

Including High School Students With Severe Disabilities in General Education Classes: Perspectives of General and Special Educators, Paraprofessionals, and Administrators

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Increasing the participation of youth with severe disabilities in general education has remained a consistent and prominent focus of legislative, policy, and research initiatives. We examined the perceptions of high school staff regarding the goals, barriers, benefits, outcomes, and supports associated with including adolescents with severe disabilities in general education classes. We found that general and special educators, paraprofessionals, and administrators both converged and diverged in their evaluations of different aspects of general education participation. Despite broad agreement regarding the benefits of and instructional priorities in general education classrooms, stakeholders differed significantly in their perceptions of barriers associated with including students with disabilities in general education classes at their high schools.

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The importance of inclusive educational services for students with severe disabilities has received strong articulation from a variety of sources. Legislative initiatives beginning with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142) and culminating with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act Amendments of 2004 (PL 108-446) have called on schools to serve students with disabilities with their general education classmates to the "maximum extent appropriate." Increased participation of students with disabilities within the general curriculum

also is implicit in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In addition, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) challenged schools to "provide effective teaching methods and ensure that those with additional needs benefit from strong teaching and instructional methods that should be offered to a child through general education" (p. 9). The policy statements of several professional organizations also have advocated for the educational inclusion of students with severe disabilities (e.g., American Association on Mental Retardation/The Arc, 2002; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2000; TASH, 2000). Furthermore, research documenting the social, academic, and behavioral benefits associated with inclusion in general education classes is accumulating steadily (e.g., Carter & Hughes, 2005; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Ryndak & Fisher, 2003).

Despite this support, the adoption of inclusive educational practices—in which students with disabilities are full-time members of general education classrooms and provided the appropriate supports, modifications, and services necessary to learn—by schools across the country remains slow, sporadic, and uneven. Recent data indicate that the majority of students with severe disabilities spend a limited amount of their school day attending general education classes. Specifically, 72% of students with multiple disabilities, 58% of students with mental retardation, and 60% of students with autism spend the majority (i.e., 60% or more) of their school day outside the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). These educational placement patterns have not experienced a dramatic shift over the past 15 years (Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Archwamety, 2002). Moreover, students with severe disabilities participate at diminished rates in extra-curricular activities (Wagner, Cadwallader, & Marder,

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2003) and often remain isolated from their general education peers in noninstructional school settings (Carter, Hughes, Guth, & Copeland, 2005). At the secondary level, the participation of students with severe disabilities in general education classes becomes increasingly restricted (U.S. Department of Education). Relative to elementary grades, students with severe disabilities spend substantially more time outside the general education classroom in high schools.

What accounts for the apparent disconnect between recommended and actual educational practices in the area of including students with severe disabilities in general education classes? What factors influence the seeming reluctance of schools to implement more inclusive service delivery models? Implementation of educational practices certainly relies heavily on school staff's acceptance of those practices. Therefore, failure to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the value of an educational approach could hinder efforts to increase general education participation and lead to practitioners' rejection of a particular service delivery model (Schwartz & Baer, 1991; Snell, 2003). A clearer understanding of the perceptions of school staff regarding the goals, process, and outcomes associated with including students with disabilities in general education classes has the potential to yield information regarding program viability and offer greater understanding of factors that may influence educators' placement and programmatic decisions. Although a number of studies have been undertaken to this end (e.g., Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996), additional research is needed to address several limitations of this literature.

First, educators' perceptions regarding including students in general education classrooms are likely to be context specific (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Grade level and disability label are two salient factors that may have an influence on the perceptions of practitioners. Relative to elementary classrooms, high school classrooms are characterized by increased academic complexity, faster instructional pacing, lecture-dominated instructional arrangements, heightened teacher demands, and greater expectations for student independence (e.g., Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). Prior research has identified significant differences in the perceptions of secondary school staff relative to elementary school staff in such areas as curricular focus (e.g., Sands, Adams, & Stout, 1995), classroom expectations (e.g., Lane, Wehby, & Cooley, 2006), and instructional priorities (e.g., Zhang, Wehmeyer, & Chen, 2005). However, investigations of educators' perceptions concerning inclusion in general education have largely focused on preschool, elementary, and middle school staff (e.g., Cook, 2004; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996), with less attention directed toward high school staff.

Research also suggests that educator perceptions may be influenced by student characteristics such as disability label (e.g., Soodak, Podell, & Lehman, 1998) and

severity of disability (e.g., Cook, 2001). As a result, information must be obtained that focuses on educational practices related specifically to supporting the general education participation of students with severe disabilities. However, limited research has addressed the perceptions of educators regarding the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in high school classrooms (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002; Hodge, Ammah, Casebolt, Lamaster, & O'Sullivan, 2004; Janney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes, 1995; Smith, 1997, 2000; York & Tundidor, 1995).

