

Inclusion Rates as Impacted by the Perceptions of Teachers' Attitudes, SES, and District Enrollment

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine if a statistically significant correlation exists between the Arkansas inclusion rates of school districts and the attitudes of special education teachers, socio-economic status of students, and school district size as determined by average daily membership. The study included 557 junior high and high school special education teachers in Arkansas involved in delivering services to students with specific learning disabilities, ages 15-18, in public school schools in Arkansas. The participants were asked to complete a teacher attitude survey regarding inclusion. Although a significant correlation was not found between teachers' attitudes and district inclusion rates, the data indicated a statistically significant correlation between inclusion rates and socio-economic status and the enrollment size of the district.

Special education is being perceived not as a place but as specialized instruction based on the individual needs of the child (Moore, Gilbreath, and Maiuri, 1998). Inclusion, one of the most controversial issues facing special education, is a strategy by which this specialized instruction is delivered. Although there are various definitions of inclusion, some educators define inclusion as a movement toward combining special education and general education services by including students with disabilities into the regular class (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). Other terms such as “mainstreaming” and “integration” have been used to describe the practice of inclusion. Some educators have defined inclusion as the act of providing individualized instruction and supplemental aids and services that address the educational needs of children with disabilities in the context of the regular classroom.

The law does not specifically mention the term “inclusion” but does require schools to place students in the least restrictive environment. However, the law does not provide clear directions on how a school district determines the least restrictive environment (LRE) for a student (Moore, Gilbreath, and Maiuri, 1998). This lack of clarity has created confusion among practitioners in special education, regular education; administrators, parents, and other groups as to what constitutes the least restrictive environment for an individual child. Some argue that the law requires that all children be educated in the regular education setting, while others maintain that the needs of the child may not always be best served in the regular education environment and that placement decisions must be made on an individual basis.

The application of the inclusion strategy seems to vary among states despite IDEA legislation that specifically describes the categories of disability and a common requirement across states to place students in the least restrictive environment. For example, according to the U. S. Department of Education, Special Education, in its Twenty-Second Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA (2000) for the 1997-98 school year, the percent of students with specific learning disabilities educated in the regular class ranged from 89.82 percent in Vermont to 15.99 percent in Texas. Vermont, North Dakota, Ohio, Colorado, Oregon, Massachusetts, Minnesota, South Dakota, North Carolina, Connecticut, and Nebraska had the highest percentages of students with specific learning disabilities being mainstreamed into the regular classroom. In contrast, Texas, Mississippi, South Carolina, Delaware, Illinois, and Louisiana ranked among the lowest in educating these children in general education classrooms and had a greater number being served in separate school and separate class settings. Other states such as Arkansas were considered to be average in their attempts to implement inclusion. Arkansas reported a regular class placement rate of 39.39%.

The practice of inclusion also varies among school districts. Based on the data from The Report of Children and Youth with Disabilities Receiving Special Education and Related Services Counted Under Public Law 94-142 and Part B, IDEA, Arkansas Department of Education, Special Education Division, December 1, 2000, the range of regular placement for students with learning disabilities, ages 15-18, in school districts in Arkansas ranged from 0 - 100%.

No clearly established empirical data provided insights as to why the variability of rates of inclusion exists within a state’s school districts. This variability may be the result of decisions made at the local level based on different practices or criteria, partially as a

consequence of different beliefs or attitudes of teachers/decision makers concerning the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion.

Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusion

Importance of Teacher Perceptions

In 1994, the inclusion debate continued, garnering the attention of such organizations as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and The National Education Association (NEA). The AFT demanded an end to inclusion programs that seek to place all student with disabilities in regular classrooms, regardless of the nature or severity of their disabilities, their ability to perform, or the educational benefits they and others would receive.

Since the teachers themselves would implement the inclusionary practices that were adopted, it is important to examine teachers' understandings and feelings regarding inclusion. One of the key elements for a successful inclusion program is the positive attitudes of the teachers (Baker & Zigmond, 1995; Ochoa & Olivarez, 1995; Zigmond & Baker, 1990; Zigmond et al., 1995). In a study conducted by Scruggs & Mastropieri (1996), 65 percent of teachers in general education indicated that they supported the concept of inclusion. According to Vidovich & Lombard (1998), understanding how teachers perceive the practice of inclusion may be an important step in bringing about effective inclusionary practices in our schools today, for it is these people who are the most instrumental in school reform and work more directly with the students themselves.

