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In the last decades inclusion has become a preferred model for the education of all students, including those with disabilities and diverse needs. Since the passage of PL 13/1982, Act on Social Integration of People with Disabilities (Ley de Integración Social de las Personas con Discapacidad (LISMI, 1982), the Spanish government has sought to abolish the widespread use of special education schools and special classes for students with disabilities and to replace those practices with inclusive instruction in regular education classrooms for all students. Some years later additional laws were passed [Act on General Organization of Educational System (LOGSE), 1990; Act on Educational Quality (LOCE), 2002], but in each case the mandates for inclusion have been maintained or strengthened.

Twenty-five years after the implementation of PL 13/1982 in 2007 only 0.5 percent of students identified with disabilities are taught in special schools while the rest of students with special needs (approximately 2 percent of total school population) are taught in regular classrooms alongside their peers [Ministry of Education and Science MEC, (2008)].

The policy of ‘inclusive schooling’ is being practiced in various countries all over the world and teaching students with special educational needs (SEN) in regular education classrooms is increasingly being regarded as a beneficial practice (Ainscow, 2000; Barton, & Armstrong, 2007; Peters, 2007). In Spain, inclusion has gained increasing momentum due to the Salamanca Statement, which recognized the necessity and urgency of providing education to all children and youth within the regular education system [United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1994]. In 1994 more than 300 participants representing 92 governments and 25 international organizations met in Salamanca to further the objectives of “Education for All” by considering the fundamental policy shift required to promote the approach of ‘Inclusive Education.’ The Conference adopted the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and a Framework for Action.

The Salamanca Conference marked a new point for millions of children and youth who had long been deprived of education and provided a unique opportunity to place special education within the wider framework of the “Education for All” movement. The Salamanca Statement for Action proclaimed that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs and that “those with special education needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them with a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting those needs.” (UNESCO, 1994, para.2) The Salamanca Statement also asserted that educational systems that take into account the wide diversity of children’s characteristics and needs “are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.” (UNESCO, 1994, para.2)

Since the Salamanca Conference, the inclusion movement has made significant contributions in (a) minimizing unjustified discrimination, (b) supporting the rights of children to have their SEN identified and met, and (c) developing support services and facilities to fulfill their individual needs (Disability Rights Task Force Final Report, 2004; Echeita, & Verdugo, 2004). However, although a growing body of research supports inclusion and its principles (Alemany & Villuendas, 2004; Álvarez, Castro, Campo, & Álvarez, 2005; Cardona, 2000; Fernández-González, 1999; García-Pastor, 1998; Ojen, 1999; Parrilla, 2007; Susinos, 2002), the implementation of this policy is not without its critics.

Teacher Education Students’ Beliefs of Inclusion and Perceived Competence to Teach Students with Disabilities in Spain

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Abstract

The practical difficulties of including students with disabilities and diverse educational needs into regular classrooms are apparent in all countries around the world. Successful implementation of the policy of inclusion depends largely on teachers having the knowledge, skills, and competency necessary to make it work. This article presents the results of a study investigating current Spanish student teachers’ beliefs of the inclusion of students with disabilities and perceived competence to teach them in inclusive classrooms. Results indicated that the majority of respondents agreed with the philosophy of inclusive education but feel slightly competent to teach and manage their behaviour in inclusive settings compared with the respondents perceived competence of inservice regular and special education teachers. These findings reveal ambivalence and result in several implications for the design of the new Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs at the University of Alicante in concordance with the process of the European Convergence in Higher Education.
Various studies have been conducted to determine what makes teachers differ in their willingness to work with students with SEN (Avramidis, & Norwich, 2002; Gans, 1987; Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1996). The willingness of a teacher tends to be influenced by several factors, including classroom procedures concerns, the number of different disabilities present, the severity of the disability, and the amount of teacher support available. Studies by Alemamy and Villuendas (2004), Álvarez et al. (2005), García-Pastor, García-Jiménez, & Rodríguez-Gómez (1993), and Ojea (1999) conducted in Spain indicate that teachers are positive towards inclusive education, but at the same time have serious reservation about supporting the widespread placement of students with special educational needs. In contrast, Cardona (2000) in a study with preservice and inservice teachers, reported neutral perceptions of inclusion. No statistically significant differences between preservice and inservice teachers were found in judgements of benefits and concerns of inclusion; however, further examination of the results indicated that inservice teachers perceived more benefits but also more concerns than did preservice teachers. Furthermore, their perceptions divided into two major areas (a) recognition of inclusion as a basic right, and (b) reluctance in accepting new responsibilities in educating diverse students due to additional work load, lack of skills, and scarcity of resources necessary to teach students with special needs.

