

“Attitudes of University Students Toward Individuals with Exceptionalities and Suggestions for Change ”

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Who? and Why?

- Who
 - Team of professors from the Department of Psychology and the Department of Exceptionality Programs (Special Education and Deaf Education programs).
 - A majority of the ten-person team are involved in teaching an introductory course in special education that is made available to all students on the Bloomsburg University campus. Students are able to elect to take this course for diversity credits if they are not education majors. If they are education majors, the course is required.
- Why
 - What are the students’ attitudes toward inclusive education prior to beginning *Introduction to Exceptional Individuals?* 2

Research Questions

- Do attitudes toward inclusion differ by major (early childhood, elementary education, secondary education, special education, speech and language and other)?
- Are there significant correlations between student demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, personal experiences with exceptional individuals) and their attitude toward inclusion?

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Literature Review: Historical Perspective - Resounds in 2008

Reginald J. Jones (1984). *Attitudes and Attitude Change in Special Education: Theory and Practice*:

- “We can legislate physical access and the provision of educational opportunity as we have done, but we cannot legislate acceptance; and it should not be surprising to any informed observer that meaningful implementation of legislative acts will require that we give as much attention to attitudinal barriers as we have given to the elimination of barriers of physical access, barriers of employment access and barriers of education access” (p. vii).

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Lit Review: Attitudes toward inclusion can be influenced . . .

- Culture
- Staff roles
- Experience with inclusion
- Teacher gender
- Severity of the students’ disabling conditions
- Sensitivity training
- Pre-service special education courses – number completed
- Core subjects taught by teachers
- Perceived lack of experience and knowledge
- Teachers’ self-confidence
- Support services - availability
- Field experiences with students who have disabilities

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Research Overview

- Phase One: Quantitative Research
 - Survey administered during second week of class
 - Surveys scored and coded
 - Data entered into SPSS for analysis
 - Survey administered at the end of course
 - Quantitative data analyzed
- Phase Two: Qualitative Research
 - Personal belief statement assigned and collected at the end of course
 - Qualitative data analyzed

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Phase One

Research Question #1a:

What are the students' attitudes toward inclusive education prior to beginning *Introduction to Exceptional Individuals*?

Basic Demographics

- Gender (M = 89, F = 331)
- Age (18-22 = 309, 23-39 = 31)
- Credits completed
(0-30 = 240, 31-60 = 107, 61-90 = 46, 90+ = 28)
- Highest level of education
(HS = 403 Undergraduate degree = 18)

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Research Question #1b:

Are there significant correlations between university students' attitudes toward inclusive practices and . . .

7 questions within the survey:

- Familiarity variables
 - Training
 - Legislation
 - Confidence
 - Teaching
- Types of experiences with individuals with disabilities (i.e., babysitting, camp counselor)
- The frequency of these interactions
 - Time
 - Extent of interaction

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Research Question #2:

Are the student attitudes of majors enrolled in various disciplines (i.e. early childhood, elementary, secondary, or special education, non-education programs) similar or significantly different?

- Academic major (9 categories, plus 4 generated from "other")
 - Dual Special education (N = 58)

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Methodology: Participants

- 421 undergraduate students from Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania
- Ages 18-40+
- 12 sections of Introduction to Individuals with Exceptionalities
 - 7 instructors

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Materials

- Standardized course syllabus & common course management structure
- *Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale* (SACIE Scale)
 - Validity established by Loreman, Earle, Sharma, & Forlin, 2007
 - Reliability, Inter-Rater Reliability (BU faculty)
 - Script for administration of survey
 - Eight people trained in pairs to cross check coding using a master coding sheet
 - 9% of surveys randomly recoded (98% accuracy)

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Procedures

- Phase One: Research
 - Survey administered at the beginning of course
 - Surveys scored and coded
 - Data entered into SPSS for analysis
- Phase Two: Research
 - Survey administered at the end of course
 - Personal belief Statement assigned
 - Quantitative data analyzed
 - Qualitative data analyzed

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Results:

- Demographic information of significance was evaluated based on the factors of gender, age range, credits completed, highest level of education, and major.
- Analysis of variance (ANOVA) assessing the relationship of these basic demographic variables and total score indicated **significant effects** only for the category of **major**, $F(15, 341) = 2.123, p < .01$.

*Results answered Question 1 (a) & Question 2

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Frequency of Interactions

ANOVA on the two measures of **frequency of interactions** (time and extent of interactions) and total *SACIE Scale* score indicated:

- **Time measure** indicated if the students had interactions *daily, weekly, monthly, or very rarely* with a person with disabilities.
- With the **extent of interactions** item, students characterized their experience with individual having disabilities as *none or relatively limited, some-moderate amount, extensive-a close friend or family members has a disability, or I have a disability*.
- A **significant effect** was found for the **extent of interactions measure**, $F_{(3,405)} = 6.441, p < .001$. Mean scores increased with experience.
- Contrast coefficient analysis indicated students who reported *I have a disability myself* had higher total scores than students in other categories.

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Familiarity

ANOVA on the four **familiarity** variables compared to the total score indicated:

- **Training:** Students indicated their **level of training** relevant to the education of individuals with disabilities as *none, some, or high-at least 40 hours*
- **Legislation:** Items measured their **knowledge of legislation** and or policy as it pertained to individuals with disabilities
- **Confidence:** **Level of confidence** in teaching individuals with disabilities were rated as *none to very good*
- **Teaching:** **Level of experience teaching/tutoring** an individual with a disability was identified as *none, some, and high-at least 30 full days*.
- A significant effect was found for the level of **confidence** question, $F_{(4,80)} = 2.610, p = .035$.
- Contrast coefficient analysis indicated students with high confidence levels reported significantly higher positive attitudes on the *SACIE Scale* than students in other categories.

