Inclusion

"Everybody Learning Every Second": General Education Teachers' Perspectives and Experiences Including Students with Extensive Support Needs
--Manuscript Draft--

GENERAL EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES WITH INCLUSION

"Everybody Learning Every Second": General Education Teachers' Perspectives and

Experiences Including Students with Extensive Support Needs

Abstract

When students with extensive support needs (ESN) are included in general education

classrooms, they benefit from the expertise of the general education teacher. Despite the central

role of the general education teacher in an inclusive classroom, little is known about their

perspectives and experiences including students with ESN. The purpose of this study was to

investigate general education teachers' perspectives on inclusive education, how they support

students with ESN in their classroom, and experiences that shaped their knowledge of inclusive

education. We conducted five focus groups with 16 general education teachers at two elementary

schools where all students with disabilities are included in general education classrooms. The

general education teachers in this study expressed positive views of inclusive education and

advocated for students with ESN to be included in general education classrooms. They supported

students with ESN by collaborating with other teachers and providing individualized supports for

students. The general education teachers emphasized the role of the school district in shaping the

way they provide supports for students with ESN, and they described learning about inclusive

education from other teachers. Implications for research and practice are presented and are

focused on advancing inclusive education for students with ESN.

Keywords: inclusion, inclusive education, extensive support needs, general education

teacher

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The benefits of including and educating students with extensive support needs (ESN) in general education classrooms alongside their peers without disabilities have been well-documented, including raising expectations, increasing opportunities to learn grade-level content, and realizing positive outcomes (Gee et al., 2020; Ruppar et al., 2018; Zagona et al., 2022). Students with ESN are the 1-2% of students who qualify for the alternate assessment, need individualized supports, and receive special education services under the category of intellectual disability, autism, or multiple disabilities (Taub et al., 2017).

Despite the benefits of placement in the general education classroom for students with ESN, they are rarely included in these settings for the majority of the school day (Morningstar et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2020). As researchers and teachers seek to improve outcomes for students with ESN (Agran et al., 2020), a focus on the general education classroom as a context for learning is necessary. As articulated by the AAIDD position statement (Rodriguez et al., 2020) which supports and expands upon the least restrictive environment (LRE) statement of federal disability education law, students with ESN must be taught in grade-aligned general education classrooms, receive a free and appropriate public education, and receive support and services that ensure progress and high-quality instruction. Importantly, research supports the AAIDD position statement. Specifically, general education classrooms provide greater levels of instruction and supports and more frequent access to academic materials such as books and lectures, as compared to self-contained classrooms and separate schools (Zagona et al., 2022). Taken together with the results of prior research (e.g., Gee et al., 2020), the general education classroom is the most likely context to provide students with ESN with the supports needed to

achieve "equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency" (AAIDD, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Teaching and including students with ESN in the general education classroom is commonly referred to as 'inclusive education.' One of the most foundational aspects of inclusive education is that students with ESN are educated in an age-appropriate general education classroom. However, inclusive education refers to more than just the setting for instruction; it also refers to other contextual features such as teachers' instructional practices that promote student learning of the curriculum (e.g., accommodations, modifications; Jackson et al., 2022; Ryndak et al., 2014), and the ways students with ESN are supported to experience a true sense of belonging and class membership (Ryndak et al., 2000). Inclusive education requires the provision of collaborative services in which professionals share their expertise and avoid services separate from the general education classroom (Ruppar et al., 2018; Ryndak et al., 2000).

The inclusive general education classroom provides students with ESN with a context for learning that includes instruction from a general education teacher and support from special education teachers. The training, knowledge, and prior experiences of the teachers in the general education classroom contribute to the context for learning (Shogren et al., 2014). District-level structures also contribute to the learning context of the general education classroom given the potential for professional development, district goals and processes, and common practices for collaboration among teachers to influence teacher knowledge and instruction.

Although both general and special education teachers are needed to implement effective inclusive instruction, general education teachers play an especially critical role. These teachers are experts in the general education curriculum content and classroom discourse (Kurth et al., 2019). General education teachers are responsible for curriculum planning, implementing, and

differentiating content area instruction, including students with disabilities, and collaborating with special education team members (Brownell et al., 2010). Much of the existing research on general education teachers in inclusive settings have investigated the perspectives of pre-service or new teachers (e.g., Youngs et al., 2011), was conducted internationally (e.g., Saloviita, 2015; Tiwari et al., 2015), or was conducted ten or more years ago (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006). There remains a need for current research that examines the perspectives and experiences of in-service general education teachers who support students with ESN in general education contexts within the United States.

The minimal existing research on general education teachers' perspectives and experiences of including students with ESN reveals a lack of teacher knowledge and confidence in providing academic (Cameron & Cook, 2013) and behavioral supports (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006). Lohrmann and Bambara (2006) interviewed 14 general education teachers to understand their perceptions and experiences of supporting students with developmental disabilities who had challenging behavior. In fact, some general education teachers in the study described receiving "ominous warnings" (p. 162) about students with behavior support needs from their colleagues. Teachers whose beliefs were more positive were dually certified in general and special education. The teachers described feeling supported by the school culture of inclusion, and relationships with their colleagues and support staff, but they were also worried about including a student with developmental disabilities in their classroom (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006).

