

## Preservice Teachers' Attitudes toward Inclusive Education before and After Student Teaching

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### Abstract

*Inclusion is an educational strategy practiced around the world. One of the keys to its success is a positive attitude on the part of the teacher. This study examined the attitudes of preservice teachers before and after student teaching who received extensive special education coursework and fieldwork as part of their curriculum. While the majority of participants did not change their positive attitudes during the student teaching experience, some felt less confident teaching in an inclusion classroom afterward than they did at the beginning. Furthermore, after student teaching, about half of the study participants said they did not want to teach in an inclusion setting as a career.*

**Keywords:** preservice teacher, attitude, inclusion, before, after, student teaching

### Introduction

(Hamid, Alasmari, & Eldood, 2015) define Inclusion as "...an educational practice based on a notion of social justice that advocates access to equal educational opportunities for all students regardless of the presence of a disability. Inclusion involves students with disabilities learning with their peers in regular schools that adapt and change the way they work in order to meet the needs of all students". Huskin, Mundy, and Kupczynski (2016) add that "Inclusion has become standard practice in classrooms around the world, and preservice teachers need to know how to meet the educational needs of students with a wide variety of learning styles and (dis)abilities. Success in meeting those needs depends on the degree to which that teacher has a positive attitude toward inclusive education (O'Toole, & Burke, 2013, Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009). In addition, studies have demonstrated that preservice teachers who receive training to educate students with disabilities in inclusive settings have more positive attitudes toward this task learning environment than preservice teachers who did not, and interaction with individuals with special needs prior to student teaching and previous training in disabilities significantly influenced attitudes in a positive manner Hamid et al. (2015)(Hamid, Alasmari, & Eldood, 2015). Clearly, these studies have shown that there is a correlation between preservice teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and their success in that environment. A number of other studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between exposure to pre-student teaching special education curricula, training, and/or experience, and a positive attitude toward inclusive settings (Ajuwon et al., 2012; Forlin, et al. 2009; Forlin, Earle, Loreman, & Sharma, 2011; Greenfield, Mackey, & Nelson, 2016; Hamid et al., 2015; Huskin, Mundy, & Kupczynski, 2016; Lambe & Bone, 2006b; Loreman, Forlin, & Sharma, 2007; Killoran, Woronko, & Zaretsky, 2014; Loreman, Sharma, & Forlin, 2013; Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009; Varcoe & Boyle, 2013; Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009). In 2015 Shaukat, and Rasheed noted that,

The attitudes of teachers have an impact on the overall classroom climate. The teacher-student relationships influence their acceptance of their peers with disabilities. When teachers respond in a positive and caring manner to students with behavior concerns, their peers are often found to have greater acceptance to work with them. Attitudes of teachers in an inclusion classroom are the most important aspects in creating an inclusive class. It is essential that teachers have positive attitudes towards inclusion. The foundation of positive, equitable, and inclusive attitudes towards the education of students with disabilities can be laid in preservice-teacher-preparation programs. (Killoran, Woronko & Zaretsky, 2014).

Accordingly, universities are beginning to infuse into their programs practices to help preservice teachers foster understanding and improve attitudes toward inclusive education (Ajuwon, Lechtenberger, Griffin-Shirley, Sokolosky, Zhou, & Mullins, 2012). Studies on the topic of preservice teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education have generally been performed using a survey before and after a one-semester special education course (Greenfield, Mackey, & Nelson, 2016). Results revealed that special education courses can positively influence preservice teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward inclusion (McCray & McHatton, 2011).

Colleges and universities in the state of Pennsylvania have the option of offering an early elementary/special education certification program that requires education majors to take ten special education courses (Introduction to Exceptionalities, Learning Disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Inclusive Classroom, Behavior Disorders, Assessment of Students with Special Needs, Collaboration in Special Education, Assistive Technology, Differentiated Instruction, and Intensive Reading and Writing Instruction) as part of their certification curriculum. In addition, by the time preservice teachers who exercise that certification option begin student teaching they will have completed over 210 hours of field experience observations in elementary classrooms, at least 50 of which were in inclusion or special education classrooms. Student teaching in the state of Pennsylvania is performed in either a regular classroom setting and then a special education setting for seven weeks each, or, more likely, in an inclusion classroom for 14 weeks. At the conclusion of the program, the preservice teachers graduate with dual certification in early elementary education (PreK - 4) and special education (PreK - 8). While preservice teachers from the program could teach elementary education or special education, in both cases, preservice teachers' perceptions about students with disabilities will impact their future practice.

At the time of this writing there have been no studies to investigate preservice teachers' attitudes toward an inclusion setting before and after their student teaching experience when they interact with special education students on a daily basis. Given the degree to which preservice teachers in dual certification programs in Pennsylvania are exposed to students with disabilities and inclusion classrooms prior to student teaching, the purpose of this study is to determine if their attitudes toward inclusion classrooms change as a result of the experience, and, if so, how.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

After giving informed consent, 34 university seniors, all female, majoring in early childhood/elementary education at a small university in Southeast Pennsylvania, volunteered to take a survey to explore their attitudes toward inclusion or special education at the beginning of the semester during which they would be student teaching in such an environment. At this university all students majoring in early childhood/elementary education are required to participate in an elementary/special ed certification program. Student teaching is performed in an inclusion classroom for 14 weeks. They were also asked to retake the survey 15 weeks later when they finished student teaching. Each student was assured their responses were anonymous, but were asked for their mother's maiden name as a way to match up their pre and post data, since matched responses were required for the appropriate analysis. No demographic data were collected.

