Playing in Someone Else's Field: Perspectives of Early Career Inclusive Special Educators Introduction

Nina F. Weisling[1], Amy L-M Toson[2]

[1] Carthage College, Department of Education, US.
[2] Pewaukee School District, Asa Clark Middle School, US.

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Nina F. Weisling; nweisling@carthag.edu

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ABSTRACT:

Long-standing special education teacher (SET) shortages and declining enrollment in SET preparation programs in the United States (U.S.) have resulted in a significant number of alternatively-certified SETs in classrooms, particularly in poverty-impacted schools. As a result, the least experienced teachers often serve in schools with historically underserved students. It is critical to understand the needs and experiences of these teachers to support them better. This qualitative study examined twelve first- and second-year, alternatively certified special educators' experiences in inclusive classrooms in poverty-impacted schools in the U.S. Participants completed a brief survey of demographics and daily experiences, two semi-structured interviews, and member checks. Results were analyzed to understand participants' experiences teaching within inclusive settings. Key themes - an impossible task, feeling like they worked in "someone else's stadium," and a preference for separate settings - underscore the complexities of implementing inclusive education effectively. Recommendations for special and general education teacher and administrator preparation and ongoing support are provided.

Keywords: Inclusion, Alternative Certification, Special Educators, Special Education

INTRODUCTION

Almost since the passage of Public Law-142 in 1975 (later the Individuals with Disabilities Act [IDEA] in 2004), the United States (U.S.) has faced a nationwide shortage of special education teachers (SETs). SETs are employed to provide legally protected services to students with special education needs (SEN). These shortages are partly due to declining enrollments in general teacher preparation programs and special education teacher programs (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). Additionally, SETs are 46% more likely to leave the classroom than non-SETs (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Consequently, the demand for qualified SETs is ongoing and significant, and many districts rely on alternatively-certified (AC) special educators to fill these roles, with as many as one in five SETs pursuing alternative certification routes (NCES, 2021).

Alternative certification is described by the U.S. Department of Education (2004; NCES, 2018) as nontraditional pathways to certification typically designed for aspiring teachers who (most often) already hold a bachelor's degree in a field unrelated to education and who need additional coursework in educational methods, as well as classroom experience, to qualify for licensure. Most alternatively certified teacher candidates (AC) work under an emergency, probationary, or provisional license during their first years of teaching, often with little-to no prior formal training in educational methods and pedagogy or field experience. This is compared to "traditional" routes, which generally require completing a postsecondary degree, with 2-4 years of course and fieldwork immediately before licensing.

Significantly, the challenge of finding and retaining high-quality teachers often disproportionately impacts urban and rural, poverty-impacted, majority-minority schools (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). For example, in a 2022 survey on teacher vacancies, 55% of public schools in high-poverty-impacted communities had at least one teacher vacancy, as did 58% of schools serving a majority-minoritized student population, compared to 40% in less poverty-impacted and 32% of majority-white schools. Special education, with 6% of positions open, had the highest rate of vacancies (NCES, 2022). Further, in the 2015-16 academic year, when the most recent data are available, 69% of AC teachers worked in schools serving 50% or more students of color, and 63% worked in schools where 51% or more of the students were considered poverty-impacted (NCES, 2018). While alternative certification programs and AC educators serve a critical need, AC teachers are at least 25% more likely to leave the profession than those certified through traditional routes (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Redding & Smith, 2016). Assigning less experienced and more turnover-prone educators to long-underserved schools perpetuates long-standing opportunity gaps for low-income students, students of color, and students with SEN.