In a different study, Cameron and Cook (2013) interviewed seven general education teachers about their goals and expectations for students with disabilities who were included in their classrooms for part of the day. The teachers felt they were not able to contribute to the

academic learning of students with ESN, but they were able to contribute to the students'

opportunities for socialization. The general education teachers also reported they were

knowledgeable about and willing to support students with learning disabilities, but the same was

not true for students with ESN in their classrooms. The findings of this study found somewhat

discouraging and negative perspectives of the general education teachers regarding students with

ESN. Further, this study focused on the perspectives of general education teachers but did not

explore teachers' actual experiences. In a more recent study, Zagona et al. (2021) conducted

classroom observations and interviews with nine elementary general education teachers who

included students with ESN to understand how they supported the students and how they learned

about those supports. The general education teachers described learning about inclusive

education from their colleagues; however, there is a need to gain a more thorough understanding

of the perspectives of experienced general education teachers and the factors that have

contributed to their knowledge of supporting students with ESN.

Given the need to advance inclusive education for students with ESN (Gee et al., 2020),

and the essential role of the general education teacher in implementing inclusive education

practices, it is necessary to explore the perspectives and experiences of in-service general

education teachers who have included students with ESN in their classrooms. Gaining a more

thorough and current understanding of the perspectives and experiences of general education

teachers from a district that implements inclusive educational practices for students with ESN

could provide valuable information about including students with ESN as well as how general

education teachers gained the knowledge needed to support students with ESN in their

classrooms. Extant research on this topic has revealed negative perceptions of general education

teachers such as fear and hesitation in providing supports (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006;

Cameron & Cook, 2013). However, the district context in which these teachers worked was not clearly described in these studies. Additionally, extant research has not focused on how general education teachers believe they have gained their knowledge of inclusive education. Given the critical need to build capacity within schools to expand inclusive education for students with ESN, a more current exploration of general education teachers' perspectives and experiences is necessary. The purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions:

1. How do general education teachers describe their perspectives on inclusive education for students with ESN?

2. How do general education teachers describe the ways they include students with ESN in their classrooms?

3. What experiences have shaped general education teachers' knowledge of how to include students with ESN in their classrooms?

Method

The research questions in this study were investigated using qualitative methods. Using a social constructionist epistemological perspective, we sought to understand and describe the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Patton, 2015). Research conducted from a social constructionist perspective recognizes that participants gain an understanding of a concept through social interactions. Essential to the social constructionist perspective is the notion that the culture of a community influences the perceptions of the participants (Crotty, 1998). We approached this study with the perspective that the school district where this study took place provided a cultural context that shaped the ways the teachers included students with ESN as well as how they gained the knowledge to include students with ESN. Given the need to expand inclusive educational opportunities for students with ESN, there is a need to gain a more current

understanding of the ways general education teachers include students with ESN, their

perspectives on providing such supports, and how they learned about these supports. Focus

groups were an appropriate methodological approach to use to explore the perspectives and

experiences of the general education teachers within the same district cultural context, especially

given the ways focus groups can gather the perceptions of a group on a specific topic or issue

(Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Participants

A total of 16 general education teachers who worked at two different elementary schools

participated in five focus groups (see Table 1 for demographics). There were eight participants

from each school. After obtaining approval from the university Institutional Review Board, we

began recruitment and consent procedures. Consistent with recommendations for focus groups,

we recruited participants with similar backgrounds and experiences (i.e., general education

teachers; Kruger & Casey, 2015). To recruit teachers, we presented a brief summary of the study

during a faculty meeting at one elementary school, and we presented to grade-level teams during

their lunch or planning period at the second elementary school. Our recruitment methods were

planned in collaboration with the school principals. We asked teachers to sign up on a paper

sheet if they were interested in participating, and we followed up via email to share the consent

form, answer questions, and ask them to sign up for a date and time to participate in a focus

group. After each focus group, all teachers were provided a $25 gift card incentive.

Setting

We intentionally selected a school district in the western United States that has a strong

commitment to and history of implementing inclusive education for all students. This sampling

decision aligns with positively deviant case sampling (Patton, 2015) and is used to identify

information that may be difficult to ascertain in other ways (Rose & McCullough, 2017). Given the persistent segregation of students with ESN and the lack of progress toward greater levels of inclusive education in general education contexts (e.g., Morningstar et al., 2017), sampling a district that has been successful at sustaining inclusive education for several decades was important for understanding the perspectives of general education teachers who have experience including students with ESN in their class for the full school day.

The teachers in this study were employed by a district that has been implementing inclusive education for all students since 1993, and it has committed to maintaining inclusive education through specific actions and research-based practices that align with effective and sustainable systems change efforts toward general education placements for students with ESN (e.g., Lazarus et al., 2019), as described next. First, the district implements multi-tiered systems of support, including School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS; Sailor & McCart, 2014). Next, all students with disabilities attend their home school (i.e., the school they would attend if they did not have a disability) and are taught in their grade-appropriate general education classroom alongside their peers without disabilities (Ryndak et al., 2000). Third, the district has a common vision of providing individualized services for students with any support needs in general education contexts (Lazarus et al., 2019). Fourth, the district promotes strategies for active engagement for *all* students in the classroom, and students with disabilities are supported by general and special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and peers. In this district, special education teachers for students with ESN consult with general education teachers and serve students in general education classrooms rather than in separate classroom settings. Fifth, the district encourages paraprofessional support to be used in focused ways, rather than one-to-one formats which can promote isolation.

In addition, the district's mission statement addresses the approach to instruction in the district, focusing on collaboration, engaging all students, and having high expectations. The mission statement is posted on the district website and in schools and classrooms across the district. Common language when referring to aspects of special education services reinforces the district's common vision and is included in professional development and posted on the website and in schools (e.g., "assumed competence," "our students," "meeting students' needs" rather than programs for students based upon a label). All teachers receive on-site and district professional development that aligns with the district's vision (Lazarus et al., 2019).

