

# Leveling the Playing Field: Increasing General Educator's Special Education Knowledge

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This article will showcase the power of collaborative relationships to transform pre-service learning and in-service practice in the area of inclusion. A middle school principal and college professor in Special Education partnered to address the need for support of inclusion students in schools and pre-service education in EPP's. The collaboration at the middle school level focused on increasing inclusiveness of the faculty by building knowledge. A professional development framework designed to increase inclusiveness by increasing the faculty's special education knowledge was implemented. Additionally, the education preparation programs of study were revised to integrate topics into relevant courses. Through this collaboration, a special education program of study became relevant to today's educational climate and a middle school faculty gained knowledge to increase the inclusiveness of their school. This experience was piloted in both educational institutions and is being refined for delivery in other public schools.

*Keywords:* collaborative relationships, pre-service learning, inclusiveness, special education

The data regarding students with disabilities highlights the need for all educators to be more aware of the needs of diverse students. More than any other time in history, students with disabilities, including behavioral disabilities, receive instruction in general education classrooms for increasing amounts of time (Brigham et al., 2016; McLeskey et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2010). According to the National Center for Educational Disabilities that tracks all students served by IDEA, the percent of students provided benefits through special education has increased from 8.3 percent in 1976 to 13.2 percent in 2015. The areas of greatest increase were in "other health impairments" and autism (NCES Fast Facts, 2019). In addition to the number of students being identified as having a disability has increased, the frequency with which students who have disabilities are educated alongside their nondisabled peers in general education settings has also increased. These increases

impact virtually every aspect of contemporary schooling (Cook et al., 2007). Inclusive thinking and practices were specifically supported with the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). As schools throughout the nation become increasingly inclusive by providing support services for students with disabilities in the general education setting, it is essential that the structure and philosophy that schools adopt focus on acceptance and belonging. The call for increased inclusiveness has been the center of discussions for several years. In a speech on the State of American Education Secretary Richard Riley (1998) stated:

The entire context of American education is changing. We need teachers skilled in using computers as a powerful teaching tool, and many more teachers well-versed in teaching English as a second language. Our teachers

need to teach to a higher level of achievement and be prepared to teach all of America's children—the gifted and talented, our many new immigrants, the college-bound achiever, and the disabled child who is learning so much more because he or she is now included.

Inclusion is not simply the placement of students with disabilities in a classroom with students without disabilities. Rather, it is an organization of schools, teaching, and learning which provides for each student to receive a learning experience that “fits” (Ferguson et al., 2000).

We share a common belief that inclusive practices benefit the entire school culture by providing students, faculty, and staff a sense of belonging. This conviction focused the work around a central question, “How can a partnership between a principal and a professor increase inclusiveness in the K-12 environment?” The goal for the principal-professor collaboration was to create a professional development model to improve the culture of inclusion in a K-12 environment. Studies suggest that the impact of an inclusive model of service delivery affects all students, not just those labeled as having a disability (Burnstein et al., 2004; Giangreco et al., 1993; McLeskey & Waldron, 2006; Morris et al., 2003). Special education services have historically been provided via a segregation model in which students with disabilities were instructed in environments away from students who were not identified as having a disability (Giangreco et al., 1993; McLeskey & Waldron, 2006; Morris et al., 2003). This separation can lead to an “us-them” paradigm which may cause general education teachers to feel disconnected from students with disabilities. A segregation model may also contribute to a sense that students served under an IEP are the responsibility of special

education teachers and staff. We believe that a culture of inclusion requires a proactive whole school approach which includes a shared belief in the fundamental truth that every student is first and foremost a general education student. We focused on the concepts of belonging and inclusion through the realization that knowledge is not reserved for just one “type” of teacher. We needed to dispel the myth that special education teachers held knowledge that the general education teacher was not meant to know and vice versa. In order to accomplish this, our approach centered on the components of building trust, vision, a commitment to staff development, and establishing a common language (Casey, 2019).

Inclusion is a movement seeking to create schools that meet the needs of all students by establishing learning communities for students with and without disabilities, educated together in general education classrooms in neighborhood schools (Ferguson, 1996). In order to establish a learning community that fosters inclusion, the principal and assistant professor developed a mechanism of engagement to provide in-service teachers with targeted and specific professional development designed to increase an inclusive culture and data to inform course and program development at the university level. The first task was to gain a solid understanding of the state of both environments: middle school faculty and educator preparation program. The following section details the data collection process.

