Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education and its Implication for Adult Education in the Bahamas

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Abstract: Despite the paradigm shift globally regarding the adoption of inclusive education, teachers still have varying preconceive misconceptions about its successful implementation and practices in the general education classroom. This study focused on teachers' perception of adapting inclusive education policies and procedures in the Bahamas and its implication for adult education.

Inclusive education is on the global agenda to attract the involvement and collaboration of all stakeholders. The support for this action is being guided through the principles of The Salamanca Statement (1994). Legislation by national, regional, and international agencies is aggressively enacting policies and laws to support and promote the education of all children in the general education setting. Teachers are perceived to be an integral component in the implementation of inclusive education (Haskell, 2000). Research communicates that teachers' perception are the key to the success of inclusive programs, as they are critical to the process of including students with disabilities into regular classes. It is important to examine the attitudes of educators toward the inclusion of students with disabilities into regular settings as their perceptions may influence their behavior toward and acceptance of such students (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003). The success of inclusive programs may be at risk if regular classroom teachers hold negative perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities (Van Reusen et al., 2001). Negative perceptions of inclusive education may become obstacles, as general education teachers attempt to include students with disabilities (Cawley, Hayden, Cade, & Baker-Kroczynski, 2002).

The most salient trend in education involving individuals with disabilities is that of inclusion. Teachers are regarded as a key component in the educational system. However, instruction in the general education classroom is impeded based on the individuals being taught. The need to sensitize educators to this perplexing issue is paramount to the success of all students. If teachers were more receptive toward inclusion, student achievement, socialization, skill acquisition, and access to education would increase for students with disabilities. Findings from Andrews and Frankel (2010) recognized that inadequate training and skills required to teach students with special needs are important in the implementation of inclusive education programs.

On this premise, the study was conducted to examine teacher's perception of inclusive education and its implication for adult education. It is envisage that the findings from this study will have significant impact on adult education as it relates to inclusive education. Moreover, it will inform policy makers of designing a framework to deliver inclusive education programs necessary to increase the achievement of students in regular classes. The results will also inform college administrators of practical internship experiences that would enhance the preparation of our future teachers. Finally, the study aims to sensitize readers about teacher's perception on inclusive education and the implication for adult education.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guides this study is Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978) and Andragogy (Knowles,1990). Both theories are crucial for promoting adult education regarding inclusive education in the Bahamas.

Literature Review

According to Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2012), inclusive education refers to "the practice of including another group of students in regular classrooms: students with physical, developmental, or social-emotional disabilities, and those with chronic health problems" (p. 403). The philosophical basis of Inclusive Education rests on the principles that heterogeneity within a group is both unavoidable and desirable, and that differences in ability are not marks of greater or lesser worth. The idea of inclusive education is to provide whatever adaptations are needed (as unobtrusively as possible) in an effort to ensure that all students (regardless of their disability) can participate in all classroom experiences, and as much as possible, in the same manner as everyone else.

Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education

Despite the continued movement toward inclusive practices however, recent studies (Dupoux, Wolman, & Estrada, 2005; Loreman, Forlin and Sharma, 2007; Barco, 2007; Ross-Hill, 2009) have found that many teachers have less than positive attitudes towards students with disabilities and their inclusion in general education classrooms.

Several studies have shown that primary and high school teachers share similar perceptions regarding inclusive education; some negative, and some positive as well (Dupoux, Wolman, & Estrada, 2005; Barco, 2007; Ross-Hill, 2009). Wiggins (2012) found a significant relationship between high school teachers' perceptions of inclusion and classroom setting. This researcher concluded that teachers with experience in teaching within inclusive classrooms held more favorable perceptions toward inclusive education than those teachers who did not teach in inclusive classrooms. Recent studies have shown that much hasn't changed over the past decade regarding high school teachers' perceptions of inclusive education; in a study which investigated the perceptions of general education in grades K-12, Dev (1996) revealed that overall, teachers expressed more positive attitudes toward mainstreaming than inclusion.

Sharma, Ee, & Desai (2003) found that training in special education appeared to lessen pre-service teacher's concerns regarding inclusive education. Similarly, Subban and Sharma (2001) revealed that teachers who reported having undertaken training in special education were found to hold more positive perceptions about implementing inclusive education. Loreman, Forlin and Sharma (2007) reported similar findings which showed that teachers' perceptions of inclusive education were negatively impacted by their training, or lack thereof, in special/inclusive education. In contrast, Ali, Mustapha, and Jelas (2006) found that in general, teachers held positive attitudes towards inclusive education. According to the results of their study, the teachers agreed that inclusive education enhanced social interaction and inclusion among the students and thus minimizing negative stereotypes on special needs students.

