Mothers’ and Fathers’ Perspectives on Quality Special Educators and the Attributes that Influence Effective Inclusive Practices

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Abstract: Research over the last decade or so has made it clear that quality teachers matter to student achievement. What is less clear is the ways in which they matter and how we can prepare such high-quality teachers for a variety of contexts. The research question guiding this project was what do important stakeholder groups perceive to be the skills and knowledge that high quality, beginning special educators need when they start teaching? In the field of special education, there is no clear consensus on this matter; voices of key players—parents of children with moderate to severe disabilities—have not been adequately heard. This study fills this gap in our understanding as focus group interviews were conducted with parents of children with moderate to severe disabilities. Analysis of these interviews revealed that participants’ responses fell under five major themes: Understanding, Teacher Training, Effective Communication, System, and Teacher Disposition. Inclusive practices are highlighted as parents identified these across all themes. Teacher education developers can play a major role in transforming programs to better align with what parents perceive to be the skills and knowledge that a high quality beginning special educator needs when he/she starts teaching. This information can be used to revise and renew programs to better prepare special educators.

The extent to which inclusive schooling practices are implemented is influenced by cultural, political, social, and economic contexts and by various interpretations of the concept. Implementation therefore differs among nations, states, regions, and school districts (Friend, 2011; Gabel & Danforth, 2008; Jenkins, 1998; Rouse & Florian, 1996; Vazins, 2009). Parents have a major role in the development of successful inclusion programs. Indeed, special education reform acts and regulations in many countries have provided guidelines for the active participation and involvement of parents in the education of their children. For example, in the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act P.L. 94–142, most currently revised in 2004 as P.L. 108–446 (U.S. Congress, 1997; U.S. Congress, 2004) has strong provisions for parent participation. Furthermore, research has demonstrated the benefits of collaborative relationships between home and school which include higher academic achievements, positive attitudes, improved behavior, and more successful programs (Yssel, Engelbrecht, Oswald, Eloff, & Swart, 2007). Parent reactions are also vital in the evaluation of inclusive programs. Their evaluation of curriculum, training of teachers and administrators, and their child’s education can provide valuable feedback to schools (Garrick-Duhaney, & Salend, 2000; Leyser & Kirk, 2004; Seery, Davis, & Johnson, 2000).

Results from studies which examined views of parents of children with disabilities about inclusive educational programs are mixed. Several studies of parents of students with severe disabilities in integrated programs from pre-school to high school supported their...
child’s placement and expressed satisfaction with the educational outcomes, in particular the social benefits (Davern, 1999; Freeman, Alkins, & Kassari, 1999; Gallagher et al., 2000; Hanline & Halvorsen, 1989; Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, & Widaman, 1998; Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline, & Morrison, 1995; Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, Smith, & Leal, 2002). Although the evidence presented suggests that many parents were in favor of inclusive education, they often expressed a number of doubts and concerns. A few investigators, however, have suggested that some parents of children with severe disabilities do not favor inclusion (Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001).

Understanding parents’ perspectives on inclusion, as well as the manner in which they perceive their own role, may facilitate productive communication and enhance partnership efforts between school personnel and parents. Standards for the teaching profession have grown to integrate family and community relations as a professional competency across multiple professional associations. The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, for example, has required that teachers understand how children’s learning is influenced by individual experience, talents, prior learning, culture, and family and community values in order to connect instruction to students’ experiences (INTASC, 2007).

If parents are to be included as partners in their children’s education, then their views of inclusion and related issues need to be considered. A successful system of inclusion requires that the community believe in the competence of the education system to meet the needs of all students. Parents especially have to have confidence in the capacity of the schools to understand and effectively educate their children with moderate to severe disabilities. In turn, the degree to which teachers understand parents and community life contributes to the making of a competent and well-prepared teacher (Hyson, 2003; Turner-Vorbeck & Miller Marsh, 2008).

