

Teaching Students with Disabilities in Regular Education Classes: Perceptions of Pre-Service Teachers from China and the United States

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Abstract

This study examines the beliefs of pre-service teachers from China and the United States about teaching students with disabilities in regular education classes. The participants' perceptions and level of confidence in teaching this special population are compared and analyzed. Findings of the study indicate that, overall, pre-service teachers from the two countries have favorable opinions of including students with disabilities in regular education classes, but at the same time feel inadequately prepared to teach this population.

Introduction

In the United States, federal legislation, *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* (IDEA), requires that schools educate students with disabilities in environments that are least restrictive to them. This means that such students should remain with their peers who do not have disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate, and that removal of these students should happen only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes, with the use of supplementary aids and services, cannot be achieved satisfactorily (Murdick, Gartin, & Crabtree, 2007). Although the concept of "least restrictive environment" differs from that of "inclusion," for many students with disabilities, the least restrictive environment is an inclusive regular education class. Teaching students with disabilities in the regular education class has numerous advantages including: opportunities for social interaction, ease in accessing the general curriculum, academic improvement, and positive outcomes for students both with and without disabilities (Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 2008, p. 27). Inclusion can also help to build up the self-confidence and self-esteem of the students with disabilities because being in a regular education classroom reduces the stigma associated with separated education (Ritter, Michel, & Irby, 1999; Bishop, 1995).

In China, individuals with disabilities have historically been a vulnerable group. However, some recent events and efforts, such as making the third Sunday of May the National Day for "people with disabilities," and local and national workshops and seminars on legislation and regulations enforcing educational rights for children with disabilities, have helped to raise the public awareness of individuals with disabilities (McLoughlin, Zhou, & Clark, 2005). The 2008 Special Olympics hosted in China was another more recent event that might help the Chinese to increase disability awareness and social acceptance of people with disabilities.

Inclusion as an educational experiment in Chinese schools can be traced back to the 1980's, when the China National Institute of Educational Research Special Education Center led nationwide experimental projects that focused on including children with disabilities in regular classes (Pang & Richey, 2006). Principles of Western special education systems made impacts on the development of special education in China, and the Compulsory Education Law of 1986 required schools to accept children with special needs (Deng, Poon-McBrayer, & Farnsworth, 2001). China's practice, known as Learning in Regular Classrooms (*Suiban Jiudu*), started in rural and remote areas as a

way to provide compulsory education; these were usually economically poor areas where special education schools and services were not available (Pang & Richey, 2006). Although China's Learning in Regular Classrooms was directly influenced by the inclusion practices of the West, particularly the United States, there were significant differences: Learning in Regular Classrooms emphasized compensation of incompetence more than development of competence; its primary goal was to give most children with disabilities the opportunity to go to school rather than to provide equal education; it did not emphasize individualized education, least restrictive environment, or parental involvement; it still excluded children with severe disabilities or multiple disabilities (Deng, Poon-McBrayer, & Farnsworth, 2001).

Just placing students with disabilities in regular education classes will not necessarily ensure that these students will succeed in this environment. Previous studies have investigated important factors that influence the result of inclusion. Some of these factors included: teachers' attitude toward inclusion, support that teachers received, and teachers' confidence and perception of their own preparedness. Elliott (2008) examined the relationship between teacher attitude toward inclusion and teacher effectiveness. The study findings showed that teachers who had a positive attitude provided students with significantly more practice attempts, and they were more successful than those who had a negative attitude. Leatherman (2007) pointed out that for inclusion to be successful, teachers of inclusive classrooms needed support from administrators and also needed to be included in the decisions about the inclusive classroom. In addition, the teachers also needed positive experiences with students with disabilities. In Silverman's (2007) study, pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and their epistemological beliefs were examined. The study showed that those with higher-level beliefs about knowledge and learning were more likely to have positive attitudes toward inclusion.

In order for students with disabilities to learn successfully in the inclusive classroom, it is essential that their teachers are willing to include them in the classes. When teachers have negative attitudes, or when they are unwilling to include students with disabilities in their classes, inclusion is bound to fail. Also important to successful inclusion are the teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy and competency. When teachers feel more confident and prepared, their students with disabilities in the inclusive class are more likely to succeed. In both the United States and China, school teachers may have students with special needs in their classes; therefore, teacher-training institutions in both countries should address the issues of teacher attitude and self-efficacy so that pre-service teachers are better prepared to meet the challenges in their future careers.