Second, transitioning from a mainstreaming to an inclusive service delivery model is a school-wide effort, dependent on the support and efforts of multiple staff, including administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals. If these key players are expected to actually implement those recommended practices that characterize quality, inclusive schooling, it is critical that the perspectives of a broad range of major stakeholders be sampled. In addition to the perceptions of general and special educators—the stakeholder groups on which most attention has focused—the values, beliefs, and commitments of administrators may have an important influence on how educational services are delivered within a school (Praisner, 2003; Riehl, 2000). However, research has primarily addressed the perceptions of administrators at the elementary level. Similarly, little is known about the perceptions of paraprofessionals regarding the feasibility of and outcomes associated with supporting the general education class participation of students with severe disabilities (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; O'Conner & French, 1998). Yet, their degree of support for this educational approach certainly impacts actual practices, as they often are the primary direct support provider to students with severe disabilities in these classrooms (e.g., Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001).

Third, school staff may hold divergent perspectives regarding the value of including students in general education classrooms and the outcomes associated with such participation (Pearman, Huang, Barnhart, & Mellblom, 1992). Research directly comparing the perspectives of general and special educators, paraprofessionals, and administrators would yield important information about whether these educators share similar or divergent perceptions regarding educational practices for students with severe disabilities and might shed light on factors inhibiting general education participation. Although researchers have compared some of these groups and identified important differences in their perceptions (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999; Downing, Eichinger, & Williams, 1997), only York and Tundidor (1995) examined the perceptions of all four of these stakeholder groups regarding the general education participation of students with severe disabilities at the high school level. Because their study employed qualitative

methodology and did not report findings separately by stakeholder group, additional research is needed to extend their findings.

Fourth, supporting the general education participation of students with disabilities requires a multi-component approach to service delivery, impacting educators and students along many dimensions. Attitudinal studies addressing inclusion are numerous, but most have focused on broad evaluations of educational services rather than on individual components of the inclusion process (e.g., Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Smith, 2000). Additional research is needed that extends beyond general attitudes regarding including students in general education classes and offers a detailed understanding of practitioners' perceptions of the expectations, barriers, benefits, risks, and support needs related to providing educational services for students with severe disabilities in these settings, particularly at the high school level.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of high school staff regarding the goals, barriers, benefits, outcomes, and supports associated with including adolescents with severe disabilities in general education classrooms. Specifically, we examined the perceptions of general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals working in 11 high schools within an urban school district. In addition, we investigated the extent to which these stakeholders shared similar or divergent evaluations of multiple aspects of educational services within their schools.

Method

Setting

Participants in this study were employed at all 11 comprehensive high schools that comprised a large, urban school district ($n = 76,374$ students). Student enrollment at each of the high schools ranged from 896 to 2250 students ($M = 1444$, $SD = 501$). Mean ethnicity of students across schools was 53% African American ($SD = 18\%$), 38% Caucasian ($SD = 15\%$), and 10% other ethnicities ($SD = 7\%$). According to district level data, 49% of students were eligible to receive free or reduced meals.

Two hundred and eleven students with severe disabilities (e.g., moderate to profound intellectual disabilities, autism, multiple disabilities), ages 15–19, were enrolled across all 11 high schools. None of these high schools utilized a full inclusion service delivery model (i.e., all students with disabilities enrolled full-time in age-appropriate general education classrooms). At the time of the study, 38% of these students were enrolled in one or more general education courses ($M = 1.7$ courses; range, 1–5 courses) during their school day. Students received the remainder of their educational services in community-based instruction or job training

locations (e.g., local businesses, restaurants, or community programs) and special education resource or self-contained classrooms.

Participants

General education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and school administrators employed in all district high schools participated in this study ($n = 100$).

General Education Teachers

Thirty-six general education teachers of classrooms in which students with severe disabilities were enrolled participated in this study. These teachers had an average of 17.0 years ($SD = 12.5$ years) of teaching experience, with the majority being female (61%) and Caucasian (69%). These teachers reported having an average of 3.5 years ($SD = 8$ years) of experience teaching students with severe disabilities in their classrooms and 64% held a graduate degree in education. At the time of the study, the courses taught by these teachers in which students with severe disabilities were enrolled included the following: (a) vocational (37%; e.g., keyboarding, culinary arts), (b) core academic (23%; e.g., English, history, algebra), (c) physical education (23%), and (d) related arts (17%; e.g., photography, choir) classes.

Special Education Teachers

Twenty-nine special education teachers who had students with severe disabilities on their class rolls participated in this study. These teachers had an average of 11.0 years ($SD = 6.5$ years) of classroom experience, with the majority being female (72%) and Caucasian (72%). The majority (72%) of teachers held a graduate degree in special education. At the time of the study, 61% of special education teachers had at least one of their students with severe disabilities enrolled in general education classes, whereas the remaining 39% provided educational services to students exclusively in community-based instruction sites or special education classrooms.

Paraprofessionals

Nineteen paraprofessionals working under the supervision of special education teachers to provide educational assistance to students with severe disabilities in general education or special education classrooms participated in this study. These paraprofessionals had an average of 14.8 years ($SD = 11.1$ years) of classroom experience, with the majority being female (95%) and African American (53%). A high school diploma was the highest level of education for all of the paraprofessionals.

Administrators

The 16 administrators participating in this study had an average of 14.6 years ($SD = 7.3$ years) of classroom experience and 5.4 years ($SD = 6.9$ years) of administrative experience. Half were Caucasian and the

majority were male (56%). These administrators were either principals (63%) or assistant principals (37%) at their respective schools and all held a master's (38%) or doctoral degree (62%).

