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Undergraduate Elementary Teacher Candidates’ Perceived Preparedness and Attitudes Toward Inclusion

Jewel Mahoe

Mentors: Philip Frye, Ph.D., Teacher Education

Abstract: The aim of this research is to recognize teacher candidates’ attitudes towards inclusion and perceived preparedness regarding special education. Research was conducted using a survey. The survey was administered to students by paper or online via Qualtrics. Over 100 responses were collected from undergraduate students. Data from the surveys were compiled to analyze correlations. It is anticipated that data correlations will display a trend of neutral or low confidence levels in individuals’ abilities. The results of this research will ultimately provide key information to target skills that elementary education teacher candidates feel they are lacking within the existing special education courses.

Keywords: elementary education, teacher candidates, inclusion, preparedness

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), in 2012-13, 13% of all public school students, children and youth ages three through 21%, were receiving special education services. This means that the likelihood of a teacher having a student with a disability in the classroom may be high. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, there are fourteen disabilities that a student may have and a general elementary education teacher must be prepared to provide a sufficient and enriching education to every single student in the classroom.

The topic of teacher candidate perceived preparedness and attitude toward inclusion is significant because of the implications that can potentially carry on to students in a future teacher’s classroom. An inclusive education is defined by inclusionbc.org (2015) as all students attend and are welcomed by schools in age-appropriate, general classes and are also supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the school. If a teacher candidate is not being adequately prepared, he/she may not be able to provide the best possible education to students with disabilities in the general classroom (regular classroom setting). This research aims to determine if other elementary education teacher candidates feel similar to the way that I do. This research intends to answer the question, what are the attitudes towards inclusion and perceived preparedness of teacher candidates regarding the preparation they received from their respective university in the area of special education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education of children with disabilities has dated as far back as 1817 when the first institution opened aimed towards education of the “deaf and dumb” (Villa & Thousand, 1995) although inclusion has been a more recent movement in the general education classroom. In 1975, children with disabilities were granted free and appropriate public education through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. More milestones were made in 1990 through IDEA which included major provisions including extending the availability of free and appropriate public education to children with disabilities ages 3 through 21 rather than 3 through 18. Amendments to IDEA were made in 1997 to focus on educational outcomes, procedural safeguards, Individualized Education Program (IEP) guidelines, and more (Parkay & Stanford 2010). With the passing of IDEA, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which mandated that schools are accountable for the performance of students on assessments, general education teachers are responsible to have the knowledge and skills to adapt instruction to fit all students in the classroom. In the inclusive classroom, there are a range of students that may require specific needs and services that do not fall under the category of
students with disabilities. These students include gifted and talented, culturally and linguistically diverse and students at risk for school failure (Lewis & Doorlag, 2003). The challenges of students with specific needs are very similar to those of students with disabilities; therefore, teachers must have the knowledge and experience to provide the appropriate assistance to students.

Teachers are expected to be prepared through teacher education programs with the tools to work with all students, though there are many barriers to achieving the knowledge and attitude to teach in the inclusive classroom. Recent research backs the claim that universities are lacking in their curriculum, emphasizing that courses offered are introductory in nature and many of the special education courses also provide limited teaching of instructional strategies (Maccini & Gagnon, 2006). Professionals also believe that teacher preparation programs may not be targeting the knowledge base and experience that teacher candidates would need to reach students with disabilities in the classroom. Tom Gribble, Director of Special Education for the Greeley-Evans schools district expressed “they [teacher candidates] need to have background and experience with individuals with disabilities regardless of the age or levels… too often we overreact around what students needs are.” General elementary education teachers must have background knowledge and possess a shared mindset to work with the parents and building administration to set individualized and realistic goals for the student. Most importantly teachers must be able to differentiate instruction so that the student will progress and reach the goals. (T. Gribble, personal communication, December 1, 2015).

Many universities follow a similar curriculum of Elementary Education course requirements, including the course requirement for Special Education. University of Northern Colorado, requires Elementary Education majors to take one, two credit introductory course in teaching exceptional children in the elementary classroom. This course includes the topic of students with disabilities as well as gifted and talented students. Similar to the course offered at the University of Northern Colorado, four of the five most popular colleges for elementary education as outlined by campusexplorer.com (2015), University of Northern Arizona, Arizona; Mercy College, New York; Arizona State University, Arizona; and University of Central Florida, Florida also require only one introductory course.

