

The Effect of Using a Training Program on Changing School Counselors' Attitudes towards Students with Special Educational Needs in Al-Karak District

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Abstract: This study investigated the effectiveness of a training program on changing School Counselors' Attitudes towards Students with Special Educational Needs in Al-Karak District and the factors effecting their attitudes. Thirty school counselor volunteers were selected and assigned randomly into two groups; experimental and control. An experimental design was used, where the experimental group was exposed to six sessions. The Jordanian adaptation of the Attitudes towards Disabled Persons Scale (ATDP) was administrated to both groups as pre- and post-test exposure conditions. Results of t-test revealed no significant difference between the two groups on the pre-exposure measure. The results indicated that there was a significant difference in the counselors' attitudes towards the students with special needs as a result of exposure to training sessions. Also, there were significant differences in the counselor's attitudes due to their gender and previous experience. Female counselors expressed more positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs than male counselors. School counselors with previous experience with students with special educational needs had more positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs than those who had no experience. The current study, recommends expanding research in this field and looking for other related variables. (**Keywords:** special education, counseling, attitudes, school psychology).

Introduction

During the last decades, great efforts have been made in Jordan to improve the attitudes towards students with special educational needs. These efforts were varied and involved qualifying specialists through enlarging the colleges of education programs, constructing new special education departments, activating the concerned centers and institutions services, enacting laws and regulations, and employing public awareness programs.

One of the significant and greatest efforts adopted by the Ministry of Education was the inclusion of the students with special educational needs (e.g. students with hearing impairment, visual and learning difficulties, and those with mild mental retardation) in regular schools. Recently the movement of inclusion has witnessed a lot of attention by some educators and social co-workers since it is increasingly widespread throughout the world and obtaining benefits and advantages (Booth & Ainscow, 1998).

أثر برنامج تدريبي في تغيير اتجاهات المرشدين نحو الطلبة ذوي الحاجات الخاصة في محافظة الكرك

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ملخص: هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن أثر برنامج تدريبي في تغيير اتجاهات المرشدين نحو الطلبة ذوي الحاجات الخاصة في محافظة الكرك والعوامل المؤثرة فيها. وقد تألفت عينة الدراسة من (٣٠) مرشدا ومرشدة تم توزيعهم عشوائيا إلى مجموعتين تجريبية وضابطة. وتم تطبيق برنامج إرشادي مكون من (٦) جلسات على أفراد المجموعة التجريبية. واستخدم مقياس الاتجاهات نحو ذوي الحاجات الخاصة والمعدل للبيئة الأردنية على أفراد مجموعتي الدراسة كاختبار قبلي وبعدي. وأشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى وجود فروق دالة إحصائية بين أداء أفراد المجموعتين (التجريبية والضابطة) على المقياس حيث كانت اتجاهات المرشدين في المجموعة التجريبية والذين تعرضوا للبرنامج أفضل من اتجاهات المرشدين الذين لم يتعرضوا لمثل هذا البرنامج. بالإضافة إلى ذلك أشارت النتائج إلى أن اتجاهات المرشيدات الإناث كانت أفضل منها لدى الذكور وكذلك كانت اتجاهات المرشدين ذوي الخبرة مع ذوي الحاجات الخاصة أكثر ايجابية مقارنة مع المرشدين الذين ليس لديهم خبرة. وبعد ذلك تمت مناقشة النتائج وتقديم التوصيات المناسبة. (**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التربية الخاصة، الإرشاد، الاتجاهات، علم النفس المدرسي)

Despite these efforts, the inclusion movement is facing many obstacles and difficulties. Many of educational professionals (e.g. teachers, head teachers, counselors, and decision makers) still have negative attitudes towards students with special needs. They think that dealing with those students burdens them because they need additional activities and a diversity of procedures unlike those of normal students (Scruggs & Mastropiri, 1996). However, some theorists suggest that the inclusion in regular schools would be effective only if the educational professionals' attitudes towards students with special needs are changed (Al-Qaruti, 2003; Antonak and Larrivee, 1995; Al-Khateeb, 2002 and Taylor, Richards, Goldstein and Schilit, 1997).

Changing laws and providing new opportunities and services for students with special educational needs cannot be effective unless the attitudes of professionals in the educational system who implement the laws and provide the services are positive towards those students. Like other educational professionals, school counselors play an important role in the acceptance of those students. Therefore, positive attitudes of the school counselors are vital for the achievement of inclusion of students with special educational needs. The review of literature has revealed that the attitude of school

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counselors is one of the most important indicators of successful inclusion of students with special educational needs in regular schools (Booth and Ainscow, 1998; Bender, Vail & Scott, 1995 and Al-Qaruti, 2003). Abdallah (1998) reported that attitudes formed by teachers and counselors and decision makers may affect the success or failure of inclusion, which allows and encourages the policies, which guarantee the rights of students with special needs to be educated in regular schools, whereas, negative attitudes will limit the opportunities of those students to be educated in regular schools. School counselors' experience with students with special education needs has been reported to influence their attitudes to inclusion. Roberts and Lindsell (1997) indicated that positive contacts and interactions with people with special educational needs promote school counselors' and teachers' support for inclusion; this agrees with the results of other studies (Abdallah, 1998; and Forlin, Douglas and Hattie, 1996).

