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Inclusive Education: What Makes It a Good Education for Students With Moderate to Severe Disabilities?

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Parents, teachers, and paraeducators at three inclusive schools were interviewed as part of a qualitative study to investigate perceptions regarding a quality educational program for students with moderate–severe disabilities. Instead of looking at schools engaged in a systematic change process from separate to inclusive education for students with severe disabilities, a major premise of this study was that all students, regardless of ability or disability, were educated together in chronologically age appropriate general education classrooms (preschool through 8th grade). The intent of this study was to determine what key stakeholders (parents, teachers, and paraeducators) felt was a good educational program for students with moderate–severe disabilities after an inclusive placement was a given. Fifty-eight participants were interviewed (18 parents, 23 teachers, and 17 paraeducators) representing four preschool children, nine elementary students, and five middle school students all having moderate–severe and multiple disabilities. A constant comparison methodology was used to analyze the data across both age of target child and role of stakeholder. Findings revealed 12 themes that highlighted the benefits of inclusive education for all students, specific components that needed to be in place to ensure a quality education, and typical goals for the future. Implications for the field were discussed.

DESCRIPTORS: inclusive education, inclusion, severe disabilities, preschool, middle school

Inclusive education has gained increasing attention over the past 30 years. Supported by federal mandates set forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and all previous versions of this act, as well as No Child Left Behind (2001), inclusive education has become a common objective for families of children with special needs. Although the majority of students to be included full time in general education classrooms continue to be those having mild disabilities, students with severe disabilities are also gaining access (McLesky & Henry, 1999). Informed parents recognize the benefits of inclusion for their child and are successfully sharing their dreams with professional educational team members. In fact Turnbull, Turnbull, and Wehmeyer (2006) write that inclusion is now the assumption that students with severe disabilities will be educated in typical classrooms, not that they are still trying to gain access.

Theoretical arguments for inclusive education for students with disabilities, in particular those with severe disabilities have been clearly and repeatedly stated (Downing, 2002; Hunt, Ferron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtsin, & Goetz, 1994; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002). Proponents of inclusive education have articulated various components that best support the development and maintenance of inclusive education for students with severe disabilities including strong leadership (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000; Salisbury, 2006), collaborative teaming (Hunt, Soto, Maier, & Doering, 2003; Snell & Janney, 2005), curricular adaptations and accommodations (Downing, 2002; Janney & Snell, 2004; Udvari-Solner, Villa, & Thousand, 2002), appropriate use of support personnel (Giangreco & Broer, 2005), and strong family involvement (Summers et al., 2005; Turnbull et al., 2006). In addition, numerous empirical studies have targeted a number of issues related to inclusive education. Studies have looked at benefits to students with severe disabilities (Downing, Spencer, & Cavallaro, 2004; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Foreman, Arthur-Kelly, Pascoe, & King, 2004), benefits to students without disabilities (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Downing et al., 2004), and benefits to teachers (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Copeland et al., 2002, 2004). Studies have also looked at the absence of negative impact on peers without disabilities when a classmate has a severe disability (Gallagher & Lambert, 2006; Hunt et al., 1994; Katz, Mirenda, & Auerbach, 2002). Given the numerous studies demonstrating positive outcomes for different stakeholders in schools, as well as the lack of evidence that shows detrimental effects, it is not surprising that increasing numbers of family members are requesting such placement for their child having severe disabilities.

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While inclusive education can be seen as the ultimate goal for many families, what is most important is a high quality and effective education for the child.

Although inclusive education may have originated from primarily social reasons, it is clearly recognized that simply being placed with students without disabilities is insufficient (Carter, Hughes, Guth, & Copeland, 2005; Copeland et al., 2004). If students are to learn both academic as well as social skills, just gaining access to typical learning environments cannot be the goal. Educational teams will need to identify what types of supports are needed to provide an education as well as have a clear idea of exactly what curriculum content will be important for all students to learn.

The legal mandates of No Child Left Behind (2001) have highlighted the need for educational systems to teach standards based curriculum, maintain high expectations for student growth, and document student progress. The focus on school accountability has raised the issue of not only student progress, but also a high quality education in which such progress is reflected. Although national and state standards dominate in the determination of high quality education for students without disabilities, less clarity exists for the determination of what is considered high quality for students with severe disabilities. However, it is important to determine elements of a high quality education for students having significant disabilities if we are to ensure equal access.

A qualitative study by Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi, and Shelton (2004) revealed elements of successful inclusion programs for seven young preschool children with significant disabilities. Findings from stakeholders who were interviewed suggested that four elements were important: positive attitudes of staff, solid parent-professional relationships, therapeutic interventions to reflect a child's needs, and specific adaptations. The present study expands on this research by investigating the elements of successful inclusion programs across a broader age range (preschool through middle school) and a much larger number of students and their supporters. The specific purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of critical stakeholders in schools (e.g., parents, teachers, and paraeducators) when inclusion is not the goal, but the given, to better understand the aspects of such an educational placement that make it so desired. To this end, parents, teachers (both general and special educators), and paraprofessionals of children with moderate to severe and multiple disabilities in three fully inclusive school programs (preschool/kindergarten, elementary school-K-5th grade, middle school) were interviewed to determine their perceptions regarding what is meant by a high quality educational program for certain students. These individuals were chosen because they had direct and on-going daily contact with students having moderate–severe and multiple disabilities within inclusive classrooms. Perceptions were compared by both role (parent, teacher, or paraeducator) and by age level (preschool, elementary school, and middle school).

Method

Participants

The 58 participants for this study represented three roles within three different schools—parents, teachers (both special and general educators), and paraeducators. In all, 18 parents of children having moderate to severe disabilities were interviewed (4 were preschool parents, 9 were elementary school parents, and 5 middle school parents). Seventeen general education and 6 special education teachers participated (4 preschool, 9 elementary, and 10 middle school teachers). At the preschool level, there was one special educator interviewed, three at the elementary school and two at the middle school. Finally, 17 paraeducators were interviewed and included 2 from the preschool, 9 from the elementary school, and 6 from the middle school. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 57 and somewhat reflected the ethnic background of the schools with 41 (71%) Caucasian, 9 (16%) Latino, 5 (9%) African American, and 1 each of Asian and Arabic descent. The majority of respondents were female with mothers primarily serving as the parent respondent. All but one teacher was female and 9 (53%) paraeducators were female. The majority of elementary and middle school teachers and paraeducators were relatively new to the teaching field. See Table 1 for more specific delineation of demographic information for all participants.

