Teacher Perspectives on Inclusion Support and Full Membership for Students with Disabilities

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Prior to 1975, students with disabilities (SWD) in the United States were mainly educated in classrooms separate from their peers. The Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), required equal educational access for these students. Equal access has evolved into the idea of full inclusion in general education classrooms with collaboration between general and special education teachers. In a deeper sense, the intent of IDEA had moral underpinnings, which was to ensure full school membership for students having the greatest needs. According to Black and Burello (2012), full membership for all students, including SWD, focuses on respect and relationship building. Placing all students at the center of education while embracing and acknowledging their differences helps reduce stigma and marginalization and facilitates learning. Unfortunately, despite American public educational policy expectations for schools to become increasingly inclusive, in the 40 years since inclusion practices began, there appears to be minimal progress for SWD in gaining full membership in the manner that Black and Burrello advocate.

In an effort to understand why inclusion has met with such limited success, the first author of this work conducted a qualitative study of a full-inclusion program implemented in a small, urban, southeastern United States middle school during the 2009-10 academic year. This study focused on understanding the program implementation process by exploring the perspectives of general and special education teachers through observations, interviews, and document analysis. The findings revealed that problems began at the onset of implementation and that special education student success rates quickly began to plummet. Additionally, evidence suggested an increase in teacher conflict resulting from a lack of role understanding between general and special teachers. This study provided insight into new and continuing challenges inherent in implementing inclusion programs in educational settings. Changing administrator and educator mindset toward SWD through sustained professional development and
providing access and membership in schools are challenges that need to be addressed. Moreover, defining principal and teacher roles in the collaboration process, as related to inclusion and SWD, as well as achieving fidelity when implementing inclusion programs, also emerged as key components for success.

Keywords: full membership, inclusion, special education, values, ethics, collaboration, professional development
**Introduction**

There are three significant aspects of inclusion and full membership that will be addressed in this study: 

(a) values, labels, and assumptions; (b) systemic barriers; and (c) scripts of disability. These three constructs, which will be defined in the **Context of the Study** section, emerged through a review of the literature pertaining to special education and inclusion. Prior to a contextual discussion of these three constructs, the authors provide an overview of the origins of special education and inclusion in the United States.

Inclusion, for students with disabilities (SWD), grew out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Banks, 2006). One primary purpose of inclusion was to place SWD in an educational environment considered the least restrictive setting. Wright and Wright (2009) defined inclusion as “an effort to make sure students with disabilities go to school with their friends and neighbors, while also receiving the ‘specially designed instruction and support’ they need to achieve high standards and succeed as learners” (p. 427). Ideally, students would receive accommodations and/or modifications specific to their educational needs. Since 1995, various researchers have reported essential practices for making inclusion work should include communication, collaboration, cooperative teaching, professional development, and responsible scheduling. Despite this focus on the tools of inclusion, the neediest students, with the most potential for growth, are being overlooked and left behind.

Black and Burello (2010) provide some insight as to why students with disabilities (SWD) continue to be marginalized and not reach their full potential. In order for inclusion to be successful, the civil right of free and appropriate public education (FAPE) “might be interpreted as an ethical imperative rather than simply a legal mandate that demands compliance through potential sanctions” (p.6). Moreover, general education and special education teachers need to embrace the notion of “full membership.” Full membership exists when individual differences are acknowledged and considered in the interest of student learning, but are not used in ways that marginalize and exclude. Full membership means recognizing and centering differences, while demanding high expectations for all students.
Schools should be a place where close trusting relationships with adults and peers create a climate for personal growth and intellectual development. Inclusion includes participation in activities within and outside of the classroom. Teachers need to help students feel engaged and develop a sense of belonging. This idea of full membership via inclusion is one of the most important components for preventing drop-outs (Hagborg, 1998).

In the 35 years since education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) was mandated by the Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act, PL 94-142, providing support and success to SWD in a general education setting generally has had more negative than positive outcomes. The proposed reasons for this lack of success have been many and varied, mostly focusing on issues of compliance and insufficient or ineffective tools to implement inclusion. For example, research suggests that most general education teachers have not received the necessary training to work with SWD. Classrooms have been private worlds where teachers ruled with complete autonomy and isolation. Norms of privacy have developed (Ripley, 1997). General education teachers often felt that having other individuals in the classroom encroached upon this locus of control. As one special education teacher who participated in this study shared, “I often feel like nothing more than a glorified paraprofessional.”