Procedures

During the last 2 months of the spring semester, all special education teachers who had students with severe disabilities on their class rosters at all 11 comprehensive high schools in the school district were contacted in person. Special education teachers were asked to identify all students with severe disabilities on their class rosters who currently were enrolled in one or more general education classes and the general education teachers responsible for those classes. Special education teachers ($n = 31$), their paraprofessionals ($n = 41$), and the identified general education teachers ($n = 48$) were asked by research assistants to complete a questionnaire addressing various aspects of including students with severe disabilities in general education classes at their school. Administrators ($n = 18$) identified by the special education teachers as a principal or assistant principal who was familiar with special education services in their schools were approached and asked to complete similar questionnaires.

Research assistants provided respondents with a brief verbal and one-page written overview of the questionnaire and assurance that responses would remain confidential. All questionnaires were left with the respondents to be completed individually at a convenient time. Arrangements were made for a research assistant to return within 1 week to pick up completed questionnaires. Follow-up visits and phone calls were made to obtain unreturned questionnaires. Questionnaires were completed and returned by 75% of all general education teachers; 94% of all special education teachers; 46% of all paraprofessionals; and 89% of all administrators (representing 38% of all administrators in the 11 high schools).

Questionnaire

Questionnaire items were derived through a review of the literature addressing school staff member perceptions concerning general education participation and inclusive services for children and youth with severe disabilities. Examples of instructional priorities (e.g., Agran & Alper, 2000; Hanrahan, Goodman, & Rapagna, 1990), barriers to inclusion (e.g., Agran et al., 2002; Copeland et al., 2002), benefits of inclusion (e.g., Copeland et al., 2004; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999), risks associated with inclusion (e.g., McLeskey, Waldron, So, Swanson, & Loveland, 2001; Janzen, Wilgosh, & McDonald, 1995), and training/support needs of school staff (e.g., Werts, Wolery, Snyder, & Caldwell, 1996; Janney et al., 1995) identified in previous research were retained for potential inclusion in the questionnaire. These items were grouped according to topic

area (e.g., barriers, benefits, support needs), similar items were merged, and the most relevant items were used to create a preliminary draft of the questionnaire. This preliminary questionnaire subsequently was reviewed by six graduate students in special education and one university professor. Following revisions in content (e.g., wording clarification) and format (e.g., reduction in number of items), the questionnaires were distributed to general education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators. The questionnaire contained items addressing the following: (a) participant demographics, (b) general education classroom instructional priorities, (c) barriers to including students in general education classrooms, (d) risks associated with including students in general education classrooms, (e) training and supports related to including students in general education classrooms, and (f) benefits of including students in general education classrooms, as follows. In addition, respondents were provided space to add and rate additional items, if desired.

Participant Demographics

Respondents were asked to provide personal demographic information, including gender, ethnicity, years of teaching and/or administrative experience, areas of certification, and highest degree received. General education teachers also were asked to report how long they have had students with severe disabilities enrolled in their classes, including the current semester.

Classroom Instructional Priorities

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 10 instructional areas in general education classrooms separately for both (a) students with disabilities and (b) general education students at their school (see Table 1). Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert-type scale with poles marked *not at all important* (1) and *very important* (5).

Barriers

Respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which each of 13 items were barriers to including students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms at their school (see Table 2). Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert-type scale with poles marked *not at all a barrier* (1) and *significant barrier* (5).

Risks

The extent to which respondents perceived each of five items to be potential risks associated with including students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms was assessed (see Table 3). Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert-type scale with poles marked *not at all a risk* (1) and *significant risk* (5).

Benefits

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they judged each of 16 items to be a benefit associated

Table 1
Instructional Priorities for Students with Severe Disabilities and General Education Students by Respondent

