An examination of pre-service teachers' attributions for students with specific learning difficulties

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A B S T R A C T

One of the most important factors in the successful inclusion of students with specific learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms is the teacher. Despite strong support for inclusion, mainstream teachers still demonstrate mixed responses to the inclusion of certain students in the classrooms. Further, their attitudes towards inclusion seem to be formed during their initial training. The purpose of this research was to examine the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards students with specific learning difficulties by analyzing their attributional responses to hypothetical students. Participants included 205 pre-service teachers, and the results demonstrated that the pre-service teachers' attributional responses differed according to whether or not the hypothetical students had a specific learning difficulty. Their attributional responses were likely to have an unintended negative impact on students' attributions, self-efficacy and motivation. One implication of these findings is that pre-service teacher-training needs to include a focus on teachers' attitudes and behaviors in inclusive classrooms.

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1. Introduction

The principle of inclusive education is now well-established, due in large part to its promotion in global campaigns such as the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990), the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994), and the policy guidelines on inclusion in education (UNESCO, 2007). Inclusive education embraces different populations of children, but has most commonly been interpreted as the education of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Western countries, including the United Kingdom, have enshrined the inclusion of students within legislation, a trend that has gained momentum globally. Several authors have argued that teachers need knowledge of inclusive principles and practices along with positive attitudes for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities (Carroll, Forlin, & Jobling, 2003; Forlin, 2010). Given the relationships among the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of teachers, and the likelihood that teachers' practices are shaped by their attitudes — which may differ according to the type of special educational need — we were interested in understanding teachers' attitudes to students with specific learning difficulties. Further, we wanted to investigate the attitudes of pre-service teachers, who had undertaken a unit on inclusive education, from the perspective of attribution theory.

2. Literature review

2.1. Inclusion

While legislation and policies are critical prerequisites, research has consistently demonstrated that teachers are the key to successful inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). Teachers' knowledge, beliefs and attitudes have all been examined as potential factors influencing the implementation of inclusive educational practices. Researchers have argued that teachers need both theoretical and practical knowledge (Mittler, 1992), which has been reflected in the content of programs developed for pre-service teachers. However, knowledge and skills cannot be easily separated from teacher attitudes, which also need to form part of teacher training (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Carroll et al., 2003; Forlin, 2010). Indeed, some authors (e.g., Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010) critique the traditional focus on knowledge and technical skills in teacher training, and argue instead for a focus on self-reflection. While there is some debate as to the relative importance of attitudes, knowledge and skills for teachers in inclusive classrooms, the current research focuses on the attitudes of pre-service teachers who have had minimal exposure in their training to inclusive education.

Despite some evidence that teachers support inclusion in principle (de Boer et al., 2011), the research regarding teacher acceptance of inclusion is far from being unequivocal. Some researchers reported

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positive attitudes on the part of teachers to the principle of the inclusion of students with disabilities (Abbott, 2006; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Marshall, Ralph, & Palmer, 2002). Demonstrating the gap between principles and practice, however, other research has reported neutral or ambivalent attitudes and limited knowledge on the part of mainstream teachers (Engelbrecht, 2006; Ring, 2005; Walton, 2011). In a review of 26 empirical studies focused on teachers in mainstream primary schools, for example, de Boer and her colleagues reported that most teachers were neutral or negative in their attitudes towards inclusive education (de Boer et al., 2011).

Research has demonstrated that attitudes to inclusion are more positive among teachers who have contact with individuals with disabilities (Parasuram, 2006), although these results are found more consistently when the teacher has greater experience with inclusion (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Batsiou, Bebetsos, Panteli, & Antoniou, 2008; Brady & Woolfson, 2008; Malinen et al., 2013). Other research, however, has failed to find the same pattern (e.g., Woolfson & Brady, 2009). The conflicting results may be partially explained, according to Woolfson and Brady (2009), on whether teachers felt they had been successful in their previous classroom encounters with students having special educational needs. Further, research has consistently demonstrated that beginning teachers are more positive in their attitudes to inclusive education than are their more experienced counterparts (Alghazo & Naggar Gaad, 2004; Glaubman & Lifshitz, 2001). One possible explanation of this is that many pre-service teacher-training institutions now include some coursework on inclusive education, which more experienced teachers may not have received (Brady & Woolfson, 2008).

Research has generally demonstrated a link between teacher attitudes and training in inclusive practices (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Batsiou et al., 2008; Loreman, Forlin, & Sharma, 2007). In particular, long-term training has been associated with teachers demonstrating more positive attitudes (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). The research has demonstrated, for example, that teachers who have undertaken higher qualifications demonstrate more positive attitudes when compared to those with lower educational qualifications (Sharma, Ee, & Desai, 2003). Nevertheless, there are some studies that have not supported this positive relationship between training and teacher attitudes (Brady & Woolfson, 2008; Romi & Leyser, 2006).

