Beginning General and Special Educators' Perceptions of Collaborative Instruction in Inclusive Settings

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*Abstract-*The attitudes and perceptions of three groups of pre-service math/science and special education teachers towards co-teaching in inclusive settings were investigated in this study. Responses to a semi-structured questionnaire and interviews were analyzed using a four-stage qualitative analytical process. Implications of the impact of field-based teacher preparation programs on beginning teachers' development of inclusive attitudes and their likelihood of implementing co-teaching in urban schools given specific barriers were explored.

Keywords: Inclusion, collaboration and co-teaching, perceptions, alternative teacher preparation programs, pre-service teachers

I. Introduction

Inclusive education is a concept rooted in legislative, legal, personal, and professional struggles focusing on equitable education for students with special needs. Historically, the practice of excluding a group of children from a free and appropriate public education was legislatively debunked with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142). Despite this seminal mandate, access to an education in the least restrictive environment still remained elusive for many children with disabilities. In addition, concerns about the efficacy of special education emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Specific problems included questions about the quality and individualization of instruction in special education classrooms; disproportionate representation of minority students in special education; inappropriate labeling of students; and the creation of dual and separate educational systems (Lipsky& Gartner, 1997). Ongoing litigation and political and social pressure fueled subsequent reauthorizations of PL 94-142, specifically the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 and 2004, which strengthened provisions addressing the right of students with disabilities to be educated in the general education classroom with their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible and with appropriate supports [17].

Inclusive education emerged from this ongoing debate as a remedy for social and societal segregation which begins in the schooling experience of many students with disabilities. The concept of 'mainstreaming' that permeated education in the 1970s and 1980s referred to "…placing students with disabilities in general education settings only when they can meet traditional academic expectations with minimal assistance, or when those expectations are not relevant" [6, p. 3]. In contrast, inclusion represents the philosophy that students with disabilities have a right to educated with their nondisabled peers in the general education classroom regardless of their ability to meet grade level targets. Inclusive education is "a value-based practice that attempts to bring students, including those with disabilities into full membership within their local school community" [23, p. 101]. Therefore, inclusion is conceptualized as fundamentally changing educational environments so that student differences are viewed as natural and

valued. Given the increasing prevalence of inclusive settings and understanding that specific supports are needed for inclusion to be done well and in a fashion that encourages strong buy-in from staff, it is important to investigate the experiences and perceptions of the next generation of educators charged with sustaining inclusive practices.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature is divided into the following two sections: a) Teacher attitude towards inclusion and students with disabilities and b) Alternative certification programs and inclusive practices.

Teacher Attitudes Towards Inclusion and Students with Disabilities
A number of researchers have conducted studies regarding the attitudes and perceptions of general and special educators to the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Smith & Leonard, 2005). A more dated but still relevant study by [13] investigated the attitudes of 10 elementary and secondary general educators across seven schools nominated by their principals and special education colleagues for their successful inclusion of students with disabilities. These secondary general educators taught English, social studies, and home economics/child development. Using an in-depth, face-to-face interview process, the researchers identified several themes associated with effectiveness at including students with disabilities such as reflective, flexible, and tolerant personalities, a sense of responsibility for all students, including those with disabilities, acknowledgement of a positive, collaborative and respectful relationship with their special education teacher, etc.The results of this study indicated that in order for inclusion to work, general educators needed to possess attitudes that reflected a sense of ownership for all children, a belief that all children can learn, and personalities that were adaptable to the changing needs of students. Despite these attitudes, administrative barriers, such as limited planning time and 'dumping' students in general education classrooms of effective general educators, have the potential to impact the accessibility of inclusive classrooms to all students with disabilities. In addition, it is telling that no math and science teachers were nominated by both their administrator and special education colleague as implementing effective inclusive practices in this study.
Findings from [18] substantiated the significance of a school climate in the promotion of inclusive attitudes in their survey of 188 general educators. In addition to their findings that teachers were more hostile to including students with learning, behavior, or cognitive impairments, they also found that teachers were more receptive to inclusion if they perceived that their administrators afforded them opportunities to collaborate with their special education colleagues.