### **Challenge: State of Programs**

We began with the realization that general education teachers often do not understand their role in educating students with disabilities in their classrooms and the divide may begin at the university level. This data was consistent with the findings from the 2019 survey conducted by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)

(Galiatsos, S., Kruse, L., & Whittaker, M., 2019). In the publication, *Forward Together*, NCLD reported that only 17% of teachers surveyed felt well prepared to teach students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. Additionally, the findings from the NCLD report reflected the current program practices regarding pre-service opportunities where pre-service general education teachers have little to no opportunity to learn about learning and attention issues, directly practice teaching students with disabilities during their pre-service training, and/or gain instructional experience necessary to meet the needs of students with mild to moderate disabilities (Galiatsos, et. al., 2019, p. 12).

This dilemma was examined in parallel environments: the middle school faculty who are educating students on a daily basis and pre-service teachers who are currently engaged in programs of study learning how to become professional educators. While we have a common goal to transform the educational experience of students in the K-12 environment, each partner brought a unique perspective to the table.

### **Middle School Environment**

Professional educators had previously demonstrated a feeling of uncertainty and a sense that they are not clear on their role in supporting students with a variety of disabilities within the context of the inclusion classroom. With the push for a full Response to Intervention (RTI) continuum of services, the state of Tennessee placed an emphasis on students with disabilities participating in the general education setting. This shift was based on the belief that all students who were not specifically placed in a self-contained restrictive classroom must be educated to the maximum extent possible in an inclusion environment. The intent was to produce attention to the accommodations and adjustments necessary for students with disabilities to access the general education

curriculum and the special services that may be necessary for appropriate participation in particular areas of the curriculum (U.S. Senate, 1997, p. 17.) With this shift, many pull-out/resource classrooms were dissolved for students who were below grade-level expectations. This focus created a demand for change in a couple of profound ways. When the shift towards an inclusion model of service delivery occurred, students with an IEP began to either be served in an inclusion setting for all core content classes or qualified for a self-contained classroom. Prior to the move towards an inclusive model, the middle school served students with mild to moderate disabilities in a modified content class for the core content areas. With the focus on full inclusion, general education teachers became inclusion teachers with a special education co-teacher or a special education assistant in the content area classroom. Many general education teachers experienced significant challenges during the first year of inclusion implementation. When we discussed the challenges experienced, we determined that a lack of understanding of the roles of the general and special education teacher in an inclusive setting contributed to the sense of unease with the inclusion model. An informal faculty survey was conducted. Some of the comments from teachers included, “Why can’t we just take the special ed students to another room during that period and teach them since they can’t do this work,” “They are not my students, and they keep my students from learning,” “When is enough, enough and that student will be moved out of my class?” and a comment made by an experienced faculty member, “I put the special ed kids on one side of the room and the general ed kids on the other and told the special ed kids that if they worked hard enough, maybe they could move to the right side.”

It would seem that this group of teachers were in the wrong profession from these

statements. The truth is that they lacked the knowledge needed. They had never worked in an inclusion setting and did not understand that it was part of their role as educators to embrace all students. The candid nature of these comments were not offensive to their peers. In a school that had not meshed special education services with general education services in the past, it was a foreign concept. That is precisely what led to this collaboration. The realization that the one special education course in college many years ago was not sufficient preparation for the current reality of this school and the needs of these students.

It was imperative for the partners to understand the needs of the faculty in the areas of classroom environment and lesson planning, and the knowledge that student test scores were primarily the responsibility of the general education core content teacher.

The data regarding students with disabilities highlighted the need for all educators to be more aware of the needs of diverse students. In the Fall of 2019, 150 students with disabilities receive special education services at the middle school. Out of the 150 students with disabilities, twenty-four (24) receive services in a self-contained setting, 126 students with disabilities receive services in the general education setting. Prior to the shift towards an inclusion model, sixty (60) students received services in a self-contained setting. Today, the number of students served in a self-contained setting would increase to 130 if the middle school chose to revert to a segregated model of special education service. There are currently 80 full-time teachers employed in the partnership middle school. Out of those teachers, the majority reported they had little to no knowledge of IDEA, best practices for students with disabilities, or what their role is when educating and supporting a student on an IEP. This baseline provided the foundation for the collaborative workshop to start at the

conceptual level and both teach and demonstrate what was expected.