Support for Inclusion

The literature reveals that inclusion has changed the way teachers perceive the classroom and students with disabilities. For example, Sapon-Shevin (1996) found that the inclusion of students with special needs in the regular class motivates teachers to insure that there is a greater match between the curriculum and instructional strategies used in the classroom to the individual needs of students. Belcher (1995) conducted a study of teachers in general and special education and administrators who attended the New Mexico Council for Exceptional Children State Conference. The study concluded that 41% of the respondents agreed, and 37% strongly agreed that students with disabilities could be educated in the regular class given the proper supports and services.

Villa, Thousand, Meyers, & Nevin (1996), after surveying 680 teachers in general and special education in 32 schools in the United States, found that including students with disabilities in general education results in more positive attitudes toward them by both teachers and administrators. Minke, Bear, Keemer & Griffin (1996) conducted a survey of 493 elementary teachers in the mid-Atlantic who were teaching in integrated classrooms where both the general education and special education teachers worked together in providing instruction. Those teachers involved in an inclusive class expressed more positive attitudes toward inclusion, a greater sense of self-efficacy, and felt much more confident in teaching and managing behavior than those teachers in a more traditional setting. The participants indicated that one of the key elements necessary in a successful inclusion program is the use of a co-teaching model where teachers in both

general education and special education work jointly to provide the needed resources to all students .

Teacher concerns about inclusion. Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher & Saumell (1994) conducted a survey in a large urban school district in the Southeastern part of the United States. The study involved 74 teachers on the elementary, middle, and secondary level who taught a variety of subjects and grades. The majority of teachers expressed negative feelings toward inclusion. Their greatest areas of concern were the impact inclusion would have on the academic performance of students both in the general education and special education settings, the fear of litigation, the workload that would be created, problems associated with implementation, and how this model would affect their roles in the classroom. Also in 1994, Baines, Baines, and Masterson found a negative attitude toward inclusion in classrooms where proper supports were not available to assist students with disabilities in the regular classroom. They argued that it is both inappropriate and irresponsible to place these students in inclusionary settings without the needed resources.

In a study conducted by D'Alonzo, Giordano, and Cross (1995), teachers cited the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion. The teachers felt that one advantage would be a greater level of acceptance and understanding for those with disabilities. They also believed that with adequate supports these students could realize academic success. However, they cited several disadvantages to inclusion. The instructional strategies used by teachers in traditional settings might not be effective. In addition, the teachers noted that many programs lacked adequate funding and the staff were not properly trained to work with students with disabilities. Kauffman, 1989; Kauffman et al. 1988, Semmel et al. (1991) indicated that the most common resistance to inclusion is the belief by teachers that they lack the skills needed to teach a child with a disability.

Kauffman & Hallahan (1995) suggest that, although combining special education and general education looks appealing on the surface, this practice may create an unfair burden on the system to meet the needs of all students. Taylor & Harrington (1998) echo this view. They state that critics of inclusion suggest that placing students with disabilities in regular education classes creates a burden on teachers in general education to educate these students and does not provide a setting where the students can receive individualized instruction.

Purpose of the Study

As the citations noted thus far, numerous studies have been conducted examining the attitudes of teachers in elementary special education and general education toward inclusion. This study seeks clarity in defining the relationships, if any, between inclusion rates, teacher attitudes, and demographic variables:

1. Are attitudes of special education teachers serving students, ages 15-18, with specific learning disabilities in secondary schools in Arkansas significantly related to inclusion rates in their schools?
2. Is the relationship between teachers' responses regarding inclusion and district inclusion rates of students, ages 15-18, with specific learning disabilities in the regular class in Arkansas influenced by the enrollment size of the district?
3. Is the relationship between teachers' responses regarding inclusion and district inclusion rates of students, ages 15-18, in the regular class in Arkansas influenced by the district's percentage of students in free and reduced lunch programs?

