Attitudes about Inclusion: Through the Lens of Practitioners and Novices

Janet R. DeSimone, Nancy S. Maldonado, & M. Victoria Rodriguez
Lehman College
The City University of New York

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of preservice and inservice education students, towards inclusion in school settings. Graduate students working on their New York State teacher certification in early childhood special education (n= 152) completed a survey, *Attitudes Toward Inclusion*. The survey addressed the following: attitudes towards various disabilities; perceptions of preparedness to modify instruction for students with disabilities and to meet their needs; willingness to include students with more severe disabilities in their classrooms; placement issues; and impact on general education students. The findings revealed three major themes: 1) inclusion for some students with special needs, as long as their disabilities are not severe; 2) social and learning benefits of inclusion; and 3) successful inclusion requires leadership and support. Recommendations for teacher preparation and program implementation are provided.

Keywords: early childhood, special education, teacher attitudes, inclusion

With the current increase of children beginning school with Individualized Education Programs (IEP) or Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP), it is imperative that students in early childhood teacher education programs be prepared for what they will encounter in their classrooms. Based on our experiences as teacher educators, we have come to notice that our preservice and inservice teachers appear to have limited views about inclusive education. During discussions in curriculum courses, where many students have expressed their confusion about inclusive education, it appears that the main concern for preservice teachers is how they will function as special education teachers in classrooms that have students from both general and special education; what their role will be; and whether or not they will receive adequate support. Inservice teachers, enrolled in general education classes, have expressed that inclusive education ignores children's individual needs and places too much pressure on them and administrators who are not certified in special education. Supporters of inclusion know that teachers' attitudes and the quality of instruction they

offer their students greatly influence the success of inclusive practices in the classroom (Biddle, 2006; Shade & Stewart, 2000). As teacher educators we need to address the perceptions and attitudes of our students to enable them to meet the challenges they face in their classrooms, and thus, work effectively with all their students.

Literature Review
What Is Inclusive Education?

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) and the Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC, 2009) jointly profess that quality inclusion programs for young children with disabilities should support the rights of these children and their families, to develop a feeling of membership in their community and in society, in general. Moreover, all young children with disabilities have the right to partake in all activities in order to reach their full potential, regardless of their abilities.
(*http://www.decsped.org/uploads/docs/about _dec/position_concept_papers/PositionState ment_Inclusion_Joint_updated_May2009.pd f)*

Inclusion proposes adjusting and accommodating the curriculum and the learning environment to meet the needs of all students, thus, creating a learning community for all. At its best, inclusive classrooms help define high expectations for every student, regardless of ability level. Salend (2001) posits that inclusion is not simply placement in a general classroom, but its main goal is to provide a quality education for students with special needs, as well as for their peers without disabilities who are of similar age. Proposed arguments, regarding the benefits of this practice, include students learning to accept diversity among their peers, greater social gains for students with disabilities and stronger academic performances of students with mild disabilities in inclusive settings (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003). The evolution of educational services for children with disabilities and their families, juxtaposed with the demand for quality early childhood education, has required teachers and school systems to support the inclusion model and provide quality inclusive settings (Proctor & Niemeyer, 2001).

According to Sandall and Schwartz (2008), there are several models of preschool inclusion programs: team teaching, consultation, reverse main-streaming and integrated activities. These models are dictated, in part, by the specific context of the early childhood field (e.g., child care and early childhood education; Head Start; early childhood special education; and public education). Team-teaching inclusion, also called co- teaching, serves children with and without disabilities, in the same classroom, with a certified general education teacher and a certified special education teacher. In the consultation model, children with disabilities are educated in a general education classroom with the support of a certified special education teacher (known as a special education itinerant teacher), who comes to the classroom to work with the teacher, the child or both. While the reverse mainstreaming model also educates children with and without disabilities in the same classroom, a certified early childhood special education teacher is the only teacher in the classroom. Lastly, the integrated activities model is the only model in which children with and without disabilities are placed in separate classrooms that are run by an early childhood special education teacher and an early childhood teacher, respectively; yet, every day both classes work together on specific activities.

