



## General Education Students' Changing Perceptions of Students with Special Needs

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Schools are becoming more inclusive and more students with special needs are accessing general education classrooms than ever. This action research study investigated general education students changing perceptions of students with special needs through the use of various interventions (e.g., classroom discussions, organized games, buddy reads, peer tutoring, etc.) over a four week period of time. This study was conducted in a second grade classroom setting. Two questionnaires were designed and administered to collect data about the participants' perceptions of students with special needs during the four weeks of the study. The questionnaire responses were analyzed to determine if a shift toward more positive perceptions of students with special needs occurred. Results of the data analysis indicate that the general education students' perceptions of students with special needs did improve, or evolve, as a result of the inventions employed in this study.

*Keywords:* peer perceptions, students with special needs, action research

Policy makers, educators, and parents have been working to improve education for children with special needs for many decades. As time has progressed, laws affecting children with special needs have become more defined about the type of education that is most beneficial for academic and social learning. With the most recent update to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 more students with special needs are accessing general education classrooms, rather than being solely restricted to self-contained classroom settings.

This action research study examined general education students' perceptions about students with special needs. Specifically, this study investigated the effect of weekly interventions designed to change general education students' perceptions of students with special needs, as well as educating general education students about individuals with disabilities.

Data was collected by the administration of two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was open-ended which was verbally administered individually to each participant at the beginning and the end of the study. The second questionnaire was also administered at the beginning of the study, and then each week at the conclusion of each intervention for the duration of the study.

Results of the data analysis indicate that the general education students' perceptions of students with special needs did improve, or evolve, as a result of the inventions employed in this study.

### **Review of the Literature**

Many classrooms include both general education students and students with special needs. Teachers can play an important role in how general education students feel about and act towards special needs students because,

in part, children tend to learn behavior by observing the adults in their world (Diamond & Hong, 2010).

Children's ideas about individuals with disabilities can be associated with emotional responses that influence their behavior. For example, Innes and Diamond (1999) investigated preschool children's ideas about disabilities, and their interactions with their peers with disabilities, based on mothers' comments about children with physical disabilities and Down syndrome. The results of this study revealed, in part, that the preschool children's observed social interactions were more positive with their peers with disabilities when mothers made fewer comments in regards to children with disabilities.

Bunch and Valeo (2004) investigated upper elementary grades and middle school settings where relationships among general and special needs students were not specifically encouraged. In this study, the general education students reported fewer relationships with students with special needs and more negative views towards them. Also, this study found that when teachers treat children with special needs differently from their classroom peers, general education students may receive a message that students with special needs are different from them and should be treated differently.

Merely placing students with special needs in general classroom settings is not enough to create social interaction amongst all students. Putnam, Markovchick, Johnson, and Johnson (1996) investigated the effects of cooperative learning on general education students' acceptance of classmates with special needs. In this study, two classroom environment conditions (cooperative learning and competitive learning) were explored over an eight month period of time in grades five through eight. Over the course of the study, general education students rated the desirability of working with their peers with disabilities within both classroom environments. Results indicated that positive ratings occurred more frequently in the classrooms where cooperative learning conditions were present versus the classrooms where competitive learning conditions existed. As such, inclusive classroom settings where teachers do not encourage or foster positive interactions, students with special needs may endure teasing, prejudice, stereotyping, and even rejection (Putnam et al., 1996).

According to Frostad and Pijil (2007) teachers must take the responsibility to carefully structure interactions between students with and without special needs. Their study explored the difficulties students with special needs can have in building relationships with their general education peers in inclusive education settings. The study's results indicated that up to 25% of students with special needs were not socially included in general education peer groups due to the lack of age-group appropriate social skills. Based on the study's results, Frostad and Pijil (2007) suggest that structured social

skills instruction within the classroom can support the development of relationships between general education students and students with special needs. In the absence of such structured interactions, students with special needs may feel isolated from peer groups and experience difficulty in forming friendships (Estell, Jones, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2009) which may adversely affect feelings of self-worth in adulthood (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998).

