The Lived Experiences of General and Special Education Teachers In Inclusion Classrooms: A Phenomenological Study

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Inclusion in public schools involves providing the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. A lack of understanding often exists among general and special education teachers in relation to the implementation of inclusion in general education classrooms. The focus of this phenomenological study was to describe the daily lived experiences of 4 general and 4 special education elementary school teachers who taught in an inclusion setting in a large urban district in the southeastern United States. The conceptual framework for this study was based on Glasser’s concept of an individual’s quality world (Glasser, 1998). Key findings revealed that participants believed successful implementation of inclusion is dependent on professional development opportunities, administrator support, and mutual respect between general and special education teachers. Implications for positive social change are that general education teachers may be more receptive to integrating students with disabilities in the general education setting, and special education teachers may take a more active role in the implementation of inclusion.

Since the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2004, pressure on state policy makers and school administrations to integrate students with disabilities into general education classrooms has increased. The United States Department of Education (2006) noted that approximately 80% of students with disabilities receive special education support in the mainstream classroom. Due to this increase, general education teachers are often required to differentiate their instruction for students with documented disabilities and to share their classroom with special education staff. These changes have generated varying attitudes and beliefs among general and special education teachers regarding the implementation of inclusion (Murawski, 2005; Kalyva, Gojkovic & Tsakinis, 2007; Haider, 2008). Additional research indicates that there is a lack of clarity in relation to the roles and responsibilities of both general and special education teachers who provide instruction in the inclusion setting (Ernst & Rogers, 2009; Fitch, 2003; Monahan, Marino, & Miller; Rheams & Bain, 2005).

For this study, inclusion is defined as the “integration of students with disabilities into the general education setting with special education supports that aid in the student’s access to the general education curriculum” (Friend, 2007, p.3). Inclusion reform was forged primarily by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1994, which requires that all students regardless of their disability be educated in the least restrictive environment (IDEA, 2004).

EVOLUTION OF INCLUSION

The six major goals of IDEA sparked an initia-
tive that is now known as the phenomena of inclusion. In 1986, the federal government encouraged the integration of regular and special education classrooms, known as the Regular Education Initiative (REI). According to Davis and Maheady (1991), this movement was “designed to restructure general, compensatory, and special education service delivery” (p. 211). Davis and Maheady explained that students with mild to moderate disabilities could be successful in general education classrooms with special education support and that this initiative provided students with learning problems the opportunity to receive their education in a general education setting. In legal cases, such as Timothy v. Rochester School District (1988), the courts ruled that schools could not refuse to educate a child with multiple handicaps in a general education setting. In the majority opinion of the court, the judges cited EAHCA, stating that all children must be afforded an education regardless of the severity of their handicap (Timothy v. Rochester, 1988, p. 1). Due to this ruling, states began implementing policies and procedures to begin the process of slowly integrating students with disabilities into the general education setting (Idol, 2006).

In 1997, the reauthorizations of IDEA obligated schools to include disabled students in the general education setting with inclusion as the preferred model. Within three years of IDEA’s reauthorization, 96% of disabled children were included in general education settings 80% of the school day (Partners on Education, 2010).

NEGATIVE ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS ABOUT INCLUSION

With the integration of special needs students into general education classes, objections to inclusion emerged. Due to the cost of advocating for children to be included with their non-disabled peers, parents were often hesitant to sue for this right for their child. In accordance with the Handicapped Children’s Protection Act of 1986, parents were able to sue the school district, and if the courts ruled in their favor, the school district was required to pay all or part of their legal expenses (Osborne & Russo, 2003). However, if the school board was victorious, parents were not allowed to seek any form of financial compensation. Similar research conducted by Riddell and Weedon (2010) supported these findings because this study revealed that parents have “tipped the balance of power far into their favor” in relation to special education litigation and due process hearings (Riddell & Weedon, 2010, p.113). Although parents may sue their local school board for the right of their special needs child to be included in the general education setting, numerous cases are lost because inclusion may not be the least restrictive environment for their child (Rothstein, 2000). Some educators as well as parents believe that students who are determined to have more severe disabilities and require more one-on-one assistance do not qualify for inclusion but rather for a separate setting.