Instructional areas	Group means (<i>SD</i>)								Group comparisons	
	G		S		P		A		SWD	GEN
	SWD	GEN	SWD	GEN	SWD	GEN	SWD	GEN		
Following classroom rules and procedures	4.7 (0.6)	4.9 (0.3)*	4.6 (0.8)	4.7 (0.5)	4.6 (1.0)	4.6 (0.8)	4.9 (0.3)	4.7 (0.8)	ns	ns
Learning responsibility and good work habits	4.6 (0.7)	4.7 (0.6)*	4.4 (1.0)	4.7 (0.6)	4.3 (1.3)	4.5 (1.2)	4.8 (0.5)	4.7 (0.8)	ns	ns
Developing skills for adult life	4.6 (0.6)	4.8 (0.5)*	4.5 (0.8)	4.7 (0.5)	4.5 (0.8)	4.7 (0.7)	4.9 (0.3)	4.8 (0.4)	ns	ns
Interacting socially with classmates	4.5 (0.7)	4.5 (0.7)	4.8 (0.6)	4.0 (1.0)*	4.7 (0.7)	4.5 (1.0)	4.8 (0.4)	4.7 (0.6)	ns	A > S
Acquiring citizenship skills	4.4 (0.8)	4.6 (0.7)	4.5 (0.7)	4.6 (0.7)	3.6 (1.5)	4.6 (0.6)*	4.6 (0.6)	4.8 (0.6)	A, S, G > P	ns
Actively participating in class	4.3 (0.8)	4.8 (0.4)*	4.0 (0.8)	4.5 (0.6)*	3.7 (1.3)	4.4 (1.2)*	4.4 (0.7)	4.6 (0.7)	ns	ns
Acquiring academic or vocational skills	4.1 (1.0)	4.6 (0.7)*	4.2 (0.9)	4.6 (0.7)*	3.7 (1.2)	4.5 (0.7)*	4.5 (0.5)	4.7 (0.6)	ns	ns
Learning course content	4.0 (1.0)	4.7 (0.5)*	2.9 (0.9)	4.7 (0.5)*	3.2 (1.3)	4.6 (1.0)*	3.9 (1.1)	4.6 (0.9)	A > S G > S, P	ns
Developing critical thinking	3.6 (1.1)	4.6 (0.7)*	3.1 (1.0)	4.7 (0.6)*	3.5 (1.2)	4.4 (1.1)*	3.9 (1.1)	4.6 (0.8)*	ns	ns
Completing homework and assignments	3.5 (1.3)	4.4 (1.1)*	3.0 (1.1)	4.4 (1.0)*	3.4 (1.5)	4.5 (1.0)*	3.8 (1.1)	4.4 (1.0)	ns	ns
Overall group means	4.2 (0.6)	4.7 (0.5)	4.1 (0.6)	4.6 (0.5)	3.9 (0.9)	4.5 (0.6)	4.4 (0.4)	4.7 (0.6)		

Note: G = general education teacher, S = special education teacher, P = paraprofessional, A = administrator; SWD = students with severe disabilities, GEN = general education students; 1 = not at all important, 5 = very important.

* $p < .05$.

with including students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms at their school (see Table 4). Items addressed benefits for students with disabilities ($n = 5$), general education classmates ($n = 6$),

and the respondents themselves ($n = 5$). Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert-type scale with poles marked *not at all a benefit* (1) and *significant benefit* (5).

Table 2
Barriers to Inclusion by Group

Barrier	Group means (<i>SD</i>)				Group comparisons	Overall item means (<i>SD</i>)
	G	S	P	A		
Lack of personnel to support students in general education classrooms	3.3 (1.3)	4.0 (1.1)	3.7 (1.0)	3.6 (1.3)	ns	3.6 (1.3)
Limited time to collaborate with (special or general) education teachers	3.4 (1.0)	3.6 (1.3)	3.6 (1.0)	3.8 (1.2)	ns	3.6 (1.1)
General education teachers' lack of knowledge of students' IEP goals	3.1 (1.3)	3.9 (1.1)	4.2 (0.9)	3.4 (1.0)*	P > G	3.6 (1.2)
Behavior challenges of students with disabilities	3.1 (1.0)	4.0 (1.1)	3.7 (1.0)	3.5 (0.6)*	S > G	3.5 (1.0)
Lack of resources to support students in general education classrooms	3.3 (1.2)	3.8 (1.2)	3.7 (0.7)	3.0 (1.2)	ns	3.5 (1.1)
Academic course content is not appropriate	3.1 (1.2)	4.1 (1.0)	3.3 (1.2)	3.3 (1.4)*	S > G	3.4 (1.2)
Limited communication skills of students with disabilities	2.9 (1.0)	3.6 (1.1)	3.3 (1.1)	3.3 (1.1)	ns	3.2 (1.1)
General education teachers' limited knowledge about disabilities	2.9 (1.2)	3.9 (1.1)	4.1 (0.9)	3.2 (1.1)*	S, P > G	3.4 (1.2)
Difficulty identifying classes that fit the student's schedule	2.7 (1.2)	3.3 (1.3)	3.1 (1.4)	2.9 (1.1)	ns	3.0 (1.2)
Attitudes of teachers and staff	2.1 (1.1)	4.1 (1.0)	3.3 (1.0)	2.9 (1.1)*	S > P > G; S > A	3.0 (1.3)
Attitudes of administrators	1.9 (1.1)	3.2 (1.4)	3.2 (1.3)	n/a*	S, P > G	2.7 (1.4)
Attitudes of general education classmates	2.2 (1.0)	3.1 (1.2)	3.5 (1.2)	2.4 (1.0)*	S, P > G; P > A	2.7 (1.2)
Lack of support from special education teachers	2.2 (1.3)	2.4 (1.0)	2.1 (1.0)	2.4 (1.3)	ns	2.3 (1.2)
Overall group means	2.8 (0.7)	3.6 (0.6)	3.5 (0.5)	3.1 (0.7)		3.2 (0.7)

Note: G = general education teacher, S = special education teacher, P = paraprofessional, A = administrator; 1 = not at all a barrier, 5 = significant barrier.

* $p < .05$.