Currently, 61.2% of SETs spend at least 80% of their day—and nearly 95% spend at least some portion of their day—in general education classrooms (GECs) through a practice known as inclusive education (IE; NCES, 2016). IE is now the most common service delivery model for students with SEN, making it a standard expectation for all SETs, including those certified through alternative routes (AC-SETs). While IE can positively impact students, it often falls short of this potential. Using interviews with first- and second-year "on-the-job" special educators who were simultaneously completing alternative certification programs and teaching within IE settings for some or all of the school day in poverty-impacted schools, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of the factors that AC-SETs perceive as either supporting or inhibiting effective IE implementation in GECs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive education (IE) is associated with multiple positive outcomes, including enhanced student socialization (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; DeSimone et al., 2013), increased student achievement (Cole et al., 2019), and educator growth (Conderman et al., 2013). A longitudinal comparative analysis found that students with special education needs (SENs) who spend their entire day in general education classrooms (GECs) perform "significantly better in both reading and math assessments than their peers...in separate special education classrooms" (Cole et al., 2019, p. 2). Results from a matched pair quasi-experimental study on students with SEN found that those served in the GEC demonstrated highly significant progress compared to students in separate classrooms (Gee et al., 2020).

While the benefits are significant, IE is not without challenges. It involves nuanced work that shifts the capacities expected of special and general education teachers (GETs) from largely separate to deeply integrated. Unfortunately, research from the U.S. and around the world indicates that both groups of educators, whether

traditionally or alternatively certified, consistently report low levels of self-efficacy and readiness (Specht & Metsala, 2018), intense feelings of unpreparedness (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Mitchell, 2019; Triviño-Amigo et al., 2023; Wray et al., 2022), and a lack of skills necessary to implement IE effectively (Odongo & Davidson, 2016; Stites et al., 2019).

As IE becomes more prevalent, it is essential that teachers feel capable of enacting it. This study seeks to contribute to understanding early career AC-SETs' experiences teaching within IE settings for some or all of the school day in poverty-impacted schools.

METHODS

The two researchers successfully completed their university-required National Institute of Health (NIH) *Protecting Human Research Participants* training. Further, all materials were reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. There was no outside funding.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of early career, alternatively-certified special education teachers working within general education settings in poverty-impacted schools?
2. What factors support or inhibit the effective implementation of inclusive education in general education classrooms for these teachers?

Participants

Sixty-one graduate students from two different alternative certification (AC) programs were approached for participation in this study. Each student was enrolled in two graduate-level evening courses while working full-time as a special education teacher (SET) in one of the largest metropolitan school districts in the Midwest. Among these students, 41 were first-year teachers, 20 were second-year. Thirty students were in a national AC program (17 first-year and 13 second-year students) that provided 5 weeks of full-day training, five days a week, before they entered their classrooms. The remaining 31 participants (24-first- and seven second-year teachers) were part of a university-led AC program, which included one week (5 days) of full-day initial training. Both programs offered ongoing mentoring support during the first and second years and coursework leading to licensure and a Master's degree. Of the original pool of 61 graduate students, 12 agreed to be interviewed (19.6%; see Table 1).

Table 1 **Interview and Survey Participant Demographic Data**

Factor	Participants
Gender	
Male	2
Female	10
Year of Experience	
First Year	9
Second Year	3
Race	
African-American	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	1
Hispanic	0
White	10
Other	1
Highest Degree	
Bachelors	10
Masters	2
Doctoral	0

Age Range	
21-29	8
30-39	1
40-49	1
50-59	2
Teaching Placement	
Elementary (K-6th)	1
Early Adolescence (7th-8th)	2
Secondary (9th-12th)	9
Program	
Alt. w/1-wk training	4
Alt. w/ 5-wks training	8
General Education Collaborations	
1 Teacher	1
2 Teachers	2
3 Teachers	3
4 Teachers	2
5 Teachers	1
6 Teachers	2
7 Teachers	0
8 Teachers	0
9 Teachers	1
Different Grades/Subjects Taught	
1 Grade/Subject	1
2 Grades/Subjects	2
3 Grades/Subjects	6
4 Grades/Subjects	3
% of Day in Gen. Ed. Classrooms	
1-24%	0
25-50%	3
51-75%	3
76-100%	6

Note: n = 12

Interviews

A convenience sample of 12 SETs completed a brief survey sharing demographic (Table 1) and contextual data (Table 2). They participated in two 30-45-minute semi-structured interviews with one of the two researchers, and a final member check (Seidman, 2006). Interviews were conducted using non-leading language and open-ended informal probes (Spradley, 1980; Carspecken, 1996) focused on the research questions (Yin, 2009). An interview protocol with reliability checks was employed to increase consistency across both researchers. Interviews followed a modified three-step process (Seidman, 2006): Interview one included a grand tour of open-ended questions, allowing the researchers to develop rapport with participants and frame the research; interview two included more detailed, focused probes around the research questions; and the member check consisted of sending verbatim transcriptions of recorded

interviews to each participant to elicit clarification, verification, and additional feedback (Miles et al., 2013).