Teacher attitudes have been found to vary according to the type of disability, with mild disabilities more readily accepted by teachers than more severe disabilities (Lifshitz, Glaubman, & Issawi, 2004; Lindsay, 2007), and emotional and behavioral issues more negatively received than physical or intellectual disabilities (Alghazo & Naggar Gaad, 2004; Avramidis et al., 2000; Glaubman & Lifshitz, 2001). Specific learning difficulties have also been reported as causing teachers most concern (Cook, 2001; Glaubman & Lifshitz, 2001).

There has been increasing interest recently on the relationship of teacher self-efficacy to teacher attitudes wherein teachers with higher self-efficacy held more positive attitudes towards inclusion (Leyser, Zeiger, & Romi, 2011; Malinen et al., 2013; Malinen, Savolainen, & Xu, 2012; Woolfolk Hoy & Spero, 2005; Woolfson & Brady, 2009). Of particular interest to our current research has been work that demonstrates the connection between teacher self-efficacy and the attributions that teachers make for students with special educational needs (Brady & Woolfson, 2008; Jordan, Glenn, & McGhie-Richmond, 2010; Woolfson & Brady, 2009). Given this relationship between teacher self-efficacy and attributional style among in-service teachers, we were interested in the attributions that pre-service teachers made for students with specific learning difficulties. Pre-service teachers are of interest because of their more favorable attitudes towards inclusive education (Alghazo & Naggar Gaad, 2004; Garmon, 2004) and because research has consistently demonstrated that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs — and, hence, their attributional styles — are formed early and are resilient against change in their subsequent careers (Berry, 2008; Ross & Bruce, 2007). For the purpose of this study, then, pre-service teachers' attitudes

towards students with SLD are examined through the attributions they make.

2.2. Attribution theory

Attribution theory provides the foundation for the current research examining pre-service teachers' attitudes to children with specific learning difficulties. Attributions refer to the conclusions drawn by individuals to explain why a behavior or event occurred (Weiner, 1986). According to Weiner (1979, 1985), academic performance may variously be attributed to the broad categories of ability, effort, task difficulty and luck.

Weiner argued that causal attributions could be organized into three dimensions: locus of causality, stability and controllability. Locus of causality indicates the source of the attribution as either internal or external to the individual. For example, a student who attributes an academic success to ability or personal effort is illustrative of internal locus of causality, while a student who attributes that success to chance factors is illustrative of external locus of causality. Stability indicates that the cause is persistent over time, such as when a student attributes academic success to ability. By contrast, the amount of effort the student expends is variable and, therefore, unstable. Controllability indicates the extent to which an individual is able to control the cause. To illustrate, students can determine the amount of effort they will exert on a task (controllable) but cannot so readily influence the difficulty level of the task (uncontrollable).

The attributions that students make with regard to these three dimensions influence their academic and emotional outcomes. Further, the attributions that teachers make about their students' performance will be reflected in their behaviors towards their students and, ultimately, may influence the students' outcomes (Weiner, 1979, 1986; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978). To illustrate, if a teacher attributes a student's failure to internal factors within the child, that teacher is less likely to modify instruction to assist the student (Jordan et al., 2010). The student, in turn, may feel guilt or shame and develop a lower self-esteem as a consequence (Weiner, 1979, 1986). The stability dimension influences the students' future expectations regarding performance such that when a teacher attributes failure to a stable factor, the student may not persist with classroom tasks (Weiner, 1979, 1986). Finally, the controllability dimension suggests that there can be unintended consequences for students if teachers' attributions communicate that their performance is outside their control. For example, if a teacher shows sympathy towards students after they fail a task, the students could perceive that the teacher believes they do not have the ability to succeed, thereby lowering the students' beliefs about themselves and their future performance (Clark, 1997). By contrast, if the teacher displays frustration or anger following students' failure, the students retain control (Clark & Artiles, 2000). The teachers' attributions, then, may influence the students' future motivation and learning strategies (Reyna & Weiner, 2001). Thus, while teachers may have the best intentions in offering students with disabilities sympathetic assistance or unwarranted praise for success on easy tasks, students may infer they have low ability and can expect future failure (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008; Woodcock & Vialle, 2010; 2011).

2.2.1. Attributions for students with specific learning difficulties

Students with specific learning difficulties (SLD) form the largest group of students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms (Lerner & Johns, 2009). Clark (1997) argued that teachers' attributions for students with SLD were likely to be internal, stable, and uncontrollable. For example, students with SLD were treated more sympathetically following failure than were their peers without SLD, and teachers generally expected the students with SLD to fail on future school tasks (Clark, 1997). Clark's research has been supported by research elsewhere (Georgiou, Christou, Stavrinides, & Panoura, 2002; Woodcock & Vialle, 2010; 2011), which demonstrates that teachers'