The students with disabilities, who were the subject of the interview questions, ranged in age from 4 to 14, 4 of whom attended preschool, 9 in elementary, and 5 in middle school. Of the 18 children, 9 (50%) had severe and multiple disabilities, 6 (34%) had Down syndrome, and 3 (17%) carried the diagnosis of autism. All 18 students had a moderate–severe intellectual impairment and all of the elementary and middle students were assessed using the state's alternate assessment. Eight of the 18 children (4 preschool and 4 elementary) had only experienced inclusive education, whereas the remaining 10 (56%) had spent some time in a segregated program (special day class or special school only serving students with disabilities) prior to their enrollment in these schools. See Table 2 for additional information.

Setting

The inclusive programs targeted for this research were in a large metropolitan area of southern California. One program was a preschool/kindergarten that served 62 children in 4 classrooms, 11 of whom have disabilities, with 4 having moderate–severe disabilities. The second program was a charter elementary school designed from its inception to be fully inclusive with grades kindergarten through 5th grade, serving 220 children at the time of the study. Of the 220 children, 45 had Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) with 11 (5%) considered

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Characteristic	*n*	%
Family members (*n* = 18)		
Gender		
Mother only	16	88.9
Mother and father	2	11.1
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	13	72.2
Latino	4	22.2
African American	1	05.6
Education level		
High school/some college	9	50.0
BA	4	22.2
MA	4	22.2
PhD	1	05.6
Teachers (*n* = 23)		
Gender		
Female	22	95.6
Male	1	4.4
Grade level		
Preschool	4	17.4
Elementary	9	39.1
Middle	10	43.5
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	20	86.9
African American	2	8.7
Arabic American	1	4.4
Education		
BA	16	69.6
MA	7	30.4
Years teaching	Mean	Range
Preschool	8.5 years	4–14 years
Elementary school	2.9 years	1–5 years
Middle School	2.7 years	1–6 years
Paraprofessionals (*n* = 17)		
Gender		
Female	12	70.6
Male	5	29.4
Grade level		
Preschool	2	11.8
Elementary	9	52.9
Middle	6	35.3
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	12	70.6
African American	2	11.8
Asian American	1	5.8
Latino/a	2	11.8
Education		
High school/some college	15	88.2
BA	2	11.8
Years of experiences	Mean	Range
Preschool	3 years	2–4 years
Elementary school	1.7 years	8 months–4 1/2 years
Middle school	1.2 years	3 months–3 1/2 years

to have moderate–severe disabilities. A charter middle school also designed from its inception to be fully inclusive was the third program, serving 203 students with 7 (3.5%) having moderate–severe and multiple disabilities. There were no self-contained special education classrooms on any of these three campuses. No more than 20% of the students in any classroom at any of the three school programs were students with disabilities and typically only one or two students with moderate to severe disabilities were present in a classroom. Students attending these programs represented a diverse range of students by ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Slightly over half of the students at each of the three programs were Caucasian with Latino children representing the next largest group. Only 2 (3%) of the preschoolers were entitled to free or reduced lunch program, whereas 24 or 11% qualified for this program at the elementary school, and 59 (29%) at the middle school. See Table 2 for more detailed information on all students. For the two public charter schools, there were no entrance requirements, although preference was given if siblings also attended the schools and to students living in the neighboring area. All parents applied to the school and an annual lottery (random drawing) determined who would attend. Consistent with natural proportions, the charters dictated that a specified number of slots were reserved for students with IEPs. All three schools trained their staff on inclusive practices and followed school-wide positive behavioral support strategies (Freeman et al., 2006; Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005). All schools provided related support services in an integrative manner with services embedded within general education classrooms at appropriate times of the day (e.g., physical therapy exercises during physical education).

Table 2
Characteristics of Student With Disabilities

Students (*N* = 18)	*n*	%
Gender		
Female	4	22.3
Male	12	66.7
Grade level		
Preschool	4	22.2
Elementary	9	50.0
Middle	5	27.8
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	14	77.7
Latino/a	3	16.7
African American	1	05.6
Disability		
Severe multiple disabilities	9	50.0
Down syndrome	6	33.3
Autism	3	16.7
Communication		
Verbal	7	38.9
Nonverbal	11	61.1
Inclusive/noninclusive placement		
Inclusive only	8[a]	44.4
Some segregated	10	55.6
Ages	Mean	Range
Preschool	4.4 years	4–5 years
Elementary school	9.2 years	6–11 years
Middle school	12.4 years	11–14 years

[a]4 at the preschool; 4 at the elementary school.

Procedure

Following Institutional Review Board approval, the administrators of each of the three inclusive educational sites (preschool, elementary, and middle schools) were contacted, informed of the study, and asked if they would be willing to disseminate a letter from the first author informing family members of the study and requesting their participation. Administrators forwarded the letters to those families identified as having a child with a moderate/severe disability that qualified them for special educational services. Administrators also called parents and talked to them in person regarding the study in efforts to recruit as many participants as possible. Family members who were willing to participate were contacted by the first author to set up an interview date, time, and place. Interviews were arranged for a time and place that was convenient for the family (e.g., home, school, place of employment). All parent interviews were conducted individually by the first author and were audiotaped after receiving written approval. Two husband–wife couples of two preschool children were interviewed together in their homes (but recorded only as one parent—statements combined). Only two parents at the elementary level did not respond to the request to participate as well as two parents at the middle school. Therefore, four preschoolers were targeted, nine elementary students, and five middle school students.

