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“Those Aren’t My Kids”: Secondary Pre-Service Teachers’ Attitudes Toward Students with Disabilities

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The adoption of PL 94-142 (1975) Education for All Handicapped Children Act which mandated that children with disabilities are to be provided with a free and appropriate public school education. This law issued in an increase and growth of students need of special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The success of the inclusion classroom is highly dependent on the attitude of the teachers who differentiate the instruction and articulate the high expectations for all students (Cochran, 1998). The inclusion model of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom as a collaborate partners is seen as the model for today’s schools (Winzer, 1998). Research findings indicate several factors influence the success of an inclusion program are teacher’s attitudes toward inclusion and their beliefs in their ability to instruct students with disabilities (Huber, Rosenfeld, & Fiorello, 2001; Idol & Griffith, 1998; Moore, Gilbreath, & Maiuri, 1998; Sharpe, 1994).

Georgia Gwinnett College, (GGC) was established in 2007. It is the first new college established in the state in more than 100 years. The School of Education began in 2007 with a just a few students. In the next few years, the School of Education added majors that lead to certifications in early childhood education, special education, and teacher certification in a number of secondary content areas. Our secondary teacher certification program is small, but growing along with the rest of GGC.

Within the secondary certification program, we began to listen to the anecdotal reports of our students concerning their classroom expectations about working with students with disabilities. The reports seemed to indicate a disconnect, or lack of understanding, students with disabilities will be included in the regular classroom settings where they would soon be teachers! While federal mandates continue to evolve more towards the idea of full inclusion for a large number of special education students, secondary teachers continue to express mixed feelings about working with students who are dealing with disabilities. Anecdotal as well as empirical evidence suggests that some secondary teachers’
attitudes reveal anxiety about dealing with the behaviors of students with special needs in the regular classroom, and that teachers doubt their individual preparedness to educate students with disabilities in the regular classroom setting (Ajuwon, et al., 2012).

In an analysis of the literature focusing on pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards students with disabilities, Sze (2009), found that the attitude of the general education teacher is one of the most important predictors of successful integration of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. The purpose of this pilot study was to determine the attitudes of a small group of secondary pre-service teachers toward people with disabilities.

Participants

This study included a convenient sample of 15 teacher candidates enrolled in a four year secondary teacher certification program who were engaged in their student teaching experience.

Methodology

The Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP) is the most widely accepted and used research scale used in studying attitudes toward those dealing with disabilities. (Yuker & Block, 1986). The ATDP form O, includes 20 items in a Likert format. Validity of the ATDP is high, using several approaches including content, predictive, concurrent, and construct validity (White et al., 2006). This scale takes about five minutes to administer and consists of 20 items pertaining to persons with disabilities. The instrument consists of a 6-point Likert scale. A low score on this instrument indicates that the respondent perceives persons with disabilities as different from typical persons. A high score indicates that the respondent perceives persons with disabilities as similar to those persons without disabilities (Matkin, Hafer, Wright, & Lutzker, 1983). Scoring the ATDP is based up a point awards system established by Yuker and Block. Each of the 15 scales were calculated by the researchers.
Procedures and Initial Findings

The Institutional Georgia Gwinnett Institutional Review Board approved the study. The ATDP Survey was administered and received by a faculty representative who was not the professor of record for the class. In an effort to ensure anonymity the researchers asked for no identifying information such as gender, subject taught, etc. Our purpose was to collect baseline data using the ATDP. Due to the small sample size, we wanted students to be assured there was a guarantee of anonymity. How did our respondents score on the ATDP? The data from the ATDP shows that for the 15 respondents only three scored 50 points or more. One respondent did score 63 out of 100 points. While one more student scored 60 out of a total of 100. The results of this initial pilot study seem to indicate that the 15 teacher candidates view students with special needs much differently from typical students. This attitude may be a barrier to their success in integrating students with disabilities into their regular content classes. While the data set is small, we believe this phenomenon warrants further investigation.
References


Yuker, H. E. and J. R. Block (1986) Research with the attitude toward disabled persons scale (ATDP). Hempstead (NY), Center for the study of attitudes toward persons with disability. Hofstra University.
