

Pre-service Teachers' Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education in Chongqing, China

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Abstract

This paper reports on pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education, concerns about inclusive education and sentiments toward individuals with disabilities in Chongqing, China. It uses the Sentiments Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale Revised (SCACIE-R), designed by Forlin, Earle, Loreman, & Sharma (2011), with 424 pre-service teachers involved. It was found that variables such as interaction with persons with disabilities and previous training had a significant impact on the participants' attitudes toward inclusive education. The implications for the further improvement of pre-service teacher education programs for inclusive education in China are briefly discussed.

Keywords: Pre-service teachers, Inclusive education, Sentiments, Attitudes, Concerns.

Introduction

The philosophies in relation to educating children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have changed dramatically since the 1950s, when a series of successive movements, such as the civil rights movement, as well as the normalization principle and mainstream movement, happened in Western countries. This led to a worldwide trend toward including children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities into general schools to learn together with their intact peers. A lot of countries have made efforts to design and implement policies toward inclusion, fostering the integration or inclusion of these students into mainstream environments. A key factor in successfully implementing the inclusive policy is related to the beliefs and attitudes of the mainstream teachers who carry the main responsibility for catering to special educational needs or individual differences. It has been stated that the mainstream teachers' acceptance of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, as well as their commitment to the government policy of inclusion, has a great impact on their actual practice regarding these students in the general classroom (Norwich, 1994; Avramindis & Norwich, 2002). Since the start of inclusion, a great number of research studies have been conducted to investigate mainstream teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, proving which ones have the greatest impact on the efficacy of the implementation of the inclusive policy. Recently, more and more researchers have concentrated on investigating pre-service teachers' attitudes and beliefs before and after training or programs relevant to inclusion, for the purpose of exploring how to improve the programs or training courses that prepare pre-service teachers. It was found that variables such as the length of training, gender, interaction with persons with disabilities, knowledge about local legislation, and level of training involved had a significant impact on the participants' attitudes toward inclusive education (Forlin, Earle, Loreman, & Sharma, 2011; Sharma, 2014; Thaver, Lim, & Liao, 2014).

In China, Learning in the Regular Classroom (LRC) was initiated in 1994, as a national movement in inclusive education to meet the expanding enrollment of students with SEN, which responds to the international trend of inclusion (Deng & Poon-Mcbrayer, 2004; Deng & Pei, 2009). Although there are differences between the Chinese LRC program and the Western inclusion movement, the LRC program has resulted in tremendous changes in China, which has gradually taken steps to move towards a harmonious society for all people, including those with disabilities. The expansion of the LRC program has been demonstrated by the increasing enrollment of school-aged children with SEN every year, which has broken the imperforation of special education in China (Xiao, 2005; Hua, 2003). In the LRC program, teachers are expected to take on important roles in catering for individual diversity, changing the one-size-for-all teaching model, strengthening interaction and cooperation with classmates, etc. The teachers' attitudes toward integration and inclusion have received unprecedented interest over

the past 20 years, being regarded as a key factor for successful inclusion (e.g., Peng, 2003, Deng, 2004).

However, there is a lack of research that investigates pre-service teachers' concerns and preparedness for teaching children with diverse needs in China. There is not any empirical evidence that could be provided to the teacher training institutions, as well as the policy makers, for the preparation of future teachers to face the challenge of inclusion and the crucial task of catering to diversity in the mainstream classroom. This study thus reports data collected prior to pre-service teachers having any exposure to university training in special education. The aims of this research study are to identify pre-service teachers' concerns, attitudes towards persons with disabilities, and levels of discomfort in interacting with people with a disability prior to involvement in training for inclusive education and to identify demographic variables that may account for the differences in attitudes.

