

POSTER 5

Teacher attitudes towards the inclusion of children who use wheelchairs in mainstream schools

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Summary

This paper discusses the findings of a small study aimed at identifying the attitudes, knowledge and perceived support required by primary school teachers to include physically disabled children who use wheelchairs in the classroom.

Aims And Objectives

1. To identify the attitudes and concerns of teachers towards the inclusion of a child who uses a wheelchair in the classroom.
2. To identify the training and support needs of teachers in order to facilitate the inclusion of a child who uses a wheelchair in the classroom.

Background

The inclusion of children with disabilities within the education system has been an important focus of much research and legislative attention since the 1980's in the UK. This attention has resulted in numerous changes in the how, where and type of education that is delivered to children with a disability. Inclusion encompasses not only the environmental and physical needs, but also the technical and social needs of children. This can present its own challenges to education colleagues, as there are inherent assumptions that every school can accommodate every child, regardless of their disability (Avramidis et al. 2000) and that teachers know how to accommodate and adapt to these.

One of the influential factors in facilitating inclusion in schools has been found to be teacher attitudes. There is a growing body of literature demonstrating that positive attitudes have strong predictive value in the success of inclusive practices in mainstream classrooms and that these attitudes can be influenced by the quality of undergraduate training received and exposure to children with disabilities. Much of the current focus within education is upon the inclusion of children with emotional and or behavioural difficulties in the classroom, with very little consideration given to those with physical disabilities who use a wheelchair. Meeting the inclusivity agenda can present significant challenges to both the teacher and the disabled child. It has been increasingly acknowledged that teacher attitudes, alongside cooperation and commitment of other professionals working directly with children with disabilities, are essential in facilitating inclusion (Avramidis et al. 2000; Salend 2007). Teachers are therefore in a strong position to influence the participation and inclusion of these children. Therefore the purpose of this study was to identify attitudes, concerns and type of support needed by teachers in order to include children who use wheelchairs in the classroom.

This study utilised a qualitative research design. A phenomenological approach was adopted to help understand the meaning that these teachers attribute to their experiences and perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were used to identify teachers' initial thoughts when informed they were going to have a child in their class who was a wheelchair user; what information they would need, support and training required, and what activities they felt

would be difficult for the child to participate in; as well as any potential positives as a result of the presence of this child in the classroom. The participants were 15 primary school teachers from a wide range of mainstream schools.

Qualitative interrogation of the transcript data revealed four themes: (1) Access, (2) Modifications, (3) Attitudes towards inclusion, and (4) Training needs. These themes represent teacher's attitudes and concerns, alongside perceived support needs in order to facilitate inclusion of physically disabled children in the mainstream classroom.

Discussion

There appeared to be an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the philosophy and potential benefits of inclusion of physically disabled children who use a wheelchair within mainstream classrooms. The teachers interviewed particularly identified benefits of facilitating increased social integration, self-esteem and promotion of understanding and respecting diversity, as well as providing an equal opportunity to learn amongst peers. However, they expressed lingering concerns about the feasibility of achieving inclusion. These concerns included having insufficient knowledge regarding how the child's disability would affect both their learning and physical skills, the impact upon their workload and teaching methods, space required, and availability and access to support. They alluded to having concern and anxiety regarding their ability to initially facilitate inclusion of any child who uses a wheelchair. Specifically they need training in the use of the child's wheelchair, adapting the classroom, transportation for school trips, and assistance with how to achieve participation in sports activities or school outings. There was evidence that the classroom and school environment continues to pose a significant barrier to access and therefore teachers need to learn where to seek advice regarding how best to either adapt this, or to use existing resources more flexibly.

These findings further illustrate that inclusion in a school setting often requires a range of environmental adjustments, including physical, cultural and social (Hemmingsson & Borell 2002).

References

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