Coding Process

Transcripts were analyzed using deductive and inductive coding approaches, following a pattern-matching logic (Anfara et al., 2002; Yin, 2009). Each researcher independently assigned raw codes to text segments, capturing significant phrases and ideas that emerged from the data.

Collaborative Coding. After the initial coding, the researchers convened to discuss the assigned codes and reach a consensus, ensuring that multiple perspectives were considered. The codes were categorized into major themes based on repeated patterns observed across the individual participant's verbatim interview transcripts.

Negative Case Analysis. To enhance the robustness of the findings, the researchers actively searched for negative cases (Anfara et al., 2002). This involved identifying instances within the data that contradicted or challenged the emerging themes, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences.

Triangulation. Triangulation of qualitative data points was conducted to converge the emerged themes across and within all participants related to the major findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2005). This process involved cross-referencing themes across participant interview data to ensure consistency and reliability.

Inter-Rater Reliability. The researchers evaluated the agreement among the qualitative themes. When disagreements occurred, the authors collaboratively reread the full interview transcripts, discussing their interpretations until a consensus was reached.

The coding process was systematic and collaborative, ensuring that the themes derived were both reliable and reflective of the participants' experiences. By employing a combination of deductive and inductive analysis, along with member checks and triangulation, researchers were able to produce a comprehensive understanding of the findings.

RESULTS

Demographics and Background

Demographic results indicated that participants spent between 25% and 100% of their day in general education classrooms (GECs). The 12 special education teachers (SETs) collectively worked with 42 general education teachers (GETs), averaging 3.5 GET collaborators per SET. Participants taught across up to four different subjects and/or grade levels (average 2.9) each day. In response to whether or not they had engaged in common

Table 2: **Percent of Participants Engaging in Teaching Practices in the General Education Classroom**

Teaching Activity	% of Participants
Respond to misbehavior	88.5
Established standards of conduct	73.1
Taught individual lesson	69.2
Communicate with Families	57.7
Monitored students' academic work	57.7
Taught lesson to small group	50
Modified student assessments	46.2
Graded student assessments	46.2
Planned for individual lesson	46.2
Planned for small group instruction	46.2
Planned for whole class instruction	46.2
Developed classroom routines, rules, and procedures	42.3
Taught whole class lesson	38.5
Organized, decorated, and set up a classroom space	38.5
Individualized materials, goals, and ways to instruct students at their level	38.5
Designed student assessments	30.8

Note: n=12

evidenced-based teaching practices while *in* GECs, as Table 2 shows, only five of the 16 surveyed practices had been enacted by at least half of the respondents.

Of those five practices, the top two related to concepts of classroom management, and two others referred to small group or 1:1 instruction, as opposed to co- or solo-leading a full classroom. Fewer than half of the participants indicated they had actively planned for any lesson (individual, small group, or whole class) or individualized materials, goals, or pedagogy, and less than one-third had designed assessments of student learning.

Interview Findings

The interview results revealed three central themes regarding the experiences of SETs in GECs: *An Impossible Task*, *Playing in Someone Else's Stadium*, and *A Separate Setting*. Each theme highlights the challenges and dynamics that early career SETs face in their roles, as well as their perceptions of collaboration with GETs.

An Impossible Task

In describing their schedules and daily roles and responsibilities, participants shared the perspective that they were tasked with an impossible undertaking. Specifically, nearly all participants described their days as "hectic" and "chaotic," noting that schedules changed "countless times" due to various factors such as student or teacher absences, transfer students, and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. One SET articulated, "*Every day looks different…I'm pushing in. I'm pulling out… my students may or may not be there*."

