

Chapter 1

Introduction

The intent of this study was to explore how general elementary educators learned to teach the wide heterogeneity of students in inclusive classrooms. In addition, this study reviewed previous research that explored general elementary education teachers' perceptions of inclusive education. Analyzing such knowledge provided insight into what information is known in this area of inquiry and indicated what could be learned from conducting this study.

Since the reauthorization of IDEA (PL 94-142), there have been substantial efforts to educate students with disabilities within general education classrooms (Hamill, Jantzen, & Bargerhuff, 1997). The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs predicted that, by the year 2000-01, half of all students identified with disabilities would be educated in general education classrooms 80 % of the day or more (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Many general education teachers of elementary school age children are the first to work with and evaluate students who are later identified as requiring special education services (Smith & Smith, 2000). Evaluating academic development at this early age is critical to students' overall success in school. During early observations, teachers often formulate initial ideas for the educational goals of students with disabilities. Individualized educational goals become the framework for curricular programs for students with disabilities. Appropriate individualized educational goals are a significant component of schooling and overall success for students with disabilities (Salend, 1994).

One of the obstacles that general education teachers face when students with disabilities are placed in their classrooms is lack of training. In a synthesis of information provided by nearly 6,500 general elementary educators representing areas throughout the United States, Canada and Australia, only one third of the teachers reported that they believed they had sufficient training necessary for teaching in inclusive classrooms (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Research has indicated that general teacher preparation programs have not provided instruction for teachers to know how to educate students with and without disabilities in one classroom. Teacher preparation programs have traditionally been separated into two categorical fields (Buell, Hallam, & Gamel-McCormick, 1999). General education programs have prepared teachers to teach children without disabilities while special education programs have prepared teachers to teach children with disabilities. Historically, both preparation programs have had their own curricular goals and pedagogical beliefs (Buell, Hallam, & McCormick, 1999; Pugach & Johnson, 1995). General education preparation goals are considered quite unlike the individualized skill-focused goals of special education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). Teacher preparation programs typically teach general educators to focus on group-oriented goals and to understand the dynamics related between individuals and group processes. Special educators are taught to teach students individually (Smith & Smith, 2000, p. 172). The contrast of "group vs. individual orientation" is apparent between general and special education preparation programs (Smith & Smith, 2000, p. 172).

Many special education programs have been developed because general education classrooms have been found to be inadequate for the learning needs of children with disabilities (Buell, Hallam, & Gamel-McCormick, 1999). Because teacher preparation

programs differ in such ways, there is often a deficiency in providing necessary information to general education teachers in training. Lacking specific information regarding handicapping conditions and learning theories associated with disabilities can be problematic for teachers who are later assigned to educate students in inclusive settings. A national study conducted by Lyon, Vaassen, and Toomey (1989) suggested that nearly 80% of general education teachers believed that their teacher certification preparation programs left them unprepared to teach students with a wide range of academic needs (Villa, et al., 1996).

There have been many calls to end the separation of general education and special education teaching models so that students with disabilities can learn alongside their non-disabled peers (Hamill, Jantzen, & Bargerhuff, 1999; Salend & Duhaney, 1999; Sapon-Shevin, 2000; Stainback & Stainback, 1996). However, many students with disabilities have been placed in general education classrooms with teachers who have not perceived themselves as being adequately prepared for such teaching assignments.

Background of the Problem

Arguments that support educating disabled students with their non-disabled peers are not new; many professional educators have proposed various models of inclusion throughout the past four decades (Guetzloe, 1999). What is currently problematic, however, is that many school systems are placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms without considering or providing the preparation needed by teachers (Guetzloe, 1999). To aid in the teacher preparation process, the United States Congress passed an amendment to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1997, mandating that general education and special education teachers work together to create

individualized education programs for students with disabilities (Buell, Hallam, & McCormick, 1999). Studies have revealed that this mandated collaboration is of concern to general educators because many teachers perceive themselves as lacking the abilities or understanding needed to address the many diverse needs of students with disabilities (DeBettencourt, 1999; York & Tundidor, 1995). General education teachers may enter collaborative meetings with special educators without the knowledge needed to plan for and educate students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Studies have shown that inclusion can become problematic when general education teachers do not know enough about curricular adaptations necessary for disabled students, have not learned specific information about disabilities, and do not understand the fundamental principles of inclusion (DeBettencourt, 1999; Villa, Thousand, & Chapple, 1996; Wood, 1992).

Overall, studies have revealed that teachers generally have positive attitudes toward the theoretical conception of inclusion (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). However, studies have also indicated that attitudes become less positive as teachers consider accommodating students with more severe needs in classrooms with non-disabled students (Ricciato, 2000). Quantitative studies revealed that general educators believe they have not been formally trained to teach in inclusive classrooms (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Soodak, Podell, & Lehman, 1998). Yet, many general educators have been assigned to teach in classrooms that have included students with and without disabilities. What is not yet known is what specific knowledge teachers have acquired while teaching in inclusive classrooms and, perhaps more importantly, how they have learned that information. Therefore, this study examined the following research question:

How have general elementary educators who are currently teaching in inclusive settings perceived that they learned to teach the wide heterogeneity of students in their classrooms?

The first chapter of this dissertation has identified the purpose and significance of this study exploring how elementary educators have learned to teach to the wide heterogeneity of students in inclusive classrooms. The next chapter provides a review of literature and findings from previous studies that offer a foundation and bridge between what is currently known from previous research and this study's inquiry. The literature review includes the historical emergence of the definition of inclusion, what is known about general education teachers' overall attitudes of inclusion, and an overview of the research on teachers' perceived needs to teach in inclusive classrooms.