

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE INTEGRATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: A WORK IN PROGRESS

### Abstract

Recent research indicates that institutions responsible for the preparation of physical educators can play an important role in enhancing physical educators positive attitude towards and perceived competence in teaching students with disabilities.

This study investigates the attitudes of two student groups; physical educators and post degree diploma students towards the integration of students with disabilities.

The instrument used is the Attitude Towards Mainstreaming Scale (Larrivee:1982) The ATMS has been validated for use in the Australian context (Roberts & Pratt 1988, Hudson and Clunies-Ross 1984)

Students were surveyed at the commencement of their respective courses in special education and again at the courses' conclusion.

The study has implications for the curriculum design of teacher education programs in special education as factors such as academic training and actual experience in working with students with disabilities may be important in enhancing attitudes and perceived competence.

### Why Look At Disabilities?

Since the passage of Public Law 94-142(1975) and the Warnock Report concepts such as normalisation, decategorisation of disability and integration have become part of a contemporary educational philosophy of mainstreaming.

People with disabilities are no longer content to take a back seat as spectators, but are looking for opportunities to participate. It can be argued without fear of contradiction that people with disabilities also have the same needs for socialisation, self-esteem and self-confidence. Therefore all those concerned with activities such as leisure, recreation and physical activity should be swinging open the doors to meet this demand.

Through interacting with those who have disabilities, those without are able to come to terms with some of their own fears and prejudices. An understanding of people who appear to be different will lead them to see the differences are not so great after all.

### Professional Responsibility

Assisting physical educators in the clarification and modification of their attitudes towards the disabled has been viewed as the responsibility of those involved in preservice education. (Santomier:1985, Stewart: 1991) Stewart asserts that the preparation of the physical education teacher is incomplete if their attitudes have not been measured, evaluated and developed during their preservice training, since it is these attitudes that will form the foundation of their future teaching practices.

Further to this Paese(1990) suggest the need for inservicing to follow the beginning teacher into the school setting. Carre(1980) reports the high numbers of secondary physical education teachers leaving the profession during the first three years as indicating that no matter how good a teacher education program may be, the beginning teacher will be greatly influenced by the 'system'. Induction programs then are needed to retain these promising beginning teachers who are getting discouraged and leaving

the profession. Paese(1990) suggests that teacher educators have recommended that induction programs, to be successful, need to go beyond the first year of teaching experience.

Rizzo and Vispoel(1991) in a study of perceived competence of physical educators towards teaching students with handicaps found that attitudes are influenced either directly or indirectly by academic teaching and teaching experience and these factors are directly under the control of those who design teacher education programs in physical education.

Strand(1992) in a descriptive study of physical education teacher preparation practices revealed that only 11 institutions in the United States offered Adapted PE certification which represented only 9.7% of physical education teacher training programs. It can be seen that specialist preparation in the physical education area continues to be under represented and there are indications that it may even be on the decline. Melgrano and Loovis (1980, 1988) in two studies reported that the number of preservice teachers who had taken courses in teaching physical

education to handicapped students, declined from 37 to 29 % between 1980 and 1988.

The scenario in N.S.W. however is more optimistic. A Ministerial directive has stated that a compulsory unit on Special Education must be taken by all trainee teachers. The actual details as to the content of such a course has not yet been forthcoming.

#### Labels and Attitudes

Various researchers ( Aloia, Knutson, Minner and Von Seggern 1980 , Rizzo:1984, Antonak :1980 Panda and Bartel 1972) have reported that physical educator's perception of their ability to work with disabled students depended on the label used to describe the students.

Rizzo(1984) found that physical educators held more favourable attitudes towards working with students labeled learning disabled than those labelled physically disabled. Rizzo's findings supported the earlier work of Aloia et al. (1980) but were in opposition to results reported by Antonak(1980) and Panda and Bartel (1972) who found that regular class teachers held more favourable attitudes towards students with physical disabilities. Rizzo then concluded that alternative curriculum models in physical education might help improve the attitudes of physical educators towards these students. Additionally it may be supposed that preservice training courses may be specifically designed in their content and experiences to bring about positive attitude change.

One emphasis of the Special Education course undertaken by the subjects in this study was on delabeling and decategorisation of handicap. Evidence in the research suggests that labelling tends to be a self fulfilling prophecy, with both teachers and students having certain expectations as a result of categorisation of disability

#### Disabled Student's Views

In a British study Williams and Farley (1992) observe that participation is very low among the disabled. They say this is because the disabled are socialised into a life of non-participation starting with school PE. It can also result from thoughtlessness or ignorance. e.g lack of access for

wheelchairs or the more pernicious practice of providing alternative non physical activities because this is what they want or need.

Williams and Farley found that while some students in the study disliked physical activity and avoided involvement by choice, others were restricted by organisational structures such as timetables that didn't give them the option of PE or physical constraints that prevented access to sporting fields, pools and the like.