These scheduling challenges significantly impacted SET's ability to establish relationships with students and provide continuity in service delivery. Many expressed significant difficulty in fulfilling the legal obligations outlined in students' IEPs, often referred to as "minutes." For instance, one participant shared, *"As the school year went on, my caseload changed dramatically... I now have 33 students, and it is completely impossible to meet all their minutes."* Another added, *"It's impossible to provide all the services that are required based on their IEPs... it's not a matter of working harder… there's literally not that much time in a day."*

The majority of participants also reported being assigned extra school-wide responsibilities, such as "*supervising breakfast or lunch*," "*coordinating standardized testing*," "*substituting [in the GEC] because they don't have a sub*," and/or assisting and responding to student behavioral crises, further reducing their time for providing essential services. One participant estimated, "*50-60% of some days are spent on behavior calls for students... I calculated once and found I was called [out] once every 7 minutes*."

Nearly all participants expressed confusion regarding their day-to-day responsibilities and a lack of adequate support. As one SET noted, "*They're like, 'do inclusion' and 'co-teach' and that was it!*"

Someone Else's Stadium

The second theme that emerged from participant data was a persistent feeling of teaching in "someone else's classroom." One participant summarized,

> *"Sometimes your own agency is really hard to obtain when you're always playing in somebody else's stadium. You're never on your home field… I want agency to decide when and who I'm teaching my lesson to, but if I need to be constantly teaching in that teacher's space where their nexus of control is, it's really hard for me to assert my independence and agency as a teacher... I don't want to upset [the GET]…. It's a difficult thing to manage, to have two teachers teaching in the same spot."*

These perceptions of being "outsiders in the GEC," led to uncertainties as one participant said, "*What are we doing today? Where are we at in the plan?*" These uncertainties affected their interactions with students, leading one participant to admit, "*The kids can pick up on the fact that I don't always know what's going on in class…. and so, I'm kind of viewed like lesser there.*"

The majority of participants described deferring to GETs regarding how active and engaged they were in the GEC. For example, one participant explained that "*some of the general education teachers do share lesson plans with me and are more receptive to me making my own materials.*" Another said, "*I've had to learn how to really adapt [my role] to different teachers' teaching styles.*" This deference often stemmed from a fear of overstepping perceived boundaries, with one participant noting, "*Some teachers feel attacked or threatened...They just don't want to lose control of their classroom.*" Another participant remarked, "*I rarely feel able to speak up to talk to a teacher about their teaching style, even if I know that I should because I would advocate for my students better.*" Another perceived that they "*got*" to teach in GEC where the teachers were "*so comfortable with what [they're] doing, [they're] willing to take more risks both with me taking a bigger role.*"

Overall, the majority of participants described fear of overstepping boundaries and the perceived non-collaborative nature of the GET as the primary sources for their hesitation to co-plan or co-teach within GECs. None offered suggestions for how they might assert more agency.

A Separate Setting

All participants were inclusive educators (IE) and, therefore, scheduled to support students with legally protected special educational needs (SEN) within general educational classrooms (GECs). However, many found themselves opting to pull students into separate settings. Their reported rationales were that it felt more effective, it better met the students' needs, and that they perceived it to be the preference of the general education teacher (GET) despite potentially violating students' legal Individualized Education Plan (IEP) requirements.

Many participants viewed pulling students into separate settings as more effective, allowing them to feel more efficacious as educators. One participant shared, "*It's kind of a quiet and more supportive spot that I can help them [in].*" Another echoed this sentiment, stating, "*I pull them out to the small group [because]...I run my own systems there... I generally teach all the time.*" Another shared, "*my students are now getting way more from smaller groups*." Still, another participant reported that it was simply "*easier to pull [students] out.*"

A second prevailing view was that the demands of the GEC often did not align with students' needs. One participant articulated, "*I don't think you can teach math in a room where, you know, you've got an eight-year span of ability*." Another explained:

> *"I have a lot of questions about what to do with the students that just need support that can't be given inclusively, or maybe I'm just at a point where I don't see how it could be given inclusively...I've got a student who is 16, still working on identifying vowel sounds... to try to teach phonics or word recognition inside her English 9 class with everyone else, there would be humiliating and embarrassing ... I'm trying to figure out what it would look like to do right by all of the kids and keep them in that inclusive environment."*

A third rationale for serving students outside of the GEC was participant perception that GETs preferred this approach. Responses such as, "GETs want students pulled out...saying things like, "maybe we should separate your students", and being asked to pull students because "*there's a lot of behavior issues, … [from] my students*" were shared by all participants. Other participants cited the chaotic nature of GECs as a reason for pulling students out, stating, "*At least they will be in a smaller environment with less distractions*" and how the GETs challenges with "behavior management" created an environment that is not conducive to providing individualized instruction. One participant explained that she "*usually pull[s] out three [groups]...because of some behavior issues that happen in the classroom*", which interrupt her ability to provide targeted instruction to the students with SEN.

In a few cases, SETs recognized the benefits of the GEC. One participant suggested, "*it's much harder to justify pulling kids out when you realize the importance of being in the gen. ed classroom.*" Another elaborated:

> *"I've seen how beneficial it is for kids for two teachers to be in the room and for two teachers to really know the strengths and weaknesses of the students...And having two teachers... like one teacher is prodding and coaching the students that maybe don't necessarily participate in class... and being able to also switch it up and we both can take the lead at different times."*

Overall, while SETs were expected to provide services within GECs (per students' IEPs), they frequently found themselves opting for separate, more restrictive settings to meet their students' needs better, regardless of what is legally mandated within each student's IEP.

DISCUSSION

There is a pressing need for highly trained, competent special education teachers (SETs) in school districts across the United States, particularly in poverty-impacted communities (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Due to a shortage of traditionally certified SETs, high turnover rates, and insufficient candidates entering the profession, many districts rely on alternative certification (AC) systems to fill this gap (NCES, 2020). With many students with special educational needs (SEN) educated in general education classrooms (GECs), AC-SETs often spend significant time in these settings. While inclusive education (IE) has been shown to positively impact students in a multitude of ways (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Cole et al., 2019), its implementation frequently falls short. This study aimed to understand the experiences of early career AC-SETs in inclusive settings to identify supports and barriers to effective IE.

The 12 AC-SET participants interviewed spent at least part of their workday in GECs within poverty-impacted schools in a large Midwestern city. They described their experiences implementing IE while collaborating with an average of 3.5 general education teachers (GETs) across 2.9 subject areas and/or grade levels daily (Table 1). Their roles included providing substitute coverage, responding to behavioral support calls, and managing special education-specific tasks such as Individualized Education Program (IEP) writing. The experiences of these early career SETs reveal significant challenges that affect their self-efficacy with IE, professional development

needs, and the educational experiences of students with SEN. Key themes identified—an impossible task, feeling like they worked in "someone else's stadium," and a preference for separate settings—underscore the complexities of implementing inclusive education (IE) effectively and provide insight into nuanced recommendations to support inclusive education systems.

Complexity of Responsibilities

The theme of an "impossible task" highlights the often overwhelming and wide-reaching responsibilities assigned to SETs, often exacerbated by chaotic schedules and unclear role definitions. In addition to the roles typically associated with being a SET, participants were usually asked to respond to school-wide behavioral concerns, substitute teach, and coordinate testing. Compounding this, as one participant noted, "Every day looks different...I'm pushing in. I'm pulling out... my students may or may not be there." Most participants described themselves as "spread too thin," with "chaotic" schedules that limited opportunities for collaboration and engagement in standard classroom practices (Nilsen, 2020). In addition to hindering SETs' ability to fulfill their legal obligations under IEPs, these factors undermine their capacity to build meaningful relationships with students and GETs, can lead to role ambiguity diminished self-efficacy, and can contribute to feelings of inadequacy. These experiences may provide context for participants' responses regarding their engagement in common teaching practices while *in* GEC (Table 2). Only 5 of 16 possible practices had been engaged in by a majority of participants. Across the survey and interviews, most participants spent their time in the GEC in a "support" role, aligned with much of the current literature (e.g., Nilsen, 2020).