Once a parent had been interviewed and provided written consent for others to be contacted, the primary team members for the child at school were identified. This abbreviated team (e.g., not related services personnel) included the general educator, special educator, and one paraeducator, who were identified by the family as knowing their child well. (In the few cases where a parent was not able to provide the name of a paraeducator, the special educator was asked to supply this information.) The children with disabilities were often supported by one or more paraeducators; in some cases, information about a specific child was obtained from different paraeducators. All teachers were contacted by the first author to request their participation in the study. A date, time, and place for the interview were then established that was most convenient for the teacher. The first author individually interviewed each teacher (both special and general educator). All interviews were audiotaped upon obtaining written permission and after ensuring each participant that findings would be kept confidential. The same procedure occurred for all paraeducators except that the second author completed these interviews. All teachers and paraeducators who were contacted participated in the study.

The majority of interviews took place at the school site in an empty classroom or office or outside in a quiet area. Three took place at the parents' home as requested, one occurred at a parent's work site, and one preschool parent interview transpired over the phone. The majority of the teachers and paraeducators interviews occurred on school grounds, but five took place in one of the authors' offices. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The interviewer (either the first or second author) also took notes during the interview. Interviews ranged in length from 23 to 57 min for parents (X = 35 min), from 20 to 50 min for teachers (X = 34 min), and from 15 to 37 min for paraeducators (X = 26 min). Special educators as a group averaged 42 min compared to 31 min for general educators. Following each interview participants were requested to e-mail additional information if they thought of things they wanted to add later on. Two teachers (one middle school special educator and one elementary education teacher) submitted additional information by e-mail following their interviews. These e-mail messages were added to the data and analyzed accordingly.

Interview Tool

The interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured to obtain the desired information but to allow individual participants to respond in various ways. The same set of interview questions was asked of each participant regardless of role, although wording was changed minimally when interviewing educational staff, versus parents (e.g., "the name of the child" was used with the educational staff, whereas "your child" was used with the parents). See Table 3 for questions asked of all participants. Essentially participants were asked whether they felt the child was successful at school, the components of a good educational program for that child and if that differed for same age children without disabilities,and expectations for the child as a result of experiencing inclusive education. Participants were asked to elaborate on their statements to gain as much in-depth information as possible. For example, when participants were asked about what is a good educational program for a specific student, follow up questions were often needed. Such questions might include "does the child need specific educational equipment?" Or "are any particular educational practices needed?"

Data Analysis

The 58 interviews yielded 394 pages of data that were analyzed by hand using a constant comparison approach to arrive at representative themes. The authors read each transcription individually, coded small bits of information line by line, and determined initial categories that emerged from this first reading. These categories of similar bits of information were then compared and contrasted several times throughout the interview process as new interviews occurred and decisions were made to collapse into related categories. Disagreements were discussed and interviews reread until consensus could be reached. The practice of returning to the data to constantly compare and reflect was the analytic procedure employed (see Charmaz, 2000). Related categories of information were compared to identify emerging

Table 3
Questions and Themes by Participant Role

Question	Parents (n = 18)	Teachers (n = 23)	Paraeducators (n = 17)
Question 1: Is the student/child successful or not? How do you know?			
Academic and social success	16 (89%)	22 (96%)	17 (100%)
Some more than others	7 (39%)	11 (48%)	13 (77%)
Beneficial for peers too	8 (44%)	15 (65%)	13 (77%)
Question 2: What is a high quality education for students with moderate–severe disabilities?			
Being with typical peers	16 (89%)	21 (91%)	16 (94%)
Exposure to everything and high expectations	16 (89%)	19 (83%)	16 (94%)
Individualized curricular and instructional supports	15 (83%)	21 (91%)	15 (88%)
Skilled and knowledgeable teaching staff	14 (78%)	14 (61%)	11 (65%)
Collaboration and teaming	15 (83%)	21 (91%)	11 (65%)
A positive and caring community	15 (83%)	23 (100%)	16 (94%)
Providing a balanced educational program	11 (61%)	10 (44%)	11 (65%)
Question 3: What are your hopes as a result of the student (child) being in an inclusive environment?			
Lead a normal life	12 (67%)	17 (74%)	13 (77%)
Concerns for the future	6 (33%)	8 (35%)	0

themes by role of participant and by age of child served. The naming and renaming of themes occurred to more fully capture the true meaning of what had emerged from the data. This analysis resulted in 12 overall themes that corresponded to the 3 main questions asked. The analysis occurred along role (parent, teacher, and paraeducator) and age parameters (preschool, elementary, and middle).

Verifying and Establishing Trustworthiness of Data

Triangulation of the data is one way to determine how reliable the data is; that is, to corroborate the evidence (Creswell, 2002). To obtain triangulation of the data in this study, different stakeholders from the three schools were interviewed and some observational and artifact information was obtained to verify information from the interviews. Following each interview and using both the transcriptions and the written notes taken during the interviews, a list of observable behaviors and situations were created for each child. This list served as a basis for classroom observations and examination of student work. The first and/or second author observed each child to determine if what had been stated in the interviews could either be identified in the classroom or through samples of student work. Classroom observations lasted from 20 to 60 min per child depending on what needed to be documented. For example, if it was stated by participants that pictorial modifications were being used for a given child to make the core curriculum more understandable, this was noted as part of the list and one of the authors made a notation as to the date observed. Other examples of observed behaviors include presence/use of assistive technology, interaction among peers without disabilities, use of breaks, and presence/absence of challenging behaviors.

In addition to classroom observations, student portfolios were examined to verify work that the student was doing, the accommodations being made, and student progress. Perusal of this information also was used to verify information obtained via interviews with participants.

To confirm that the information obtained during the individual interviews truly reflected their perceptions of questions asked, each transcribed interview was sent to each respondent to request feedback as to its accuracy. Member checking of this nature represents one way to confirm findings and participant approval (Janesick, 2000). Transcribed interviews were sent to 55 of the 57 participants; 2 of the paraprofessionals at the middle school were no longer employed and mailing/e-mail addresses could not be obtained. Of the 55 interviews sent by e-mail or mail, 24 (46%) were returned. Of those returned, most of the participants (92%) indicated that the interview accurately reflected their views. In two cases, new information was provided that slightly altered the analysis; the findings reported below reflect these changes.

Results

Analysis of the data coincided with the questions that were specifically asked and revealed themes that emerged from the responses to these general questions. The first question asked participants if they felt the targeted student(s) were successful in their programs or not and if so, how did they know. The second question asked participants to consider what represented a high quality education for the target child, and the third question asked participants to consider the impact of inclusion on the future. See Table 3 for a listing of the questions and the themes under each question.