Recommendations for Promoting Adult Education Practices for Inclusive Education Teachers

With the current nature of teacher preparation programs and their reported limitations in equipping teachers for inclusion, factors associated with teachers' attitudes such as those identified in the present research (i.e., discomfort, fear, teaching experience, knowledge of policy and law and uncertainty) may be important considerations in programs (Loreman, Forlin and

Sharma, 2007). Schools and districts must determine how to provide the most effective training prior to placing paraeducators with students in general education classrooms and how to provide ongoing supervision and support to allow paraeducators to provide quality services. Providing release time for special educators to initially acquaint paraeducators with the student before they enter the classroom may represent one way to do this.

Scott, Mcguire, & Shaw (2003) suggested that the Universal Design for Instruction is an avenue by which adult instruction in postsecondary education may be facilitated; it requires that faculty anticipate student diversity in the classroom and intentionally incorporate inclusive teaching practices. The value of Universal Design as it applies to educational settings and instruction is under exploration in a number of areas (Bowe, 2000; Center for Applied Special Technology, 1999; McGuire & Scott, 2002). Another approach for training general educators in inclusion, which may help to redress the disjointedness of general and special education, calls for infusing special education content and curriculum into general education courses (Aksamit, 1990; Hinders, 1995; Strawderman & Lindsey, 1995).

Methods

Study Setting

Within the archipelago of the Bahamas, The Ministry of Education is the premier institution exclusively responsible for the educational system. Throughout the 700 plus islands and cays, there are approximately two hundred and six schools in the school system; one hundred, sixty-one are fully maintained by the government and forty-five are private schools. Of the one hundred and sixty-one public schools, fifty are located on New Providence (capital of the Bahamas) and the remaining one hundred and eleven are disproportionately position throughout the archipelago. Subsequently, education is free for all persons in the public school system in the Bahamas irrespective of socioeconomic background, gender, physical or mental ability. A total of one hundred and thirteen (113) primary and all-age schools, thirty-four (34) junior and senior high schools, and eleven (11) Special Education Schools are registered in the Bahamas.

According to The National Commission on Special Education (2005), it was estimated in 2003 that 5,396 students were noted as having special needs, a combined total of 3,236 were categorized as slow learners or remedial. On this premise, much discussion was provoked regarding the all inclusive classroom and its implementation within the educational system in the Bahamas.

Study Design and Data Collection

The research methodology used in this study was a qualitative phenomenological design which was reflective of semi structured interviews with participants using preset questions outlined by the researchers. Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews conducted with 18 public school teachers (ten elementary and eight secondary) throughout the New Providence District in the Bahamas. The interviews were tape-recorded and immediately transcribed. Analysis was conducted through the process of open coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin 2010). Working within the research structure provided by the research objectives and the conceptual framework, transcribed data was qualitatively analyzed through open coding to establish themes and main concepts. Recurring topics in the text were recognized as themes and sub-themes. A table of central themes and sub-themes was constructed. This process allowed a deeper understanding and explanation of issues that were being studied. To ensure greater validity and reliability a peer reviewer read through the data to ensure themes and categories corresponded with the research questions and were properly analyzed.

Participants

Andrews and Frankel (2010) asserted that convenience sampling is the apposite sampling technique regarding the feasibility and access to participants. On this premise, convenience sampling was employed. A group of teachers (*n*=18) were selected all of which met the following inclusion criteria: must be employed by the Ministry of Education as a teacher (primary or secondary), a minimum of five years teaching experience, currently posted at a school within the New Providence District and both genders. All participants were informed of their rights regarding the Institutional Review Board.

Findings

Research Question 1. What are teachers' perceptions towards Inclusive Education?

The results from the study revealed conflicting perceptions towards inclusive education at a primary and secondary level. At the primary level, the participants were very candid with their responses. However, while most of the teachers (60%) demonstrated negative attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive education within primary schools, some of the teachers (30%) displayed mixed feelings about the practice, and one teacher (10%) firmly support the practice of inclusive education. In general, the teachers viewed the idea of inclusive education as an extremely difficult feat due to the myriad deficiencies within the public education system, which, in their opinion, would impact the success of inclusive education. Teachers reported that at this present time, "*it is not feasible for the government of The Bahamas to venture into such an undertaking because there are too many concerns in dire need of immediate resolution*" (Hunter-Johnson, Newton and Cambridge, 2014).

