

SERBIAN TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCLUSION

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This study investigated the attitudes of 72 Serbian teachers towards the inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream schools; they were asked to complete My Thinking About Inclusion Questionnaire (Stoiber, Goettinger, & Goetz, 1998). It was found that Serbian teachers held overall slightly negative attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN, with teachers with experience in teaching children with SEN holding more positive attitudes towards inclusion in comparison to teachers without such experience. No differences were observed in teachers' attitudes towards inclusion according to their years of teaching experience. Findings are discussed in relation to the effectiveness of changes that were implemented recently in Serbia regarding the educational rights and needs of children with SEN.

Introduction

Inclusion, or organised placement of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Cook, 2001), has certainly been one of the major topics in education for the last two decades (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000). However, it was not until quite recently that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) became the focus of extensive research (Avramidis & Kalyva, in press; Jobe & Rust, 1996). The major reason for this change in research interest could perhaps be traced to more contemporary approaches to education, which claim that in order to gain valuable insight into the practice as well as the dynamics of the inclusive classroom, there is perhaps no better method than to evaluate the attitudes of those who form an important part of that dynamic system; namely, the teachers (Rose, 2001). Indeed, teachers' attitudes have been found to affect the process and the outcome of inclusion to a great extent (e.g., Avramidis et al., 2000; Richards, 1999).

More specifically, teachers' positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN could facilitate inclusion in a mainstream setting (e.g., Cook, 2001; Richards, 1999), since positive attitudes are closely related to motivation to work with and teach children with SEN. Teachers' motivation in this case is of utmost importance because inclusion demands time, organisation, and cooperation with a pupil with SEN who is not customarily willing or able to participate in classroom activities (Avramidis et al., 2000). High motivation is, in turn, associated with better dynamics in the classroom, allowing thus both the child with SEN and other typically developing children in the classroom to adjust to each other's presence and to function more coherently. Although some researchers (e.g., Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) claim that it is not teachers' attitudes as such that affect inclusion, but rather the conditions of education, the influence of the former has been well-documented (Cook, 2001).

The variable that seems to be consistently linked to teachers' attitudes towards inclusion is their experience in teaching children with SEN (Wishart, 2001). Teachers who have worked with children with SEN in an inclusive setting tend to hold more positive attitudes towards inclusion than teachers without relevant experience (Avramidis et al., 2000; LeRoy & Simpson, 1996). However, not all teachers with experience in teaching children with SEN hold equally positive attitudes towards inclusion, probably due to their varying degree of teaching experience that is correlated with their age (Stoiber, Goettinger, & Goetz, 1998). Older teachers with many years of teaching experience are often characterised by lack of enthusiasm, fatigue, and conservatism in their views regarding teaching children with SEN (Center & Ward, 1987). Teachers' age might also determine the amount of special training that they have received in educating children with SEN, since nowadays special needs courses

are normally part of the university curriculum (Richards, 1999). Therefore, younger teachers with less years of teaching experience may have attended specialised courses that have impacted on their attitudes towards inclusion.

Although the topic of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion is widely researched in many countries, evidence from Serbia is very scarce. Gacic (1998), Hrnjica (1997), and Pejovic (1989) looked at overall attitudes towards inclusion among primary schoolteachers and found that they held in general negative attitudes towards inclusion, which might be accounted for by a severe economic crisis in Serbia that resulted in general negativity and dissatisfaction of the educational staff. Sretenov (2000) conducted the only study in Serbia that grouped teachers according to their experience in teaching children with SEN and reported that pre-school teachers with more experience in teaching children with SEN held more positive beliefs about inclusion than teachers with less relevant experience. However, a lot of changes have taken place since the publication of these studies. More specifically: a) five currently effective laws dealing with social provision for children with SEN - Social Protection Act, Law on Social Protection and Provision of Social Security to Citizens, Family and Marriage Relations Code, Law on Financial Support, and The Law on Child Day Care - were implemented; b) inclusion of courses on education of children with SEN in the university curriculum even for mainstream teachers became an absolute priority for the Government and student teachers nowadays have at least a moderate training in teaching children with SEN before graduating; and c) a great change was recorded in general public attitude towards children with SEN, with increased awareness of their rights and needs (Save the Children Report, 2004).

Within the context of these changes that have very recently taken place in Serbia, the aim of the present study is to explore teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN. It is expected that Serbian teachers will hold in general negative attitudes towards inclusion regardless of their years of teaching, with teachers with experience in teaching children with SEN holding more positive attitudes towards inclusion in comparison to teachers without such experience.

