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Longwood University

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Self-Perceptions of Special Education Students Within The Regular Classroom

Sean Rayner

Longwood College

This thesis was approved by

Dr. Patricia Whitfield:

Patricia R. Whitfield

Dr. Ruth Lyn Meese:

Ruth Lyn Meese

Dr. Rachel Mathews:

Rachel Mathews

Dr. Jennifer Apperson:

Jennifer Apperson

Date of Approval

December 14, 1995

Running head: Self-Perceptions

Abstract

This study was conducted to determine the self-perceptions of special education students within the regular education classroom. The subjects in this study consisted of 25 students from a mid Atlantic school system in Virginia. The subjects were high school students. The data were collected by using a questionnaire. The questionnaire included 18 closed ended or likert questions. The data were then analyzed qualitatively by descriptive statistics. The results showed that students with disabilities perceive their behavior to be the same in both the special education and the regular education classroom.

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First of all I would like to thank **God** for his mercy. I know that none of this would be possible without him. Thank you for bringing us through the smooth and the rough and for making me see that all people, all experiences and all actions are all expressions of you.

Mom you believed in me, when I didn't believe in myself, thanks for the confidence and for believing in my dreams. You are my friend and my foundation, you make life worth living. Thanks for all your help and love. I want to dedicate this to my biggest inspiration.

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Self-Perceptions Of Special Education Students Within The Regular Classroom.

The Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975 mandated the right of all students to an education in the least restrictive environment. Mainstreaming is the process of integrating students who are considered to have mild learning and/or behavior differences into classes of their peers without disabilities. Mainstreaming of students with mild disabilities can be successful if regular classroom teachers are able to modify or adapt their instruction to meet a wide range of students' needs. Most teachers feel that it is difficult for them to educate students within the current structure of education (Bogdan, 1983).

Mainstreaming has been, and remains , a highly debated topic. Most of the debate has been centered on whether mainstreaming works, as opposed to the value of mainstreaming as it relates to equality and justice. The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions students who are in a mainstream classroom for 20% of the day hold regarding their behavior.

Mainstreaming, Regular Education Initiative, And Inclusion.

Recent research suggests that educators, with proper training and resources, can successfully modify or adapt instructional practices to meet a wide range of students' needs by organizing individualized programming, cooperative activities, and adaptive learning

environments in regular classroom settings (Slavin, Leavey, & Madden 1984). When mainstreaming takes place, a variety of students with diverse learning characteristics can be academically and socially successful within the mainstream of regular education (Johnson & Johnson, 1981). As Gihool (1976) has noted, mainstreaming should not imply an integration of students defined as special into the mutual conditions of traditional regular education, but rather the mainstream itself should be designed to appreciate differences, celebrate differences, and adapt for those differences.

Recent research on mainstreaming suggested that students with disabilities actually received more instructional time in the regular class, while the amount of allocated time was remarkably low in the resource room. The result of a study by Calhoun and Elliot (1977) indicated that students with disabilities assigned to regular classrooms significantly outperformed those students assigned to segregated alternatives.

Rich and Ross (1989) addressed two questions concerning the amount of time individual students were in the classroom within the school day: (1) the amount of time allocated to learning tasks while in the classroom; and, (2) the amount of allocated time that was spent on a task. Data combined for all special education alternatives revealed that students were actually in the classroom 78.5% of the time (slightly more than four and one half hours). While in the classroom, they were allocated 65.2% of the time to be on learning tasks. Of the allocated hours, they were on task 64.4% of the time or 33% of the school day.

However, another study suggested that allocated time and time on task were

half hours). While in the classroom, they were allocated 65.2% of the time to be on learning tasks. Of the allocated hours, they were on task 64.4% of the time or 33% of the school day.

However, another study suggested that allocated time and time on task were significantly lower in special education classes. The special class, and to some extent the special school, displayed significantly less in-class time, allocated learning time, and time on tasks. This relatively ineffective use of learning time in the separate alternatives could have serious implications for the educational appropriateness of restrictive settings in the future. (Stainback & Stainback, 1985, p.145).

