TEACHER'S ACCEPTANCE OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY

Daniela Dimitrova-Radojchikj, Natasha Chichevska-Jovanova
University Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Macedonia

Abstract. The success of inclusive education depends on the acceptance and the ability of teachers to facilitate a good learning environment for all students. The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' acceptance of students with disability in their classroom, and the factors that influenced such acceptances. Quantitative research was used to gather information from general education teachers. The sample consisted of 122 teachers at 6 schools. The study found that the school teachers irrespective of their age and experiences have similar scores on Diversity Acceptance Checklist (DAC) of students with disabilities.

Keywords: acceptance, teachers, students with disability, inclusive education

Introduction

The right to an inclusive education is articulated in both the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC)[1] and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability* (CRPD).[2] As a signatory to the CRC and CRPD Macedonia is obliged, under international human rights law, to respect, protect and fulfill the rights articulated within, including the right to inclusive education. Thus "to adopt appropriate legislative, administrative, budgetary, judicial, promotional, and other measures toward the full realization of the right" including provision of assistance and services as required to bring about inclusive education (Jonsson, 2007) This requires acting upon the recognition that "Inclusion is a right, not a special privilege for a selected few" (Kliewer, 1998). But, *what are inclusive policies in our country*? The Education act 2008 regulated the inclusion of students with disability in general schools. Namely, Article 51 states: "*Parents have the right to enroll their child with disability in general schools unless a special need of the child is such a nature that should follow the teaching in special schools*". Additionally, Article 42, paragraph 9 states: "*General school may employ special education teacher in the classroom with children with disability*". But, there is no clear precision of these two articles and it's generating a practical problems. In the first Article, it is not defined precisely who decides that the child should go to a general or special school, and in the

second Article, the word "*can*" often mean "*not to*" employ a special education teachers in the inclusive classroom. Case studies show that parents hire private special education teachers who work with their child at school (Dimitrova-Radojichikj & Chichevska-Jovanova, 2013). Therefore, it is essential, as soon as possible to establish rules for inclusive education in general schools, which will contain the obligatory functional assessment, development of individual education plans (IEP), make inclusive team in school and determine their tasks, etc.

Although inclusive education has not been fully implemented in our country, many teachers have experience with the inclusion of students with disability. Teaching children with disabilities in general classroom is a reality. As Skrtic et al. (1996) pointed out; inclusive education goes far beyond the physical placement of children with disabilities in general classrooms. Being physically present in a mainstream setting does not automatically result in inclusion (de Boer et al., 2011; McLeskey & Waldron, 2007). Inclusion involves all students having the right to be truly included, to actively participate with others in the learning experiences provided, to be valued as members of the school community and to have access to a system that delivers a quality education that is best suited to their unique competencies, skills and attributes (Ainscow, 2000; Farrell, 2000; Fisher et al., 2002). The inclusive classroom welcomes diversity and the wide range of student needs that accompany student's differences. Ferguson (2008) noted that inclusive practice is not easy because it attempts to make learning available - "to everybody, everywhere and all the time".

The research has found that through participation in inclusive education, teachers experience professional growth and increased personal satisfaction (Finke et al, 2009). Teachers have a critical role in creating classroom environments that encourage students to become active, self-motivated learners (Deemer, 2004). Indeed, the teacher's role to ensure students with disabilities to participate actively in the classroom is important for true inclusion. The goal of this paper is to determine the level of teachers' acceptance of students with disability in their classroom.

Method

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 122 teachers in Macedonia. The sample of teachers was recruited from six public general schools (for pupils from 5 to 14 years old).

Instruments

The Diversity Acceptance Checklist (DAC) of Students with Disabilities was administered to the participants. The instrument is a modified version of a questionnaire

originally constructed by Khalsa & Miyake (2006). This rating instrument measures teachers' acceptance of diversity in their classroom. The DAC contains 20 questions, for our research we used rated on a 4-point Likert scale – type rating scale with responses ranging from strongly disagree (0), to strongly agree (3). In addition to the DAC, a background instrument, developed by the author, requested information about gender, age, years of teaching experience, type of teacher (primary or secondary), previous teaching experiences with students with disabilities taught during the past years, and are there students with disability in their class this school year.

Procedures

Survey questions were distributed to teachers by the school principal or an assigned teacher during staff meetings. The entire questionnaire required about 15 minutes to complete. All responses were anonymous. The survey packet had three sections. It began with a cover letter describing the purpose of the study. The second section addressed general background information about teachers. The last section included the DAC.

