Meeting the Needs of Special Education Students in Inclusion Classrooms

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Abstract

Based on interactions with general education teachers, observations of special education students in inclusion classrooms, and general education teachers' input during the Response to Intervention (RTI) process, a resource teacher found that many teachers were ill prepared to meet the diverse needs of special education students in the inclusion classroom. More importantly, the students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) were not being implemented. As such, an action research project was initiated to explore three main research questions: (1) What challenges do special education students present for general education teachers in inclusive classrooms?; (2) What are the perceived needs of general education teachers in relation to accommodating special education students in their classrooms?; and (3) In what ways can administration support general education teachers in accommodating special education students? The findings identify general education teachers' need for better communication, professional development concerning children with disabilities, and a need for more planning time.

Meeting the Needs of Special Education Students in Inclusion Classrooms

A major challenge in schools today is the sheer volume of students being labeled as special needs under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). It has been well documented that the rate of student referrals for special education is high, particularly among minorities and English Language Learners (ELLs) (Guiberson, 2009; Klinger & Harry, 2006; Skiba et al., 2006; Skiba et al., 2008; Zetlin, Beltran, Salcido, Gonzalez, & Reyes, 2011). Such findings may indicate that the needs of special education students are not being correctly identified. However, in cases in which students are correctly identified, their needs are often not met in general education classrooms. In order to improve the educational experience of special needs students in the inclusion classroom, teachers must be knowledgeable about IDEA, curriculum differentiation, and appropriate instructional practices for learning disabled students. For the purpose of this study, inclusion is defined as the student receiving services in the general education classroom for the majority of the time and only being pulled out when appropriate services cannot be delivered in the regular education classroom environment.

In 2007-08, about 6.6 million children and youth, representing 13% of national public school enrollment, received special education services (NCES, 2010). Approximately 94.6% of those children spend a percentage of their day in the general education classroom (NCES, 2010). These statistics reveal a significant change in placement practices as an article by McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, and Hoppey (2010) notes that in1990, only 34% of students with disabilities spent most of the school day in general education settings.

Implications of Inclusion

As with any major change in the educational system, inclusion comes with implications. According to Murphy (1996),

> The widespread adoption of a fully inclusive approach to educating students with special needs will necessitate a comprehensive restructuring of both regular and special education at all levels—from classroom organization and pedagogy, to curricula, to program administration, to teacher preparation. (p.470)

Although it is necessary for all stakeholders to be involved in this "comprehensive restructuring," general education teachers seem to have the greatest challenge. Not only are general education teachers expected to teach students with special needs, they are expected to be fully prepared to do so (i.e., be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills). The problem, however, is rooted in teachers' preparation—both preservice and inservice.

Teacher Preparation

Several studies have explored the notion of teacher preparation in the area of special education (Chang, Early, & Winton, 2005; Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, & Merbler, 2010; Holdheide & Rechly, 2008). The consensus among the literature has been that general education teachers are inadequately prepared to work with special needs students and, therefore, not prepared for inclusion. Although this has been a major concern for nearly two decades, efforts to address this issue have been futile in most cases. While there are institutions of higher education that report their efforts in providing general education teacher candidates with coursework that focuses on exceptional children and/or special education in general (Harvey et al., 2010), teachers are still entering classrooms unprepared for inclusion each year.

This action research project grew out of one special education resource teacher's concern with the daily challenges of general education teachers in inclusive classrooms. Through her interactions with the general education teachers at her school, the resource teacher found that these teachers' voices needed to be heard. To further explore the teachers' challenges, three research questions were developed: (1) What challenges do special education students present for general education teachers in inclusive classrooms?; (2) What are the perceived needs of general education teachers in relation to accommodating special education students in their classrooms?; and (3) In what ways can administration support general education teachers in accommodating special education students? It is

the intent of this project to use the results to help guide administrators in choosing and implementing appropriate professional development for general education teachers and, more importantly, in making sure the teachers continuously receive the necessary support to successfully meet all students' needs.

Background

This study was conducted at a mid-sized Title I elementary school campus in Texas with a "Recognized" performance ranking through the State Department of Education. A partnership with the local University maintains this campus as a Professional Development Laboratory School (PDLS) where teacher professional development is data and research driven and paramount in the improvement of student achievement. The population at the school is primarily African American and Hispanic bilingual with 11% of the 935 students receiving special education services through Speech, Alternative Academics, Preschool Programs for Children with Disabilities (PPCD), and Resource.

