Bringing Disability Awareness into the General Curriculum

Alves, S. [1] & Lopes-dos-Santos, P. [1]

[1] University of Porto, Portugal

Email: alvessilvia33@gmail.com; plsantos.fpce@gmail.com

Abstract

The increased movement fostering inclusion of students with additional support needs into general education classrooms raised the need to introduce discussions about issues concerning the full participation of students with disabilities within educative contexts. The expansion of interaction opportunities resulting from the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms was expected to guarantee itself the conditions for the development of positive attitudes in typically developing students. However, evidence seems to contradict such claim. Considered as one of the main constraints to inclusion, negative attitudes manifest themselves through events such as interaction avoidance, bullying and teaser behaviours towards students with disabilities, compromising their social and academic development. In order to face this problem, several initiatives emphasize the advantages of infusing disability awareness programs into the general curriculum, due to its potential as a privileged instrument to promote learning and the development of positive values as well. Disability awareness programs are grounded on the postulation that behaviours can be changed through interventions that consider cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of attitudes. Programs evaluation results show improvements in attitudes, knowledge and social acceptance of students with disabilities endorsed by typically developing peers. Thereby, reflecting on evidence from international empirical experiences, this paper aims to draw a framework for developing a disability awareness program that can help teachers to address disabilities issues in their lessons. Particularly, based on the exploration of disability awareness programs as an effective strategy to improve attitudes towards students with disabilities, we will consider the following questions: (1) Why should we teach about disabilities in the general curriculum? (2) To what extent are teachers being prepared in their initial education to deal with disability issues within classrooms? (3) What contents are commonly approached in disability awareness programs? (4) What types of disability awareness interventions demonstrate higher levels of efficacy?

Keywords: inclusive education; children with disabilities; disability awareness; general curriculum; peers' attitudes

1   Introduction

The demand to include students with disabilities into the regular classroom with opportunity to access the general curriculum raised the need to introduce, in that same curriculum, topics about the meaning and experiences of disabilities within educative contexts. Such need seems to be specially relevant since empirical evidence has been demonstrating that – despite the confirmed educational and social benefits of inclusive education for students with and without disabilities (Mrug & Wallander, 2002; Pijl & Frostad, 2010) – equity in access to education doesn´t automatically ensure the full participation and social acceptance of students with disabilities (McDougall, DeWit, King, Miller, & Killip, 2004). The quality of educational contexts (Nilholm & Alm, 2010), attitudes from teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002) and typically developing peers (Vignes et al., 2009), as well as teachers' initial and continuous training (European Agency for the Development of Special Needs Education [EADSNE], 2010) gain emphasis among the most studied factors impacting on the inclusive school development. In particular, this paper aims to draw a framework for developing disability awareness programs that can help teachers to address disability issues in classrooms, constituting therefore an effective resource to improve positive attitudes in typically developing peers.

1.1 Need for teaching about disability issues within the general curriculum

According to Allport's *contact theory* (Slininger, Sherrill, & Jankowski, 2000) and Zajonc's *mere exposure theory* (2001), the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular schools is expected to guarantee itself conditions for the development of positive attitudes in typically developing peers resulting from the expansion of interaction opportunities between students with and without disabilities. However, research showed that the access of students with disabilities to inclusive contexts doesn't ensure spontaneous interactions (Diamond & Tu, 2009), nor the development of positive attitudes (Rillotta & Nettelbeck, 2007). Indeed, typically developing peers commonly don´t establish interactions with students with disabilities, unless they are prompted to do so (Frea, Craig-Unkefer, Odom, & Johnson, 1999) and, without intervention, they tend to show reduced levels of social acceptance and negative attitudes towards students who have disabilities (Favazza, Phillipsen, & Kumar, 2000). Considered as one of the major constraints to the inclusion of students with disabilities (McDougall et al., 2004; WHO & World Bank, 2011), negative attitudes manifest themselves through events such as social interaction avoidance, bullying and teaser behaviors (Llewellyn, 2000). In these circumstances, students with disabilities are likely to experience reduced feelings of belonging, security, and acceptance, leading to maladaptive social skills, withdrawal socialization (Hogan, McLellan, & Bauman, 2000) and problems in academic achievement (Cook, 2002). Students with disabilities report several attitudinal barriers, including inappropriate comments and behaviors endorsed by others as the worst aspect of their scholar experience (Hogan et al., 2000).

In order to face this problem and promote the full participation of students with disabilities, several initiatives have been taken to change negative attitudes endorsed by typically developing peers through the implementation of disability awareness programs in regular education classrooms (e.g., Ison et al., 2010; Yu, Ostrosky, & Fowler, 2012). Ferguson (2001) went further and discussed the importance of making disability awareness instruction part of the general curriculum, through which students should be taught about disability and the importance of valuing individual differences. The underlying core idea relies on considering the curriculum a key instrument for the promotion of learning and developmental experiences (Pacheco, 2005). Therefore, bearing in mind the role that education can play in challenging disabling attitudes and in building inclusive societies (Beckett, 2009), the infusion of disability awareness programs into the general curriculum would represent a preventive approach to reduce negative attitudes and barriers to the inclusion of students with disabilities, as well as it would prepare all students to adopt ethical and moral principles of valuing individual differences.