Statistical analysis

The collected data is presented in tables and figures. Then, the scores for each question were recorded in a notebook. Afterwards, the scores were used with the SPSS software to calculate the mean and standard deviation for each variable as well as to perform independent sample t-test. For statistically significant difference, the difference of level of $p<0.05$ was applied.

Results

Description of the sample

The number of secondary teachers ($n = 69$) was greater than the number of primary teachers ($n = 53$). Of the 122 participants, females represented 82.2% ($n = 101$) of the sample. The mean age of the respondents was 40.06 years ($SD = 8.71$), with a range of 25–59 years. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 1 to 36 years. The mean years of experience was 13.06 ($SD = 9.97$). Only 22.9% of the respondents ($n = 28$) reported that they don't have previous teaching experience with students with disabilities. This school year, 45.1% ($n = 55$) of the teachers don't have students with disability in their classroom.

Analysis of teachers' acceptances

On the first question from the DAC: *Do I see a student with special needs as an individual with disabilities or as a disabled individual,* only 1 secondary teacher (0.8%) sees the student with special needs as a disabled individual, not as an individual with

disabilities. The mean scores of the other 19 questions are presented in Table 1. They are not significantly different from the mean (t = 0.012; df=18; p > .05). But, the results of this study showed that the lowest mean scores are on the third and the sixteenth question from the DAC. So, the teachers' don't feel comfortable communicating with the parents of students with disability (M=0.96) and interacting with the students with mental and physical disability (M=1.34).

The independent t-test was conducted to find the mean and to compare the DAC of teachers with teaching experience (n=98) and without teaching experience (n=24) with pupils with disability. Table 2 shows the general mean score for teachers' with teaching experience which was 2.09 and that of teachers' without teaching expiries which was 2.12. The results imply that both teachers, with or without teaching experience, have similar score on the DAC. The standard deviation for teachers' with teaching experience was 0.56 and that of the teachers without teaching experience was 0.43. This implies that teachers with teaching experience were little more homogeneous in their answers while teachers without teaching experience had more diversity in their frequency of reported of Diversity Acceptance Checklist of students with disabilities. The mean difference in the DAC between teachers with and without experience was no significant (t = -0.067, df=36, p >.05).

Table 1. Attitude toward acceptance

Items	SV	SD	Min	Max
2. Do I try to support individual capabilities and adapt to students' needs?	2.65	0.55	1	3
3. Am I comfortable in the interaction with students with mental and physical disabilities?	1.34	1.04	0	3
4. Do I assist students in communicating their thoughts and feelings in alternative ways (e.g., drawing, sign language, communication board, etc.)?	2.69	0.60	0	3
5. Do I attempt to determine students' diverse learning styles and teach with them in mind?	2.64	0.52	2	3
6. Do I use a variety of instructional strategies that encourage group work (e.g., cooperative groups, learning buddies, peer reading, etc.)?	2.18	0.48	1	3
7. Do I understand where, when, and how to offer support to a student with special needs?	1.97	0.77	0	3

8. Do I know where to start in the process of choosing appropriate adaptations and modifications to classroom activities, curriculum, and materials?	1.59	1.00	0	3
9. Is my classroom set up to be responsive to a variety of instructional and behavioral needs?	1.77	1.00	0	3
10. Do I adjust the physical arrangement of the room for students with disabilities?	1.99	1.01	0	3
11. Do I try to use a variety of assessment procedures for all students (e.g., oral testing, contract grading, point systems, pass/fail, etc.)?	2.38	0.69	0	3
12. Do I set up student conferences to provide one-to-one feedback?	1.42	0.77	0	3
13. Do I view students with special needs as "my" students?	2.76	0.69	0	3
14. Do I use encouragement more than reprimands?	2.93	0.42	0	3
15. Do I use alternative approaches toward behavior management (e.g., active listening, planned ignoring, time-out, check lists, etc.)?	1.66	0.81	0	3
16. Do I feel comfortable communicating with parents of students with special needs?	0.96	1.11	0	3
17. Am I comfortable with support services provided in my classroom?	1.51	1.05	0	3
18. Am I comfortable with team collaboration (co-teaching, co-planning, etc.)?	2.38	0.76	0	3
19. Do I see my responsibility as a "teacher" as one who facilitates the learning process of all students who enter my classroom?	2.45	0.80	0	
20. Do I trust the administration to give me adequate support?	2.66	0.65	0	3