The purpose of this study was to examine and compare the perceptions of pre-service teachers from China and the United States about teaching students with disabilities in regular education classes. Findings of this study would help answer such questions as: Are pre-service teachers willing to have students with disabilities in their future classes? Do they feel adequately prepared to teach such students if they are placed in their classes? Do pre-service teachers in China see the issue of inclusion the same way as the American pre-service teachers? To answer these questions, the participants' attitudes toward inclusion and level of confidence in teaching students with disabilities would be compared and analyzed. Hopefully, findings of the study would be useful to educators of both countries.

Methods

Participants

The participants of the study were 157 pre-service teachers from one teacher-training university in northeast China and 279 pre-service teachers from one teacher-training institution in the northeast of the United States. Among the Chinese participants (145 female, 12 male), 26 were college sophomores and 131 were college juniors. The American participants were college students (220 female, 59 male) that included 181 freshmen, 50 sophomores, 46 juniors, and 2 seniors. Both the Chinese and American participants were selected based on convenience samples. None of the participants had taken special education courses at the time of the study.

The Survey

This study used a questionnaire that was adapted from a previous study (Li & Curran, 2007) that investigated the perceptions of pre-service teachers in the United States. The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions (see below), which asked the participants to indicate their perceptions and confidence regarding teaching students with disabilities in regular education classes. In the questionnaire, a Likert scale was used with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 6 indicating “strongly agree.”

1. I have adequate training to modify instruction for students with disabilities.
2. I'd like to have students with disabilities in my classes.
3. Students with disabilities will benefit more from being included in regular education classrooms than being separated in special education classrooms.
4. Regardless of severity, students with disabilities belong in classes with non-disabled students.
5. I have enough training to successfully manage a classroom that includes students with emotional and behavioral disorders.
6. Putting students with disabilities in regular education classes will improve their social skills.
7. I know the special needs of students with disabilities.
8. Making modifications for students with disabilities is not fair to other non-disabled students in the same class.
9. Including students with disabilities in regular education classes reduces the teacher's attention to students without disabilities.
10. I am sensitive to the concerns and issues of families regarding their child with a disability.
11. I am willing to adapt my instruction to include students with disabilities in my class.
12. I know many teaching strategies that are effective for teaching students with disabilities.
13. I know how to teach students with learning disabilities.
14. I know how to teach students with mental challenges.
15. I know how to teach students with speech and language disorders.
16. I am willing to include students with behavior problems in my class.
17. I am willing to include students with sensory impairments in my class.
18. I am willing to include students with mild and moderate mental retardation in my class.
19. I know how to meet the special needs of students with attention problems.

Procedures

The survey was administered to pre-service teachers of the two countries at the end of a fall semester. Instructors of the pre-service teachers helped administer the survey in their respective classes. The Chinese participants used the same survey without translation. The instructor provided explanations to those who had questions about the language. Before taking the survey, the participants from both countries were informed of the purpose of the study and their rights to voluntary participation. They could refuse to participate, or discontinue participation at any time, without being penalized. No risks to the participants were anticipated, and they did not receive any payment for participation of the study.

Results

The statistical Mann-Whitney test was run to analyze the collected data. The following table shows the mean scores of the responses from the two countries' participants. The highest possible score is 6, which means the participant strongly agrees with the statement; thus, the higher the score, the higher the level of agreement with the statement.

As shown in the table, the participants from the two countries were more positive about some questions and less positive about others. Overall, the Chinese pre-service teachers were highly positive about Q2 (I'd like to have students with disabilities in my classes), Q3 (Students with disabilities will benefit more from being included in regular education classrooms than being separated in special education classrooms), Q4 (Regardless of severity, students with disabilities belong in classes with non-disabled students), Q6 (Putting students with disabilities in regular education classes will improve their social skills), Q10 (I am sensitive to the concerns and issues of families regarding their child with a disability), Q11 (I am willing to adapt my instruction to include students with disabilities in my class), and Q17 (I am willing to include students with sensory impairments in my class). Their responses to other questions were less positive and mostly fell within the neutral range.

