

The Impact of Perceived Support on Attitudes Towards Inclusion

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In Ontario, the inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms is a reality for many students (Government of Ontario, 2004). According to 2003-2004 school board data, 61,701 elementary and 65,692 secondary school students received special education programs and/or services in a regular classroom. An additional 15,438 identified elementary students and 6,895 identified secondary students spent up to 50% of their time in a regular classroom.

Given that inclusion impacts many students, previous research has explored conditions that contribute to a positive student experience. Some of the variables that have been identified include administrative attitudes, resources inside and outside of the classroom, and support from professionals (Bender, Vial & Scott, 1995). However, the most important variable impacting successful inclusion identified by previous research so far is positive teacher attitudes (Jamieson, 1984; Bender, Vial & Scott, 1995; Chow & Winzer, 1992; Buell, Hallam, Gamet-McCormick & Scheer, 1999).

One factor that could be contributing to positive teacher attitudes is additional staff support provided to students who have exceptional needs. Research has consistently found that teachers perceive collaboration with other personnel to be necessary to ensure success in inclusive schooling (Rainforth, York & Macdonald, 1992; Reeve & Hallahan, 1994; Villa & Thousand, 1994). Various types of staffing support (e.g., Educational Assistants) are commonly mentioned by teachers when they are asked open-ended questions about what factors would improve inclusive placements, however, they are rarely formally assessed in research measuring general attitudes towards inclusion. (Avramidis and Brahm, 2002).

The presence or absence of additional staff support has not been sufficiently addressed in previous research. General measures of attitudes towards inclusion used in current research (e.g., the *Attitudes Towards Mainstreaming Scale*, Berryman, 1989; *Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education Scale*, Wilczenski, 1995) ignore how many additional staff resources a regular teacher can expect to have in their classroom to assist in the inclusion process. This is particularly important because many students with special needs in Ontario who are included in regular classrooms have an Educational Assistant (E.A.), or share an E.A. with other students.

Current research questions such as "It is difficult to maintain order in a regular classroom that contains a special needs child" or "Integration of special-needs children will require significant changes in regular classroom procedure," do not allow the teacher respondent to consider these issues with an understanding of whether or not the student would be provided with additional support in the classroom (Berryman & Neal, 1980). The responses teachers might provide to such questions could vary a great deal depending on whether or not teachers expect students with exceptionalities to be provided with additional support staff to assist the regular classroom teacher in including an exceptional student. This study contributed to previous research by more closely examining the impact of perceived support. Specifically, this research explored the hypothesis that perceived support provided to the student with exceptionalities within the regular classroom is a significant predictor of perceptions of positive contact, and as a result, positive teacher attitudes towards classroom inclusion.

Research Participants

One hundred and fifteen Concurrent and Consecutive Education students at Queen's University participated in this study (13 males; 102 females). Ages ranged from 16 to older than 25, and year in program ranged from first year of Concurrent Education until fifth year (i.e., Consecutive Education).

Measures

Participants were presented either with a vignette scenario in which a student with special needs has an Educational Assistant or does not have an Educational Assistant, and asked to rate both their perception of support provided to the student, and their opinion about continuing to include the student in a regular classroom (i.e., with typically developing peers). Afterwards, participants completed a *Background Information Questionnaire* containing a series of questions measuring other variables that have previously been demonstrated to impact attitudes towards inclusion, such as previous experience with children who have special needs (both inside and outside of the classroom), instruction in special education, age, teaching experience, and quantity of contact. Finally, participants were asked to fill out a general measure of attitudes towards that has demonstrated validity in previous research, the STATIC (*Scale of Teacher Attitude Towards Inclusion*) (Cochrane, 1998).