The above studies suggest that teachers who are the prime implementers of the policy of inclusion are often not prepared to meet the needs of students with significant disabilities and that a more aggressive approach is necessary to preparing general education teachers for inclusion. As teachers’ attitudes are difficult to change, Beare (1985) concluded that the best approach to improve teachers’ feelings of competence about teaching students with disabilities was to increase preservice training. Most studies on inclusive education have been conducted overseas and they have tended to focus mainly on inservice educators. In addition, both international (e.g., Cook, 2002; Loreman, Sharma, Forlin, & Earle, 2005; Romi, & Leyser, 2006) and national (Cardona, 2000; García-Cabero, García-Sánchez, García-González, & Rodríguez-Bravo, 1992) studies reflect a lack of research on how preservice teachers perceive the pedagogical implications of inclusion, indicating that student teachers have serious concerns related to their ability to design and deliver effective instruction for children with special needs. Moreover, preservice teachers have raised concerns about how they will cope with students with severe emotional and behavioural problems (Forlin, 2006; Heflin & Bullock, 1999; Stough, Montague, & Landmark, 2006).

The above overview points to a growing realization that teacher preparation can play a significant role in achieving the desired outcomes for inclusion. Moreover, studies of both preservice and inservice teacher attitudes towards inclusion have shown that teacher attitudes are affected by the quality of preparation received (Beare, 1985; Lambe & Bones, 2006a, 2006b; Harvey, Yssel, Bauerman, & Merbler, 2008; Winter, 2006). These studies conclude that improving and increasing training provision of the preservice phase of teacher education would be the most effective method of promoting better attitudes and competence to inclusion. As Lambe (2007) pointed out, “if student teachers complete their preservice education without having developed positive attitudes toward inclusion this will be very difficult to change and may have a negative effect on the inclusion of learners with disabilities” (p. 63). Tait and Purdie (2000) and Beare (1985) found that positive attitudes are evident in student teachers early in their initial training and suggest that improved preparation at the preservice phase would be the best point to nurture these attitudes.

Teacher education programs in Spain add difficulties to training for inclusion. Spanish regular and special educators commonly express concern that they are not prepared to provide inclusive education for students with disabilities (Cardona, 2000, 2004; Harry, 2005). Currently, teacher preparation in this country involves more than 300 programs in 51 universities that produce approximately 20,000 preservice teachers. Each training institution prepares teachers for one of seven specialties at the elementary level (Kindergarten Education, Primary Education, Physical Education, Musical Education, Foreign Language Education, Special Education, and Speech Therapy Education). All of these three-year pre-service programs already include compulsory courses on special education, but most undergraduate and post-graduate programs end with no courses on inclusive education. A review of preservice teacher training programs offered by 16 universities in this country (Cardona, Chiner, Gómez, Gonzaléz-Sánchez, & Lattur, 2004), highlighted the relative small number of courses in inclusive education. Of the total number of programs reviewed, only 25% included either a compulsory or elective course in special/inclusive education. However, these Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs are going to change soon due to the process of the European Convergence in Higher Education.

In 1999, the Spanish Ministry of Education alongside with other 28 European countries (currently 46 countries) assumed the Bologna Declaration (Confederation of European University Rectors’ Conferences, & the Association of European Universities, 1999). The purpose of the Bologna accords was to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010-11 by making academic degree standards and quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe. The three priorities of the Bologna process are (a) introduction of the three cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate), (b) quality assurance and (c) recognition of qualifications and periods of study. Since then, further government meetings have been held in Prague (May 2001), Berlin (September 2003), Bergen (May 2005), London (May 2007), and Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve (April 2009). The Bologna Declaration has put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents. Therefore, as a consequence of this process
schools of education in Spain have initiated a significant reform and renewal of its initial teacher education programs, and by the academic year 2010-11 all prospective teachers will have to complete a four-year undergraduate program for initial certification in one of two majors Kindergarten Education or Primary Education. These new programs will be composed of 240 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits distributed between basic common courses (60 ECTS credits), common courses in certification teaching subject areas (102 ECTS credits), student teaching (45 ECTS credits), elective courses (27 ECTS credits), and 6 ECTS credits for a final program project. ECTS is a standard for comparing the study attainment and performance of students of higher education across the European Union and other collaborating European countries. One academic year corresponds to 60 ECTS-credits that are equivalent to 1,500-1,800 hours of study in all countries, irrespective of standard or qualification type, and is used to facilitate transfer and progression throughout the Union. ECTS also includes a standard grading scale intended to be shown in addition to local (national) standard grades. In these new programs, it is planned that diversity and special/inclusive education content will be infused across the curriculum where all instructors will deal with SEN within subjects areas.