In a related study, Kauffman and McCullough (2000) conducted a qualitative investigation of twelve students who were placed in self-contained classrooms. Kauffman and McCullough noted that the participants appeared happy in this type of setting because they were treated as separate but equal. Crockett (1999) noted that some special educators agree with the placement of these children in a separate setting; they believe that if inclusion becomes the norm, their jobs will become obsolete or that they will be viewed as secretaries and/or assistants to the general education teacher. Principals also may be hesitant to embrace inclusion and encourage its implementation, because, as Crockett noted that there is “a scarcity of information about the cost of providing inclusive instruction and little to support the suggestions that inclusion might save money” (p.24). Moreover, Lieberman (1992) asserted,

_We are testing more, not less. We are locking teachers into constrained curricula and syllabi more, not less. The imprint of statewide accountability and government spending [is increasingly] based on tangible, measurable, tabulateable, numerical results ... The barrage of curriculum materials, syllabi, grade-level expectations for performance, standardized achievement tests, competency tests, and so on, continue to overwhelm even the most flexible teachers. (pp. 14-15)._ 

Tornillo (1994) argued that teachers “are required to direct inordinate attention to a few, thereby decreasing the amount of time and energy directed toward the rest of the class” (p.7). Due to the added stress of high stakes testing, general education teachers often feel that they will be unable to meet the necessary state and federal requirements, such as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and annual benchmark criteria due to the fear that teaching students with disabilities in the inclusion setting is a far greater task than initially anticipated (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, and Eloff, 2003; Tornillo, 1994). Migyanka’s (2005) mixed methods study found that negative attitudes toward inclusion stemmed...
from “legal time, lack of professional development and resistance to having another teacher in the classroom (p. 215). Other researchers also noted that general education teachers often feel that they do not have proper training or adequate planning time as well as administrative support and knowledge of policies regarding special education students (Cook, Cameron, and Riddle 2009; Nimante and Tubele 2010; Parasuram 2006; Tankersley 2007). This lack of information often has a significant impact on the general education teacher’s attitude towards inclusion. Finally, parents sometimes question the validity of inclusion as they battle for including their disabled child in an environment where they may struggle with adjusting socially instead of allowing their child to remain in a separate setting where the child feels comfortable and is viewed as normal by peers with disabilities.

In another study, Farrell, Dyson, Polat, Hutcheson and Gallanaugh (2007) examined four age groups of students who were of British descent. Their findings revealed that placing students with disabilities in an inclusion setting did not guarantee academic success. Mowat’s (2009) findings revealed similar findings because his study revealed that integrating students with emotional disabilities has no impact on their academic success. Hammond and Ingalls (2003) and Begeny and Martens (2007) also noted that there were insufficient data to affirm that inclusion actually works. They also stated that educators were less likely to support inclusion because the data did not give a definitive answer to the concern that including students with disabilities in the general education classroom is the most appropriate and least restrictive environment. Again, the lack of clarity among educators regarding the effectiveness of inclusion supports the need for additional research about the phenomenon of inclusion. Data from this study may aid educators and policymakers about how to differentiate instruction and how to clearly define the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. In addition, this study may also assist in the development of effective inclusion practices that may improve academic achievement for students with disabilities.

POSITIVE ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS ABOUT INCLUSION

Just as there are individuals who are opposed to the integration of students with disabilities into the general education classrooms, some educators feel that the current special education system is flawed and ineffective. For example, the National Association of State Boards of Education (1992) cited studies indicating that 43% of students in special education do not graduate and are more likely to be arrested than their nondisabled peers. Advocates of inclusion also suggest that children who are labeled as “special” tend to have lower self-esteem as well as lower academic expectations of themselves. In addition, Stainback, Stainback, and Bunch (1989) criticized the current special education system as disorganized and mismanaged and do not meet the needs of students with disabilities.