Participants

All certified professional educators surveyed were highly qualified for their positions under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). There was an equal mix of bilingual and English speaking educators with a multitude of experience levels and a wide variance in their level of education. The staff represented many comparable elementary campuses in Texas. Of the 70 teachers who were sent the surveys 56 responded for a response rate of 80%. Seven participants were chosen for the focus group by each grade level team who were asked for a volunteer representative. The seven teachers consisted of certified general education 1st- 5th grade classroom teachers, a physical education teacher, and one resource (inclusion) teacher. Additionally, the teachers greatly varied in their years of teaching experience and in their pre-service teacher education (see Table 1). Only two of the teachers received significant special education training through either college courses, district-based professional development, or state-mandated training. The remaining teachers had minimal training or experience through campus-based trainings, readings of material relevant to special education, or other experiences outside of the public school system.

Table 1
Focus Group Participants' Educational Experience and Background

PARTICIPANT	YEARS OF TEACHING	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND
Participant 1	15+	B.S. in Special Education & Bilingual Education M.Ed. Educational Administration
Participant 2	6	B.S. in Elementary Education
Participant 3	6	B.S. in Elementary Education M.Ed. Educational Administration
Participant 4	6	B.S. in Elementary Education
Participant 5	2	B.S. in Elementary Education
Participant 6	10+	B.S. in Elementary Education

Design and Methodology

The research design was mixed methods, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data. First, an electronic questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data pertaining to the needs and challenges of staff members who serve special education students in inclusion classrooms. Specifically, a Likert scale was used to determine the difficulty level of the challenges presented by special education students and the importance level of the perceived needs of the teachers. Qualitative data was then collected through a multi-grade level focus group where participants were asked to discuss proposed questions pertaining to the project topic (meeting the needs of special education students) in an open forum.

Focus Group

Focus group questions (see Appendix B) were designed to determine the challenges presented by special education students in the inclusion setting and what the teachers' perceptions were in relation to accommodating the students. It was our goal to have the discussion drive the direction of the focus group. In contrast to individual interviews, focus group participants relate their experiences and reactions among presumed peers with whom they likely share some common frame of reference (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). In this manner, the focus group was able to delve deeper into the topic of discussion.

Data Analysis

The focus group interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcription was then read and analyzed separately by members of the research team. The researchers looked for patterns, or themes, throughout the text of the transcript and comments were made within the margins of the transcript. The researchers then met to compare data analysis and discuss themes, which emerged from the data, to determine a level of agreement. To analyze teacher responses to the online questionnaire concerning their greatest perceived challenges and needs, a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used.

Results

The intent of this study was to determine what general education teachers perceive as their needs and greatest challenges to successfully meet the needs of special education students and in what ways administrators can support general education teachers in accomplishing this goal.

Qualitative Results

Three major themes were established through analysis of the focus group data: (1) communication; (2) collaboration vs. disconnect; and (3) lack of professional development.

Communication

Communication was the most important factor discussed as needing improvement. As in any relationship, skilled, open communication appears to be the strongest foundation for success. The only way to have successful collaborative experiences in education is through successful communication. According to Snyder (1999), "one of the biggest factors aiding the success of the program is constant communication between regular education and special education teachers" (p.178). Teachers participating in the forum cited communication gaps when it came to informing general education teachers prior to placement of special needs students in their classrooms, informing them of schedule changes for special needs students, and communicating goals and objectives of instruction for special needs students. One participant imparted:

> *I think it is very important with communication between the teacher, resource, occupational therapist, the special education team lead and the principals. Sometimes, the decisions are made way over there and I'm the last to know.*

Resource teachers and administrators need to understand the impact special needs students have on general education teachers when placed in their classrooms. There is a need for additional time for planning instruction, behavioral concerns, scheduling and the social dynamics of all students in the classroom. At the same time, general education teachers must communicate their needs to administrators and the special education department. Administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers should be continuously communicating in regard to curriculum concerns, classroom management, social skills training for students, instructional strategies, and student progress in order to create a network that efficiently addresses the educational needs of children with learning disabilities in the inclusion classroom.