In early childhood classrooms the ongoing increase of students with dis-

abilities, since the early 1990s, has called for an increase in services, as well as the need for new competencies in teaching pedagogy. The increase of more diagnosed young children with disabilities caused a tremendous amount of trepidation and uncertainty among both special education and general education teachers who were placed together in one classroom (Hunt, Soto, Maier, Liboiron & Bae, 2004). Piper (2007) posits that the dramatic increase and the diversity of young students' backgrounds and needs, warrants a reexamination of the ways that we prepare special education teachers to work in inclusive early childhood settings. Successful implementation of any teacher education program relies heavily on the attitudes of teachers (both preservice and inservice). Their philosophies and attitudes about inclusive education need to be seriously considered prior to them stepping into the classroom and filling the role of the special educator in an inclusive environment (Vartuli, 2005).

Attitudes Apropos Inclusion

The passage of Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, renamed in 1990 as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and reenacted in 2004 (PL 108-446), guaranteed free, appropriate public education in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for all children with disabilities three to 21 years of age. The interpretation of LRE, for all children with disabilities three to 21 years of age, has changed throughout the years. The most recent 2004 version states that children with disabilities are to be schooled in regular school settings with children who are not disabled. Additionally, this version of LRE stipulates that this occur in all school settings, public and private, as well as other types of care facilities. Children should be removed from the general education en-

vironment only in cases of severe disabilities, when the general school setting cannot provide the supplementary aids or delivery of services (20 U.S.C. 1412a, 5, A).

However, the rights of young children with disabilities were not fully acknowledged until 1986 with the passage of PL 99-457, which extended the provisions to all three- to five-year-old children with disabilities. It also gave states incentives to serve babies and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays, as well as their families. Before the passage of PL 99-457, the mandate to place young children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment involved spending some time in an early childhood setting with children without disabilities. This practice was known as preschool mainstreaming, reverse mainstreaming and integrated special education and was often granted, only if and when, the children with disabilities had the skills that allowed them to adequately function in an early childhood setting. In the 1990s, the term preschool inclusion gained momentum, and this term had varied meanings for different people and was the result of a change in society's beliefs and attitudes toward educating young children with and without disabilities, together, in the same classroom. This is the way the "least restrictive environment" is now interpreted (Odom, Buysse & Soukakou, 2011).

Since the inception of inclusion, students with special needs have been moved from separate special education classrooms into general education classrooms. Inclusion, at its best, provides participation and access to high quality education, regardless of socioeconomic status, with the support that each child needs (Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006). Ideally, inclusive education would provide all students with experiences that allow them to learn from each other's individual

differences. Although inclusion can be accomplished in different ways, effective inclusion implementation "is about belonging, participation and reaching one's full potential in a diverse society" (Odom, Buysse & Soukakou, 2011, p. 347). This only can be accomplished if all schools accept the responsibility for being ready for all young children.

According to Niemeyer and Proctor (2002), there is limited research on how student teachers identify inclusive practices. A major factor influencing best practices in inclusion classrooms is teachers' attitudes and perceptions about inclusion. Previous research (Hornby, 1999; Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000; Salend, 2001; Hammond & Ingalls, 2003) suggests that support services, adequate resources, administrator support, appropriately trained personnel and teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusion are essential for effective inclusive classrooms. Further, Mitchell and Hegde (2007) note that the success of inclusive practices depends heavily on the amount of support and training at the teacher preparation level, followed by inservice professional development such as observing model classrooms, workshops, study groups and engaging in research. In addition, teachers who feel supported of pedagogy in general, develop more confidence in their teaching practices.

Dalğar and Shabaz (2012) suggest that negative teachers' attitudes towards integration [inclusion] result from teachers not being aware of students with disabilities in their classrooms. Their research also found that teachers' attitudes towards integration are affected by class size, teachers' ages, types of disabilities and school support. Proctor and Niemeyer's (2001) study of preservice teachers and beliefs about inclusion also found that the preservice teachers did believe that children with special needs could succeed in inclusive settings, as long as there was support from the administration; appropriate resources; and academic and social instruction that focused on child-centered and developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood. Further, the preservice teachers believed inclusion was a beneficial setting for all children, except in cases where a child with special needs would interrupt the flow of inclusive practices in the classroom.

