



The Supporting Effective Teaching (SET) project: The relationship of inclusive teaching practices to teachers' beliefs about disability and ability, and about their roles as teachers

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 August 2008

Received in revised form

16 January 2009

Accepted 17 March 2009

Keywords:

Teacher opinions

Teaching skills

Teacher effectiveness

Special needs students

Inclusive schools

Mainstreaming

Elementary

ABSTRACT

The Supporting Effective Teaching (SET) project consists of studies that examine the relationship between elementary general education teachers' beliefs about disability and ability and their roles in inclusive classrooms, and how these are related to teaching practices. Teaching effectiveness is operationally defined as multiple dimensions of teaching practices observed in inclusive classrooms. This paper examines previously reported and newly completed studies that investigate the characteristics of teachers in inclusive classroom settings, what they believe about their roles and responsibilities and about their students' learning, and how their beliefs relate to their teaching effectiveness with students both with and without disabilities.

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1. Introduction

Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, and Christensen (2006) claim that inclusive education is a far-reaching notion that concerns *all* students. They propose that inclusion focuses on the transformation of school cultures to 1) increase access (or presence) of all students (not only marginalized and vulnerable groups), 2) enhance the school personnel's and students' acceptance of all students, 3) maximize students' participation in various domains of activity, and 4) increase the achievement of all students.

In a study of 11,000 students in the United States, Blackorby et al. (2005) found that students with disabilities who spend more time in regular classrooms had higher scores on achievement tests, were absent less, and performed closer to grade level than their peers who were withdrawn for instruction. Overall, students with disabilities performed less well on achievement tests than those without disabilities. Yet, students with disabilities

in inclusive settings outperformed their segregated peers with disabilities. In Canada, Demeris, Childs, and Jordan (2007) reported that the number of students included in Grade 3 classrooms, and class size had no negative influence on the provincial test achievement scores of the students without disabilities, and may indeed have contributed to a slight increase in scores on reading and mathematics.

At face value, the success of inclusive education would seem to be inevitable. However the notion of inclusion has been poorly accepted in the schools. Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) found that two thirds of teachers favour inclusion in principle, but less than one third believe that inclusion can be successful with the resources available to them. Teachers' ambivalence about inclusion increases as they become more concerned with teaching subject matter, as the stakes for student achievement become more prominent in secondary schools (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Ainscow (1999) and Gibbs (2007) notes that teachers' views about inclusion may depend in part on the social learning processes within the school.

One issue is that the inclusion initiative may potentially be in conflict with policy initiatives that aim to identify teacher effectiveness and teaching quality in terms of student academic outcomes (Florian & Rouse, 2001; Kelchtermans, 2005). In both the

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United States and Canada, work on the quality of teaching in regular classrooms, and how instructional quality affects student achievement has in part been driven by the focus on school improvement premised on large-scale assessment that is used to hold teachers and schools accountable for student achievement. In both countries a strong move toward local or school system-level accountability has occurred in the last 20 years with the introduction of state- and province-wide testing of students at various grade levels, and the allocation of resources tied to the achievement outcomes of such “high-stakes” assessments (McLaughlin & Jordan, 2005; McLaughlin & Rouse, 2000). Tensions have arisen as a result of the limitations that the school improvement initiative has placed on the definition of teacher quality at the expense of other valued student outcomes such as inclusion. Teacher quality has become narrowly interpreted (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005), a view of teacher quality that has ignored the value of teaching students who would otherwise become disenfranchised, such as those with disabilities. In the terms used by Artiles et al. (2006) to define inclusive education, cited above, only the fourth criterion, student achievement, is valued as an educational outcome.

Teachers may be faced with apparently disparate messages about inclusive education. On the one hand they are told that they are to meet teaching quality objectives by raising class averages in student achievement, while on the other hand told that they are to be responsible for diversifying instruction to meet a range of learner needs. It is no surprise therefore that teachers express ambivalence about including students with disabilities in their classes.