Instrumentation

The questionnaire for the study was adapted from an instrument developed by Wanzenried (1998) that addresses the attitudes and beliefs of teachers in special education toward inclusion. The respondents encountered such topics as the academic and non-academic benefits of inclusion, the effect of inclusion on students without disabilities, the use of supplemental aids and services, the cost of providing services, amount of planning involved, the level of collaboration, and the support system available.

The survey instrument consists of 24 statements that respondents were asked to indicate their agreement and disagreement regarding the inclusion of students with specific learning disabilities, ages 15-18, in regular classes in Arkansas. A description of each item in the survey, the percentages of frequency response ranging from 1 "Strongly Disagree", to 4 "Strongly Agree" are included and the mean for each item. Six items on the survey instrument were re-coded with reverse values, so that a response of 1 would show a negative orientation toward inclusion and 4 showing a more positive response to inclusion.

Data Analysis and Reporting

SPSS and Pearson's r statistical analysis were utilized to determine the relationship, if any, between teachers' scores on the instrument (dependent variable) and their school district's inclusion rate (independent variable). In addition, a significance or probability was computed to determine the likelihood that the relationship (correlation) would occur by chance. A Two-tailed test for significance was used. Both the $P \geq .05$ and $P \geq .01$ levels of significance were noted.

In order to strengthen the analysis and control for the influence of other variables, additional analysis was to be conducted using partial correlation. Partial correlation was to be used if there was a statistically significant relationship between inclusion rates and teachers' responses on the survey. Computing partial correlation "partialed out" the influence of other independent variables. Partial correlation was to be used to determine whether the relationship between teacher's scores and their school's inclusion rate was influenced by the size of the school's enrollment.

Population

The population for the study included junior high and senior high special education teachers who were teaching in a non-categorical special education program or in a class serving students with mild handicaps, ages 15-18. The teachers included in the study were generated from a list provided by a state department of education. Of the 1040 teachers contacted, 557 participated. This was a response rate of 53.5%. Of the 308 school districts surveyed, teachers from 221 districts responded to the survey instrument.

Findings

School District Demographic Data

Enrollment Size (Average daily Membership, ADM). As depicted in Table 1, the enrollment size of the districts varied with the largest district reporting an enrollment of 24,344 to the smallest district with 79 students. The largest percentage of the respondents, 27.5% or 153 teachers, represented districts that had 5000 or more students. By contrast, 11.5% or 64 teachers who participated in the study represented school districts with less than 500 students.

Table 1

Enrollment Size of Districts (ADM)

# of Students	<u>n</u>	Percent	Valid Percent
Below 500	64	11.5	11.5
500 -1000	102	18.3	18.3
1001 - 2000	113	20.3	20.3
2000 - 4999	125	22.4	22.4
5000+	153	27.5	27.5
Total	557	100.0	100.0

Socio-Economic Status, SES Level. For the purposes of this study, the SES level was defined as the percentage of students who qualified for free and reduced lunches as reported by the Department of Education as of October 1, 2000. As indicated in Table 2, the largest percentage of the respondents, 331 or 59.4%, represented school districts with free and reduced percentages ranging from 26-50%, and the smallest percentage, 17 or 3.1% of the districts, reporting 76-100% of their students qualified for free and reduced lunch. The SES level of participating districts ranged from 2.18% - 94.80% with a mean of 44.8%.

Table 2

Number and Percentage of Respondents and the SES Level of Corresponding Districts

Percentage of Students who Qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch	<u>n</u>	Percent	Valid Percent
0 -25	62	11.1	11.1
26 -50	331	59.4	59.4
51 -75	147	26.4	26.4
76 -100	17	3.1	3.1
Total	557	100.0	100.0

Research Questions

Question # 1: Are the attitudes of special education teachers serving students with specific learning disabilities, ages 15-18, in secondary schools in Arkansas significantly related to inclusion rates in their schools?

As illustrated in Table 3, SPSS analysis of the data revealed no significant correlation between the response means of the teachers on the survey instrument and the inclusion rates of school districts in Arkansas.