In the past few years, there have been many people who believe regular educators, rather than special educators, should take primary responsibility for students with disabilities. The advocates of this viewpoint are commonly called proponents of the Regular Education Initiative (REI). REI advocates have frequently suggested that special education has proven ineffective or of questionable worth (Biklen & Zollers, 1986). The REI movement supports the idea that the general education system assumes primary responsibility for all students in the public school. This responsibility includes identified disabled students and also those students who have special needs.

A change in the view of services for students with disabilities has occurred. Many advocates feel that the education of students with disabilities needs to move toward full inclusion. Full inclusion is viewed as a chance to increase the opportunities and span of time that students with disabilities are given to interact with peers and adults without

Teacher-Student Interaction

The regular education classroom has become a familiar classroom placement for students with disabilities. The boundaries between special and regular education have become more permeable. The approaches, research, and literature of both groups evidently have applicability for the education of students with mild disabilities in a mainstreamed setting (Larrivee, 1986).

Reith, Posgrove, and Semmel (1981) identified factors that have application for teachers of mainstreamed students. In this study, educators increasingly have investigated teachers' interactions with students to learn whether regular classrooms are effective learning environments for mildly handicapped children. Depending on the nature of the investigation, regular classes were found to be both conducive and non-conducive to learning for handicapped students. For example, Eder's (1981) examination of school learning environments reported that lower ability students were assigned by their teachers to groups and environments less conducive to learning.

Some studies have focused on educators' reports that regular classrooms teachers are unresponsive to students who do not learn easily. For example, Eder (1981) noted that teachers assigned students with disabilities to low-achieving study groups where task and academic expectations were minimal: thus, students were given inadequate academic resources. Other studies have shown that substantial time allocated for instruction and

high-impact teaching of students with learning disabilities was low in both special and regular classes (Eder, 1981, p 125).

An increasing interest has arisen in the argument of whether the general educational environment is, or can be, sufficient to meet the needs of students with disabilities. A great deal of research on both teacher effectiveness and applied behavior analysis has been conducted. Many of these studies were conducted to investigate teachers' interactions with students and to understand if regular classrooms are an effective learning environment for students with disabilities (Staub & Hunt, 1993, p. 42).

Recently , research has emerged that suggested that the more effective teachers are characterized by higher standards for students, lower tolerance for behavioral excesses, and resistance toward accepting students with disabilities into their classrooms (Gersten, Walker, & Darch, 1993). Such findings highlight an area of study that has been subject to little empirical investigation and has been all but ignored in recent literature.

Brady, Swank, and Taylor (1988) studied the teacher-student interactions in a middle school , mainstreamed, class. The results suggested that there are some significant differences between experimental and control teachers on a pre and post-contrast, and on a follow-up contrast. The study stated that some specific sets of academic questions were used with both sets of subjects. The results suggested that if teachers can continue to make improvements in both the regular and special education environments, positive consequences for students' academic performance can result (Brandy, 1988). Brandy (1988) stated that a combination of training content, active training format, and systematic

feedback seem to be responsible for these improvements.

Brady, Taylor, and Freiberg (1992) investigated a design to change teacher-student interaction on middle school social studies and science classes. The results showed significant differences between experimental and control teachers on a pre-post test. Differential effects on the science and social studies teachers were seen. They found that important changes in the teaching interactions of one group of science teachers were observed because of the teachers' effectiveness training. They suggest that the general education environment can become a sufficient environment of learning for students with disabilities.

Landrum (1992) examined teachers' standards and tolerance with respect to an interactional model of teacher-student relationships. He stated that the interactional model suggests that participants in some cases influence each other by implications of teacher characteristics compared with the mainstreaming of difficult-to-teach students. "In particular, the application of coercion theory to relationship between teachers and students suggests that just as mothers are often victims in coercive relationships with their problem children, teachers may also become victims of their students and the systems that hold them responsible for educating atypical learners." (Landrum, 1992, p. 135). The significance of emerging research on teachers' characteristics is still being discussed despite of the increasing attention that calls for reforms to focus on the issues surrounding the integration of students with disabilities into the regular education setting.