On the other hand, [24] specifically assessed the attitudes of 125 high school teachers representing a broad spectrum of content areas using a survey with a four-point Likert scale. The survey measured teacher attitudes towards inclusion along four domains: 1) level of preparation to work with students with special needs, 2) teacher perceptions of the impact of students with special needs on the classroom climate, 3) teacher perceptions about their efficacy with students with special needs, and 4) teacher perceptions of the level of acceptance of students with special needs by their nondisabled peers. Contrary to prior research findings, the results indicated that content area taught had no impact on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion.

What proved influential was the level of special education training teachers received. Those with higher levels of training reported more affirmative attitudes towards inclusion. This finding raises serious questions for teacher educators who prepare teachers through on-the-job, fast track alternative certification programs with little or condensed special education coursework. The majority of teachers in the [24] study received their certification through traditional programs. Approximately 46% of the teachers surveyed indicated that they received adequate to high levels of training in special education,

equivalent to two or more college courses or professional development through the acquisition of advanced licensing or degrees in special education. It is evident that alternative certification programs deliver programs that are more condensed, briefer, and require fewer credits (Humphrey & Wechsler, 2005). The assumption can be made that the amount of special education coursework or training provided to general education teacher candidates in alternative certification programs would be minimal at best. The resulting implication is that the school settings in which these candidates are being provided their experiences becomes doubly important in the formation of attitudes that support the implementation of inclusive practices [22].

Alternative Certification Programs and Inclusive Practices
How is this discussion on inclusion relevant to the preparation of new special and general educators? Research suggests that the attitude of teachers towards inclusion is influenced by their awareness of disabilities as well as their pre-service experiences and training in strategies and interventions for students with special needs [2; 4; Friends & Cook, 2002).

Teacher educators who provide primarily alternative certification programs emphasizing 'learning on the job' approaches to teacher preparation are faced with an enormous challenge when attempting to prepare educators who are able to address a wide range of needs in inclusive general education classrooms. Reviews of the research on alternative certification programs (Humphrey & Wechsler, 2005; SRI International et. al., 2002; Feistritzer, & Chester, 2000) surfaced the following characteristics of alternative certification programs that could impact the development of attitudes supporting inclusive practices such as: demand of highly qualified teachers, less prior classroom experience, challenging more restrictive placements, inadequate pre-service clinical training prior to job placement, and a significant gap between theory and practice.

Attitudes towards students with special needs and beliefs about inclusion of beginning teachers enrolled in alternative certification programs will be influenced both by their faculty and courses and their experiences in the classrooms in which they are placed. Their tacit knowledge about collaborative instructional practices will be developed by their observations of these practices in their school placements, the level of success of their attempts to implement inclusive practices, and explicit guidance from program faculty. Experiences directly and indirectly influence the development of attitudes and, in many cases, interactions with others help to shape personal attitudes. Experiences do not occur in a vacuum and attitudes are learned and developed within social environments influenced by a particular cultural context (Rajecki, 1990). Beginning educators' actual experiences of inclusion in school settings and what they learn about inclusion in their courses will be mediated by their prior knowledge about inclusion, their attitudes towards student differences, and their philosophical perspectives on teaching and learning. Knowledge of the attitudes of beginning educators in alternative certification programs may allow researchers and practitioners to predict or anticipate future behavior or practices. Teacher educators can use this information to develop creative strategies to influence attitudes towards inclusion and co-teaching that are malleable or open to change.

III.   Methodology

The researchers investigated preservice teacher attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities during a two-phase study taking place between Fall 2006 and Spring 2010. The study involved making changes to the delivery of specific alternative certification program courses for three cohorts of pre-service general and special educators and analyzing the impacts of these changes on attitudes and experiences. Data were analyzed from questionnaires administered to one special education cohort and one general education cohort at the beginning of their programs in Phase 1 of the study. Lessons learned

from Phase 1 data informed additional program changes in Phase 2, the impact of which were investigated through interviews with one special education cohort at the end of their two-year alternative certification program.

SAMPLE

Phase 1 respondents consisted of 30 preservice math and science secondary teachers and 16 provisionally licensed special education teachers who were enrolled in alternative certification programs at a large urban university in the Midwest specifically designed to prepare educators to teach diverse learners. The preservice general education teachers who participated in this study were post-baccalaureate students enrolled in a one year teacher preparation program that consisted of both traditional and on-the-job models of student teaching. The provisionally licensed teachers were enrolled in a two-year post-baccalaureate secondary special education certification program .