These examples are but a few highlights of the challenges and ethical issues surrounding inclusive education for SWD. In an era of political, economic, and educational change that appears to be of global proportions, ethics and values sensitivity have begun to play an important part in acceptance and understanding of the changes taking place. Begley (2010) stated that our increasingly diverse society makes sensitivity to the values of others important, in regards to education. A key to developing this sensitivity is dialogue, which, unfortunately is often a missing link in the collaborative processes essential for successful inclusion (Smith & Leonard, 2005). Student diversity, increasing numbers of SWD, and a desire to ensure success for all stakeholders necessitates educator collaboration, ongoing dialogue, and an understanding of differing values and perspectives. The ethical implication is clear: the words and actions of educators leave lasting impressions and shape the character of many students (Program Goal X, n.d.).
It is apparent that collaboration is a necessary component for achieving full membership for educational stakeholders, including parents and their children with disabilities. Without authentic collaboration, parents are not able to fully participate in the life of the school and their children’s education. Collaboration should reflect a learner-centered approach if schools are to prepare and connect SWD to the larger community in a global society. Moreover, all pertinent educational stakeholders contribute knowledge and experience that can help counteract the many and varied barriers to full membership (Black & Burello, 2010). The Council for Exceptional Children’s (CEC) website provides a set of twelve professional and ethical principles and practice standards. Of importance and direct relationship to the practice of collaboration and full membership are: (a) promoting meaningful and inclusive participation with individuals with exceptionalities in their school and communities; (b) practicing collegiality with others who are providing services to individuals with exceptionalities; and (c) advocating for professional conditions and resources that will improve learning outcomes of individuals with exceptionalities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2010). Starratt’s (2012) ethical position that teachers should teach to nurture the growth of all students in order for them to become fully participating adults in a global society aligns with the CEC principle of promoting meaningful, inclusive participation and full membership. Additionally, to achieve a fully inclusive school environment would also require that general and special education teachers be mindful of what Branson (2010) describes as the ethic of doing right by others, putting aside one’s own gains to focus on those of others. Ware (2002) mentioned the need to change our way of thinking from students having a disability to students having diverse abilities. In other words, a disability is not a deficit.

As already indicated in this discussion, several of the principles of what Black and Burello (2010) describe as full membership are noticeably parallel to the standards and practices cited by the CEC as well as the positions reflected in the writings of Starratt and Branson. For example, the principle of recognizing and centering differences with high expectation for all students correlates with that of the CEC standard of promoting meaningful and inclusive participation of SWD. Associated with this standard is Black and Burello’s (2010) principle for developing schools where SWD are placed with peers.
in natural proportion to peers and are not segregated. Starratt’s (2012) ethical rationale for preparing students to be contributing adults in a global society aligns with Black and Burello’s (2010) principle of starting from difference, moving to community and then the common increases the potential for SWD to become those contributing adults in an increasingly complex society.

**Context of the Study**

Perhaps it will take a paradigm shift in the mindset of all stakeholders to truly understand the concept of authentic inclusion. Most definitely, it will take administrators, general education teachers, and special education teachers involving themselves in the change process. Learning where problems still lie in order to develop appropriate professional development, shift attitudes, and understand how personal values factor into providing educational benefit and full membership access for SWD is the importance of this study. Embracing community and full membership in schools must focus on learner centered outcomes if inclusion is to go beyond the classroom to promote quality of life experiences for all stakeholders (Black & Burello, 2012).

The school district, located in the southeastern United States where this qualitative study was conducted, implemented mandatory full-inclusion services for students with disabilities in its high schools at the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year. Full inclusion was mandated due to the limited number of highly-qualified, content-area certified special education teachers employed in the district as required by law to teach credit bearing courses that would result in graduating with a high school diploma. The change to full inclusion took place with little or no teacher training or preplanning. Students with disabilities were assigned to classrooms after all general education students had been placed, without regard for their individual learning or behavioral needs. In addition, SWD were often placed with the weakest teachers. Special education teachers’ schedules and caseloads were not considered and collaboration time was not scheduled. This caused strife among many of the general and special education teachers. At the same time that high schools made the change to full inclusion, middle schools were encouraged to implement the practice as well. The underlying reasoning was to better prepare middle
school children for life as high school full-inclusion students. There appeared to be little or no consideration of providing opportunities for full membership in the schools.