In addition, studies conducted by Nutbrown and Clough (2009) and Sayeski (2009) concluded that disabled students who are integrated into the general education setting demonstrate heightened self-esteem and increased socialization skills. Supporters of inclusion also suggest that the collaborative efforts of both the general and special education teacher may heighten classroom expectations for all students. Furthermore, general education students are more accepting of their non-disabled peers because the inclusive environment creates a sense of social and cultural awareness, which precipitates tolerance and patience towards students with disabilities (Staub & Peck, 1994; Mastropieri, Scraggs & Berkley, 2007; Newburn & Shriner, 2006). Additional studies support Burk and Southerland’s (2004) study, and these studies found that the teacher attitudes about inclusion as well as clearly defined responsibilities between the special education teacher and the general education teacher produce academic success and improved social skills for both the special needs students and their non-disabled peers (Biddle, 2006; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Kings & Young, 2003; Ryan, 2009; Titone, 2005; Woolfson, 2009).

In yet another study, Watnick and Sacks (2006) reported mixed results in relation to general and special education teachers’ attitudes about inclusion for students who were English language learners as well as for students with a documented disability. They found that teachers who looked favorably upon the implementation of full inclusion believed that special education students who were taught in a grade level classroom worked very hard to fit in with their general education peers and teachers. Yet, teachers also believed that full inclusion produces positive outcomes when there is a good fit between students and teachers with positive supports in place (Carter, 2005). In addition, Watnick and Sacks noted that educators who did not view inclusion favorably felt this way due to the lack of staff and appropriate training about how to implement a “viable co-teaching model” (p.72).
In a study concerning the inclusion experiences of general and special education teachers, Holdings and Southerland (1997) asked questions related to the participants’ lived experiences about inclusion. One participant noted that her experiences with inclusion in relationship to the parents of general education students were mixed. Wimberley noted that some general education parents initially felt uncomfortable with inclusion:

There were about three or four people who said they weren’t that comfortable with it, but by the end of last year, the feedback was totally opposite. That was particularly true in the case of one mother who had never had anything to do with anyone who was different. She was very leery about inclusion, but eventually she said she couldn’t believe how her child had learned from the experience (As cited by Holdings & Southerland, 1997).

In addition, Wimberley noted that she had extreme difficulty providing services for students with disabilities because the staff she received was not properly trained or qualified as a special education teacher. Wimberley also found the inclusion process to be very stressful because not only did she have to find assignments for the class to do, but she also had to find tasks that the untrained staff member could do as well (Holdings and Southerland, 1997).

In other qualitative research, Pickard (2009) conducted a case study in which he implemented the Welsh Inclusion Model in grades four and five at Title One Schools in the Piedmont area of North Carolina. Pickard implemented all four stages of this model in which each phase sought to integrate various elements of inclusion practices, co-teaching techniques, and instructional strategies. The stages of the Welsh inclusion model were designed to gradually transfer the responsibility of implementing inclusion from administrators to teachers and students. The findings indicated that students with special needs were academically successful under the Welsh inclusion model as evidenced by the 12.5% growth of composite scores on the end-of-grade tests for students with disabilities (Pickard, 2009). In addition, Pickard noted that teachers who participated in the study felt free to explore using various learning and instructional strategies, which allowed students with disabilities to access the general education curriculum regardless of its level of complexity.

**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Currently in the United States, over six million students are identified as students with disabilities and represent a 43% increase since 1989 (United States Department of Education, 2006). Of these six million students, 80% are considered to be fully mainstreamed into an inclusion setting. Current research indicates that general educators feel that mainstreaming students with disabilities is a problem because inclusion does not make sense in light of pressures from federal laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act, state legislatures, and the public at large to develop more rigorous academic standards and to improve the academic achievement of all students (Amrein, Berliner, Rideau, 2010). Quantitative research has been conducted on the attitudes and beliefs of general and special education teachers about inclusion and has exposed a lack of understanding of inclusion and how it is approached and applied in the classroom (Begeny, Martens 2007; Monahan, Marino, Miller, 2001; Shade, Stewart, 2001; 2007). However, few qualitative studies have explored and described the daily lived experiences of both general and special education teachers in an inclusion setting and how those lived experiences may influence their attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of general and special education teachers who have taught or who are currently teaching in an inclusion setting and how those lived experiences influenced their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. Although research has documented both positive and negative attitudes and beliefs that educators have towards inclusion (Berry, 2010; Brandon, Ncube, 2006 Cook Cameron, and Tankersley, 2007), there is little research that documents the lived experiences of both general and special education teachers who have taught or who are currently teaching in an inclusion setting at the elementary level. This study will help fill the research gap in understanding the daily lived experiences of general and special education teachers and how those lived experiences may or may not have shaped teachers’ attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion.
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study is based on Glasser’s (1998) Choice Theory. According to Glasser, teachers are a key component in determining the success or failure of educating students with disabilities in inclusive educational settings. Included in this theory are the teachers’ abilities to feel competent in their quality worlds. Glasser’s choice theory defines an individual’s quality world as a “small personal world which each person starts to create and re-created throughout life through a small group of specific pictures” (p. 45). These pictures fall into three major categories, including “the people [they] want to be with, the things [they] want to own or experience, and the ideas and beliefs that govern [their] behavior” (p. 45). According to Glasser, building strong relationships with individuals can only foster the quality world of a person. Glasser also concluded that individuals were responsible for their own thoughts and actions. Glasser’s concept of a quality world forms the conceptual framework of this study because Glasser proposes that individuals choose to develop attitudes and beliefs about situations based upon lived experiences. Therefore, teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about inclusion may be determined by their experiences in the educational setting. Glasser’s concept of a quality world pertains to this study because the goal of this study is to understand the lived world of human experience in relation to the inclusion setting.