Data Collection

We created questions for the focus groups based on existing literature and recommendations from Krueger and Casey (2015; Supplemental File Table 1). Focus groups were held at the school site in a teacher's classroom or the school library. The two focus groups held in the library were after school and privacy signs were placed on the doors to ensure confidentiality and prevent distractions. The first author facilitated the first three focus groups while the second author was present. The second author facilitated the fourth and fifth focus groups. Focus groups were audio recorded, and the audio files were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. The time length of focus groups ranged from 29 to 59 minutes.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose (2021), and members of the research team individually read the transcripts to begin the coding process. The first author read two transcripts, the second author read two transcripts, and the third author read one transcript. Using Dedoose, each research team member applied the following master codes aligned with the research questions to the transcripts they read: (1) perspectives on inclusive education; (2) how the

teacher includes students with ESN, and (3) how the teacher learned about inclusive education (Miles et al., 2014; see Data Analysis Figure, Supplemental File Figure 1).

Next, the first author completed first cycle coding with all five transcripts. First cycle coding included an open-coding process to develop a codebook with elemental/descriptive codes for each of the three master codes (perspectives on inclusive education, how the teachers included students with ESN, how the teachers learned about inclusive education; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016). The codebook included code definitions, examples, and non-examples, (see Supplemental File Codebook). The first author applied these codes to all five transcripts in Dedoose. Next, the second and third authors used the codebook to independently code a subset of excerpts (phrases or sections from the transcripts that the first author coded) in Dedoose ($n =$ 58). The research team met to debrief and discuss disagreements and revised the codebook to reflect their discussion. The first author reviewed all five transcripts and revised codes as necessary using the revised codebook. The second and third authors used the revised codebook to independently apply codes to a second subset of excerpts (phrases or sections of text from the transcripts that the first author coded; $n = 35$). The research team met to debrief and discuss disagreements and refined the codebook. The first author then reviewed all five transcripts to revise codes to reflect the minor updates made to the codebook. To ensure consensus, the second author independently coded two full transcripts using the final codebook, and the third author independently coded two different full transcripts using the final codebook. The first author met with the second and third authors one-on-one to review the transcripts each author coded, discuss any disagreements, and reach consensus.

Following the completion of coding, the first author downloaded all coded excerpts and analyzed them using a process of searching for patterns and clustering (Miles et al., 2014).

Major, recurring concepts from each code were summarized to reflect the theme, and excerpts were organized under each theme as examples. The first author met with the other two authors to share findings and to engage in discussion to confirm the meaning of the themes (Miles et al., 2014). Finally, each author independently re-read all five transcripts to verify the themes were indeed aligned and accurately represented the transcripts.

Trustworthiness and Positionality

The research team worked collaboratively and implemented investigator triangulation throughout the project (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The research team debriefed throughout the data analysis phase and systematically reached consensus to maintain an awareness of their positionality (Brantlinger et al., 2005). We sent the transcripts of the focus groups to all participants for member-checking purposes; one educator replied but did not include edits or changes, only confirmation (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Research conducted from a social constructionist perspective recognizes that researchers may bring their biases to a study, and it is important to disclose such biases (Patton, 2015). All authors are advocates for inclusive education and former special education teachers. The first author has an existing relationship with the district in which this study was implemented.

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Findings

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The purpose of this study was to understand general education teachers' perspectives and experiences supporting students with ESN included in their classrooms, the ways they included students with ESN, and how they learned about inclusive education.

Perspectives on Inclusive Education

The general education teachers shared their perspectives on inclusive education, including (a) their viewpoint that inclusive education means including all students with necessary

supports, (b) advice to other general education teachers about inclusive education, (c) a description of the benefits of inclusive education for themselves as teachers and the students, and (d) the acknowledgment that inclusive education can be challenging.

"Including Everybody" and Supporting Students

The general education teachers described their understanding of inclusive education and that it means all students are included and receive the supports they need in the general education classroom. The participants used phrases such as "all students," "including everybody," and "equal access" when they described what came to mind when they thought of inclusion. The general education teachers explained that inclusion means including the student in the general education classroom. One teacher said it means "not segregated- together as a whole."

The general education teachers also explained that an important aspect of inclusive education is the provision of supports for students. For example, one participant explained that inclusion means "all participating, and that might mean that we have to accommodate or modify things for them to be able to participate at their ability, but [it means] to be included." Another teacher said that inclusion "comes down to support," and she emphasized the importance of "personalized support" by saying "I think that's the key to inclusion from my perspective." In a third example, a teacher specified that inclusion refers to in-class support, and she explained that the students with ESN should be in the general education class for the whole day, not just for 10 minutes which is what happened in her previous teaching placement in a different district.

The general education teachers referenced the school district when they described their understanding of the meaning of inclusive education. The general education teachers in one focus group had worked in the district for 4, 11, and 18 years. The general education teacher who had worked in the district for 18 years explained:

> I really do think our district has that philosophy of 'it takes a village' and so we know that this is a climate or environment that the [student with ESN] is being placed in. [The student is] not just being placed with a teacher.

This description of the context for including a student with ESN was essential to this teacher's explanation of the meaning of inclusion. The general education teacher who had worked in the district for 11 years mentioned the district mission statement on instruction when she described her thoughts on inclusion, and she explained the mission statement includes the following point:

> everybody learning every second, and that's everybody… that's not 92% of the population, it's everybody… if they are one of our kids, they're in our classroom participating, learning the same things as everybody else in the way that they can. And so there is no, you know, there is no 87% is good enough. It's everybody. It's 100%, 100% all the time.

The general education teachers explained their understanding of inclusive education as everyone being included all the time with the needed supports, and given their description of the district when talking about what inclusive education meant to them, this understanding was situated in the context of the school and district which is committed to inclusive education.

