



Perceptions of Social Justice and Attitudes toward Inclusive Education among Pre-Service Teachers in the USA: A Brief Report of an Exploratory Study



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Abstract

With the signing of the Education for All initiative of 2000, as well as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 2007 bolstering the call for inclusive education globally, research investigating attitudes toward inclusive education among education professionals has become exigent. This article reports the findings of an exploratory study which examined the correlation between and predictive validity of the perceptions of social justice and attitudes toward inclusive education for individuals with disabilities among 96 pre-service teachers at a school of education in the United States. Results suggested a significant positive correlation between affirmative perceptions of social justice and supportive attitudes toward inclusive education. Further, a hierarchical regression analysis revealed a small but significant level of predictive validity between perceived social justices on attitudes toward inclusive education. Implications and further directions for research are discussed.

Introduction

The movement toward inclusive education for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities is increasing steadily on a global level, as evidenced by the 21st century initiatives of Education for all as well as the UN Convention on Persons with Disabilities [1,2]. In order to ensure that the efforts toward more inclusive opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities is addressed with care and precision, increased attention in research must also be put forth in addition to policy and practice reforms. One area of potential research is the investigation of attitudes and perceptions of pre-service teachers, or teachers in training, toward inclusive education.

There are a number of means by which inclusive education is conceptualized in the literature, including time spent in the general education classroom and including students during times of academic strengths. While these pragmatic conceptions are common and sensible from a certain perspective, a potentially more important and socially relevant means is to conceptualize inclusive education in terms of social justice [1,3]. That is, including individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in general education classrooms with non-disabled peers is not just an educational policy reformation, but rather

a social justice policy reformation implemented to fulfill an individual's social and civil rights.

The elusive nature of measuring perceptions of social justice creates numerous challenges for researchers, causing many to pursue other more attainable avenues. For this reason, research on social justice in education is sparse. However, one's sense of morality, especially in terms of perception of social justice, is an imperative factor in the effectiveness and the longevity of practicing teachers, especially those who work with marginalized groups of any kind [4,5]. Furthermore, while there are

some very valuable qualitative inquiries into the nature of social justice across many disciplines, systematic quantitative inquiries are much less available. One reason for this sparsity is the difficulty in conceptualizing and quantifying social justice in a meaningful way. For the purpose of this paper, social justice will be conceptualized as working to elucidate social practices of domination, privilege, and oppression in which inequities are not addressed through redistribution of wealth or resources, but through the requirement of unjust processes to be scrutinized and transformed at a practicable social level [6].

Inclusive education is another element of 21st century schooling that is apt to present conceptual and methodological

challenges for research due to the multitude of definitions and practices available that have been constituted as “inclusive.” Further, measuring individual attitudes toward inclusive education can also be challenging due to a paucity of available instrumentation. However, if a global move toward inclusive education is to be successful, deepening and widening the understanding of both pre-service and in-service teacher attitudes is imperative, as logic dictates that if there is a lack of support for inclusive education, there is likely to be a lack of willing teachers to develop and improve upon inclusive-based practices. The current study aims to investigate the following questions:

- a. Do pre-service teachers display positive and supportive attitudes toward inclusive education?
- b. Do pre-service teachers display an affirmative perception of social justice?
- c. Is there a correlation between perceptions of social justice and attitudes toward inclusive education?
- d. Can perception of social justice be used as a predictor for positive attitudes toward inclusive education?

Method

Participants and setting

A sample of 96 pre-service teachers from a college-based teacher training program in the United States was used. All participants were enrolled in a degree preparation program leading to state-based teacher certification in both general education and Students with Disabilities, yielding two total certifications. Participants were recruited via printed advertisement and personal request after the researchers obtained permission from the college’s upper administration, school and department level administrators and chairpersons, as well as individual professors. The study also received full approval

Table 2: Distribution results.

	Frequency			
	f	%	Range	Mode
Attitudes toward Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES)			29-85	59
Low Support (16-42)	9	9.6		
Moderate Support (43-69)	74	76.9		
High Support (70-96)	13	13.5		
Eastern Teachers Disposition Index (ETDI)			69-90	90
90	37	39.4		
80-89	45	47.9		
<79	12	14		

Results

Do pre-service teachers display positive and supportive attitudes toward inclusive education?

The participants’ attitudes toward inclusive education was measured using the Attitudes toward Inclusive Education Scale

from the institution’s Institutional Review Board. Participants ranged in age from 20-50 years old, with 85% identified as being in their 20’s (age 20-29). Eighty-three percent of the participants were female; while 16% were male (1 participant did not identify gender). This demographic information is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics.

Gender	%
Male	16
Female	83
Age	%
20-29	85
30-50	15

Instrumentation

Perceptions of social justice were measured using the Perception of Purpose subscale of the Eastern Teacher Disposition Index (ETDI) [7], which employs a Likert-type rating system of 1-6 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). This subscale consisted of 15 questions which mirrored concepts of morality and social justice as delineated in the extant literature [4,5]. The maximum score for this subscale is 90, with higher ratings indicating a more affirmative perception of social justice. There is no established reliability score to date present in the literature. For the current sample, reliability analysis was calculated using Cronbach’s alpha and determined as high ($\alpha=0.872$). Attitudes toward and perceptions of inclusive education were measured by the Attitudes toward Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES) [8], a 16-item Likert-type scale from 1-6 (strongly disagree to strongly agree), with higher ratings indicating more positive attitudes. The maximum score for the ATIES is 96. Reliability for this scale has been established in the literature yielding Cronbach’s alpha scores as high as $\alpha=0.88$ [8-10]. For the current sample, reliability analysis using Cronbach’s alpha was calculated as high ($\alpha=0.83$).