Interviews conducted by Williams and Farley seemed to reinforce the belief that disabled students are socialised into low expectations. It was clear from student comments, that whatever the limitations in terms of physical activity, the social benefits to both able bodied and disabled of the integrated PE setting were considerable. This study suggest that teacher expertise or maybe more importantly teacher attitudes may be another factor. This is illustrated by the comments of one pupil "I don't think the Teachers knew what I could do." (p51.)

#### Method

Participants in this study were 83 Diploma of Education students and 42 Physical Education majors in their third year of study. The Diploma of Education students were enrolled in a 10 week Special Education course which involved three hours per week attendance. The Physical Education group were enrolled in a 14 week course also involving three hours per week attendance. In addition the Physical Education group were given the opportunity to visit a Special School located near the university. Students were not required to take part in the study to gain marks or as any part of course assessment.

Subjects were surveyed prior to the commencement of the course and again in the final weeks of the course.

#### Instrument of Evaluation

The instrument used to measure attitude was the Attitude Towards Mainstreaming Scale (ATMS) developed by Larrivee (1982) and adapted for the Australian context by Roberts and Pratt (1988)

The ATMS has a reported split-half reliability of .92 (Larrivee and Cook 1979). Green, Rock and Weisenstein (1983) investigated the ATMS and found the internal consistency reliability was .89.

Roberts and Pratt (1983) in an Australian study investigated the psychometric properties of reliability and construct validity of the ATMS to measure the attitudes of teachers towards the integration of disabled children into regular schools. The construct validity of the scale was investigated by way of a factor analysis to determine the factorial validity of the scale. The internal reliability scale for the 30-item scale was .91, a result which was comparable with the results of previous investigators. Another Australian study which uses the ATMS is the Hudson and Clunies-Ross (1984) study. This study accepted the ATMS as a valid and reliable instrument.

The ATMS is a 30-item Likert type survey designed to look at teacher attitudes. The dimensions of teacher attitude under investigation include:

- a) general philosophy of mainstreaming
- b) classroom behaviour of special needs students

- c) perceived ability to teach special needs students
- d) classroom management with special needs students
- e) academic and social growth of special needs students

#### Testing and Experimental Design

Surveys were administered on the first day of classes to both groups. Student names were not required on the survey however students were asked to volunteer their student number for purposes of matching the pre and post test. This would enable the researcher to detect whether attitude change had occurred with specific individuals as well as the total group in the study. Pre and post test matching of responses was not possible as large numbers of students did not volunteer their student numbers.

Students from both groups completed the survey again in the last week of classes.

As can be seen from Table 1. the pre and post test numbers for both groups differ. This can be explained in the Physical Education group by numbers of students joining the course late who were not available for the pretest. In the Diploma of Education group, attendance dropped in the last weeks of the course as pressures and deadlines for assignments mounted.

Reported attitudes before the training course in Special Education and reported attitudes after the Special education course were examined for both Diploma of Education and Physical Education groups. Attitudes of both groups were also compared using a two sample t-test.

Table 1  
Experimental Design

Group 1 Diploma of Education

Group 2 Physical Education

Pretest n= 83

Pretest n= 39

Treatment-Special Education Course  
Education Course

Treatment-Special

Posttest n= 54

Posttest n= 42

#### Course of Study

During a 10 week course of study, Diploma of Education students, all of whom were graduates from a variety of method backgrounds, were exposed to

10 two hour lectures and 10 one hour tutorials. Lectures included guest speakers who specialised in some area of disability, films or videos of disabled people participating in sports.

Emphasis was placed in the course on delabelling and decategorisation of disability. The principle of normalisation (Nirje 1970) and the rights of disabled people were stressed throughout the course.

Information given was aimed at challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about disability.

Assessment was in the form of a major assignment, tutorial presentation and progressive journal.

Physical Education students took part in a 14 week course of study of 14 two hour

lectures and 14 one hour tutorials.

Assessment took the form of a tutorial presentation, a progressive journal and a final examination. In addition students were expected to make one compulsory two hour visit to a nearby Special School.

Students from both groups were encouraged to go beyond the course and seek out information and experiences from the wider community and media that related to disability. Formal instruction and information gained from tutorial involvement as well as related reading in the area of disability were assumed to be the active ingredients during both the 10 week and the 14 week courses.

No instruction or discussion was given based on the ATMS survey items.

## Results

### Differences in the Pretest

Analysis of the results showed a number of areas where the difference in attitude of the two groups was statistically significant.

### Perceived Ability to Teach Students with Special Needs

In the area of perceived ability to teach students with special needs

Physical Education students supported the notion that many of the things regular class teachers do with regular students are also appropriate for special needs students, however the Diploma of Education students largely disagreed or were undecided.