Table 2. Previous teaching experience

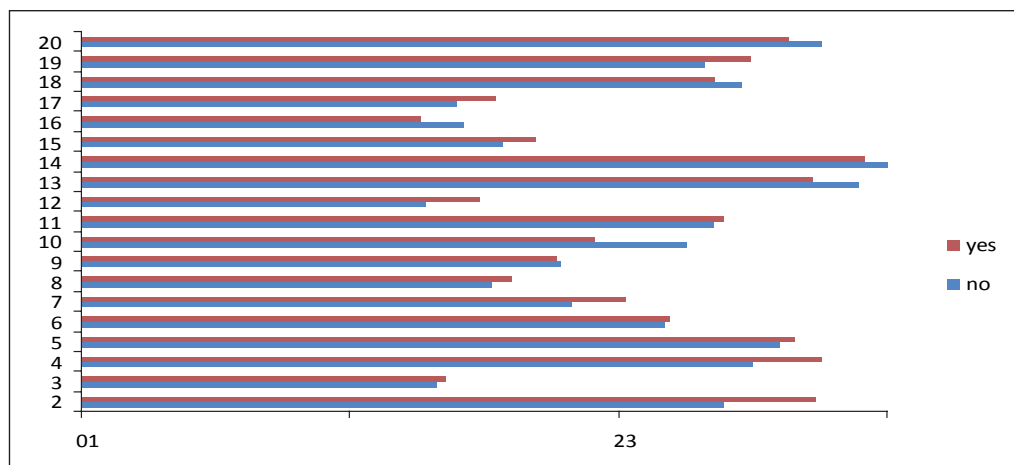| Previous teaching experience	N	SV	SD	t	df	p
Yes	94 (77.1%)	2.09	0.56	-0.1914	36	> .05
No	28 (22.9%)	2.12	0.54			

Fig. 1. Distribution of average points about acceptations' of
teachers according to experience

It has been determined that there is only a significant difference between the average points on the second, fourth and sixteenth question of the DAC towards teachers with and without experience. In other words, attitudes towards "*trying to support individual capabilities and adapt to students' needs*" (t=2.933, df=120, p=.048), "*assisting students in communicating their thoughts and feelings in alternative ways*" (t=1.995, df=120, p=.004) and "*feeling comfortable communicating with parents of students with special needs*" (t=2.567, df=119, p=.011) were significant better in teachers who had previous experience with students with disability.

Table 3. Age distribution

Age	N	SV	SD	t	df	p
< 39	55 (45.1%)	2.10	0.54	0.042	36	> .05
> 40	67 (54.9%)	2.09	0.61			

Table 3 reveals that the total sample of teachers who were <39 years old is 55 (45.1%) and 67 (54.9%) were >40 years old. The mean age of the younger teachers was 33.05 years (*SD* = 3.95) with working experience average 5.56 years (SD=4.42), and the mean age of the older teachers was 47.37 years (SD=6.29) with working experience average 19.22 years (SD=9.00). The t-values for significance of difference between general mean values of DAC of younger and older teachers are not significant at .05 levels.
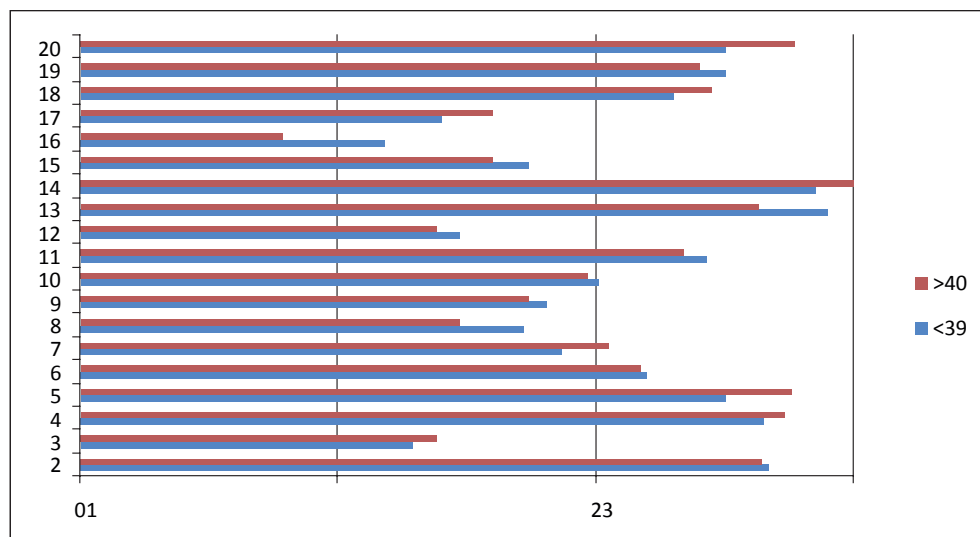
Fig. 2. Distribution of average points about acceptations' of teachers according to age