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Types of Experiences

ANOVA on the **types of experiences** with individuals with disabilities (i.e., babysitting, camp counselor, service clubs, helping friends, no experience, and other experiences) indicated:

- The only significant effect on types of experiences was found for babysitting, $F_{(1,384)} = 3.818, p = .051$.
- Students with **babysitting** experience ($M = 51.849, SD = 6.241$) reported higher total scores on the *SACIE* scale than students with no babysitting experience ($M = 49.286, SD = 5.452$).

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Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns

- The three factors of the scale significantly correlated with the total score.
- Within the factors of sentiments and concerns, all items correlated as expected. However,
 - item 2 (*I am grateful that I do not have a disability*), within the attitude factor did not correlate with scale
 - items 3 (*I feel comfortable around people with disabilities*)
 - Item 4 (*I am afraid to look a person with a disability straight in the face*)
 - Item 1 correlated negatively with scale (*It is rewarding when I am able to help people with disabilities*).

*As a result of these findings, a revised scale has been developed by Loreman et al that eliminated item 2. This revised scale will be used by this research team for further studies.

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Discussion:

- Results relating the *SACIE Scale* with the **student's major** were strong, demonstrating a relationship between student career choice and attitudes toward individuals with disability.
- The **strength of the relationship** between attitude and inclusive practices was hoped for but not necessarily expected.

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Discussion

- The connection may be due to the fact that individuals choosing the field of special education may already possess an **empathetic predisposition and sensitivity** for individuals with disabilities.
 - This could be seen as a logical conclusion since students who plan on working with individuals with disabilities should have a positive attitude regarding this population.

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Discussion

- An additional strong correlation existed with types of experience and comfort levels when students provided **babysitting** with individuals with disabilities.
- Volunteer group experiences cannot be assumed to be as valuable as one-on-one care.
 - It is unknown what variables within each of these types of experiences influenced the results.

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Discussion

- Self-reported disabilities provided the strongest relationship with the extent of experiences as these **students live with disabilities** on a daily basis.
 - There is not enough information to determine why this relationship is so strong, beyond the fact that if a student lives with a disability and is in an inclusive setting, such as a college classroom, then they may feel very positively about inclusive practices.

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Qualitative Research: Personal Belief Statements

- Students were required to write a . . .
 - personal belief statement regarding the inclusion of individuals with exceptionalities in public schools, community employment and neighborhoods.

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Qualitative Research Analysis

- Preliminary Analysis
 - Individual statements coded as
 - Agree – all statements were supportive
 - Disagree – all statements were nonsupportive
 - Neutral – conflicting statements
- Current Analysis
 - qualitative analysis using *HyperResearch*
 - Themes for support or nonsupport of inclusion
 - Link themes to survey results
 - Explore course elements that impact supportive attitudes

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Agree (n=277)

- “I believe that inclusion in public schools is extremely important. Inclusion of individuals with exceptionalities in public schools can promote acceptance of those individuals at an age when acceptance is needed most.”
- “I fully believe that a person with exceptionalities should be included in the neighborhood, no matter how severe their disability is. Interacting with their neighbors and friends from the neighborhood could help children with disabilities socially as well as emotionally....”
- “The acquisition of personal skills like communication, the ability to work with others, and listen and accept directions from someone is proficiencies that are not able to be gained in a non-inclusion setting.”

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Disagree (n=22)

- “I feel that having them in their separate classroom was the best way to go about educating them.... I think it was a great idea to make a special classroom for them to learn in, they received more attention and help from their teachers and ended up being able to get closer with the other students in the school because they were now only around for a short amount of time, which gave everyone less time to judge them.”
- “When it comes to employment, I can see it being hard on the employer when they have to decide to hire an individual with a disability. I do believe they have all the right for whatever job they pursue, but in some cases it can be too difficult for them. For example, a person in a wheelchair would not be too productive in an environment that involves a lot of lifting and moving.”

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Neutral (n=16)

- “If the child is able to learn well in a regular classroom setting, then let the child have that opportunity. But in extreme cases, the regular classroom may not be the best option for some students. For example, if a student has severe emotional and behavior disorders that would put the other students in danger, then this would be a case where inclusion isn't the best option.”
- “Inclusion is a topic that I have mixed feelings about. In a perfect world inclusion is an obviously optimal educational setting. Unfortunately there are many aspects of the practice of inclusion that are affected by our imperfect world..... An educational setting should be decided based on each child's individual case. Once the child is placed, he/she should be carefully observed over a period of time to determine if the proper placement has been made.”

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Limitations

- Convenience Sample (Bloomsburg University Students/Northeast Region of PA)
- Espoused beliefs may differ from actual beliefs
- Voluntary participation might limit number of negative attitudes
- Qualitative data confined by parameters in the writing assignment
- Beliefs and ethics held by instructors may impact developing perspectives

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Implications

- Research will provide recommendations to universities for developing quality coursework and effective instructional strategies
- Findings will provide a description of the impact of the Introductory course on attitudes
- Comparisons will reveal attitude variations
- Research will allow faculty to identify variables that impact attitudes

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Implications

- Five years of research should enable faculty to make comparisons of attitudes of pre-service teachers upon completion of the nine credits of coursework that will be required as a result of a new policy

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Future Research

- Is there a significant difference in students' attitudes toward inclusive education prior to and after the completion of the course, Introduction to Exceptional Individuals, at Bloomsburg University?
- What reasons or factors are stated in the students' essays (Personal Belief Statement on Inclusive Practices) to support their opinions and/or attitudes toward inclusion?
- Public vs private

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