One of the most frequently cited studies that deals with teacher-student interaction

is also written by Landrum (1993). Landrum examined the idea that all teachers can or should be expected to adapt their regular education environment and accept responsibility for educating different learners. He examined the relationship between teachers and students with disabilities and formed the interaction transaction perspective, which focused on particular attention to teachers' attitudes, tolerance, limitations, and the different characteristics of students, whose skills and behavior are noticeably different from the norm.

Landrum suggested that the wisdom of placing students in classrooms with no regard for the match between teacher and student characteristics is doubtful at best. An example he gave is placing a hearing impaired student with a teacher that is trained in the area of visual impairment. This illustrated his idea that teachers are placed with students whom they are not trained to educate. Landrum felt that a match between teacher characteristics and students' behavioral and learning needs must be met for both parties to enjoy a reasonable opportunity to achieve success in a regular class setting.

Gunter, Kenton, and Jack (1993) examined the effects of negative reinforcement on student's and teacher behavior. Negative reinforcement strengthens behavior that results in the escape or avoidance of a stimulus. The authors argued that negative reinforcement is a factor in the academic interactions of students with disabilities and their teachers. The authors looked for other sources of aversive stimuli within academic interactions between teachers and students with disabilities. The researcher gave four recommendations. The first is that the teacher should be alert to the appropriateness of academic materials as the first line of intervention. Second, the teacher's rate of positive responses to students has to

be increased. Third, incorrect student response should be a key indicator that the student does not know the intended information. When an incorrect response is given, the teacher should immediately give the student the correct response. Finally, the teacher must be aware that his/her own behavior is shaped by his/her interactions with students. The researcher also suggested that these four steps be paired with classroom organization, contingencies of positive reinforcement, peer behavior, and family conditions.

Peer Interaction

Social interaction with peers is an important component of the socialization of all young children and eventually becomes a major influence in their lives as pointed out by Guralnick (1986). Peer interaction presents children with the chance to develop and practice communication skills through questions and comments. However, a study by Chadseyrush (1990) found that although high school students with disabilities attended an integrated school, only a few interactions occurred between them and their peers without disabilities. Chadseyrusch also found that those few interactions were observed at either a school site or a job setting. The interactions tended to be task-related rather than social interactions.

Many studies have documented the positive effects of peer interactions for students with disabilities. Results of these studies suggested that interactions with peers with disabilities may also benefit from the social development of a student without disabilities. Biklen, Corrigan, and Qucik (1989) found that participation with peers with disabilities enhanced the sensitivity of students without disabilities towards differences in general.

Staub and Hunt (1993) conducted a study that evaluated the effects of social interaction training on interactions between high school students without disabilities and their peers with severe disabilities. The results indicated that training increases the frequency of initiations of interactions directed from the students without disabilities toward their partners with disabilities. The researchers also found an increase in the proportion of interactions that were social in nature, with a resulting decrease in the frequency of task-related interactions, as well as an increase in targeted social behavior of the participants with severe disabilities. The researcher suggested that "when planning for reciprocal interactions to occur between students with and without disabilities, we must provide an effective, efficient training approach for enchainning their occurrence, and we must be prepared to follow through with our efforts" (Staub & Hunt, p. 55).

As many researchers have stated, mere placement of these students within a regular school context does not automatically result in increased social interaction between students with disabilities and those without. As Gresham (1982) suggested in a review, little evidence supports the notion that increased contact between the two groups of students in an integrated setting will result in either more positive attitudes toward students with disabilities or social acceptance of these students by their peers without disabilities. Given the results, students with mild disabilities often hold low social-status positions in regular classrooms. It is also acknowledged that these students display patterns of social behaviors that are different from those of their regular class peers (Gresham 1982).

