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Preparing for Secondary Inclusion: What Educators Can Learn from
Parents of Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

As part of a movement toward collaboration between general and special education teacher preparation, the authors met with focus groups including parents of teenagers with disabilities, English and special education teachers, and pre-service teachers from both programs. Some of our most relevant findings sprang from conversations with parents whose children were placed in inclusive settings. The issues that surfaced highlight several issues relevant to teacher development and support. Most remarkable is the clarification that there are two worlds of education: school for the masses and school for the exceptions. The purpose of this article is to present what we learned from parents of teenagers with disabilities through our analysis of the primary issues they identified. We also provide a context and hypothesis for gaps in teacher expectation and preparation, and finally identify pathways for improving teacher preparation through collaboration at the university, school, and teacher levels.

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Interviewer: Ideally, what do you want from your child's high school English teacher?

Parent: My perfect English teacher expects to work with kids with disabilities in her classroom. She would expect them to be part of the class... I want a teacher who can teach to all levels, who can have gifted kids in her class and knows what to do with them while she's working with the middle range kids and she's got other kids way down below, but is able to talk about *Romeo and Juliet* with all of them.

Interviewer: In what areas do you need more support?

First-year Secondary English Teacher: I love my job, don't get me wrong, but, even though we spent two years learning about teaching reading and writing, we didn't talk enough about the kids who need more help. I didn't really understand that I would be teaching everybody. Do you know what I mean? I don't feel prepared—actually, I don't even know where to begin.

Introduction

As part of a movement toward response to intervention (RTI) and improved collaboration between general and special education teacher preparation programs at a large southeastern U.S. university, we (teacher educators in general and special education) met with multiple focus groups, all stakeholders in our educational system, to discuss perceptions, experiences, and observations about inclusive practices in middle and high school. Our focus group participants included parents of teenagers with disabilities, current classroom teachers in secondary general and special education, and current students enrolled in general and special education teacher preparation programs. Each group discussed perceptions of current educational practice, focusing especially on their expectations of inclusive secondary language arts classrooms. Of the hours spent listening to each of these groups, one of the most fruitful evenings sprang from conversations we had with parents of teenagers with disabilities, whose children were placed in inclusive language arts classrooms.

The impetus for these interviews was the “highly qualified” language within the No Child Left Behind Act (currently known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, ESEA) and its regulatory impact on secondary schools. In addition to addressing the regulatory impact of recent ESEA initiatives, we were also concerned about our pre-service teachers’ capacity for successfully addressing the needs of an increasingly diverse population of students, particularly students with disabilities. More recently IDEA 2004 further emphasized the issue of “highly qualified,” requiring that students with disabilities be instructed by special educators certified in the content they teach—not just special education—and the implied consequence that more and more students with disabilities are educated in general education classrooms (Brownell, Sindelar,

Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; Courtade, Servilio, Ludlow, & Anderson, 2010; Smith, 2005).

Clearly, the evolving scope of educational expectations and accountability has implications across disciplines and at all stages of teacher preparation and retention.

At the large southeastern U.S. university where this research was conducted, reflection on the concept of highly qualified teachers brought to light the distinct and divergent pathways to teacher licensure taken by our general and special education majors. For example, majors in the secondary English language arts program complete overwhelming coursework in English content but had no formal preparation for working with students with disabilities, nor any conceptual understanding of the current state of inclusive education. In contrast, special education majors completed no specific content coursework beyond the typical foundational coursework at the university level.

The issues presented in this article highlight multiple topics relevant to secondary education in American public schools. Most remarkable was the confirmation that we still have two worlds of education—school for the masses and school for the exceptions. The primary category of our qualitative analysis, therefore, represents three interdependent themes, each rooted in the limitations of its predecessor: 1) disparities in teacher preparation between general and special education, 2) consequent disparities in expectations for students, and 3) subsequent experiences of the practical dissonance that occur when secondary students are forced to fit into pre-established, frequently narrow, school infrastructures.