The lack of adequate preparation of teacher candidates to teach students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom has been studied and researched with similar results. Frankel, Hutchinson, Burbidge & Minnes (2014) conducted a questionnaire targeting elementary education and early childhood teacher candidates and found that most teacher candidates in both categories rated themselves as limited or moderate regarding knowledge of working with students of different disabilities. This is important because the study indicates that both elementary and early childhood teacher candidates do not feel completely confident in their knowledge. A survey conducted by Brackenreed & Barnett (2006) found that most of the 420 teacher candidates responded as “somewhat” confident in their abilities in the general education classroom. Similar to the Breckenreed & Barnett study, an observational study done by Hoover (2001) found that cooperating teachers observing preservice teachers in classrooms that contained students with behavioral disorders and learning disorders also provide evidence that limited preparation and time in the classroom showed limited skills in working with students with disabilities. Studies across different populations also found that teacher candidates were not performing at the level they should be at. A study done by Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman & Merbler (2010) targeted special education, elementary education, and secondary education faculty from 41 states and the District of Columbia. The results concluded that most participants responded “neutral” about the curriculum and instruction for teacher preparation although training efforts in inclusion need to be addressed. A study done by Atiles, Jones & Kim (2012) of early childhood preservice teachers at Midwestern University using a
modified Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale found that proficiency could be increased with meaningful field experience opportunities. The issue of lack of perceived preparedness is not constricted to North America. In a study done by Loreman, Sharma, and Forlin (2013), 380 teacher candidates within Canada, Australia, Hong Kong and Indonesia reported average/low confidence in teaching students with disabilities, and average/poor knowledge in inclusion policy. It was also reported that majority of the participants had not had significant prior interactions with people with disabilities. Strong differences between nations were also present.

The purpose of this research was to find out the attitudes towards inclusion and perceived preparedness of teacher candidates regarding the preparation they received from their respective university in the area of special education. This research is important to understand the needs of teacher candidates. Appropriate results and recommendations are necessary to inform Elementary Education curriculum coordinators to make changes based on teacher candidate needs as outlined by the data. Based on literature, the results were anticipated to indicate that majority of the elementary education teacher candidates identify as neutral or not sufficiently prepared to teach students with disabilities.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants were chosen based mainly by major; all participants indicated an Elementary Education major. Online surveys were distributed by email to teacher candidates in their practicum and student teaching. The online survey was also sent to students enrolled in an online course required by the Elementary Education program. Paper surveys were distributed during class time in courses required by the Elementary Education program. Survey information and directions were given prior to the survey by the primary researcher or by the professor using a script. Participants taking a paper survey were instructed to read a consent form and indicating their consent by completing the survey. Participants taking a survey via Qualtrics indicated their consent by continuing past the consent form on the first page of the online survey and by submitting the survey. Professors were given the option to provide compensation to participants in the form of extra credit towards the class. Professors were not informed who had or had not taken the survey; therefore, if extra credit was given, the credit was applied towards all students in the class that the survey was given to. Professors were briefed about the procedure of awarding extra credit via email.

Risks and discomforts to participants were minimal. Risks of completing the survey were no more than typical classroom activities. Participants may feel uncomfortable submitting a paper survey and may also feel uncomfortable submitting their personal perceptions and attitudes of the program they are currently enrolled in. Participants were instructed to place completed paper surveys into an envelope to minimize discomfort. Participants were given the option to omit any questions that provoked discomfort.

**Materials**

In order to address the research question a survey was conducted. The survey was designed by the primary researcher based on input from professionals in the field of special education, as well as elementary education. Two forms of the survey were available, a paper survey and an electronic survey. Qualtrics was used to conduct the electronic survey. The survey included fifteen questions in three parts. Section one of the survey focused on the demographics/background of the participant, including the participants major, minor, gender, years in the Elementary Education program, relevant field experience, courses taken in Special Education, and their status in the program. Participants were instructed not to put their name on the survey or any contact information that may lead to identification. Section two of the survey focused on the participants’ perceived preparedness and attitude toward inclusion; questions were answered using a five-point scale. Each number from one through five indicated a level of familiarity, comfort, or
preparedness. Section three of the survey focused on participants’ personal recommendations using an open-ended question. The average time estimated to complete the survey was three minutes. To assure quality control, a class of Elementary Education majors piloted the survey with completion times between two to five minutes. Participants in the pilot reported no concerns regarding identification based on survey responses. Before distribution, an undergraduate student, an elementary education professor, and a special education professor reviewed the survey for coherence, detail and concepts, and appropriate revisions were made.