In the present study, we survey preservice teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of specific aspects of inclusion, as well as student perceived preparedness or competence to teach students with disabilities in a time of renewal and restructuring of the ITE programs in Spain. The preservice period offers significant potential to influence positive attitudes, consequently increased concentration in this phase of teacher education would seem to provide the best means to create a new generation of teachers who will ensure the successful implementation of inclusive policies and practices. The following research questions were the focus of this study:

1. What are the beliefs, perceptions and attitudes about inclusion of preservice general education teachers at the end of their teacher training program?
2. Do these student teachers feel competent to teach students with significant disabilities, and,
3. How does their competence compare with the respondents’ perceived competence of inservice general and special education teachers?

This study will provide baseline data and guidance for planning the new ITE programs at the University of Alicante as well as will promote faculty reflection on program implications with specific attention to the areas of inclusion and equity issues.

**Method**

**Participants and Context**

The study took place at the Faculty of Education, University of Alicante, institution located in the south-east of Spain. Since its founding in 1979, the Faculty of Education, as a school within an urban bilingual area, has aimed to develop child-centered education grounded in knowledge of human development and focused on preparing students for teaching in urban bilingual settings. Although the University of Alicante is fully identified with the Bologna process, at this time ITE programs follow the traditional format of three year of study. The teacher education programs at this Faculty require a minimum Grade Point Average (GPA) in high school and to pass an exam for entry called Selectividad. Performance on both is combined into a university entrance score which is determinant to be accepted or not in one of the five teacher education programs (e.g., Kindergarten Education, Primary Education, Music Education, Physical Education, and Foreign Language Education). The Faculty of Education enroll about 200 teachers annually in elementary school programs. A typical undergraduate teacher education program (e.g., Maestro: Primary Education) consists of 203 credits (1 credit = 10 hours of student work at the university). On average, 55.5 credits of general studies (core courses in education theory and pedagogy), 74 credits of major credits (courses in professional studies and certification teaching subject area), 32 credits of practicum (student teaching and other field based experiences), 48 credits of electives, and 25.5 credits of free configuration courses.

The population for the present study consisted of the 2006-07 cohort of student teachers in their last year of study enrolled for the award of Bachelor Degree in Maestro. The study involved a sample of 114 participants (students present in class the day the survey took place) who were asked to complete a survey. These participants represented each of the five major areas in the ITE programs: Kindergarten Education (18%), Elementary (62%), Foreing Language (9%), Physical Education (6%), Musical Education (4%), and no response (1%). At the time of the study, all participants had been taught the following subjects: Educational and Developmental Psychology, Sociology of Education, Theory of Education, Didactics and School Organization, Pedagogical Foundations of Special Education, Psychological Foundations of Special Education, New Technologies Applied to Education, Didactics of Maths, Didactics of Language, Didactics of Social Sciences, Didactics of Natural Sciences, and a 32-credit Practicum for a total of 171 credits. None of the students had started either their Practicum (teaching internships) at the time of data collection took place. Practicums do not begin until students’ last semester in the program. Participants’ ages ranged from 19-49 (M = 23.08; SD = 4.21). Ninety-six of the respondents (84%) were female, and 16% were male.

**Instrumentation**

A questionnaire developed by Rao and Lim (1999) was adapted and used as a measuring instrument to record the responses of the research participants. The instrument was originally written in English and translated into Spanish using a back translation procedure (Brislin, 1986). Three sections of the original survey instrument were used in this study (a)
demographic information (4 items), (b) preservice teachers’ perceptions of the inclusion of students with disabilities (12 items), and (c) preservice teacher perceived competence to teach these students compared to the attributed competence to regular education teachers and special education teachers (15 items). To establish the face validity of the instrument, the translated version of the questionnaire was given to five faculty members of the Faculty of Education. They made comments and provided feedback on a few items and these suggestions were incorporated into the draft. Prior to distribution, the survey was also piloted using a sample of 30 student teachers from another university. Their feedback was also taken into account in designing the final version of the survey. Reliability was established using Alpha coefficient of internal consistency and produced the following indexes: for “Preservice teachers’ perceptions of inclusion (α = .54), and for “Preservice teacher perceived competency to teach students with disabilities (α = .88).

