



Manuscript 1062

Collaborative Inclusion: IEP Team Perspectives on Supporting Students with Extensive Needs and the Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

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Abstract

This mixed methods multi-case study explored the inclusion of students with extensive support needs, including multiple disabilities and autism, in a small elementary school setting. The study focused on the perspectives of school-based IEP team members regarding inclusive practices. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, the research incorporated raw score data from the Teacher Attitude Towards Inclusion Survey alongside individual interviews, a focus group, and the development of tailored student support plans. A ten-week coaching intervention was implemented, grounded in Kunz and Carter's (2021) collaborative and consultative framework, to enhance the team's capacity for inclusive education. Findings suggest that the participants were not as inclusive in their practices as their perspectives indicated. Themes presented around collaboration and differentiation have implications for teacher and administrator preparation regarding how collaboration and the process of modifying curriculum is taught to teacher and administrator candidates.

Keywords

extensive support needs, inclusion, autism, collaboration, differentiation, UDL, collaborative frameworks, multiple disabilities, intellectual disabilities, special education

Collaborative Inclusion: IEP Team Perspectives on Supporting Students with Extensive Support Needs and the Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

The public school system in the United States educates over 7.5 million students with educational disabilities. These students receive an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is based on their unique needs (NCES, 2022). Disability is a significant part of our world, even though society often treats it as outside the norm. This misunderstanding of disability has led to practices that negatively impact students. While the outcomes can be measured in numerous ways, one striking outcome is that people with disabilities live below the poverty rate at approximately twice the national average (Goodman et al., 2019). However, inclusive education has been shown to be a mediating factor between disability and poverty as it leads to higher rates of employment (Qian et al., 2018).

While public education has been based on a segregationist, eugenic mindset from the beginning, there has been steady growth of inclusion since the 1980s (NCES, 2022; Osgood, 2005). In 2024, 67% of students supported with IEPs spent 80% or more in the general education classroom. All growth has not been equal, though. Among the most stagnate categories of disability are multiple disabilities, autism, and intellectual disabilities (NCES, 2022) and these students tend to have the most extensive support needs (ESN). This lack of inclusive practice is also occurring at a time when there has been a significant increase in the population of students identified with all disabilities, and a dramatic increase in autism. In 2000, one in every 150 eight-year-olds was diagnosed as on the spectrum. By 2020, that number had increased to one in every 36 eight-year-olds (Zablotsky et al., 2023; Richter, 2024).

Practices have traditionally placed students with extensive support needs in segregated settings far more than their peers; however, shifting attitudes regarding inclusion and the increase in population of students with disabilities are pushing best practices towards more inclusion. To better understand inclusion practices, this research study builds on the concept of true inclusion, which is founded in the ideas of equity, access, and belonging and seeks to overcome discrimination, marginalization, exclusion and underachievement for all individuals regardless of any marginalizing factors, including disability (Ralabate, 2024). True inclusion practices geographically situate students in their local education agency grade-appropriate general education classroom and create a sense of belonging because students are in their least restrictive environment studying the same curriculum matter as the other students, with the curriculum modified to their needs along with access to appropriate supports (Ralabate, 2024; United Nations, 2019). Because true inclusion requires a collaborative approach, the purpose of the research was to investigate school-based IEP team members'

perspectives on inclusion and understand how a research-based intervention affected these perspectives within an elementary school in a large Midwestern school district.

Literature Review

While it is important to note that there are limitations in researching effective inclusion due to the lack of aggregated data from research with large sample sizes, the converging body of evidence indicates that inclusion is, at worst, equivalent to a segregated setting in terms of student growth, and, at best, the appropriate environment to maximize student growth (Agran et al., 2020; Cole et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2007; Cosier et al., 2013; Hunt et al., 2004). Within the past 20 years, experimental and quasi-experimental studies have shown that knowledge and vocabulary acquisition, the speed of acquisition, lesson engagement, and academic outcomes are better facilitated in a general education environment (Cole et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2007; Gee et al., 2020). The research also indicates that both functional and academic vocabulary can be taught, creating evidence that functional curriculum versus academic curriculum tension is not necessary (Brown et al., 1979; Collins et al., 2007; Knight et al., 2010). According to Knight et al. (2010) students with severe disabilities can successfully learn academic content when given appropriate supports in general education settings such as vocabulary aligned with grade-level content, problem solving in mathematics, and literacy skills through shared reading and writing activities. Additionally, meaningful inclusion has led to greater social development, leadership opportunities and academic support for students without disabilities in the general education setting (Hunt et al., 2004; Kart & Kart, 2021). Spooner et al. (2012) highlight evidence-based teaching strategies for students with severe developmental disabilities that include embedded instruction within general education, time delay and systematic instruction, and peer-mediated strategies.

With all the benefits of inclusion, it is important to look at why students with ESN are not taught in more inclusive settings. Four themes emerge across the literature: 1) pre-service training does not prepare general education or special education teachers for the reality of inclusion, 2) teacher attitudes towards inclusion tend to be negative and worsen as teachers age, 3) a lack of clarity for the roles that IEP team members play in the day-to-day education of students, and 4) a lack of enough common planning time for collaboration (Cosier et al., 2020; Dessementet et al., 2012; Gal et al., 2010; Monsen et al., 2014; NCES, 2022).