Some studies conducted in preschool and elementary settings where young children have regular contact with special needs children typically have more positive attitudes toward individuals with special needs (Innes & Diamond, 1999; Teigland, 2009). For example, Kalyva and Agalotis' (2009) study explored sixth grade general education children's understanding of and attitudes towards children with physical disabilities in inclusive settings. The participants in this study were divided into two groups; children who had contact with children with physical disabilities, and children without such contact. Both groups completed two questionnaires to measure their understanding of disabilities and attitudes toward the inclusion of children with disabilities. Results indicated that the children with regular contact (versus limited or no contact) with peers with physical disabilities tended to understand that disabilities are not always easily identifiable, but were able to articulate what a disability or special need is, and demonstrate more empathetic behavior toward peers with disabilities. Also, this group of children expressed more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of peers with disabilities when compared to the children without regular contact.

According to Bunch and Valeo (2004), children who learn empathy and acceptance of children with special needs at an early age will be less likely to demonstrate abusive behavior, and in some instances advocate for individuals with special needs. As such, providing opportunities for socialization and friendships in early school settings may foster better peer relationships among general education and special needs students.

Innes and Diamond (1999) suggest the use of targeted interventions, such as structured play and children's literature, as means of positively impact young children's perceptions of individuals with disabilities. Read alouds and classroom discussions can also be effective for increasing young children's acceptance of peers with special needs (Martinez & Carsepecken, 2006).

In this study, the effect of weekly interventions designed to change general education students' perceptions of special needs students, as well as educating general education students about individuals with disabilities was investigated.

#### **Research Question**

This study investigated the following question: will general education students adopt a more positive

perception of students with special needs as a result of a four week intervention?

**Methods**

**Participants**

This study was conducted in a suburban public elementary school in a medium-sized school district in a western state. All of the participants, 12 males and 12 females, were in a second grade classroom setting that included three students with specific learning disabilities.

**Procedure**

Since the intent of this study was to change not only general education students' perceptions of their peers with disabilities, but to identify activities that

would engage both students with and without disabilities in a second grade classroom setting, an action research design was employed. Action research provides research techniques that allow classroom teachers opportunities to improve upon the education environment in the classroom (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The primary researcher of this study was also the classroom teacher in the second grade setting at the time of this study.

This study took place over a four week period of time. At the beginning of the study, two questionnaires were administered to collect data about the participants' perceptions of students with special needs.

Name _____	Date _____
1) What does it mean for a person to have special needs?	
2) What do you think about people with special needs?	
3) Do you know anyone with special needs? What is his/her name?	
4) What do you do when students with special needs pass you in the hall?	
5) If you saw someone with special needs being teased, what would you do?	

*Figure 1. Pre and Post Verbally Administered Questionnaire.*

Name _____	Date _____
1. Do you think people with special needs can learn?	
Yes	No I'm not sure
2. Do you think people with special needs should be treated the same as other students?	
Yes	No I'm not sure
3. Would you be willing to work with students with special needs in our classroom?	
Yes	No I'm not sure
4. Would you play with a child with special needs on the playground?	
Yes	No I'm not sure
5. Would you invite a student with special needs to sit with you at lunch?	
Yes	No I'm not sure
6. If someone was teasing a student with special needs, would you help?	
Yes	No I'm not sure

*Figure 2. Weekly Questionnaire.*

The first questionnaire was open-ended and was verbally administered individually to each participant at the beginning and the end of the study (Figure 1). To prevent participants from formulating responses based on others' opinions, each participant met with the research assistant outside of the classroom setting during each administration of this questionnaire.

The second questionnaire was also administered at the beginning of the study, and then each week at the conclusion of each intervention for the duration of the study (Figure 2).

The participants completed this questionnaire on their own. However, during each administration of this questionnaire, the questions were read aloud to all participants as a means of increasing the understanding of those who might not be able to read the questions on their own. Privacy folders were used to keep participants from formulating responses based on other participants' responses.

Throughout the four week period of this study, 30 minute targeted interventions were employed. During the first week, participants were read a book about varied disabilities as a catalyst for classroom discussion. Also, the participants toured the school's Intensive Learning Center where some students with special needs receive additional support outside of the general education classroom.

The intervention for week two included the participants and students with special needs playing organized games together. For example, one game required pairs of students (both general education and their peers with special needs) to hold hands and attempt to tag another pair within particular boundaries. This game allowed the students to have physical contact with each other and work together in their tagging efforts of others.

