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# Creating Positive School Experiences for Students with Disabilities

*The school experiences of students with disabilities can be positively or negatively influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of students and school personnel and by general school policies. School counselors can take the lead in assessing school climate in relation to students with disabilities and initiating interventions or advocating for change when appropriate. This article provides an overview of factors to consider in creating positive school experiences for students with disabilities and suggestions for intervention efforts.*

Individuals with disabilities often are stigmatized, encountering attitudinal and physical barriers both in work and in daily life. Although federal legislation (e.g., Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990) protects the inherent rights of individuals with disabilities, that legislation cannot always protect them from subtle forms of discrimination and prejudice. School-age students with disabilities often have negative school experiences related to their having a disability, and school counselors, administrators, and teachers can help to create more positive school experiences that promote their academic, career, and personal/social growth. By examining the attitudes and behaviors of school staff and students as well as systemic factors related to the school, school counselors in collaboration with other school personnel can determine areas for intervention and respond accordingly.

## ATTITUDES TOWARD STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

For the past 20 years, researchers have examined the attitudes of a variety of professionals toward individuals with disabilities. Although many researchers found that people in general possess negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities (Gething, LaCour, & Wheeler, 1994; Yunker, 1994), much of the research provided comparisons of only one group of individuals to another without identifying attitudes as positive or negative. In relation to school counselors and educators, very little research has

been conducted in the past 10 years, and most of that research has focused on teachers and/or has examined attitudes toward inclusion, as opposed to attitudes specifically toward students with disabilities. The research summarized below suggests that school personnel and students might possess slightly negative attitudes toward students with disabilities and that the attitudes of school counselors are similar to, if not more positive than, those of other school personnel.

Recent research suggests students and teachers possess somewhat negative attitudes toward students with disabilities, or that they view individuals with disabilities as different from and inferior to individuals without disabilities (Gething et al., 1994). From their meta-analysis of research studies published from 1990 to 2000, examining attitudes toward children with disabilities, Nowicki and Sandieson (2002) concluded that children without disabilities generally preferred to interact with children without either physical or intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, McDougall, DeWit, King, Miller, and Killip (2004) examined the attitudes of ninth-grade students toward students with disabilities and found that, although the majority had attitudes classified as neutral to positive, slightly over 20% had negative attitudes. They also found that females had slightly more positive attitudes than did males, and students who had a friend or classmate with a disability had more positive attitudes than those students without direct contact with students with disabilities. Finally, Hastings and Oakford (2003) found that student teachers possessed more negative attitudes toward students with behavioral and/or emotional problems than toward students with cognitive disabilities. The former were perceived to have a more negative impact on the school and on other students.

In comparing attitudes of various professionals toward students with disabilities, Yunker (1994) reported few differences among the attitudes of regular education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and other educators toward students with disabilities, but he did not state whether their

attitudes tended to be positive or negative. Additionally, Carney and Cobia (1994) examined the attitudes of counselor education graduate students and found that students in the school counseling program had significantly more positive attitudes than students in the community counseling program, but significantly less positive attitudes than rehabilitation counseling students. Again, whether individuals with more positive attitudes actually possessed positive attitudes or simply less negative attitudes is unclear. Finally, Milsom (2001) found school counselors to have attitudes toward students with disabilities similar to those of pre-service teachers reported by Eichinger, Rizzo, and Sirotnik (1991).

With regard to attitudes about inclusion, Isaacs, Greene, and Valesky (1998) surveyed elementary school counselors and found that they had somewhat positive attitudes about inclusion. In contrast, Praisner (2003) found that a majority of school principals had either negative or ambivalent attitudes toward inclusion. She found that principals who had completed more training (both pre-service and in-service) related to inclusion and special education had more favorable attitudes. Prior positive experience with students with disabilities also resulted in more positive attitudes toward inclusion among principals.

Yuker and Block (1986) reported that attitudes toward individuals with disabilities are positively correlated with attitudes toward mainstreaming. Although mainstreaming and inclusion are conceptually different (see Alley, n.d., for definitions of these concepts), both relate to the idea of integrating students with disabilities into regular education classrooms. There is no research to support positive correlations between attitudes about inclusion and attitudes toward students with disabilities; however, given the positive correlation between attitudes toward students with disabilities and attitudes toward mainstreaming, it seems likely that such a relationship might exist.

## **BEHAVIORS TOWARD INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES**

Just because an educator or a student possesses a negative attitude does not necessarily mean that individual will act negatively toward a student with a disability. Thoughts and actions are often separate; however, negative attitudes have been linked to bias and discrimination (Millington, Strohmer, Reid, & Spengler, 1996). In fact, educators who have negative attitudes toward students with disabilities tend to expect low achievement and inappropriate behavior from those students (Beattie, Anderson, & Antonak, 1997). The negative attitudes of school

personnel and students toward students with disabilities can manifest themselves in a variety of ways.