Method

Participants

The participants of the present study were 72 element teachers in twelve inner-city Belgrade elementary schools, 60 women and 12 men; most primary schoolteachers in Serbia are women, and therefore gender differences in attitudes towards inclusion were not further explored. The first group comprised of 35 teachers – 30 women and 5 men - (mean age = 38 years and 7 months) with experience in teaching children with SEN in classrooms organised to accommodate such a child; that is, teachers from special and inclusion schools. This group was practically self-selected, given the limited number of inner-city schools in Belgrade that accommodate students with SEN. The second group was made up of 37 teachers – 30 women and 7 men - (mean age = 40 years and 5 months) without experience in teaching children with SEN in any setting. They were teaching in elementary schools in the same areas as teachers from the first group and an effort was made to match the two groups in terms of age, gender, and years of teaching experience (the mean years of teaching for both groups was 16). Out of the 80 teachers who agreed initially to participate in the study, 72 returned completed questionnaires. The return rate (90%) was very satisfactory.

Measures

The questionnaire that was used in this study was entitled *My Thinking About Inclusion Scale* (MTAI) and was devised by Stoiber et al. (1998). It consisted of a 28-item scale, divided in three parts: a) *core perspectives* (12 items), which assessed teachers' agreement with the claim that children with disabilities are entitled to education together with their typically developing peers in inclusive classrooms, b) *expected outcomes of inclusion* (11 items), which is most closely associated with the construct *expectations from the child with SEN* and according to Stoiber et al. (1998) significantly influences teaching practices, and c) *classroom practices* (5 items), which examines how inclusion influences classroom dynamics and general teaching practices. The possible range of scores for the total scale was from 28-140 (with high values indicating negative beliefs). There were 14 reverse questions (e.g. Inclusion is NOT a desirable practice for educating most typically developing students). Examples of the statements that were included in the questionnaire are: *Children with special educational needs have the right to be educated in the same classroom as typically developing students*, *Children with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms develop a better self-concept than in a self-contained classroom*, and *Children with special educational needs monopolise teachers' time*.

In order to complete the questionnaire, the participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Accept; 2 = Agree; 3 = Undecided/Neutral; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly Reject). Stoiber et al. (1998) stated that the subscale intercorrelations were moderate ($r = .50$ for core perspective-classroom practices, $r = .55$ for expected outcomes-classroom practices, and $r = .75$ for expected outcomes-core perspectives). They also reported that the internal consistency of the MTAI scale was high (.91) and provided the following alphas for core perspective (.80), for expected outcomes (.85) and for classroom practices (.64). The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients for the three subscales of the MTAI questionnaire in the present study were $\alpha = .78$ for core perspectives, $\alpha = .76$ for expected outcomes, and $\alpha = .73$ for classroom practices and they were considered satisfactory. It could be seen that internal consistency in this study is lower in expected outcomes and higher in classroom practices in comparison to the alphas of the original study – reflecting possibly cultural variations.

Procedure

The principals of the schools that accommodated students with SEN were contacted initially and asked to call a meeting in order to brief the potential participants of the purpose of the present study. The 40 teachers with experience in teaching children with SEN who agreed to take part in the study were matched for age, gender, and years of teaching experience with teachers from neighbouring mainstream schools who did not have any experience in teaching children with SEN. They were all assured for the confidentiality of their responses and they were asked to complete the questionnaire that was returned to the researcher in person in a closed envelope. The 8 questionnaires that had missing data or more than one answers in an item were excluded from the analysis with the SPSS. The appropriate test to address the aim of this study was MANCOVA, with the whole scale and the three subscales of the MTAI scale as the dependent variables, experience in teaching children with SEN as the independent variable, and years of teaching experience as the covariate.

Results

The data showed that Serbian teachers had overall slightly negative attitudes towards inclusion of children with SEN. As far as MTAI subscales were concerned, teachers held slightly negative attitudes towards core perspectives, neutral attitudes towards expected outcomes, and very negative attitudes towards classroom practices. The means and standard deviations for the entire sample, the whole scale, and the three subscales are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of the Participants' Scores in the Core Perspectives, Expected Outcomes, Classroom Practices Subscales and the Entire MTAI Scale

Attitudes	M	(SD)
Core perspectives ^a	34.06	(7.61)
Expected outcomes ^b	28.89	(7.15)
Classroom practices ^c	18.68	(3.38)
Whole scale ^d	82.21	(15.28)

a = score range 12-60, b = score range 11-55, c = score range 5-25, and d = score range 28-140 (with the highest score being more negative)

Table 2
Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Attitudes Towards Core Perspectives, Expected Outcomes, and Classroom Practices Regarding Inclusion of Teachers With and Without SEN Experience

Experience in teaching children with SEN	Attitudes		F	η^2
	Yes M (SD)	No M (SD)		
Core perspectives ^a	28.83 (4.59)	39 (6.54)	55.41*	0.45
Expected outcomes ^b	24.20 (4.16)	33.2 (6.54)	49.04*	0.41
Classroom practices ^c	17.54 (3.58)	19.76 (2.82)	8.15**	0.11
Whole scale ^d	71.09 (9.35)	92.73 (12)	69.86*	0.52

a = score range 12-60, b = score range 11-55, c = score range 5-25, and d = score range 28-140 (with the highest score being more negative) * $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$

MANCOVA showed when the covariate (years of teaching experience) was controlled for, the main effect of experience in teaching children with SEN on attitudes towards inclusion was strong and

significant ($F(4,66) = 23.84, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.52$). Univariate ANOVAS suggested that this effect is quite strong and evident both in the subscales - core perspectives ($F(1,69) = 55.41, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.44$), expected outcomes ($F(1,69) = 49.04, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.41$), and classroom practices ($F(1,69) = 8.15, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.11$) - and in the whole scale ($F(1,69) = 69.86, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.52$). Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2 (above).