Procedure

Paper Surveys

Professors of undergraduate Elementary Education classes were contacted via email in regards to promoting the survey. Professors who agreed were given the choice of allowing the primary researcher to come into their classroom to personally recruit participants by administering the paper survey during the assigned class time or having the professor administer and collect paper surveys. If the professor chose to allow the primary researcher to come into the classroom, the slate of events was: the primary researcher introduced the general background and instructions to the class of participants, the researcher allowed participants to ask questions, the researcher distributed the consent forms and surveys to the class, and promptly left the classroom, allowing participants to complete the survey and place them into the designated envelope. The professor of the class was responsible to return the envelope to the office of the primary researcher within twenty-four business hours after completion. If the professor chooses to administer and collect the surveys himself/herself, the slate of events was: a packet of surveys, consent forms, an instruction sheet and an envelope to collect paper surveys was put together and left the professor’s mailbox in McKee Hall, participants were be briefed using the script, participants were given time to complete the survey as needed, participants placed their completed or incomplete (if they choose not to participate) survey and signed consent form in the designated envelope. The professor was instructed not to open the envelope and to return the envelope to the office of the primary researcher within twenty-four business hours after completion. Survey results were input onto a spreadsheet using Excel. Individual surveys were destroyed following input into the spreadsheet.

Electronic Surveys

A professor of an undergraduate Elementary Education online course was contacted via email in regards to promoting the survey. The Student Teaching Placement Officer of the Colorado university was contacted in regards to promoting the survey via email to Elementary Education teacher candidates in their practicum and student teaching, as they are not on campus to complete a paper survey. Participants taking the Qualtrics survey completed the survey online using the link sent to them. The consent form was located on the first page of the survey. Survey results were input on a spreadsheet using Excel. Individual surveys were deleted following input into the spreadsheet.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using Exel and SPSS. The research question was addressed by looking at descriptive statistics, correlations, and open-ended responses related to perceived preparedness and attitude toward inclusion. The dependent variable of the survey was the attitudes and perceptions of the teacher candidates. The independent variables that were identified include minor, years in the Elementary Education program, relevant field experience, and courses taken in Special Education. Open-ended quotes were taken from surveys to analyze trends.

RESULTS

Demographics

The participants included in the sample consist of majority female teacher candidates (see Table 1 for demographics). 107 surveys were received and used in the sample. All participants indicated a major in Elementary Education. One survey was discarded based on indication that the
participant’s major was not Elementary Education, and this survey was not included for data analysis. Four participants indicated a Special Education minor, and five participants indicated to have taken additional courses in special education at the Colorado university. A majority of participants spent one, two, or three years in the Elementary Education program (see Table 2 for years in the Elementary Education program.). Of 107 participants, twenty-two were currently in their Elementary Education practicum and fourteen in their student teaching. All participants stated prior experience with children; the highest amount of participants indicated a prior experience in babysitting, candidates (see Table 3 for relevant field experience). Close to half of the percent of participants completed the special education course required of undergraduate elementary teacher candidates. Most participants had not completed additional courses in special education at the Colorado university or at a previous university.

Table 1. Demographics of participants gender, completion of required special education course, and competition of additional Special Education courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of required Special Education course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have completed</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not completed</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of additional Special Education courses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have completed</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not completed</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Percent of participants per number of years in the Elementary Education program. Each semester is represented by 0.5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years in the Elementary Education Program</th>
<th>0.5</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1.5</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>2.5</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>3.5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 years and up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Participants</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Percent of participants per relevant field experience. Participants were able to select multiple experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant Field Experience</th>
<th>Practicum</th>
<th>Student Teaching</th>
<th>Babysitting</th>
<th>Substitute Teaching</th>
<th>Volunteering</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Participants</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perceived Preparedness

Participants indicated overall perceived preparedness to teach students with disabilities on a five-point scale. Amongst all participants, the greatest number identified as moderately unprepared, on the scale. Overall perceived preparedness was also analyzed with a sample of participants who have taken the required special education course for Elementary Education majors and those who indicated no minor in Special Education. The data showed no significant variation from the sample of the entire population of participants. Participants also indicated specific pieces of perceived preparedness including the identification of students with disabilities, the referral process, continuum of services, and evaluating a student, using a five-point scale. Responses collected from the entire population of participants indicated a neutral familiarity in identification, moderately unfamiliar familiarity in the referral process, moderately unfamiliar/neural familiarity in continuum of services, and a neutral comfort in evaluation of a student (see Table 4 for perceived preparedness).

A correlation analysis was performed on the data using SPSS (see Table 5 for correlational analysis). The variables, perceived preparedness and years in the Elementary Education program were analyzed. The Pearson’s $r$ statistic was reported as 0.036. This indicates that there was a positive correlation between perceived preparedness and years in the Elementary Education program. It also indicates that the relationship between the two variables was very weak. The Sig (2 tailed) value was reported as 0.726. This indicates that there is no statistically significant correlation between the two variables. Increases or decreases in the participants’ years in the Elementary Education program did not significantly relate to increases or decreases in perceived preparedness.