Advice for Other General Education Teachers

The participants' advice to other general education teachers was positive and conveyed the following messages about inclusive education: it "needs to be happening," it is not something to fear, and it is important to be open-minded and communicate with team members.

Inclusive Education "Needs to be Happening." The general education teachers described the importance of students with ESN having the opportunity to be included in general education contexts, not only for their own learning but for the learning of others. One teacher explained the importance of inclusion to promote acceptance:

> … if you don't ever meet somebody like that until you're already set in your ways, what are the chances that you're going to be accepting and that you're going to go out of your way to be friendly…You know, it's very easy to look at people that are different, you know, and judge and make decisions without having been exposed to that.

Other general education teachers also advocated for inclusive education. During a different focus group, when asked what they want other teachers to know about inclusion, four teachers contributed to the assertion that inclusive education should be happening:

> Participant 1 …it can be done
> Participant 5: yea, absolutely
> Participant 3: Be open to it
> Participant 1: As soon as possible
> Participant 4: It's not easy, but it's, you have to work at it…

Other general education teachers also indicated that inclusive education takes work, but that the work is worth it. For example, one general education teacher said, "…it's possible. It's hard work, and you have to you know, be diligent on it, but it's possible and the benefits are extreme." A different teacher expressed the same sentiment when asked what she would want other teachers to know about inclusive education: "[inclusive education] is a lot of work, but the, the blessings and benefits for the teacher and the entire class are priceless, socially and academically for them all to be exposed to a variety of learning styles that people have."

Inclusive Education is not Something to Fear. In addition to advocating for inclusive education, the general education teachers wanted other teachers to know that inclusive education is not something to be feared, either by explaining their previous feelings of fear or by acknowledging their awareness that other teachers may be afraid of aspects of inclusive education. The general education teachers advocated for inclusive education, explained that it should still be happening, and urged other teachers to embrace rather than fear inclusive education. For example, one teacher said, "So I just feel like it's a little bit scary, and you could have growing pains with it, but it's, you can definitely do it."

One general education teacher explained that she was "a little bit scared" to include a student with behavior support needs because she did not know anything about him. She had

heard that the student had behavior support needs, and she became nervous. However, once she got to know the student, she had a positive experience, and she urged other general education teachers "not to be scared." One general education teacher who had taught in the district for 10 years explained that she offered reassurance to a new teacher: "it can be a challenge definitely… just embrace that opportunity and the challenge of it." A different general education teacher explained a similar perspective:

> it's the fear of the unknown. They [teachers] don't know what to expect or how to do it, or maybe they just feel they're not capable of including a student. So I just think that they, I would like for them to know- it's wonderful. It's not anything to be scared of, it's just a great opportunity.

In addition to encouraging other general education teachers to not be afraid of inclusive education, the participants also emphasized the value of being open-minded and communicating.

Open-Mindedness and Communication are Important in Inclusive Education.

Across focus groups, the general education teachers wanted other teachers to know that they should be open-minded, try new things, and communicate to learn how to best support a student with ESN. For example, one teacher said, "just make sure you ask if you need it, you know, ask colleagues and other people what to do because it can be hard sometimes and sometimes you don't have new ideas." A different teacher's advice was similar: "ask for help. I mean there's no, I feel like there really isn't a reason to struggle. Somebody else could come in and struggle with you and figure it out." In a different focus group, a general education teacher emphasized the need for communication and support when she said "what I would want others to know is the importance of communication… and the importance of support… Because without those two things, you just throw a student into the classroom, that's not inclusion." Another general education teacher explained that her advice to new teachers is to "ask questions, ask questions,

ask questions. Because you're never going to know it all and especially in teaching there's something new every year… just don't ever be embarrassed to ask a question."

The general education teachers' advice about communicating and being open-minded was linked closely with the need to think creatively about supporting students with ESN. For example, one general education teacher wanted other teachers to:

> be ok with trying things that seem counterintuitive like noise, allowing students to stand instead of sit, cutting work in half to prove they know a skill and giving them a bit of a break or at least a chance to feel successful. [Students with ESN] may need to show you what they know with modifications that don't seem ordinary or in ways that you wouldn't expect but allow them to show you want they know through different avenues. Be creative! I have even had to put Velcro on desks before just so they have something to touch for sensory purposes while they work. Sometimes you think students are acting out by doing little things like ripping little pieces off their paper or tapping on their tables but really they just listen and learn better with the extra sensory input like Velcro on their desk, a visual schedule to know what is coming next…

In addition to advising others to not fear inclusive education and instead be open-minded and creative, teachers described the benefits of inclusive education for themselves and students.

Inclusive Education is Beneficial for all Students

The general education teachers described the benefits of inclusive education: All students learn about diversity, empathy, advocacy, and acceptance. While speaking about inclusive education, one teacher said, "the kids just grow up with so much knowledge… they're just so worldly, it's really amazing." One general education teacher explained the life-long benefits of inclusive education for all students when she said inclusive education "will build lots of strong advocates in school who will go on to be as strong advocates as adults for people who have disabilities." A teacher in a different focus group explained a similar perspective:

> The benefits are two-sided because if you're getting the whole class on board to help and support this kiddo, then that kiddo is enriching the rest of the class, and it, and it carries with those kids for the rest of their lives.

Another general education teacher explained learning about diversity is "such a great opportunity for our students here." This teacher shared that when she was in school, students with disabilities would "get off [her] bus and get on another bus and go to a different site;" she described feeling "frightened" because she did not know where the students with disabilities were going. She underscored the benefits of inclusive education because she did not have that experience.