The middle school in this study developed an implementation plan for full inclusion at the end of the 2008-2009 school year. As the primary developer of the plan, the lead researcher in this study worked closely with the principal to create joint collaboration time for general and special education teachers as well as support scheduling for students. According to reports from the school’s special education instructional specialist, the implementation of the 2009-2010 full-inclusion plan was not successful. This was purportedly the result of general and special education teachers refusing to collaborate and work together. Since the lead researcher was involved in the development of the full-inclusion plan, she was interested in learning why implementation was unsuccessful. Hearing that inclusion was not working for students and teachers, she wanted to discover what the problems were, what changes needed to be made, what ethical issues may have compromised the success of the plan, and what insights general and special education teachers could give for improvement. The overall goal was to help prevent problems that other middle schools in the district might encounter as they began to implement the full inclusion model.

Black and Burello’s (2010) discussion of full membership identified the following 10 features or principles which should be present in fully inclusive schools:

- starting from difference and moving to community and the common;
- parents and guardians being able to fully participate in the life of the school;
- recognizing the differences, but also demanding high expectations for all students;
- developing schools where students with IEPs are placed with peers in natural proportion and are not in clustered programs of like students;
- communities choosing to define disability as a central feature of the human experience;
- being prepared to center purpose and work against bureaucratic inertia; principles of deliberative democracy invoked by school leaders;
- having access to quality teachers with moral literacy;
- the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to promote high expectation for students;
- principles of deliberative democracy are invoked by school leaders;
- having access to quality teachers. (pp.2-6)

These principles informed the researchers’ understanding of full membership and their decision to focus on three significant conceptual aspects of inclusion addressed in this study: (a) values, labels, and assumptions; (b) systemic barriers; and (c) scripts of disability. The first concept of inclusion, values, labels and assumptions are those broad constructs of disability that limit our ability to see beyond what medical and psychological perspectives have created. It is the assumption that SWD have natural limitations and differences (Ware, 2002). One example of values, labels and assumptions that stands out in the lead researcher’s memory pertains to her days as a special education teacher. One particular student, labeled ED (emotionally disabled), was to be placed in classes as a full-inclusion student. Because of the student’s “label” and the teachers’ assumption that he would be a behavior problem, he was inadvertently set up for failure. Preferential seating was used to keep control of his behavior in the classroom, which resulted in his being segregated from his peers and additional behavioral outbursts as he attempted to gain teacher attention. Eventually, a specialized system of behavioral support was put into place where the student was placed in a self-contained setting and expected to learn academic and social skills in a one-on-one setting without other adult or peer interactions.

The second concept addressed in this study, systemic barriers, relate to barriers set up by the school community or culture. These barriers, developed over time as a result of attitudes, labels, and assumptions imprinted on societal members, view SWD as defective or damaged, being less than whole. One example of a systemic barrier, that the lead researcher experienced, related to a special college level program designed specifically for students with moderate cognitive functioning levels. This program, designed to provide students with an opportunity to experience post-secondary education, revolved around their specific needs, allowed them to participate in on-campus courses, and gave them a chance to grow both academically and experientially. Because these students did not earn an actual degree, even after completion of the program at the university, they were not allowed to walk across the stage with the
other university graduates to receive recognition. In effect, they were denied this “rite of passage” to adulthood because of their disability, a systemic practice widely accepted and uncontested.

The third concept, script of disability, is a label or description, medically or psychologically given or perceived that institutionally identifies individuals as having some type of deficiency or disability. Scripts are formed or written from medical and deficient models of disability. An example of a script of disability the lead researcher recently experienced involved a principal and a student who was acting out during summer remediation classes. Because of this behavior and the way the student “looked” to the principal, he (the principal) took the student to the special education instructional specialist to “do something with, he is one of yours.” The instructional specialist immediately told the principal that the student was not in special education. The principal’s response was, “he must be, he acts like he is.” In other words, the principal had a preconceived script for how special education students behave.

Informed by these three significant conceptual aspects of inclusion, the following questions guided the research:

1. What values, labels, and assumptions are reflected in the general and special education teachers’ practice regarding inclusion?
2. Are there any systemic barriers to full membership evident in the school?
3. Are there any scripts of disability reflected in the school?