Phase 2 respondents included 13 preservice special educators in the final semester of their six-semester program.

INSTRUMENTS

The researchers used a questionnaire with open-ended questions with the initial sample in Phase 1 and in-depth open-ended interview questions for Phase 2 to evaluate attitudes towards collaborative instructional partnerships (see Appendix A for research instruments). A questionnaire collecting demographic information and measuring attitudes of preservice educators towards inclusion and collaborative instruction was developed based on a review of the literature on co-teaching. The interview questions were based on four themes that emerged from a literature review on collaboration and its implementation: characteristics of collaboration, beliefs and perceptions about collaboration, how collaboration works, and teacher education as well as from the results of the questionnaire.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The first phase of the study, which began in Fall 2006, involved the use of a researcher-developed questionnaire after the preservice special educators and math/science teachers received a minimum of seven weeks of instruction in a course co-taught by the two faculty researchers, both prior special educators. The faculty researchers collaboratively planned and presented each week's class, and made explicit planned and spontaneous instructional decisions. After modeling co-teaching for approximately half a semester, the questionnaire was administered by distributing copies to students enrolled in one of their required core courses for the post-baccalaureate secondary exceptional education and the post-baccalaureate general education teacher training program. Both groups of teachers were asked to complete the survey on a voluntary basis.

The second phase of the study occurred after data from Phase 1 were analyzed and program changes made (e.g., changes to course content, more strategic placement of special education preservice teachers in schools with more inclusive service delivery models). The second phase of the study focused on a cohort of special education teachers who were at the end of their program. Since the initial cohort of special educators who participated in Phase 1 of the study were not consistently able to make changes to their job placements, the researchers decided to implement program changes for the cohort of special educators only who were beginning their program in Summer 2008 and completing their program in Spring 2010. Recruited participants engaged in the study on a voluntary basis. A graduate student researcher collected the data to increase respondents comfort level, since both faculty researchers had previously taught these students, and some of their interview responses may have included positive and negative perceptions of their alternative certification program. One-hour interviews were audio taped and transcribed for analysis.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Responses to the open-ended questions on the questionnaires and interview questions were transcribed. A four-stage analytical process was employed. The first stage involved independent exploratory reading of the transcribed responses by the two faculty researchers and graduate student who conducted interviews to identify specific topical codes. In the second independent reading of the data, each researcher independently identified categories within which specific topics could be grouped. Then the recurring theme approach to qualitative data analysis was employed independently by each researcher to identify emerging themes and subthemes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, the research team met to check for the reliability of themes and subthemes across researchers. Approximately 82% of both the themes and subthemes were corroborated by both researchers' independent analyses. In cases where disagreements occurred, the researchers came to consensus regarding how to code the specific passage, statement or phrase.

RESULTS

Both beginning special educators and general math and science secondary educators had similar views regarding what constitutes inclusion and collaborative teaching. Both groups viewed inclusive education as enabling students with and without disabilities to be educated together in the general education classroom, experiencing the general education curriculum in ways that minimized or eliminated stigmatization and labeling. Beginning educators acknowledged that accommodations for specific academic, behavioral, and social needs would be necessary to ensure quality learning experiences for all students. Some respondents voiced concerns about the appropriateness of inclusive education for some students with significant behavioral, cognitive and emotional needs.

When asked to provide definitions of collaborative teaching, the respondents expressed two different viewpoints. Some respondents viewed collaborative instruction as educators, particularly general and special educator dyads, engaging in collaborative planning, instruction, assessment and behavior management characterized by shared responsibility and equality of input. Others viewed collaborative instruction as instruction characterized by the general educator as the instructional lead with the special educator as the 'support' teacher responsible for modifying instruction for included students with special needs.

Collaborative Teaching Skills

When asked about the specific skills needed for co-teachers to be effective, seven themes were identified: 1) ability to work with others/cooperation and respect, 2) successful communication, 3) commitment to co-teaching through shared control, 4) organization, 5) flexibility/adaptability/openness, 6) necessary knowledge of students and content, and 7) clear delineation of roles and responsibilities.

