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Effects of Disability Awareness Educational Programs on an Inclusive Classroom

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Abstract

Students with disabilities are more often than not included in the general education classroom. This study develops and implements a Disability Awareness Program in a fourth grade classroom and through action research, determines whether the program was influential in shaping positive behaviors towards students with disabilities. The students were exposed to five disability lessons on autism, physical disabilities, dyslexia, blindness/ vision impairments and accessibility. Three lessons, beginning, middle and end, began with questionnaires on disability knowledge and moral thinking. Each lesson was partnered with open discussion. In response to the positive attitudes, the classroom environment become more inclusive of students with disabilities, provided a more welcoming learning environment and fostered better friendships among all students. By educating students on different disabilities, they became more accepting and understanding of individual differences. The individual lessons, activities and discussions allowed students to critically think about the treatment of people with disabilities and the importance of inclusion to benefit their development and happiness.

Introduction

The push for inclusion in schools is stronger than ever. Students of all levels of ability are placed in the same classroom, taught the same material by the same teacher. Inclusion is said to provide greater access to the general curriculum, increase social interactions and have higher expectations for students with disabilities. Inclusion provides opportunities for increased achievement, both socially and academically, for students with disabilities. The diverse learning styles to not only help learn academic material but also social skills that play into the

development of a range of strengths and needs (Maich & Belcher, 2012). Inclusive classrooms also have the potential to alter societal attitudes in a more positive way towards students with disabilities (Rillotta & Nettelbeck, 2007). However, many typical developing students are not educated on disabilities so they are not as understanding, accepting and empathetic to those students with disabilities. This has the potential to result in a negative classroom environment or even bullying. Along with the installment of the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1975, and the doubling numbers of students receiving special education services in schools (Ellman, 2012), inclusion is the more sought out process because of the benefits it provides to both students with disabilities and also typical developing students, however, many students without disabilities are not educated on disabilities which leads to negative attitudes towards peers with disabilities and a less inclusive classroom environment. This research suggests benefits to incorporating disability awareness into the curriculum and the benefits it has on an inclusion classroom's overall environment.

Literature Review

Disability Awareness in Schools

Disability awareness programs are influential to the overall environment of a school. Disability awareness in schools is extremely important because it educates students so they may become better citizens (Lindsay & McPherson, 2011). Including disability and ableism understanding into a multicultural education will benefit student's long term by guiding them through the process and providing them with tools they need to be more understanding of diversity. Inclusion is important and supports understanding because contact between majority and minority groups is an effective way to eliminate prejudice and support tolerance for differences (Gasser, Malti & Buholzer, 2012). In regards to any type of diversity, education and involvement is important to developing understanding and acceptance. Researchers have found awareness programs to be essential because they lead to positive attitudes towards students with disabilities (Morin, Rivard, Crocker, Boursier & Caron, 2008). When students are educated on the topic of diversity or specifically disability, they are likely to develop a more positive attitude towards differences. Negative attitudes towards students with disabilities develop out of ignorance (Ison, McIntyre, Rothery, Smithers-Sheedy, Goldsmith & Parsonage, 2010). As a solution to end ignorance, disability awareness programs educate students, foster and nourish

positive attitudes in typically developing peers towards students with disabilities. Researchers believe that negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities begin to form early in the developmental process (Krahe & Altwasser, 2006) therefore, it is important to educate students while they are of primary school age so they can carry their positive attitude with them through their schooling and through life. Awareness programs are a way to promote acceptance, understanding and increase knowledge about different disabilities, (Ison et. Al, 2010) which as a result, leads to the decline of negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. The decline of negative attitudes is key to the development of an accepting school environment.

Awareness training is beneficial when they incorporate hands-on activities demonstrating what life with a disabilities may be like (McGinnis, 2006). Disability awareness programs can take all forms including simulations, discussions, literature exposure, real life contact and collaboration and role playing. It is important when conducting simulations, however, that students understand that just because an individual has to do something differently does not mean that their life is affected in a negative way. It is thought that disability simulations fail to depict what individuals with disabilities lives are like and instead are counterproductive by creating negative attitudes towards living life with a disability (Lalvani & Broderick, 2013). Disability awareness may not always be just for the students, it is also an important professional development strategy for teachers, administrators and other school personnel also need to be educated on disabilities in order to have a more positive attitude and create an inclusive environment for all students. Schools are established for academic development but also have a social component, it is thought that schools that cater to supporting both academic and social inclusion were more effective in creating a positive environment (Rillotta & Nettlebeck, 2007). In order for a school to be successful and help students grow, they must make the effort to teach students academic as well as social/life skills.