Inclusion may seem difficult for educators when they are mandated to step out of their traditional roles; therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of both general and special education teachers who provide instruction in an inclusive setting and to describe the impact of these experiences on their attitudes and beliefs about educating students with disabilities, based upon Glasser’s concept of an individual’s quality world. Although federal law requires students to be educated in the least restrictive environment, the demands placed on general and special education teachers to provide instruction to a more heterogeneous classroom has increased since the passage of the NCLB Act (National Education Association, 2004). These increased demands have created a sense of hopelessness and frustration among both general and special education teachers because they are required to step out of their quality world into an inclusion setting where they are ill-equipped and unprepared to teach students with disabilities (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, 2000; Kalyva, Gojkovic and Tsakiris, 2007).

In addition to Glasser’s choice theory, the conceptual framework for this study is also supported by current research studies conducted by Biddle (2006); Henley, Ramsey, and Algozzine (2002); Keeffe and Moore (2004). These studies noted that inclusion can be successful when both the general education teacher and the special education teacher have a clear and concise understanding of their roles and responsibilities. The conceptual framework is also supported by other studies conducted by Monahan, Marion and Miller (2001); Henning and Mitchell (2002); Murawski (2005); and Kalyva, Gojkovic, and Tsakiris (2007), which identified feelings of pride, inadequacy, frustration, and lack of support as reasons why educators like or dislike the phenomenon of inclusion.

In summary, Glasser’s choice theory (1998) examined the following three conceptual constructs in relation to an individual’s quality world: (a) the people with whom individuals want to be, (b) the things that individuals want to own or experience, and (c) the ideas and beliefs that govern an individual’s behavior. Glasser noted that positive interpersonal and personal relationships foster the quality world of an individual. Therefore, Glasser’s theory and other current research studies support the conceptual framework for this study because individuals choose to develop attitudes and beliefs about a situation based upon their lived experiences.

Research Questions

These were the research questions explored in the study:

1. What is the essence of the lived experiences of general and special education teachers in relation to inclusion in classrooms?
2. How do these lived experiences impact their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion?
3. What are general and special education teachers’ beliefs about participating in the education of students with disabilities in inclusion settings?

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Setting

This study was conducted in a large urban school district in the eastern part of the United States. The Blessed School District was the pseudonym that was used throughout the study to maintain the confidentiality of the district. During the 2010-2011 school year, the Blessed School District included 28 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, and 7 high schools. The total
student population was 39,901 of which approximately 18.1% of the students were receiving special education services. The district employed 2,156 full time employees, of which 779 employees worked at the elementary level. Demographically, the Blessed School District employed 62.9% European Americans, 29.8% African Americans, 2.9% Asian Americans, 4.4% Latino Americans, and 0.40% Native Americans. Only 19.2% of the Blessed School District’s teaching staff were male versus 80.8% of the staff that were female (district web site, 2010).