Question 1: Is the Student/Child Successful or Not? How Do You Know?

Under this general category of success three main themes were found: academic and social success, some

more than others, and students without disabilities benefited too.

Academic and Social Success

In general all participants felt that the student they represented were successful in some way, either academically, socially, or both. For some parents the progress was exceptional as indicated by a preschool parent speaking of their daughter,

> She was nonverbal. At first she screamed the whole time we were there. I called [teacher's name] and I said, "I don't think this is working. I don't think she's getting anything out of this…" But now she's *very* happy. She loves her friends at school. We'll get to school and she's like, Look mommy, there's [name of peer].

There was some differentiation among roles and age levels. For example, parents and teachers at the middle school level tended to make broad statements about their child/student being happier, more independent, and more motivated to go to school/participate in class. This group was also less likely to speak of academic successes. In contrast, teachers and paraeducators at the elementary level along with preschool teachers tended to identify more specific academic improvements—especially in basic math (e.g., identification of numbers, counting), reading (identification of letters/sounds, sight words), and to some extent writing skills (e.g., penmanship, use of alternative ways to write). For example, one general education elementary teacher stated,

> We've seen a lot of change with writing. We've gone from the beginning of the year where [student's name] had a box per letter and now we just give him a line and he will write a whole sentence after he has dictated it to us.

In regard to "how they knew" most of the participants spoke in broad terms, (e.g., through observation), although five elementary teachers specifically referenced IEP goals and one middle and four elementary teachers spoke of informal assessments as a way to measure progress. Only one middle school paraeducator made a specific reference to data collection as a way to measure success.

Some More Than Others

However, while stating successes for all students, it was clear that some respondents felt that some students were more successful than others. Two issues emerged: behavioral challenges and difficulty assessing what students are learning/what they know. Some students engaged in aggressive and disruptive behaviors such as spitting, biting, hitting, loud vocalizations, and frequent out of seat behavior. For students for whom notable decreases in the rate of these behaviors were observed (primarily younger children), participants spoke of this as a clear success. However, for some students, decreases in these behaviors had not occurred and in fact remained a significant challenge for teaching staff and families alike. Expressions of success for these students were less robust, and especially for the older students, teachers expressed frustration in how best to meet the needs of these students. Further, out of concern for all students, students who engaged in disruptive behavior were frequently removed from the classroom for a break, thus further limiting their exposure and opportunity to be engaged in the curriculum.

> It's hard to feel like they [students with behavioral challenges] are learning on a daily basis… And also, they spend so much time out of the classroom because of need-based breaks…. I'll have this great lesson and then [student] will tantrum about something at times and it's just so frustrating because I'll be heart-broken that he didn't participate because I had it in my mind that he would just love what we were doing (middle school teacher).

> Well, we need a room for them to go to if they are really having a rough time. They could take a 5 minute break. But whatever is their break, it is still curriculum related in some way….Because basically, once they're [student & paraeducator] out of the room, I don't know what's going on. And then I feel weird at an IEP when I'm telling the parents that "yeah, he's comprehending this or that" (middle school teacher).

Teachers and paraeducators also spoke of their uncertainty of what some students are actually learning. This was most pronounced at the middle school level, although some paraeducators at the preschool and elementary school level noted this, as did one teacher at the preschool level. Further, this finding was primarily associated with students who are nonverbal and/or experience physical impairments in addition to cognitive delays.

> I wouldn't know how to assess her. She does a lot with shapes and just trying to match things up but I don't know if she's just guessing and gets some right sometimes. She's just really hard (middle school teacher).

> And then [student], he actually had some health problems, but he was also showing amazing knowledge of [the] alphabet and numbers, [but] he's inconsistent in showing us. One time he'll get it 100% of the time and today he would not answer any questions for me (preschool teacher).

Benefits for Peers Too

A final theme under this broad question was the frequently mentioned benefits to students without disabilities. Although participants were not asked about the impact on students without disabilities, the majority of teachers (15 or 65%), just under half of the parents (8, 44%) and 13 (77%) of the paraeducators also felt that students without disabilities benefited from learning in an inclusive environment. The types of benefits most often cited included (a) greater awareness and tolerance of differences, (b) enhanced empathy and compassion for others, (c) learning while helping others, and (d) acquiring special and unique skills (e.g., sign language, use of assistive technology). As one preschool paraeducator explained:

> In an inclusion program they're [students without disabilities] getting the same education, but along with that education…they're getting interactions with people who have differences, and you can't get that in a regular program. They're learning to be patient and understanding and my favorite part about it is hearing a preschooler explain to one of their older brothers who hasn't been in an inclusion background why [student] has a wheelchair and that's how she gets around. I mean, just articulating that as a four year old is amazing to me.

Question 2: What is a High Quality Educational Program for Students with Moderate–Severe Disabilities?

This key question resulted in seven major themes: being with typical peers, exposure to everything and high expectations, individualized curricular and instructional supports, skilled and knowledgeable staff, collaboration and teaming, a positive and caring environment, and providing a balanced educational program.

Being with Typical Peers

In general, respondents felt strongly that students with moderate–severe disabilities needed to be with their classmates without disabilities. Only two secondary teachers, two elementary parents, and one middle school paraeducator failed to mention this component. Rationale for needing to be with peers without disabilities included appropriate role models, natural supports, conversational partners, and peers as motivators. The following quotes from a preschool parent and an elementary school paraeducator highlight why this aspect of a good educational program was deemed essential:

> Kids are his champions. One of the teachers was telling me that the therapist was working with [student] while he was trying to walk and the PT was trying to intervene and do stuff for him and one of the friends said, "no, no, no, he can do that". And as soon as he heard the peer telling him that he could do it, he did it. It's like they motivate him and they support him in such a huge way.

> He needs peer role models….He learns so much from them. He learns more from them than he does from me or the teacher because that's what kids look at. I think primarily, it's like—what are my friends doing? And sometimes we'll use that as a cue "where are your friends now?"

