# "Don't Get Your Briefs in a Bunch"
## What High School Students with Disabilities Have To Say About Where They Receive Their Services

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In the field of special education, one of the most fervently debated topics is where students with disabilities should receive their academic instruction. Increasingly, students with varying special needs receive their education within the general education setting. This placement is commonly referred to as "inclusion," although its legal term, not necessarily synonymous, is "least restrictive environment" (LRE).

One of the most significant requirements associated with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1997) is the least restrictive environment (LRE) provision. Specifically, this provision mandates that:

> To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1412)

Ideally, inclusion in general education classes is meant to give students with disabilities more academic challenges and social self-

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esteem. For many, the idea of including students who have traditionally been segregated from mainstream classes is a daunting and seemingly impossible endeavor. Special education professionals who have openly endorsed inclusive education for all students, regardless of the severity of the disability, have been ridiculed and referred to as "the anointed" (Kavale & Forness, 2000, p. 79) or "quacks" (Kauffman, 1999, p. 250). Those against inclusive environments assert that there are certain students who directly benefit from being separated from the mainstream population for at least some, if not all, of their instructional day (e.g. Baker & Zigmond, 1995; Hallahan, 1998; Schulte, Osborne & McKinney, 1990). Unfortunately, what initially began as a crusade for securing equal and appropriate education for students with disabilities has mutated into a divisive battle among teachers and administrators about where students with disabilities should receive their education. According to Cohen (1993), educational placement of students with disabilities has evolved into an argument that is dealt with as a political issue complete with personal agendas and mudslinging.

Sadly, a once noble mission to advocate for students appears to have been blurred by catapulting political viewpoints on the role of public education and disability. The discussion over inclusive practices has shifted to a focus on "where" rather "how" the education of students with special learning needs should take place. What is troublesome is that student voices about their perceptions of educational placement are not included in the debate. Research has indicated that students have distinct ideas about the best ways to maximize their educational experiences and their voices should be considered when determining placement or curriculum adaptations (e.g. Klingner & Vaughn, 1999; Marks, Schrader & Longaker, 2000).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to look beyond polemical constructions of the "inclusion" debate and instead begin to learn from what high school students have to say about their experiences so that we, as educators, can be more successful meeting the needs of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

An appropriate education for students with disabilities at its best is ostensibly designed to provide all students with academic challenges and positive self-esteem. Clearly, examining the perceptions of students with disabilities regarding their school experiences is paramount when determining the efficacy of various educational placements. Traditionally, students with disabilities have been denied a voice in where or how they

should receive their education. Much of the literature about education for adolescents focused on both non-disabled students' and teachers' perceptions of working with students with disabilities (e.g. Fisher, 1999; Giangreco, Dennis, Cloniger, Edelman & Schattman, 1993; Stoler, 1992). Students with disabilities do care about their education and have distinct feelings about what constitutes the best and worst part of school (Kortering & Braziel, 2002).

Although there is limited research that examines the perceptions of high school students with disabilities towards their education, the existing literature indicates that most students want to do well in school and appreciate classes that allow them to experience success (e.g. Klinger & Vaughn, 1999; Kortering & Braziel, 2002; Rodis, Garrod & Boscardin, 2001; Vaughn, Schumm & Kouzekanani, 1993). Mixed results have been found when students with learning disabilities were surveyed about resource room versus general education. Some researchers found students were more positive toward general education settings (Shoho, Katims & Wilks, 1997), some found students were more positive toward resource room settings (Klingner, Vaughn, Schumm, Cohen & Forgan, 1998), and some found no difference (Howard & Tryon, 2002).

Problems exist with the research base on student perceptions because different studies used different measures and variables that make it extremely difficult to draw comparisons across the literature. Additionally, much of the previous research in this area involved surveys rather than allowing students the opportunity to tell their stories and share specific examples of their experiences. This study will add to the current conversation of what constitutes a positive educational experience by including the ideas that high school students with disabilities have about themselves and their educational experiences.

## Method

A naturalistic research approach was used to explore the feelings of students with disabilities about their educational experiences. This process allowed us to examine the perceptions of students through the lenses of their own experiences (Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001) and within the context of their school. The use of qualitative methods to collect and analyze data allowed us to move beyond the traditional special education deficit perspective to take student strengths and viewpoints into account (Anzul, Evans, King & Robinson, 2001).