Hoyson, Jamesian, Odom, and Strain (1985) demonstrated that effectiveness of

using peers as direct change agents , and discussed some associated limitations. In the study, the researchers sat in a school setting and directly prompted peers to initiate positive social interactions with disabled students. They used the peers to teach organized interaction as well as to assist in desired activities .

Sasso, Mitchell, and Struthers (1986) presented a study that focused on two different methods used to simplify the social integration of students with disabilities in the school setting. They specifically looked at the interactive values of peer tutoring and structured interaction activities on social initiations of their non-disabled peers towards students with disabilities. The results of this study revealed that the non-disabled students, signed initially to a tutoring phase, interacted at a far lower rate than did the students who had been exposed to the structured interactions. The researchers also stated that the data indicated that the programs studied will enhance the normalization process for students and youth with disabilities. The researchers also suggested " that peer tutoring carried out in highly structured one-to-one sessions did not affect the social initiations of the tutors, it can be argued that the artificial nature of the activity inhibited normalized relationship. That is, tutoring conducted outside of a discrete trial format with non-academic skills may achieve the desired results" (Sasso, Mitchell, & Struthers, 1986, p. 257.).

In integrated education, students can have many positive benefits for the social abilities of the students with disabilities. These benefits include increased rates of social responsiveness and increased numbers of social bids directed towards peers, as stated in a study done by Delquadri, Greenwood and Hall (1986).

Anita, Kreimeyar, and Elgredge (1994) studied the effects of two interventions on the peer social interactions of one hundred five students with and without disabilities. They found " that there was a positive peer interaction and the different interacted-activities intervention resulted in a greater gain in total positive peer interaction than the social status intervention" (Anita, Kreimeyar, & Eldredge, 1994, p. 263). The researcher suggested that intervention needs to be conducted in stable groups of children with and without disabilities over a lengthy period of time. Familiarity seems to be a big factor that influences peer interaction

It has been shown that teacher-student interaction and peer interaction both play an important part in the behavior of students with special needs. The purpose of this study is to see if special education students perceive their behavior to be better in the regular educational classroom than in the special education classroom.

Method

Subject

The subjects selected for this study were students identified to receive special education services in a public school in Virginia. Criteria for selection included: (A) The students must be between the ages of 14 and 21 (i.e., in middle or high school), (B) The students must be mainstreamed for at least 15% of the day, and (C) The students must be labeled as having either an emotional behavioral disorder, learning disability, or mental retardation by the school division.

The study took place in a mid-Atlantic suburban high school in the state of Virginia. All of the questionnaires were distributed either in a resource room or in a special education classroom.

Instrument

The questionnaire was developed by the researcher and reviewed by a panel that included faculty in the Psychology, Special Education, and Education departments at Longwood College and Hampden Sydney College. The questionnaire included 18 forced-choice or Likert scale items assessing students' perceptions of their behavior (see Appendix A)

Procedures

A letter of explanation and a copy of the questionnaire were sent to twenty randomly selected school divisions in the state of Virginia. (See Appendix B). Permission to conduct the study was obtained from only one school division.

Permission to survey the children was obtained from the parents/guardians . All subjects were assured that their participation was completely voluntary and all answers were to be confidential. No information identifying subjects, school, or school division would be disclosed (See Appendix C).

The researcher met the students at the beginning of each class. The teacher identified the researcher as a graduate student from Longwood College working on a thesis. The teacher then left the room. The researcher explained the questionnaire to the subjects and handed the questionnaire to each student. The researcher stayed in the room to answer any questions. Once the questionnaire was finished by all the students, the researcher went around the class and collected them all. The researcher extended his gratitude to the subjects and asked the teacher to return to the classroom. This procedure was repeated for all seven periods.

Results

The subjects of the study were 25 high school students identified by the school system as eligible for special education services. The students were diagnosed by certified school psychologists and met the state and federal standards for either mental retardation, learning disabilities, or emotional disorders. The students were enrolled in regular education classes for most of the day. The sample was made up of nineteen males and six females. There were fifteen whites, nine blacks, and one Asian student. The student's ages were from 15 to 19 years.