Positive exposure and education is what is needed when developing a disability awareness program. In an inclusion classroom, a classroom containing both general education students and students who receive intervention, students may be surrounded by peers with disabilities but mere exposure, the idea of simply placing a student with a disability in a classroom with typically developing students is not enough to truly create an inclusive environment demonstrating behaviors of acceptance and positive attitude (Rillotta & Nettlebeck,

2007). It is thought that the environment handicaps an individual with a disability more than the actual impairment because of the large effect the environment has on an individual's success (Leicester, 2011). In a school setting, disability awareness programs should be incorporated into the classroom and received by all students in order to create a more accepting and positive environment for students with disabilities. The school climate sets the tone for the individual classrooms. If a school takes the initiative to raise awareness and implement disability education in its classrooms, then it will have a better chance of fostering peer acceptance and accommodate students with disabilities (Lindsay & McPherson, 2011). A positive atmosphere will be more conducive to learning and as a result, if the students with disabilities are more comfortable in their environment, they may be more academically successful.

Promoting Supportive Attitudes towards Individuals with Disabilities

Many outside influences shape a child's attitude. They may develop ideas about diversity, life and people from home, peers, and life experiences but school plays an important role in developing attitude. School is the place where students learn surrounded by other people with many differences. At school, students should learn to be accepting, understanding and friendly. Those skills should also be reinforced at home. Students who are not taught how to develop an appreciation for diversity, are the students that have poor social acceptance and result in unsuccessful inclusion (Rillotta & Nettlebeck, 2007). Students with this outlook on differences need guidance and insight into the benefits of being surrounded by people who are different from yourself. Before one can help change a student's attitude, one must understand the components of attitude. Attitude consists of three components, affective, behavioral and cognitive. The affective component reflects a child's feelings towards an individual with a disability. The behavioral component includes behaviors or thoughts of behaviors about interacting with a student with a disability. Lastly, the cognitive component includes statements of understanding or knowledge of beliefs about a student with a disability (Campbell, 2006).

Altering attitude begins with the teacher, the classroom authority figure. Teachers have a lot of influence on a child's first impression with unfamiliar peers (Campbell, 2006). It is noted that teachers with a more positive attitude towards inclusion in their classroom were more confident in their ability to educate a student with a disability in an inclusion classroom (Campbell, Gilmore & Cuckelly, 2003). In order for teachers to have a positive attitude, they

have to feel comfortable and confident in their ability to teach. This goes back to the administration and their obligation to provide materials and opportunities for all teachers to further their professional development and learn how to teach students with special needs. Teachers who are uncomfortable educating students in an inclusion classroom may develop a negative attitude, which leads to lower expectation and less learning opportunities for students with disabilities (Campbell, Gilmore & Cuckelly, 2003). It is important for teachers to display a positive attitude towards students with disabilities and teacher can be aware of their attitude and treatment through self-monitoring (Bae & Clark, 2005). Teachers must check themselves often and must be objective in their behaviors (Bae & Clark, 2005). By keeping their behavior in check, teachers can make sure they are setting the most positive example for their students.

Inclusive classrooms provide students with the opportunity to learn positive social skills while learning academic material. One benefit of an inclusive education is that typically developing students develop a more positive attitude because they learn to reduce stereotypes about disabilities and increase their tolerance for differences through contact with children with disabilities (Gasser, Malti & Buholzer, 2012). Children's attitudes towards students with disabilities have been researched and it was concluded that the varying level of attitude depended on the function of the disability (Gasser, Malti & Buholzer, 2012). For example, non-visible disabilities, like mental disabilities, are looked upon with a more negative attitude, compared to visible disabilities, like physical disabilities, which are looked to with a more positive attitude. However, students with Autism are often victims of negative attitudes even after increased contact with said individuals (Campbell, 2006). Meta-analytic research concluded that inclusive classroom environments have a "medium-sized positive effect of children's attitudes towards persons with disabilities" (Gasser, Malti & Buholzer, 2012) when compared to non-inclusive classroom environments. Students who are exposed to diversity and understand the importance of individual differences of any kind, whether it is ability, race, gender, religion or language, are less afraid and more likely to establish relationships, which leads to acceptance and a more positive environment (McGinnis, 2006). A positive environment encourages learning for all students' not just students with disabilities.

As concluded in the previous section, it is important for students to develop an awareness for disabilities because it will allow them to be better citizens. This is important because

society's attitude towards an individual with a disability affects their integration not only in schools but also in the community (Morin et. al, 2013). If individuals have not developed a positive attitude and an acceptance of disabilities during their school years, then they will be more likely to carry those prejudices with them through life, hindering the inclusion of people with disabilities into society. It is no secret that education has a positive correlation with attitudes (Morin et. al, 2013). In order for students to develop a positive attitude towards individuals with disabilities, it is important for them to have the opportunity to access information about different disabilities, understand what people with disabilities go through, and acknowledge how to treat and include people with disabilities into society.