Exposure to Everything and High Expectations

The majority of participants, across grade level and role, felt that students with moderate–severe disabilities should participate in all aspects of everyday life. The term "exposure" was used often to describe the importance that all children have access to a wide array of experiences as they are growing up. Parents spoke of including their child in all family events, after school programs and participating in typical recreational and community events. Paraeducators, especially at the middle school level, talked of the importance of not "babying" students, and teachers spoke of having high expectations for all children, as expressed by this middle school teacher:

> You have to make the assumption that someone is capable and then find out how capable they really are and adjust what you need to keep raising the bar. If you have a student who can only say a few words, you will want to work on saying more words. You want to work on ways for the student to communicate more and more ideas and keep challenging them physically, emotionally, and academically. They all go hand in hand. I think it's a matter of being comfortable raising the bar…and just know the balance of when you push too hard.

Exposure included access to the core curriculum. Although all participants viewed this as an important component of a good inclusion program, how this was discussed varied slightly by role. Parents liked the fact that their child had exposure to the general education curriculum but also noted that mastery of this material was not necessarily the highest priority, as expressed by this mother:

> I feel like exposure to that core curriculum, even if you're not good at it,…those concepts are exercising the brain in ways that we will use for the rest of our lives. So it doesn't matter to me so much that he doesn't do so well…the exposure is so much of it. I think it's the key (elementary school mother).

Teachers and paraprofessionals, on the other hand, spoke of access more in terms of it what looked like. The phrase "same but different" was often used to explain that all students participated in the same curriculum but for some, the work was modified.

> I think it looks the same but I also think it looks different. If you look at the work they are getting—it might look different than the student next to them yet it has the same objective in it. So the student next to them is doing multiplication and they are doing multiplication [by counting]. It might look different in the way they are doing it but the objective of doing the multiplication is the same (elementary school teacher).

Individualized Curricular and Instructional Support

The two types of curricular supports mentioned the most often were modifications and assistive technology. Nearly all participants across role and age level stated the importance of providing modifications that were individualized, meaningful, and relevant. Many examples were given per target child such as the use of pictures with print, greatly simplified content, rephrasing of questions (e.g., yes/no or specific options versus opened ended questions), and a variety of alternative ways to write (e.g., use of letter or number stamps, typing responses on a label maker, and pasting pictures or words onto a paper). Along with modifications, participants also spoke of the important role of assistive technology in supporting students who experienced physical and/or communication challenges. Examples included positioning equipment (e.g., adapted chairs, standers, etc.), slant boards, switch controlled devices, computers with adapted hardware, and voice output communication devices.

The need for modifications was discussed in both a positive and negative way—positive in that they allowed for students to access and benefit from the general education curriculum, and negative in the sense that additional and/or more meaningful modifications were sometimes needed. The need for more or better modifications was most pronounced at the middle school level (80% of the parents; 70% of the teachers), followed by elementary level parents (44%) and paraeducators (44%). No elementary teachers felt this was an issue. One parent expressed her concern in the following passage:

> At times I feel that maybe her modifications aren't beneficial to her in the long run. Maybe her modifications could be better so that she could get more out of what she can understand in her life. I think that lots of times whatever the class is doing her modifications are on the same principle. It's modified, it's less than what the others have to do, but I don't think that she understands.

A paraeducator expressed a similar concern while also acknowledging the issue of time, as represented by this quote:

> I think they [the students] could be more successful with more individual and better modifications. … But again, there is not the time to do a lot of better modifications on the spot because you are just trying to get any modification. … Sometimes we pump out a bunch of generic modifications, that is what I call it, the same modification for three or four kids. We modify to the lowest ability and sometimes that is kind of disappointing.

These comments are consistent with data collected via observation and review of work samples/portfolios. The portfolios consisted of work examples organized around the main content areas (e.g., math, language arts, science). Several examples of appropriate modifications were noted through observation and work samples. For example, a 7th grade language arts chapter book was reduced to 4–5 pages with 1–2 simple sentences and illustrations of big ideas. However, the authors also observed incidences in which the same modifications were used for two or more students of different abilities and/or needs. Also, in a few cases, students were physically prompted to paste answers onto worksheets with what appeared to be a greater emphasis on completing the task versus learning basic skills and/or content. Some work samples also reflected age inappropriate modifications (e.g., 1st grade math worksheets for middle school students), and for one student, the portfolio included full page typed papers that reflected complete and grammatically correct sentences without an explanation of the student's contribution or how the final product was "modified" with peer and/or adult support.

Instructional supports included providing opportunities to be actively engaged in the curriculum, chances to practice skills/material being learned, and access to breaks when needed. Just over half (57%) of the teachers discussed the need to incorporate opportunities for hands-on learning. For example, one middle school teacher spoke of making volcanos out of clay and mixing materials such as baking soda with vinegar during science lessons. Although noting that most students enjoyed these activities, teachers emphasized the importance of having these types of activities available to help students with the more significant disabilities remain actively involved in the lesson.

In addition to hands-on activities, teachers and parents—primarily elementary level—also spoke of the importance of structure and consistency, as well as providing frequent opportunities to review and practice concepts and skills being learned as a means to enhance mastery of content. Parents, in particular, liked the way in which the school day was structured and felt such consistency helped their child learn. At the elementary level, homework and the frequent presentation of similar materials served as a way to provide needed practice.

Finally, approximately two-thirds of the teachers (61%) and one third of the paraeducators (35%) mentioned the importance of providing systematic breaks as a means of reinforcing students for completing portions

of their work and as a way to head-off disruptive or other challenging behaviors. Only two parents mentioned this. Data from observations corroborate this finding. The larger classrooms at the elementary school allowed for greater flexibility in terms of moving around the classroom, making it somewhat easier to contain breaks to the classroom setting. This was less true at the middle school, where the small nature of the classrooms often limited breaks to outside the classroom, with options of going to the computer lab, taking a note to the office, getting a drink of water, or simply taking a short walk around campus.

One additional finding under this theme was the propensity of teachers and paraeducators to talk of differentiated instruction as something available to all students, not just students with disabilities. There appeared be a general view that all children are unique and that an important part of their job was to be respectful of all learners. This finding is best represented by the following remark from a middle school teacher:

> I mean I have students who can't sit still. They may be tapping or maybe they have to be moving or doing something else. There are certain students that need to be asked questions to be kept on top of things. There are certain students who don't want to be asked questions so I don't call on them until I check their understanding somehow. There are certain students who are the class clowns, so I incorporate that by having them speak a lot more or get up in front of the class or do something so they don't have to blurt out those random thoughts. I accommodate for all of my students.