During week three, organized games continued, as well as team building activities with both the participants and the students with special needs. For example, each participant was paired with a student with special needs for peer tutoring in reading or math. This team building activity allowed the participants an opportunity to bond with their peers with special needs.

During week four, students with special needs came to the general education classroom setting to "buddy read" with the participants. The students with special needs brought their own books to read. Both the participants and the students with special needs took turns reading to each other. This activity allowed the participants an opportunity to equally engage with their peers with special needs.

#### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was time. Data was only collected over a four week period; this may have limited the effects of the interventions. Also, the number

of participants (N = 24) and the specific grade level in the study may limit the generalizability of the findings. The participants' ability to fully understand the items on the questionnaires may have been a limitation. It is difficult to control and assess whether or not young participants are able to portray their perceptions through questionnaires.

#### **Data Analysis and Results**

The pre and post verbally administered questionnaire responses were analyzed to determine the type of responses (positive, negative, ambiguous, or uncertain) given for the total participant group. As depicted in Tables 1 and 2, each response on the questionnaire given at the end of the study indicates a shift toward more positive perceptions when compared to the initial questionnaire responses at the beginning of the study.

As such, by the end of this study the participants generally were able to identify a special needs characteristic, spoke more positively about individuals with special needs, indicated that they now know someone with a special need, changed their hallway behavior towards students with special needs, and indicated that they would intervene if a student with special needs was being teased.

As depicted in Table 3, the participants' perceptions of students with special needs evolved during the course of this study. In other words, the participants' perceptions began to shift after the first week's interventions and each subsequent week thereafter. Item 1 and 6 on the weekly questionnaire demonstrated the most significant shift in the participants' perceptions. As such, by the end of the week 1 and 2 interventions, all of the participants believed that students with special needs can learn and would intervene if they were being teased in some manner.

Although items 2, 3, and 4 demonstrate a general shift in the participants' perceptions, a small percent of the participants were not sure if individuals with special needs should be treated the same (4.2%), or if they would work with peers with special needs in the classroom setting (16.7%), or would play with their peers with special needs (16.7%). Item 5 indicates a moderate shift in the participants' perception in regards to inviting a peer with special needs to sit with them at lunch, with 37.5% still not sure.

An analysis of the data from both the verbally administered questionnaire and the weekly questionnaire did not yield significant differences based on the gender of the participants.

#### **Discussion and Implications**

##### **Discussion**

This study's results are encouraging. Planned, specific interventions greatly shifted the participants' perceptions of their peers with special needs.

Table 1

Verbally Administered Questionnaire Results for the Total Participant Group – Beginning of Study

Type of Response	Q1*		Q2*		Q3*		Q4*		Q5*	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Positive Response	6	25.0	3	12.5	8	33.3	9	37.5	20	83.3
Negative Response	0	0	10	41.6	12	50.0	8	33.3	1	4.2
Ambiguous Response	0	0	1	4.2	1	4.2	1	4.2	1	4.2
Uncertain Response	18	75.0	10	41.6	3	12.5	6	25.0	2	8.3

\*Note: see Figure 1 for questionnaire items.

Table 2

Verbally Administered Questionnaire Results for the Total Participant Group – End of Study

Type of Response	Q1*		Q2*		Q3*		Q4*		Q5*	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Positive Response	22	91.0	15	62.5	23	95.0	23	95.0	24	100
Negative Response	0	0	4	17.0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ambiguous Response	0	0	4	17.0	1	4.2	1	4.2	0	0
Uncertain Response	2	9.0	1	4.2	0	0	0	0	0	0

\*Note: see Figure 1 for questionnaire items.