The first five themes targeted 'soft' skills, or skills related to personality characteristics that are typically not impacted by coursework or professional development training experiences. For example, one respondent indicated that "Co-teachers have to be willing to share class time, and are open to other methods of teaching the same subject. Co-teachers need a like-minded philosophy of teaching and discipline. They must communicate well and distribute responsibility and work fairly. They must use their knowledge to help each other so that students are engaged and learning occurs." This need to be open to sharing all aspects of teaching was a common theme across most responses. Beginning educators recognized that co-teachers must resist 'competing' for students' respect, for space, for materials, and for control in order for collaborative teaching to be effective for all students. They recognized that this kind of relationship could only be developed through open communication, flexibility, openness, and mutual respect.

Benefits of Collaborative Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms
Respondents mentioned several benefits of co-teaching for educators and for students. Six themes were identified for benefits to teachers, including: 1) increased ability to generate ideas leading to increased life-long learning, 2) increased efficiency through shared work, 3) increased ability to meet needs of students, 4) increased expertise in content knowledge, 5) support system, and 6) more effective classroom management. Perceptions of the benefits were mediated by preservice teachers' philosophy of inclusive education and co-teaching. Respondents who believe co-teaching involved the general educator as the instructional leader with the special educator as the support teacher believed that "The benefit for teachers is that there is more help in the classroom and the teacher can focus on teaching the topic while the co-teacher can focus on individual students' needs." Respondents who believed co-teaching involved shared control and responsibility for instruction of all students in the general education classrooms typically had responses such as the following.

 Co-teaching can bring <u>innovation</u> into the classroom. The sharing of ideas and ability to collectively analyze strengths and weaknesses of lessons and delivery. Teachers get a chance to learn from another teacher's style. For teachers, it lowers the burden of knowing everything about everything and having to do all the planning. Co-teaching for teachers is great because they can combine their strategies and content knowledge.

Despite expressed differences in the benefits of co-teaching for teachers, respondents were very consistent about the benefits of co-teaching for students. Three themes were identified: 1) more attention from teachers, 2) different perspectives and ways to view instruction, and 3) modeling of how adults work together. Beginning educators highlighted the importance of students having models of how to work with others. They also valued the fact that "Co-teaching provides different perspectives and more information for students. The students get multiple points of view on a topic or different sources for knowledge".

Barriers to Implementing Collaborative Instruction
Though concrete barriers related to resources were surfaced (e.g., lack of planning time, lack of funding for additional teachers, materials and space), the majority of themes of perceived barriers related to intangible personality characteristics or perceived stigmatization. Six barriers were expressed: 1) wanting control, 2) conflicting teaching styles, 3) ability/willingness to work with students with disabilities, 4) lack of clear roles/responsibilities, 5) perceived preferential treatment, and 6) peer awareness of disability status. The following responses clearly illustrate the barrier related to the inability to share 'power'. It should be noted that that majority of these types of responses were expressed by the general education math and science educators.

Beginning special educators were more likely to express misgivings about co-teaching arising from potential stigmatization of students with special needs, "If the special ed. teacher is in the reg. ed. classroom working with special ed. students, special ed. students may feel labeled. The high school students may feel like they are not as smart as the regular ed students because they might get singled out." In addition, both general and special educator respondents conveyed definitive stances regarding the appropriateness of inclusion for specific students. Many felt that attempts to include students with severe behavioral or cognitive disabilities would present a barrier to effective co-teaching arrangements.

IV.   Discussion And Implications

Substantial research has been conducted regarding attitudes towards co-teaching, barriers to co-teaching in inclusive environments, and essential skills for establishing and sustaining collaborative teaching teams [15; 11; 20; 3]. There has been a tremendous proliferation of alternative certification programs designed to address the persistent shortage and lack of retention of teachers in high needs areas, such as special

education and math and science education [16;; Humphrey & Wechsler, 2005). This study targeted beginning math and science general and special educators enrolled in on-the-job alternative teacher certification programs. It is evident that the trend is to fill teaching vacancies in high needs areas and districts with uncertified beginning educators who are typically working as full teachers of record, therefore it is critical to assess the nascent attitudes these beginning educators possess towards inclusion and co-teaching early in their careers. They are the future of inclusive educational practices.