Skilled and Knowledgeable Staff

Parents, teachers, and paraeducators alike all spoke of the importance of having well-trained, highly skilled, and knowledgeable staff. Parents spoke of how staff were so "in tune" with their child and how they possessed highly specialized skills not typically required of other teachers, as demonstrated by this quote from a preschool mother:

> One of the wonderful things about full inclusion is that the teachers are so skilled…. Like [child] would not sit at the table with other children. She would be screaming constantly. So her teacher set a table with a mirror away from the other children so that [child] could see the other children, but still be by herself. And then she [the teacher] moved a typical peer a couple of weeks later, a typical peer at the table with [child]. In about 3 months she moved from the separate table to the main table. I mean that's facilitation-that's not just being around typical peers. That's a very skilled teacher…. The teachers here are really on the cutting edge.

Both teachers (61%) and paraeducators (65%) also spoke of the importance of trained staff, in particular, trained paraeducators. Participants explained that it was not just about extra adults in the room, but instead, having trained and qualified staff that are able to effectively implement instruction across content areas and specialized needs. In fact, a number of teachers and paraeducators commented on the importance of not hovering over students, but of knowing when to be flexible and backing away from students to encourage greater independence.

Collaboration and Teaming

Another essential component of a quality educational program for students with moderate–severe disabilities is the importance of open communication and working together as a team. Almost half of the teachers (10 of 23), 6 of whom were at the elementary school reported the importance of regular communication with parents. Teachers expressed the importance of including families in the planning process and eliciting their feedback on an on-going basis to best serve their child. Over three quarters of the parents (no difference by age) also expressed this view. Parents, in particular, found homework as a way to help them understand what their child was learning as well as an avenue to provide feedback and input. Only a handful of parents (22%) felt that more or better communication was needed.

Collaboration and teaming included working closely with related service staff, including occupational, physical, and speech and language specialists. Parents were the most likely to address this topic (15 of 18, or 83%), although 9 teachers, primarily at the preschool and elementary level, also spoke of the importance of working with related service personnel. All three schools employed an integrative services delivery model in which services are provided within general education classrooms and activities. Participants' view of this model varied widely by role with teachers perceiving this approach as very effective, whereas the majority of the parents expressed concerns. In general, teachers spoke positively of their interactions with related service staff, expressing appreciation of their specialized knowledge. They talked of two primary benefits to this approach: it allowed teaching staff to implement specific strategies as designated in the IEP throughout the school day, and because specialists were in the classroom, they were available to assist all children.

> Pull in services. I think that it's better because it makes sure that the information—the strategies that speech would be using with her individually are given to her throughout the day, 100% of the time, rather than just the hour a week or the 30 min a day, or whenever it would happen.

In contrast, only four parents (across the age span) felt as positive and in fact almost 75% of the parents (also fairly evenly distributed by age) stated a clear need for more and/or better related services. Parent's primary concern centered around whether the child was receiving an adequate level of direct service and as a result had hired specialists to provide additional hours of therapy outside the school setting. One parent even went as far as to suggest that in order for her child to attend this school, she had to, in essence, "give up" related services for her child.

In addition to receiving assistance from outside specialists, teachers and paraeducators also spoke strongly of the importance of being able to count on assistance from colleagues. Teachers expressed appreciation in having others to help brainstorm ideas for lessons—including how to design the lesson with all students' needs in mind and how to effectively engage students with challenging behaviors. For example, at the elementary school, grade level teams met daily for debriefing and at least once a week for planning, especially for the purposes of co-teaching. Teachers at the elementary level in particular commented on the benefit of co-teaching as providing special education support on a consistent basis.

> That's the most exciting part of collaboration with your colleagues. It's really thrilling to sit in a planning meeting and present an idea and have one of your colleagues question different parts of the idea until it is clear what your goals are for the students. Then someone will jump in and add a variable to the lesson that makes the proposed lesson even richer. Next, someone will share a modification and then another person will say, "I like part of your idea, but how about if we add this component?" In the end the idea sharing and fine tuning makes us better educators and the students receive better instruction (elementary teacher).

A final topic under collaboration and teaming was the importance for all staff to "be on the same page" which included knowing what to do and being consistent. With regard to consistency, this was primarily discussed within the context of consistency in the assignment of paraeducators. In general, the opinion expressed by a third of the parents (elementary and middle school) and all of the middle school teachers was that *more* consistency was needed. A few paraeducators at the elementary school echoed these sentiments as well. The primary concerns were (a) consistent implementation of instruction, (b) ensuring students received support on a consistent basis, and (c) breakdown in communication, especially between home and school. At these school programs, paraeducators were not assigned to one child for the day, but were assigned to a classroom with a target student(s) to assist as needed.

A Positive and Caring Community

A sixth theme under the second question related to the importance of creating a learning environment where all children are accepted and valued. As noted earlier, the basic premise behind the creation of these schools was the view that all children should be educated together. Thus, it is not surprising that participants expressed a strong belief in inclusive education, as well as a basic belief that all children have strengths and abilities. Parents, in particular viewed a strong belief in inclusive education as a basic foundation for creating a positive learning environment. For the most part, teachers and paraprofessional across grade levels echoed these views, as expressed below:

> It's [inclusive education] wonderful for all of us. I think it's good for them [students], I think it's good for the teachers, I think it's good for the parents, [and] I think it's good for society. That's why I'm here. I believe in it for sure (middle school teacher).

Consistent with the belief in inclusive education on a philosophical level was the view expressed by the majority of the participants—across role and grade level—that the inclusive placement currently enjoyed by the student was superior to a more segregated environment. This belief was expressed by 16 (89%) parents, 23 (100%) teachers, and 16 (94%) paraeducators. Concerns expressed regarding segregated placements included poor communication partners, children learning to become more disabled, not being challenged to learn, a lack of appropriate role models, and minimal instruction, especially in academics. Although the majority of teachers and paraeducators had no experience teaching in a special education setting, 11 of the 16 parents who made comments of this nature were familiar with specialized settings. They made it quite clear in their remarks that they believed the inclusive environment was far superior in helping their children reach desired goals.