The purpose of this article, then, is to discuss the insights gleaned from the parent focus group and the implications for inclusive secondary schooling and teacher preparation. First, we present an historical context framing the current issues in inclusive education. Second, we

present what we learned from parents of students with disabilities regarding the educational experiences of their teenage children. Finally, through our analysis of issues identified by the parents, we provide a context and hypothesis as to why these disparities exist and propose alternatives to traditional teacher preparation to address these current challenges.

Historical Context

The context for our collaboration is rooted within the history of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the legislation upon which special education is built. IDEA provides both the mandate for addressing the needs of children and teenagers with disabilities in schools as well as the practical implications for policy development. IDEA is periodically reviewed by the United States legislative bodies and subsequently reauthorized with sometimes subtle and sometimes dramatic changes related to the concerns of parents, advocacy groups, and political currents. One consistent shift in the most recent reauthorizations of IDEA is the ever-increasing emphasis on serving the needs of students with disabilities in the most inclusive environment (Gable & Hendrickson, 2000). A first step in this process was the Regular Education Initiative (REI) sponsored by the Department of Education in the mid to late 1980s (Hallahan & Mock, 2003; Yell, Drasgow, Bradley, & Justesen, 2004).

IDEA 1990 presented the notion of the “least restrictive environment” (LRE) and consequently the concept of a continuum of placement options for students with disabilities (Yell & Shriner, 1997). This addition of LRE language to the law meant that schools were to consider on a case by case basis which setting was optimal for each student—with the trend toward placing students in the closest placement possible to a general education classroom. In the past, students with disabilities were served in residential settings, special schools, and special classes.

Special educators consistently refer to the continuum of services when considering the many steps possible to bring each student closer to the ultimate goal of education in the general curriculum (Gable & Hendrickson, 2000).

The 1997 reauthorization of IDEA further emphasized this trend. In contrast to the notion of gradually moving students with disabilities into the general education classroom, the philosophical notion of inclusion presumes that the general classroom *is* the most natural setting for all children (Gable & Hendrickson, 2000). IDEA 2004 more closely aligns with No Child Left Behind and takes one more significant step toward the education of students with disabilities in the general curriculum, holding schools accountable for *all* students' education (Hardman & Nagle, 2004). Further, the focus on research based interventions and a response to intervention in IDEA 2004 enforces the need for general and special educators to collaborate academically (Sansosti, Noltemeyer, & Goss, 2010; Vaughn & Fletcher, 2010).