Table 3
Risks of Inclusion by Group

Risk	Group means (SD)				Group comparisons	Overall item means (SD)
	G	S	P	A		
Students with disabilities may disrupt class	3.1 (1.2)	3.5 (1.2)	3.7 (1.5)	3.3 (0.9)	ns	3.4 (1.2)
Including students may demand much of my time	3.4 (1.1)	2.8 (1.3)	3.3 (1.1)	3.6 (1.1)	ns	3.2 (1.2)
Students with disabilities may be teased by classmates	2.8 (1.2)	3.5 (1.1)	3.2 (1.3)	2.9 (0.7)	ns	3.1 (1.1)
Students with disabilities may fall further behind academically	3.0 (1.0)	2.9 (1.4)	3.1 (1.3)	3.4 (1.2)	ns	3.0 (1.2)
General education students may be held back academically	2.7 (1.4)	2.6 (1.4)	2.4 (1.6)	3.0 (1.2)	ns	2.6 (1.4)
Overall group mean	3.0 (0.9)	3.0 (0.8)	3.1 (1.0)	3.2 (0.7)		3.1 (0.9)

Note: G = general education teacher, S = special education teacher, P = paraprofessional, A = administrator; 1 = not at all a risk, 5 = significant risk.

Training and Supports

Respondents were asked to identify whether they had received each of eight types of training/supports related to including students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms (see Table 5). In addition, respondents were asked whether they felt they had additional need for each type of training/support. One item, "administrator support regarding inclusion," was not included on the administrator version of the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize responses to questionnaire items by group (i.e., general education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators) and across individual items. A series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were

used to identify significant differences between groups for items related to (a) classroom instructional priorities, (b) barriers, (c) risks, and (d) benefits. Post hoc comparisons were made using Tukey's HSD test with p set at .05. In addition, paired-samples t tests were used to compare ratings for each group of respondents of the importance of instructional areas for special education and general education students. Furthermore, questionnaire items related to training and support were analyzed using chi-square tests.

Results

Classroom Instructional Priorities

The majority of instructional areas were rated as being somewhat important to very important by all

Table 4
Benefits of Inclusion by Group

Benefit	Group means (<i>SD</i>)				Group comparisons	Overall item means (<i>SD</i>)
	G	S	P	A		
<i>For students with disabilities</i>						
Opportunities to interact socially with classmates	4.4 (0.7)	4.7 (0.6)	4.3 (0.9)	4.4 (1.0)	<i>ns</i>	4.5 (0.7)
Learning important social skills	4.4 (0.8)	4.6 (0.7)	4.3 (1.0)	4.6 (0.7)	<i>ns</i>	4.4 (0.8)
Developing friendships with classmates	4.3 (0.8)	4.4 (0.9)	4.1 (1.0)	4.3 (0.9)	<i>ns</i>	4.3 (0.9)
Enhancing personal growth	4.4 (0.7)	4.5 (0.8)	3.8 (1.4)	4.5 (0.6)	<i>ns</i>	4.3 (0.9)
Learning important academic or vocational skills	3.9 (1.0)	3.8 (1.0)	3.7 (1.1)	4.2 (0.8)	<i>ns</i>	3.9 (1.0)
<i>For general education classmates</i>						
Improving attitudes toward students with disabilities	4.4 (0.8)	4.6 (0.8)	4.2 (1.2)	4.5 (0.5)	<i>ns</i>	4.4 (0.8)
Increasing knowledge about students with disabilities	4.3 (1.0)	4.6 (0.8)	4.3 (1.2)	4.5 (0.7)	<i>ns</i>	4.4 (0.9)
Increasing diversity of students in the classroom	4.1 (1.0)	4.3 (0.8)	3.7 (1.4)	4.5 (0.5)	<i>ns</i>	4.2 (1.0)
Increasing responsibility and citizenship skills	4.1 (1.0)	4.3 (0.9)	4.1 (1.2)	4.1 (0.8)	<i>ns</i>	4.2 (1.0)
Enhancing personal growth	4.0 (1.2)	4.5 (0.8)	3.7 (1.5)	4.3 (0.7)	<i>ns</i>	4.1 (1.1)
Improving academic or vocational performance	2.9 (1.3)	2.9 (1.4)	3.2 (1.3)	2.9 (1.1)	<i>ns</i>	3.0 (1.3)
<i>For yourself</i>						
Increasing knowledge about students with disabilities	4.1 (1.1)	3.9 (1.3)	4.1 (1.1)	3.7 (1.4)	<i>ns</i>	4.0 (1.2)
Compliance with recent legislation	4.0 (1.2)	4.1 (1.3)	4.1 (1.3)	4.2 (0.9)	<i>ns</i>	4.1 (1.2)
Professional growth	4.2 (1.0)	3.9 (1.3)	3.9 (1.3)	3.7 (1.3)	<i>ns</i>	4.0 (1.2)
Personal satisfaction	4.1 (1.0)	4.0 (1.1)	3.8 (1.4)	3.4 (1.5)	<i>ns</i>	3.9 (1.2)
Increasing confidence in my teaching skills	3.8 (1.2)	3.8 (1.4)	3.9 (1.4)	3.0 (1.3)	<i>ns</i>	3.7 (1.3)
Overall group means	4.1 (0.7)	4.2 (0.7)	3.9 (0.9)	4.1 (0.4)		4.1 (0.7)

Note: G = general education teacher, S = special education teacher, P = paraprofessional, A = administrator; 1 = not at all a benefit, 5 = significant benefit.