Effect of Peer's Attitude on an Individual with a Disability

Negative attitudes are detrimental to the success of an individual with a disability. In order for a student to flourish in the school environment, they must be exposed to the least restrictive environment possible. Negative attitudes create barriers that are difficult for students with disabilities to overcome and limit one's ability to achieve success and independence (Sable, 1995). Many people rely on others opinions to guide how they feel about themselves. This is no different for people with disabilities. They link their social value and self-concept to the attitudes of their peers (Sable, 1995). Their development in these areas and integration into society depends on how their peers respond to their disability. The emotional health of students with disabilities has a strong impact on their academic performance and their future success (Ellman, 2012). When students are bullied or ignored in the classroom, it affects their school work. It is hard to focus on subtraction or the Civil War if a student is worried about not having any friends or who they are going to sit with at lunch because none of their classmates accept them. Before a student can focus on their education, they must be secure in other aspects of life, physically and emotionally. The social inclusion of a student with a disability is crucial to their overall academic achievement and success.

In order for a student with a disability to take full advantage of their educational and social responsibilities, they must be surrounded by supportive individuals with positive attitudes. Students with disabilities participate less than typically developing peers in school and in the community because of the negative attitudes barricading them from participating fully in life (Ison et. al, 2010). They feel as though they are not accepted or supported when they participate

and most individuals would rather not subject themselves to discrimination. In the United States there are laws put in place to eliminate the discrimination of individuals with disabilities, which support the rights of these individuals and promotes a positive attitude towards individuals with disabilities, but there are still obstacles (Krahe & Altwasser, 2006). The development of positive attitudes are one way to remove such obstacles for the students, citizens, friends, family members, co-workers and other individuals with disabilities. When obstacles are removed and barriers are broken, students with disabilities have to best chance for educational success.

The purpose of this study is to see how influential disability awareness programs are on shaping positive attitudes of individuals without disabilities towards individuals with disabilities. The student's attitudes effect the overall classroom environment which determines whether students with disabilities are truly welcomed socially and academically into a general education classroom. Throughout my research, I have sought to answer several questions; Does educating students about disabilities change their attitudes in a positive way towards individuals with disabilities? Do positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities allow for greater access to the academic material and social inclusion?

Method

Participants

The study included 29 students, 12 boys and 17 girls, in an inclusive classroom setting. The school is in northwest Ohio, working middle class majority socioeconomic status. The students were fourth grade students ranging in ages 9-10. Five students received special education services. The 5 students receiving intervention were pulled out of the classroom daily during language arts class, testing and intervention. Their disabilities were mild/moderate learning disabilities and ADHD. None of the students were English language learners. The class composition by ethnicity is 10.3% Black, Hispanic or Indian and 89.7% is Caucasian. The school as a whole has 390 students enrolled in grade Pre-K through 5. Of those 390 students, 79.14% are white, 3.27% are Hispanic, 2.25% are black and 2% are Asian. The fourth grade has 63 students divided amongst three teachers. The classes rotate for math, science and social studies classes throughout the afternoon. The school participates in a Positive Behavior System, promoting good behavior and the development of good character skills like respect,

responsibility and positive attitude. The students participate in the DARE program, led by a DARE officer to teach students about bullying, drugs and alcohol and other bad behaviors. There was no known disability awareness program offered to the student body prior or at the time of study.

Research Design: Action Research

Action research is, “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment” (Reason & Bradury, 2001). Action research is a way for educators and individuals to research how their processes are working. The typical process for conducting action research includes, “1. Selecting a focus 2. Clarifying theories 3. Identifying research questions 4. Collecting data 5. Analyzing data 6. Reporting results 7. Taking informed action” (Segar, 2000). For this study, I chose action research because I wanted to be more aware of the effects of educating students about disabilities in an inclusive classroom and how it would affect the overall classroom environment. I was doing an action, teaching, and then observing how my action influenced my students. The results of the study benefit me in my future career, but also other educators that wish to create a more inclusive environment for their students with disabilities. I care about students with disabilities and how they fit into a general education classroom, therefore, this research will help me be more effective at creating that type of positive environment in the future.

Procedure

Questionnaires were conducted at three different points throughout the 5 week educational period, beginning, middle and end. The questionnaires addressed different ideas including disability knowledge prior, acceptance/ treatment of people with disabilities and disability knowledge post 5 week activity period. Each week, a 30 minute lesson was presented on a different disability, type of disability or other important ideas surrounding disabilities like person first language or the least restrictive environment and accessibility. Lessons included disability stimulations, bibliotherapy, the use of children’s picture books to elicit social, emotional and behavioral goals (Maich & Belcher, 2012), cooperative learning, combined inclusive groups working together towards a common goal (Rollotta & Nettlebeck, 2007) and discussion on each topic or disability. Through action research, observations of students’

behaviors, interactions and attitudes were noted. Observations were conducted previous to disability awareness lesson, during and after each disability presentation.