### **Instrument**

The survey used was created and validated by Lambe and Bone (2006b), who designed it to discover education student's attitudes toward a range of inclusion issues after Irish parliament passed a mandate requiring all classrooms to be inclusive in 2008, two years hence.

The original survey contained 27 statements, but was shortened for this study because the majority of the questions were designed to illicit responses related to Ireland's education culture's reaction to a near complete restructuring of the Irish educational structure. The original survey used a three-point Likert scale: 1 = Agree, 2 = No opinion, and 3 = Disagree. However, the resulting 11-item survey instrument used in this study solicited responses on a forced-choice four-point Likert scale designed to eliminate a neutral midpoint response: 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, and 4 = Strongly Disagree. The questionnaires were placed on SurveyMonkey.com and made available for the students to access.

### **Results**

The responses to each statement in the questionnaire were examined and the frequencies of each answer sorted by its number. Like categories were combined in order to better generalize data trends, i.e. Strongly Agree and Agree were combined; likewise, for responses that disagreed with the statement. Frequencies were then transformed into percentages. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Survey Results:**

No.	Statement in Questionnaire	n	Before student teaching		After student teaching	
			Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
1	I think all teachers should experience teaching pupils with special educational needs.	34	91.2%	8.8%	94.1%	5.9%
2	I think you need to be a special kind of teacher to teach pupils with special educational needs.	34	91.2%	8.8%	97.1%	2.9%
3	I think you need an interest in special educational to be an effective teacher of special education.	34	94.1%	5.9%	97.1%	2.9%
4	I am concerned I have no experience in working with special educational needs.	33	20.6%	79.4%	42.4%	57.6%
5	I am concerned I will not have the skills required to teach special educational needs in an inclusive setting.	34	20.6%	79.4%	41.2%	58.8%
6	I think that inclusion is the best practice for dealing effectively with pupils of different abilities.	33	90.9%	9.1%	87.9%	12.1%
7	Having pupils with diverse special educational needs in the classroom is unfair to other pupils.	34	17.6%	82.4%	20.6%	79.4%
8	A teacher should be concerned with educational issues and not be expected to deal with pupils' emotional and behavioral problems.	34	8.8%	91.2%	23.5%	76.5%
9	I would prefer to teach in a selective educational system if I had the choice, i.e. a non-inclusive classroom.	33	26.5%	73.5%	51.5%	48.5%
10	It is more important for schools to promote academic achievement than social inclusion.	34	29.4%	70.6%	17.6%	82.4%
11	It is more important for schools to promote social inclusion than academic achievement.	32	38.2%	61.8%	37.5%	62.5%

### **Discussion**

In survey item #1 students were asked to respond to the statement, "I think all teachers should experience teaching pupils with special educational needs." In this study 91.2% of pre-student teaching preservice teachers and 94.1% of post-student teacher preservice teachers agreed. Sharma, and Desai (2012), found that participants who had training courses in special education were more confident to educate individuals with special needs in general classes too.

Hamid, Alasmari, and Eldood (2015) noted that in a study conducted by them “Training positively influenced participants' attitudes and improved their confidence to educate children with special needs in general classes.

Loerman, Forlin, and Sharma (2007) agreed, “Teacher preparation programs also need to provide preservice teachers with opportunities to experience success in working in inclusive environments, as in this study confidence levels were found to have a highly significant impact on attitudes. Success naturally leads to increased confidence, which in turn leads to improved attitudes.” The preservice teachers in this study had the benefit of these types of opportunities before student teaching. For survey statement #2, “I think you need to be a special kind of teacher to teach pupils with special educational needs” respondents agreed (91.2% before, and 97.1% after student teaching). This question was closely tied to In statement #3, “I think you need an interest in special educational to be an effective teacher of special education,” 94.1% of students agreed before student teaching and 97.1% agreed after.

Mardis (2017) claims a general public belief that teachers who work with special needs students have a unique disposition that facilitates an enthusiasm, compassion, and ability to teach those students. The higher number of agreement after student teaching may be attributed to the full time teaching experience of teaching students with special needs which helped the students in this study realize whether or not they are that special teacher. The implications of this will be explored later in the discussion section.

Items #4 and #5 of the survey addressed the experience and skills confidence felt by pre-student teachers toward starting to work in an inclusion classroom, namely, “I am concerned I have no experience in working with special educational needs” and “I am concerned I will not have the skills required to teach special educational needs in an inclusive setting.” respectively. In this study, nearly four out of five (79.4%) of pre-student teaching respondents answered they felt they had the experience and skills to teach in an inclusion environment before student teaching for both questions. However, after finishing their student teaching experiences, those numbers dropped to 58.8% and 57.6% respectively. This is understandable because during field experience, students in this study spent time observing and assisting a teacher in a special education classroom. The student teaching experience was different from coursework and field experience in that it required students to take over planning, teaching, accommodating, and assessing students. Stempien and Loeb (2002) noted that the heavy workload of a special education classroom combined with pressure to complete tasks in a timely manner caused many new to that environment to feel unsuccessful, which lowered the teachers' self-confidence.