Inclusive Education is Beneficial for all Teachers

The general education teachers also described the benefits of inclusive education for themselves, including the fact that they have been impacted personally and professionally in positive ways through the process of including students with ESN in their classrooms. The general education teachers described developing patience, empathy, understanding, open-mindedness, and creativity through the process of including a student with ESN in their classroom. For example, when asked what inclusion does for them as a teacher, one general education teacher said she learned patience, and another teacher said, "it allows [her] to see the individuality in each of the students." The teachers described learning more about how to support students with ESN by including them in their classrooms. One teacher explained that including one student with ESN "gives you the confidence" to support other students in the future.

The general education teachers also described other ways they have benefitted and grown professionally after including students with ESN in their classroom. One teacher decided to pursue a special education endorsement as a result of her experiences including a student with ESN, and another teacher said: "these [students with ESN] have changed my life and how I teach the regular ed classroom entirely." That same teacher said that after including students with ESN in her classroom for a year, she was a "better person" and a "better teacher." One general education teacher explained the ways that including students with ESN has impacted her

teaching practices and connections with her students. She said:

> …[you are] able to do so much more in your classroom when you have [a student with ESN]… because you're reaching a broad spectrum of levels… I really love having an [a student with ESN] because it gives me an opportunity to really connect on a different level with my kids, with everyone.

A different teacher explained the impact of the relationship she developed with a student and his family. She was still in contact with the child's mother at the time of this study, and she said the "biggest reward" is when she is able to facilitate the student's relationships that last for years.

Inclusive Education can be Challenging

The general education teachers described overwhelmingly positive views of inclusive education, and they also acknowledged the challenges that they have experienced including students with ESN, specifically when students have had behavior support needs or when they did not know how to support and include the student. The general education teachers described both specific and general examples of students with ESN who also had behavior support needs as well as how it impacted them and their class and how the students responded. For example, one general education teacher explained that one of her students was demonstrating challenging behavior and was disrupting the class, and she explained that her students learned to be understanding of the student and the breaks the student needed.

The general education teachers also described challenges related to not knowing how to support specific students with ESN in their classrooms. For example, one teacher explained that at the beginning of the school year, she wondered how she was going to teach the rest of the class when this student was included in her classroom. After receiving support from a special education teacher at the school, the teacher learned how to teach all of her students. General education teachers also described challenges related to paraeducators, including being nervous about their presence in the classroom, uncertainty about the roles of paraeducators and

themselves, and the challenges involved when there are staffing changes.

How General Education Teachers Included Students with ESN in Their Classrooms

Participants also described how they included students with ESN in their classrooms. Two primary strategies emerged: (a) collaboration with team members and (b) the provision of individualized supports to students with ESN.

Collaboration

The general education teachers described the ways they have collaborated with their colleagues at their school to support the implementation of inclusive education, and they emphasized communication and relationship-building as being essential to this process. The teachers explained they have shared information with other team members for the benefit of the student, and they have received information from other team members that they could use to support the student with ESN. They described the process of supporting students to be included as a "team effort", and that they "have to work together, especially with the special education teachers in order to make the modifications." The teachers described working with other team members and developing a relationship with them, including special education teachers, paraeducators, and parents. One teacher said, "there's a lot of open communication, we're involved in their [evaluations] and their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)… they want our input." A different teacher emphasized the "importance of support" among team members. She explained that she has heard of other school districts where a student with ESN is just placed in the general education classroom without any support, and she said, "the way that [inclusive education] functions, with the best results, the most productive results, is if you really do have that communication support… that has to be there."

The general education teachers explained that they have benefitted from receiving

support for including students with ESN in their classrooms. The general education teachers

expressed how helpful it has been to have the support of the special education teacher who shares

information about the students with ESN at the beginning of the school year and throughout the

school year. One of the teachers said, "we have to work together, especially with the special

education teachers in order to make the modifications." The next general education teacher to

speak in that focus group called it a "team effort."

One general education teacher explained how helpful it has been to get support with

knowing where to start in supporting the student who was included in her classroom. This

teacher was including a student with complex health, physical, and communication needs, and

this was a new experience for her. The special education teacher had told her to expect the

student to participate in all activities in the classroom and if he needed support then that would

be provided. If the class was sitting on the rug and reading, the student should be doing the same

activity with needed support. The general education teacher explained how helpful it was to have

that direct guidance from the special education teacher.

Another general education teacher also explained that it was helpful to learn from the

special education teacher that the student should be involved in all aspects of the classroom with

the needed supports. When emphasizing the importance of learning from each other, a teacher

said "communicating, asking, asking, asking, asking, sharing. I think that's critical." The next

teacher to speak in that group added, "I think sometimes we [general education teachers] just

forget to ask for help because we feel like, well, they're in my room. It's on me."

The general education teachers also described the importance of communication and

relationship-building with paraeducators in their classrooms. A general education teacher said:

> another thing that I should mention is it's very important for the teacher to have a good
> relationship with the parapro. Have open lines of communication and have the parapro

feel as though they're part of the classroom and that the students can go to them as much as they come to me.

She went on to say that "the students see what a great relationship I have with [the paraeducator] and it just establishes a really good culture in the classroom." Another general education teacher explained that she expects the students to respect the paraeducator in her classroom, and that person is a second teacher in the classroom. Additionally, a general education teacher explained that there was one paraeducator in her class for the first quarter, but then at the beginning of the second quarter, there was a different paraeducator. The student started demonstrating some behavior needs, and the general education teacher explained that she talked with the paraeducator to explain what the student could do, and what supports they needed. Through this, the teacher emphasized the importance of constant communication.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of communication and relationships, the general education teachers also described specific ways they have shared information with their colleagues to support students with ESN, highlighting how the general education teachers contribute to the provision of inclusive practices in the school. One general education teacher shared strategies with the speech-language pathologist to support a specific student; this teacher learned this information from the student's previous teacher and passed it on when the speech pathologist needed guidance. A different teacher explained that she shared a behavior support strategy with the teacher her student would have the next year. In addition to describing strategies for collaboration, the general education teachers also explained that they provide individualized supports for the students who are included in their classrooms.