Table 4. Preparedness and attitude toward inclusion on a five-point scale. The whole population includes all participants. The sample group includes participants without a Special Education minor and have taken the required Special Education course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Preparedness by Category</th>
<th>Whole population</th>
<th>Sample group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification of children with disabilities</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral process in your school district (or any school district)</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuum of services for children with disabilities</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referring a child for special education services</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Preparedness and attitude toward inclusion on a five-point scale. The whole population includes all participants. The sample group includes participants without a Special Education minor and have taken the required Special Education course.
Table 5. Correlational analysis of years in the Elementary Education program and perceived preparedness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Preparedness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years</strong></td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>102</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparedness</strong></td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>99</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Attitude Toward Inclusion**

Participants indicated overall attitude of including students with disabilities in the general education classroom on a five-point scale. Amongst all participants, the greatest number identified that students with disabilities should be in the general classroom most of the time. Overall attitude toward inclusion was also analyzed with a sample of participants who have taken the required special education course for Elementary Education majors and those who indicated no minor in Special Education. The data showed little significant variation from the sample of the entire population of participants, candidates (see Table 4 for attitude toward inclusion). Participants were asked to identify individuals they would seek for support when working with children with disabilities. The most frequent choice of support was the cooperating teacher and second was a professor (see figure 1 for persons of support).

**Figure 1.** Individuals Participants were able to select more than one person.

![Figure 1](image-url)

**Open Ended Responses**

Participants were given the opportunity to provide open-ended feedback concerning what may be helpful in preparation to teach in the inclusive classroom. The most common responses indicated, field experience and observations as well as, additional courses in Special Education. Participants were also given the option to provide any additional comments. One particular participant’s response stated, “I felt that my EDSE 430 class did not prepare me enough for work with exceptional students in the Elementary classroom. Our teacher was a grad student so we did not benefit from learning as much as we could...
have from the class. The class was an easy A, but
the content didn't go into depth enough of what
we could do as teachers to help exceptional
students in our classrooms.” A response from the
perspective of a participant with a Special
Education minor read, “I feel students should
have to take EDSE 201 to get a better overview of
what different disabilities are and for more
awareness of students with disabilities.”

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of this study,
recommendations for program revision point
towards field experience and a reform of the
Special Education course for Elementary
Education teacher candidates, which includes an
increase of courses and further instruction on
Special Education content for educators.

All participants indicated low levels of overall
perceived preparedness. Analysis of a sample of
participants who have completed the required
Special Education course and were not Special
Education minors showed no significant
difference in the trend of perceived preparedness.
These analyses indicate that students who are
considered “prepared” by the university are
actually reporting low perceived preparedness,
similar to the whole population. Additional
correlation analysis showed no statistically
significant correlation between the years in the
Elementary Education program and perceived
preparedness. This means that teacher candidates
at all levels of the program consistently feel
unprepared to teach students with disabilities.
Participants also show evidence of feeling
moderately unprepared and neutrally prepared in
specific areas of Special Education topics.
Participants also suggested extending instruction
to increase their knowledge of topics. Participants
also identified a professor as the second most
popular individual they would seek for support
when working with students with disabilities. In
order to establish relationships with Special
Education professors, more courses must be
provided. This evidence suggests that an increase
of courses and further teaching may be helpful in
assisting students to acquire Special Education
content for educators.

The most popular response to increase
preparedness was reported as field experience and
observations. Participants have identified what
they would like based on their own professional
opinion in the program. Participants also indicated
the cooperating teacher as the individual they
would seek for support when working with
children with disabilities. Teacher candidates
would require the opportunity to go out to the
district schools to make connections with
cooperating teachers, and in order to do this;
programs must organize a field experience
component.

Attitude of participants indicated a somewhat
high level of comfort with inclusion in the
classroom. Trends of inclusion in the whole
population and those from the sample group
showed no significant difference.

One limitation to this study was the specific
population of participants. Participants represent
one Colorado university and may not be an
accurate representation of Elementary Education
teacher candidates across the nation. An important
limitation to this research is the questions of the
survey are not standardized. The survey was
created with input from professionals from the
fields of elementary education and special
education. The survey is specific to my research
and has not been tested in other studies. The
sample size of this study was too small to
accurately represent perceived preparedness for
those who took the special education course and
were not special education minors and some open-
ended free responses were unclear and unspecific.

CONCLUSION

Future research can be pursued by establishing
Elementary Education program revisions to
increase teacher candidate perceived preparedness
in Special Education courses and by monitoring
results the pilot program. Research can also be
furthered through collection of data representative
of other populations, including a different
university or different major. A longitudinal study
may also provide necessary feedback as to the
preparedness of teachers as they are in a teacher preparation program and progress to teaching in the field.

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