### General Philosophy of Mainstreaming

While attitudes of both groups were supportive of integration as a philosophy Physical Education students showed more positive attitudes than their Diploma of education counterparts. 92% of Physical Education students believed that "the integration of special needs students can be beneficial to regular students" (Item 21 ATMS) while 74% of Diploma of Education students supported the idea. Similarly 89% of Physical Education students

compared with 81% of Diploma of education students supported the belief that " integration offers mixed group interaction which will foster understanding and acceptance of differences" (ATMS item 6 )

#### Classroom Behaviour of Special Needs Students

Both groups believed that the classroom behaviour of special needs children required more patience from the teacher .However 82% of Physical Education students disagreed that the behaviour of special needs students sets a bad example for other students( ATMS item 9) while 63 % of diploma of Education students disagreed.

Two items relating to the classroom behaviour of special needs students caused the most uncertainty among both groups in the study.Item 14 " Most

special needs students are well behaved in the classroom". brought a 56% undecided from the Physical education students and 67 % undecided from the Diploma of education students.

33% of Physical Education students thought special needs students were well behaved.

15% of Diploma of Education students thought they were well behaved but 16% did not feel they were well behaved.Item 19 " It is likely that the special needs student will exhibit behaviour problems in the classroom" brought a 48 % undecided 28 % agree and 24% disagree from Diploma of Education students and a 54 % undecided 10% agree and 36% disagree

#### Academic and Social Growth of Special Needs Students

Physical Education students supported the notion more strongly than Diploma of Education students that "the challenge of being in a regular class will promote the academic growth of the special needs child" ( item 4 ATMS) with both groups showing significant numbers undecided ( P.E. 38.4 % Dip Ed 46% )

Both groups felt that integration would promote the social independence of Special Needs students ( Phys Ed 87 % Dip Ed 69 %) while an enormous discrepancy is shown for Item 25 "The special need student will be socially isolated by regular classroom students" with 64 % of Physical Education students disagreeing while 39.9% of Diploma of Education students disagree with the idea.

#### Differences in the Posttest

The most significant differences in the posttest were found in the Diploma of Education group which showed increase in positive attitudes across 11 items in the ATMS.The greatest areas of attitude change included belief that many of the things regular class teachers do are appropriate for special needs students. Other areas of dramatic change ( 20-25 % increase in positive attitude) include beliefs relating to classroom management with special needs students(item 7 up to 81% from 56% , item 29 up to 75 % from 50% ) and acceptance of special needs students by regular peers (item 25 up to 59 % from 39 %)

The Physical Education group showed significant difference in attitude on only two items of the ATMS.These were items 1 and 16 which both related to

the area of perceived ability to teach special needs students. Students in the posttest showed a change in their attitude from 51% to 73 % in agreement with the notion that many things regular classroom teachers do are appropriate for special needs students indicating a positive change. Physical education students level of disagreement dropped from 82 % to 42 % while their level of agreement grew from 5 % to 25% in relation to Item 16 which pertains to the category "Perceived ability to teach students with special needs"

#### Discussion

Given that the two groups in the study had significantly different components (Contact versus no contact with students with disabilities, length of course and assignments/ examinations) this investigation leaves open the question as to the relative salience of various components of the Special Education Courses as they affect attitudes toward disabled persons. It is possible that student anxieties that appear high at the beginning of the course may have sensitized their responses to the survey in their search for clues as to what was expected for the course. While both groups in the study showed positive attitudes towards students with special needs across a variety of focus areas, the Physical Education students indicated a higher level of positive support. In addition Physical Education students selected the "undecided " category in the Likert scale less frequently than their Diploma of Education counterparts. This may be accounted for in part by the fact that the Physical Education group are a more homogeneous group whereas the Diploma of Education students came from a variety of method backgrounds with majors in Maths, Science, English and so on. In contrast the Diploma of Education group showed the greatest positive change in attitude across both groups.

The Physical Education group showed an increase in positive attitude in two areas only, both of these relating to perceived ability to teach students with special needs.

It is possible that due to exposure to the training course as well as contact with special needs students in school visits that Physical Education students became more confident or felt better prepared to teach students with special needs.

The results of this study support in part and contradict in other areas the findings of other researchers. Antonak (1980) and Panda and Bartel ( 1972) found that regular class teachers held more favourable attitudes towards students with physical disabilities. This study found that attitudes of Physical Education trainee teachers were more favourable than the Diploma of Education group towards students with disabilities in the pretest. Here the assumption is that Diploma students represent the regular class teacher student population.

Diploma of Education students showed greater positive attitude change than the Physical Education group in the posttest. This may be attributed in part to the differing course components. The Diploma group lacked the contact with students with disabilities.

Various researchers have shown that contact with disabled people is a

significant factor in changing attitude (Hannah & Pliner 1983; Stephens and Braun, 1980 ; Rowe & Stutts 1987) However the Physical Education students despite contact with disabled students showed less overall attitude change with the exception being the area of perceived ability to teach students with special needs. This may be one positive outcome of the Physical Education students course experience.

It is impossible to determine from this study whether change in attitude from pretest score to posttest score is a direct result of the experimental treatment or of an interaction between the pretest and treatment. Future research on attitudes of trainee teachers should provide opportunity for students to comment on the impact of various aspects of their course. In addition control groups should operate to determine which aspects of a given Special Education Course are significant in changing attitude.

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