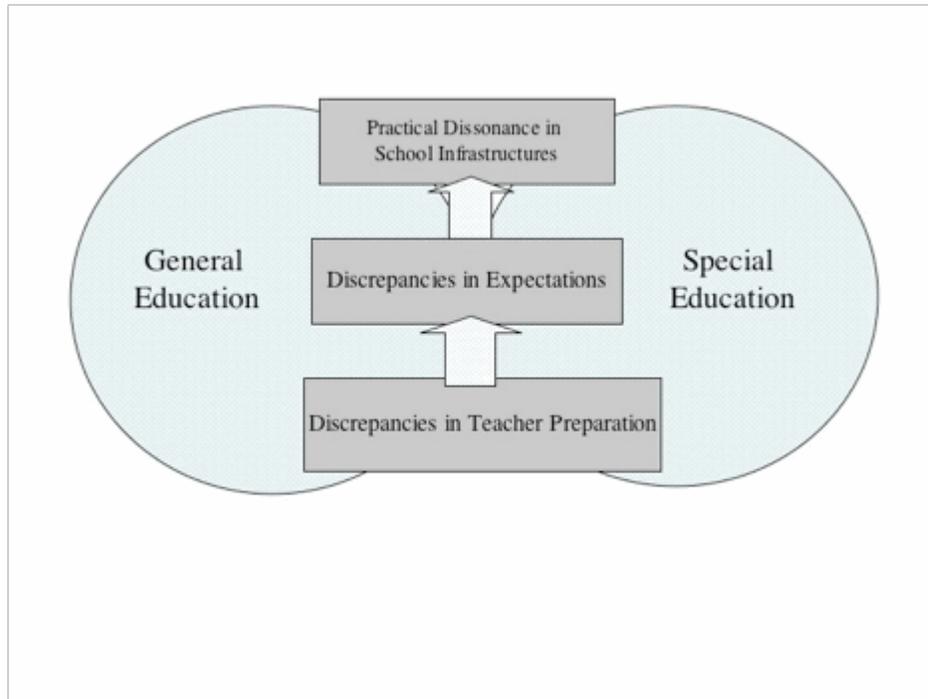
Parent Focus Group

Our original intention for meeting with the parent focus group was to gain insight into parents' perceptions of their teenagers' experiences in inclusive secondary classrooms. We also sought their input as a form of member check (Berg, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) following our development of collaborative teacher preparation models between secondary general and special education programs, beginning with English language arts. We wanted to ensure that our intentions resonated with the population they would impact. The focus group members were five parents of teenagers with a range of disabilities, including Down Syndrome and mild intellectual disability, moderate learning and physical disabilities, significant physical and communicative disabilities, and Autism. All of their children were either in middle school, high school, or

transitioning from middle to high school. We are hopeful that this group represents the experiences of a cross-section of parents of children with disabilities and are confident in the relevance and timeliness of the discussions. While we recognize that these parents are not necessarily experts on their students' academic achievement, we sought their input as experts on their children and on their hopes for their children's experiences in inclusive classrooms.

Themes from the Qualitative Analysis

Themes were developed through an inductive process by thoroughly reviewing the transcripts of focus group and follow up interviews seeking evidentiary warrant for assertions and repeatedly scrutinizing the interview data to determine if it consistently supported these assertions. Further, it was essential to seek disconfirming evidence or discrepant cases which might affect the assertions being made (Creswell, 2008; Erickson, 1986). Quotes from interviews were chosen as a means of explicitly presenting the perspective of the participants. This analysis allows readers to see direct evidence from the body of data that support the themes highlighted by the investigators (Erickson, 1986). Therefore the quotes we present here serve as glimpses into the evening's discussions. As noted previously, our overarching conclusion was a confirmation of the distinctions between the two worlds for teenagers in general and special education. The following themes support this general assertion (see Figure 1 for a Graphic Representation).



Discrepancies in Teacher Expectation

Parent: Expect a lot out of the kid. And I know that's a hard thing to do. Well how much is he going to be able to do? I don't know, but let him tell you. Find out from him. Talk to him about things. Ask him questions. Let him sit through stuff. Let him take in a little bit and then try different ways to get it out of him. He'll do it if you *expect* it of him.

Parent: Maybe discussion is difficult because he is hard to understand. But he can tell you. He can show you. He can type it out for you. He can add to a discussion. He doesn't have to give you a 10-minute dialogue about the book, but he can add to it, bits and pieces. I don't think he's given the *opportunity* to do that.

The issue of expectation is a complicated one on both sides of the general and special education spectrum. Many special educators are primarily focused on the success of their students and are reluctant to push them into areas of academic discomfort, while general educators have a

difficult time knowing what to expect on any level; on both counts, these teachers often fail to fully realize the potential of their students. For the purposes of our analysis, we divide the focus group's comments on expectation between general and special education.

For secondary general educators, these parents' statements focus on the need for student-centered teaching. In order to include students with disabilities we need to examine the individualized interests and abilities of the students. The debate over inclusion among parents, administrators, policymakers, and teachers has persisted in varying ways for some time. Seldom though, have we thought to ask the children affected by the inclusion movement (Dieker & O'Brien, 2005). If we want to know how to best include teenagers with disabilities, why not ask them?