Teachers without experience in teaching children with SEN were more negative than teachers with relevant experience in all the factors that were assessed.

Discussion

The finding that teachers in Serbia hold generally slightly negative attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN, which confirmed the hypothesis of this study, was in line with previous studies that were conducted in Serbia (Gagic, 1998; Hrnjica, 1997; Pejovic 1989) and in contrast with research from other countries that indicated overall positive attitudes towards inclusion (e.g., Gilmore, Campbell, & Cuskelly, 2003; Wishart, 2001). Therefore, it is likely that the reforms that have taken place in 2000 with the implementation of supportive laws may have increased public awareness of the needs and rights of people with SEN (Save the Children Report, 2004), but they have not influenced yet teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, since the formation of attitudes is influenced by many factors (O'Hanlon, 1993).

This claim could be further supported by the finding that teachers held overall negative attitudes towards inclusion irrespective of their years of teaching experience. Since in Serbia special needs training was just introduced in universities (Save the Children Report, 2004), it is likely that teachers with a few years of teaching experience did not have the chance to benefit from proper training, which could make them less resistant to inclusive practices (Leyser & Tappendorf, 2001; Van-Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2000).

Moreover, the present study showed that experience in working with children with SEN did differentiate between teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. More specifically, it was found that Serbian teachers with experience in working with children with SEN held more positive attitudes towards their inclusion than their colleagues without relevant experience. This finding has been supported by studies conducted in other countries (e.g., Avramidis et al., 2000; Gilmore, Campbell, & Cuskelly, 2003; Stoiber et al., 1998; Wishart, 2001) and also in Serbia by Sretenov (2000) who found that Serbian pre-school teachers with more experience in teaching children with SEN held more positive beliefs about inclusion than teachers with less relevant experience. This could be explained by a finding reported by LeRoy and Simpson (1996); the confidence of teachers both in their teaching efficacy and in successful inclusion increases together with their experience in teaching children with SEN.

When looking at the subscales of MTAI, the teachers expressed the most general negative attitude towards classroom practices, which could be explained by the fact that they lack support and resources both at the classroom and at the school levels (Save the Children Report, 2004). The absence of these environment-related factors has been associated with negative attitudes towards inclusion in other countries as well (Avramidis & Norwitch, 2002). Teachers with experience in teaching children with SEN were somehow more positive than teachers without such experience probably because they were *forced* to resolve these practical problems in their everyday teaching practice (Stoiber et al., 1998).

Serbian teachers held also in general slightly negative attitudes towards core perspectives, which assess in this questionnaire the belief that children with SEN have the right to be educated in classrooms with typically developing children and that inclusion is considered *best practice* for educating all children (Stoiber et al., 1998). This finding could be accounted for by the work of Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996), who reported that teachers are far from accepting a total inclusion or *zero effect* approach to the provision of special education, even if they hold positive attitudes towards inclusion. Teachers without experience in teaching children with SEN were more negative in their beliefs regarding core perspectives of inclusion possibly because they lacked more knowledge and specific skills in instructional and management skills than teachers with relevant experience (Avramidis et al., 2000).

As far as expected outcomes of inclusion are concerned, Serbian teachers held an overall neutral attitude towards inclusion, probably because inclusion started being implemented in Serbia in 1998 (Save the Children report, 2004) and they did not know what to expect (Avramidis et al., 2000). The teachers who had experience in teaching children with SEN were more positive than teachers without

such experience, probably because they felt that they could make a difference (Janney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes, 2005; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005).

Despite the usefulness of this study – which was the first one differentiating between primary schoolteachers with and without experience in teaching children with SEN in Serbia – it should be stressed that it has the following limitations: a) the sample is not representative of the whole population of teachers in Serbia, since only teachers from inner-city schools in Belgrade were surveyed; b) the design is not longitudinal and therefore it is not possible to detect trends in attitudes towards inclusion using the same measure; c) there was no differentiation as to teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of different types of SEN, which are thought to constitute an important parameter (Heiman, 2001; Lifshitz, Glaubman, & Issawi, 2004; Soodak, Podell, & Lehman, 1998); d) the data was collected through self-reports, so it was not possible to establish whether teachers' attitudes were reflected also in the teaching practice; and e) there was no data linking attitudinal scores to either teaching effectiveness or to student outcomes. These limitations could be addressed in future research in an attempt to further evaluate the nature of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion in light of the contextual changes that have recently taken place regarding inclusion in Serbia. Given the fact that the implemented changes in Serbia have not reinforced positive attitudes towards inclusion, it might be advisable to revise the content of the new training programmes.

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