Survey statement #6 continued with the topic of inclusion. Survey respondents were asked to respond to the statement “I think that inclusion is the best practice for dealing effectively with pupils of different abilities.” In this study, 90.9% of preservice teachers demonstrated a positive attitude toward an inclusive environment at the start of student teaching, a number that dropped slightly (87.9%) when student teaching was concluded. The amount of exposure to special education courses, students with disabilities, and inclusion environments are directly linked to preservice teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusion. As noted before, the preservice teachers in this study underwent coursework about inclusion and observations greater in number than those in previous studies, most of which amounted to a single introduction to special education course (Ajuwon, Lechtenberger, Griffin-Shirley, Sokolosky, Zhou, & Mullins, 2012; Forlin, et al. 2009; Forlin, Earle, Loerman, & Sharma, 2013; Greenfield, Mackey, & Nelson, 2016; Hamid, Alasmari, & Eldood, 2015; Huskin, Mundy, & Kupczynski, 2016; Lambe and Bone, 2006b; Loerman, Forlin, & Sharma, 2007; Killoran, Woronko, & Zaretsky, 2014; Loerman, Sharma, & Forlin, 2013; Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009; Varcoe & Boyle, 2013; Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009). Early opponents of inclusion worried that having special education students in a classroom setting would negatively impact the ability of non-special education students to learn. Statement #7 asked respondents' opinions of whether having pupils with diverse special educational needs in the classroom is unfair to other pupils. About four out of five (82.4%) of student teachers disagreed before student teaching and nearly the same ratio (79.4%) felt the same way afterwards. Some of the issues special education students present are emotional and behavioral as much as learning-related. The next item in the survey, #8, asked respondents whether they thought a teacher in an inclusion classroom should only be concerned with educational issues and not to be expected to deal with emotional and behavioral problems. The majority of pre-student teachers (91.2%) disagreed, and while the number of student teachers who felt the same way after student teaching declined (76.5%), over three quarters of respondents still felt dealing with emotional and behavior issues was part of teaching in an inclusion classroom. Further, having extensive coursework, field experience, and a positive attitude, toward inclusion does not mean all post-student teaching preservice teachers want to work in an inclusive classroom. The next item on the survey, #9, asked participants to respond to the following statement, “I would prefer to teach in a selective educational system if I had the choice, i.e. a non-inclusive classroom.” Only 26.5% of pre-student teachers agreed with this statement. However, after student teaching, nearly twice that many preservice teachers in this study (51.5%) indicated they would choose a non-inclusive classroom. Lambe and Bone, (2006b) found similar numbers: 44.9% of survey respondents

didn't want to teach in an inclusive environment either. Huber (2009) noted that attitudes fell along a continuum, with some preservice teachers ambivalent or undecided, while others were negative or positive about inclusive practices.

The last two items on the survey were concerned with the environment of the classroom since it fosters both social inclusion and academic achievement, and a balance between the two is essential. Survey respondents in this study were asked in question #10 if it is more important to promote academic achievement than to promote social inclusion. Prior to student teaching the majority (70.6%) disagreed. After student teaching the percentage rose to 82.4%, suggesting that student teachers viewed student socialization as at least as important as academics. Hurst, Wallace, and Nixon (2013) found that social inclusion and interaction in the classroom were strongly connected to student learning, and positively impacted academic success.

Asked about the opposite in the final item on the survey, making social inclusion a priority over academic achievement, 61.8% disagreed before student teaching and, nearly the same percentage (62.5%) disagreed after, suggesting student teachers understood the value of primarily focusing on academic achievement. In special education coursework, the laws and requirements for inclusion are studied at length, but the student teachers' presence in the public school setting allows them to experience the laws and requirements implemented first hand.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to examine preservice teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education before and after student teaching. Participants in this study had the benefit of extensive coursework and field experiences from which had an initial positive attitude toward inclusion a high level of confidence about teaching in an inclusion classroom, and a willingness to face behavioral as well as special education issues, all of which were confirmed via pre-student teacher survey

This study also revealed a lessening of confidence about having the skills or experience to work with special education students at the end of student teaching compared to when they started. Stempien and Loeb (2002) noted this results from a disconnect between class work and observation compared to the actual demands and expectations of the special education classroom. In addition, this study found half of post-student teaching preservice teachers preferred to work in a non-inclusive classroom. This isn't surprising since Huber (2009) noticed pre-service teachers' attitudes towards inclusion classrooms fell along a continuum, with some preservice teachers ambivalent or undecided, while others were negative or positive about inclusive practices. Kiggundu (2009) adds that the value of student teaching is it exposes participants to real world teaching situations in which they are able to contextualize what they've learned, and determine if they've made an appropriate career choice.

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