

Teacher-Related Factors in the Academic Success of  
Special Education Students in Inclusive Classrooms

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### **Teacher-Related Factors in the Academic Success of Special Education Students in Inclusive Classrooms**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 13% of all public-school students in the United States receive special education services, and of these students, 35% have specific learning disabilities (2013). Although special schools have made highly significant contributions to the education of students with special educational needs, there has been concern over the fact that these schools operate largely, at both the primary and post-primary level, in isolation from the mainstream school system. Beginning in 1990, efforts have been made to shift away from the segregated model of provision towards one of access and inclusion. In 1994, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education stated that students with special educational needs must have access to regular schools. More recently, inclusive education has been supported by federal mandates set forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) along with No Child Left Behind (2001).

Over the years, the United States has appeared to increase the availability of inclusive education for students with special needs and learning disabilities by a significant amount. In fact, according to the 2004 Annual Report to Congress, the national average for the percentage of students who spent at least 80% of their time in general education classes has increased from 31.6% in 1989 to 51.9% in 2004. In this paper, the following research question will be explored: What influences the academic outcomes of children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms? This is relevant to applied psychology because schools and teachers can use this information to better support the academic success of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

#### **Benefits of Inclusive Education**

As the movement towards inclusive education for students with different learning abilities continues to gain momentum, many studies have been conducted providing

evidence that inclusive education is beneficial to students with learning disabilities. For example, The First National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) identified a large sample of students with disabilities who finished schooling in 1987 and revisited them 2 years and 5 years after school completion. The results from this study sadly revealed that students with disabilities were dropping out of school at a high rate and that many students were not attending post- secondary schooling and were not successful in finding jobs.

Although the majority of students from that study had experienced mostly segregated schooling and pursued a different course of study than their peers with no documented learning disability, data revealed that students who had been in inclusive settings tended to experience more positive schooling and employment outcomes after graduation (Wagner, 2001). In addition, a study conducted in 2002 compared the academic and behavioral outcomes of eighth grade students with learning disabilities attending schools with two types of special education models: one inclusive and the other pullout. Results indicated that students who served in inclusive classrooms earned higher grades, achieved higher standardized test scores, committed less behavioral infractions, and attended more days of school than students in the pullout program (Rae, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002).

### **Challenges in Inclusive Education**

Although there is ample evidence supporting the benefits of inclusive education for students with special educational needs, the development and implementation of inclusion in general education classrooms presents a number of significant challenges to general education teachers. One main challenge is that general education teachers are required to meet the individual needs of every student in their classroom, despite the sometimes extreme variation in each student's learning capabilities. Taking into consideration the large role teachers play in providing appropriate education to students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms, it is worth examining possible teacher-related factors that could possibly be correlated to the academic functioning of special needs students in inclusive

classrooms.

One factor that has received a substantial amount of attention by researchers is the role student- teacher relationships (STR's) play in the social and academic functioning of students. Developing research has shown a significant relationship between the quality of student-teacher relationships and children's social outcomes, with relationships rated high in closeness predicting social competence several years later (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). In addition, a study by Hamre & Pianta (2001) found that early STR's are predictors of academic and behavioral outcomes in elementary school and can have lasting effects through eighth grade.

Finally, on the topic of students with learning disabilities, a study by Robertson and colleagues (2003) examined the student-teacher relationships between general education teachers and students with autism. Their study found that child-behavior problems were associated with the level of conflict in the student-teacher relationship. Considering these findings indicating the highly influential role STR's play in student's academic and behavioral functioning, is reasonable to hypothesize that the nature of student-teacher relationships in inclusive classrooms could also have a significant influence for children with disabilities' social and behavioral outcomes. In order to apply these findings to students in inclusive education classrooms, examination of relationships between children with learning disabilities and general education teachers may be an appropriate next step in understanding the academic functioning of students in inclusive classrooms.

### **Teacher Attitudes Related to Inclusive Education**

Another factor worth examining is teacher attitudes in inclusive classrooms and the potential impact they could have on the academic functioning of students. Research performed in Australia regarding professional attitudes towards integration/inclusive education has provided significant information in this area. Studies conducted between 1985 and 1989 examined the attitudes of head-teachers, teachers, and preschool administrators,

and revealed that these professional groups varied considerably in their opinions on which types of children will be successfully integrated (Center et al., 1985; 1989). In other words, school faculty members are significantly divided in their opinions on inclusion of students with learning disabilities, with administrators having the most positive attitudes about inclusive education and teachers having the least positive attitudes towards inclusivity because of the perceived impact inclusion would have on their ability to support all their students on equitable levels. Another study in 1989 revealed the same: school administrators had the most positive attitudes towards inclusion, while classroom teachers had the most negative attitudes towards inclusion (Garvar-Pinhas & Schmelkin, 1989). If the same is true for the attitudes of teachers in inclusive classrooms in the United States, it is worth examining if a teacher's beliefs towards inclusion are correlated with the academic functioning of their students.

Continuing on this topic, Avramidi and Norwich's (2002) literature review sought to examine the role of teacher's attitudes towards inclusion, based on the assumption that the successful implementation of any inclusive policy is largely dependent on educators positive attitudes about the same. These researchers concluded that there is enough evidence to suggest that, in the case of more severe learning needs and behavioral difficulties, teachers hold negative attitudes towards the implementation of inclusion. This evidence, according to researchers, indicates the necessity of adopting a gradual approach in the implementation of inclusion, including careful planning, monitoring, and reviewing of the process in order to increase positive attitudes towards inclusion (Avramidi & Norwich, 2002). Although these findings are helpful in terms of how to improve teacher's attitudes towards inclusion, more research is needed on whether there is even a direct correlation between teacher's attitudes towards inclusion and the academic success of children with learning disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

### **Conclusions & Gaps in the Literature**

Although the benefits of inclusion for special education students are widely accepted and schools are increasingly integrating these students into general education classes, more research on this topic is needed in order to better understand the academic and social functioning of special education students and thereby increase their likelihood of academic success in general education classrooms. Upon examination of two teacher-related factors: student-teacher relationships and teacher's attitudes towards inclusion, research has shown the significant influence STR's have on student functioning as well as the frequency of negative attitude towards inclusion among classroom teachers. Taking these factors into consideration, additional and potential future directions for this research are:

1. Are teachers' attitudes towards inclusion correlated with the academic success of special education students in inclusive classrooms?
2. Is the quality of student-teacher relationships between special education students and general education teachers in inclusive classrooms correlated with students' academic achievement?
3. Do teachers' attitudes towards inclusion impact the quality of their relationships with special education students in inclusive classrooms?

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