### *Setting*

The school site selected for this study was a suburban high school that

served grades 9-12. The school population was approximately 2,700, with roughly 600 students receiving special education services (including gifted services). At the time of the study, the school site had five inclusive cross-curricular teams and the majority of students with mild disabilities were integrated into general education one or more periods per day.

### *Participants*

The fifteen high school seniors who participated in this research all met the following selection criteria: (a) met eligibility requirements for special education services under the guidelines presented in accordance with IDEA; (b) currently received special education services in a resource classroom at least one period per day; and (c) spent at least one year of school in an inclusive general education classroom setting and at least one year in a self-contained resource room setting. Of the fifteen students who participated in this study, twelve were labeled as "learning disabled," two were labeled as "behavior disordered," and one was labeled as "communicative disordered." Thirteen of the participants were male and two were female. The group was of similar middle-class socio-economic status and most of them had received special education services since elementary school. All of the participants knew each other and had one or more classes together during their senior year in high school.

### *Data Collection*

Two sources of data were collected within a three-month period during the students' senior year in high school. First, the participants were given four short open-ended writing assignments dispersed over a two-month period. The participants were asked to write about their feelings toward school and teachers. These responses were collected at various times throughout the research period. The participants were instructed to "free write" about their school experiences and were given prompts if they did not know how to begin the writing process. Prompts included topics such as "good and bad teachers," "what you think teachers should know," "advice to new teachers," and "best classroom experiences."

Next, the respondents participated in two focus groups to allow them to freely voice their opinions and attitudes about their high school experiences. The discussion at the first focus group began with loosely structured questions to assist in the understanding of how the participants think and develop the perspectives they hold (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The first set of questions for the focus groups were predetermined and were:

(1) How do you feel about school?
(2) How do your teachers help you in your classes?

(3) What is the difference between general education and special education?
(4) How do you think most people view special education?
(5) What's the most important thing that new teachers should know?

These questions were developed from previous reviews of literature on the efficacy of inclusion of students with disabilities in general education and in self-contained classes and our experiences as special education teachers. Once the first round of meetings was transcribed, the contents were reviewed and we established an initial set of codes that related to the purpose of the study. The codes were used as a framework to begin the discussion in the next focus group and as a structure to begin the thematic analysis of the data.

Using the emerging themes as a guide to begin the discussion at the second focus group, the questions were less structured and allowed the participants to digress and offer new, insightful information (Merriam, 1998). All focus groups took place at the school setting and lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. One participant did not feel comfortable speaking about her educational experiences in a focus group, but she agreed to be interviewed separately using the same initial questions.

To ensure validity of the research and to observe the same scene from different angles (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994), the data were collected at various times throughout a three-month period, and member checks were conducted by regularly sharing summaries of the data interpretations with the participants of this study. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim by the researchers, and separated into categories according to emerging themes and patterns. Responses were thought to be significant if the topic emerged in the comments of more than one of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The initial set of codes from the first focus group meeting guided the data analysis and additional codes were added as new themes emerged from the transcripts and writing assignments. Once the last focus group was completed and the writing assignment were collected, all the data were reviewed and separated into smaller color-coded categories that encompassed the thoughts and insights the participants conveyed during the research period. Additionally, once the categories of responses were established, weekly sessions with a colleague who was competent in the areas of qualitative research procedures assisted in looking for competing themes and possible variations of the data. Using this colleague as a critical friend helped ensure credibility of the research by corroborating that the views of the participants were not being filtered through the researchers' theoretical lenses.

## Results

Analyses of the data indicated the emergence of two major themes relating to the students' educational experiences. First, the student voices revealed that the stigma of being labeled as "special education" resulted in feelings of frustration. Second, when compared to general educators, special education teachers appeared to be more willing to listen and assist students in the classroom.