Lesson 1: Physical Disabilities

The lesson began with a questionnaire asking questions about disabilities. I wanted to know what the students already knew about different disabilities or the population with disabilities. Questions included, what is a disability? How many people in the United States have a disability? Give me an example of a disability, Do you know anyone or are friends with anyone who has a disability? Students answered varied widely, resulting in a widespread understanding level of disabilities. The questionnaire also include moral questions about treatment of disabilities that would be used as a baseline for data collection on change in attitude. After independently completing the questionnaire, we discussed as a class what a disability was before leading into our simulation. The students responded with ideas like “when someone is different” and “when a person has something wrong with them and cannot do the things that we can do”. Upon the conclusion of the activity, I realized that the majority of the class had this outlook on what a disability was based on their questionnaire responses. I promoted the idea that even though someone may appear different, or they may so something in a different way, they are still a person with emotions and feelings and they should be treated just like everyone else. I used Deaf people as an example explaining that they can still communicate even though they do not have the ability of hearing or sometimes speech, they do not have a disability, just a different ability because they use their hands to communicate.

After discussion, five students volunteered to participate in the simulation for the class. If more time was available, the exercise would have been open to all students. Each student put a heavy pair of socks on their hands. The socks represented the inability to use/move your fingers or hands. One to socks were applied, the students were asked to complete tasks that involve those extremities. The five students attempted to tie their shoes, unwrap a small piece of candy and zip up their jackets. Several students were successful as some of the tasks while others struggled. During the simulations, the remainder of the class was given the direction to observe their actions and emotions. The participating individuals commented that “it was difficult”, they were “frustrated and embarrassed” that they couldn’t complete the task. While opening the candy, each student was not allowed to eat their candy unless they were successful in unwrapping it, this

increased the motivation to work hard to unwrap the candy and all five students eventually were successful. After the simulations were complete, the class discussed what other activity may be difficult if you have a disability like Muscular Dystrophy where is hindered the use of your hand and fingers. Countering talking about what an individual with this type of disability may not be able to do, I challenged the class to think of others ways they may go about completing these activities. In conclusion, we reviewed what a disability was and what type of disabilities we learned about today.

Lesson 2: Vision Impairments/ Blindness

The lesson began with a review of the previous lesson. The students were asked what a disabilities was and what disabilities we shed light on during our previous time together. Without reminder, the students were able to tell me our discussed definition of a disability and also knew the name of several different physical disabilities we previously discussed. Before we began the simulation, I introduced vision impairments. The students discussed what constituted a vision impairment and how someone may develop a vision impairment. I informed the students that anyone could potentially develop one throughout any point in their life from aging, an accident or a genetic cause. I shared several statistics with the students about blindness, the most shocking was that someone in the world becomes blind every 5 seconds. As a class we counted to 5 and took a moment to reflect on what that meant. We discussed what activities may be difficult for someone with a vision impairment and they came up with ideas like watching television, using a computer or eating. We also discussed what ways an individual with a vision impairment may do similar things but in a different way. The students were aware of vision aids like glasses, canes and braille to help them read. We discussed other technologies that may be associated with an everyday computer like text to speech software or ease of access modes where the print is larger and colors are more user friendly. We also discussed how to behave if they see another student or a person with a service dog. The students learned that the dog was working and that they should not disturb it or try to pet it unless given permission by its owner. They were excited to do another simulation and the whole class volunteered to participate.

For the simulation, I chose five different students so each student will have the opportunity to participate in at least one activity. Before blindfolding the students, I made sure I had their verbal consent and they were comfortable with being blindfolded. After blindfolding

each student, I handed them a labeled plastic bag with a different amount of change in each bag. The students were instructed to count the total amount that was contained in each bag. The students were allotted a five minute time period to count the coins. Several students concluded counting before the time was up. Once they were finished counting, they removed their blindfolds and revealed to the class their total. As the facilitator, I revealed the actual total. Several students were dollars away from the actual amount compared to one student who was only \$.02 away. For the students who were not even remotely close, I asked what was so difficult and why did they think they were so far away from their goal. Students responded with answers like “they couldn’t keep track of what they had previously counted” and “it was hard to tell which coin was which to determine an amount to count”. I then asked the student who was extremely close what strategies she used to count her coins, she replied with, “I used the sizes of the coins and the texture on the sides of the coins to determine what coin I was counting”. Many other students were surprised by the technique and noticed the texture differences as I passed around sample coins.

After the simulation, I presented the class with a scenario, they were an individual with a vision impairment checking out at the grocery store and there was a long line behind them. They were reaching in their purse/pocket to find the exact change. After describing this to the students, I had them take a few moments to picture the image in their head and asked them how they would have felt. One student responded with “rushed”, another with “embarrassed”, I explained to the class that to a seeing individual it may have seemed scary and they may have felt rushed but an person with a vision impairment has done it a million times so for them it was nothing out of the ordinary, just a part of their everyday life.