(ATIES), which is a 16-item scale employing a Likert-type rating system of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), with a maximum score of 96. Participant scores indicated a range of 29-85, with a mode of 58. Frequency distributions indicated that 9 (9.6%) of the respondents indicated low support (16-42), 74

(76.9%) of the students indicated moderate support (43-69), and 13 (13.5%) indicated high support.

Do pre-service teachers display an affirmative perception of social justice?

Respondents affirmative perception of social justice was measured by the Perception of Purpose subscale of the Eastern Teachers Disposition Index, which is a 15-item questionnaire with a maximum score of 90. For the current sample, the range of scores was 69-90, with a mode of 90. Frequency distributions indicated that 37 (39.4%) of respondents indicated a score of 90, 45 (47.9%) indicated a score of 80-89, and 12 (14%) of respondents indicated a score of less than 79. Distribution results are illustrated in Table 2.

Is there a correlation between perceptions of social justice and attitudes toward inclusive education?

In order to begin to understand whether the concepts of social justice and attitudes toward inclusive education are related, Pearson correlations were run between the Perception of Purpose subscale of the ETDI and the ATIES score. Results

Table 4: Regression for attitudes toward inclusive education.

Source	r2	β	B	SS	df	MS	F
Perception of Purpose	0.047*	0.218	18.018	577.734	1	577.734	4.571

SS: Sum of Squares, MS: Mean square, * p<0.05

Discussion

This exploratory study sought to investigate pre service teachers’ affirmative perceptions of social justice and its connection to attitudes toward inclusive education. Overall, the pre service teachers in the sample indicated generally positive support for inclusive education, with the majority scoring in the moderate to high support range. This finding is similar to those reported in the extant literature [11-13]. Additionally, results indicated that the pre service teachers demonstrated generally affirmative perceptions of social justice. Because this area is not widely studied, it is unclear whether these results represent typical findings. Finally, statistical analyses indicated that there was a small but significant correlation and VAF for the Perception of Purpose score on the ATIES score, suggesting that it is possible that affirmative perceptions of social justice may predict positive attitudes toward inclusive education. These findings, too, lack precedent in the extant research.

Limitations

As this study was exploratory in nature, there are a number of limitations that must be considered. First and foremost, the sample utilized was somewhat small, and comprised members of the same teacher preparation program. Additionally, there were a disproportionate number of females in the sample. Therefore, it is unclear whether these findings are generalizable or idiosyncratic to the particular program from which the participants were drawn. Second, because the instrumentation

indicated that here was a small but significant correlation between the Perception of Purpose subscale score and ATIES score (r=0.218; p<0.05). Correlations are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation between ETDI and ATIES scores.

Measure	1	2
1-ETDI	1	0.218*
2-ATIES	0.218*	1

*p <0 .05

Can perception of social justice be used as a predictor for positive attitudes toward inclusive education?

Because the Perception of Purpose score correlated at a small but significant level with the ATIES score, its potential as a predictor variable was investigated by running a hierarchical regression analysis. This statistic was used to determine the variance accounted for (VAF) by the Perception of Purpose score on the ATIES. Results of the hierarchical regression analysis indicated that Perception of Purpose subscale score significantly accounted for approximately 4-5% (r2=0.047; p<0.05) of the variance of ATIES. Results of the hierarchical regression analysis are summarized in Table 4.

utilized were comprised of self-reported measures, it is not possible to verify that the information provided represented accurate or stable indications of perceptions of either perception of social justice or attitudes toward inclusive education. Both measures, however, did attain high reliability scores within the sample itself.

Suggestions for Future Research and Practical Applications

As an exploratory study, the main purpose of conducting this research was to explore potential relationships between variables in order to inform decision making for more robust and comprehensive future studies. It is suggested that future research endeavors utilize larger and more heterogeneous samples that are better representative of more diverse populations geographically and programmatically. Further research would also benefit from the use of a more sophisticated questionnaire implementing multiple measures for each variable. A more sophisticated questionnaire would likely provide a more comprehensive representation of each variable, and potentially better capture the essential elements of each concept.

In terms of practical applications, while the findings of the study must still be carefully contextualized within its scope and limitations, the results indicated that social justice may be as important a component to the development of both teacher attitudes and teacher practices as are pedagogical methodology

and content knowledge. As such, teacher programs can capitalize on such measures to assess whether and how concepts of social justice are addressed through coursework, and how support for inclusive educational practices can be infused within the whole of the teacher education program. Additionally, as measures become more reliable and sophisticated, teacher preparation programs can incorporate the use of periodic analyses that monitor potential change, growth, and development of individuals' development of affirmative perception of social justice and/or attitudes toward inclusive education. Finally, as the importance of data-based decision making and evidence-based practices is expanding, developing means of better measuring this important element of teacher quality both quantitatively and qualitatively is of utmost importance to teacher education programs. Continuing this type of research can contribute significantly to both screening and developmental assessment practices.

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