Praisner (2003) suggested that the attitudes of school principals “could result either in increased opportunities for students to be served in general education or in limited efforts to reduce the segregated nature of special education services” (p. 136). She found that principals with positive attitudes were more likely than principals with negative attitudes to recommend inclusive educational placements for students with disabilities. In essence, future opportunities for students with disabilities might be hampered by a principal who possesses a negative attitude, particularly if those students are prevented or discouraged from completing regular academic coursework (e.g., algebra) required for admission to a 4-year college.

One might question the effectiveness of a school counselor who possesses a negative attitude toward students with disabilities. If, as suggested by Hannah (1988), teachers who have negative attitudes are often reluctant to teach students with disabilities, it seems likely that school counselors who have negative attitudes would be reluctant to become involved with students with disabilities. Professionals who are uncomfortable with individuals who have disabilities might avoid contact with those individuals or “neglect opportunities for their clients’ development” (Beckwith & Matthews, 1994, p. 53). Thus, school counselors who are uncomfortable with students with disabilities might choose to avoid participating in Individualized Educational Program meetings and/or rely on other school personnel to address those students’ academic, career, and personal/social needs. In addition, Bowen and Glenn (1998) suggested that school counselor bias against students with disabilities could result in a school counselor having low expectations for students with disabilities. In this sense, school counselors whose behaviors are consistent with their negative attitudes might discourage students with disabilities from pursuing more rigorous courses of study, potentially limiting their future career options. In fact, Janiga and Costenbader (2002) reported that students with disabilities are most often encouraged to pursue vocational education.

Student behaviors related to negative attitudes toward their peers with disabilities are also important to examine. As discussed previously, students prefer interacting with peers without disabilities (Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002), and related to that finding, Heinrichs (2003) indicated that students with disabilities experience more rejection by peers than do students without disabilities. Bullying directed toward students with disabilities is common, and Heinrichs suggested that the cognitive, behavioral, and/or physical differences of these stu-

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dents make them “easy targets” (p. 196). Bullying can take many forms, and rejection can have long-lasting effects (Beale & Scott, 2001).

## **STUDENT OUTCOMES RELATED TO NEGATIVE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS**

Individuals with disabilities often internalize negative attitudes (Brillhart, Jay, & Wyers, 1990). Moreover, the negative attitudes and actions of others can negatively affect the behavior, social relationships, education, employment, and health of individuals with disabilities (Yuker, 1994) because their self-perceptions are greatly influenced by the attitudes and expectations of others (Oermann & Lindgren, 1995). For example, if educators have low expectations in terms of academic achievement and appropriate behavior from students with disabilities (Beattie et al., 1997), then those students may be more likely to behave as expected. That is, they might exhibit inappropriate behavior and put little effort into schoolwork.

Medina and Luna (2004) explored the experiences of Mexican-American students enrolled in special education and reported negative educational and personal/social outcomes. The students reported feeling disrespected by teachers, indicated that teachers did not notice derogatory comments directed at them by their peers without disabilities, and reported that they did not believe that their teachers cared about them. They also reported feeling “alienation, disinterest, and anxiety regarding their classrooms, teachers, and classmates” (Medina & Luna, p. 15). Similarly, Rodis, Garrod, and Boscardin (2001) reported that students with disabilities often felt misunderstood by both teachers and peers.

For all students, negative attitudes and behaviors exhibited by peers can have long-lasting effects. Bullying and relational aggression have been addressed in recent professional literature, and the avoidance or rejection of students with disabilities by their peers as well as potential physical or verbal aggression directed toward them should be viewed as bullying and addressed as such. Numerous negative outcomes have been associated with bullying (see Seals & Young, 2003), and common outcomes include academic problems, absenteeism, loneliness, and loss of friends (Roberts & Coursol, 1996).

## **UNDERSTANDING ATTITUDES**

Negative attitudes and behaviors of students toward their peers with disabilities may occur for many reasons, but empirical research has not identified any specific causes. Nevertheless, assessing student attitudes is important prior to implementing any school-based intervention. Salend (1994) identified

a number of methods for assessing the attitudes of regular education students toward students with disabilities, including sociograms, direct observation, and formal attitude assessments.