1.2 Attendance for teaching about disabilities issues in teachers' initial education

Due to the responsibility for implementing the curriculum in the classroom and given the daily contact with students with and without disabilities, teachers are in a privileged position to foster positive attitudes in typically developing students towards people with disabilities. In this sense, Forlin (2008) points out that the teachers' role concerns not only to inform and facilitate learning but also to behave as a model for guiding the ethic and moral development of their students, acknowledging that the way teachers interact with students with disabilities influences students' behavior and attitudes towards their peers with disabilities (Cook, 2002). Although, in order to potentiate the inclusion of students with disabilities, teachers need to feel able and competent to create a classroom environment that facilitates the learning of all students (WHO & World Bank, 2011). In a recent national Portuguese survey, Sanches-Ferreira et al. (2010) noted that regular teachers report a lack of knowledge to deal with students with disabilities inside classrooms. In the EADSNE *Teacher Education for Inclusion* report (2010), initial teachers' training in inclusive education was identified as an important variable for facilitating the progress of inclusive education efforts in schools. However, despite the developments in special education systems, it is still common to graduate in teaching without having any theoretical and practical training on inclusive education (Sanches-Ferreira & Micaelo, 2010). Within this context, the infusion of disability awareness programs into the general curriculum can be seen as an instrumental tool to evaluate the fit of initial teachers' training curricula in fulfilling the role of preparing professionals – with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes – to teach all students.

1.3 Contents of disability awareness programs

The contents of current disability awareness programs vary as a function of the identification of students' needs. In 1994, Raabe proposed a set of guiding questions to build disability awareness programs, including: "*are there physical and attitudinal barriers that need to be broken?*"; "*are students aware of similarities, as well as differences?*"; "*do*

students know how to interact with their peers with disabilities?"; "do students realize that people are more alike than different?"; "have students learned to celebrate the unique disabilities of each individual?". Two nuclear contents can be protruded beyond these questions: (1) understanding what means to live with disabilities; (2) accepting individual differences (Beckett, 2009; Diamond & Tu, 2009). There exist a number of disability awareness teaching resources which commonly include the aforementioned contents addressed through activities that focus on: factual information about particular disabilities; exploring myths and stereotypes about disability; understanding the effects of disability in daily activities such as moving around; understanding similarities and differences between everyone; rights and responsibilities, including UN Human rights (e.g., "Just Like You", "Friends who care", "Count Us In! Curriculum Support Package").

Moreover, an emergent debate on disability awareness programs points out the importance of promoting students' understanding of disability framed by the Social Model of Disability. In this sense, the conceptualization of disability should reflect the most suitable approach to promote the full participation of students with disabilities in regular schools (Beckett, 2009).

1.4   Types of disability awareness programs

The assumption behind the development of disability awareness programs is that the attitudes from typically developing peers towards students with disabilities reflect their beliefs about persons with disabilities and predicts behaviours endorsed towards them (Ajzen, 2005). Attitudes are often described as having three related components including: the cognitive domain of ideas and beliefs upon which the attitude is based; the affective domain of emotional feelings about the object; and the behavioral domain of intended actions that corresponds to assumptions or beliefs (Triandis, 1971). Thereby, disability awareness programs incorporate techniques to modify attitudes towards persons with disabilities. In this sense, Triandis, Adamopoulos and Brinberg (1984) identified three broad strategies for changing attitudes: (1) information – providing accurate information about disabilities; (2) behavioural modification – setting up situations in which the target person is rewarded when she/he makes a positive response to a person with disabilities; (3) experiential – creating conditions and situations in which the experiences of the target person in the presence of people with disabilities would be positive. Supported by the premise that behaviors can be changed through interventions that reflect the multidimensional nature of attitudes, disability awareness programs are described as more effective for successful attitude-change when using a combined approach, which promotes positive contact experiences with persons with disabilities and provides information and knowledge about disabilities (e.g., Krahé & Altwasser, 2007). It seems that a combined approach is an effective strategy to foster positive attitudes towards students with disabilities. The challenge relies on the infusion of such programs into the general curriculum, so that disability awareness activities turn out to be intentional and systematic rather than episodic practices.

2   Conclusion

The infusion of disability awareness programs into the general curriculum was presented as a relevant strategy to foster inclusive education through the enhancement of knowledge about disability, the improvement of positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and acceptance of peers with disabilities. International experiences report disability awareness programs addressing two main contents: (1) understand what means to live with disabilities; (2) accept individual differences. Supported by the premise that behaviors can be changed through interventions that reflect the multidimensional nature of attitudes, disability awareness programs are described as more successful when using a combined approach merging the promotion of positive contact experiences with the provision of information and knowledge about disabilities. As stated, teachers have a critical role in the process of modeling attitudes of typically developing peers towards students with disabilities and consequently in the process of maximizing their inclusion. However, some existing reports suggest that this nuclear role is not being conveniently addressed in initial teacher training programs.

Based on the presented arguments, it is our belief that bringing disability awareness into the general curriculum is a basic condition for the sustainability of inclusive education.

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