While policy and research provide a beginning foundation for defining what constitutes high quality special educators, there is not a clear consensus on this matter and voices of key players in special education have not been adequately heard. The evidence to date has suggested several sets of knowledge and expertise needed by special educators to be successful. Quality teachers matter to student achievement. What is less clear is the ways in which they matter and how we can prepare such high-quality teachers for a variety of contexts. A group of voices has been missing from this discussion: parents of children with moderate to severe disabilities. In addition to policy makers, researchers, and professional organizations such as Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and INTASC, an important stakeholder group with perspectives on special educator quality are the families of students with moderate to severe disabilities. While there have been several studies that examined the experiences and perspectives of parents of young children with disabilities and document many difficulties between parents and professionals (e.g., Bailey, Skinner, Rodriguez, Gut, & Correa, 1999; Schall, 2000; Hatton & Correa, 2005; Smith, Chung, & Vostanis, 1994; Gray, 1993; Hutton & Caron, 2005; Kohler, 1999; Renty & Rogers, 2006; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Lea, 2006; Rao, 2000), to our knowledge, no study has directly examined parents’ perspectives of what characteristics define a high quality special educator for school-age children. This study helps to fill the gap in the literature.

Our research question was what do mothers and fathers perceive to be the skills and knowledge that a high quality beginning special educator need when he/she begins teaching? We view this to be an important question that can inform teacher education programs and provide direction for future direct research on actual educator knowledge and skills in practice. To answer our research question, we used facilitated focus group interviews and discussions. Results from these endeavors provided insight into mothers’ and fathers’ perspectives of quality beginning special educators. Inclusive practices are highlighted as parents identified these across all themes.

Method

Participants

This investigation used purposive sampling to identify participants. This sampling method entails sample selection based on participant
knowledge of or experience in the topic of interest and possession of characteristics identified by the researchers as selection criteria (Brotherson, 1994). Parent focus groups occurred after a regular meeting of two separate support groups, one for mothers and one for fathers yielding nine fathers and five mothers as participants. The focus groups occurred in the location where support group members frequently meet. The majority of participants were parents of children with moderate to severe, low-incidence disabilities (e.g., Autism, Rett syndrome, Down syndrome). Their children with disabilities ranged in age from preschool to high school (see Table 1).

**Focus Group Protocol**

Focus group interviews served as the data collection method. This type of group interview is unique because a group of participants typically meets only once (Brotherson, 1994). The specific intent of focus groups is to provide insights about how people perceive a situation rather than infer, generalize, or make statements about a population (Krueger, 1994). Focus groups afford three particular advantages for incorporating parental voices into teacher education. First, focus group dialogue creates a synergistic effect, allowing a wider range of information and insight than would private individual responses (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Second, focus groups are particularly useful when working with individuals who have a history of limited power and influence as it provides them with a vehicle for reflecting upon their own lived experiences. Third, focus groups provide important information to decision makers before a program or service is initiated, such as in planning and program design (Krueger, 1994). Focus groups also have disadvantages, including (a) lack of opportunity to develop a sense of comfort and rapport with other participants over time and (b) participants’ hesitancy to say things in a group context that they might be willing to share in a one-to-one interview.

We spoke with each group separately in order to obtain their unique perspective, but used a common set of questions in order to compare and contrast the information we received. We explained the study, obtained written consent, and asked people to respond in free-flowing conversations. Participants engaged in a 1-hour focus group discussion facilitated by the investigator.

Prior to the initiation of the discussion, the first author, who acted as facilitator, described the process. The focus group protocol was designed in a manner wherein a group facilitator kept the discussion on track by asking a series of open-ended questions, which flowed from general to specific. A process developed by Krueger and Casey (2000) was used in the design of the protocol. The specific open-ended questions that we asked to facilitate and guide the discussion were: 1) What are the most critical needs in your district related to special education, 2) What do you think a beginning special education teacher should know or be able to do on day one, 3) What distinguishes a great special education teacher from an “okay” teacher, 4) If you were going to design a special education teacher training program, what would you include, and 5) Do you think your beginning special education

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Son/Daughter</th>
<th>Children’s Disability</th>
<th>Children’s Ages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Son - 3</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>4–5/Pre-school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Daughter - 2</td>
<td>Rett syndrome</td>
<td>7–8/2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Son - 4</td>
<td>Global delays</td>
<td>Birth-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Daughter - 5</td>
<td>Angelman syndrome</td>
<td>4/Pre-School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>8–10/2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; - 4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>TBI</td>
<td>14–18/high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prader-Willi syndrome</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
teachers have the strategies to work with the population of students they serve? Diverse families as well. . . ?