The Spanish version of the instrument contained 32 items in total. In section I participants were asked for information about their certification area in the ITE program, age, gender, and previous contact with children with disabilities. In Section II they were asked to respond to 12 statements regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities using a Likert-type rating scale. Participants based on their knowledge/experience indicated the extent to which they agree or disagree with each of the statements by selecting among the following response choices: Strongly Disagree = 1, Moderately Disagree = 2, Slightly Disagree = 3, Slightly Agree = 4, Moderately Agree = 5, Strongly Agree = 6. This section consisted of items like: The social and emotional needs of children with disabilities are better met in special classes for children with disabilities than in regular classes (Item 1), Teaching different subjects to children with disabilities is asking too much of regular education teachers (Item 8), or Most preservice teachers who will teach in regular schools would rather not teach children with disabilities (Item 12). In Section III the respondents had to rate the competence of average Regular Education Teachers (RET), average Special Education Teachers (SET), and themselves to (a) teaching children with and without disabilities, (b) managing the behavior of children with and without disabilities, and (c) working with parents using the following rating scale: Not at all Competent = 1, Insufficiently Competent = 2, Sufficiently Competent = 3, Highly Competent = 4. Additionally, the questionnaire included one open-ended question asking the participants in what specific area(s) did they feel more knowledge/help should be given in their ITE program.

Procedure

Faculty members of the School of Education assisted in the distribution of the survey. Collection of data took place prior to the delivery of the class lecture during the fall sessions of 2006 in a core course of the program. Each copy was accompanied by a letter from the researcher explaining the study and the questionnaire, and requested the students’ participation. Potential respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary, and that data would be confidential with no implications for their grades. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the University, Vice-Chancellor of Research and Innovation, and from the Dean of the Faculty of Education. The questionnaire took 15-20 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

A variety of techniques were used to analyze the research data. These techniques included statistical descriptive measures, percentagess, and inferential statistical techniques using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The SPSS (version 15.0 for Windows) was used to run these calculations. Findings were synthesized according to the aspects of student teachers’ perceptions of inclusion, and competence to teach students with significant disabilities in inclusive classrooms comparing their perceived competence to the competence they attributed to in-service general education and special education teachers. Finally, we established a coding schema to track the topics that emerged from respondents’ written responses to the open-ended question included in the questionnaire and counted the presence of the thematic indicators.

Results

Student Teachers’ Perceptions of Inclusion

Table 1 highlights perceptions of the respondents regarding the philosophy of inclusion. As can be seen, student teachers mostly agreed to items addressing the theoretical and academic issues of inclusive education. The majority (93%) believed that children with disabilities should not be taught in separate groups and that the needs of the majority of children with disabilities could be met in regular classrooms (78% agreed). They also showed agreement with the effectiveness of inclusion: Seventy percent of respondents agreed that the social and emotional needs of students with disabilities could be better met in regular education classrooms than in special education classrooms, and that the academic performance (92%) and the social/emotional adjustment of students without disabilities (95%) were not negatively affected by the inclusion of children with special needs.

While these perceptions can be considered clearly positive towards inclusion, when asked whether or not they believed special education teachers were better trained or were more effective than regular education teachers (RET) in teaching students with disabilities and diverse needs, a large percentage of the respondents agreed. Seventy-nine percent indicated that special education teachers were better prepared than RET to teach school subjects to students with disabilities while 61% agreed that special education teachers were more effective than RET in teaching academic subjects to students with special
needs. Moreover, 69% of the respondents believed that SET used different teaching methods than RET. Interestingly, when asked whether or not teaching school subjects to children with disabilities was asking too much of RET, 93% of the respondents disagreed.

Respondents were also positive when asked whether or not they would recommend the integration model. Almost all of the total cohort respondents (92%) indicated that they would recommend the inclusion model for students with disabilities. However, they were more skeptical when asked about RET willingness to teach students with disabilities: 62% agreed that regular education teachers would rather not teach students with disabilities, and 40% thought the same of preservice teachers.