Collaborative practices and frameworks have proven to be beneficial, especially for students with extensive support needs (Hunt et al., 2003; Hunt et al., 2004; Kuntz & Carter, 2018). These frameworks offer the opportunity to address some obstacles to inclusion, typically by providing a series of prompts and graphic organizers used to guide and structure collaboration among team

members. By clarifying roles, assigning specific work for team members, and creating plans for inclusion, the frameworks align to evidence that has increased student-teacher interaction, student-peer interaction, and positivity toward inclusion (Hunt et al., 2003; Hunt et al., 2004; Kuntz & Carter, 2021). Given this literature base, this multicase study sought to address the following question: How do the school-based IEP team members of a student with extensive support needs perceive inclusion, and how does their perception change after the implementation of a collaborative framework?

Research Design

Within the context of obstacles to inclusion, the expansion of inclusion throughout special education, and the ontological framework of critical disability theory, we conducted a mixed methods multicase study with three cases from a single elementary school. The elementary school, located in a large district in the Midwest, contained approximately 350 students, and housed three specialized programs for students with multiple disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and autism. The cases were bound by student need and included: 1) school-based IEP teams for students who were served under the IDEA categories of intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, or autism, 2) a placement outside of general education for 40% or greater of the day, and 3) a curriculum modified by the state extended standards.

Internal Review Board and Participants

This research was approved by the supporting university Internal Review Board (IRB), following the expedited protocols prescribed by the university due to the limited nature of the risk involved. After approval from the university IRB, we followed the school district protocol to obtain permission from the superintendent to conduct the research and then identified participants through purposive sampling. The lead researcher, who was an elementary special education instructional coach in the district where the study was conducted, identified potential participants based on students in different special education programs. The school housed three separate programs for students with extensive support needs: one for students with multiple disabilities, one for students with social communication and behavior needs, and one for students with intensive social communication needs. Because each case is bound by student need, cases reflect the three special education programs found in the school. Once potential participants were identified, the lead researcher explained the study to determine interest and then proceeded through the informed consent process. Each participant signed an informed consent before the start of the study, and all were

aware their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could leave the study at any point with no repercussions. Each case was comprised of the school-based IEP team members serving a student with extensive needs and included a general education teacher, a special education teacher, and a paraprofessional (see Table 1).

Table 1
Summary of Participants

Case	Name	Role	Years in Education	Years in Current Role	Highest Education Level
3 rd Grade	Lisa	GE	17	3	Master's
	June	SPED	23	3	Master's
	Patty	Para	10	4	Associate's
4 th Grade	Lana	GE	2	0.5	Bachelor's
	Beth	SPED	21	3	Master's; NBCT
	Kate	Para	1	0.5	Associate's
5 th Grade	Kathryn	GE	14	12	Master's
	Jada	SPED	12	9	Bachelor's
	Anna	Para	6	6	High School

Note. NBCT = National board certified teacher, GE= General education teacher, SPED= Special education teacher, Para= Paraprofessional

Members of IEP teams participated in a ten-week coaching intervention: Kuntz and Carter's (2021) Collaborative and Consultative Framework. The framework has been established as an effective tool for increasing engagement and developing teacher/student interaction in the general education classroom, as well as an effective tool for delivering content and increasing academic growth (Kuntz & Carter, 2021). This study sought to understand the IEP team members' perspectives while using this established framework for collaboration.

The Intervention

The framework is broken into two parts: The Student Support Plan and Quick Plans (Kuntz & Carter, 2021). The Student Support Plan (SSP) is developed for each student at a team meeting before the beginning of the school year and is based on input from both the team and the student's IEP. The SSP details the student's strengths and interests, present levels of performance in core academic subjects, and helpful strategies. The team uses that information to create a goal for

the time in general education based on content and student needs. The plan then includes the accommodations and modifications noted in the IEP to that classroom environment. Every classroom routine is analyzed for general expectations and the application of required supports (i.e., communication, assistive technology, physical, peer, and para-professional). The second phase of the intervention is the Quick Plan (QP). This quick planning meeting format is used to merge the weekly lesson plans with the SSP to create a clear plan for that upcoming week of classes. The lead researcher acted as a coach throughout the study and modeled how to modify curriculum and use the accommodations.

Data Collection

To capture IEP team members' perceptions of inclusion and changes to these perceptions after implementing a collaboration framework, we collected multiple sources of data including a teacher attitude survey, individual interviews, two focus groups, and audio recordings of and teacher communication about planning meetings. Data were collected before, during, and after the intervention.