Critical issues that were raised during discussions were probed and answers were mirrored back or summarized by the facilitator. This data collection strategy was used for participants to express their thoughts about needs related to training of and working with learners who have moderate to severe disabilities. The focus group interview was recorded using a digital audio device and transcribed verbatim by a doctoral student.

Data Analysis

The qualitative paradigm for research offered the present study a process that gave participants an opportunity to express their views and the researchers a strategy for listening and developing categories to reflect those views. Qualitative research offers an interpretive and analytical model of inquiry. It is the search for meaning that makes the qualitative paradigm particularly relevant to this study as we sought to describe the perspectives of the various groups on a common set of concepts. Atkinson, Delamont, and Hammersley (1993) state that the qualitative perspective offers the opportunity to explore the present actors’ perspectives and strategies in their own terms.

Data Reduction

Data reduction began immediately after fieldwork. During this data-reduction phase, all pages of transcripts were read and reread individually by both authors. These two authors participated individually and then collectively in the category development phase. Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1995) approach was followed to analyze the interview data after they were transcribed. The first step was to “reach a position where one has a stable set of categories and has carried out a systematic coding of all the data in terms of those categories” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 213). The research team (two authors) met and collaboratively agreed on the identification of content related to attributes that influence inclusive practice. Individual themes were generated from open coding of all transcripts (line-by-line). The next step was to work on the analytic categories that appeared to be of significance to determine if there was a clear boundary between them. Then, similarities with and differences to other data that had been similarly categorized were noted. After such a test, each category (a) remained intact, (b) was subdivided into two or more categories, or (c) was merged with other categories to form a new one. After the categories were firmly established, they were compared with each other to determine if they were related. Categories that appeared to be connected to each other were combined under a broader category.

Trustworthiness

Numerous triangulation strategies were implemented to ensure trustworthiness. Many were employed at the operational level, including (a) multiple informants, (b) multiple researchers and analysts, (c) comparable data collection protocols, (d) coding checks (inter- and intra-rater agreement), (e) verbatim transcripts providing thick descriptions, and (f) peer debriefs. By using investigator triangulation, social science researchers “attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint” (Cohen & Manion, 1986, p. 254). In qualitative research, triangulation aims to enhance the credibility and validity of the results by giving a richer, yet balanced picture of the situation (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2008). In the research process on which this thesis is based, triangulation was achieved mainly through two kinds of ways.

Firstly, so-called data triangulation was achieved through multiple data collecting, sources, procedures, and strategies. Another kind of triangulation that was applied during the research was the concept of researcher or investigator triangulation. Since the data was analyzed through shared expertise of other researchers, the final interpretations are outcomes of an interactive and collaborative process. However, the data were analyzed both individually and also in the collaborative discussion where the final interpretations were developed.
Results

Analysis of focus group interviews revealed that participants’ responses fell under five major themes: understanding, teacher training, effective communication, teacher dispositions, and system. Each major theme contained specific elements which are described below.

Theme 1: Understanding

Parents discussed the need for teachers to be aware/have understanding of three factors: the specific disability, communication needs and the relationship to challenging behavior and home life.