Preparing Preservice and Inservice Teachers to Support Inclusive Education

In early childhood special education programs, it is critical for teacher education students to acquire the knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices and best practices for differentiating instruction, in order to provide excellence in teaching students with special needs. These ideals propose a challenge to higher education in respect to the differences in content of teacher preparation, which directly influences the overall attitudes toward inclusion. Teachers practicing in inclusive settings come with an assortment of training and educational experiences. Many have not been trained in dual programs, which combine general and special education pedagogy, and thus, these students experience conflicts in trying to merge both styles of teaching (Kamens, Loprete & Slostad, 2000; Mitchell & Hegde, 2007). These teachers also may lack opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills they need in order to work with young children with disabilities in the classroom. Another factor that promotes teachers' negative attitudes is collaboration with auxiliary classroom personnel. Some teachers fail to see the need for collaboration with other personnel and consider these individuals to be intrusive and disruptive in the classroom (Maldonado & Rodriguez, 2006). Successful inclusive practices require a team approach where all personnel involved in the

classroom meet and plan together to address the needs of the children. In essence, collaboration offers the opportunity to capitalize on the diverse and specialized knowledge of general and special educators who have had different training and experience (Wood, 1998).

Purpose of the Study

In order to strengthen our graduate programs, we (the researchers) thought that we really needed to understand our students' perceptions and attitudes towards inclusive education, so we could work towards changing any potentially negative or ill-conceived perceptions and addressing our students' anxieties and hesitancies about being special education early childhood teachers in inclusive environments. We opted to survey our students early in the program, since changing attitudes requires time, specific course work and reflection that focuses on making candidates aware of their attitudes and their impact on practice (Vartuli, 2005).

This descriptive study, which used survey research, explored the attitudes of early childhood special education (ECSE) graduate students, attending a program in an urban, public institution, regarding the placement and teaching of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. The study focused on the following major question: What are the general attitudes of ECSE graduate students about inclusion of students with disabilities?

Method
Participants

Over a three-year time period, 170 surveys were distributed to students admitted into the ECSE program. A total of 152 responses were received (89.4% return rate), with 145 (95%) female respondents and seven (4.6%) male respondents. Eighty-two (53.9%) of the respondents were pursuing their first master's degree, and the majority of respondents (59.2%, $n = 90$) possessed no teaching certification and were enrolled in this education program to attain dual certification in special education and early childhood, along with their master's degree. Of the respondents, 92 (60.5%) were currently working in schools: 44 (28.9%) were teaching; 41 (27%) were paraprofessionals, with the remaining working in schools as counselors, administrators, social workers, or psychologists. The other thirty (19.7%) respondents currently were not working in schools. Although some respondents (44.7%, $n = 68$) had not taught to date, the majority of them had taught, in general education classrooms, for one-two years (26.3%, $n = 40$) or for three-four years (16.4%, $n = 20$), with the remainder having taught nine-14 years (9.2%, $n = 14$). When asked about their teaching experience in inclusive classrooms, the majority of participants (63.8%, $n = 97$) never taught inclusion, with a large percentage having taught inclusion for one-two years (19.7%, $n = 30$), followed by three-five years (5.3%, $n = 8$); six-10 years (2%, $n = 3$); and more than 10 years (1.3%, $n = 2$). (See Table 1 for demographic characteristics.)

Table 1
Demographic Variables for Survey Respondents

Variable	Number (%)[a]
-Gender	
Female	145 (95.4)
Male	7 (4.6)
-Positions of those currently working in schools	
Teaching	44 (28.9)
Paraprofessionals	41 (27)
Mixed positions	7 (4.6)
- Teaching experience	
Never taught	68 (44.7)
Taught 1-2 years	40 (26.3)
Taught 3-4 years	20 (16.4)
Taught 9-14 years	14 (9.2)
- Inclusion teaching experience	
Never taught inclusion	97 (63.8)
Taught inclusion 1-2 years	30 (19.7)
Taught inclusion 3-5 years	8 (5.3)
Taught inclusion 6-10 years	3 (2)
Taught inclusion more than 10 years	2 (1.3)

[a]The number of respondents varied because of missing cases.

Measures

The *Attitudes Toward Inclusion Survey* was designed as a three-part questionnaire. Part I (18 items) provided demographic data regarding the participants and their schools, if currently teaching. Part II (22 items) used a five-point (*strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, strongly agree*) Likert scale to measure participants' *attitudes* regarding students with a range of disabilities, their ability to learn and their classroom placements. Part III (2 items) contained two open-ended statements that asked participants to complete and comment on reasons why they were in "favor of inclusion" and/or "against inclusion."