Before the end of our session together, I took the students back to a broad discussion about disabilities. I asked them what stereotypes may be associated with an individual with a disability. There was silence for a moment and one student raised her hand and asked what a stereotype was. After explaining to the students to the best of my ability, they responded with things like “not cool or fun”, “not smart” and “not normal, weird”. From there, I encouraged the students to not just think as someone with a disability has someone who is different, weird, stupid, and uncool or not fun, but instead, to think of them as another human being with feelings, emotions, a personality and sense of humor, wants, needs, interests and hobbies. Just because

they have a disability does not make them any different as a person, they may just do certain activities in a different way.

Lesson 3: Autism

As done in previous lessons, this lesson began with a review of the previous weeks. Even with a week gap, the students remembered that we had discussed vision impairments as well as physical disabilities. To start off the new lesson, I provided the students with another questionnaire. This questionnaire regarded more moral reasoning regarding disabilities. It asked true and false questions like “all people in a wheelchair sick, I would help a student with a disability who was in my class if they needed help, I would be happy if I had a disability, etc.” Some of the student responses were shocking because several said they would be happy if they had a disability because they would learn to live a happy life even with their disability. Many replied in a positive way towards individuals with disabilities. After collecting the questionnaire, I introduced the lesson on Autism. I described what Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) was and when it is developed or diagnosed. I also informed the students about the wide range of symptoms and characteristics of Autism based on where it is on the spectrum.

Because it would be hard to simulate life with Autism, I used literature to explain what it might be like to live with ASD. Research has noted the benefits of using fictional characters to demonstrate the characteristic of Autism Spectrum Disorders (Maich & Belcher, 2012). For my demonstration, I use the popular children’s book titled *Ian’s Walk* by Laurie Lears. *Ian’s Walk* is about a little boy and his day at the park with his older sister. Throughout the walk to the park, one sister is annoyed and embarrassed because Ian likes to do things differently and his senses are stimulated by different things in the world around him. After having lost Ian, his sister freaks out and realized that Ian is special and important. On the walk back home, his sister enjoys the little things that Ian enjoys and realizes that they aren’t so weird. The students were engaged in the story and really understood Ian’s character. Several had sympathy for Ian and showed scared emotions when Ian’s sister lost him in the park. Upon finishing the book, the class participated in a discussion. Several also replied with similar ideas reflecting that they would be open to participating in activities that the individual with Autism wished to do so that they were willing to play and be involved in the activity.

Before ending the lesson, I talked with the class about how to talk about people with disabilities. I explained the idea of an individual being a person first and then their disability, not categorized by their disability. This is known as person first language and is the most appropriate way to address individuals. I also presented the students with a challenge. I challenged the students to stop using the “R” word. Many students did not know what word I was referring to therefore, I had to use the word but I encouraged them to replace it in their vocabulary. We talked about why that would may be inappropriate to use in everyday language and why we should not call someone retarded. I explained to the students that they should take responsibility for spreading the word to end the use of the “R” word by even standing up to their friends when they hear the word and tell them that it is not a nice word and they should pick another one. Overall, it was a very good lesson and the students were engaged and involved in the literature and the discussion the entire thirty minutes.

Lesson 4: Ease of Access

At the beginning of the lesson, we reviewed our previous three lessons as well as what a disability was. Instead of talking about a specific disability, I discussed with the class the physical environment of a public space and the effect that it may have on a person with a disability. I discussed the importance to the set-up of the room and how that may inhibit a students who is blind or in a wheelchair’s ability to move freely around the room. I also discussed the underlying theme from the American’s with Disabilities Act and its strides to making the world more inclusive towards people with disabilities. The act made regulations regarding building structure, curb cuts and other such improvement to ease access. I talked with the students about heights of things and how it would be hard to get a drink of water if the fountain was too high or wash their hands if the sink did not have room underneath for a wheelchair. I asked the students to think about how students with vision impairments were supposed to know what room they were in, many responded with braille signs but their job was to see if their school has braille signs outside the rooms.

After introductory discussion, I separated the students into five groups. The groups were specifically assigned and included one student on an IEP in each group. This allotted for cooperative learning to take place. The students were grouped with an individual with a disability and had to work together to perform a task. Each student was given a role, one was the

leader, one was the recorder, one was the presenter and two were the observers. The students were provided with a list of items to observe throughout the school building. With specific instructions to be very quiet, the teams traveled around the school building looking and analyzing the accessibility of each item on the list. The students were instructed to answer yes or no to each item as to whether it was accessible or not. They were also advised to give a 1 to 2 sentence response as to why it was or why it was not. Some items on the list included items discussed above but also areas like the playground, entrances and exits of the school and hallways. While the groups were out and about, I walked the hallways making sure they were abiding by my rules. I had no trouble with any of the groups. The groups collaborated and quietly discussed whether or not that would be accessible for someone with a disability. They talked about what disabilities it would have not been easily accessible for and how it could be changed.