Disability awareness. Parents of students with disabilities were concerned that teachers recognize the individual differences and diversity of their children. More specifically, they believed teachers have to see the students as children first rather than labels and that educators must be provided with disability specific training to address individual needs. One father identified a great teacher as one who, “... listen[s] to parents and realize[s] the parents can teach you something about how to teach their children because each child is unique. Even every Down’s syndrome kid is different.” Despite a child’s diagnosis, “every child is different” (mother) and “oh my God there are variations! Each one has their own personality, and when you get a label with your kid, right... all of a sudden this is the same problem with doctors, when we were talking about doctors, which is that you get a label, people learn in school what that label means, and then they stick to that. In reality, these kids have as much diversity as kids that don’t have that label or whatever their diagnosis is” (father).

Mothers reported a similar viewpoint as fathers and identified the need for teachers to understand the disability but to remember that “no child fits in a box” (mother). One mother reflected, “I think you just need to be really careful to know that no matter what the diagnosis, disability, whatever, every child is different. They’re going to have different needs.”

Communication needs and relationship to challenging behavior. Mothers and fathers reflected on the need for teachers to understand challenging behavior and how it relates to disability. One father shared “... they [teachers] don’t seem to understand that behaviors are communication and that when the kid’s acting up, you know... he’s trying to tell you something... he can’t talk” Another father stated “just because she can’t talk, doesn’t mean she’s not taking it in... it doesn’t mean she doesn’t have anything to say...” One mother wanted school personnel “... to understand that the behavior problems of autism are almost always attributable directly to the disorder, and not because their parents aren’t strict enough, or because they are willfully defiant, or don’t scream and throw and run out of the class all the time because they don’t want to do the math. It’s because they can’t handle the world around them.”

Home life. In addition to understanding the disability parents shared that they would like teachers to gain a perspective of their home life. One mother identified the need to gain the home perspective by having teachers perform home visits, specifically she stated “... they [teachers] don’t really see them struggling, they don’t see what the family really goes through at home.” Further, one mother reflected “... they [teachers] see the child at school but getting the parent perspective and seeing what parents do, to the homework, trying to do it, and get them dinner, and which is kind of that other side.” One mother wanted teachers to see their home to “spend three hours or something... in the morning.” They discussed the difficulty of someone truly knowing what it’s like to parent a child with special needs on a daily basis. For one mother, “until you’ve spent the night awake, wondering if your child will be able to live independently as an adult, you don’t get it.”

Theme 2: Teacher Training

Parents from both focus groups identified several aspects of teacher training they felt should be top priority/addressed to develop high-quality special education teachers. These included: curriculum and instruction, field experiences and mentors, advocacy, and listening and interviewing.

Curriculum and instruction. Mothers and fathers believed it was necessary for novice teachers to have a broad understanding of a student’s curriculum, to be able to adapt curriculum, and to use varied, flexible activities to meet students’ needs. Several parents expressed the need for teachers to differentiate instruction and wanted teachers to have more
knowledge about curriculum and the assistive technologies that could benefit their son or daughter. According to one father, “My son is very literally doing the same curriculum doing minor manipulations of identifying colors and matching numbers for three years now.” The father reported that teachers did not collaborate around curriculum nor was the curriculum differentiated to meet his son’s needs. He reported, “...no one seems to be able to adapt curriculum.” One mother commented that general education teachers know the curriculum and how to differentiate as well, and that this could be accomplished by “general education teachers receiving classes in special education too...” Further, that “general education teachers being more educated about the kids they’re going to be involved with.”

Field experiences and mentors. Mothers and fathers discussed the need for general educators to have more and varied field experiences. In addition, use of a mentor was cited as a strategy to train both special and general education teachers. One father suggested the idea to, “...take brand new teachers and have them follow teachers that I knew were highly competent, motivated, and well-informed... like an intern... like a doctor does an internship.” Several commented that “…[field experience]...it should definitely be more”

Advocacy. Mothers and fathers identified the need for teachers to have advocacy skills for themselves and on behalf of their child(ren). One mother reflected on the skills she believed a teacher would need: “you’re going to have to advocate [sic] take it a step further, you’re going to have to be a leader and advocate...” Another mother commented on the need for the teacher to be an advocate for the students with other parents: “...I think that the teacher needs to be able to educate the parents of the typical parents about why inclusion is important.” Several fathers discussed the need for teachers to have advocacy skills to stand up to the “system.” For example, one father shared “...that minimizing expense of teaching these kids is the number one interest of the school district. And so, the teachers come out and they are beaten down. We can’t do this and we can’t do that because it costs too much...so again. ...teacher the student that, you know, you have, in some respects you’re an advocate. Another father commented “you have to stand up, not for the kids necessarily but for your whole rights as a teacher.”