The survey, which took approximately 20-25 minutes to complete, was distributed during a program orientation. Students were invited to participate in the study and asked to place the completed surveys in an envelope, so that those who chose not to participate would not feel any pressure to participate. The *Survey* was constructed after an extensive review of literature on teachers' attitudes regarding early childhood inclusion and an examination of other existing and relevant instruments. Lastly, to help establish instrument validity, a panel of experts

(individuals with experience in early childhood and special education and/or inclusion) was asked to review and comment on the instrument. All quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, and the open-ended survey responses (Part III), since the nature of the questions was so specific, were coded into three categories: 1) pro inclusion; 2) con inclusion; or 3) mixed inclusion.

Results

The responses received from the survey are summarized below, organized according to major sections of the survey instrument.

Support

Survey respondents were asked to comment on their perceptions of the level of administrative support and resources available to aid them in teaching inclusion. Although some of the respondents had not taught in schools, the majority of the respondents currently (or had prior) worked in schools within some capacity (e.g., paraprofessionals, counselors, etc.) and still were able to comment on the support structure at the schools where they worked. Twenty-six percent of survey respondents considered the support level of their school's administration to be *low* or *extremely low*, and 32.2% considered administrators' support to be only *average*. More than half (50.7% and 54%, respectively) *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that two major problems with inclusive settings were that the school's leaders did not *organize schools successfully to include students with disabilities* and did not offer valuable *professional development necessary to include students with disabilities successfully*. When asked to rate the level of available support services (e.g., counseling, resource room or teacher, instructional materials, etc.), more than one-fourth (27%) of the survey respondents felt that existing services were below average, while close to another one fourth (24.3%) believed that support services were only average (see Table 2).

Table 2
Demographic Variables for Survey Respondents

Variable	Number (%)[a]
-Level of support services	
Extremely low	21 (13.8)
Low	20 (13.2)
Average	37 (24.3)
High	16 (10.5)
Extremely high	7 (4.6)
-Level of administrative support	
Extremely low	24 (15.8)
Low	16 (10.5)
Average	49 (32.2)
High	11 (7.2)
Extremely high	7 (4.6)

- School leaders do not organize schools successfully to include students

Strongly agree   15 (9.9)
Agree   62 (40.8)
Undecided   59 (38.8)
Disagree   9 (5.9)
Strongly disagree   1 (1.7)

- School leaders do not offer valuable professional development to include students to
Strongly agree   24 (15.8)
Agree   58 (38.2)
Undecided   48 (31.6)
Disagree   13 (8.6)
Strongly disagree   2 (1.3)

ªThe number of respondents varied because of missing cases.

Respondents' Willingness to Include Students in Their Classrooms and Placement Beliefs

Multiple survey questions (22 items) dealt with specific disabilities, and respondents were asked to rate their willingness to teach students, from a variety of disability categories. Respondents *strongly agreed or agreed* in their willingness to include students with mild disabilities (95%) or learning disabilities (89.5%) in their classrooms. For the categories of autism, communication disorders, sensory impairments, intellectual disabilities and physical/health impairments, less than 20% of the respondents strongly agreed in their willingness to include these students in their classrooms, while one-fourth of the respondents were *undecided* about including students with autism, intellectual disabilities and sensory impairments in their classrooms. Further, less than half (27.6%) of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the survey statement: *Regardless of severity, students with disabilities belong in classes with nondisabled students*, and more than one fourth (34.2% and 29.6%, respectively) were undecided or *strongly disagreed* with this statement. (See Table 3.)

Table 3
Early ChildhoodGraduate Students' Willingness to Include Students with all Types of Disabilities

| Beliefs Statement | Number (%)ª | | | | |
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Willingness to include or adapt instruction for students with					
-Intellectual disabilities	23 (15.1)	73 (48)	38 (25)	11 (7.2)	3 (2.0)
-Mild disabilities	68 (44.7)	77 (50.7)	1 (.7)	0 (0)	1 (.7)
-Learning disabilities	51 (33.6)	85 (55.9)	8 (5.3)	1 (.7)	1 (.7)
-Autism	29 (19.1)	72 (47.4)	38 (25)	7 (4.6)	1 (.7)

-Communication disorders	30 (19.7)	90 (59.2)	21 (13.8)	4 (2.6)	1 (.7)
-Sensory impairments	28 (18.4)	67 (44.1)	41 (27)	8 (5.3)	4 (2.6)
-Physical and health impairments	26 (17.1)	87 (57.2)	29 (19.1)	6 (3.9)	1 (.7)

[a]The number of respondents varied because of missing cases.