The results were interpreted using descriptive statistics. The results indicated that high school students with disabilities tend to have the same views of what their behaviors as students without disabilities. (see Table 1).

Fifty two percent of the students indicated that they liked being mainstreamed in the regular education class. Only twenty- eight percent said that they felt uncomfortable around students who are not in special education classes. Sixty percent of the students indicated that they believed the regular education teacher expected them to work harder in his/her class. Sixty -four percent of the students felt that the special education teacher made the worker easier for them. Only two percent of the students felt that they had to act like the other students in the regular education class; however, twenty eight percent of students agreed that the regular education student could recognize if they were a special educational student. Sixteen percent of the students questioned agree that if they act up in the regular

education class, the students will make fun of them. Twenty eight percent of the students questioned felt the other students would not like them if they act up all the time in the regular education class.

Only sixteen percent of the students indicated they felt they could get away with acting up in the special education classroom, because the teacher expected them to. The same percent of students felt it was easier to avoid working in the special education classroom because the teacher expected them to. Approximately one third (32%) of the students identified as special education students indicated that it is hard to make friends with students in the regular education class. Fifty-six percent of the same students agreed it was important to feel accepted by their regular education peers.

Sixty-four percent of the students questioned indicated they felt the special education teacher made the work easier for them. Only twenty- eight percent of the students agreed the regular education teacher made them feel like they can achieve anything. Forty percent of the students questioned indicated that some of the students in special education classes liked picking on the teacher. However, only twelve percent agreed it was all right to act up in the special education class if the other students were. Fifty-four percent of the students questioned indicated that they felt smarter in the regular education classroom than in the special education classroom. Only fifteen percent of the students indicated that they did not try to work hard in the special education classroom because they felt stupid.

A factorial design was used to analyze the data in this study. The groups were

divided into students who were mainstreamed for 50% or more of the day and students who were mainstreamed for 49% or less of the day. The researcher computed the mean for each group. The mean of the students mainstreamed for 50% or more of the day was 25; where as, the mean for the students who were mainstreamed less than 50% of the day was 15. The researcher then used a t-Test for independent samples. After calculating the mean, the obtained value was 2.56. The obtained value was than taken to the distribution table in the Educational Reseach book by Gay, 1992. The score was valid at the .05 level of significance.

The results indicated that the more the students were mainstreamed, the more positive his or her attitude is towards the classroom setting, the teacher, and his/her peers.

Discussion

This study was an initial attempt to demonstrate that special education students perceive their behavior in the regular education class as different than in the special education class. The results, however, did not substantiate this hypothesis. The students in this sample, as a whole, perceived their behavior to be the same in both the special education class and the regular education class. Evidently, both classroom settings are similarly structured or use the same behavioral modification techniques.

Since the sample size of this study was so small, the results may not generalize to the population at large. The results indicated that the longer a student is mainstreamed, the more positive his or her attitude is towards the classroom setting, the teacher, and his/her peers. It was also shown that the less students with disabilities are mainstreamed the more they tend to have trouble interacting with peers and teachers.

There are two limitations to this study. The first limitation of this study was the lack of school system support. There were twenty school systems that were selected for this study. However, there was only one school system that allowed the researcher to conduct the study. The second limitation of this study was the sample size. It is difficult to make general comments regarding a specific group when the sample size is so small.

This researcher feels that more research on the types of factors affecting students' perceptions and interactions in the school setting is needed.

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Appendix A
Students Questionnaire

Students Questionnaire

Part 1: Place a check on the appropriate line.

1. _____ Male _____ Female
2. What grade _____
3. I am Mainstreamed _____ of the day.

Part 11. Read each statement below and circle **one** number which represent your opinion. Use the following scale.