Listening and interviewing. Participants discussed the importance of a teacher who had good listening and interviewing skills. Parents wanted to know that teachers are listening to them. They wanted teachers to actively listen to their needs and concerns. Mothers and fathers cited the need for teacher training in these areas. One father discussed the need for teachers to “pull information out” given that he had “so much information in his head.” Specifically, “It’s more than listening, you need to teach them interviewing skills...they need to know how to pull information out.” Mothers and fathers frequently mentioned “active listening.” For one father “the best teacher that we had in 17 years was the one who would simply listen to us.” Further, another father shared that the best teachers hid family had were ones where they “…got e-mails from them and were actually able to communicate effectively with them, and they tried different things.” One mother reflected upon her son’s elementary program and shared her frustration, “they won’t listen to you. They don’t hear me.”

Theme 3: Effective Communication

Another theme parents identified as critical to developing high-quality special education teachers and inclusive programs was Effective Communication. This included partnering and sharing of resources and teachers who were respectful towards parents.

Partnering and sharing of resources. Mothers and fathers emphasized the importance of communication with families and the ability to establish positive relationships with them as skills beginning teachers need. One important aspect of this relationship is the teacher viewing parents as “a valuable resource in their child’s education” (mother). Many parents believed great teachers understand that parents have invaluable insight and ideas about what works for their child. “Parents are probably the most able to give the proper feedback on what’s working and what isn’t” (father) and “parents can make [a teacher’s] job easier.” They also stressed that parents want to be a “partner” in their child’s education (mother).
Respect. According to our findings, it is important parents feel that their advice and knowledge is respected and solicited by the teacher. One father declared, “The number one expert where you’re going to get the most information is the parents.” Parents have an “expertise,” they know their kids better than anyone else because, “they’re doing it 24/7” (father). As one mother so aptly put it: “Parents have a lot of information and often they feel like it’s discounted. That the [teachers] go in there going ‘oh, I went to school and I know how to run an autism program.’ So did I… it’s called 8 years of parenting this child.”

Theme 4: System

Mothers and fathers identified “system” issues as being a key influence on early career teachers. Within the contexts of districts, schools, and communities the key themes identified by parent were resources, school-wide commitments, and critical transition periods.

Resources. Money, bussing, and class size issues were cited by mothers and fathers to influence service delivery. One mother identified a “systemic problem” as “teacher salaries are so horrendously low… that they can’t afford to even take classes… some of them have to get summer jobs.” Another mother stated “and they’re out of money to buy crayons.” Reflecting on the need for teachers to be trained but recognizing the reality, one mother stated: “we never have enough money to train our teachers. They don’t have enough money to train themselves.” Another factor related to resources was bussing. One mother reflected that bussing was a key factor in deciding placement for her son. Specifically, “… it’s crazy because bussing drives a lot of our placement too. It’s crazy how much bussing drives the system.” Last, class size was cited as a key factor related to teacher quality. One father identified his concerns, “and then the other thing is [sic] class size… we’re setting up teachers to fail by giving them so many kids.”