Table 5
Percentage of Respondents by Group Reporting Receiving and Needing Training Supports Related to Inclusion

Area	Group								Group comparisons		Overall percentages	
	G		S		P		A		Rec	Need	Rec	Need
	Rec	Need	Rec	Need	Rec	Need	Rec	Need				
Pre-service training on inclusion	46	-	52	-	44	-	63	-	ns		50	-
District in-services on inclusion	44	25	31	52	50	38	69	44	ns	ns	45	38
Conferences or workshops on inclusion	44	33	52	52	63	44	75	44	ns	ns	55	42
Additional resources and personnel	28	61	28	72	31	69	19	81	ns	ns	27	69
Administrator support regarding inclusion	42	39	44	61	19	50	-	-	ns	ns	38	49
Books or journal articles addressing inclusion	33	28	52	45	25	38	56	69	ns	*	41	41
Training regarding making modifications for students	39	39	48	48	44	56	50	69	ns	ns	44	49
Adapted/appropriate curricular materials	26	57	24	66	19	69	31	81	ns	ns	25	66
Overall group mean	38	40	41	57	37	52	52	65			41	51

Note: G = general education teacher, S = special education teacher, P = paraprofessional, A = administrator; Rec = received, Need = needed.

* $p < .05$.

groups for both students with severe disabilities and general education students (see Table 1). Across groups, "interacting socially with classmates" ($M = 4.67$) and "following classroom rules and procedures" ($M = 4.67$) were rated as most important for students with severe disabilities, whereas "completing homework" ($M = 3.40$) and "developing critical thinking skills" ($M = 3.50$) were rated as least important. Moreover, "developing skills/knowledge for adult life" ($M = 4.75$) and "following classroom rules and procedures" ($M = 4.75$) were rated as most important for general education students, whereas "interacting socially with classmates" ($M = 4.41$) and "completing homework" ($M = 4.42$) were rated as least important.

Differences in each group's ratings of the importance of instructional areas for students with severe disabilities and general education students were quite pronounced. Overall, instructional areas were rated as more important for general education students than for students with disabilities. Specifically, five areas were rated significantly higher for general education than special education students by general education teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals: "actively participating in class," "acquiring academic or vocational skills," "learning course content," "developing critical thinking," and "completing homework and assignments." General education teachers also rated three additional areas significantly higher for general education students: "following classroom rules and procedures," "learning responsibility and good work habits," and "developing skills for adult life." Paraprofessionals rated one additional area significantly higher for general education students: "acquiring citizenship skills." Administrators, in contrast, rated only one of all 10 goals significantly higher for general education students: "developing critical thinking." Across all instructional areas, only one was rated higher for special education

students: "interacting socially with classmates" when rated by special education teachers.

A series of one-way ANOVAs identified few significant differences between groups on individual items. Significant effects were found for group on the importance of "acquiring citizenship skills" for students with disabilities, $F(3, 96) = 4.40$, $p = .006$; "learning course content" for students with disabilities, $F(3, 96) = 8.02$, $p < .001$; and "interacting socially with classmates" for general education students, $F(3, 96) = 3.03$, $p = .033$. Post hoc Tukey HSD tests revealed that paraprofessional ratings of the importance of "acquiring citizenship skills" for students with disabilities were significantly lower than administrator ($p = .009$), general education teacher ($p = .029$), and special education teacher ratings ($p = .016$). Administrator ratings of the importance of "learning course content" for students with disabilities were significantly higher than special education teacher ratings ($p = .006$) and general education teacher ratings were significantly higher than both special education teacher ($p < .001$) and paraprofessional ratings ($p = .039$).

Barriers

Overall, items were rated as moderate barriers to including students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms (see Table 2). Across groups, the most substantial barrier reported was "lack of personnel to support students in general education classrooms" ($M = 3.62$), whereas the least substantial barrier was "lack of support from special education teachers" ($M = 2.28$). The item rated as the most substantial barrier by general education teachers was "limited time to collaborate with special education teachers"; by special education teachers, "attitudes of teachers/staff"; by paraprofessionals, "general education teachers' lack of knowledge about students' IEP

goals"; and by administrators, "limited time to collaborate with special education teachers."

A series of one-way ANOVAs indicated significant effects for group on the following items: "general education teachers' lack of knowledge of students' IEP goals," $F(3, 95) = 4.50, p = .005$; "behavior challenges of students with disabilities," $F(3, 95) = 4.49, p = .005$; "academic course content is not appropriate," $F(3, 96) = 4.24, p = .007$; "general education teachers' limited knowledge about disabilities," $F(3, 96) = 7.05, p < .001$; "attitudes of teachers/staff," $F(3, 95) = 19.27, p < .001$; "attitudes of administrators," $F(2, 81) = 10.46, p < .001$; and "attitudes of general education classmates," $F(3, 96) = 7.58, p < .001$. In general, special education teachers and paraprofessionals rated items as greater potential barriers than did general education teachers or administrators. For example, special educators and paraprofessionals judged the "attitudes of general education classmates" and "general education teachers' limited knowledge about disabilities" to be more substantial barriers to including students in general education classrooms than did general educators.