Staff development has been reported to be a key factor to the success of inclusion as well as to positive attitudes toward inclusion. Marchesi (1998) and Bender et al (1995) reported that the professional training of teachers and school counselors was closely related to their attitudes towards students with special educational needs. Therefore, in order to achieve successful inclusion outcomes, teachers and school counselors must receive adequate preparation and training. Attitudes also are affected by the nature and severity of the disabilities. Forlin et al (1996) and Al-Khateeb (2002) found that acceptance of inclusion was lower for children with an intellectual disability than for children with a physical disability. On the other hand, evidence indicates that the counselors' attitudes towards students with special educational needs are increasingly changed as a result of continuously dealing with them, which implies that they gain more experience.

It seemed necessary to carry out a study exploring the attitudes of school counselors towards students with special educational needs as well as exploring the effectiveness of certain techniques to modify these attitudes through providing them with information about students with special educational needs.

Study hypotheses

The current study aims at investigating the following hypotheses:

1. There would not be significant changes in the counselors' attitudes towards students with special educational needs due to providing them with information about those students.
2. The effectiveness of providing information would not be significantly varied due to the gender of the counselor.
3. There would not be a significant difference in the counselors' attitudes towards students with special educational needs due to the previous experience.

Methods

Participants

The sample of the study consisted of (30) volunteered counselors (18 males, and 12 females). The participants were randomly assigned into two groups: the experimental group (9 males, 6 females) who were subjected to the experimental treatment, and the control group (9 males, 6 females). Ten of the participants had previous experience dealing with students with special educational needs ranged from 4 to 10 years.

Study design

For the purpose of this study, a pre test- post test experimental design for an experimental and control group was employed. So the experimental group's members subjected to the treatment, which forms the independent variable in this study whereas the attitudes towards the students of special educational needs is the dependent variable.

Instrument

To explore the attitudes of the participants towards students with special educational needs, the Jordanian version of the Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons (ATDP) Scale, (Form O) was used in this study (Yucker and Block, 1986). The ATDP-O consists of twenty items, each item is measured on 6 Likert alternatives ranging from "(+3) 'I strongly agree to (-3) 'I strongly disagree". The scores range from 0 to 120. So the cut point is (60), where the higher score reflects positive attitudes and the low score reflects negative attitudes towards students with special educational needs. The personal information was gathered from the participants (i.e. gender, age and experience). Before the administration, the ATDP-O was first translated into Arabic, then it was given to 3 specialists in English language to evaluate the validity of the translation. Although (Alghazo, Dodeen, and Al garyouti, 2003) have indicated that this scale was modified to suit the Jordanian environment, the content validity of the instrument was granted by giving it to 4 specialists in counseling and special education. According to their suggestions and recommendations, some of the items were modified to suit the Jordanian environment. After this procedure, some of its items were modified to express the attitudes towards the inclusion process (e.g. dealing with classroom includes some students with special educational needs is very enjoyable. It is hard to teach students with special educational needs, Students with special needs require special procedures and techniques....)

To estimate the reliability of the adopted translation of the instrument, it was administered to a sample of (40) counselors, and a split-half method was used to calculate the internal consistency coefficient, which was (0.78), which is acceptable to be adopted in such a study.

Study procedures

Different procedures and techniques were employed with the subjects of the experimental group for the purpose of changing their attitudes towards students with special educational needs.

- The first procedure was the group discussion which involves providing written materials for group members, showing a movie which contains information about people with special educational needs and a presentation produced by a person with special educational needs. In addition, the researcher used group counseling skills in order to help the group focus on the key issues.
- The second procedure was providing the participants with information presented by a person with special educational needs. It has been argued that successful implementation of this technique results from several factors such as the structure of the presentation by a person with special educational needs, his/her personality and social characteristics, for example, not acting in a stereotypical manner, having at least the same education, social and occupational status. In this study, information was presented by a visually impaired person who had a high status within the Arabic Department at Muthah University and was of the same age as the members of the group.
- The third procedure implemented in this study was exposing the participants to related media such as using a movie about a girl with special educational needs. It is argued that viewing films about people with special educational needs is associated with positive attitudes and films such as Rain man, Doha and her motor disability which do much to provide accurate information about people with special educational needs. In this study, Doha and her motor disability was shown since it presents a holistic view of the person with special educational needs, with all her strengths and weaknesses.