After ten minutes, the students came back to the classroom and we discussed what they observed. Once they revealed their findings, we went through the discussion questions, some of which the students already answered in their findings. If buildings and items were accessible from the start, individuals with disabilities would not be pointed out as different for not being able to access the environment fully. In conclusion, we reviewed how important it is to make things accessible for all people and the effect that an environment may have on an individual with disabilities.

Lesson 5: Dyslexia

The lesson began with the third and final questionnaire. The students quietly filled out the morality questions and passed them in when complete. The students filled out the questionnaires anonymously. Upon completion of the survey, the class reviewed what was discussed in previous weeks and revisited what a disability was. When discussion was concluded, I passed out the Dyslexia worksheet while beginning discussion on what dyslexia was and how it effects students and their learning. The students were instructed to work with a partner to try to decode the message using the given key. After several minutes, I asked for a volunteer to try to read the paragraph out loud to the class. Several students attempted to read the paragraph but none were successful. As a class, we went through and decoded the message together and read out loud together. Once the activity was completed, we discussed the challenges that a student with

dyslexia may face and what emotions they would encounter while reading or writing. We talked about strategies that a student with dyslexia may use to help them read faster and how they could help a friend who has dyslexia. The students were engaged and worked well in their partnerships.

Results and Discussion

There were several themes that developed throughout my research. The more the students learned about disabilities, the more accepting they became. The students were excited for their disability lesson each week and were engaged in each activity. Each student actively participated in discussion and in the activity as a participator or an observer. At the beginning of the program, the students had negative views on disabilities. A person with a disability was an individual who was different, less of a person because they were not capable of functioning the same way as a 'Normal' person. The majority of students agreed that someone with a disability had something wrong with them. Throughout the program, the students learned that people with disabilities may complete tasks differently than an abled being, but they are not any less of a person. As a class, the students developed a working definition of what a disability was and it changed as the weeks progressed and their knowledge, understanding and attitude towards individuals with disabilities changed. The classes final definition was an "an individual with feelings that has to do something in their own way." It is was inclusive definition that attributed to individuals with disabilities being their own person with emotions that have similar goals in life, they just take a different path.

Throughout each discussion, the students were able to not only talk about the difficulties or weakness of the different disabilities, but I also encouraged them to think about the strengths that could be associated with each disability. The students used their critical thinking skills to come up with tasks or other goals that the individuals could accomplish better because of their disability. The students began by feeling sorry for people with disabilities but towards the end of the program, they realized that people with disabilities did not need sympathy, they needed support and understanding. This was especially true for *Ian's Walk*, they felt bad for Ian for getting lost and also felt bad for his sister because she was embarrassed but after discussion, the students understood that Ian just preferred to do things differently. The class expressed that they would be welcoming to Ian and participate in activities that he would want to do in order to get him socializing so they could develop friendships. The students retained information from

previous weeks and carried lessons with them especially when it came to person first language and not using the 'R' word. The way the students talked in discussion changed, they began referring to 'disabled people' as 'people with disabilities'. Some students still made mistakes with their inclusive language, but their peers were there to guide them and with more time, it is a habit that will fully develop throughout the classroom. The questionnaires showed positive moral change. The first round showed interest but not much understanding. Some students knew that they were supposed to be nice to people with disabilities but would have strayed away from an opportunity to help or interact if they had the choice. In the second round, several students changed their thinking about working with other students with disabilities and showed interest in helping them in the classroom, sitting with them at lunch and even being their friend. During the last round, the majority of the class was supportive of the idea of developing friendships with children with disabilities and overwhelmingly has positive thoughts and ideas towards those individuals and their inclusion in the classroom. Overall, the change in the students was subtle, but their language and enthusiasm for the program expressed their positive attitude development.

Implication, Limitations, and Future Study

From this research, one can imply that teaching students about disabilities will only benefit their development as a student and a citizen. Mini lessons added to the curriculum or included in the curriculum when possible has the potential to help a student develop an understanding of individual differences and provides them with the opportunity to be accepting of others. Even though the study showed improvements in attitude towards individuals with disabilities, several factors may have also been at play. The research was conducted in a sample inclusive classroom. The results would be more convincing if the sample size was larger than one classroom and possible among different grade levels. It would also be more convincing if there was more time. My study included five lessons but other research similar has been conducted with more, providing more exposure and therefore, better results. Not only did I only conduct five lessons, but my lessons were one week apart from each other. More progress may have been made in altering attitudes if the students were given the opportunity to have daily exposure instead of weekly. Another factor at play, was the previous relationship that I had with my students. Prior to my research, I have had the opportunity to work with the students extensively. In order to know that it was merely the disability awareness program, the students

would have to be exposed by an unbiased, unfamiliar source. However, I do believe that having established relationships with the students benefited the program because the students trusted me, were comfortable with me and their peers to participate in discussion, were excited when I was teaching a lesson and respected me enough to pay attention when I was teaching.