Teacher Attitude Towards Inclusion Scale

The data collection process began with all participants responding to the Teacher Attitude Towards Inclusion Scale (TATIS). The TATIS was developed to measure teacher perceptions about inclusion (Cullen et al., 2010). At the time of its development, the shift in education being measured was from no inclusion to including those with mild to moderate disabilities, and that was reflected in the survey (Cullen et al., 2010). For this research, we expanded the scope from mild to moderate (MMD) to include students considered to have moderate to extensive support needs (ESN). The TATIS includes 14 statements with the language "mild to moderate disabilities." In each instance, we modified the survey to be followed by a new statement that replicated it and replaced "mild to moderate disabilities" with "moderate to extensive support needs." For instance, statement number one from the original TATIS is, "All students with mild to moderate disabilities should be educated in a regular classroom with non-handicapped peers to the fullest extent possible" (Cullen et al., 2010, p. 13). Statement number one, when modified read: "All students with moderate to extensive support needs should be educated in a regular classroom with non-handicapped peers to the fullest extent possible." Each statement was scored. The additions of these statements enabled the researchers to identify differences in attitudes towards students with MMD versus students with ESN; thus, data captured the shifting attitudes towards greater inclusion, and critical disability theory. Participants completed the modified TATIS, via a paper form, before and after the intervention.

The TATIS offers a Likert scale of *1 = Agree Very Strong* through *7 = Disagree Very Strongly*. The TAITIS includes a scoring sheet indicating raw scores and provides directions for converting to *t*-scores and factor percentile ranks. However, due to the limitations created by altering the survey, percentile scoring was not conducted. Data analysis involved the use of raw scores. Additionally, the wording of the section measuring belief in the efficacy of inclusion caused the Likert scale to operate in reverse. As a result, we reverse coded that section. Overall, the lower the scores, the greater the inclusivity of perspectives. Cullen et al. (2010) identified three key dimensions of teacher attitudes toward inclusion in the literature: perspectives on students with disabilities in inclusive settings (POS), beliefs about the efficacy of inclusion (BEI), and beliefs about professional roles and responsibilities (PRF).

Interviews and Focus Groups

Each participant engaged in a pre-intervention interview about their perspective on inclusion, lasting approximately 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted by the lead researcher who used open ended questions based on the topics of obstacles to inclusion found in the review of the literature and Harkins and Fletcher's (2015) Survey of Educator Attitude. After the conclusion of the intervention, each general education teacher and paraprofessional then engaged in a short, approximately 20-minute follow-up interview to discuss the collaborative framework and their experiences with implementing their role. The lead researcher recorded and transcribed, via the transcription software Otter.ai (2023), both the pre-intervention and the post-intervention interviews.

One week after the completion of the intervention, the lead researcher held two focus groups, each lasting about 45 minutes. All nine participants attended one of the focus groups, with four participants in one group and five in the other. The lead researcher recorded each focus group via Otter.ai (2023) with a backup recording by Microsoft stream, to be better able to track speakers for the transcription. The focus groups discussed questions based on both their experiences with the framework, and adapted questions from Harkins and Fletcher (2015) Focus Group Interview Questions.

Planning Meetings and Documents

All planning meetings were facilitated by the lead researcher who was also the intervention coach. Researchers used audio recordings using Otter.ai (2023) to collect data at most meetings, with the transcriptions of those recordings produced and edited for accuracy in Microsoft Word. If these meetings could not be recorded, the lead researcher took field notes during the meeting and entered these into the

research database via Microsoft Word. Throughout the intervention, the lead researcher conducted regular fidelity checks to monitor implementation.

At the beginning of the school year, each IEP team met for approximately 1 hour to complete a Student Support Plan. This was followed by regular meetings between the intervention coach and the general education teacher to create the Quick Plan for the upcoming lesson. The frequency of meetings was determined by the needs of the students, as 2 teams met weekly to plan for the forthcoming week, and 1 team met every 2-3 weeks to plan for the following unit of study. These decisions were based on the specific modifications of the material, and how long a student would use the modified materials. When schedules did not permit a time to meet, the Quick Plan was worked out through emails, and copies of the emails were printed, and downloaded into a pdf format to add to Microsoft OneDrive. Ultimately the Microsoft OneDrive folder was deleted, and all data were moved to secure folder on a password protected Dropbox (2008), and printed copies were secured in a locked file cabinet in the lead researcher's office.

Data Analysis

After careful transcription of the interview, focus group, and planning meeting recordings, all qualitative data (e.g., transcripts, documents, and field notes) were entered into the research database in a Microsoft Excel sheet. Informed by critical theory applied through a disability lens, a deductive approach was employed by using two propositions and one rival proposition:

1. Collaborative frameworks define each person's role, clarify the purpose of the time in general education and draw on the strengths of each team member to create more engaging inclusion for the student.
2. Collaborative frameworks use the strengths of the team, creating a positive experience with inclusion for each team member.
3. Rival proposition: Collaborative frameworks are cumbersome, create unnecessary work and meetings regarding a student who would best be served in a segregated setting, and which burden the IEP team, causing perceptions to, at best, remain the same, and at worst, worsen due to the additional burden of meetings and work.

Propositions were developed out of the current body of literature related to inclusion and collaborative frameworks, and the historical view of inclusion as well. These served to calibrate the data collection around the purpose of the research and formed a basis for the deductive codes used in analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2009). A data point was defined as a phrase, sentence, or 1-2 sentences together that contained information that associated with a proposition or

the rival proposition. Using the propositions as the primary lens, qualitative data were reduced to 1,105 data points at the beginning of analysis.