These passages also clearly connect the need for teachers to know their students in authentic and constructive ways. They make a strong case for utilizing all available resource staff and support. Unschooled in special education methods or field experiences, many secondary general educators do not know what to realistically expect from students with disabilities. Often they are caught between a reluctance to push students too far—fearing the consequences of expecting too much, or refusing to allow for any accommodation, demonstrating a misunderstanding of the concept of educational fairness and equity (Lavoie, 1986). On the classroom level, teachers who have not had experiences with students with disabilities or their families may not understand the value of IEP meetings, parent conferences, and increased interaction with students with disabilities. Teachers who are not familiar with strategies for establishing appropriate accommodations often take an all-or-nothing approach; if the student is not able to conventionally participate in a face-to-face class discussion, handwrite a journal entry, or

compose a timed in-class essay, the uninitiated teacher may wrongly assume that the child is incapable of understanding the day's lessons and concepts.

Parent: But I don't think it's done intentionally [...] It's hard to look at our kids and know that they're 16 and look at what they're bringing home and look at how they're talked to. [...] Their community job trip to the pumpkin patch is tied to academics? [...] It's an insult to them. It's an insult to us.

Parent: Honestly, I don't care what [diploma] you give him. With a special diploma they give him a piece of paper that says he's spent 12, 14 years in school. By that point, I don't care what you call it. But I want him to have some intellectual conversations with somebody. I want him to be able to get on the Internet, do some research, look up something, be able to tell me something beyond the obvious.

So much of what has been done in special education has been meant to help students avoid failure and to preserve their self esteem. In the process, the educational community may have forgotten to maintain high expectations for *all* students (Gartner & Lipsky, 2004; Lane, Pierson, Stang, & Carter, 2010). The unofficial trend in special education is that special educators are there to protect *their* students (Hehir, 2002). It is important to make the distinction, however, between being an advocate and a protector. When teachers protect students, they may limit their outcomes. Being an advocate means assuring that students with disabilities get the equitable education to which they have a right, not keeping them hidden away from the other students.

An unfortunate challenge for the success of students with disabilities is the limited perception of their potential. Special educators consistently struggle with striking the balance between compassion and high expectation. Rather than focusing on those skills that would ultimately lead to a standard diploma, special educators often maintain an emphasis on very basic academic and social skills (Gartner & Lipsky, 2004)—skills that may not prepare students for life as independent citizens after their years in school. This is not to say that these skills are not important, but this emphasis is likely a result of lowered academic expectations (Hehir, 2002).

Practical Dissonance

Parent: Here's what happened to my son. In his 10th grade English class, the regular ed class, they were reading *Of Mice and Men*. And he was getting it, he was. He may not have gotten all of it, but we were reading and re-reading the chapters at night. But he was falling behind. We decided to put him back in the special ed class. What he brought home changed drastically. I'm not kidding. He had a paper that had pictures on it that said, "When the sun is out, it is *blank*. When the moon is out it is *blank*." It drove me crazy.

Parent: [In special education] they expect less of the students. That's why I'm trying to get her a regular diploma. I know, especially in math, that she doesn't have all the skills for a regular diploma, but I'm pushing it because if I put her on a special diploma, they're going to try to keep her in a special ed class.

Parent: And so in trying to go from a special ed class to a regular ed class [...] Why would you want to go to the regular class because the special ed class has so many more

cool things in it and you don't have to work? [...] I think that that's the struggle for the parent is convincing our own children that that's *not* where they need to be.

These statements reflect the practical impact of the discrepancies in expectation on the experiences of students and teachers. Gaps in expectations and philosophy among secondary educators manifest themselves as systemic barriers intruding on the life outcomes of individual students. As students with disabilities enter secondary school, the expectations issue becomes so thoroughly intensified that students and families find themselves in situations where they must choose whether they want a traditional education or an alternative, special education. In the above example, the family opted to remove their son from the general English class because it was simply too difficult to navigate within limited classroom accommodations.

The parents with whom we discussed the issues of inclusion in middle and high school spoke clearly about their hopes for their children—they wanted teachers to be open to a diversity of paths possible for teaching and learning. No, a student with communication deficits may not be able to jump into a fast-paced discussion on the complex relationships in *Of Mice and Men*, a novel that comments on society's problematic views of disability. But what has been lost by not finding new approaches for discussion through such avenues as augmentative communication or simple patience? The irony of ignoring the contributions of a student with a disability while discussing this Steinbeck classic is staggering.