**Methodology**

**Setting**

The urban middle school where this study took place was located in the southeastern region of the United States. To attend this school, students completed an application process and met specific requirements for entrance. Requirements for acceptance included having a grade point average of 2.0 or higher, a 92% attendance rate, and an A, B, or C in conduct. There were approximately 403 students of which 50 (around 12%) were considered to have disabilities. Twenty-three educators, of which seven were certified special education teachers, and 12 were general education teachers teaching core-content subjects, served these students. Of the remaining four teachers, one taught physical education, one taught music, one
taught library science, and one taught technology and computer science. The school had a 99% African-American population with 93% of the school population on free or reduced lunch, reflecting its high number of students falling within the confines a low socio-economic status.

Participants

General and special education teachers agreed to participate in this study. The school principal determined the selection of the participants and she provided their schedules. This removed the opportunity to randomly select participants.

Of the six participants, teachers number two, three, and four were inclusion teachers in science/social studies, math, and English/reading, in that order for grades six through eight. (Throughout the remainder of this document, they will be referred to as SPED #2, SPED #3, or SPED #4 respectively.) Together they had a total of 50 years of experience. SPED #3 had five years of experience and recently came to the district from a neighboring one. He aspired to be an administrator. SPED #2 had been an inclusion teacher her entire career. SPED #4, also a school coach, had been a resource teacher for several years and planned to retire soon. Teachers number one, five, and six taught general education classes in 8th grade science, 8th grade social studies, and 8th grade English in that order. (Throughout the remainder of this document, these teachers will be referred to as GED #1, GED #5, and GED #6.) Together they had a total of approximately 50 years of experience in the field of education. GED #5 was the only one with any actual special education experience as she taught SWD for her first five years in education. A fourth general education teacher declined the interview. She was the general education teacher paired with SPED #3, which did not allow a comparison or contrast to teacher opinions in the area of math. SPED #2 and GED #5 had been an inclusion pair for several years. They had the opportunity to develop a meaningful, working relationship, even serving as co-chairpersons on several school-based committees. General education teacher number six participated in the study by special request due to the rumors that her inclusion experience was negative and that the SWD in her class had been rescheduled to a resource setting with Sped #4, the inclusion teacher originally assigned to work with her.
When full inclusion began at the start of the 2009-2010 school year, SPED #4 received no prior notice of the change from his resource teacher position the previous year to that of being a full-inclusion teacher, until the first day of school. He learned about it when SPED #3 shouted it out across the library during a faculty meeting. He and GED #6 were paired together. Their inclusion pairing had since been dissolved due to irreconcilable differences and students’ failure to be successful in that setting. Special education teacher number two was also an inclusion partner with GED #1. Perspectives of teachers from the remaining grade levels were not included due to not obtaining permission from the principal for interviews.

**Data Collection Methods**

After emailing the principal for permission to conduct the study, then meeting with her to explain its purpose and obtain permission to conduct interviews, the lead researcher sent an email to the general and special education teachers who were going to participate. The purpose of the email was to re-introduce herself and make them aware of the upcoming visits. Teachers were interviewed in their respective classrooms except for GED #5 and GED #6. Due to time constraints, multiple school closures for inclement weather days, and the lead researcher’s job duties, the alternate method of an email questionnaire was utilized to gather interview response data.

Interview data of general and special education teachers involved in the inclusion setting were utilized to gain individual perspectives on inclusion in general education classrooms and to determine what ethical considerations may have been involved in decisions or ideas presented by those perspectives. Four teachers; one general and three special educators, were interviewed face to face in their classroom. Each interview averaged 45 minutes. Participants knew the researcher so rapport had already been established. At the onset of each interview, the lead researcher provided a brief introduction to the study and ensured participant anonymity and the confidentiality of responses.

Pre-developed guiding questions were presented for teachers to answer. The initial questions were developed from published literature that discussed areas related to inclusion practices in the general education setting and the idea of full membership for SWD. Additional follow-up questions were asked
for clarity or more information as the need arose. Two general education teachers were interviewed via email due to inclement weather causing school closures and the lead researcher’s job requirements at mandatory meetings and educational emergencies. While there were additional personnel involved in the implementation of full inclusion in this school setting, such as paraprofessionals and speech therapists, due to time constraints they were not included in this study.