Despite the gloomy picture, there are exemplary schools that contribute to high levels of inclusion and also rate highly on overall student achievement. In the U.K., Dyson, Farrell, Polat, Hutcheson, and Gallannaugh (2004) found that schools that are effective in inclusion develop unique ways to adapt to their local communities. Dyson, Polat, and Farrell (2004) suggest that effective schools develop an “ecology of inclusion” (p. 14). Florian and Rouse (2001) note that when schools have access to a variety of supports and teaching strategies they can be effective both in inclusion and in sustaining high levels of student achievement.

In considering how to help educational systems become more inclusive, the nature of teachers’ beliefs and how beliefs relate to their consequent actions need to be understood (Gibbs, 2007). How do teachers cope with competing professional demands and do their responses influence who they teach and how effective they are in meeting the range of student needs in their classrooms? What differences do they exhibit in their beliefs about their roles and responsibilities for including students with disabilities, and for teaching students who are at risk of academic failure? In other words, what are their professional priorities for and beliefs about their roles in promoting learning in inclusive classrooms and how do these relate to how they practice?

2. The SET project

The Supporting Effective Teaching (SET) project commenced in 1992. Its purpose is to develop a model of teacher characteristics and school-related factors that predict the effectiveness of general education (regular) elementary classroom teachers’ practices with students with disabilities included in their classrooms. In various publications the elements of the model have been explored (Jordan & Stanovich, 2001, 2003, 2004; McGhie-Richmond, Underwood, & Jordan, 2007; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998, 2002, 2004). Four constructs are central to the model: (1) teachers’ beliefs about disability and their roles and responsibilities for students with disabilities; (2) teachers’ practices in core subjects in their classrooms; (3) their practices in accommodating students with

disabilities and those at risk of school failure; and (4) the influence of the school norm, that is, the collective beliefs or prevailing ethos of the administrators and staff in the school about their roles with and responsibilities for all students.

In the SET project, teaching effectiveness is operationally defined by teachers’ scores on the Classroom Observation Scale (COS; Stanovich, 1994; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998), a scale derived from the synthesis of effective teaching skills reported by Englert, Tarrant, and Mariage (1992). The COS contains criteria for rating teachers on three groups of teaching characteristics as delivered to the class as a whole: time management, classroom management and lesson presentation and delivery (Appendix A). A discriminant functions analysis of the 32 items in the COS revealed that 5 items discriminate more from less effective teachers, resulting in a factor that indicates the teachers’ engagement of learners (McGhie-Richmond et al., 2007). The COS also contains observational ratings of the extent and quality of lesson-related interactions between the teacher and two or more students who are designated as having a disability or are nominated by the teacher to be at risk of failure. Thus the operational definition of teaching effectiveness in this project is multi-dimensional. It includes a range of teaching skills identified as being effective in general education classrooms (Englert et al.’s., 1992 synthesis, the student engagement factor), as well as measures of the length and type of instructional interactions between the teacher and students both with and without disabilities and those at risk in the classroom.

3. Research questions

The main purpose of this paper is to present the findings of the SET research program. Rather than follow a standard reporting format, a series of research questions will be addressed from the results of various studies:

1. Are teachers who are effective overall with all their students also the most effective in including students with disabilities and those at risk in their general education classrooms?
2. Do teachers differ in what they believe about disabilities and their roles with and their responsibilities for their students with disabilities? If so, are differences in such beliefs related to a larger set of epistemological beliefs about the nature of ability and how children learn?
3. Are differences in teachers’ epistemological belief structures reflected in how they practice in inclusive settings? Is any difference reflected both in their observed practices, and in their self-reported instructional preferences?
4. How are differences in the beliefs and practices of teachers reflected in the opportunity to learn provided to students with disabilities and students at risk in inclusive classrooms?
5. What are the implications of the project’s findings for guiding the development of effective inclusive practices, such as influencing teachers’ beliefs about the nature of ability and disability, and their roles and responsibilities in teaching students with diverse needs?

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This is perhaps the most difficult question to address, because, as noted above, teaching effectiveness can be measured through achievement gains in non-disabled students, but is more difficult to determine for students with disabilities and those who are underachieving. The student outcomes question was addressed in the SET project in several studies.

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