Selection of Participants
The participants for this phenomenological study consisted of four general education and four special education teachers who had taught or were currently teaching in an inclusion setting at one of the 28 elementary schools in the Blessed School District. According to Creswell (2007), criterion sampling works well for phenomenological studies because it is essential for all participants to have experienced the phenomenon that is under investigation. The criteria used for selecting participants for this study were as follows: (a) a general education or special education teacher who had taught or was currently teaching in an inclusion setting, (b) a general education or special education teacher who was currently teaching at one of the elementary schools in the Blessed School District, (c) a general education or special education teacher who had one or more years of experience teaching in an inclusion setting, and (d) a general education or special education teacher who was licensed as a teacher in the Blessed School District in his or her respective content area. To meet this criterion, the general education teacher must be licensed in elementary education, and the special education teacher must be licensed in special education. Eight participants who met all four criteria were invited to participate in this study. Mertens and McLaughlin (2004) suggested that the appropriate number of participants for phenomenological research is six, and Creswell (2007) suggested that 10 participants is adequate. For this study, a sample size of eight participants was sufficient to capture the significant experiences of the participants in an inclusion setting and how these learned experiences have shaped their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Interview Protocol
For phenomenological research, the researcher is often the sole person responsible for data collection and for the design of the instrument that will be used to collect the data. According to Hatch (2002), individual interviews are generally the principal source of data collection for phenomenological studies. Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggested the use of interview forms or conversational guidelines to help keep the “interview focused and on track” (p.147). Qualitative interviewing “explores experiences and uncovers meaningful structures which can be obtained from participants by designing interview questions that are open ended” (Hatch, 2002, p.86). Both initial and follow-up interviews were conducted for this study because, according to Weiss (1994), “interviewing is an especially important means for data collection because interviewing gives us a window to the past” (p. 1). By using interviews, a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants emerged.

The interview questions designed were based on the research questions and were related to the conceptual framework and the review of the research literature for this study, especially concerning the attitudes and beliefs of teachers about inclusion and their roles and responsibilities in an inclusion setting, as well as the their lived experiences while teaching in the inclusion setting. Questions for the initial interview were open ended and began with background questions related to the participant’s years of teaching experience. These introductory questions allowed participants to become acquainted with the interview process. Next, several descriptive questions were designed to encourage participants to provide detailed information about their lived experiences in the inclusion setting. Additionally, structured questions allowed data to be gathered that described participants’ understanding of the phenomenon of inclusion. Questions were designed to explore how the participants lived experiences shaped their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. Questions for the follow up interview were also opened ended and allowed the participants to share additional information regarding their daily lived experiences in an inclusion setting. The follow up questions also gave participants the opportunity to discuss any changes regarding their perceptions about inclusion.

Reflective Journal
The participant’s reflective journals were also aligned with the research questions and conceptual framework. The journal format encouraged participants to document their daily lived experiences in an inclusion setting and how those lived experiences shaped their attitudes and
beliefs about inclusion, possibly in an unobtrusive manner. The reflective journal also encouraged participants to express their feelings, ideas and insights regarding the phenomenon of inclusion.

**Key Findings**

The eight themes and three subthemes identified in the data analysis address the three research questions and are the basis for the key findings of this study. These findings emerged from the initial interviews, follow up interviews as well as the journal entries of the eight participants. In relation to Research Question 1, (What is the essence of the experiences and attitudes of general and special education teachers’ experiences and attitudes in relation to inclusion in classrooms?) three findings emerged.

The first finding is that even though the views on inclusion vary among general and special education teachers, the majority of the participants believed that inclusion provides equal educational opportunities for all students and that appropriate teaching methods are used in this model. However, four of the participants also believed that inclusion requires the expertise of special education teachers and a heterogeneous classroom. Only two participants indicated that inclusion strives to mainstream special needs students and that this model requires collaboration, factors that probably seemed obvious to the other participants.

The second finding is that the majority of the participants believed that general and special education teachers need to work collaboratively and to implement appropriate learning strategies for all students. Four of the eight participants believed that the role of teachers in an inclusion setting is to help students with special needs, but they also believed that the role of the special education teacher is often limited in this setting. The majority of the special education teachers believed that their role was limited in the inclusion setting because the general education teacher was often “territorial”, and the general education teachers lacked confidence in their ability to implement and differentiate traditional curriculum in an inclusion setting. Additionally, the majority of the general education teachers believed that the role of special education teachers was limited in their respective classrooms due to the excessive amount of paperwork and IEP meetings that the special education teachers had to attend on a weekly basis. Only two participants believed the role of teachers in an inclusion setting is to help students accept inclusion and to facilitate learning for all students.