Document analysis, including a review of the students’ disabilities, schedules, report card grades, and statewide testing results was also conducted. This information was used to correlate success and changes made for some students to a resource setting due to their lack of success in the inclusion setting.

**Limitations**

The information gathered was limited in that the researchers were not given access to all of the general education teachers working with SWD at the school site. Interviewing these individuals may have provided additional insight into problems or effective practices that make inclusion successful. Continued research related to class sizes and the actual number of SWD in those classes would have been helpful. Interviewing via email did not provide an opportunity to delve deeper into answers two of the participants provided. A follow-up phone conference would have provided clarification and more in-depth information. Conducting observations in the inclusion setting may have provided a better understanding and help connect responses given from both sides of the perspective.

**Data Analysis**

The principles of full membership (Black & Burello, 2010) informed the analysis of data collected in this study. Inductive data analysis began during the interview process and continued throughout the transcription of interview data and field notes. Coding involved analyzing all general and special education teachers’ interview response data. Interview data were clustered according to the three research questions pertaining to *values, labels, and assumptions, systemic barriers, and scripts of discipline*. Student assessment data were analyzed also. All stages of the data analysis process allowed the researchers to see emerging themes and patterns of responses related to educational and ethical issues that
needed to be addressed in order to achieve full membership in schools and improve inclusionary practices that benefit all students, including those with disabilities.

**Research Findings**

Mandatory inclusion practices in this school district, located in the southeastern region of the United States, were implemented in all high schools at the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year. Schools in this district made the change to full inclusion with little to no teacher training or preparation. Students were scheduled into classrooms without considering their learning or behavioral issues, special education teacher schedules, caseloads, or planning time for collaboration. Students with disabilities were generally the last ones to be scheduled and often placed with the weakest teachers. This caused strife among many general and special education teachers. At the same time that full inclusion in all high schools was mandated, this district encouraged its middle schools to implement inclusive practices. The major reasoning was to prepare students for full inclusion when they entered high school in the future.

The middle school in this study developed a plan to implement full inclusion at the start of the 2009-2010 school year. Being a principal developer of this plan, the lead researcher worked closely with the school’s administrator to develop schedules and collaborative planning times for general and special education teachers. According to reports from the school’s special education instructional specialist, full inclusion efforts had not worked. This was reported to be the result of general and special education teachers refusing to collaborate. The findings of this study, which are presented and discussed according to each research question, may help shed light on this problem and, hopefully, alleviate future problems for other middle schools in the district as they begin to implement a full inclusion model to support education in the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities.

**Values, Labels, and Assumptions**

Research question one focused on the values, labels, and assumptions reflected in teachers’ practices regarding inclusion. One overarching idea both groups of teachers agreed upon became apparent very quickly in the data analysis process. Inclusion, for both sets of teachers, means providing a “gateway” to the general education curriculum by “bridging the gap” through small class sizes, appropriate
modification of the curriculum, and the all important collaboration and communication between both
general and special education personnel. Teachers interviewed indicated that students should be
considered “ours” not “yours or mine” and that special education students should be made to feel as part
of the class. As SPED #2 stated: “[Inclusion means] providing an environment where all children, general
and special education, can be educated together, adjusting, and accommodating as needed, where all
children come away with some form of success whether academic or social.” Special education teacher
number three mentioned that “inclusion practices take a child from ‘isolation’ and [feeling] ashamed to
being integrated into a regular classroom to where a child feels that they have the same opportunities as a
general education student.” It was evident that both general and special education teachers’ espoused
values were reflective of the principles of full membership; however, data suggested that these values
were not always commensurate with practice. This was evidenced in comments noted during the
interviews. For example, GED #6 felt that SWD needed too much attention while GED #1 mentioned that
inclusion practices were acceptable as long as students did not have any behavioral issues. Further to this
inconsistency between espoused values and those reflected in practice was the statement of SPED #3,
who indicated that inclusive education should be the goal for all children and that working together was
the key. In reality, this teacher’s work day was sometimes spent performing administrative tasks,
conducting personal business on a cell phone, and leaving campus for personal reasons.