Along with the view that children should be educated together was the expression of acceptance on a wider level. Teachers and paraeducators across the age span viewed students as capable learners who belonged at the school. Parents and educators alike often used the word "community" to express an atmosphere of acceptance, a place where kids helping kids is the norm, and a setting where school staff see the best in children, as expressed by this elementary school parent:

> I think his self-esteem was really heightened by being in the environment at this school because people really felt he had something to offer and it wasn't just his brother. It was every kid. They look at what every kid has to offer, that every kid has something to offer and to teach us.

However, although a basic belief in inclusive education was evident, some teachers—primarily middle school general educators—expressed a conflict between their beliefs on the one hand and day to day practice on the other. These teachers expressed uncertainty in their abilities to modify the curriculum and keep students actively engaged in a meaningful way. In essence, believing in inclusive education is one thing, implementing it is another, as expressed by this teacher: "I like the idea of inclusion. I think it is really neat and it's something I definitely believe in. Putting it into practice is not always as easy as the idealism in my head."

A second component of a positive learning environment was the use of positive behavior support as a fundamental strategy to address challenging behaviors. As noted earlier, all three schools incorporated a schoolwide positive behavior model into everyday practice. Teachers' understanding of these concepts was evident in their comments of "why" some students displayed challenging behaviors, noting "boredom" and fatigue as a common reason. Similarly, paraeducators (elementary and middle) talked about the importance of frequent use of positive reinforcement to increase desired academic and social behaviors.

A final component of a positive learning environment is the need for adequate space. Just under half of the teachers (10 of 23), primarily preschool and middle school, mentioned the desire for larger classrooms and more storage space. Teachers at the middle school, in particular, commented that small classes hindered their ability to use technology on a larger scale. Classes were particularly small at these two schools, making it difficult to accommodate individual student needs for movement and to handle the amount of physical equipment needed.

Providing a Balanced Educational Program

Approximately half of the parents, teachers, and paraeducators across age levels talked of the importance of teaching social and communication skills, in addition to academics. Parents and paraeducators spoke of the importance of teaching kids how to play and interact with others, including initiating social interactions. Although parents and paraeducators tended to limit their comments to children with disabilities, teacher's comments were often broader in scope—speaking of this need in terms of all children. Further, these comments were often age specific; for example, teachers of younger children spoke of teaching children how to get along whereas teachers of older students talked more of the specific challenges of preadolescence and adolescence. In general, however, participants across roles view the role of school to address both the social and academic needs of children.

While generally pleased with this aspect of the educational program, just under half (44%) of the parents (across all age levels) and two of the paraeducators (one each at the elementary and middle schools) felt additional direct instruction in communication and social skills was needed. The primary wish was for a greater emphasis on teaching students how to initiate and maintain interactions with others. Two parents at the middle school also expressed a wish for the curriculum to include instruction in life skills.

Question 3: What are your Hopes as a Result of the Student (Child) Being in an Inclusive Environment?

The final question asked participants to consider outcomes as a result of the education the students were currently receiving. Responses to this question resulted in two major themes: lead a normal life and concerns for the future.

Lead a Normal Life

The majority of the participants reported a desire to see students grow up and lead lives like everyone else. There was little difference across age although all preschool parents and paraeducators stated this hope compared to a somewhat smaller number as students aged. Having a normal life included typical postschool outcomes such as employment, college, and living independently. Additional wishes included having friends, marriage, and in general living happy and productive lives. A third outcome expressed primarily by parents was the desire for their child to be valued for who they are in all settings—not just at school where inclusive education was the premise. This included being viewed as capable and having the same opportunities afforded people without disabilities. One elementary parent's comments were typical of many of the respondents:

> Just that he is a valued member of society. That he will accept nothing less than to be part of the world. That he will find something significant to do with his life that makes him happy and will fulfill him. That he will have friends and have a job and work for the weekends just like everyone else, and have a great social life. Have romance in his life. All of those things that any parent wants for their kid—a vibrant significant life.

Concerns for the Future

A less positive theme involved comments from 8 of the 10 middle school teachers who expressed concerns for the future. Concerns raised included (a) fear that fully inclusive options for high school would be limited and (b) uncertainty that some of the students (primarily those with more significant academic and behavioral needs) would be able to live independently or acquire meaningful employment. One middle school general educator expressed her concerns in the following statement:

> One of the things that I always worry about is when they leave us and they go on to wherever it is they

> go on to. I hope they will be able to find their niche. Somewhere where they feel that they fit in because I'm so worried because we don't have a high school. I'm just worried about what are they going to do. I worry about them.

Another middle school teacher reflected on the future for three students, two of whom had severe and multiple disabilities and the third who had a moderate disability:

> As far as what their futures have, what is in store for them? I mean, with [student] and [student], I don't know what…[student] is so much more low-achieving that I don't know if he would be able to be on his own.

Discussion

A qualitative research design was used to examine the perceptions of key stakeholders in what constituted a quality educational program for students with moderate–severe disabilities within an inclusive learning environment. Several components were consistently stated across all age levels and roles targeted, whereas others seemed linked to a specific age range or role of participant. It is not surprising when interviewing parents and teaching staff in inclusive situations that there would be a strong finding related to the value of children learning together. That was expected although the question was never asked outright. Parents who appreciated the feeling of community at the inclusive school wished for these same outcomes in other settings as well. However, it was not just the fact of children learning together that was mentioned as a critical component of a student's educational program. Rather, participants identified several qualities and characteristics they felt needed to be in place for the student with moderate–severe disabilities to obtain a quality education.