### *"You're in special ed because you can't do what everyone else can do"*

The most prevalent theme that emerged during the data analysis is the students' desire to be seen as typical teenagers, which included not receiving pity or special treatment because of their disabilities. The negative social stigma that the students faced was endemic. The responses in the focus groups painted a picture of frustration that was caused purely because the students were labeled as "special education." According to Amy,

> It's just, they cannot...everybody thinks, of what I know, everybody thinks that all special ed is because of the word 'special' is in there that all we have, all this big old problems because we're 'special', you know? We're, we have this problem with school, we're special and they get the idea that we like, fight, where we like to cause trouble. All these wrong accusations thrown at us....we're the nobodies.

Tomas reminisced in his journal about his initial experience when he was first assigned his special education label and was moved out of his general education classroom:

> They [teachers] said I couldn't keep up with the workload...I could handle the workload if they would have figured it out. Furthermore, I feel cheated by the system because I was in a nice setting. I felt good and I especially don't like being in special ed. It has caused me problems with my personal life. I thought I was expected, by being in a small class, to ditch more, be bad.

Tomas elaborated further in a later focus group:

> All you have to do is act stupid for when you're in middle school. Act like you don't know nothing and you're just going to sit there and shrug. And you're classified right there (hand smacking) you're now special ed. Here you go. Here's your new ride.

The participants in this study expressed that even the word "disability" frequently conjured antagonistic or disparaging images from their typical peers. The respondents indicated that outside of their special education classes, they had to keep hidden any evidence of their disability. Amy

noted: "like, if you tell someone you're in special ed. They always go 'oh, you're in special ed. Oh, I didn't know that.' It's like, 'I'm sorry.'"

The participants sought to find interests outside of school where others knew nothing about the types of teachers they had or the classes they were forced to take. Sadly, even outside the school walls the disability stigma seemed to follow them. This exchange among three of the students illustrates the spiral of misunderstandings and negative stereotyping associated with the special education label:

> Cody: I don't tell nobody at my work no more that I'm in special ed, because they'll look down on you later. Like they'll be all cool with you at first.
>
> Pat: Try to use you up?
>
> Sam: Do you need help with this; do you need help with that?
>
> Cody: They really do. They'll ask you like extra, like, like what's the word. . .condescending? Do you know what that means? They'll think of more stuff to ask you or ask you if you need help doing stuff.
>
> Interviewer: Do you like that or hate it?
>
> Cody: Hate it.

### *"Special Education classes are easier to learn"*

When asked why they enjoyed special education classes, students initially indicated in their journals and the focus groups that it was "easy work," but upon further probing, it was discovered that the teachers who created positive environments made academics easier for students with diverse learning needs. Reflecting on his own experiences in general education versus special education, Tomas reported

> Special ed., like, it's easier to learn...like in the [general education] government class we have to do something and it's due that day. And like government, I don't like even understand, and in special ed you get the teacher to help you and they don't mind helping you neither.

According to the journal responses and the focus groups, most students indicated they preferred special education classes because they were given "more one-on-one-attention," and they can "learn at [their] own pace." In his journal, Sam reported "I really don't mind my classes this year because there is nothing wrong with my classes. All of my teachers are easy- going and good for a change." The results of this study support much of the published research on student perceptions of instruction in inclusive classrooms (e.g., Klingner & Vaughn, 1999). Students preferred to receive their instruction from teachers who explained lessons carefully and provided students with choices and

modifications to ensure they learned the material rather than merely covering chapters in a textbook. When asked about their feelings towards using high school textbooks, the students commented,

> Jason: How is that learning? Just basic bookwork?
>
> Tim: You read out of the books, like straight out of the books and do an assignment or a review or something all quiet. And you can't talk out loud.
>
> Sam: That's just learning how to read out of a book you see, that's all it is. It's just learning how to read but not how to do it. Where if you have a teacher that tells you, with real experiences, that's how you learn.

Teachers who were willing to share their experiences and relate the curriculum to real life situations were perceived to be the driving components of effective learning environments. When asked what constituted a "good" classroom, several students shared their thoughts and offered advice to future educators:

> Tomas: You learn more cuz you want to be respected. You want to talk to a teacher the same way you can talk to anyone else. It's a lot different, like in regular ed., you can't talk to a teacher…you just can't go up and talk to them. They're just like, I don't want to hear what you say.
>
> Sam: I'd tell teachers to respect their students.
>
> Tim: Yeah! Don't get your briefs in a bunch…don't get uppity. Some of the new teachers, they're uptight about themselves…how they're educating. They're more "book" than "open."
>
> Jason: [Special education classes] is different learning, though. Because like the teachers teach you one-on-one with their experiences and their, what they learned.
>
> Sam: Yeah, their education and what they learned, not necessarily book work entirely.