1 Methodology

1.1 Participants

The participants were purposive sampling, including freshmen and sophomores at the Normal University in Chongqing, China. All the participants were preparing to be mainstream teachers of a general major in the primary phase. A total of 424 pre-service teachers participated in this study, with 68 males and 352 females (Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic information of the questionnaire sample (n = 424)

Variables	Category	Frequency	%
Academic Major	Primary/Elementary	416	98.11
	Special Education	8	1.89
Gender	Male	68	16.04
	Female	352	83.02
Age	< 25	421	99.29
	26–35	3	0.71
Highest qualification obtained	Secondary School	424	100.00
Interaction experience	Yes	225	53.07
	No	199	46.93

Variables	Category	Frequency	%
Training level	None	309	72.88
	Some	111	26.18
	High (> 40 hours)	4	0.95
Knowledge of local legislation	Very good	3	0.71
	Good	7	1.65
	Average	48	11.32
	Poor	139	32.78
	None	226	53.30
Confidence in teaching	Very high	15	3.54
	High	79	18.63
	Average	267	62.97
	Low	52	12.26
	Very low	11	2.59
Teaching experience	Nil	286	67.5
	Some	131	30.9
	High (>30 days)	7	1.6

1.2 Instrument

The Sentiments Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale Revised (SCACIE-R) (Forlin, Earle, Loreman, & Sharma, 2011) was used to collect the data. The traditional Chinese version of the SCACIE-R used in Hong Kong had been translated into a simplified Chinese version by three of the authors of this study, who have a good command of both Chinese and English. The simplified Chinese version was further adapted in terms of specific words and expressions according to the original version in English, for the purpose of fitting in with the language habits of people in mainland China. The SCACIE-R contained two parts. Part One referred to general demographic information; the pre-service teachers were asked to provide information on six variables, including age, gender, interaction with people with disabilities, previous training, knowledge of local legislation, and their level of confidence in their ability to teach students with disabilities. Part Two involved 15 items that investigated the pre-service teachers' sentiments, attitudes, and concerns regarding inclusive education. Each item on the SCACIE-R is rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree), 2 (agree), 3 (disagree), to 4 (strongly disagree).

1.3 Statistical Testing of Results

All the data were analyzed with SPSS 17.0, including descriptive analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and T-test and Analysis of Variance, with an inspection level of $\alpha = 0.05$, in order to perform a mean comparison between different groups.

1.4 Results

Of the total number of pre-service teachers nearly 84% were female ($n = 352$) and the rest male, with the majority being 25 years old ($n = 421$) or older. 53.3% of the pre-service teachers ($n = 226$) were not familiar with the local legal regulations or policy in relation to children with disabilities, 32.78% ($n = 139$) were slightly familiar, 11.32% ($n = 48$) understood it quite well, and only 2% ($n = 10$) were quite clear about it. 22.17% of the pre-service teachers ($n = 94$) had faith in their ability to educate students with disabilities, while 62.97% ($n = 267$) displayed a general level of faith.

Means and standard deviations for SACIE-R are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviation for SACIE-R ($n = 424$)

Category variable	Sentiments			Attitudes			Concerns		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender									
Male	68	2.58	0.43	68	2.61	0.43	68	2.32	0.41
Female	348	2.54	0.49	352	2.66	0.46	350	2.30	0.47
Interaction with people with disabilities									
Yes	223	2.61	0.46	225	2.70	0.43	223	2.32	0.45
No	197	2.48	2.70	199	2.61	0.48	199	2.29	0.47
Previous training									
None	306	2.52	0.47	309	2.66	0.45	308	2.27	0.45
Some	110	2.63	0.52	111	2.65	0.48	110	2.40	0.47
High > 40 hours	4	2.85	0.34	4	2.70	0.62	4	2.30	0.53
Knowledge of local legislation									
Very good	3	2.80	0.60	3	2.60	0.53	3	2.87	0.23
Good	7	2.34	0.38	7	2.34	0.32	7	2.34	0.32
Average	47	2.52	0.62	48	2.61	0.53	48	2.33	0.49
Poor	139	2.58	0.50	139	2.67	0.48	137	2.33	0.47
None	223	2.54	0.44	226	2.67	0.43	226	2.28	0.45

Category variable	Sentiments			Attitudes			Concerns		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Confidence in teaching									
Very high	15	2.60	0.55	15	2.80	0.71	15	2.41	0.57
High	79	2.71	0.51	79	2.66	0.53	78	2.35	0.47
Average	264	2.52	0.46	267	2.66	0.42	266	2.32	0.44
Low	51	2.44	0.43	52	2.64	0.42	52	2.17	0.45
Very low	11	2.62	0.62	11	2.45	0.44	11	2.13	0.71

Note: Mean response range 1 (strongly agree), 2 (agree), 3 (disagree), to 4 (strongly disagree).