Respondents also were asked to comment on some general statements about successful classroom placement, as it relates to specific disabilities, as well as parents (see Table 4). Although 38.6% of the respondents *disagreed*, more than one fourth (29%) *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are too easily distracted to learn in a general education classroom. Further, although 40.1% of the respondents *disagreed* with the statement: *Students with emotional/behavioral disorders do not belong in a general education classroom*, one fourth (26.3%) were *undecided*, and one fifth (22.3%) *strongly agreed* or *agreed* with this statement. Yet, 71.7% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that students with learning disabilities can be successful in general education classrooms. Lastly, when asked if parents should have the final decision regarding the educational placement of their children in a general education class, 50.7% of the respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that parents should have the final decision; yet, more than one fourth (28.3) still were *undecided*.

Table 4
Inclusive Philosophy and Beliefs About Impact on General Education Students

	Number (%)[a]				
Beliefs Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
-Regardless of severity, students with disabilities belong with nondisabled students	9 (5.9)	33 (21.7)	52 (34.2)	45 (29.6)	9 (5.9)
-Students with disabilities will benefit more in separate special education classrooms	20 (13.2)	26 (17.1)	41 (27)	38 (25)	19 (12.5)
-Inclusion will improve social skills of students with special needs	45 (29.6)	81(53.3)	15(9.9)	1 (.7)	0 (0)
-Making modifications for students with disabilities is not fair to general education students in the same classroom	5 (3.3)	7 (4.6)	34 (22.4)	73 (48)	29 (19.1)

-Teachers give less attention to students without disabilities when they have students with disabilities in class	3 (2)	27 (17.8)	45 (29.6)	61 (40.1)	10 (6.6)
-Including students with special needs produces a positive learning environment in general education classrooms	26 (17.1)	67 (44.1)	40 (26.3)	10 (6.6)	2 (1.3)
-Placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms will improve their learning performance	17 (11.2)	61 (40.1)	58 (38.2)	11 (7.2)	2 (1.3)
-Students with learning disabilities can be successful learners in a general education classroom	30 (19.7)	79 (52)	19 (12.5)	14 (9.2)	7 (4.6)
-Students with emotional and behavioral disorders do not belong in a general education classroom	9 (5.9)	25 (16.4)	40 (26.3)	61 (40.1)	13 (8.6)
-Students with ADHD are too easily distracted to learn in a general education classroom	8 (5.3)	36 (23.7)	33 (21.7)	59 (38.8)	12 (7.9)
-Students with ADHD are too easily distracted to learn in a general education classroom	8 (5.3)	36 (23.7)	33 (21.7)	59 (38.8)	12 (7.9)
-Parent(s) should have the final decision regarding their child's educational placement	19 (12.5)	58 (38.2)	43 (28.3)	26 (17.1)	2 (1.3)

[a]The number of respondents varied because of missing cases.

General Philosophy About Inclusion and Its Impact on General Education Students

Respondents were asked to comment on general statements related to their philosophy on inclusion and the impact they believe it may have on general education students. When asked to comment on the statement: "*Students with disabilities will benefit more from instruction in separate special education classrooms than from being included in general education classrooms,*" 30.3% of respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed*, while 27% were

undecided. However, a large majority (82.9%) of respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that inclusion improves the social skills of students with special needs. The majority was much less when respondents were asked to comment on the learning environment and performance in inclusive settings. Sixty-one percent of respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that including students with special needs in general education classes produces a positive learning environment, but barely half (51.3%) of the respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that placing students with special needs in general education classrooms will improve learning performance. Respondents also were asked to comment on the fairness of inclusive practices to general education students. Sixty-seven percent of respondents did not think that making modifications for students with disabilities was unfair to general education students; however, still 22.4% of respondents were *undecided* about this issue. Further, a much larger percentage of respondents *strongly disagreed* or *disagreed* (46.7%) with the statement: "Teachers give less attention to students without disabilities when they have students with disabilities in the same classroom, than *strongly agreed* or *agreed* (19.8%), with still a rather large number (29.6%) of respondents *undecided* on this issue, as well. (See Table 4.)