### Table 1

**Student Teachers’ Perceptions of Inclusion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical and Academic Issues</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10. Children with disabilities should be usually taught in a separate group from children without disabilities in classroom settings.</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The needs of the majority of children with disabilities can be met in regular classrooms.</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The social and emotional needs of children with disabilities are better met in special classes than in regular classes.</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The social and emotional adjustment of children without disabilities is negatively affected when integrated among children with disabilities.</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The academic performance of children without disabilities is negatively affected when integrated among children with disabilities.</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Instructional Concerns and Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Special education teachers use different teaching methods for school subjects from RET for children with disabilities.</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Special education teachers are more effective than RET in teaching school subjects to children with disabilities.</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Teaching different school subjects to children with disabilities is asking too much of RET.</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Special education teachers are better trained than RET to teach school subjects to children with disabilities.</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Willingness to Teach Students with Disabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Most teachers in regular schools would rather not teach children with disabilities.</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Most preservice teachers who will teach in regular schools would rather not teach children with disabilities.</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Given the choice between integrating children with disabilities in the regular classrooms and special schools, I recommend the integration model.</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perceptions of Competence to Teach Students with Significant Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms

The mean ratings of 2.67 and 2.72 (around the scale’s mid point) for teaching and managing the behaviour of students with disabilities reflects that the respondents did not feel sufficiently competent both in their own instructional skills, and in their ability to control and manage the behaviour of students with special educational needs (see Table 2). Nevertheless, respondents’ ratings of competence were higher for teaching and managing the behaviour of students without disabilities ($M = 3.29$ and $3.04$, respectively), indicating that student teachers felt sufficiently confident of their competence in these domains as well as in working with parents ($M = 3.44$).
Overall, respondents’ perception of competence was $M = 3.03$ while, student teachers’ perceptions of RET and SET’s competence was $M = 3.21$ and $3.56$, respectively. These results revealed a statistically significant difference in competence between self-competency to teach special needs populations and the perceived competency attributed to RET and SET. Specifically, student teachers rated their own teaching and management skills to teach and manage the behaviour of students with and without disabilities at a significantly lower level ($p < .01$) than they rated the regular education and special education teachers’ skills (see Table 3). At the same time, respondents felt themselves significantly less competent than they perceived regular and special education teachers were in working with parents, $F(2,112) = 6.24$, $p = .002$. This suggests that student teachers perceived themselves less prepared to teach students with disabilities than they thought of inservice teachers. As would be expected, student teachers rated their skill level to teach children with disabilities and manage behaviour as not sufficient and perceived SET more competent than RET to teach these children. Specifically, the more frequent themes that emerge from the open-ended question of the questionnaire when they were asked in what specific area(s) did they feel more knowledge or help should be given in their ITE program, their answers were: learning more about IEP (Individual Educational Plan) requirements of children with disabilities, learning more instructional strategies and how to use them in inclusive environments, learning more about curriculum adaptation, learning how to deal with the behaviour of these students, and how to identify and meet specific student needs. These results add evidence to the belief that student teachers rarely perceived themselves well prepared for working with students with disabilities.

### Table 2

**Descriptive Comparisons of Respondents’ Perceptions of Competence to Teach Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical and Academic Issues</th>
<th>M/SD</th>
<th>NA1 %</th>
<th>IC2 %</th>
<th>SC3 %</th>
<th>HC %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching children with disabilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average regular classroom teacher</td>
<td>2.73/.61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average special education teacher</td>
<td>3.76/.43</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student teacher</td>
<td>2.67/.65</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching children without disabilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average regular classroom teacher</td>
<td>3.55/.53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average special education teacher</td>
<td>3.29/.61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student teacher</td>
<td>3.29/.55</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Managing the behavior of children with disabilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average regular classroom teacher</td>
<td>2.75/.74</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average special education teacher</td>
<td>3.71/.47</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>59</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Managing the behavior of children without disabilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Average regular classroom teacher</td>
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<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td><strong>Working with parents</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>52</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1NA = Not at all competent; 2IC = Insufficiently competent; 3SC = Sufficiently competent; 4HC = Highly competent
Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to obtain perceptions from a cohort of student teachers about the inclusion of pupils with disabilities in regular classrooms as well as their feeling of competence to teach them in inclusive classrooms. The majority of respondents agreed with the philosophy and the benefits of inclusion, but did not feel sufficiently competent to teach and manage the behaviour of students with disabilities in inclusive settings. These results give support to other studies (e.g., Clough, & Lindsay, 1991) that assume that newly qualified teachers hold positive attitudes towards inclusion at the end of their preparation programs, and at the same time confirm the findings of previous studies (e.g., Cardona, 2000; Hastings & Oakford, 2003; Lambe & Bones, 2006a, 2006b; Loreman et al., 2005) which indicated that while preservice educators have a positive attitude towards inclusive education, these perceptions are contradictory. In this study, respondents clearly expressed their support for inclusionary practices because of the academically and socio-emotional benefits on students with and without disabilities, however, 40% of the respondents thought of preservice teachers that they would rather not teach students with disabilities. These findings reveal ambivalence towards the inclusion of students with disabilities and exemplify the tendency of preservice teachers to see disabilities as problems not as resources.