The students' dialogues indicated the importance of teachers who took the time to acknowledge their opinions and were able to make the connection between education and real-life experiences. Teachers who displayed a willingness to communicate on a personal level with the respondents conveyed the impression that they genuinely care about the success of their students. For example, Jason shared his thoughts on two teachers he had during his junior year of high school:

> Like Mrs. Chavez and Mr. Robinson. They make us want to do good in school. They tell us about stuff, you know, like, lessons they learned. They open up to us, so I don't want to let them down, you know? I know they care about what happens to us. Since Mrs. Chavez talks to me, I know she cares and I can talk to her. You know what I'm saying?

As a result, students felt comfortable learning in these types of classroom communities and established positive relationships with the teachers. Tim pointed out in the focus group:

> In special ed you get the teacher to help you and they don't mind helping you neither. The teachers not only want you to get a good grade, but they want you to understand it and you can do it on your own. It's better than just copying it because that's all I do in my other class.

In sum, the respondents indicated that the special education label adversely affected peer and social relationships, but the relationships that were formed with teachers in self-contained settings were often more personal, and perceived to be desirable learning situations.

## Discussion

Although this study provided an interesting perspective from students who receive special education services, several limitations must be considered when interpreting the findings of this research. All of the participants attended the same high school and shared many of the same teachers during their educational careers. Furthermore, as with any study with a small number of participants, it is difficult to generalize the results to a larger population. However, we believe that the student voices represented in this article hold important implications for educators. Although the data could be used to support the continued segregation of students with disabilities, in actuality they have a much broader sociological implication. Interestingly, even though the students despised their special education label, they enjoyed being in a small group setting. But, the students preferred the special education classroom, not because of the "intensive, relentless instruction" (Zigmond & Baker, 1996) that it is supposed to provide. They preferred special education because of a genuine effort from a teacher to listen to them and teach more than what was prescribed from a textbook. Positive relationships and fostering acceptance and belonging were what these students craved. What was also revealed was that the desired characteristics of teachers and environments are not solely limited to a specific classroom setting.

Unfortunately, many general education high school teachers still preserve the negative connotation of the word "disability." Teachers and students come to the classroom with preconceived notions and sets of definitions that permit them to construct the day-to day-reality of their lives (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990). Obviously, teachers play a crucial role in perpetuating or dispelling the traditional disability myth. Educators' beliefs and attitudes about students are paramount when implementing

an instructional program that is focused on students' needs and strengths, rather than solely relying on the tedious, traditional textbook curriculum. Encouraging teachers to look past the disability label offers promise for a broadened sociological perspective of viewing disability as a socially constructed phenomenon, rather than a deficit-based label (Jones, 1996).

There are many barriers to overcome before implementing more inclusive practices for students with learning disabilities. However, the results of this study indicate that the characteristics of teachers in positive learning environments could easily be transferred to any classroom setting. Teachers obviously need to be versatile and willing to accept change, and continually challenge the connotation of disability being a "description of how individuals are to be regarded, treated and integrated into society" (Lompana, 1989, as cited in Jones, 1996 p. 347). Students' desires to learn and feel accepted in a classroom were directly correlated to the type of teaching and environments teachers created, and school leaders can be instrumental in encouraging a sense of acceptance and belonging for all students.

While the results of this study add to the body of literature on student perceptions about their educational experiences in general and special education, the research leaves us with more questions than answers. We do not intend the results to be used as "pro" or "anti" inclusion. We are not asking whether or not students with disabilities should be educated in general or special education settings. Instead, we prefer to ask the question *how* can we learn from students the best way to support them in general education? Further, if students have to be removed from general education for whatever reason, how do we minimize the stigma of segregation? Listening to the students as we formulate answers to these questions may have a profound impact on teachers and teacher educators. General and special educators at all levels will have to collaborate to address the concerns raised by the students in this study. It is only through this collaboration that we will truly be able to meet the challenge of educating all students in the least restrictive environment.

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