Provide Individual Supports

The general education teachers explained their perspectives on how they provide individual supports for students with ESN, including their view that different students may need

unique and individualized supports and opportunities. For example, one teacher said, "one thing that works for one kid is not going to work for all of them." One general education teacher explained how she views the process of providing individualized supports and helping her class to understand that different students may need different supports:

> …We are all individuals. We may look the same on the outside somewhat, but the way we are inside is completely different and that can't be seen. And so if you need a writing grip to help you write, then that tool is provided to you. And if you need manipulatives to help you do math that, you know... And so helping them understand that… equal is not everybody gets the same thing at the same time. Equal is everybody gets an opportunity to try that thing, but some might need more opportunities, some might need more tools…

In a different focus group, a general education teacher communicated a similar sentiment by explaining "what is fair is offering the student the tools that they need to be successful, even if that's not the same tool for every student." One fifth-grade teacher described the complexity of providing individualized accommodations and modifications for students when she said "some students are on grade level in some areas and then other areas they receive accommodations. So it's just knowing okay, he's going to take… the test on this, but not on this… it's a lot of organizing in your mind." Overall, the teachers described their commitment to providing individualized supports for students as well as their perspectives on these supports.

The general education teachers also described other ways they provided supports to students with ESN, including peer supports and individualized behavior supports. When describing peer supports in her classroom, one teacher said "the kids are also working to include the kids because most of the time, we don't want teachers or adults prompting, we want them working their peers…". This teacher's recognition of the value of peer supports was important for understanding the ways she facilitates individualized supports in her classroom.

The teachers also described the behavior supports they have provided for students with ESN who were included in their classroom. For example, one teacher described an incentive

system that she implemented for a student as part of her commitment to implementing effective

supports for students. The student loved logos, so he drew a logo and showed it to the class on

the document camera. The class gave the student feedback, and he loved this activity. A different

teacher discovered that printing football pictures for the student to color was an effective

incentive for a student. Across focus groups, the teachers discussed the ways they have provided

supports to individual students with ESN as well as their perspectives on these supports.

Experiences that Shaped General Educators' Knowledge of Inclusive Practices

The general education teachers explained they have become knowledgeable about how to

include students with ESN in their classrooms from (a) colleagues at their school site and (b)

participating in professional development provided by the school district.

Learned About Inclusive Education from Colleagues

The most common way teachers described learning about inclusive education was from

colleagues, including special education teachers and other general education teachers. The

general education teachers described their appreciation for learning from colleagues about a

specific student at the beginning of the school year and learning from special education teachers

who modeled inclusive practices in their classroom. When describing how she learned about

inclusive education, one general education teacher said a special education teacher with whom

she worked would:

> …always offer a hand or 'what can I do to help you' and then she'd come in with ideas, and so I think that helped me just to make sure that I was including the students. And you could go to this person and say, "Am I doing this right?"

A different teacher expressed a similar point when she explained that a special education teacher

helped with teaching strategies, observed in the classroom, and helped to pinpoint areas to work

on when supporting the student. A general education teacher explained that she has learned about

inclusive education "100% from the special ed[ucation] teachers."

The general education teachers referenced the support they received from the special education team as new teachers. For example, one teacher said: "I think the supports in the special ed department were definitely put in place to support me as a brand new teacher." A different general education teacher described a similar experience: "I think my first year teaching I just had so much support from staff here at [school name]… They came into the classroom to make sure that I, you know, knew what I was doing and see if they could help me in any way." A third teacher explained that she learned from the special education teacher during her first year of teaching; she said the special education teacher was "absolutely wonderful in communicating with me and, I didn't have to, like, trudge through it alone, at all. And so, it was a team."

The teachers in this study also described learning about inclusive practices from other teachers at their school. The teachers were able to go to their grade-level team leader (another general education teacher) for support and to share ideas about including students with ESN. The general education teachers also described going to their colleagues for materials, suggestions, and encouragement. One teacher explained that seeing another general education teacher include a student with ESN in her classroom helped her to understand how it could be done. These two teachers' classrooms were "reading buddies," so the two classes would get together periodically for the older students to read to the younger students. The general education teacher explained that a student in her reading buddies class had complex health and physical support needs, "but there was never a time when he wasn't a part of her class." This teacher explained her concern about doing something wrong or not knowing how best to support a student with these needs, but it helped her to see how her colleague included this student. In general, this teacher said it was very beneficial to learn from teachers who "embrace" inclusive education.

Learned About Inclusive Education from District Professional Development

In addition to learning about inclusive education from their school colleagues, the general education teachers learned about core concepts related to inclusive education from district-level professional development. Teachers in three focus groups explained they learned about inclusive education during the district's professional development for new teachers. They learned about concepts such as individualized needs, person-first language, and behavior supports. A teacher said she learned about putting the student first, rather than thinking about their disability first during new teacher training. The teachers specifically mentioned they learned about concepts central to inclusive education from the district special education director who presented during the new teacher training program. One teacher who had taught in the district for five years said "without the support of the district we would not be where we are" [with inclusive education].