Additionally, the findings revealed that the respondents appeared to be more comfortable with the traditional system of special education provision than with the inclusive model as can be deduced from their responses: A large majority of respondents believed that SET are better trained (79%) and more effective (61%) than RET in teaching school subjects to children with disabilities, and that 62% of RET would rather not teach children with disabilities. Another interesting finding was that only a minority of the cohort respondents perceived themselves highly competent (8%) to teach children with disabilities, while 76% thought of SET as highly competent compared to average RET (9%). For managing the behavior of children with disabilities, again only 8% of respondents felt highly competent while 72% thought of SET and 16% of RET as highly competent. Results of the ANOVA (univariate analysis of variance) comparisons were statistically significant \( p < .01 \) suggesting that the respondents’ beliefs and perceived skills of RET and SET for teaching and managing the behavior of children with and without disabilities were significantly different.

In light of these findings, the present study results in several implications and recommendations for the design of the new ITE programs at the University of Alicante. First, there is a need for the new programs to examine the new structures proposed for the Ministry of Education and Science (MEC, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c) to design ITE programs accordingly with the Bologna Declaration, and the extent in which these new programs will provide student teachers with exposure to issues of diversity, particularly, in terms of disability. Considering the results of the ANOVA, it is imperative that student teachers in the new ITE programs are prompted to (a) raise their level of awareness regarding issues of disability, and (b) begin to see children with disabilities as resources and opportunities to learn and understand student characteristics more deeply giving them opportunities that have the potential to develop not only preservice teachers’ knowledge but skills and empathy with the learners’ abilities. Therefore, we recommend that the new programs consider what more could be done to further develop

| Table 3 | ANOVA Comparisons of Respondents’ Perceptions of Competence to Teach Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Student Teacher | RET\(^1\) M/SD | SET\(^2\) M/SD | F | df | p | Direc |
| Teaching students with disabilities | 2.67/.65 | 2.73/.61 | 3.76/.43 | 127.74 | 2 | .000* | SET > RET & STU |
| Teaching students without disabilities | 3.29/.55 | 3.55/.53 | 3.29/.61 | 7.85 | 2 | .000* | RET > SET & STU |
| Managing behavior of students with disabilities | 2.72/.65 | 2.75/.74 | 3.71/.47 | 89.89 | 2 | .000* | SET > RET & STU |
| Managing behavior of students without disabilities | 3.04/.66 | 3.34/.64 | 3.36/.63 | 8.35 | 2 | .000* | RET & SET > STU |

\(^1\)RET = Regular education teacher; \(^2\)SET = Special education teacher

*Significant at 1% or above
Preservice teachers’ knowledge and skills regarding their initial knowledge and experiences they have had with unfamiliar educational contexts and learners. At the same time, it is very recommendable to explore ITE faculty’s understanding of disability and inclusionary issues. As mentors and instructors, it is critical that they be actively involved in furthering their own understanding and practises related to issues of inclusion of students who differ. Third, these findings imply that the ITE program needs to reconsider the ways in which the curriculum addresses: (a) issues of equity within the educational system; (b) the teacher’s responsibility for addressing these issues; and (c) the impact that equity issues can have on the learner’s opportunities for effective instruction and achievement. Finally, we suggest that the ITE program instructors participate in a series of conversations with practitioners in the field in order to determine curriculum needs in regarding subjects and activities that address ITE students’ understanding of equity issues in the education of children with disabilities and other specific educational needs.

In conclusion, while the results of this study provide valuable insights into student teachers perceptions of the inclusion of children with disabilities and their perceived competence to teach them, they also substantiate the assertion that the solutions for how best to prepare teachers may begin with understanding how teachers beliefs are integrated within the classroom (Taylor & Sobel, 2001). Future studies need to encompass longitudinal research in order to link beliefs and attitudes to practice, and compare/contrast if the ITE new programs contribute in a significant way to better prepare student teachers for inclusion. Surveys involving larger samples and incorporating focus groups are required for future research on this topic.

References