On the other hand, the American pre-service teachers were particularly positive about Q2 (I'd like to have students with disabilities in my classes), Q3 (Students with disabilities will benefit more from being included in regular education classrooms than being separated in special education classrooms), Q6 (Putting students with disabilities in regular education classes will improve their social skills), Q10 (I am sensitive to the concerns and issues of families regarding their child with a disability), Q11 (I am willing to adapt my instruction to include students with disabilities in my class), Q16 (I am willing to include students with behavior problems in my class), Q17 (I am willing to include students with sensory impairments in my class), and Q18 (I am willing to include students with mild and moderate mental retardation in my class). The American pre-service teachers, however, showed lower levels of agreement to questions such as: Q1 (I have adequate training to modify instruction for students with disabilities), Q5 (I have enough training to successfully manage a classroom that includes students with emotional and behavioral disorders), Q8 (Making modifications for students with disabilities is not fair to other non-disabled students in the same class), Q13 (I know how to teach students with learning disabilities), Q14 (I know how to teach students with mental challenges), and Q15 (I know how to teach students with speech and language disorders).

A comparison of the responses from the participants of the two countries revealed that the Chinese participants gave more positive responses than the American participants

Table 1
Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions and Confidence Regarding Teaching Students with Disabilities in Regular Education Classes

| | Country | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | <i>p</i> |
|-----|---------|-----|------|----------------|-----------------|----------|
| Q1 | US | 279 | 2.96 | 1.450 | .087 | .023 |
| | China | 157 | 3.38 | 1.734 | .138 | |
| Q2 | US | 279 | 4.39 | 1.229 | .074 | .626* |
| | China | 157 | 4.38 | 1.482 | .118 | |
| Q3 | US | 279 | 4.33 | 1.228 | .074 | .036 |
| | China | 157 | 4.51 | 1.453 | .116 | |
| Q4 | US | 279 | 3.44 | 1.390 | .083 | .000 |
| | China | 157 | 4.49 | 1.453 | .116 | |
| Q5 | US | 279 | 2.50 | 1.386 | .083 | .000 |
| | China | 157 | 3.28 | 1.636 | .131 | |
| Q6 | US | 279 | 4.53 | 1.205 | .072 | .001 |
| | China | 157 | 4.82 | 1.377 | .110 | |
| Q7 | US | 279 | 3.30 | 1.405 | .084 | .001 |
| | China | 157 | 3.80 | 1.522 | .121 | |
| Q8 | US | 279 | 2.94 | 1.353 | .081 | .723* |
| | China | 157 | 2.96 | 1.634 | .130 | |
| Q9 | US | 279 | 3.56 | 1.274 | .076 | .004 |
| | China | 157 | 3.15 | 1.499 | .120 | |
| Q10 | US | 279 | 5.16 | 1.090 | .065 | .000 |
| | China | 157 | 4.34 | 1.399 | .112 | |
| Q11 | US | 279 | 5.19 | .901 | .054 | .000 |
| | China | 157 | 4.48 | 1.347 | .108 | |
| Q12 | US | 279 | 3.13 | 1.518 | .091 | .668* |
| | China | 157 | 3.20 | 1.521 | .121 | |
| Q13 | US | 279 | 2.68 | 1.400 | .084 | .003 |
| | China | 157 | 3.10 | 1.446 | .115 | |
| Q14 | US | 279 | 2.28 | 1.326 | .079 | .000 |
| | China | 157 | 3.11 | 1.517 | .121 | |
| Q15 | US | 279 | 2.60 | 1.450 | .087 | .000 |
| | China | 157 | 3.13 | 1.528 | .122 | |
| Q16 | US | 279 | 4.68 | 1.154 | .069 | .000 |
| | China | 157 | 3.99 | 1.432 | .114 | |
| Q17 | US | 279 | 4.91 | 1.044 | .062 | .000 |
| | China | 157 | 4.11 | 1.385 | .111 | |
| Q18 | US | 279 | 4.67 | 1.208 | .072 | .000 |
| | China | 157 | 3.99 | 1.391 | .111 | |
| Q19 | US | 279 | 3.16 | 1.636 | .098 | .000 |
| | China | 155 | 3.83 | 1.436 | .115 | |

* Not significant

to questions 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 13, 14, 15, and 19, while the American participants responded more positively to questions 9, 10, 11, 16, 17, and 18. Regarding questions 2, 8, and 12, there were no significant differences between the two groups.

Discussion

When students with disabilities are placed in regular education classes, it is essential that the teachers have the right attitude toward inclusion of such students because the teachers' attitudes are related to their effectiveness as teachers (Elliott, 2008). Teacher-training institutions, when preparing their candidates for the teaching workforce of tomorrow, should ensure that these future teachers are not only equipped with knowledge and skills needed for teaching, but that they also have the right attitude toward teaching an increasingly diverse student population, including those with disabilities.