Schoolwide commitment. Mothers and fathers identified several factors that promoted inclusion for their son or daughter at a school they attended. In addition, these factors also supported teachers as school administrators relied on a particular belief system or practice that facilitate inclusion and natural forms of support. These factors related to the reliance on schoolwide, positive systems of support, use of paraeducators, and a continuum of services (least restrictive environments) within the building. Mothers and fathers reflected on schoolwide programs that promoted acceptance. One mother talked about a program within her son’s school that promoted acceptance, “… there are innovative programs that make it easier and cut down on the amount of bullying or misunderstanding or all of those things. I was thankful for that.” Another mother identified the use of paraeducators within the school building to be helpful, “… every classroom has a para-educator support that’s trained in those main disorders…”. Parents identified the need for a continuum of services and how helpful it is to have a school that has experience and a history with inclusion. One mother reflected on a team that had worked together for many years, “… the school that my son is at now has a long history of special education programs on their campus and I think that affects how those programs and those kids are seen on that campus. It’s like the difference between feeling like they’re trying to find a way for your kid to survive in that campus vs. where we are now, like maybe that’s one of the systems of that campus, and he’s just part of that family, that group.”

Critical transition periods. Interestingly, mothers were the only ones who identified the critical transition periods—into preschool, out of school into community, and moving to a different school district—as successful components of inclusion. One mother stated, “… into preschool, it’s a horrible transition… you feel like you have no support, you feel like you’re just lost.” Another mother added her comments, “so in the transition on the older part of it too, it’s even more difficult I think than [the preschool] one.” Lastly, a mother commented, “I hate the transition of having to move her to a new school district.”

Theme 5: Teacher Dispositions

See the potential of children. Our focus group participants also pointed to the personal characteristics all teachers must possess. “A great teacher is the teacher that sees the potential of the child” (mother). A common theme was the ability of a teacher to see a child’s potential, to believe that all of their students can learn regardless of their disability, and to teach in
accompany with that belief. As one mother so eloquently expressed, “this is a child, not a diagnosis.” Four mothers mentioned the importance of teachers recognizing the potential in their children, no matter whether the child was verbal or not. In these interviews, participants expressed that great special education teachers understand that each of their students has unique abilities, challenges, and learn “at a different pace and in different ways” (mother). One father reflected “I mean, even just a few years ago, I was at a conference where half the teachers didn’t believe that autistic kids could actually read...” Another father identified that teachers needed to “develop a little empathy” around their son’s behavior.

Dignity. Teacher dispositions also related to dignity and how the children were talked about or referred to by teachers. One mother reflected on an experience she had with a psychologist, “... had little notes by each kid, like she wrote autistic by one kid who didn’t have a diagnosis and parents weren’t going to go there yet, and were not ready for that yet, wrote dwarf by a kid that was.” This mother expressed her concern of teachers in an inclusive environment, “... you know, two teachers in the room, oh I’ve got that autistic kid in my class or I’ve got that kid with Down’s syndrome this year and you know, complaining about it and stuff.” This mother wanted teachers to remember, “We have access to our kids’ schools. You don’t know if we’re walking by. Pay attention.”

Affection. Teacher dispositions matter to parents. These dispositions include the ability to be affectionate. It was important to parents that the teachers like their son or daughter. This was expressed in the way the teachers talked about the children and in the way they expressed affection towards the children.

One mother reflected that she wanted her child to have a more affectionate teacher, “It seems to me like the teachers... are less affectionate... like they’re instructed to separate that more...” Several parents mentioned the importance of touch and that this conveyed that the teacher cared for and liked their son or daughter.

Discussion and Implications

This project illustrates themes relating to factors that could be addressed in preservice and inservice teacher programs. The issues of understanding, effective communication, teacher training, system and teacher dispositions are complex and the work related to addressing the needs in these areas cannot simply involve the creation of new courses. Rather, the process must engage key voices in conversations that generate information to transform the training. This research adds the missing piece from the discussion as it includes the voice of parents of children with moderate to severe disabilities.

Teacher education developers can play a major role in transforming programs to better align with what the voices of key players in special education perceive to be the skills and knowledge that a high quality beginning special educator needs when he/she starts teaching. If today’s teachers are to be adequately prepared to meet the challenges they are facing, they must be provided with appropriate, quality preparatory programs that align with characteristics of quality special educators. This preparation is likely to have a greater impact on practice if it is closely aligned with what key players in special education, including parents of children with moderate to severe cite as positive qualities. This information can be used to revise and renew programs to better prepare teachers. This research generated specifics that could not have been anticipated from knowledge of best practices in teacher education or a review of the literature on what constitutes a highly qualified special educator. This research adds the missing piece from the discussion by including the voice of parents of children with disabilities.