Training program

A total of six weekly meeting sessions were held with the experimental group and the average length of each session was 90 minutes. Brief information about each session is presented below.

First session: The purpose of this session was briefly explained to the participants, who were asked to introduce themselves to the group, and then what came into their minds immediately when they heard the word 'students with special educational needs'. Here the target was to understand the emotional responses of the participants. It was not surprising that some of the group members tried to give a description of special educational needs. However, there were some spontaneous responses as well - e.g. one of the group expressed her feelings: "Well, I do not know, it is hard to explain my feelings when it comes to disabled people. I feel sad towards them".

Before summarizing the whole session, an information sheet which consisted of facts about people with special educational needs people was given to the group members and they were asked to read the material for the next meeting. This meeting, being the first of six, was formal. No one knew the others and everyone was

nervous, thus the main purpose was to create a friendly group atmosphere in order to foster members confidence in their ability to discuss freely and spontaneously.

Second session: The previous session was summarized, and group members were reminded of the information sheet that had been circulated to them. Then the group members were left to discuss issues concerning students with special education needs, and the majority shared their personal experiences with students or people with special educational needs. Outlining the main issues raised throughout the group discussion ended the session.

Third session: This session was taken up by showing the movie 'Doha and her motor disability', the life-story of Doha, disabled from birth, who challenged her disability.

Fourth session: The purpose of this session was to discuss the reactions and views of the group members about the movie. It was assumed that the discussion would increase the participants' awareness of different perspectives about people with special educational needs on account of the fact that movie showed reactions of school counselors towards the main character of the movie, Doha.

Fifth session: A colleague of the researcher was invited as a speaker with (3) students from Mu'tah University to talk about their disability (1 male and 2 female). They shared their experience, including their childhood difficulties, and especially those experiences that had empowered his/her personal growth. The aim of this session was to emphasize the importance of acceptance and support from others.

Sixth session: The main theme of this last session was to evaluate the previous sessions and to complete the previous weeks' discussion on the participants' interpretations and feelings about the presentation by a person with special educational needs and also the movie. Almost all participants made comments about the fifth sessions and linked their arguments with their personal experiences in their own schools. A common issue raised by each member was that the resources provided for students with special educational needs, and to school counselors, were far from sufficient. The need for pre- and in-service training for educational professionals was another issue that was emphasized.

At the end of the sixth session, the Jordanian adaptation of the ATDP-O (Yucker and Black, 1986) was administered as a post-test to both groups.

At the end of the post-test, participants were informed about the direct purpose of training, that is measurement of their attitudes towards students with special educational needs, and if training sessions had an impact on attitudes of those who participated in the training sessions compared to the attitudes of those who did not. The procedures of this study conducted by the researchers during the first semester of the academic year 2005/2006 at Mu'tah University.

Results

To examine the first hypothesis of the study, the analysis of variance (2x2) was used and the results of this analysis were summarized in table 1. The results revealed that there was a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the attitudes of both the control and experimental groups at post- test, also there was a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in the attitudes of the experimental group between their performance on both the pre- and post- tests. Table 1 presents the results of this analysis.

Table (1) : Results of analysis of variance

| Source of variance | Sum of Squares | d.f | Mean of Squares | F Ratio |
|--------------------|----------------|-----|-----------------|---------|
| Between groups | 240.66 | 2 | 120.33 | 9.55* |
| Within groups | 676.82 | 28 | 24.17 | |
| Total | 917.48 | 30 | | |

* $p < 0.05$

Table (2) demonstrates the means, standard deviations and the level of significance for the means of the pre- and post-test scores of the groups.

Table (2): Means, standard deviations and the level of significance of the pre- and post- test scores

| | Pre- test | Post- test | sig |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Experimental group | | | |
| <i>M</i> | 69.13 | 88.47 | $P < .05$ |
| <i>SD</i> | 12.66 | 11.25 | |
| Control group | | | |
| <i>M</i> | 70.67 | 71.72 | $P > .05$ |
| <i>SD</i> | 14.93 | 16.87 | |

Table (2) shows that the mean of the experimental group on the post test was (88.47) with standard deviation (11.25); meanwhile it was (71.72) for the control group with standard deviation (16.87) .

Regarding the second hypothesis, the results of t-test indicated that there was a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the means of the attitudes of the male participants of the experimental group on the post test and that for the female participants. The means for males was (66.92) with standard deviation (15.01), whereas it was (71.39) with standard deviation (13.11) for females.