From this initial organization, we conducted four rounds of coding initiated by the lead researcher and reviewed, at each round, by research team members. At the end of each round, codes were collaboratively agreed upon through discussion and shared interpretation (Saldana, 2021). For round one of coding, the propositions and rival proposition were used to pattern match and to develop notes alongside the deductive coding. Round two focused on organizing the data by the phase of intervention: pre-intervention, implementation of the intervention, and post intervention. Analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data comprised round three, matching qualitative data to the three factors measured by the TATIS: Perspective on Student in inclusion (POS), Belief in the Efficacy of Inclusion (BEI), and Beliefs about Professional Roles and Responsibilities (PFR). Finally, the analysis from the first three rounds of coding was then used for explanation building in round four (Yin, 2009). Throughout data collection and analysis, analytic memos were used to bridle bias, as well as annotate any language which pertained to the propositions or other patterns that emerged (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

TATIS Analysis

As the surveys took two separate measurements from the same sample, a paired-samples *t*-test was the chosen statistical test to establish if the two means collected from the same sample differed significantly (Fields, 2024). In the context of this work, it represents the difference of two compared raw score means – either pretest and posttest, or mild-to-moderate disabilities (MMD) and moderate-to-extensive support needs (ESN). The raw score means from both tests were entered into JASP, University of Amsterdam’s open-source statistical analysis software (Wagenmakers, 2018). The *t*-test provided quantitative data on the perspectives of the IEP team members regarding inclusion, specifically, the individual factors measured in the TATIS.

Analyses were limited to raw score results due to the alteration of the survey, including reserve scoring for the belief in efficacy of inclusion factor, to test for statistical significance. The individual answers and rankings of scores were then used to compare to qualitative data.

Trustworthiness and Validity

While trustworthiness is often a concept used with qualitative research, Yin (2009) offers the idea that validity, as measured through construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability, is appropriate for case studies. In

this case study, there was use of an identified and defined specific intervention (i.e., a collaborative framework), applied to a specific group of students (i.e., those with extensive support needs). Use of multiple methods of data collection also strengthened the construct validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2009). Additionally, the use of quantitative data to inform the analysis of the qualitative data provided clarity of what is being measured to generate themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2009). Internal validity was addressed through pattern matching, addressing rival explanations, explanation building, and logic models in this research's design (Yin, 2009). External validity was addressed through replication logic across all cases, with the specificity of design and logic, making this research replicable (Yin, 2009).

Bias was bridled with reflective memos and applying the principal researcher's lens as a special education teacher, special education instructional coach, general education teacher, and parent of children with disabilities. The creation of a case study database, which contains copies of all transcripts, audio recordings, documents and memos is proof of research and provides a foundation for reliability for this study.

Results

Both quantitative and qualitative analysis indicated that, across all cases, there were shifts in perspectives surrounding inclusion, and that participants' perspectives did not match their practices. Qualitative themes reflect perceptions about why students should or should not be included, the complexities of effective collaboration, and conflicting views of differentiation.

TATIS Results

There was no statistical significance found between pre-test and post-test perspectives on inclusion (see Table 2). This would indicate that the coaching intervention had no significant impact on their perspectives on inclusion.

Table 2

Total TATIS Mean Raw Comparison Pre-Test vs Post-Test

Degree of Disability	Pre-test		Post-test		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
MMD	38.67	7.21	38.33	10.21	0.136	8	0.895
ESN	43.44	7.59	46.11	8.67	-1.115	8	0.297

Note. MMD= mild to moderate disabilities, ESN = moderate to extensive support needs

There was a statistically significant difference in attitudes towards inclusion of students with MMD versus those with ESN (see Table 3).

Table 3

Total TATIS Mean Raw Score Comparison Mild to Moderate vs Moderate to Extensive

Timing	MMD		ESN		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Pre-test	38.67	7.21	43.44	7.59	-3.482	8	0.008
Post-test	38.33	10.21	46.11	8.67	-4.282	8	0.003

Note. MMD= mild to moderate disabilities, ESN = Moderate to extensive support need

That difference suggests more inclusive attitudes are held towards students with MMD than ESN; a fact that did not change from pretest to posttest. Raw score analysis did show that participants saw themselves as more inclusive than their practice indicated.

Qualitative Findings

Analysis revealed three themes that formed the perspectives of the IEP team regarding inclusion: 1) Placement-shifting perspectives about inclusion and segregation, 2) Collaboration – it's more than communication, and 3) Differentiation – conflicting views on materials, roles regarding modifications, and curriculum focus.

Placement- Shifting Perspectives about Inclusion and Segregation

While there was no statistically significant shift towards or away from more inclusive perspectives as measured by the TATIS, there were shifts in perspective for why students should be segregated or included. Before the intervention, the conversations regarding segregation or inclusion focused on negative student behaviors, such as aggression and disruption, and the safety of other students in the classroom. For example, trauma reactions, caused by aggressive behaviors of students with extensive support needs were mentioned by several participants. Kathryn, from the 5th grade case, shared an example from her recent past:

We even had like another student that was sitting close to that student drop a book and I had a student get up [and turn] around. Like their first reaction was that the other student was throwing the book, even though it wasn't that student, right? Like they started to duck rather than stop and realize they were the only one so kind of that... impact of not knowing what's going to happen next.

