching children with special needs in a university general education preparation program can improve pre-service teachers' perceptions toward having students with disabilities in their classrooms as well as having positive interactions with individuals with disabilities. Recommendations based on the findings of this study include:

1. Rather than have pre-service educators enroll in one introductory course in teaching students with exceptionalities, have this knowledge embedded into all courses.
2. Provide extensive field-based experiences observing and teaching public school students with disabilities.
3. Have teachers with disabilities involved in pre-service teachers' university experience by having them as guest lecturers and as student teaching supervisors, co-teaching courses.
4. Ensure that pre-service courses include a combination of field-based experiences with students with disabilities, exposure to people with disabilities, and opportunities for other types of interactions with individuals with special needs (i.e., interviewing professionals with disabilities, and writing research papers on modifications for students with special needs).

The authors of this study are planning future research that will utilize scenarios of students with blindness/visual impairment or deafness/hard of hearing. Since the future study is focused on low-incidence populations, it will be interesting to compare pre-service teachers' perceptions between high-incidence and low-incidence populations. In conclusion, further research on the perceptions of pre-service teachers toward inclusion is needed to identify how universities can better prepare future educators to have a positive attitude toward inclusion and be prepared with a skill set that will enable them to teach students with disabilities to become contributing members of society.

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Appendix

Modified Pre-Service Inclusion Survey

Check the word that best describes your feelings after reading the following scenario.

The administrator of your school calls you in for a conference two weeks before school is out. The administrator informs you that next school year you will have several new students with disabilities in your classroom. He also shares that next year the school will make an effort to include students with disabilities in general education classes as often as appropriate. The special educator for your district is also in attendance at this conference and she is hearing this information for the first time, too. The administrator goes on to say that the students with disabilities that will be in your class have the identified disabilities of ADHD, autism, learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disorders, and intellectual disabilities. You leave the meeting feeling...

1.	Enthusiastic	Somewhat Enthusiastic	Neutral	Somewhat Unenthusiastic	Unenthusiastic
2.	Scared	Somewhat Scared	Neutral	Somewhat Fearless	Fearless
3.	Anxious	Somewhat Anxious	Neutral	Somewhat Relaxed	Relaxed
4.	Comfortable	Somewhat Comfortable	Neutral	Somewhat Uncomfortable	Uncomfortable
5.	Angry	Somewhat Angry	Neutral	Somewhat Not Angry	Not angry
6.	Unwilling	Somewhat Unwilling	Neutral	Somewhat Willing	Willing
7.	Interested	Somewhat Interested	Neutral	Somewhat Disinterested	Disinterested
8.	Confident	Somewhat Confident	Neutral	Somewhat Insecure	Insecure
9.	Nervous	Somewhat Nervous	Neutral	Somewhat Calm	Calm
10.	Pleased	Somewhat Pleased	Neutral	Somewhat Displeased	Displeased
11.	Weak	Somewhat Weak	Neutral	Somewhat Powerful	Powerful
12.	Annoyed	Somewhat Annoyed	Neutral	Somewhat Indifferent	Indifferent
13.	Accepting	Somewhat Accepting	Neutral	Somewhat Opposing	Opposing
14.	Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Neutral	Somewhat Unprepared	Unprepared
15.	Resistant	Somewhat Resistant	Neutral	Somewhat Cooperative	Cooperative
16.	Happy	Somewhat Happy	Neutral	Somewhat Unhappy	Unhappy
17.	Pessimistic	Somewhat Pessimistic	Neutral	Somewhat Optimistic	Optimistic