Contrary, at the secondary level, revealed that teachers at the high school level in The Bahamas demonstrated moderately positive attitudes toward inclusion and was consistent with previous studies conducted internationally (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Gal, Schreur, & Engel-Yeger, 2010; Monsen, & Frederickson, 2003). The majority of participants (62.5%) made statements which revealed that they had positive views toward inclusion. One participant expressed that, "I think it is an exceptional idea because children can learn from each other and teachers can collaborate on best practices". Subsequently, some teachers (25%) welcomed the idea of inclusion, but exhibited mixed feelings toward the idea of inclusive education. The teachers believed that certain factors were necessary for inclusion to be effective. Additionally, one teacher commented, "I believe inclusive education can be embraced in all stages. If disabilities are categorized and some of the less severe disabilities can initiate the process then we can gauge how effective it is". Subsequently, one participant (12.5%) perceived inclusion as negative and in irate voice expressed, "I did not train to teach students with special needs because I don't have the patience". This comment suggests that training will play a critical role in how teachers' perceive inclusive education.

Research Question 2. What are some possible factors that influence teachers' perception towards inclusive education?

At the primary level, it was noted by two participants (20%) that misconceptions regarding the definition can be an influential factor regarding inclusive education. However, upon further analysis of the data collected, the following themes emerged as the most prominent among teachers' responses in regards to the factors which influenced their perceptions towards the implementation of inclusive education (a) lack of teacher training, (b) insufficient resources, (c) limited administrative support, (d) teachers' attitudes, (e) large class sizes, and (f) poor building infrastructure (Hunter-Johnson, Newton and Cambridge, 2014).

At the secondary level, the following themes emerged regarding influential attitudinal factors: (a) lack of resources, (b) insufficient training, (c) inadequate information about inclusive education, (d) lack of support, and (e) administrative support.

It was revealed that at both levels (primary and secondary) there was a consistency regarding influential factors that influence teachers' perception towards education. The major theme emerging at both levels were lack of training of teachers, insufficient resources and lack of administrative support.

3. What are some recommendations for promoting adult education practices for inclusive education teachers at the elementary and secondary school level?

The results from this revealed unanimously that the government of the Bahamas needs to provide some adult education programs for teachers with responsibility for an all-inclusive classroom. When questioned regarding their recommendations, the participants indicated that the program should be mandatory, free to all teachers, administrators and policy makers (elementary and secondary), conducted at a national and international level, provided in the format of in-service awards which allow teachers to focus solely on the knowledge being learned regarding inclusive education, initiatives (financial and non-financial) should be provided to participants, and should be documented for evaluation purposes.

Discussion

The research is meaningful and contributes to educational practices and theories regarding inclusive education and the development of adult education programs for all inclusive teachers. First, the study revealed that there are misconception regarding the definition of all-inclusive education which evidently has a rippling impact on teachers' perception of inclusive education and their willingness to accept such initiatives within the educational system. To this end, much emphasis is needed regarding the education of all teachers and administrators regarding inclusive education, its implementation and best practices. Such educational sessions can be presented in seminars, workshops, conferences and official communication from the Ministry of Education.

Second, the research revealed three overarching factors that influence teachers' perception of inclusive education as: (a) lack of training, (b) insufficient resources and (c) administrative support. This suggests that it is imperative to develop adult education programs specifically dedicated to inclusive education teachers. Such program should be free and mandatory for all teachers, both pre-service and paraeducators within the government and private sector. However, to ensure teachers value the program and perform at their utmost best, their performance should be evaluated and factored into their annual performance appraisals as an influential factor for their promotion.

Further, this program should be guided by the principles of andragogy as asserted by Knowles(1990). The major objectives of the educational program are to emphasize teaching skills that would enhance teacher trainee's capacity to support students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. On this premise, the program should also be reflective of best practices both nationally and internationally regarding instructional techniques, strategies for modification of lesson, classroom management techniques and inclusion of teaching manipulative for an all inclusive classroom. The program should further call for inclusive education teachers to be well versed with methods for infusing special education content and curriculum into general education courses. Lastly, it is recognized that teachers play a fundamental role in shaping the overall attitudes towards students with disabilities in classrooms. Therefore, this educational

program should also have a component that focuses on redesigning pre-service teacher training programs and modifying paraeducators attitudes and perception with the view of facilitating more positive feelings in the interactions between teachers and students with disabilities. By addressing these factors in pre-service and pareducators teacher training, it is suggested that the classroom practices of present and future teachers would ultimately be modified. Such emphasis would also address any preconceived anxiety regarding teaching in an all inclusive classroom.

To ensure such adult education programs are successful, it is paramount that all the relevant resources to ensure the program is successful are available. This would include proper training facilities, instructional resources, assistive technology and materials necessary for implementation of an inclusive education classroom. It further calls for proper modifications to be made to schools for all physically disable students and special furniture.

Support is also a crucial factor with the implementation of the adult education programs for inclusive education programs. Such support should originate at the school level and extend to the Ministry of Education. As a support mechanism and to ensure quality control both the inclusive environments and the inclusive education programs should be evaluated annually. Further, proper policies and procedures need to be implemented by the Ministry of Education.

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