Collaboration vs. Disconnect

Problems develop in inclusive settings when children with disabilities are "dumped wholesale" into classrooms, with budget cuts and no planning and collaboration. Special educators lament loss of control over the learning environment and fear loss of specialized services for students with disabilities (Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Many of the teachers felt there was a disconnect and a general lack of collaboration between the special education department and the general education teachers. The special education department on this particular campus included resource teachers, occupational therapists, speech therapists, alternative education teachers, PPCD teachers, counselors, gifted and talented teachers, special education team leaders, diagnosticians, paraprofessionals, and administration. As one participant stated, "There is no connection, it seems, between the resource setting and the general education setting." This disconnect extended to planning, grading and instruction.

Planning was a leading cause for concern. General education teachers have discerned the importance of planning instruction and interventions with the special education teachers but encounter time or schedule restraints when it comes to collaborative planning. The majority of the teachers participating in the focus group felt that the Individual Education Plans (IEPs), which are plans for instruction, are confusing and difficult to follow. There seemed to be a general lack of understanding of the content of IEPs and Behavioral Intervention plans (BIPs). This lack of understanding extended to the progress monitoring system as well. One teacher stated:

> *Here is his IEP. Here is what you have to do. He has to learn this four out of ten times or six out of ten times, and it's like another language to me. ...So how am I going to document that he does this eight out of ten times, assess it, and explain it to the [resource] teachers?*

Another example of disconnect as it pertains to instruction is the idea that the resource teacher, general education teacher, and parents are not all working toward the same goals. A veteran teacher participant was discouraged by the time and effort she puts into planning with minimal results. She felt that the disconnectedness resulted in failure for her as a teacher and for the student, as reflected in her statement:

> *I find all the resources, I do all this work and the students don't have a consistent setting when they go home. Mom does not force them to do homework, the special ed teacher is going in one direction, I'm going in another direction.....and there is no way if the special ed teacher, the teacher, the parent and the student do not have the same goal and the same structure. If they don't read at home, there is nothing we can do. We can't do miracles here.*

The disconnection was not limited to communication or collaboration issues between teachers in both departments, but a disconnection with the special needs students themselves while in the inclusion classroom. The teachers felt their time with these students was disjointed due to pull out for resource and other services; many times efforts were futile. For example, one teacher participant said:

> *...for me the biggest challenge that I face is when there is disruption toward the daily routine, especially if we are doing small group instruction and I am including the student. He has to be pulled to go to the Special Ed teacher. Then, he has to come back and catch up and for me, I kind of wish it could be a more predictable pattern where I could adjust the one to one instruction and not hinder his inclusion in the classroom. That's one thing that I think would be great; if we could find a way to not disrupt the structure and routine.*

A major concern inclusion teachers have is building positive relationships with special educational needs students. This becomes challenging when students are pulled out for services and do not spend continuous blocks of time with the inclusion teacher. One teacher stated:

Like the ones in the afternoon that leave, a group of four, they're hardly ever with me. And so, I mean I know them as children but I think I'd be lying if I said that I knew exactly what level they're on and I know what to do with them; because I don't….I feel kind of frustrated sometimes.

Professional Development

The most impactful commission of administrators in supporting general education teachers in meeting the needs of special needs students was to provide consistent professional development in the area of disabilities, behavior, and federal laws and mandates driven by IDEA. According to researchers, professional development in special education for general education teachers improves the attitudes of these teachers concerning inclusion (Avramidis, Baylis, & Burden, 2000). A more positive attitude concerning inclusion is a huge step in improving the educational experience of special needs students in inclusion classrooms. Studies conducted by Ornelles, Cook, and Jenkins (2007) concluded that general education teachers felt less confident than special educators in their ability to facilitate successful inclusion of students with disabilities. This conclusion calls for more in depth training and professional development to support general education teachers. Teachers' confidence to teach is one of the key characteristics that predict teaching ability; those who believe they can positively impact student achievement are more likely to be effective in meeting students' needs (Eggen & Kauchak, 2006). Teachers knew they were not fully prepared and repeatedly stated that there was a tremendous need for professional development to help clarify the admissions, review, and dismissal (ARD) process, assessment process, BIPs and IEPs, legal responsibilities of teachers and progress monitoring. One participant had this to say about professional development:

> *I think the professional development being updated is important. How to address those needs is very, very important. Having sessions that will give us the tools that we can take care of those needs would be great.*

Teachers' participation in professional development varied greatly. Those teachers who had professional development that pertained to special needs students affirmed it was minimal and "not enough to apply it" in the classroom or they felt they needed refresher courses because previous professional development was brief and they felt they did not get much out of it. This attitude was shared by both general education teachers and special education teachers alike.