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how general education teachers in a district that provides inclusive education for students with disabilities (a) describe their perspectives and experiences including students with ESN, (b) describe the ways they include students with ESN in their classrooms, and (c) describe the experiences that shaped their knowledge of inclusive education. Given the social constructionist perspective that guided this study, we approached the findings from the viewpoint that the culture of the school district influenced the perceptions of the participants (Crotty, 1998; Patton, 2015). The general education teachers described the importance of the district in guiding the way they include students with ESN in their classrooms. The teachers in this study also mentioned specific district-level practices such as common language to describe aspects of the provision of special education services, the district's new teacher training program, the district mission statement on instruction, and the ways teachers

collaborate. Understanding the perspectives of general education teachers regarding the ways the district practices shaped their knowledge of inclusive education is critically important for special education professionals who advocate for inclusive education because (a) they are strategies that special education teachers can implement in their own schools when working toward including students with ESN, and (b) the strategies for collaboration described by the teachers can be used to support general education teachers to learn about including students with ESN in general education classrooms.

One of the purposes of this study was to understand how general education teachers describe their perspectives and experiences of inclusive education. General education teachers advocated for inclusive education, described the positive impact that it has had on their teaching, and provided positive and encouraging advice for their colleagues and other teachers. Previous research investigating the perspectives of general education teachers documented much less positive perspectives on including students with ESN (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006). In this study, the school district context in which the general education teachers were teaching supported them to learn about including students with ESN, feel positive about including students with ESN, and overall, develop a sense of advocacy for inclusive education (Shogren et al., 2014). This study offers a new contribution to the literature by documenting how the contextual features of a school district (e.g., mission statement, professional development, common language) facilitate general education teachers' positive perspectives on inclusive education. Given the critical need to advance inclusive education for students with ESN and ensure positive outcomes, access to high-quality educational opportunities, and high expectations (AAIDD, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2020), the identification of the general education teachers'

positive views in this study as well as the role of the school district in shaping their perspectives and knowledge is important for informing future research and practice.

The findings of this study included specific examples of how teachers collaborate with each other to support students with ESN in their classrooms. General education teachers described their appreciation for working with special education teachers who consult with them by sharing information with them at the beginning of the school year and visiting their classrooms throughout the year to offer support. This finding is important for special education teachers to be aware of because it suggests the value of the special education teacher spending time in the general education classroom and advocating for the ability to spend the time in general education classrooms. These collaborative practices, and teacher advocacy for them, can support the much-needed advancement of inclusive education for students with ESN by providing support to the general education teachers who are including them in their classroom.

General education teachers also described how they collaborate with other general education teachers through the grade-level team and team leader structure. Facilitating the development of networks for collaboration may give general education teachers an opportunity to learn about inclusive education from a colleague who has similar responsibilities, and these opportunities might support general education teachers to "see" inclusive education in action, thus helping to shape their understanding of how to implement the same inclusive practices in their own classrooms. This type of model for collaboration that capitalizes on both general and special education teacher collaboration may be beneficial in schools where there are very few or only one special education teacher because of the potential for general education teachers to support each other in addition to getting support from the special education teacher.

Limitations

Although we recruited participants from two schools, we purposefully selected teachers from the same district, and these teachers thus received the same district-level supports. Additionally, this study presents the views of 16 participants which may not represent the perspectives of all teachers in the district. Due to scheduling issues, we were only able to recruit the participation of 16 participants. There is a need for future research to investigate the perspectives and experiences of more general education teachers who are including students with ESN from a variety of schools, districts, and geographic locations. Further, the teachers in this study were all working at elementary schools, and their perspectives may be situated in contextual features of that setting (e.g., curriculum, home classrooms rather than rotating classrooms). This district has implemented inclusive education since 1993. The experiences of general education teachers in school districts working to transition to more inclusive models of service provision may be different, and they may need additional supports (e.g., technical assistance, coaching). Future research is needed to understand the views of general education teachers in districts that are not yet implementing inclusive education or who are struggling to do so. An additional limitation is that we were not able to conduct a second-level member check with participants due to the lack of availability of all teachers after we completed the analysis.

Implications for Research

Given the limited progress toward inclusive education for students with ESN and the critical need to do so to ensure equal opportunity and improve outcomes for this population of students (Rodriguez et al., 2018), the findings of this study suggest several important directions for future research. We describe five suggestions in detail next.

First, the general education teachers in this district included students with ESN in their classrooms, and some have done so for more than 10 years. Their positive perspectives and

advocacy for inclusion have not previously been documented, and it suggests the critical need to learn more from teachers and administrators in districts that have been successful with implementing inclusive practices to gain information that would be useful in replicating these practices. Specifically, there is a need for future research to investigate district-level policies and practices to learn how to support the continuity of inclusive education over long periods of time. Examples of such initiatives to be investigated include collaborative planning practices (frequency, structure, support from administration), processes for planning individualized supports, professional development practices (frequency, structure, content), hiring practices, ways of supporting new teachers to include students with ESN, and systems for partnering with families to design effective, individualized support plans for students.

Second, future research should also explore what teachers and districts can do to construct these supports for inclusive education when they are not already in place. For example, the teachers in this study mentioned the importance of the district's mission statement on instruction and that all students participate in their classroom with individualized supports. Future research should explore the impact of the introduction of similar practices (e.g., mission statement, supports-based framework for approaching instruction infused in professional development) to understand the extent to which such practices that align with systems change efforts (e.g., Lazarus et al., 2019) influence the perspectives of general education teachers.

Third, given the role of administrators in shaping the culture of a school (Torres, 2019), future research should also investigate the perspectives and experiences of school-level administrators in schools that have an established history of implementing inclusive education for students with ESN. School principals are responsible for bringing district-level initiatives to their school site, supervising teachers, working with families, and ensuring all students make

progress. Given their role, future research investigating the knowledge and perspectives of administrators regarding inclusive education is important. Specifically, learning more about the experiences and perspectives of administrators who have shifted their schools to include students with ESN would be valuable because this information could be useful for other administrators and special education teachers. This type of research could uncover suggested areas of priority when shifting to more inclusive practices and resources for problem-solving barriers.