The result in Fig. 2 indicates that there is a statistical difference between younger and older teachers' acceptations on fifth, thirteenth and twentieth question. Namely, on the fifth question: *"Do I attempt to determine students' diverse learning styles and teach with them in mind"* (t=2.686, df=120, p=.008) and the twentieth question: "*Do I trust the administration to give me adequate support"* (t=2.088, df=119, p=.03) question, older teacher have better mean score. But, on the thirteenth question: "*Do I view students with special needs as my students*", the mean scores were statistically significant at younger teachers (t=2.181, df=119, p=.03).

Discussion

Teachers are crucial in determining what happens in the classrooms and they are those who would argue that the development of more inclusive classrooms requires teachers to cater for different student learning needs through modification or differentiation of the curriculum (Florian, 2012). Many teachers reported that they did not think that they could teach such children, but their confidence and repertoire of teaching strategies developed over time. This would suggest that by 'just doing it' teachers are capable of developing knowledge and positive attitudes to inclusion.

Based on the findings of this study, it could be inferred that the majority of teachers try to support individual capabilities and make some adaptations to students' needs, and

use a variety of assessment procedures for all students. But they noticed that don't feel comfortable in interaction with students with mental and physical disabilities, and in the communication with parents of students with disability. The result also indicates that teachers are not happy with supporting services provided in the classroom.

Teachers must be aware of the different learning disabilities and how they affect a person's ability to learn. Teachers who help children understand and discuss differences help create an educational environment that supports empathy for all individuals. Accepting diverse learning styles of students will help create a learning environment that will erase labels and focus on individual talents as well as group cohesiveness. Our result indicates that teachers are trying to determine students' divers learning styles. In the same vein, the findings also showed that older teachers have statistical better mean score than the younger teachers.

Some research studies assert that teachers with more experience teaching students with disabilities in their classes show more favorable attitudes toward inclusion (Leyser et al., 1994; Bender et al, 1995; LeRoy & Simpson, 1996), while increased knowledge and experience about inclusive practices may also promote positive attitudes (Shoho et al., 1997). Teaching experience is cited by several studies as having an influence on teachers' attitudes; Clough & Lindsay (1991) found that younger teachers and those with fewer years of experience have been found to be more supportive of inclusion. Teachers' attitudes appear to vary with their perceptions of the inclusion according to teaching experience; many studies regarding teaching experience indicated that younger teachers and those with fewer years of experience are more supportive of inclusion. However, although those studies indicated that younger teacher and those with fewer years of experience are more supportive of inclusion, other investigators have reported that teaching experience was not significantly related to teachers' studies (Avramidis et al., 2000). In our research, generally, teachers with and without experience, and also younger and older teachers have similar results on DAC.

Conclusion

Although there is a widespread support for inclusion at a philosophical level, there are some concerns that the policy of inclusion is difficult to implement because teachers are not sufficiently well prepared and supported to work in inclusive ways.

Inclusion requires teachers to accept the responsibility for creating schools in which all children can learn and feel they belong there. In this task, teachers are crucial because of the central role they play in promoting participation and reducing underachievement, particularly with children who are with disability. Inclusive learning community should foster collaboration, problem solving, self-directed learning and critical discourse (de Boer et al., 2011).

NOTES

1. http://www.unicef.org/crc/
2. https://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=150

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✉ **Ms. Daniela Dimitrova-Radojchic**
Ms. Natasha Chichevska-Jovanova
Faculty of Philosophy
Ss Cyril and Methodius University
Goce Delchev Blvd.,
1000 Skopje, Macedonia
E-mail: daniela@fzf.ukim.edu.mk
E-mail: natasac@fzf.ukim.edu.mk