Summary of Qualitative Results

There are many challenges in meeting the educational needs of children with disabilities in the inclusion classroom. Our study concluded that general education teachers are frustrated with the structure of the system (grading, progress monitoring, scheduling, placement of students), lack of professional development opportunities concerning children with disabilities, communication breakdown between departments, and the lack

of collaboration between administration, the special education team, and general education teachers. The findings of this study are indicative of the need for in- depth professional development for general education teachers. Our study confirms previous research done by Rea, McLaughlin, and Walther-Thomas (2002) who concluded that there is an obvious need for better communication among professionals, collaborative problem- solving and the development of appropriate support services along with an emphasis on initial preparation and continuing professional development programs.

Summary of Quantitative Results

Questionnaire results were analyzed separately for the teacher perceived challenges and teacher perceived needs. Two one-way repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted with the factor being the seven items measuring teachers' perceptions of challenges or needs and the dependent variable being either the challenge scale score or the need scale score. The scales ranged from 1 to 5; 1 represented "not at all challenging" or "not at all important", and 5 represented "very challenging" or "very important". The means and standard deviations for the challenge scale scores are presented in Table 2. The results for the ANOVA indicated an overall significant difference between the seven items on the questionnaire measuring teachers' perceived challenges: Wilks' $\lambda = .454$, $F(6,50) = 10.015$, p <.01, multivariate eta squared (η^2) = .546.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for the Challenge Rating Scale, n = 56

Item	Teacher Perceived Challenges	M	SD
1	Students ability to keep up with the pace of the curriculum	3.57	0.783
2	Modifying curriculum	2.82	0.765
3	Finding the time to meet SEN students needs	3.45	0.807
4	Grading appropriately	3.20	0.980
5	Behavior disrupting the learning of others.	3.20	1.182
6	Making appropriate accommodations	2.84	0.968
7	Collecting data / documentation	3.12	1.113

Given the overall significant finding, follow-up paired comparisons were run. There were a total of 21 unique comparisons for the seven items. Among the unique comparisons, four were significant. The Bonferroni procedure was used to adjust the familywise error rate across the 21 tests, the nominal .05 alpha level was adjusted to .002 (i.e., .05/21 = .002). The resulting significant paired comparisons are displayed in Table 3. All paired comparisons were significant at the p <.001.

Table 3

Significant Pairwise Comparisons for the Challenge Rating Scale

Item	Teacher Perceived Challenges	M	*p* value
1	Students' ability to keep up with the pace of the curriculum	3.57	<.001

2	**vs.** Modifying curriculum	2.82	
1	Students' ability to keep up with the pace of the curriculum	3.57	
	vs.		<.001
6	Making appropriate accommodations	2.84	
2	Modifying curriculum	2.82	
	vs.		<.001
3	Finding the time to meet SEN students' needs	3.45	
3	Finding the time to meet SEN students' needs	3.45	
	vs.		<.001
6	Making appropriate accommodations	2.84	

In summary, teachers reported students' ability to keep up with the pace of the curriculum as the most challenging event (Item1). Time to meet special educational needs (SEN) students' needs (Item 3) was reported as the second most challenging event. Both Item 1 and Item 3 were significantly more challenging than modifying the curriculum (Item2), or making appropriate accommodations (Item 6). The results suggest, administrators could offer teachers support with helping special education students keep up with the pace of the curriculum and with finding time to meet SEN students' needs.