Table 3

Results of the Weekly Questionnaire for the Total Participant Group

	Beginning of Study		End of Week 1		End of Week 2		End of Week 3		End of Week 4	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Q1*:										
Yes	21	87.5	22	91.6	22	91.6	24	100	24	100
No	1	4.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not sure	2	8.3	2	8.3	2	8.3	0	0	0	0
Q2*:										
Yes	20	83.3	21	87.5	21	87.5	22	91.6	23	95.8
No	1	4.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not sure	3	12.5	3	12.5	3	12.5	2	8.3	1	4.2
Q3*:										
Yes	13	54.0	13	54.0	14	58.3	16	66.6	20	83.3
No	1	4.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not sure	10	41.6	11	45.8	10	41.6	8	33.3	4	16.7
Q4*:										
Yes	9	37.5	14	58.3	14	58.3	15	62.5	20	83.3
No	1	4.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not sure	14	58.3	10	41.6	10	41.6	9	37.5	4	16.7
Q5*:										
Yes	7	29.2	10	41.6	11	45.8	14	58.3	15	62.5
No	2	8.3	2	8.3	1	4.2	0	0	0	0
Not sure	15	62.5	12	50.0	12	50.0	10	41.6	9	37.5
Q6*:										
Yes	23	95.8	24	100	24	100	24	100	24	100
No	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not sure	1	4.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

\*Note: see Figure 2 for questionnaire items.

In other words, this study showed evidence of change in general education students' perceptions about students with special needs after a four-week intervention. For example, the participants were able to define or name characteristics of individuals with special needs and articulate what it means to have special needs. They also indicated that all students with special needs can learn, and indicated an improvement in their hallway behavior towards their peers with special needs by saying "Hi" or waving. By the end of this study, all of the participants indicated they would intervene if a student with special needs was being teased in some manner. These findings

support the results of similar studies at other grade levels, or school settings (Bunch & Valeo, 2004; Frostad & Pijil, 2007; Kalyva & Agalotis, 2009).

Interventions employed in this study, such as playing organized games together and various team building activities, helped to facilitate acquaintances and friendships for some general education students and their peers with special needs. Prior to this study, the participants did not spend much time getting to know their peers with special needs. However, the participants' indicated weekly positive changes in their perceptions of students with special needs, with some reporting empathic

feelings for their peers. Upon completion of this study, many participants inquired as to when they would spend time with their "buddies" again.

Targeted interventions in this study required a minimum of 30 minutes of instructional time each week, suggesting an attainable goal for any classroom. However, effective collaboration between the special educator and the regular educator is important in the planning and implementation process of interventions.

#### Implications

According to Putman et al. (1996), general education students' perceptions of students with disabilities can be fixed and rigid throughout the school year. They suggest that instructional methods where students can work together over an extended period of time can shift the perceptions of students with disabilities by their general education peers.

The results of this study suggest that when teachers integrate targeted interventions within the classroom, general education students' perceptions of students with disabilities can shift to more positive and accepting attitudes. Without such positive shifts in attitudes or perceptions, students with disabilities may face major barriers to successful inclusion in general education classroom settings and/or schools.

Epstein (2007) states that teachers often use an intentional approach for teaching academics, but could also adopt an intentional approach to support peer social relationships between students with and without special needs. Effective intentional strategies, such as the interventions employed in this study, would support more interactions among students with and without disabilities (Hollingsworth, 2005).

In part, the intent of inclusive classrooms and/or school settings is to develop or increase the positive perceptions of students with disabilities by their general education peers. The intention of this study was to not only change general education students' perception of their peers with disability, but to also provide activities that would engage and benefit both students with and without special needs. With time for effective planning and collaboration between the general education teacher and the special education teacher, the interventions implemented in this study could be replicated in any school to provide general education students and students with disabilities the opportunity to make friendships and to become more empathetic towards each other. By taking an intentional approach to supporting peer relationships between general education students and students with disabilities, classrooms and/or school settings can support the intent of inclusion; stronger academic achievement, peer acceptance, and friendships. In the end, these goals are what inclusive classroom and/or school settings should be about.

This study also suggests a number of opportunities for future work in this area. For example,

follow-up studies could increase the duration of the interventions and/or implement additional interventions to more accurately assess the effects.

Others have suggested that children with special needs should have opportunities for interaction with their general education peers before third grade as a means of benefiting from inclusive classroom settings (Innes & Diamond, 1999; Teigland, 2009). Research at the first grade or preschool level could help determine if there is truly an optimal age to educate students about special needs and to form peer groups. Additionally, other grade levels beyond the elementary setting could be explored with a larger sample size and/or a control group to determine the effect of various interventions on peer relationships between students with and without disabilities.

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