Some of our findings echo those of others who have engaged in similar research. Parents, teachers, and paraeducators in the current study reported benefits for students with disabilities as well as those without. This finding adds to the research also demonstrating the benefits of inclusive education (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Downing et al., 2004; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Foreman et al., 2004). Support for both the student and those serving the student (teachers and paraeducators) was clearly identified as a necessary component by respondents in this study. As the Cross et al. (2004) study found a positive attitude by staff appears to be important, as well as a strong parent–professional relationship. Findings from the current study also highlighted the belief in inclusive education and solid communication between school and home along with several other components. Similarly, Lohrmann and Bambara (2006) interviewed 14 elementary education teachers, about essential supports needed to include students with developmental disabilities who have challenging behavior. Teachers stated the need for supports for teachers, collaboration, unique teaching strategies individualized for each student, and modified curriculum. In addition the need for a positive learning environment and collaborative, highly qualified teams, identified in the present research as necessary components of a quality program, are also components supported in the literature (Horner et al., 2005; Snell & Janney, 2005; Thousand et al., 2002).

Limitations

Certain caveats are advised when considering the applicability of these findings to other situations. This study reflects the perceptions of primarily female Caucasian participants of three small programs in one western state. In particular parent respondents were primarily mothers with only two fathers responding with their wives at the preschool age. The majority of the school staff interviewed were age 30 or below and the teachers at the elementary and middle school level had limited teaching experience (an average of 2.9 and 2.7 years, respectively). Therefore, generalizing findings to other programs should be done cautiously. Furthermore, the programs studied were designed from their inception to be fully inclusive and therefore, the perceptions of those hired to work in these programs and the families who wanted this type of education for their child, may not represent other families or teaching staff. Another limitation may involve the familiarity of the first author to a few of the parents and teachers that she interviewed. This familiarity along with the bias of the authors toward the support of inclusive practices may have influenced participant responses. However, participants were encouraged to speak freely and were ensured of the confidentiality of their responses. In addition participants provided information that was inconsistent with the researchers' biases. Therefore, it is believed that the information obtained does accurately reflect participants' perceptions and were not overly influenced by researcher bias.

Implications for the Field

Findings from this study raise additional questions. Little was shared by participants regarding the actual core curriculum that students with moderate–severe disabilities should be expected to learn. A basic premise of inclusive education for students with moderate–severe disabilities is that they have access to the core curriculum with the necessary curricular modifications and instructional supports (e.g., assistive technology, paraprofessionals, and collaboration). The importance of modifying the curriculum was made clear by almost all respondents, but what was less clear is what students were to learn once modified, especially in relation to grade level

standards. Furthermore, several respondents expressed concern regarding the lack of appropriate modifications for students. Teachers, paraeducators, and parents of middle school students in particular expressed more concern regarding the adequacy of the program, especially for those students with the most severe disabilities. As the core content becomes more challenging and as content standards become more difficult and abstract, more extensive accommodations may be necessary. Of interest in this study was the relatively small number of participants stating the need for "functional or life skills" training. The concern that students with moderate–severe disabilities who are included in general education classrooms on a full time basis will not receive adequate instruction in more basic "life skills" has been mentioned in the existing research to date (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002). However, in this study such a concern was much less prominent. Future research should examine the opinions of stakeholders when students are in specialized and self-contained learning environments to determine if and in what ways these views may differ from findings from this research.

A second issue raised by these findings reflects the ongoing struggle to adequately support students with serious and/or pervasive challenging behaviors in school settings. The series of articles and invited commentaries in the special edition of *Research and Practices for Persons with Severe Disabilities* (Vol. 31 (1), 2006) on school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) clearly brings to light the need for further research in this area. SWPBS is designed to meet the academic and social needs of all students by incorporating a three-tiered system in which intensity of supports mirror the intensity of needs. Universal strategies focus on teaching and reinforcing prosocial behaviors, whereas secondary and tertiary strategies are more intensive to address the needs of students with specific behavioral needs (Freeman et al., 2006). As Hawken and O'Neill (2006) note, much of the research to date on SWPBS has focused on the effectiveness of universal strategies on larger outcomes, such as reduction of office referrals and suspension and expulsion rates. However, little is known on the effectiveness of SWPBS for students with the most significant behavioral needs. In general, participants (primarily middle school) in this study viewed students who exhibit serious and pervasive challenging behaviors as less successful and expressed concerns for their future. Further research is needed to better understand what resources and supports, including training of school personnel (Brown & Michaels, 2006; Crimmins & Farrell, 2006), are needed to best meet the needs of all students within an SWPBS model.

Little research exists in the field to compare embedded therapy in general education classes to the more traditional pull out model. In this study, a disparity between roles regarding integrated related services of occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech therapy emerged between parents and professionals. In general teachers valued the "pull-in" approach to related services as a benefit for all children. Parents on the other hand were less positive in general and felt that they almost had to relinquish related services in order for their child to attend the inclusive school. Research is needed to more thoroughly compare the two models and determine which appears to be more effective for certain students and under what conditions. Perhaps, more information and clarification regarding this service delivery model also need to be shared with family members.

Findings from this study regarding the need for appropriate adaptations and accommodations for students (especially at the secondary level), the necessity of ongoing collaboration among staff members, and the importance of technology to enhance student learning raise the question of whether teachers are receiving the type of training necessary to support inclusive education. If personnel preparation programs for both special educators and general educators are not preparing teachers in these skill areas will inclusive education be provided in an appropriate manner or will students with moderate to severe disabilities continue to be denied access to general education environments?

With legal mandates like the No Child Left Behind and its requirement that all students not only have access to the core curriculum, but also be actively involved in it and demonstrate progress, much greater attention needs to be paid to what exactly that should look like for those students with severe disabilities. Although respondents generally felt that the students with moderate–severe disabilities were successful (academically, socially, or both), there was less agreement regarding the characteristics of academic success for those students having the most complex disabilities.

The difficulty that states appear to be having aligning adapted assessment to core curriculum standards (Browder et al., 2004; Kohl, McLaughlin, & Nagle, 2006) may be related to the inability to clearly articulate the exact content that students with moderate to severe disabilities are expected to learn. Although access may be the first and necessary step, a clear understanding of the actual content to learn from the core, age-level curriculum is needed before an objective measure of progress is possible. Once teachers have this knowledge then schools must discover ways of supporting them with the time to collaborate, make accommodations, learn the technology, and teach. Physically bringing students of diverse abilities together is not the goal of inclusion. Rather, providing the most effective learning environment must be the goal for all students.

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