Resources emerged as topics across all cases, with decisions regarding placement contingent upon what is best regarding the use of district money. As conversations progressed, team members began to express what they thought were the guiding principles behind placement decisions such as money, space, and “the squeaky wheel” (i.e., a term one participant used for teachers who were the most outspoken about having a student removed from their classroom). In her individual interview, Lisa, from the 3rd grade case shared ideas that were echoed across all the cases:

To be honest, I think that’s tied to money. Always. A paraprofessional has a salary tied to them and being in a unit has the money amount tied to it, and if somebody is selected to go to a particular school or behavior school that has a money amount tied to it. I think that it is often about money, and it should not be, unfortunately, but I think that it is what it is. And I don’t think that we lowly teachers have any decision making in that.

After the intervention, reasons to segregate or include were based on specialized instruction, especially in life skills, and prosocial behavior and relationships in the general education classroom. However, a marked shift in conversation was that behavior became a reason to include extensive support needs after the intervention. This was reflected in references to students with extensive support needs more often displaying expected behaviors than general education students and in the strategic use of paraprofessionals, especially in 4th grade case. Strategic use of paraprofessionals was cited by several participants. As discussed, in one focus group. Beth and June noted the behavior support that could be provided by a paraprofessional and Patty responded:

Well, I’ve even asked...I’m like certain kids are not the role models. If you put them with me, I mean, there’s a certain few that will be better because Allison is not acting up... sometimes ... like when we go to specials, I can say, ‘Okay, don’t put this kid with this kid. So, I think that helps [behavior].

The conversations after the intervention focused much more on why students with extensive support needs should be included, citing academics, social skills, and peer friendships as reasons to include (see Table 3).

Table 3

Reasons to Segregate and Include Students with ESN

	Before the Intervention	After the Intervention
Reasons to Segregate Students with ESN	Student distracting others Aggressive behaviors Money and convenience Poor quality of inclusion	Instruction of life skills Specialized breaks Academic needs IEP goals

	GE teachers uncomfortable with ESN	GE teachers as antecedents for behaviors
Reasons to Include Students with ESN	GE students model expected behaviors GE students learn to interact with ESN Exposure to academic curriculum	ESN model expected behavior for GE students Friendships with peers Goals for social skill acquisition for all Academic goals

Note. GE = General education teacher; IEP = Individualized Education Program; ESN = Moderate to extensive support need

When considered with the descriptive data from the survey for individual participants and cases, themes emerged around collaboration and differentiation.

Collaboration – It's More Than Communication

Perspectives on collaboration remained the same throughout, which aligns with answers from the PRF section of the TATIS. Throughout all the transcripts, all participants stated that they thought they worked well collaboratively, which was in line with their mean score on the PFR section of 2.19 pre-test score out of seven, and a 2.28 mean on the post-test (with 1 being the most collaborative answers). However, when asked about collaboration, the answers always focused on functional communication, such as testing groups and schedule changes or texting about attendance.

Evidence that collaboration was lacking took several forms in addition to their conversations focusing on functional communication. The absence of a working relationship between the general education teacher and special education teacher created a void that the paraprofessionals had to fill. Across all cases, before the intervention, paraprofessionals referenced teaching their students lessons they created "I mean when we're in the room she's doing what they're doing, or you know, I modify it. She is not doing as much. I will narrow it down to what she does." However, coaching revealed that Patty was not only reducing the size, but often changing the lesson material to something she thought would be more accessible to Allison. This resulted in a reliance on the paraprofessional, Patty, in ways that June noted were not appropriate to her position, with Patty directing the instruction of Allison's use of augmentative communication, written expression and speech-to-text technology in the general education classroom. As June shared in a focus group, she was aware this was not appropriate practice but was not sure what options were available as she simply did not have the time: "I

know I rely heavily on the paraprofessionals to support me. Maybe I shouldn't, but I do because they are in there and I'm not". As a result, situations such as Patty determining argumentative writing was too difficult for Allison occurred in which she then applied the strategies from the Quick Plan to a writing topic she came up with on "What I did this Weekend."

In one focus group, the absence of the IS in inclusion led to the discussion that paraprofessionals should be trained on material modifications, the state standards, and be a part of the IEP creation and meetings, rather than their role of providing accommodations in the general classroom. Across all cases, participants indicated that they knew that this was not best practice for using a paraprofessional. As noted by Kathryn, GE teacher from the 5th grade case: "There's not enough time for us to explain everything they need to understand, to work with the kids because they're not licensed teachers. I mean, and they, let's be real, do just as much as us every day..."

The paraprofessionals, too, mentioned the lack of collaboration. Across all cases, before the intervention, paraprofessionals indicated routinely walking into general education classrooms without any knowledge of what was planned on a regular basis. At the beginning of the study, the general education teachers shared their lesson plans with the principal researcher via Google Drive. However, they only shared them with the special education teachers after being coached to do so. Additionally, none of the special education teachers had access to the district's ELA and math curriculum. Planning sessions or looking at curriculum only happened when engaging in a coaching session, which was during the time of the intervention. The paraprofessionals noted the difference collaborative planning made and expressed desire for this to be the norm. Kate, from the 4th grade case, noted the impact of communication and collaboration on her experience during the intervention:

I think, like, the gen ed giving, ...the special ed teachers, kind of their curriculum or what they're doing ahead of time so that we can prepare... But I think that would be the biggest thing is ... the resources have to be given [to me] first.