Risks

Overall, the five items were rated as being only moderate risks associated with including students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms (see Table 3). Across groups, the item rated as being the greatest risk was "students with disabilities may disrupt class," whereas the item rated as being the least risk was "general education students may be held back academically." Significant effects for group were not found on any of the risk items, suggesting that general education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators judged the risks associated with general education participation similarly.

Benefits

Almost all benefits associated with including students in general education classrooms were rated as substantial, as seen in Table 4. Across groups, the most substantial benefit for students with severe disabilities was judged to be "opportunities to interact socially with classmates" ($M = 4.46$); for general education classmates, "improving attitudes toward students with disabilities" ($M = 4.41$); and for the respondents themselves, "increasing their knowledge about students with disabilities" ($M = 4.07$). The benefit item rated as being the least associated with including students in general education classrooms was "improving academic or vocational performance" for general education students ($M = 2.96$). Significant effects for group were not found on any of the benefit items, suggesting that groups viewed the benefits associated with inclusion similarly.

Training and Supports

Considerable variability existed with regard to training and supports received or needed by groups (see

Table 5). Across respondents, the most frequently reported training/supports received were "conferences or workshops" (55%), "pre-service training" (50%), and "district inservices" (45%). The least frequently reported training/supports received were "adapted/appropriate curricular materials" (25%) and "additional resources and personnel" (27%). The training/supports most frequently reported as needed were "additional resources and personnel" (69%) and "adapted/appropriate curricular materials" (66%). The training/supports least frequently reported as needed were "pre-service training" (73%) and "district inservices" (62%). Chi-square tests indicated a significant difference for groups on only one item, "books or journal articles addressing inclusion needed," $\chi^2(3, n = 97) = 7.96, p < .05$.

Discussion

Increasing the general education participation of youth with severe disabilities has remained a consistent and prominent focus of legislative, policy, and research initiatives. Although efforts to include younger students in preschool and elementary school settings have received much attention, older students with severe disabilities continue to have limited involvement in general education classrooms in most public high schools. This study extends research on general education participation at the high school level by examining the perspectives of four groups of educational stakeholders—general and special educators, paraprofessionals, and administrators. We found that these stakeholders sometimes converged and sometimes diverged in their evaluations of different aspects of and outcomes associated with enrollment in general education classes.

Considerable agreement across four groups of stakeholders regarding the benefits associated with attending general education classes was evident. General and special educators, paraprofessionals, and administrators all agreed that a number of substantial benefits accrued for students with severe disabilities, general education classmates, and for themselves as professionals. Respondents' high ratings of social-related benefits for students with disabilities were especially prominent and are corroborated by previous research examining the impact of different placement models on social outcomes of younger children (e.g., Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997). Similarly, school staff perceived that classrooms serving both students with and without severe disabilities also would benefit general education classmates by increasing their understanding of disability-related issues and by fostering personal growth, a finding echoed by students themselves in related studies (e.g., Copeland et al., 2004; Fisher, 1999).

This broadly shared and highly positive perception of benefits across all stakeholders is interesting in light of the limited extent to which students with severe

disabilities actually were enrolled in general education classes in these high schools. Although support of the assertion that students and educators benefit from general education participation may be an important prerequisite for implementing inclusive practices (Simpson, de Beor-Ott, & Myles, 2000), such a conviction appears to be insufficient to motivate a substantial shift in service delivery models. That is, an awareness of potential benefits may not, by itself, be enough to prompt educators to enroll students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms at the high school level. Perhaps these educators viewed the *relative* benefits of serving students using community-based or self-contained models as equally or even more promising than those benefits available using more inclusive models. Future researchers should ask respondents to provide ratings of potential benefits for both general education and special education settings, enabling a direct comparison of relative benefits. Another possibility is that these benefits—although prominent—did not outweigh the barriers to inclusion in general education classrooms that exist in these schools.

In fact, we found that moderate to substantial barriers were identified by all groups. Among the most prominent barriers were limited time to collaborate, lack of resources and personnel in general education classrooms, and the behavioral challenges exhibited by students with disabilities. These barriers may be important factors influencing the educational placement decisions of teachers (Brozovic, Stafford, Alberto, & Taber, 2000). That these barriers are similar to those identified by teachers more than 10 years ago is disappointing (e.g., Downing et al., 1997; York & Tundidor, 1995). Substantial developments in research and practice in each of these areas have occurred over the past decade, producing promising models for collaboration (e.g., Hunt, Soto, Maier, & Doering, 2003; Wallace, Anderson, & Bartholomay, 2002), effective strategies for utilizing personnel and resources in general education classrooms (e.g., Carter, Cushing, Clark, & Kennedy, 2005; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003), and improved technologies for providing positive behavioral support in general education settings (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2001). However, the extent to which staff at participating schools had access to these developments remains uncertain, especially in light of the limited professional development they reported receiving.