Knowing what mothers’ and fathers’ in this study identify as characteristics of highly qualified special education teachers can influence the development of experiences that align to promote these characteristics. It is clear that parents wanted to know that teachers are listening to them—actively listening to their wants, needs and concerns. Parents want to be seen as a resource where their expertise is valued.

We know that developing content knowledge and pedagogy in critical areas is important as is fostering certain beliefs about teaching students with disabilities. A mechanism must be in place for addressing teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning as these be-
liefs play a role in facilitating or inhibiting the acquisition of effective practices for working with students with disabilities and the families. In preservice and inservice teacher education, we must attend to teachers’ beliefs and work to promote an attitude to foster success in their work with students with disabilities and consciously create multiple opportunities to blend theory, disciplinary knowledge, subject-specific pedagogy, and knowledge of students as learners and to situate this integrated knowledge in classroom practice (Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2005). Teacher preparation programs must contain a strong connection between conceptual learning activities (coursework) and practice/internships. We see this coursework-fieldwork linkage as essential for acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to become a highly qualified special educator. In addition, use of a mentor to facilitate this linkage is a critical piece of the training model. Special educators must practice what they learn during coursework in authentic settings. Some parents identified home visits as an avenue to promote a deeper understanding which perhaps could influence teacher dispositions.

Teacher preparation is likely to have a greater impact on practice if it is closely related to what key players in special education, including parents of children with disabilities cite as positive qualities. This information can be used to revise and renew programs to better prepare teachers. Being a highly qualified special educator requires a complex set of skills. This skill set needs to be cultivated over time where initial teacher preparation programs and inservice professional development align to support the developing teacher. Brownell, Hirsch, and Seo (2004) suggest that evaluations of carefully crafted induction efforts that are focused on well-defined teacher standards is what we need to foster alignment which assists to develop the quality special educators the field needs. Strong relationships between the school, especially the teacher, and the families are crucial—not only for solving and preventing problems, but also for the exchange of information that may provide the assistance that the student requires to be successful at school and in the home.

This project has generated interesting insight into parents’ views which has implications for teacher training and fostering inclusive practices. Clearly, the sample does limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other individuals in other settings and other countries, but it does highlight particular areas of potential interest for those who design and implement teacher training programs. This research provides information from critical informants on what skills and knowledge a high quality beginning special educator needs when he/she begins teaching which has implications for teacher preservice and inservice programs. Results can inform programs and provide direction for future direct research on actual educator knowledge and skills in practice.

Limitations

In qualitative research the researcher is considered as the main instrument for data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation (Paisley & Reeves, 2001). As such, in a qualitative research study researchers bring in their inherent (researcher) biases, which must be acknowledged and identified (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Although multiple researchers were used for data triangulation, similar backgrounds of the researchers may have influenced the analysis and subsequent category development. Researchers need to be aware of the role that this bias can play and seek ways to be reflexive in the interpretation of the data. One way to obtain and use reflexive data from the researcher is by debriefing the researcher. Specifically, to debrief a researcher, someone who is not involved in the study interviews the researcher and collects debriefing data. Researchers in this study attempted to examine one another’s perspectives through deep dialogue in an attempt to control for this bias.

Another form of researcher bias may have occurred as the participants were aware of the researcher’s position within an institute of higher education. This position may have inhibited some participants or may have led to others being more open about certain topics they felt would influence the training of teachers. The researchers background, interests, and potential bias, was made clear to the participants in an attempt to be transparent.

Full member validation with the actual participants would have been desirable; however,
given the fluid nature of the groups and desire for anonymity it was difficult to achieve this. A brief account of these findings was submitted to two of the group leaders who were present during the focus group. These leaders provided a verbal positive response that the themes and findings were indeed what they heard as well.

References


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