Obstacles to collaboration were also evident in the data, specifically in the areas of schedules, staffing, and caseloads. If a true definition of collaboration was applied, collaborating in all the domains of instruction, curriculum development, assessment and progress monitoring, it would be expected to happen with as many as ten different general education teachers per special education teacher (Sisti & Roblado, 2021). This is because each special education teacher is required to cover 3-5 grade levels, and each grade level has 2-3 core subject teachers. The schedules for the special education teachers were so hectic, Jada from the 5th grade case stated:

It goes back to the communication piece. I'm like when you have three to give grade levels... I would love to communicate with you guys better, but I basically start the year with, "Here's an IEP. Here's my phone number. If you need anything, let me know" because there is just not enough time. She continued to share that their schedules are so hectic, forms of communication included text, email, lunchroom, and talking "when I'm in the [bathroom] stall."

The unrealistic nature of the schedule and workload impacted the relationships need to effectively collaborate. As communication opened due to the intervention, relationships between the general education teacher and the paraprofessional strengthened. Once lines of communication were opened at the Student Support Plan meetings, the paraprofessionals and general education teachers began to communicate in the absence of the special education teacher. This communication, which came closest to true collaboration, happened throughout the day as the paraprofessionals saw the general education teachers.

Differentiation – Conflicting Views on Materials, Roles Regarding Modifications, and Curriculum Focus

What to teach these students and what materials to use were questions that came up in conversations across all cases before the intervention. While those questions were addressed in the Student Support Plans and the Quick Plans, there were still a multitude of perspectives on what was "supposed" to be taught as the intervention progressed. Kathryn, the general education teacher in the 5th grade case, expressed concerns over whether academic materials, even when the student showed the ability to engage in the lessons, were in their best interest, or if life skills of some type would be better. In a Quick Plan meeting early in the intervention, Beth, the special education teacher from the 4th grade case, expressed confusion over the need to engage in the effort to modify general education curricula, since the student was assessed via the alternate assessment based on the extended standards. Historically, she had sent file folder games from her classroom for Jason to work on while in math class. The perspective of the team members for the 4th grade case was that the only point of value was the students' math IEP goal. From the 3rd grade case, Lisa and June (general education and special education teachers) expressed the importance of Allison engaging in the standards in both the Student Support Plan meeting and the subsequent Quick Plan Meetings, however, in class coaching during a fidelity check revealed that Patty was modifying the work to a rigor that was less than the extended standards when she believed it was too difficult for Allison.

Those perspectives also emerged in interviews and the focus group after the coaching intervention as well. IEP team members expressed some concerns over whether academic materials, even when the student showed the ability to

engage in the lessons, were in their best interest, or if life skills would be better, as Kate stated to the agreement of everyone during a focus group, "... kids with disabilities also need to be taught like life skills and other things like that... things that you couldn't do in a gen. ed. room." There was also dissonance between verbal support for access to grade level content while modifying the work to lower grade level content. For instance, while the 5th grade team originally agreed to Kevin working on the grade level standards in class during the creation of Kevin's Student Support Plan, the general education teacher and paraprofessional insisted, via an email, his class warmup packet be drawn from materials two grade levels lower.

Kathryn stated in a planning email: "I am also torn, because I am wondering if he is getting much out of the actual standards/curriculum at grade level." Part of what shaped the perspective of curricular focus was the idea that students were not "on level" with their peers, which emerged as a phrase or part of a similar phrase (such as "appropriate level" or "grade level") across all cases 28 times. That concern was voiced despite students in full inclusion, both those with IEPs and those without, showing similar standardized test scores to those with ESN. General education teachers and paraprofessionals viewed the students by comparing them with grade level standards rather than modifying grade level content. Even in instances where the general education teacher modified the work, it often involved presenting work based on lower grade level standards.

Discussion

The themes that emerged in the analysis of the data present opportunities for discussion, implications, and recommendations for teacher preparation programs.

Collaboration

The overall take-away in these case studies was that what the participants perceived that collaboration was truly only communication, even though the answers to the TATIS items regarding collaboration showed that the participants saw themselves as collaborative. The literature suggests that individualized accommodations and modifications created and carried out by team members in defined roles with well-designed and implemented progress monitoring are the best practices in collaboration (Fisher et al., 2003; Lingo et al., 2011). Additionally, it should be happening in all domains of a student's educational experience: assessment, curriculum development, instruction, and progress monitoring (Sisti & Robledo, 2021). While during the coaching intervention, much was done to coach the paraprofessionals on providing the accommodations there was little evidence of the teams embracing accommodations beyond sending

a paraprofessional with each student, and providing visual behavior supports. As evidenced in the transcripts, curriculum development was not addressed without the coach's support across all cases. In the classrooms, across the cases, the paraprofessional was delivering instruction directly to the student. Progress monitoring was another area where practice did not line up with the literature's definition of collaboration, as the coach had to direct the paraprofessionals to turn in the student's work samples to the general education teachers.