- 1--Strongly Agree
- 2--Agree
- 3--I Don't know
- 4--Disagree
- 5--Strongly disagree

1. I like being mainstreamed in regular classes. 1 2 3 4 5
2. I believe the regular education teacher expects me to work harder in his or her class. 1 2 3 4 5
3. I feel uncomfortable around students who aren't in special education classes. 1 2 3 4 5
4. I feel I have to act like other kids in the regular classes. 1 2 3 4 5
5. If I act up in the regular education class, the kids will make fun of me. 1 2 3 4 5
6. I feel that I can get away with acting up in the special education room, because the teacher expects me to . 1 2 3 4 5
7. I feel it's easier to get away with not doing my work in the special education room because the teacher doesn't expects me to. 1 2 3 4 5
8. It's hard to make friends with the kids in the regular education class if you don't act like them. 1 2 3 4 5
9. It's important to feel accepted by your regular education peers. 1 2 3 4 5
10. Regular education kids can recognize if you are a special education kid. 1 2 3 4 5
11. The special education teacher makes the work easier for me . 1 2 3 4 5
12. Some of the students in the special education class like to picking on the teacher. 1 2 3 4 5
13. I feel like a regular student when I'm in a regular education class. 1 2 3 4 5
14. I feel smarter in the regular education classroom. 1 2 3 4 5
15. I feel stupid in the special education classroom, so i don't try to work hard. 1 2 3 4 5
16. The kids won't like you if you act up all the time in the regular classroom. 1 2 3 4 5
17. The regular education teacher makes me feel like I can do anything. 1 2 3 4 5
18. It is OK to act up in the special education class if everyone else is. 1 2 3 4 5

Appendix B

School Participation Letter

To the Director Of research:

My name is Sean Rayner and I am a graduate special education student at Longwood College. I am currently involved in completing my thesis which involves self-perceptions of students who have disabilities in both the regular education and the special education classrooms. I am seeking permission to send questionnaire which deal with these types of disorders.

The school system and the students' names will remain confidential. This will be accomplished by asking for the school number population of students with disabilities and than picking every fifth number until twenty participants have been chosen. The questionnaire should take no longer than ten minutes for each child to complete.

Thank you for your assistance with this project. I will be contact with you in the near future concerning the questionnaire.

Sincerely
Sean Rayner

Appendix C

Parent Participation Letter

Dear Parent/Guardian

My name is Sean Rayner and I am a graduate special education student at Longwood College. I am currently completing my thesis which involves students' self-perceptions. In doing my research, it is necessary to do a questionnaire about students self-perceptions of behavior.

Your child has been suggested to participate in this study. The child's name and his/her school system will remain confidential. This will be done by giving each child a random number. Your child will only be noted in this thesis by hi/her number. There will be no descriptions of children or the school in the thesis.

Your child will be involved in this study by way of a questionnaire, which will have a list of questions regarding self-perceptions. After completing the questionnaire, the student will place the questionnaire in an envelope and drop it in a box, that will be placed in the front of the classroom.

Parental consent for this research study is strictly voluntary without undue influences or penalty. The parent signature below assumes that the child understands and agrees to participate cooperatively. If there are any questions or concerns about the questionnaire, please contact Sean Rayner at Longwood College (804-395-3940). Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely

Sean Rayner

student's name

Signatures of Parent/Guardian

Date

Table 1
Student Response Frequency

Student Response Frequency

Question Number	AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	MEAN
1.	52%	8%	40%	2.24
2.	60%	32%	8%	2.44
3.	28%	60%	12%	3.40
4.	2%	44%	34%	3.12
5.	16%	64%	20%	3.12
6.	16%	60%	24%	3.56
7.	16%	80%	4%	3.52
8.	32%	56%	12%	3.48
9.	56%	16%	28%	2.56
10.	28%	40%	32%	3.36
11.	64%	28%	8%	2.6
12.	40%	40%	20%	3.08
13.	56%	24%	16%	2.72
14.	44%	40%	16%	3.2
15.	16%	16%	28%	3.6
16.	28%	28%	24%	3.96
17.	28%	28%	24%	3.24
18.	12%	12%	66%	3.92