The third finding is that both general education and special education teachers believed that general education teachers need more professional development about the inclusion model. This finding is significant in light of the fact that the participants did not agree on any other beliefs about the needs of general education teachers in relation to providing instruction in an inclusion setting. Therefore, the data indicates that general and special education teachers agree that additional professional development is the most significant need that general education teachers have in relation to providing instruction in an inclusion setting.

For Research Question 2, (How do these lived experiences impact attitudes and beliefs about inclusion?), three findings emerged. The first finding is that the majority of participants believed that their lived experiences with inclusion created positive attitudes about inclusion. Only two of the participants believed that the limited involvement of the special education teacher in the inclusion setting impacted their attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion in a negative way. In relation to why these inclusion experiences generated such positive attitudes, one participant commented that she enjoyed the learning activities in the inclusion classroom. Additionally, two participants noted that their positive experiences in inclusion related to working collaboratively with their teaching partner as well as working with open minded teachers. Finally, two participants noted that their experiences in inclusion were positive because administrators supported them.

The second finding was that in general participants held one of two different views about the influence of their experiences with inclusion on their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. Three of the participants believed that the influence of experience on their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion was limited. However, three participants also believed that the influence of experience on their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion was significant, particularly in relation to a better understanding of effective instructional strategies. In particular, they believed that inclusion offered a way to use appropriate teaching methods for students with disabilities so that they are able to be successful in the general education classroom.

A third finding was that experiences with inclusion influenced the implementation of inclusion in a number of ways. The majority of participants believed that experience in an inclusion setting provided an improved understanding of the challenges of this implementation as well as improved understanding of students with
disabilities. Only two participants believed that their inclusion experience created greater respect between general and special education teachers and improved confidence in working with students with disabilities. Only one participant believed that her experience in an inclusion setting resulted in increased participation from all stakeholders, and only one participant believed that her experience in an inclusion setting resulted in limited knowledge about how to implement inclusion.

For Research Question 3, (What are general and special education teachers’ beliefs about participating in the education of students with disabilities in inclusion settings?), two findings emerged from the data analysis. The first finding was that the majority of participants believed that administrative support is needed to educate students with disabilities in an inclusion setting. Additionally, two participants believed that harmonious relationships between general and special education teachers must be developed. Only, one participant believed that educating students with disabilities in the inclusion setting involved opportunities for team teaching, and only one participant believed that a teacher’s commitment to working in an inclusion setting improves as a result of this experience.

In relation to the implementation of inclusion, other participants believed that administrators needed training in relation to the implementation of inclusion. Other participants believed that administrators needed to provide smaller inclusion classes and collaborative planning and teaching time for both special and general education teachers as well as support for an inclusion pull-out model.

The second finding is that the majority of participants believed that teachers who work in an inclusion setting need to create a positive work environment that aids in their effectiveness when working in this type of setting. Four participants believed that developing a good rapport with their teaching partner aids in being an effective teacher in the inclusion setting. Two participants believe that getting to know students with disabilities also aids in being an effective teacher in this setting. Finally, only one participant believed that having an open mind when working with students with disabilities aided in being an effective teacher in the inclusion setting.

In relation to this finding, teachers believed that specific strategies could be used to create a positive environment for inclusion. However, there was no agreement on which strategies should be used. One participant believed that the development of mutual respect between both teachers is important in creating a positive environment for inclusion. Other participants believed that creating an environment of trust, focusing on positive outcomes, believing that all students can learn, making teachers accountable for inclusion responsibilities, and understanding the inclusion model as well as the general education curriculum are strategies needed to create a positive environment for inclusion.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