The workload for the intervention specialists and general education teachers played a part in the lack of collaboration, which ties back to themes seen in the literature (Bamiteko et al., 2017; Gal et al., 2010; Monsen et al., 2014; Polloway et al., 2019). However, workload and resources were only two parts of this perspective on collaboration. The priority collaboration takes, both at a district and classroom level, may well be reflective of the attitudes surrounding why the students are in general education classes at all, and may reflect a desire on each part to maintain control over their domain rather than collaborate.

Differentiation

What to teach students with ESN and with what materials were addressed in the themes as well. It was expected that the use of Quick Plans would address this issue, and it seemed to do so on a superficial level. However, from early on in the intervention, concern was expressed as to why students with extensive support needs were having materials modified from the state learning standards as opposed to materials based on life skills and IEP goals. Life skills emerged early in the field of special education and were applied to all students with disabilities (Osgood, 2005). While this approach has limited peer review research, and its efficacy has never been fully established, its popularity among certain groups of parents and teachers has created a lasting impact on teacher perspective (Gilmour, 2018). This was evidenced in this study, when teachers expressed this concern about the students with ESN engaging in curriculum that would not benefit them as much as life skills.

How to modify the work was another area of insight from this study. The participants were genuinely concerned about the students not being on the same "level" academically as their typical peers, thus making it necessary to create different work for them based on lower grade levels. Even though modifying grade level work was modeled to them, and created with the coach, the belief that the students required lower grade level materials persisted. This is an area where the research lined up with their perceptions regarding biases, but the evidence regarding student learning did not. It has been established that maintaining expectations for grade level curriculum, but modifying that curriculum, produces greater growth and retention in knowledge and language acquisition, student

engagement in learning, and academic outcomes as measured by standardized testing in multiple studies (Cole et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2007; Cosier et al., 2013; Gee et al., 2020).

Implications

Implications of this research support the idea that teachers are truly not prepared for collaboration. They are not prepared for the number of people they will need to collaborate and co-teach with, or what it may look like in their context once in the field. While ideally co-teaching is one general education teacher and one special education teacher, co-teaching often happens across grade levels, and across classrooms in one grade level as seen in this case study. An additional implication is that there is a lack of administrative expectation for true collaboration.

Life skills are still seen as a viable – possibly preferable – educational option. Even students in full inclusion are sometimes viewed as better candidates for life skills than inclusion because they are doing “lower grade level work” (which is being given to them by the teacher who is modifying in that manner). IEP roles do not indicate who is to modify content and carry out accommodations. Consequently, paraprofessionals, who at best have an associate's degree, are providing far too much of the modification and supports to these students. Students with the most needs have their general education directed by the staff with the least training. Teachers, both special education and general education, are equipped to modify curriculum.

Recommendations

Teacher candidates should be prepared to provide meaningful inclusion where the student is actively engaged and showing anticipated growth in the curriculum and IEP goals. The recommendations outlined in this paper focus on how teacher preparation programs can enhance their candidates understanding of teaching children with disabilities.

Replace Life Skills with Pivotal Skills

Teacher preparation programs need to change the discussion surrounding life skills. The concept of life skills as a curricular focus has been present since the beginning of public special education (Osgood, 2005). This is not to say that students do not need training in activities of daily living, but that there is a time and place in their education for that to happen. Teacher preparation programs need to teach pre-service teachers about the transition plan portion of the IEP, in a way

that helps them understand how this fits into their students' education. IDEA mandates that IEPs have a transition section starting at age 16 (at age 14 in many states), which guides the student's education until graduation focusing on activities of independent living, vocation, and post-secondary education.

Foundationally, teacher preparation programs need to shift the model of education to the concept of universal pivotal skills rather than functional skills or life skills (Ruppar et al., 2023). Pivotal skills are universal skills, identified by universities and employers, that all students need to master such as self-determination, social skills, vocational skills, core academics, and communication. Pivotal skills form the foundation of all education, including the specialized supports and transition planning within the IEP (Ruppar et al., 2023). This concept of pivotal skills needs to be taught to all general education and special education teacher candidates as the way to view universal education and its relationship to special education.

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a growing movement, and in many instances, it has been adopted as an idea and is in the process of being implemented into practice (Ralabate et al., 2012). UDL is based on the idea that all lessons should have multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (CAST, 2024). For UDL to be a reality in all classrooms, it needs to be embedded across all courses of study in preparing teachers and administrators. One first step in doing this is to embed the structure of UDL into the college required lesson plan format by placing a table in the lesson plan to show engagement, representation, and expression. While differentiation may be mentioned in a lesson plan, this idea places universal differentiation at the beginning of planning the lesson, rather than trying to take an idea and then differentiating it. While UDL will not make the lesson automatically differentiated for all, it will cover many students, making individualized differentiation a smaller and more manageable task. This will require training professors and instructors who are not special educators in basic principles of UDL or establishing co-teaching in the methodology courses as a matter of practice.