Discrepancies in Teacher Preparation

Parent: The kids are coming. The kids are there. They've been there. They should expect that and prepare themselves to model appropriate interaction with the students with

disabilities so that other students know how to interact with our kids. Teachers don't know what to do. [...] They need to expect that they are going to get kids with disabilities in their classroom. They need to prepare themselves for it.

Parent: I challenged the school to allow him to be in general ed classes. But the reality is none of these teachers were prepared. None of them know anything in terms of disabilities [...] They were frightened. [...] The administration said point blank, "We don't have kids with disabilities in our classes." They said, "The teachers don't have the skills. They don't have the knowledge. They don't have the understanding."

Parent: We started trying to do some inclusion into general ed classrooms in 4th or 5th grade. None of the teachers in the school would hear of it. They said, "We don't know what to do with kids with disabilities. We don't want them here. [...]" So there was absolutely no including. He was totally segregated. He moved to a special ed teacher for "severe and profound." [...] The special ed teacher had a special ed degree, but she had no background in math, science, English, nothing. So the whole first year that my son was there in 6th grade, he had nothing.

The parent focus group offered great insight into the practical implications of preparing general and special educators in such separate and distinct pathways. Typically, secondary content majors at most universities complete approximately 36 credit hours in teacher preparation coursework, plus a minimum of 30 hours in their content in the College of Arts and Sciences. In contrast, special education majors are prepared with an emphasis on providing instruction, which addresses the needs of students who struggle to learn, adapting traditional materials and curriculum, addressing the needs of students with social/behavioral challenges, and

preparing students with more functional skills to transition into the workforce after school. Seldom do special education teachers receive preparation in secondary content knowledge. This is particularly true for teachers at the secondary level (Dieker & Murawski, 2003; Laprairie, Johnson, Rice, Adams, P., & Higgins, 2010). Teacher preparation institutions often focus on the need for special education teachers to teach basic skills in reading and math. The assumption that students with disabilities will not advance beyond basic skills illustrates the inherent bias in preparation of special educators. How can students in special education be expected to achieve on grade level in high school when their teachers were never prepared to teach them the content they are expected to learn?

Implications of Analysis

As mentioned previously, even though IDEA 2004 clearly mandates that all students have access to quality curriculum and education, and that many classrooms in both middle and high school support inclusive environments (Hardman & Nagle, 2004), Colleges of Education and other teacher preparation programs are not adequately exposing pre-service teachers to the realities of inclusive classrooms across the United States (Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, & Merbler, 2010; Turner, 2003). Although emphasis is placed on serving students with disabilities according to a continuum of services and placements favoring education in the regular classroom, there is considerable variability across the country regarding actual student placement. Some educators have suggested that these differences are related to inconsistent philosophical orientations of school district administrators and to historical approaches to service delivery rather than individualization to students' educational needs (Hardman & Nagle, 2004; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996).

Traditionally, the unspoken purpose of education has been to teach only those students who had the greatest potential to succeed in an academic setting. A school's approach to educating children did not have to be changed to fit the specific needs of a specific child (Skrtic, 1999). In contrast, the child had to fit the pre-existing program or not be included in the educational offerings. IDEA (originally the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) was a mandate to change this notion. However, it is not clear whether this has truly changed, in a practical sense, for adolescents with disabilities.

Practical limitations of accountability-driven secondary schools significantly limit the flexibility in placement options for students with disabilities, thereby negating the true idea of a continuum of services (Hehir, 2002). In recent years, some have begun to question whether inclusion is even a reality. A recent investigation into the inclusion of students with learning disabilities suggested that what is perceived as an increase in inclusive practice may in fact be an illusion (McLeskey, Hoppey, Williamson, & Rentz, 2004). Stakeholders in education must confront the reality that although placement of students in special education is meant to provide supports and services, the actual outcome may be placement of children in a disparate educational setting which impedes their ability to meet their potential (Lipsky & Gartner, 1987).