### **Educator Preparation Environment**

The separation between general and special education teachers begins at the educator preparation level and the paradigm continues in the classroom. The university offers seven pathways to obtain a general education license. Out of those programs, pre-service general education teachers are only required currently to complete two special education courses: Introduction to Special Education and Effective Inclusion Strategies. Students were informally polled and reported they felt unprepared to participate in IEP team meetings and how to adequately provide instruction for students with disabilities. Pre-service teachers reported similar feelings to the current in-service teachers during discussions held in class. The demographics of pre-service and current in-service teachers are similar. The majority are white females who are either married or in a relationship with a family. A side-by-side comparison between the general education initial license areas and the special education programs of study was also conducted. Pre-service special education teachers are required to complete eleven courses in the general education program of study totaling 33 hours as compared to the two required courses totaling 6 hours of coursework in the area of special education provided to the general education majors. Additionally, we found the placements of students in the general education setting further emphasized the divide between general and special educators. Educators in the state of Tennessee are required to participate in a performance-based assessment, edTPA, during the final student teaching placement. This assessment requires the general education candidate to collect data on three focus learners. However, the assessment stops short of requiring the

general education candidate to demonstrate effective instruction practices with a student receiving special education services. The lack of inclusive classroom placements and a lack of focus on students with disabilities for the candidate's initial licensure assessment, further exacerbate the disconnected feeling reported by the majority of general education candidates.

A syllabi review was conducted on the two required special education courses for general education candidates. While the Introduction to Special Education courses provided candidates with an overview of special education law and disability categories, the courses fell short of providing general education candidates with the understanding of the role they play in educating students with disabilities. The IEP process, instructional strategies, and a philosophical belief that all students are first and foremost general education students was not discussed. Upon additional reflection on the course content, it is reasonable to identify how general education candidates may feel disconnected from serving students with disabilities. For example, the discussion regarding disability categories did not include how the student who met specific disability criteria could and should be included in the general education setting. The realization that the educator preparation program did not focus on instilling an inclusive mindset in all teacher candidates sparked a call to action in the college. Research by NCLD (2019), revealed that states set a low bar for preparing general educators to teach students with disabilities (Galiatsos, et. al, 2019, p. 12). Without proper preparation, teachers may feel overwhelmed and unsupported contributing to the divide between special and general education. The following partnership section will discuss both areas as well as the process we used to mitigate the challenges.

### **Partnership Process: Cycle of Transformation**

Partnerships between universities and K12 schools are intended to address specific shared needs and goals and sometimes take the form of a professional development school (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). While it is still the desire of the partners to expand this collaboration into a full professional development school, we began by addressing the specific shared needs and goals of each organization. The partnership began as a discussion regarding the content pre-service general education teachers were learning to prepare them to teach students served under an IEP in an inclusive setting and evolved to a desire for the university professor to assist the middle school principal in the development of a professional day of learning and on-going support for middle school teachers.

### **Putting Special into the General Education**

The faculty workshop focused on a succinct message which included federal laws, how students are identified with a disability, how a student qualifies for an IEP, the expectations of the state of Tennessee and articulating the expectation for the school to become fully inclusive. The delivery model was paramount for implementation success. During the professional development workshop, teaching teams including the special education professional were grouped together, and were provided experiences that simulated disabilities, helped educators recognize their own neurodiversity through activities, explored student files, and considered appropriate applications of accommodations and modifications. The day was created around activities designed to engage the faculty, incite curiosity, and empower educators to start the school year with an inclusive mindset.