Collectively, these findings suggest a need for systemic changes within schools to provide more precise expectations and support structures for SETs and GETs to share the teaching and learning. Administrators must recognize the importance of and prioritize stable schedules created with students' IEPs in mind, along with consistent roles for each educator.

Agency, Collaboration, and Self-Efficacy

The sentiment that SETs are teaching in "someone else's stadium" reflects the struggle for agency that many SETs experience in IE. Participants expressed a desire for greater control over their teaching practices, as one participant articulated, "*I want agency to decide when and who I'm teaching my lesson to.*" However, many participants felt constrained by the dynamics of collaboration with GETs. They stated, "*If I need to be constantly teaching in that teacher's space where their nexus of control is, it's really hard for me to assert my independence and agency as a teacher...I don't want to upset [the GET].*" This desire for agency is critical, as it influences SETs' self-efficacy and perceived effectiveness in the classroom. As a field, it is vital to examine strategies for fostering a collaborative culture.

Responses from this study largely mirror the work of Paulsrud & Nilholm (2020), who found that personality match, equal distribution of power and responsibilities, and support from school leaders through clear messaging and professional development are essential. When participants perceived GETs as supportive and willing to share responsibilities, SETs felt more confident in their roles. One participant noted, "*The [GET] made sure that the kids know that I'm a teacher, that I am not their assistant.*" This highlights the importance of mutual respect and acknowledgment of each teacher's expertise in fostering a positive collaborative environment. Soliciting information about teacher attitudes, beliefs, and skillsets related to IE could positively impact its effectiveness.

Preference for Separate Settings

Nearly all participating SETs expressed a preference for pulling students into separate settings despite potential violations of IEPs. Participants felt that pulling students out was often more effective, with one stating, "*It's kind of a quiet and more supportive spot that I can help them get their homework done.*" Others believed they could better meet students' needs in smaller groups or because they perceived the "gap" between the rigor of IEP goals and classroom instruction to be too large. Still others explained that this space increased their sense of agency, saying, "*I run my own systems there...I generally teach all the time*." This preference indicates a disconnect between the ideals of inclusive education and the realities faced in GECs.

As with previous findings above, this suggests that both SET and GET would benefit from professional development (PD) and ongoing support that builds and sustains collaborative and inclusive practices. Additionally, schools may alleviate some of this burden by ensuring that SETs have limited GET partnerships for which they are responsible, along with ample time and a school-wide expectation for collaboration.

Efficacy

Sharma, Loreman, and Formin (2011) identified three areas where inclusive educators must have high levels of self-efficacy: knowledge of effective teaching practices,

the ability to foster a culture of belonging, and skills for effective collaboration. This builds on previous research showing that positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion (Heyder et al., 2020; Yada et al., 2022) and a strong sense of self-efficacy—defined as the belief that one can achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 1977; 2000) - are integral to the success of IE. Participants overwhelmingly described limited success in developing the knowledge, skills, practices, collaborative opportunities, and efficacy needed to feel effective within GECs.

Recommendations

While IE intends to provide students with SEN access to the general curriculum, current AC-SETs participating in this study described a lack of knowledge, skills, efficacy, collaboration, and opportunities to develop each to support this goal adequately. Schools must evaluate the effectiveness of their inclusive structures and support both internal systems and educator training. Implementing collaborative and flexible scheduling for co-planning instruction, along with small group instruction within GECs, could be a starting place to bridge the gap between inclusion and individualized support in separate settings. Providing mentors who have special education-specific experiences across the continuum of placements could likewise make a significant impact (Cornelius et al., 2019).

Additionally, training and assistance for all educators and administrators on what it takes to implement IE effectively is crucial. Key areas of training include scheduling, data-based pedagogical choices, IEP development, and collaborative planning. Co-teaching, as one of many evidence-based practices in IE, requires significant training, time, and skill development for all involved. When preparation and support programs strategically integrate the skills, practices, and mindsets of inclusive education for administrators, special and general education teachers - including how to be effective collaborators - students may be more likely to receive the high-quality IE they deserve.