In addition, significant differences were found in the extent to which groups judged certain aspects of the educational environment to comprise barriers to general education participation. Specifically, special education teachers and paraprofessionals rated more than half of the items as constituting more substantial barriers than did general educators. Because special educators assume primary responsibility in placement decisions for students with disabilities, their evaluations of barriers are of particular concern. The extent to which special educators

are accurately evaluating or overestimating these barriers is not clear—in reality, barriers may not be nearly as formidable as perceived. Discussions among different stakeholders regarding their perspectives of barriers may serve to alleviate discrepancies. Indeed, a collaborative teaming model offers one promising approach for ensuring that placement and support decisions are not made in isolation by teachers (Hunt et al., 2003).

Significant differences were found in ratings of the importance of instructional areas for students with disabilities and their general education classmates across general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals. Such discrepancies in instructional priorities challenge educators to identify effective strategies for meeting the individualized needs of students with severe disabilities within the general curriculum (Wehmeyer, Lance, & Bashinski, 2002). Interestingly, administrators did not evaluate the instructional priorities of students with severe disabilities and their classmates differently from each other. Although administrators do not work directly with students in classroom contexts—a fact that may account for responses that diverge from those of their staff—this finding may be influencing the extent to which they recognize the need to provide additional training to their staff in this area. Coupled with their evaluations of the benefits of including students in general education classrooms, this also may indicate that administrators hold higher expectations for special education students and more favorable views of general education participation than has previously been attributed to them (Praisner, 2003).

Our findings also revealed important information about the instructional priorities held for students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms. General education teachers placed higher priority on social and functional skill outcomes (e.g., following rules/procedures, learning responsibility, interacting with classmates) relative to academic outcomes (e.g., completing course assignments, learning course content, acquiring academic/vocational skills). Although this emphasis may be influenced by the types of classes in which students with disabilities were included, there is consistency between these priority areas and those identified by special educators in the present study and in research by Agran and Alper (2000). The ratings of instructional priorities also raise questions about the extent to which students enrolled in general education classes are truly accessing the general curriculum. Recent legislation is challenging educators to ensure that instruction provided to students with and without disabilities aligns with local and state standards (Cushing, Clark, Carter, & Kennedy, 2005). Thus, planning and support teams must work to clarify their instructional expectations for all students in general education classrooms and ensure that shared expectations are held by all educators.

Across almost all areas, stakeholders reported considerable need for additional training and support.

Consistent with findings from other studies conducted at the elementary level (e.g., Werts et al., 1996), the gap between training and supports received and needed was quite large. Moreover, the supports that stakeholders report receiving do not appear to align with those they report actually needing. Unlike Buell, Hallam, and Gamel-McCormick (1999), however, we did not find significant differences among general and special educators with regard to training needs. Most educators in this study had received their pre-service training many years prior (early to mid-1990s) and reported having received little additional training related to supporting students' general education participation. Finding effective avenues for providing professional development in ways that directly impact classroom practices remains a continued research need (e.g., Clark, Cushing, & Kennedy, 2004; Klingner, Ahwee, Pilonieta, & Menendez, 2003). Promising approaches may include creative combinations of sequenced workshops, onsite consultation, strategic mentoring, summer institutes, and provision of follow-up support.

Additional research is needed to address several limitations of this study. First, study participants all were drawn from a single, urban district that utilized a range of service delivery models for students with disabilities, none of which was fully inclusive. Although this district is typical of other urban districts with regard to the extent of general education participation of students with severe disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), perceptions are likely to differ in districts that rely more heavily on inclusive models or are in suburban and suburban districts. Future researchers could expand this study and make comparisons across multiple districts that span the range of service delivery models. Second, there remains a likelihood of positive bias due to our choice of sampling procedures. We only queried general education teachers who had current first hand experience including students with severe disabilities in their classrooms. Similarly, we only obtained the views of administrators who were nominated by special education teachers as very familiar with special education services at their school. Future research endeavors should incorporate the evaluations of general education teachers who have evinced reluctance to include students with severe disabilities in their classrooms and administrators who have less familiarity with special education services at their school. Because prior, first-hand experience with inclusion is likely to impact stakeholders' perceptions, future comparisons should be made among educators who hold comparable levels of experience with including students in general education classrooms.

Third, we did not couple the subjective evaluations of stakeholders with documentation of actual outcomes of students receiving services in general education classrooms. Additional research is needed to confirm the extent to which stakeholders' perceptions of barriers, risks, benefits, and instructional priorities align with empirical

outcome data. Fourth, we only obtained the perspectives of four stakeholder groups: general educators, special educators, paraprofessionals, and administrators. Although these people certainly were involved with and impacted by educational practices within their school, other stakeholders—such as related service providers, school counselors (Isaacs, Greene, & Valesky, 1998), parents (Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001; Peck, Staub, Gallucci, & Schwartz, 2004), and students with and without disabilities (Copeland et al., 2004)—were not asked about their perceptions regarding the process and outcomes of educational programming at their school.

Obtaining the perspectives of key personnel expected to adopt a recommended educational program is fundamental to ensuring the acceptance and fidelity of implementation of an intended program (Schwartz & Baer, 1991; Wolf, 1978). Our findings showed that educators and administrators, in general, held favorable views toward enrolling high school students with severe disabilities in general education classes. We recommend that practitioners closely evaluate barriers to general education participation—such as cited in this study—that may exist in their own educational environments and identify needed supports and training to promote inclusion as a more widely adopted model of secondary special education service delivery.

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