Respondents also were asked to reply to two open-ended statements: 1) I am in favor of inclusion because; and 2) I am against inclusion because. In this section, 108 out of 152 (71%) respondents answered either one or both questions. Seventy (64.8%) respondents (out of the 108) were in favor of inclusion, and their reasons generally could be classified in one of the following categories: 1) because inclusion benefited children with special needs (31 respondents; 44.2%); or 2) because inclusion benefited both children with and without

disabilities (39 respondents; 55.7%). Some of the specific reasons respondents were in favor included,

"Children learn tolerance for each other"

"It [inclusion] teaches the other children in the classroom acceptance;"

"I think both the children with disabilities and the rest of the class can benefit, be more tolerant and teach social skills, which are very important [at a] young age;"

"I think it will facilitate normal children to be accepting of children with disabilities;" and

"It [inclusion] does not discriminate against children and allows all children the positive and rewarding experience of learning together and from each other."

Only eight respondents (7%) indicated that they were against inclusion and cited the following reasons:

"I feel that it is distracting for all teachers, typical students and students suffering from disabilities;"

"The student with disability could be further left behind and regular students cheated from one-on-one attention and not challenged;"

"Sometimes students feel uncomfortable with the arrangement. Sometimes the behavioral issues takes away a lot from teaching time;"

"Often not enough is done to aid children with disabilities in order for them to experience continued success;"

" I believe that a smaller classroom setting will benefit a child with disabilities by helping them focus more and have more of an interaction with the teacher;" and

"Students may act out because of their disability especially if parents are not administering medication correctly. Some students need a smaller setting."

The remaining respondents were in favor but with reservations (21 people; 19.4%); were not sure what they believed, since they did not know enough about inclusion (six respondents; 5.5%); or were against inclusion for students with severe disabilities (three respondents; 2.7%). Some comments from respondents with reservations included,

"In order to have 'good' inclusion there should be a supportive network for the teachers and the students;" and

"If not handled appropriately it could leave the special education children without support and take time away from the general education children. It will only work with the correct support and some schools just don't have the means or desire to provide the support."

Discussion

The findings from this study revealed three major themes concerning ECSE graduate students and inclusive education. These themes include (1) inclusion for some students with special needs, as long as their disabilities are not severe; (2) uncertainty about the learning benefits of inclusion; *and* (3) successful inclusion requires support and organization.

Theme One: Inclusion for Some Students With Special Needs, as Long as Their Disabilities Are Not Severe

Data indicated that respondents were committed to the inclusion of students with certain types of disabilities; namely learning disabilities and mild disabilities, but they were undecided about or less committed to the integration of students with disabilities such as intellectual disabilities, autism and sensory impairments or children with severe disabilities. Although the majority of respondents fully believed that students with learning disabilities can be successful in general classrooms, close to more than one-fourth of respondents were not sure whether or not they were willing to integrate into their own classrooms or adapt instruction for students with more severe disabilities. Data revealed further evidence that severity of disability did impact respondents' beliefs about including students. Basically, an overwhelming majority of respondents believed that students with mild disabilities belong in the general education classroom and that students with learning disabilities can be successful in this type of placement. However, only slightly more than one-fourth of respondents believed that the general education classroom is the right placement for students with severe disabilities, and close to one-third of respondents were not sure what they believed. Further, approximately half of the respondents felt (or were not sure) that students with emotional and behavioral disorders do not belong in inclusion, and students with ADHD would be too easily distracted in such a placement. Such results may suggest that preservice and inservice teachers are resistant to including students with behavior-related disabilities rather than those who only have academic-related special needs.

Theme Two: Uncertainty About the Learning Benefits of Inclusion

In general, more than one-fourth of respondents admitted to being against inclusive settings or to having reservations about such placements. This is problematic, considering that inclusive placements have become more prevalent in recent years and many early childhood special education teachers do find themselves teaching inclusion upon graduation from teacher education programs. Survey results indicated that most graduate students believed strongly that inclusion offers social benefits for students with special needs. However, the graduate students (many of them current teachers) were not as confident in the academic benefits of inclusion, as

evidenced by a rather large number of respondents still believing that students with disabilities would benefit more from instruction in separate special education classrooms or not even having an opinion on the issue. Further, while data indicated that most respondents believed that inclusion does produce a positive learning environment for students with special needs, barely half of them felt that this type of environment would aid in improving the learning performance of students with special needs. These specific responses reflect a deep-seated philosophical disconnect, within the graduate students. They seem to believe, in theory, that the inclusive learning environment is more conducive and positive, but disagree when asked about the very practical aspect of the classroom – learning performance. Lastly, close to one-fourth of respondents were not sure whether or not making modifications for students with disabilities was unfair to general education students. This finding indicates that some of the graduate students were not certain in their beliefs about inclusion in regards to educational legal mandates such as instructional and/or curricular modifications.