This study first explored the perceptions of pre-service teachers about teaching students with disabilities in regular education classes. A close examination of the participants' responses showed that, overall, the pre-service teachers from both the United States and China had favorable opinions about including students with disabilities in their classes (Q2), and they were willing to make adaptations for these students (Q11). Many respondents believed that regular education classes were more beneficial to students with disabilities than special education classes (Q3), and that regular education classes would help improve students' social skills (Q6). It is interesting to note that many Chinese pre-service teachers in the study were very positive about having students with disabilities in their classes, even though this practice was relatively new in China. This seems to support the observation of Mcloughlin, Zhou, and Clark (2005) that disability awareness had increased in the country following a series of political and social events in recent history.

The second important finding of the study was that participants from both countries were not very confident about teaching students with disabilities. Neither group felt that they were adequately trained for adapting instruction (Q1) or that they knew many effective strategies for teaching students with disabilities (Q12). Many participants were not very positive in admitting that they were well-informed about the special needs of students with disabilities (Q7). Similarly, when it came to teaching students with specific disabilities (Q13, Q14, Q15), their responses were not very positive. This lack of confidence could be related to the fact that these participants had not received any training in special education, and they had not taken courses about special education in their programs. So, in principle they would welcome students with disabilities, but at the same time, they also felt a little uncomfortable about taking on such a challenge. Teacher-training institutions, therefore, face the task of enhancing pre-service teachers' confidence by teaching them the skills and strategies necessary for inclusive classes.

It is interesting to note that when comparing the confidence levels of the two groups, the Chinese participants' responses were more positive than their American counterparts (Q1, Q7, Q13, Q14, and Q15). A possible explanation was that the American pre-service teachers might very likely have had experiences of being educated in the same classrooms with students with disabilities in the past. They were more aware of the challenges, and therefore, they were more realistic about their abilities than the Chinese participants who might lack such experiences.

The results of analysis also showed that the American participants responded more positively than the Chinese participants to questions regarding sensitivity to family

concerns and issues (Q10), willingness to make adaptations (Q11), and willingness to include students with some specific disabilities such as: behavior disorders (Q16), sensory impairments (Q17), and mental retardation (Q18). Since all these factors may influence the result of inclusion, teacher-training programs, particularly those in China, must add plans to address them.

Although the findings of the study were useful in helping us understand the perceptions and confidence levels of pre-service teachers, limitations of the study could be found that included: 1) The study used relatively small samples from the two countries; the participants were selected from just two schools which were not well-represented. Further studies that involve more pre-service teachers and more schools are needed to help explore the issues with greater insight. 2) The questionnaire included 19 questions which were adapted from a previous study. The questions were designed to tap the participants' perceptions and confidence regarding teaching students with disabilities in regular education classes. Since their perceptions and confidence could be influenced by so many different variables, the questionnaire appeared limited in scope to explore them fully. 3) Due to the differences in the two countries' educational systems and the differences in the participants' experiences, the pre-service teachers' understanding of disabilities and services needed by students with disabilities could vary significantly. Therefore, some of the differences in the participants' attitudes could be a result of the fact that they were not looking at the same thing. It is recommended that future studies take steps to control these variables. 4) The survey was conducted in English without translation for the Chinese participants. Although the participants could read English and were allowed to ask for clarification when needed, the possibility could not be ruled out entirely that some Chinese participants did not understand certain questions well but chose not to ask for clarification. Thus, the language barrier facing some participants is an issue that should be addressed in future studies.

Conclusion

Pre-service teachers from both countries in this study generally had positive attitudes toward teaching students with disabilities in regular education classes. They saw the benefit of inclusion in helping such students develop their social skills. The participants were willing to make adaptation of instruction for students with disabilities. However, many participants indicated they did not have adequate knowledge or training in teaching students with disabilities, and thus, they did not feel very confident in taking this challenge. This finding supports other research studies which indicated that pre-service teachers needed more training so as to better meet the individual needs of students with disabilities (Leatherman, 2007; Lombard, Miller, & Hazelkorn, 1998). As Jung (2007) pointed out, when pre-service teachers were provided with training and exposure to specific situations involving students with special needs, their confidence levels would increase, which then would also influence their attitude toward teaching this population.

In summary, it is important that teacher-training institutions in both the United States and China offer courses in special education to pre-service teachers, and they seek opportunities to expose pre-service teachers to classroom environments involving students with disabilities. Pre-service teachers will benefit from such environments where they can witness experienced teachers teaching students with disabilities. By doing this, teacher-training institutions can better prepare pre-service teachers to meet the challenge in their future careers.

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