Although research identifying reasons for negative student attitudes is scarce, a number of explanations for negativity from educators toward students with disabilities have been proposed. Research cited previously (i.e., Praisner, 2003) suggests that one reason school personnel might possess negative attitudes toward students with disabilities is that they did not receive adequate training regarding those individuals and therefore feel unprepared to provide services to students with disabilities effectively. This theme has consistently emerged in literature related to both school counselors and teachers. School counselors surveyed by Milsom (2002) reported completing minimal formal training related to students with disabilities prior to being employed as school counselors and indicated they felt somewhat prepared to provide services to students with disabilities. Additionally, Forlin (2001) reported that teachers felt stressed when working with students with disabilities because they did not possess knowledge or feel competent. Finally, Pavri (2004) found that both special education and regular education teachers received little to no pre-service training related to effective inclusion for students with disabilities. In fact, special education teachers reported receiving less training in this area than did regular education teachers.

In addition to not feeling prepared, school personnel also face demands placed on them by superiors. Disability legislation (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and current educational reforms, including No Child Left Behind, create systems in which school personnel are held accountable for student outcomes. Forlin (2001) found that teachers reported high levels of stress when they felt they personally would be held accountable for the educational outcomes of students with disabilities. The teachers also worried that spending more time addressing the needs of students with disabilities would result in their having less time to focus on students without disabilities. “The highest levels of stress appear to come from a teacher’s personal commitment to maintaining effective teaching for all students in their classes” (Forlin, p. 242).

Thus, understandably, negative attitudes seem to characterize educators who care about students and about being effective but who may have little control over or support for their work. Stress and frustration seem to be natural outcomes, in such situations. It seems likely that the majority of teachers would be more positive if they had more knowledge about students with disabilities and effective strategies for working with those students.

## INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE ATTITUDES

As advocates for students with disabilities, school counselors are positioned to take the lead in their buildings to ensure that these students have positive school experiences, develop skills for future academic and career success, develop social skills, and enjoy emotional health. A number of programs could be initiated in an effort to address the training needs of school personnel and to facilitate positive interactions among all students. Self-awareness is important, however, and school counselors can benefit from taking time to honestly assess their own beliefs about and attitudes toward students with disabilities prior to accepting or volunteering to work on school-based interventions. School counselors who possess negative attitudes might consider participating in professional development activities (see Milsom, 2002) to address their own biases. Because school counselors are responsible for meeting the needs of *all* students, comfort with and positive attitudes toward working with students with disabilities can be viewed as important qualities of a professional, ethical, and multiculturally competent school counselor.

### Targeting School Personnel

Given the limited amount of training related to students with disabilities completed by many school personnel, and given the research suggesting that more positive attitudes are associated with greater amounts of pertinent pre-service education, in-service or other professional development activities can be viewed as a critical intervention related to creating positive school experiences for students with disabilities. Praisner (2003) advocated in-service training related to students with disabilities in general, and Pace (2003) found professional development seminars effective in increasing awareness about students with disabilities among regular education student teacher supervisors. However, other researchers have recommended identifying one specific content area (e.g., behavioral interventions for students with disabilities) as important for teacher professional development.

Numerous researchers (Lieberman, James, & Ludwa, 2004; Pavri, 2004; Schepis, Reid, Owenbey, & Clary, 2003) have recommended that school staff be trained to help promote cooperative relationships between students with disabilities and students without disabilities. They suggested that successful interactions between these students often do not occur naturally, and teachers must be able to facilitate interactions effectively if they want students with disabilities to engage socially with their peers. Additionally, Salend (1994) indicated that successful

inclusion for students with disabilities into regular education classrooms (i.e., students succeeding academically and socially) requires cooperative interactions between students with disabilities and students without disabilities.

Pavri (2004) found that both general and special education teachers needed ideas for initiating and supporting cooperative social interactions between students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Additionally, through their research Schepis et al. (2003) found that preschool teachers who completed a professional development training designed to give them strategies for helping students interact were able to increase the interpersonal interaction between students with disabilities and those without disabilities. Over time the student interactions increased both when the teachers were present and when they were not, suggesting that teachers can learn to facilitate cooperative relationships among these students and that students can learn how to interact if they are provided with opportunities and/or encouragement.

Professional development activities also can be designed to help teachers in the classroom. Vaughan (2002) and Corbett (2001) suggested that schools can better address the needs of all learners if teachers learn to modify classroom lessons in ways that will benefit the range of learning styles present in any classroom. Students with disabilities are not the only students who can benefit from creative methods of instruction and assessment, and perhaps helping teachers reframe the way they approach teaching in general will result in less frustration related to having to accommodate students with disabilities. School principals can model or co-teach in an effort to train teachers in new techniques (Doyle, 2002).

How can school counselors, who also might have limited knowledge of this type of content, take any sort of leadership role in the process? First, they might bring to the attention of administrators the need for training and support in this content area and advocate that in-service time be devoted to addressing effective practices for working with students with disabilities. School counselors then might serve as coordinators and collaborators, identifying individuals who can provide this type of training. School counselors with limited knowledge about students with disabilities also will likely learn a lot in the process.