Theme Three: Successful Inclusion Requires Leadership and Support

As is evident from the survey results, administrative support was a significant factor in what respondents felt contributed to effective early childhood inclusion programs. Professional development programs and successful scheduling and school structuring seemed to be major problems, based on the respondents' ratings. The majority of the respondents rated their administrators' support to be only average or less.

The findings of this study specifically reveal the importance of ongoing teacher training, support from administrators and adequate resources for providing ideal inclusive programs. These positions mirror Avramidis et al.'s (2000) research, which found that although two thirds of the 10,560 teachers surveyed agreed with the general concept of inclusion, the remaining one third expressed concerns over their skills, training and resources needed for implementing successful inclusive practices In addition, the value of professional development on inclusive practices has been stressed in several studies (Biddle, 2006; DeSimone & Parmar, 2006; Elhoweris & Alsheikh, 2006), with particular focus on ways professional development contributes to the development of positive attitudes towards inclusive education. Research also shows that teachers develop negative attitudes toward inclusion when they are placed in classrooms without proper training, advanced notice or adequate supports. These types of administrative practices frustrate teachers, hurt children and negatively affect classroom practice.

Educational leaders must provide teachers with appropriate, substantial and ongoing inservice programming for teaching in early childhood inclusive settings and better organize (e.g., placements and scheduling; adequate planning time and teacher collaboration time; etc.) schools. Although this research targets improvements to early childhood special education programs, it is also highly recommended that graduate students, in administrative and leadership programs, be educated on model inclusive programs and effective inclusive professional development, since they will, one day, be responsible for leading schools, teachers – and inclusion programs. Additionally, they should be mentored by administrators that run exemplary inclusion programs in their schools.

Although teacher education programs cannot control the level of support administrators devote to teachers, it is strongly recommended that teacher

preparation programs provide their students the opportunity to do observations and internships in exemplary inclusion programs, where both general and special education students thrive in their development both academically and socially. The ideal experience would be one where teacher education students are required to develop strategies and curricula that would not only enhance academic learning but that also would provide the means to enhance children's social awareness and acceptance of differences. In addition, teacher education programs must put more emphasis on educating students about including children with severe disabilities and addressing the often existing misinformation and unjust prejudices students have concerning certain disabilities. Further, using strategies such as class discussions, role-playing and journal writing, teacher education programs also could encourage their students (current and future teachers) to reflect on their attitudes towards and their perceptions of inclusive practices, which may provide a newfound self-awareness for the students and an outlet to express their concerns, fears and inconsistencies.

One of the first steps toward understanding successful instruction in early childhood inclusive classrooms is to understand teachers' attitudes regarding inclusion and students with special needs. Such insight can help teacher educators, school leaders and staff development specialists work more effectively with teachers to develop early childhood programming that meets diverse learning needs, to design better quality teacher preparation and to establish needed support services at sites where inclusion programs are implemented.

Limitations of the Study

The present study extends our understanding of ECSE graduate students'

attitudes regarding inclusion and inclusive practices. However, the current research also had its share of limitations. First, the sample was one of convenience and was not representative of all ECSE programs, from either across the state or nationally. Second, there always is the possibility that respondents, given that they were currently enrolled in their graduate program, responded to survey questions in ways they thought the ECSE faculty would want them to respond. Lastly, although the survey was created after an extensive literature review of the topic and was examined by a panel of experts in special education and/or inclusive education, there is an absence of statistical methods used for examining the structure of the survey. Indicators of reliability for the survey should have been recorded.

Conclusion and Future Studies

The study presented here is only the first phase of a multi-step research project in which the researchers are involved. The next phase sets out to investigate the attitudes of preservice educational leadership (EDL) candidates towards inclusion and students with disabilities. Since these individuals will one day be leading schools, responsible for cultivating instruction, planning inservice programs and coordinating students' classroom placement, it is critical to understand their attitudes regarding students with disabilities and the best placements for such students. Further, the attitudes towards inclusion, of future school leaders, certainly impact the ability of both special education and general education teachers who are working in inclusive classrooms. Finally, the last phase of this research project involves post survey analysis, which will give the researchers insight into whether or not attitudes of ECSE and EDL candidates have changed after completing their respective programs. Such research studies may prove revealing and contribute to a deeper understanding of the attitudes of teachers

and leaders towards inclusion and students with disabilities, as well as provide constructive strategies, for teacher and leader educators, to use to foster more open and equitable attitudes towards these issues.