Students are the actual victims of the discrepancies highlighted here. The pace and substance of classes in general and special education can often be dramatically different. This is particularly true as students advance into middle and high school (Lenz, Bulgren, Kissam, & Taymans, 2004). Whereas students in the general curriculum are typically exposed to a standards-driven curriculum dictated by standardized testing, students in special education may be preparing for more functional life skills, far removed from the traditional content of English,

science, math, and social studies (Hehir, 2002). It is no surprise when considering these disparities, how difficult it would be for a student to move from secondary content in special education to secondary content in general education without experiencing significant dissonance. Imagine a student leaving and trying to reenter the general education class. It would take very little time to be left behind. Clearly, this leads to limitations in placement options for students with disabilities. Although the Least Restrictive Environment is the philosophical foundation for placing students with disabilities (Yell, et al., 2004), it is impractical to individualize placement for students who are trying to live in two distinct worlds.

Implications for Teacher Educators in General and Special Education

Ultimately, our parent focus group wanted to express that their teenage children have no *place* in secondary schools. Students with disabilities simply don't fit. Parents and families get a sense that their children must conform to some pre-established model for educational services at a school—ironic in light of the historical context in which special education law developed. Special educators who view IDEA as a symbol of progress and change in American schools lament the time when public schools refused even to offer a place for children with disabilities.

This irony causes many to question the notion of progress related to the education of students with disabilities. Currently, if students want to be in general education, they must be on a regular diploma track with teachers who are forced to teach at break-neck speed adhering to extreme levels of accountability, and rarely have time or opportunity to individualize. If students require more specialized services (i.e., a self-contained special education class), they may be fated to lower levels of curricula and diminished expectations. Many parents feel that their children are stuck in the middle.

Often, general education teachers in all content areas receive little or no preparation for successfully including students with disabilities in their classrooms, and may not know what to expect from these students. These teachers' anxieties about having students with disabilities in their classes are both genuine and valid. Conversely, teachers in special education are often guilty of lowered expectations (Hehir, 2002) and may be out of touch with the appropriate curricular demands at the secondary level (Dieker, O'Brien, Ogilvie, & Davis, 2005). On both counts, teacher preparation is an early foundation for these discrepancies. General educators get little exposure to students with disabilities during their preparation, and often, have no coursework to develop even a basic awareness of students with special needs. Special educators typically have such broad expectations for certification that they do not develop the adequate content knowledge to teach curricular standards at the secondary level. We will better prepare teachers by bridging these two worlds of education at the outset of their preparation.

Future Directions: Collaborative Teacher Preparation

Collaboration in both teacher preparation and practice provide possible solutions to bridging these worlds. More clearly than anything we heard, the parents' statements represent a clarion-call for collaboration among general and special educators. From their comments, we hear first-hand the drastic differences that students may experience in general and special education environments.

The dual certification programs being developed in several states are a means for addressing the need for collaboration in teacher preparation. For example, students in secondary preparation programs can elect to be dually certified by adding core special education coursework. This dual certification option addresses several salient needs in both teacher

preparation and the practical needs of classroom teachers. Though an additional time commitment may be required, dually certified teachers will be better able to meet the needs of all students in inclusive classrooms, modeling respect and understanding of natural human diversity. Additionally, these teachers will be less apprehensive about trends toward inclusive practices such as “Universal Design for Learning,” the notion of teaching content in a manner that works for all students (Messinger-Willman & Marino, 2010; Pisha & Coyne, 2001; Villa, Thousand, Nevin, & Liston, 2005). Research on teacher preparation has indicated that dual certification programs are excellent and effective models for preparing teachers (Ryan, Callaghan, Krajewski, & Flaherty, 1996). Our goals as teacher educators are in keeping with the desires of the parents we met at the beginning of this collaboration—we all want teachers to expect students with disabilities to be in their classrooms, to challenge them to meet their potentials as learners and citizens, and finally to provide a model for living and working in a diverse world.

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