### Intervening with Students

Teachers are being encouraged to help students develop cooperative relationships, and research examining student attitudes toward their peers with disabilities has suggested that contact with students with disabilities might lead to positive attitudes. In fact, Lieberman et al. (2004) noted that positive

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contact with students with disabilities is the only effective way to help students gain an understanding of and knowledge about students with disabilities. Therefore, student interaction seems an important goal, and structured activities have been recommended with regard to helping students develop skills to successfully interact with each other. A number of specific suggestions have been provided in the literature.

Salisbury, Gallucci, Palombaro, and Peck (1995) provided recommendations for promoting social interactions between students with and without disabilities. Included in their list were cooperative learning groups, which they indicated could provide both social and academic benefits to students with disabilities. Additionally, they suggested that teachers engage students in collaborative problem-solving (e.g., through regular classroom meetings) in order to provide students a voice for concerns related to students with disabilities and to help them develop understanding or empathy. More specifically, students who must generate possible reasons for a student with a disability behaving in a particular way might develop a greater understanding of and empathy for that student. Peer tutors also were suggested as a way both to assist students with disabilities academically and to promote positive interactions between students. Finally, Salisbury et al. recommended modeling from teachers as an effective way to teach students how to interact. Through watching a teacher interact with a student with a disability, other students not only will learn how to interact with that student (e.g., perhaps it is important to interact with a student who has a right-eye visual impairment by remaining visible to the student's left eye), but also will see that the student is similar to them in many other ways.

In addition to being able to interact cooperatively with each other, students benefit from gaining an appreciation for diversity in general. Heinrichs (2003) suggested that schools can help students develop tolerance and respect for differences by teaching empathy and anger-management skills and promoting respect for others via the general curriculum. The variety of character education programs available can be used as a foundation from which discussions and activities specific to students with disabilities can be incorporated.

School counselors can promote similar agendas (i.e., diversity and cooperation) via direct service activities with students. Both small group and classroom guidance activities can be designed to promote respect for differences and interaction among students with and without disabilities. Additionally, school counselors could serve as coordinators of peer tutoring programs and collaborate with teachers in the implementation of classroom-based activities.

## School-Wide Considerations

Successful implementation of any type of programming depends on support from administrators and cooperative efforts from school personnel. Vaughan (2002) recommended that schools make time to assess their cultures (i.e., attitudes and beliefs about students with disabilities) as well as existing policies and procedures. Negative messages can unintentionally be communicated to students via language or procedures. For example, schools that single out students with disabilities as different (e.g., issuing special diplomas for students in special education), rather than acknowledge that all students learn differently, might unintentionally communicate to those students that they are less worthy than other students. Students are savvy to the beliefs of school personnel, even when those beliefs are not verbalized. Educators should "show high levels of personal commitment, hope, and optimism" (Attfield & Williams, 2003, p. 32) so that students do not limit their aspirations. For example, by inviting and encouraging all students to participate in college fairs or register for college admissions exams, school personnel communicate their belief that all students have a right to pursue postsecondary education.

In another effort to prevent students with disabilities from being singled out, school personnel might examine their enforcement of school rules. All students should be expected to adhere to school rules, and disciplinary actions should be equitable (Salisbury et al., 1995). Bullying and teasing will likely ensue when some students are held to different standards than others. Similarly, high expectations for all students with regard to both behavior and academics (Corbett, 2001; Salisbury et al.) will help students with disabilities reach their potential and help other students develop an understanding that students with disabilities do not need special treatment in every area of their life.

Finally, schoolwide initiatives to promote and celebrate diversity have been encouraged (Kugelmass, 2001). For example, student projects, school activities, and artwork on the walls can be highlighted. McDougall et al. (2004) recommended the implementation of school-based programs that emphasize success for all students rather than competition as well as programs that focus on respect and cooperation.

## CONCLUSION

School counselors can draw from their training and conduct needs assessments to identify potential systematic, programmatic, and attitudinal areas for change in order to create positive environments for students with disabilities. In collaboration with other school personnel they can help to establish school policies that communicate respect, high

expectations, and interest in equitable outcomes for all students. They also can bring to the attention of administrators the importance of ongoing professional development for school personnel in relation to working with students with disabilities. Whether it be through direct services offered to students or in collaboration with teachers, school counselors can help students develop appreciation for students with disabilities and related skills for successfully interacting with them. Finally, by communicating high expectations and providing support, school counselors can help students with disabilities understand that their disabilities should not be reasons to limit their aspirations. ■

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