Fourth, future research must investigate the perspectives of more general education teachers across the United States, including the perspectives of teachers across various grade levels and geographic locations, and should consider their years of experience including students with ESN. The findings of this exploratory study suggest a need to further investigate the specific ways general education teachers support students with ESN in their classrooms, including the ways they ensure inclusion and progress in the general education curriculum by implementing individualized supports (e.g., modifications) for students across domains (e.g., academics, communication, behavior; Thompson et al., 2018). Additionally, it would be valuable to understand if general education teachers believe all students with disabilities would benefit from the supports they provide to students with ESN. Additionally, general education teachers in this study described the value of special education team members visiting their classrooms and learning from general education and special education colleagues at their schools. There is a need to investigate specific ways in which general education teachers collaborate or co-plan with special education teachers to develop and implement grade-aligned modifications. Existing research has highlighted the need for both teachers to approach modifications from a common perspective, and there is a need to learn more about how to accomplish this in practice to ensure student supports are aligned with the general education curriculum (Pratt et al., 2017).

Finally, the teachers in this study broadly mentioned specific challenges, but they did not describe challenges commonly referenced when it comes to inclusive education and students with ESN such as a lack of time to collaborate or not knowing how to modify assignments (Ballard & Dymond, 2017). Future research should investigate the role of a school district that provides supports for teachers (e.g., professional development, frameworks for collaboration that support new teachers) to mitigate the challenges that teachers might experience when including students with ESN in general education classrooms.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study also suggest several implications for practice, we describe three implications next. The participants in this study explained that other classroom teachers may be nervous about including a student with ESN. First, special education teachers should consider that general education teachers might be afraid of including a student with ESN, either through fear of the unknown or because they lack knowledge of how to support the student. The special education teacher can support the general education teacher by explaining specific ways to support the student with ESN at the beginning of the year and then modeling those supports in the classroom throughout the year. Teachers in this study described the value of special education teachers visiting their classrooms to share information and discuss strategies. There is a need for special education teachers to spend time in general education classrooms, collaborating with the general education teacher and providing individualized supports for the student with ESN.

Second, special education teachers should be mindful that general education teachers who include students with ESN in their classrooms may benefit from opportunities to talk with other general education teachers or with other members of the special education team to discuss

supports for students with ESN. Several teachers in this study emphasized the need to think creatively, be open to new ideas, and remember that each student is an individual. Because the general education teachers described learning how to include students with ESN from their colleagues, it is important to cultivate and expand on opportunities for general education teachers to communicate and share ideas for student supports. This type of collaboration could be enacted during faculty meetings, grade-level planning meetings, or other school-level professional development. It is important for special education teachers to be mindful of the value of advocating for and facilitating networks of general education teachers because of the potential for their collaboration to contribute to the process of building capacity within the school to implement inclusive education.

Finally, there is a need for teacher preparation programs to prepare special and general education teachers to collaborate with one another by designing opportunities to practice gaining skills to implement inclusive practices. Examples of such learning opportunities include assignments focused on co-planning individualized modifications to the general education curriculum and inclusive instructional practices, and then spending time in the classroom implementing the plan. Opportunities to practice and apply skills involved in supporting students with ESN included in general education classrooms have been noted as valuable by teachers in previous research (Zagona et al., 2017), and it would be important for teacher preparation programs to integrate practice in this area.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Educator	Focus Group	Age	Years taught at the school	Years taught in district	Total years teaching experience	Total years experience including SWD	Highest degree	Teaching Certificate Endorsement/s
1	1	45	18	18	23	23	Master's	Reading Cert Principal Cert
2	1	29	7	7	7	7	Bachelor's	Early Childhood
3	1	33	3	3	10	10	Bachelor's	SEI
4	1	24	< 1	< 1	< 1	< 1	Bachelor's	Reading, ESOL
5	1	33	3	4	4	4	Master's	
6	2	31	5	5	9	9	Bachelor's	
7	2	44	6	6	6.5	6	Bachelor's	
8	2	45	13	13	13	10	Master's	
9	3	42	8	11	18	11	Bachelor's	Early Childhood, SEI
10	3	28	4	4	6	4	Master's	
11	3	58	13	18	18	18	Bachelor's	ELL
12	4	43	10	10	5	5	Bachelor's	
13	4	33	9	9	10	9	Master's	
14*	5	29	2	5.5	5.5	5.5	Bachelor's	Early Childhood
15	5	25	2	2	2	2	Bachelor's	ESL
16	5	49	1	9	12	10	Master's	

Note. *= Special education co-teacher; Cert= Certificate; ESOL= English for Speakers of Other Languages; ESL= English as a Second Language; SEI= Structured English Immersion; SWD= Students with Disabilities
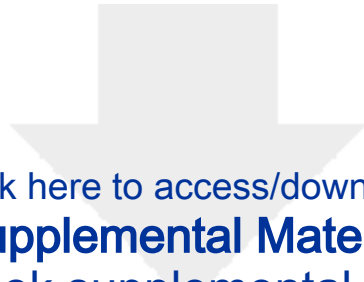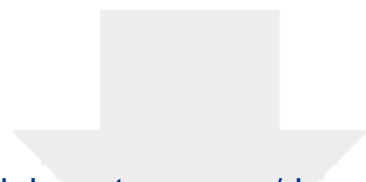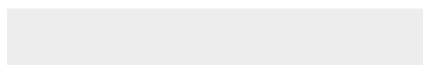
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