The entire faculty was asked to meet for six hours of face-to-face professional development. The day was built on the clear learning target: As an educator, I will be able to describe the basic tenets of special education law, the disability categories and support structures, and the role I play in supporting a student with an IEP. We designed a handbook around the three areas of law, disability categories and support structures, and roles of educators for the educators to use during the day and as a guide for teachers to reference as they plan for the school year. The full-day workshop began with a few teachers who voluntarily chose to assume a disability in the area of vision, hearing, sensory, or physical. The only stipulation was that they could not choose to remove the impairment until the end of the day. This activity was designed to provide the educators with empathy and trust that the professionals on the team would support them during the day. The day also included testimony from faculty whose children are identified as students with disabilities and faculty who personally experience life with a disability. The statements from peers made an impact on the faculty and assisted to increase the desire to become an inclusive school. The handbook was designed to be interactive and included areas of discussion and reflection. The intent was to design a professional development framework which included opportunities for engagement after the initial training day. This was accomplished through both on-demand questions posed by the faculty and intentional discussions between faculty and principal during team and whole-faculty meetings. The assistant professor provided support for both the on-demand and the planned discussions embedded through the school year.

### **Ensuring Relevance for Educator Preparation Programs**

The partnership was designed to echo the work cited by Heafner, McIntyre, and Spooner (2014) where faculty were viewed as equal partners at the school and were offered the ability to engage the perspectives of practitioners to inform the work of faculty. According to a study by Oliver and Reschly (2007), teacher preparation programs need to place a greater emphasis on preparing both general and special educators to be competent and efficient at managing today's classrooms with their diverse range of learners. The study further states, "This approach means not only giving preservice teachers the intellectual understanding of the issues involved, but also ensuring that they have ample opportunity for guided practice and feedback" (Oliver & Reschly, 2007). The cycle of transformation created by the principal and assistant professor was designed to provide preservice teachers with the intellectual understanding of current issues in teaching and assist in-service teachers in the improvement of their practice based on the issues faced daily in their classroom.

The university program of study transformation began with a discussion between the initial license program team leads. The leads reviewed each program of study and syllabi to determine how to close the gap between general and special education teacher candidates. During this discussion, the need for a special education minor was identified as well as the incorporation of activities to increase candidates' understanding of support structures and the role each educator plays in the education of all students.

### **Next Steps and Future Research**

As a result of this collaboration, the middle school faculty reported a lower sense of anxiety regarding the education of students with a disability. When questioned, the faculty contributed that the change of

mindset was due to both the informative professional development workshop and the on-going support provided by the principal and the assistant professor. Faculty no longer felt they were alone in the education of students and were safe to ask for assistance. Additionally, the course content of the initial licensure programs was revised to include practical applications to support an inclusive mindset. Teacher candidates are being instructed from the lens of inclusion rather than seeing inclusion as something that happens as an afterthought. With the addition of a special education minor, it is expected that additional students will choose the path to include the special education endorsement alongside their initial license in the area of general education.

As we continue to refine this process, we are called to focus on future professional development opportunities offered to teachers and administrators as well as the educational approach provided for teacher candidates majoring in education (Causton-Theoharis, et.al., 2011). We support the work by Friend & Bursuck (2004) who highlight the need for purposeful efforts to create teams that work together to plan, communicate, and teach all students as a crucial first step. As the process evolves, intentional work around the formation of inclusive teams will be imperative. The team approach will be replicated at the university level for candidates especially during the Effective Inclusion Strategies course. In addition, the placement of that course will be moved to be paired with other courses which lend themselves to practical field experiences. The combination of coursework and an opportunity to discuss lessons from the field will be included in the course of study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this project are that it is confined to one public school and one university. It has not been studied or

replicated in other educational environments. Furthermore, the impact long-term for this school has not been investigated. However, the increase in students being served with diagnosed disabilities is universal, and the changes to the service model in the state of Tennessee is impacting all schools in this state.

### **Conclusion**

We found that this partnership provided both the pre-service candidates and in-service teachers with support and knowledge to begin the shift towards an inclusive service delivery model in a K-12 environment. The professional development framework created by the partners provided the middle school faculty with a concrete guide based on the immediate needs expressed by the teachers. This information informed the program of study for teacher candidates to include practical applications for support services when instructing a student with a disability. Based on preliminary data, we feel that the next step in this process is to formalize the work through a comprehensive research study. We feel that the partnership work to date has led to promising outcomes for students, faculty, and administrators as we work to educate all students with their peers. This partnership will continue to strive to ensure that all students are seen first and foremost as general education students by leveraging the power of university-school partnerships. We will continue to focus on creating inclusive schools and ensure that our teacher candidates leave our programs with a focus on inclusion throughout their professional education careers.

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