In future studies, the length of the program would be extended. Not only would the length be extended, but more lessons would be incorporated into the program to ensure that the students are learning as much as possible about different disabilities. With such a short program length, it was not possible to teach about each and every disabilities which is what would have been ideal. In order for students to be fully aware of disabilities, they must be exposed to all different kinds. In a future study, I would design lessons for a wider range of disabilities so they students have the opportunity to learn about many different kinds. The sample size of students would be larger and with varying ages to ensure that the program is beneficial to the development of positive attitudes. Overall, the study resulted in positive attitudes to foster, but needed extended time to nourish and help grow into deeper understanding of disabilities.

Application

As a pre-service intervention specialist this research is very valuable to me and the development of my future classrooms. Because the push for inclusion is so prominent in our education systems, it is inevitable that the majority of students will have an educational experience involving another student with a disability. If teachers are aware of negative attitudes and their relation to student performance, than why is there not more being done to help create a more respectable and accepting environment? As a per-service teacher with the goals of working in a co-teaching inclusive setting, I would like to be able to collaborate with a general education teacher to incorporate disability awareness into the curriculum. It may not be required in the Common Core content standards but it is an important life skill that students should be developing at an early age. Schools are preparing students for life by educating them, teachers should be educating students on all types of things that they may encounter throughout their life especially disability awareness and acceptance of diversity because students may be the future employers, law makers, administrators, and other figured of authority in society and we should want them to be accepting of all people and well-rounded in their education and life experiences. A successful awareness program is about content but also exposure. Students need to be exposed

to the idea of disabilities and if possible individuals with disabilities so it is not a foreign concept. Teachers can easily incorporate facts, mini-lessons, simulations, literature or exercises into their everyday curriculum. Diversity can be incorporated into the curriculum in many different ways especially through literature and history.

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Appendix

1. Disability Questionnaires
 - a. #1
 - b. #2
 - c. #3
2. Lesson Plans
 - a. Physical Disabilities
 - b. Vision Impairments/Blindness
 - c. Autism
 - d. Ease of Access
 - e. Dyslexia
 - i. Dyslexia activity worksheet

Appendix 1a.

Disabilities # 1

1. What is a disability?
2. Give me an example of a disability?
3. Do you know anyone with a disability?
4. What disability would you like to know more about?
5. How many people in the United States do you think have a disability?

True or False

1. I can have fun with someone with a disability
2. Everyone who uses a wheelchair is sick
3. People with disabilities are weird
4. We should treat people with disabilities the same as a person without disabilities
5. People who are dyslexic are stupid because they read slow
6. It is okay to say something or someone is retarded
7. It is okay to call a boy autistic
8. You should always pet a service dog when you see one

Appendix 1b.

Disabilities #2

Circle True or False

1. All people who use a wheelchair are sick?

True

False

2. We should treat a person with a disability the same as a person without a disability

True

False

3. I would not be friends with a person with a disability

True

False

4. People with disabilities are the same as me

True

False

If you answered True, how are they the same?

If you answered False, How are they different?

5. People with autism are weird

True

False

6. I would help a kid in my class with a disability if they needed help

True

False

7. If I had a disability, I would be happy

True

False

8. What have you learned so far about disabilities?

Appendix 1c.

Disabilities #3

True or False

9. I can have fun with someone with a disability
10. Everyone who uses a wheelchair is sick
11. People with disabilities are weird
12. We should treat people with disabilities the same as a person without disabilities
13. People who are dyslexic are stupid because they read slow
14. It is okay to say something or someone is retarded
15. It is okay to call a boy autistic
16. You should always pet a service dog when you see one
17. People with disabilities are the same as me

18. I would help a kid in my class with a disability if they needed help
19. People with autism are weird

20. Name three important things you learned about disabilities

1.

2.

3.

Appendix 2a.

Activity 1:

Socks, Socks, and More Socks

Source: "A Perfect Fit, 4-H Involvement for Youth with Disabilities." 1996. Breaking New Ground/National AgrAbility Project, Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service.

Disabilities Addressed

Muscular dystrophy (a muscle disease that weakens muscles and reduced movement)

Multiple sclerosis (damaged nerve cells and spinal cord resulting in bad communication from brain)

Cerebral palsy (movement disorder that inhibits movement)

Desired Outcome

This activity is designed to make student aware of the challenges faced by people who have a muscular mobility disability.

Materials Needed

- Heavy Pairs of Socks
- Several Pieces of Tightly Wrapped Candy, shoe laces and coat with zipper

What to Do

1. Select a few volunteers from the class.
2. Ask them to place tow socks on each hand.
3. Instruct one student to unwrap a piece of candy and eat it, one student to tie their shoes and another student to zip up their jacket

Questions to Ask

following completion of the activity, ask and discuss the following questions:

- What were some of the problems encountered?
- What was the most difficult part of trying to eat a piece of candy, tie your shoe or zip your jacket?
- What are some other tasks that would be difficult for you to do on a daily basis.

Appendix 2b.

Activity 2:

How much do you see?