Collaboration Across all Teacher Method Courses

When preparing teacher candidates, it is important to teach collaboration, specifically across all the domains of education, and embedded into content and methods courses for both general education and special education teacher candidates (Sisti & Roblato, 2021). In differing methods courses, teacher candidates learn about best practices for different subject matter. In addition to

content or subject specific best practices, teacher candidates must also be equipped with evidence-based practices for teaching students with disabilities (Spooner et al., 2012). When this collaboration between subject-specific method courses and special education emphasis courses happen, we set up future general and special education teachers to be better equipped in providing appropriate academic supports and evidence-based strategies for teaching students with disabilities.

Teacher candidates should be taught the fundamentals of collaboration as a manner in which to work, meaning teaching about mindsets surrounding voluntary participation, parity, having shared goals and responsibility, sharing accountability for outcomes, and sharing resources (Friend & Bursuck, 2018). Collaboration should be taught to intersect across all domains of education: instruction, curriculum development, assessment and progress monitoring (Sisti & Roblato, 2021). Introducing collaborative frameworks as a method of organizing and guiding collaboration can begin in teacher candidates first exceptionalities class and become an expectation for planning throughout their course of study.

Direction Instruction in Modification of Curriculum

Teacher preparation programs need to prepare both general education and special education teacher candidates in how to modify curriculum. Programs need to equip teachers to understand the difference between skills and content, and that IEP goals do not form the basis of a student's education. There is a need for the student to access the general curriculum, and creating access requires that all aspects of instruction are addressed ahead of time.

All teacher candidates need to be taught how to break down a standard, or use state-provided extended standards, considering modifications and accommodations. For example, Kentucky's reading standard for literature (RL 3.1) states, "Ask and answer questions and make and support logical inferences to construct meaning from the text" (KDE, 2019, p. 123). Kentucky's *Breaking Down a Reading & Writing Standard Guide* directs teachers to first look at the goal by graduation that a standard is building towards. Then to look at necessary background knowledge and skills, and to delve into the multidimensionality of the standard through analysis of content and comprehension (KDE, 2025). However, when modifying a standard, more work is involved. Alternate Assessment Targets can be used to reduce parts of the standard with specific guidance to what is expected for assessment. In the case of RL 3.1, the Alternate Assessment Target is: "Limit full standard to answering questions and making logical inferences to construct meaning (excludes support)" (KDE, 2019, p. 123). A teacher candidate can use this to identify the most fundamental skill, and then identify all 5 skills covered (i.e., ask questions, answer questions, make logical inferences, support

logical inferences, and construction meaning from the text), and how to prioritize the skills or arrange them by complexity. Methods courses need to address how to plan for these modifications, including how to scaffold each of the skills in the standard, through such strategies as mini-lessons, pre-teaching, and systematic review. Finally, they need to plan on how they will apply accommodations to the text they use when working on this standard. Will they reduce the complexity of the text? Will they reduce the length of the text? Will they provide a picture aided version of the text?

Administrator Preparation

According to Casale et al. (2024) responsibility for the oversight of IDEA compliance at the school level is dependent on principals and assistant principals. Therefore, administrators must be prepared through their administrator preparation programs to know the federal law that governs special education, IDEA. Not only is having intimate knowledge of IDEA important but course work for administrators should also equip future leaders to support and require the UDL and true collaboration (Billingsley et al., 2017; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). The literature indicates that principals, in particular, play a pivotal role in producing professional learning opportunities that lead to meaningful inclusion, and yet, professional development and principal leadership in this area has been shown to be insufficient (McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). Inclusion needs to be a part of strategic planning for school districts; a part of designing curriculum, building school culture, and building teacher capacity to promote high expectations for students with disabilities, develop safe and positive learning environments, and promote effective instructional practices (Billingsley et al., 2017). The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) point towards this type of inclusion specifically in Standard 5: Community of Care and Support for All Students which states “Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 13).

UDL and collaboration need to be embedded as core aspects to all the courses necessary for training administrators, so that budgets and schedules are set with collaboration in mind (CAST, 2024). Administrators need to be taught to look beyond state requirements for special education and intervention specialist caseloads and look at the number of grade levels they are required to cover. This means understanding what financial resources are needed to fully fund inclusive education with appropriate staff to promote not only effective instructional practices, but to organize effective working conditions for staff (Billingsley et al., 2017). If administrators are not thinking about these issues, or do not have this

depth of knowledge about special education, they are unable to provide the support necessary for the teachers to collaborate.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the individual nature of each IEP team. The unique nature of each students' needs created a different context and work, in addition to the perspectives and experiences that each team member brought to the team. A confounding variable in any research on inclusive practices is the quality of instruction. This research did not look at the quality of instruction, but only adherence to the plan. Finally, a limitation to the application of the Teacher Attitude Toward Inclusion Scale (TATIS) is created by altering the rating scale beyond the original scope in which it was created and tested. The alterations made impact the psychometric properties of the instrument and must be considered. Additionally, the small sample size impacts the validity of the statistical findings. These limitations were acceptable for this research, as the use of the instrument was to reflect on the attitudes of the participants, and it is important that the data gathered from the TATIS only serves to enlighten the qualitative findings, rather than being interpreted to be the foundation for the findings.

Conclusion

By focusing teacher and administrator preparation on UDL principles, collaboration, and modification of materials as a foundation of teacher preparation, teacher candidates can be equipped to instruct in all the contexts in which they find themselves and better meet the needs of our diverse population.

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