Given the challenges perceived by participating SETs—such as lack of agency and perceived status as lesser-than-pre- and in-service support should include training on self-advocacy. Many SETs described hesitancies related to *socialized niceness*, which prioritizes harmony over assertiveness (Castagno, 2019; Galman et al., 2019).

Implications of Socialized Niceness

Socialized niceness can manifest in various ways within educational settings, particularly among SETs who may feel pressured to conform to social norms that prioritize harmony over assertiveness, to essentially just "play in someone else's stadium." As a construct, socialized niceness can serve to perpetuate rather than disrupt inequitable or ineffective practices that often negatively impact groups that have been systemically marginalized. This can lead to situations where SETs hesitate to voice concerns, advocate for their students (as mentioned directly by a participant), or challenge ineffective practices. For instance, a SET may remove a student from the GEC, regardless of what the IEP dictates, because the GET "wants students pulled out," thereby maintaining comfort. In another example, if a SET notices that a GET is not implementing accommodations outlined in an IEP, it may choose to remain silent to avoid conflict. SETs, as well as their GET and administrative colleagues, especially those serving in communities with large percentages of students of color and/or who, are impacted by poverty, may benefit from being taught to recognize, interrogate, and work through socialized niceness in order to best advocate for and ensure the most effective educational experiences with and for their students with and without SEN.

For example, GETs, SETs, and administrators should be provided with opportunities to learn about socialized niceness. Readings, discussing common classroom scenarios, role-playing, and rehearsing can all help each party identify and then disrupt interactions or practices that, through socialized niceness, may sustain an undesirable status quo (e.g., ineffective IE practices). After that, schools can establish regular meetings where SETs work together and collaborate with their IE colleagues to work through problems of practice to foster a solutions-oriented and collaborative culture. By addressing socialized niceness directly and with practice and support, schools can create a more inclusive environment where both SETs and GETs feel effective in their teaching and empowered to advocate for their students.

Final Thoughts

The challenges presented by participants raise the question: How well are schools and practitioners prepared to enact the legalities, practicalities, and moralities of IE effectively? Overall, the findings indicate that neither SETs nor their GET counterparts nor school leaders in poverty-impacted schools serving a high percentage of students of color are fully prepared. SETs and GETs, as well as administrators must develop the mindset and skills to enact IE effectively. Preparation, professional development, coaching, and support programs must strategically integrate skills, practices, and mindsets of inclusive education for all practitioners involved. Only then will students

with special education needs receive the high-quality IE they deserve.

LIMITATIONS

This study was limited to a small sampling of AC-SETs from a single Midwestern state, and therefore, the results may not be generalizable. A second limitation included the absence of data explicitly measuring self-efficacy or attitudes toward inclusion, which could have helped shape the impact of this research. A third limitation is the reliance on self-reporting from participants. Self-reported data relies on memory and recall, both of which can be influenced by various factors, including but not limited to time, context, emotions, motivation, and social norms. Further, memory bias can lead to inaccurate or incomplete responses, as participants forget, misremember, exaggerate, or omit certain details or events. A final limitation related to this study is the absence of perspective from the general educators with whom participants engaged in IE. This is a vitally important area for further examination.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study, based on the responses of 12 early-career AC-SETs working in inclusive education (IE), offer several important implications and insights for the field of inclusive education. Overall, these findings support and expand previous research indicating that while IE can have important and impactful positive effects on students with and without special education needs (SEN) (as well as SET and GET), it far too often falls short of its potential.

Specifically, this study sheds light on the intricate and nuanced challenges experienced by special education teachers (SETs) in general education classrooms (GECs), emphasizing the need for more precise role delineation, more intentional collaborative efforts between SETs and GETs, and increased administrative training and support in IE. This training will enable school leaders to create and support systems and structures that facilitate and foster a more inclusive educational environment for *all* learners. Addressing these challenges is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of inclusive education practices and ensuring the provision of quality services for students with and without special education needs in the general education classroom. Our students deserve nothing less.

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