References

Avramidis, E., Bayliss, P., & Burden, R. (2000). A survey into mainstream teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the ordinary school in one local education authority. *Educational Psychology, 20*(2)*,* 191-211.

Biddle, S. (2006). Attitudes in education: Assessing how teachers' attitudes about inclusion of learning disabled students affects their use of accommodations. *The Science Teacher, 73*(3), 52-56.

Bradshaw, L. & Mundia, L. (2006). Attitudes to and concerns about inclusive education: Bruneian in-service and pre-service teachers. *International Journal of Special Education, 2*(1), 35-43.

Dalğar, G., & Shabaz, U. (2012). The comparison of the views of early childhood teachers and candidate teachers towards inclusion education. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 2*(1), 105-116.

DeSimone, J. R., & Parmar, R. S. (2006). Middle school mathematics teachers' beliefs about inclusion of students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 21,* 98-110.

Elhoweris, H., & Alsheikh, N. (2006). Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. *International Journal of Special Education, 21*(1), 115-118.

Hammond, H., & Ingalls, L. (2003). Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion: Survey results from elementary school teachers in three southwestern rural school districts. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 22*(2), 24-31. Retrieved from http://fidarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa405/is_200304/ai_n9201

Hornby, G. (1999). Inclusion or delusion: Can one size fit all? *Support for Learning,14*(4), 152-157.

Hunt, P., Soto, G., Maier, J., Liboiron, N., & Bae, S. (2004) Collaborative teaming to support preschoolers with severe disabilities who are placed in general education early childhood programs. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 24*(3), 123-142.

Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20U.S.C. §1400 *et seq.* (2004).

Kamens, M.W., Loprete, S.J. & Slostad, F.A. (2000). Classroom teachers' perceptions about inclusion and pre-service teacher education. *Teaching Education*, *11*(2), 147-158.

Maldonado, N., & Rodriguez, M. V. (2006).Who are these people in my classroom? Reaching out to related services personnel. *Focus on Inclusion Quarterly from the Association for Childhood International, 3*(3)*,* 1-5.

Mitchell, L. C., & Hegde, A. (2007). Beliefs and practices of in-service preschool teachers in inclusive settings: Implications for personnel preparation. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, *28*, 353-366.

National Association for the Education of Young Children and Division of Early Childhood Council for Exceptional Children. (2009). Early *Childhood: Inclusion.* (Joint Position Statement).) Retrieved from *http://www.decsped.org/uploads/docs/about_dec/position_concept_papers/PositionStatement_Inclusion_Joint_updated_May2009.pdf*

Niemeyer, J. A., & Proctor, R. (2002). The influence of experience on student teachers' beliefs about inclusion.

Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 23, 49-57.

Odom, S. L., Buysse, V. & Soukakou, E. (2011). Inclusion for young children with disabilities: A quarter century of research perspectives. *Journal of Early Intervention*, *33*(4), 344-356.

Piper, A. (2007). What we know about integrating early childhood education and early childhood special education teachers' preparation programs: A review, a reminder and a request. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 28*, 163-180.

Proctor, R., & Niemeyer, J. (2001). Preservice teacher beliefs about inclusion: Implication for early intervention educators. *Journal of Early Intervention, 24*(1), 55-66.

Salend, S. J. (2001). *Creating inclusive classrooms: Effective and reflective practices (4th ed.).* Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

Sandal, S. R., & Schwartz, I. S. (2008*). Building blocks for teaching preschoolers with special*

needs (2nd ed.). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, Co.

Shade, R., & Stewart, R. (2001). General education and special education pre-service teachers' attitudes. *Preventing School Failure*, *46*(1), 37-41.

Vartuli, S. (2005). Beliefs: The heart of teaching. *Young Children, 60*(5), 76-86.

Wood, M. (1998). Whose job is it anyway? Educational roles in inclusion. *Exceptional Children, 64*(2), 181-195.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Janet R. DeSimone, Lehman College; Department of Counseling, Leadership, Literacy and Special Education; Carman Hall B20; 250 Bedford Park Boulevard West; Bronx, NY 10468; 718.960.4993.

Contact: janet.desimone@lehman.cuny.edu