The results of this study indicated that beginning and general and special educators enrolled in alternative certification programs hold both positive and pessimistic perspectives on viability of developing successful collaborative instructional relationships in inclusive classrooms. Many of the barriers they expressed related to individual personality traits or characteristics that not necessarily modifiable by professional development. Federal teacher quality regulations described in federal mandates, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Act required educators to be highly qualified to teach academic content to their students. Oftentimes, special educators do not possess the level of content expertise necessary to deliver content-rich instruction at the high school level. These mandates explicitly state that teacher quality requirements for special educators can be met through co-teaching arrangements where a special educator is paired with a general educator who is considered the 'content expert'. Given the generally positive attitudes towards co-teaching expressed by the respondents in this study and given the 'blessing' of the federal government, is co-teaching likely to be implemented by beginning educators in alternative certification programs?

Unfortunately, the answer to this question is not necessarily. The researchers were interested in determining whether or not the nature of these beginning educators' experiences in their urban classroom placements influenced their likelihood of implementing co-teaching. The results indicated that only 50% of the 46 respondents were very likely or somewhat likely to use co-teaching in their current school placement. Respondents indicated that their likelihood of implementing co-teaching was influenced by the fact that they did not observe co-teaching being consistently practiced in their current classroom placements. Students with disabilities, even milder disabilities, were often taught core academic subjects by special educators in completely self-contained settings. The majority of these educators were exposed to service delivery models in urban high schools that did not support inclusive and collaborative teaching. This was evident in schools that attempted inclusion, "The special ed teacher usually has to run between 3 rooms to help all the students…the special ed. teacher isn't in the classroom for more than 2 minutes.", as well as non-inclusive schools, "I have been put into all self-contained classes and I believe due to logistics and reluctance co-teaching is not going to happen in the near future… Right now all of our ExEd classes are self-contained… I would like to, but it is not used right now."

Though this study sampled only a small number of general and special education teachers enrolled in two urban alternative certification programs, the potential implications of the findings for the longevity of inclusive education are serious. Beginning educators may possess positive attitudes and personalities conducive to co-teaching in inclusive settings. However, if they fail to observe inclusive education and effective co-teaching practices in the job placement where they experience at least half of their accelerated certification program, how likely are they to continue to view co-teaching as a viable and achievable approach to educating students with disabilities? This is embodied in the following statement, "I have not observed it yet and am not certain if it is a common practice at my current high school. I haven't seen any instance of it in any classroom. I'm not sure how to make to happen". University faculty should provide authentic models of co-teaching for students, particularly those placed in non-inclusive settings where students with special needs are segregated from the general student body. In addition, it is imperative that urban schools are provided with ongoing training to develop and implement service delivery models supporting inclusive classrooms. Schools systems must increase their awareness

of the importance of the tangible (e.g., funding, staffing, student scheduling, and materials) and intangible (e.g., time, support) resources needed to encourage sustainable inclusive practices. It is clear that future educators need more than just the will and desire to co-teach in inclusive settings, they need to observe effective models of co-teaching both in their schools and at the university level.

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Appendix A
Questionnaire
1. What is your definition of inclusion?
2. Do you think inclusion is a viable option for all students with disabilities?
3. What is your definition of co-teaching?
4. What skills do you believe co-teachers need to possess in order to work together successfully?
5. What are the strengths of co-teaching – for students? For teachers?
6. What barriers to co-teaching in inclusive environments do you think may occur in high schools?
7. How likely are you to use co-teaching in your school?

Interview Protocol
Q1) What does collaboration looks to you?

Q2) What is your experience, if any, with collaboration?

Q3) Explain the role(s) of both the teachers in your collaborative partnership?

Q4) How does individual instructor's strengths and weaknesses influence division of labor?

Q5) What different strategies do you follow to establish an effective collaborative partnership?

Q6) What steps or formal procedure, if any, did your co-teacher follow in establishing rapport with you?

Q7) Do you think that your current administrator facilitates the effective use of collaborative skills in your building? Explain.

Q8) Which inclusion model does your school use? Did you get any orientation or training to implement that in your classroom?

Q9) Since you have had experience inclusion in your school settings. Explain three potential benefits and challenges of implementing collaborations.

Q10) How can the implementation of collaboration be improved in your setting?

Q11) Explain what practical collaborative experience(s) did you have had in your teacher certification program.

Q12) Have you used any technology like video-chatting, on-line chatting or emailing in collaborating with your co-teacher, if so, how has it helped?