Concerning the third hypothesis, which investigated the effect of previous experience, the results of t-test indicated a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in the counselors' attitudes towards the students with special educational needs due to the previous experience. The mean of the attitudes of the experienced counselors was (75.8) with standard deviation (16.15), whereas, it was (64.18) with standard deviation (11.19) for counselors without previous experience.

Discussion

The results of the study emphasized the importance of providing information about students with special educational needs in changing the counselors' attitudes towards those students. The results indicated that there were significant differences between the counselors' attitudes towards students with special educational needs. The participants in the experimental group, showed more positive attitudes as a result of exposure to training sessions, which implies that providing

information about those students helps in changing the counselors' attitudes toward them. The results of this study supports the findings of Roberts and Lindsell's (1997) study that suggested providing appropriate information about students with special educational needs as well as positive contact with them improve people's outlook to those students. They also agreed with the results of Bender et al (1995) who also reported that exposing counselors to training sessions would be effective in changing their attitudes toward students with special educational needs. The common thought among Jordanian people and professionals is that students with special educational needs are insane, helpless, and in need of extra and special care. Consequently, they do not prefer to deal with them. It seems that giving information about students with special educational needs helped in changing the school counselors' thoughts and beliefs about the students with special educational needs (Roberts and Lindsell, 1997).

In this regard, many findings indicated that exposure to training sessions that involved information about students with special educational needs was effective in changing the counselors' attitudes (e.g. Norwich, 1994). Using media exposure techniques alone or in combination with other techniques resulted in a positive attitude change (Eichinger, Raizzo and Sirotnik, 1992). Regarding the effectiveness of the technique of using presentations by a person with special educational needs on the counselors' attitudes, the results of studies were inconsistent. Some researchers argued that the effectiveness of this technique depends on the personal, demographic, and social characteristics of the presenter (Eichinger et al, 1992), and they suggested that the effect of a presentation will be effective only if it is used along with other techniques. Generally, the results of this study emphasized the effectiveness of combining training techniques in changing the counselors' attitudes towards the students with special educational needs.

The results of the study revealed that there was a significant difference between the participants' attitudes of the experimental group due to their gender. Female counselors expressed positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs more than males. The results are consistent with other studies findings (Yucker & Black, 1986; Smadi and Sartawi, 1998). This result might be attributed to the woman's traditional role of motherhood. Women in general are more sensitive than men; they are more likely to be affected by the presentations and other techniques in training sessions than men, which therefore affected positively their attitudes towards students with special educational needs. Evidence indicated that females are more socially mature than males. They are superior in social and communication skills (Mcilveen and Gross, 2002).

Regarding the effects of the previous experience, the results of this study showed that there were significant differences between counselors' attitudes towards students with special educational needs due to

previous experience, although all counselors in the experimental group expressed more positive attitudes at the post test. The attitudes of the counselors who had previous experiences were better than those counselors who had not had previous experience, so, this result supports by the findings of other studies (Smadi and Sartawi., 1998; Al-khateeb, 2002). It seems that working with students with special educational needs helps in obtaining knowledge about those people, which in turn corrects their ideas and thoughts. The results suggested that working with this type of students develop the counselors' skills and abilities to deal with them. Although the findings of this study assert the importance of previous experience in improving the counselors' attitudes towards students with special educational needs, reviewing the literature indicates that there are different perspectives on this issue. Some professionals argue that the attitudes of professionals may not be favorable towards people with special educational needs, due to their unrealistic optimism about people with special educational needs. Thus, it is argued that initial optimistic attitudes based on lack of knowledge and personal experience may become more negative, depending on the quality and intensity of such experience and the reality base of the initial beliefs and attitudes (Abdallah, 1998; Roberts and Lindsell, 1997; and Al-Khatteb, 2002).

finally, it is argued that work experience with people with special educational needs leads to positive attitude formation (Schroth, Moorman and Fullwood, 1997). School counselors' expectations appear to be related to attitudes and, in this context, the significant positive effect of working experience with students with special educational needs on the school counselors' attitudes towards such students may indicate that those who had significantly positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs also had more realistic expectations of them. That is to say, they were probably knowledgeable about the circumstances of each of the students with special educational needs with whom they worked and were conscious of what they are expected to do. Another reason may be attributed to the availability of adequate support services to those school counselors while working with special educational needs students; they may have had support from other related professionals while working with this population. As a conclusion, this study was performed in Al-Karak district for the easiness of reaching the sample there. So it is results would be valid for this sample and other related samples. As well as the results subjected to the procedures and it's instruments.

The subjects of this study have been school counselors. However, attitudes towards students with special educational needs are created by society as a whole. Therefore further studies should be conducted with other specific groups and/or with community. Social mainstreaming being one of the main targets of the inclusion movement, this kind of research should be conducted for students without special educational

needs in order to promote acceptance of their peers with special educational needs.

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