Teachers were also asked to rate seven items that reflect the needs they have in order to better serve their speciation education students. A repeated measures ANOVA was run to determine if there was a significant difference between any of the perceived needs. The multivariate Wilks' lambda (λ) did not indicate an overall significant difference between the seven items measuring teachers' perceived needs: Wilks' $\lambda = .819$, $F(6,47) = 1.731$, $p =.135$. As a result, no follow-up comparisons were needed. In short, teachers perceived all of the items listed in Table 4 as important needs.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for the Need Rating Scale, n = 53

Item	Teacher Perceived Needs	M	SD
1	Professional development in SPED and IEP	3.91	1.043
2	Behavior Support	3.85	1.133
3	More collaboration with SPED team	4.08	.895
4	More time for planning in order to differentiate instruction	4.09	.838
5	More individualized or small group time with SPED students	4.21	.840
6	Help implementing the accommodations on IEP	3.94	.949
7	More resources available for modified curriculum	4.13	.941

Conclusion

For many students with disabilities, gaining entry into general education classes has been a long, hard and litigious road (Conner & Ferri, 2007). Our study has determined that

once special needs students gain access to the general education classroom, there are many difficult and frustrating issues for general education teachers on the road to successful inclusion education. In addition to the need for quality professional development, general education teachers must be involved in everything from the Response to Intervention (RTI) process to the planning and delivery of differentiated instruction for students qualifying for services under IDEA. This collaborative effort with the special education department and administrators must be steeped in effectual communication.

This study clearly demonstrates that general education teachers want to be involved in the processes of special education. This may include grading, developing goals and objectives on the IEP, and helping to create BIPs and ARD decisions. When teachers work collaboratively with the special education team, it will build stronger understandings and knowledge of the impact of inclusion on the students they teach and create more positive attitudes toward inclusion. An analysis done by Avarmidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) revealed that there was an association between the respondents' perceptions of the skills they possessed and their attitudes towards inclusion. Positive teacher attitudes make a strong argument for extensive professional development in the area of special education.

If communication, collaboration, and professional development are in place, successful inclusion instruction will likely occur. A collaborative planning and teaching foundation will bridge the gap that is causing the feeling of disconnect between general education teachers and special education. Administrators must take responsibility for providing professional development, providing concurrent planning time for general education and special education teachers, and providing support with curricular adaptations and accommodations. Special education teachers must take responsibility for including and supporting the general education teacher in the inclusion classroom, planning and developing the IEP, and progress monitoring of special needs students. General education teachers must take responsibility for voicing their needs and concerns, participating fully in the RTI and ARD process, and keeping a positive attitude toward inclusion. When administrators, general education teachers, and special education teachers take collaborative responsibility, communicate often and effectively, and educate themselves and others, inclusion will be a successful educational opportunity for special needs children.

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Appendix A

Teacher Questionnaire

Instructions: Rate the following items to reflect your perceived level of **<u>CHALLENGE</u>** with each item.

	Teacher Perceived Challenges				
	Not at all Challenging	Not Very Challenging	Fairly Challenging	Very Challenging	Extremely Challenging
Items	1	2	3	4	5
1.Students ability to keep up with the pace of the curriculum in the GE classroom	1	2	3	4	5
2. Modifying curriculum	1	2	3	4	5
3. Finding the time to meet SEN students' needs	1	2	3	4	5
4. Grading appropriately	1	2	3	4	5
5. Behavior disrupting the learning of others	1	2	3	4	5
6. Making appropriate accommodations	1	2	3	4	5
7. Collecting data/documentation	1	2	3	4	5

Teacher Questionnaire

Instructions: Rate the following items to reflect the **<u>NEEDS</u>** you have in order to better serve your special education students.

	Teacher Perceived Needs				
	Not at all Important	Not Too Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
1. Professional Development in SPED and IEP's	1	2	3	4	5
2. Behavior Support	1	2	3	4	5
3. More collaboration with Sped team	1	2	3	4	5
4. More time for planning in order to differentiate instruction	1	2	3	4	5
5. More individualized or small group time with SPED students	1	2	3	4	5
6. Help implementing the accommodations on IEP	1	2	3	4	5
7. More resources available for modified curriculum	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

1. Explain the academic challenges that you have in the classroom with special educational needs students.
2. What is the most difficult challenge?
3. Explain the behavioral challenges that you have in the classroom with special educational needs students.
4. Explain the type of experience you have working with special educational needs students in the classroom.
5. In what ways do you adjust instruction to meet the needs of special educational needs students?
6. What types of support can administration give to classroom teachers to improve instruction for special educational needs students?