An examination of Table 2 and Table 3 reveals that 53% of the pre-service teachers ($n = 225$) had interacted with people with disabilities, whilst 47% ($n = 199$) had no experience of interaction with people with disabilities.

Table 3

Impact of Demographic Variables on Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns

	Category variable	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Sentiments	Gender	0.58	0.56
	Area teaching	-1.71	0.09
	Interaction with people with disabilities	2.64	0.01*
Attitudes	Gender	-0.85	0.40
	Area teaching	-1.05	0.29
	Interaction with people with disabilities	2.00	0.04*
Concerns	Gender	0.25	0.80
	Area teaching	-2.30	0.02*
	Interaction with people with disabilities	0.77	0.44
	Variable	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Sentiments	Previous training	2.82	0.06
	Knowledge of local legislation	0.72	0.58
	Confidence	3.37	0.01*
Attitudes	Previous training	0.07	0.94
	Knowledge of local legislation	1.02	0.40
	Confidence	0.94	0.44
Concerns	Previous training	3.30	0.04*
	Knowledge of local legislation	1.44	0.22
	Confidence	2.00	0.09

Note: * $p < 0.05$. Mean response range 1 (strongly agree), 2 (agree), 3 (disagree), to 4 (strongly disagree).

The different interactive experiences of the pre-service teachers with people with disabilities had a significant impact on their sentiments and attitudes toward inclusive education ($P < 0.05$). Specifically, those pre-service teachers who possessed interactive experience with people with disabilities held relatively positive and active attitudes toward inclusive education. Moreover, there was an insignificant difference in concern on inclusive education between them with and without interactive experience with people with disabilities.

72.88% of the pre-service teachers ($n = 309$) did not have any training experience in relation to special education, and 26.18% ($n = 111$) had received some training. Whether they were trained in special education did not significantly affect their sentiments and attitudes toward inclusive education ($P > 0.05$). Those with experience of training in special education actually showed more concern about inclusive education than those without experience of training in special education.

2 Discussion

Understanding pre-service teachers' beliefs about inclusion is important as positive attitudes toward inclusion are amongst the strongest predictors of the success of the inclusion reforms (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin, 2010a). This study explored pre-service teachers' sentiments when engaging with children with disabilities, acceptance of learners with special needs, and concerns about implementing inclusion. Several demographic variables were found to have a significant impact on the pre-service teachers' sentiments, attitudes, and concerns about inclusive education, such as interaction with persons with disabilities and previous training. The results of this study indicated that the pre-service teachers' major concerns were their lack of skills to teach students with disabilities effectively and a lack of resources to accommodate individual differences.

In this study, the majority of participants indicated having poor or nil knowledge of legislation, a similar trend was observed for the confidence variable as a large majority of participants indicated having average or low level of confidence in teaching students with disabilities. The level of confidence was associated with beliefs about adopting inclusion in the classroom, but there was no significant difference in terms of attitudes toward including students with disabilities and concerns about inclusion. Prior experience and knowledge about students with disabilities were linked with more positive attitudes on the part of the pre-service teachers toward inclusion. Chambers (2011) reported that level of confidence and knowledge of legislation were positively and significantly correlated with attitudes towards including students with disabilities and conversely negatively correlated with concerns about inclusion. In China, the majority of pre-service teacher training programs for general education teachers do not include

any special education content. Teachers with limited prior interaction with individuals with disabilities are often found teaching these students. This lack of experience and expertise inevitably affects the quality of instruction in mainstream classrooms (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). It is necessary to extend beyond course content knowledge in order to produce positive attitudes of pre-service teachers.

The findings of this study have some important practical implications for preparing pre-service teachers to work in inclusive schools. It is particularly important that pre-service teachers' training must consider the sentiments, attitudes, and concerns of teachers in training and ensure that their courses provide the most appropriate preparation to enable them to be better prepared for inclusive education. Teacher training must provide a relevant pedagogy to enable pre-service teachers to develop appropriate dispositions and positive attitudes toward inclusive education. In future studies, we will report how teacher preparation programs impacted on pre-service teachers' dispositions towards inclusion, their sentiments about engaging with persons with disabilities, their attitudes towards inclusive education for students with disabilities, and their concerns about implementing inclusive practices.

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