Table 3

Correlation Between Response Mean and District Inclusion Rate

Descriptor	<i>Response Mean</i>
<u>Inclusion Rate</u>	
Pearson's <i>r</i>	.064
Sig. (2 Tailed)	.163
N	478

Question # 2: Is the relationship between teachers' responses regarding inclusion and district inclusion rates of students with specific learning disabilities, ages 15-18, in the regular class in Arkansas influenced by the enrollment size of the district?

No significant correlation was found between inclusion rates and the survey responses of the teachers; as depicted in Table 4, a negative correlation of -.182 at the .01 significance level was found to exist between the inclusion rate and the enrollment size of the district. As the enrollment size increases, the inclusion rate decreases.

Table 4

Correlation Between Inclusion Rate, Response Mean, and ADM

Descriptor	<i>Inclusion Rate</i>	<i>Response Mean</i>	<i>ADM</i>
<u>Inclusion Rate</u>			
Pearson's <i>r</i>		-.064	-.182**
Sig.		.163	.000
N		478	478
<u>Response Mean</u>			
Pearson's <i>r</i>	.064		
Sig.	.163		
N	478		

** . Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Question # 3: Is the relationship between teachers' responses regarding inclusion and district inclusion rates of students with specific learning disabilities, ages 15-18, in the regular class in Arkansas influenced by the district's percentage of students in free and reduced lunch programs (SES)?

A significant correlation was not found between inclusion rates and the teachers' responses to the survey; however, as illustrated in Table 5, a significant negative correlation was found at the .01 level between the inclusion rate and the SES level of the school district. The correlation was $-.228$. As the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch decreases, the inclusion rate of the district increases.

Table 5

Correlation Between Inclusion Rate, Response Mean, and SES

Descriptor	<i>Inclusion Rate</i>	<i>Response Mean</i>	<i>SES</i>
<u>Inclusion Rate</u>			
Pearson's <i>r</i>		-.064	-.228**
Sig.		.163	.000
N		478	478
<u>Response Mean</u>			
Pearson's <i>r</i>	-.064		
Sig.	.163		
N	478		

** . Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Conclusions and Speculations

The purpose of the study was to determine if a relationship existed between teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and the inclusion rates of school districts in Arkansas. Based on the review of relevant literature and the findings of this study, the following conclusions are warranted:

1. Socio-economic status had a significant influence on inclusion rates. As the percent of students on free and reduced-priced lunches decreases, inclusion rates increase. One may speculate that decreases in free and reduced lunch counts in school districts may coincide with decreases in incident rates of students with disabilities in those same districts. If this were the case, it could result in students with disabilities being more likely to be educated in the regular classroom as opposed to segregated classrooms, because the lower numbers of inclusion would be perceived as less of an interruption to the instruction in that setting.
2. District enrollment has a significant influence on inclusion rates. As the enrollment size increases, the inclusion rate decreases. One may speculate that inclusion may be a necessary way for children with disabilities to receive special education services in school districts with smaller or decreasing enrollments. This may be the result of the shortage of certificated special education teachers nation-wide and specifically their availability for employment in rural school districts.
3. Attitudes of special education teachers toward inclusion have little influence on inclusion rates. One may speculate that factors such as rates of poverty and availability of special teachers for employment have the greatest impact on rates of inclusion and the attitudes of special education teachers toward inclusion have little or no impact on the issue.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made as a result of the findings and conclusions of this study:

1. This study focused on the attitudes of teachers toward the inclusion of students with specific learning disabilities; however, further study should be conducted to see if similar results occur for inclusion of students with other disabilities.
2. The study should be replicated on a national level to determine how the results compare to Arkansas.
3. The study should be replicated and include general education teachers, administrators, and parents regarding inclusion.
4. Further study should be conducted on the elementary level to determine if similar results would occur.
5. Additional study should be conducted in an attempt to understand how such variables as enrollments, and social economic status impact inclusion rates of school districts.
6. A study should be conducted to determine whether rates of inclusion are impacted by the availability of special education teachers to school districts.

Ethos

IDEA requires that the educational placement for students with disabilities must be made on an individual basis considering the specific needs of the child. However, as indicated by the findings of this study, other factors may influence how those decisions are made. Regardless if regular class placement or some other setting is selected, it is important for educators to understand what factors influence these decisions, so that the best quality program can be designed to meet every child's needs.

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