Analysis

Results indicated that there was a significant relationship between perceived quality of support provided to students with special needs, ratings of the quality of contact, and positive attitudes towards inclusion. This relationship was evident through several different analyses. For example, correlational analyses using variables on the Background Questionnaire revealed that when asked to consider past experiences with students with special needs, participants consistently gave very strong ratings of quality of contact for students whom they also perceived to be well-supported ($r=.882, p<.01$). This relationship was calculated using the overall average of participants' perceptions of support provided to students with special needs they had worked with in a classroom, and the average of all quality of contact ratings for those students. Second, using the vignette scenarios, Pearson coefficients were calculated to examine the relationship between the answers to the first follow-up question ("How well were this student's needs identified and supported in the classroom?") and the second follow-up question ("Should this student continue to be included in a regular classroom with typically-developing peers?"). Participants who perceived the student to be well-supported were more likely to favour continuing to include the student in a regular classroom ($r=.762, p<.001$). Third, a regression analysis conducted using information from the Background Questionnaire to determine which variables were predictive of ratings of high quality of contact between teachers and students with special needs. A multiple regression was conducted in which demographic variables (age, gender) were entered in block one, instruction in special needs was entered in block two, total quantity of school contact with individuals with special needs was entered in block three, and average quality of support provided to students with special needs was entered in block four. Quality of support provided to students accounted for 50% of the variance in ratings of quality of contact, $R^2(3, 111)=.819, p<.001$, above and beyond all other variables entered, $R^2(3,111)=.309, p=.004$. Finally, regression analyses also indicated that previous experiences with well-supported students ($\beta=.544, t=3.247, p=.002$) and good quality of contact ($\beta=.423, t=1.981, p=.051$) were predictive of overall attitudes towards inclusion, whereas other predictors demonstrated by previous research (such as quantity of contact) were not ($R^2=.180, F \text{ change } (8, 77)=2.118, p=.044$). Therefore, a significant positive three-way relationship among quality of support, quality of contact and both general and specific attitudes towards inclusion was shown in four ways.

Results

Results indicated that there was a significant relationship between perceived quality of support provided to students with special needs, ratings of the quality of contact, and positive attitudes towards inclusion. This relationship was evident through several different correlational analyses. For example, when asked to consider past experiences with students with special needs, participants consistently gave very strong ratings of quality of contact for students whom they also perceived to be well-supported. As well, in the vignette follow-up questions, participants who perceived the student to be well-supported were more likely to favour continuing to include the student in a regular classroom. Also, in regression analyses, good quality of support accounted for 50% of the variance in ratings of quality of contact above and beyond a series of other predictor variables such as instruction in special education and quantity of experience with students who have special needs. Furthermore, in regression analyses, previous experiences with well-supported students and good quality of contact accounted for 54% of the variance in overall attitudes towards inclusion, whereas other predictors demonstrated by previous research (such as quantity of contact) were not. Perceptions of support were also correlated with willingness to include a student with special needs in the specific vignette scenario. Therefore, there was a significant positive three-way relationship between quality of support, quality of contact and both general and specific attitudes towards inclusion.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to clarify the importance of considering perceived support when measuring attitudes towards inclusion through examination of both general and specific attitudes towards inclusion. Results indicated that a specific measure of willingness to include a particular student with special needs (i.e., the vignette score) was not related to a general measure of attitudes towards inclusion (i.e., the STATIC score). This result raises the concern that general measures of attitudes towards inclusion may have little predictive power for specific ideas teachers may have about which students with special needs should be included in regular classrooms. As well, the strength of the relationship among perceived support, positive contact, and positive attitudes towards inclusion merits serious consideration in future research. In particular, measures of teacher attitudes should not be considered to accurately reflect their preferences about inclusive practices unless they specifically take into account whether or not that teachers can expect that the student with special needs will receive additional support within or outside of the regular classroom.

These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that teachers are generally more positive about inclusion when they can expect to be provided with high quality support when it is required and suggests that inclusion could become a successful possibility for a more students if such support was provided to the teachers involved (Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, & Scheer, 1999).

Although the sample obtained in this study was relatively large, it should be noted that these findings may have limited generalizability to both regular classroom teachers and other preservice teachers. Preservice teachers may hold different opinions than professionals already established in the field because of their limited experience (Avramidis & Brahm, 2002). Therefore, the results from this research should not necessarily be generalized to experienced teachers.

The results of this study suggest perceived support is an important variable to consider when evaluating teacher attitudes towards inclusion.. As well, results suggest that a general measure of attitudes towards inclusion may provide an incomplete and potentially incorrect representation of pre-service teachers' beliefs. Each of these results merit consideration in future research.

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