The findings of this study are clearly grounded in the significance of this study in relation to practice in the field and future research. In relation to practice in the field, this study gave voice to eight general and special education teachers who shared their positive and negative experiences about working in an inclusion setting. Their voices revealed the importance of listening to both groups of teachers regarding their lived experiences with inclusion in order to provide a more balanced understanding of this phenomenon. In addition, professional development that demonstrates how to successfully implement various inclusion models may promote social change because general and special education teachers may feel more confident and prepared to teach students with disabilities in an inclusion setting. The creation of support groups for teachers who work in an inclusion setting may also promote positive social change because teachers may be more comfortable with sharing the challenges and rewards of teaching in this setting with other colleagues who teach in the inclusion setting. Future research on this topic may assist school districts in the creation and implementation of effective co-teaching models as well as create positions within school districts for teachers to become inclusion coaches at their schools.

Finally, these findings support positive social change because all of the participants strongly believed that with appropriate professional development, administrative support, and the development of mutual respect between general and special education teachers, inclusion can be successfully implemented. By supporting these beliefs, social change may occur as general education teachers may be more receptive to integrating students with disabilities into the general education classroom. Additionally, special education teachers may see their role in the inclusion setting as more than just a disciplinarian and paraprofessional, but that of a co-facilitator who shares equal responsibility in the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

**CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to explore the daily lived experiences of general and special education
teachers who had taught or who were currently teaching in the inclusion setting and how those lived experiences shaped their attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion. Findings from the study revealed that the participants encountered both positive and negative experiences in the inclusion setting. These experiences clearly impacted their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. In general, both general education teachers and special education teachers believed that administrative support, mutual respect, a positive work environment, and open minds towards inclusion, professional development opportunities, and knowledge of students with disabilities are all crucial components needed to successfully implement inclusion.

Inclusion is a phenomenon that continues to spark debate among teachers, administrators, and policymakers throughout the United States. Although this study was conducted on a small scale, the findings contribute to the existing body of research because current research reveals the successful implementation of inclusion can enhance social skills for both students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers as well as increase student achievement for students with disabilities (Pickard, 2009; Santoli, Sachs, Romey, 2008; Siller, 2008). These data may inspire local school divisions to create professional development opportunities related to effective inclusion practices. Additionally, school districts may be prompted to develop support groups for teachers who work in an inclusion setting. By providing support for general and special education teachers who work with students with disabilities in the inclusion setting, positive social change may occur as school districts strive to provide teachers with the appropriate resources they need to successfully educate students with disabilities in the traditional classroom environment.

While no one strategy or model can solve all the issues related to inclusion, the development and implementation of effective inclusion practices and teacher support should be explored in greater depth in order to improve the overall success of inclusion. This study reveals that the majority of general and special educators would be more receptive to integrating student with disabilities in the inclusion setting if they were properly trained and had the support of administration. In relation to special education teachers, the findings revealed they have a limited role in the implementation of inclusion as they were often viewed as paraprofessionals, disciplinarians and secretaries rather than individuals with education training and expertise in differentiating instruction for students with disabilities in the general education setting.

With such varying attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion, it is imperative that the voices of both general and special education teachers be heard so that the roles of general and special education teachers can be clarified and implementation of the inclusion model can be improved. In order for inclusion to be successful, it is critical that general education teachers feel prepared to educate students with disabilities by using a variety of instructional strategies that will allow them to be successful in the general education classroom. Additionally, special educators must view themselves as co-facilitators in the inclusion setting rather than auxiliary staff. The findings of this study also revealed that the success and or failure of inclusion hinges on the attitudes and beliefs of the educators who have dedicated their lives to ensuring that all students, regardless of their disabilities, receive a fair and appropriate education in their least restrictive environment.

Author Biography

Rinyka Allison, Ph.D., graduated from Walden University in 2011 with a Doctorate in Education, with a specialization in Special Education. She obtained her Masters in Special Education-Cross-Categorical from the University of Phoenix in 2006 and her Bachelor's in Social Work in 1998, from Austin Peay State University. For seven years she has taught special education at the elementary and secondary level grades 2-10 in both the inclusion and self-contained setting. Currently, Dr. Allison serves an Instructional Specialist for Virginia Beach City Public Schools, is a member of the Response to Student Needs Committee for her division, and is an adjunct faculty member in the college of education here at GCU. Dr. Allison can be contacted at rallison01@my.gcu.edu
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