Disability addressed

Blindness: the inability to see. Can be caused by genetics, can be born with it, and can happen from an accident or a disease.

Desired outcome

This activity is designed to make students aware of the challenges faced by people who have a vision impairment or are blind.

Materials:

5 blindfolds

5 bags of coins

What to do:

1. Select a few volunteers from the class
2. Assist them with putting on their blindfolds
3. Hand each student a bag of coins
4. Instruct students to count the coins in their bag without being able to see

Questions to ask

- Why was counting the coins without seeing difficult?
- What emotions were you feeling when you were trying to count the coin?
- How did the audience feel watching the students attempt to count the coins?
- What tricks did you use to count the coins?
- How would you feel if you were standing in a grocery line and everyone was waiting on you/pressuring you to count your change?
- What are some other tasks that would be difficult for you to do on a daily basis?

Appendix 2c.

Activity 3:

Ian's Walk

Disability addresses

Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism is a developmental disability that affects the normal functioning of the brain. It is present at birth and is usually diagnosed by age three and is present through adulthood. People with autism have difficulty with communication skills, social skills and reasoning. Symptoms vary widely so it is referred to as a spectrum disorder.

Desired Outcome

This lesson is designed to make students aware of the behaviors that people with autism may have and how to be their friend.

Materials Needed

"Ian's Walk" by Laurie Lears

What to do:

1. Introduce autism to the students
2. Read "Ian's Walk"
3. Discuss using discussion questions

Questions to Ask

1. What are some things Ian did differently than you?
2. What are some things that Ian did the same as you?
3. What do you think Ian would have been good at?
4. What did you notice about Ian's sister on their walk back? How was she different than before?
5. How could/should you behave if your friends with someone with autism?

Appendix 2d.

Activity 4

How inclusive is your school building?

Disability addressed

All disabilities. The physical environment of buildings, communities and other public places greatly affects the acceptance of people with disabilities. It is important for students to be aware of design features that may affect an individual with a disability.

Students will learn about curb cuts and their importance during the Americans with Disabilities Act. They will also learn about braille on the bathroom signs or classroom signs. The importance of the height of sinks, toilets or water fountains will be stressed as well as door size, ease of mobility around the classroom and even the inclusiveness of the playground.

Desired Outcome

This lesson is designed to make students aware of the design of their school and whether it is disability friendly or not.

Materials Needed

Environment list

Are the accessible? Yes or no? Why?

Water fountains

Door widths

Toilets

Restroom sinks

Playground

Hallways

Desks

Restroom signs

Classroom Signs

School entrance/ exits

Countertop/ cabinets/ shelves

What to do:

4. Introduce physical environment restrictions to the students
5. Divide students into 5 groups, 1 student on an IEP in each group (cooperative learning)
6. Give each student a checklist
7. Encourage each student to QUIETLY look around the classroom and the school building for the different items on the list. Encourage students to put themselves in the shoes of someone with a disability and see how constricting the physical environment may be.
8. Give the students a 10 minute time frame to check everything off their list
9. Discuss using discussion questions

Questions to Ask

6. What are some things you noticed that would be difficult to access that weren't on the list?
7. What could you do to make things more accessible for people with disabilities?
8. Why is it important to make buildings and objects accessible to everyone in a public space?
9. What would you do if something wasn't accessible for someone with a disability?
10. How would you feel if you were in an environment that you couldn't fully function in because things were not accessible to you?

Appendix 2e.

Activity 5:

Disability addresses

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability in reading. People with dyslexia have trouble with word recognition, decoding and spelling. Students have slow vocabulary development and trouble with reading comprehension, reading out loud and reading fluency.

Students with dyslexia can be successful in reading and writing with proper support.

Students with dyslexia are often easily frustrated, emotional and easily pressured.

Desired Outcome

This lesson is designed to make students aware of the characteristics of dyslexia and the learning difficulties associated with having dyslexia.

Materials Needed

Dyslexia handout (attached)

Pencil

What to do:

10. Introduce Dyslexia to the students
11. Instruct students quietly to complete the activity
12. Ask for a volunteer to attempt to read the paragraph with the specific directions
13. Discuss using discussion questions

Questions to Ask

11. Why was the activity difficult?
12. What strategies did you use to complete the task?
13. How did you feel while doing the activity?
14. How would you feel if everything you read, books, magazines, tests, signs etc. were like that?
15. If you were partnered with someone with dyslexia, how would you treat them?

Appendix 2ei.

Read and try to re-write the following passage using the instructions in the box.

Berechuqes useq qo be rounq puq nom zosq are spuare. Spuare berechuqes tly tesqer enq lenq paqqr qhen rounq berechuqes. Spuare berechuqes heve qwo layers calleq skins which till qha berechuqe wiqh air when obans.

When you see:	Pronounce as:
t	f
q	d or t
z	m
p	b or q
b	p
m	w
a (as in bat)	e (as in pet)
e (as in pet)	a (as in bat)