Even with this espoused overarching ideology regarding inclusion support there were numerous
problem areas identified that hurt inclusion practices and thwarted the notion of full membership. One
major concern was the large class sizes including the number of special education students in each class.
Other concerns included the lack of collaboration or planning time, along with the state and IDEIA
mandated documentation to provide evidence of collaboration and student progress. Several teachers in
both areas of expertise commented that teacher compatibility and teaching philosophies needed to be
considered as well as having respect for each other and their positions.
**Systemic Barriers to Full Membership**

Data analysis identified systemic barriers to full membership as well. Systemic barriers in schools are related to policies, procedures, and or practices that may unfairly exclude certain groups from taking part. Special education teacher number four’s experience as an inclusion teacher found him being left in charge of the class on numerous occasions while the general education teacher left to do other things. This may be a symptom of a systemic barrier. Oftentimes, it is claimed that general education teachers do not understand the role of the special educator in an inclusive setting. In the incidence described in this study, SPED #4 felt like a substitute teacher or paraprofessional while GED #6 felt as if inclusion was “forced and intrusive.”

Another example of a systemic barrier may be reflected in the fact that, as stated previously in the methodology section of this study, the principal provided a schedule of the general education teachers’ planning times to avoid classroom disruption during lessons. It was interesting that the principal indicated that the special education teachers’ schedules were flexible so they could meet with the lead researcher at any time. This begs a question about the classes these special education teachers were assigned to and which children might not get the support they needed that day. Moreover, this would be an explicit denial of the students’ free and appropriate public education (FAPE) according to IDEA and their respective IEPs. Not only was FAPE a concern in this instance, but what becomes of the opportunity for full membership? Without the support of those highly qualified special education teachers, the learning potential and full membership of students is compressed. Black and Burello (2010) see this as a marginalized practice that treats SWD as less than those who are not. It should be noted here that the lead researcher ensured that she made contact during the special education teachers’ planning times so as not to disrupt the support provided to student in the general education classrooms.

Another systemic barrier example that was noted came from GED #6. She stated, “I am not special ed trained.” This systemic barrier, according to Ware’s (2002) position, may have developed due to the general education teacher’s perception that she lacked the expertise necessary to support the SWD in her class. However, in order to ensure full membership for students, one does not need to be specially
trained to work with students, even those having a disability. There was also evidence that general and special education teachers viewed inclusion practices differently. For example, SPED #3 stated, “Everybody has to be on board,” while SPED #2 mentioned, “They are not my children or your children, they are our children” and this is not a “your room/my room issue.” The idea of being independent classrooms has become more the idea of independent communities rather than being interdependent, which would lead to more inclusive support for SWD. According to Ware (2002) such disparate views of inclusion serves to create systemic barriers, creating a climate ripe for failure. Instead of viewing inclusion as “a marriage, a partnership” (SPED#3), some of the teachers expressed very different views. Unfortunately, if independent classes and parallel systems continue to be in place, then full membership will always elude those needing it most.

Scripts of Disability

Additional issues of concern that teachers shared were highly reflective of scripts of disability. A script of disability is the labeling of a student by his or her identified or perceived disability which can result in the denial of acceptance, inclusion, or full membership in the school-community (Black & Burello, 2012). Scripts have come about due to the influence of institutionalized ideas about the natural limitations of those who are different, defective, or damaged. Therefore, students are forced to conform to the script we perceive them to have or that they have been labeled with (Ware, 2002). Both groups of teachers made statements that labeled special education students, forcing SWD to conform to the idea that they were both different and deficient compared to their general education student counterparts. For example, GED #6 stated, “Students with disabilities take away time with general education students, everyone suffers.” Special education teacher number four felt that, “Students with disabilities need more specialized instruction that can best be provided in a separate setting. Inclusion takes away from all.” General education teacher number one said, “Having the special education teacher work with SWD gives me more time to work with others.” Full membership for SWD may not be occurring due to these values, assumptions, and scripts of disability.
There was general consensus among general and special education teachers regarding how to address the needs of special education students in the general education classroom. Most felt that inclusion was not for all students based on two specific reasons. One was behavior and the other reason was cognitive level. Special education teacher number two passionately stated, “It is unrealistic to put a student that is working on a third grade level into an eighth grade classroom learning the Pythagorean Theorem. Come on, and that is what they are being taught. Even as an inclusion teacher there is just so much watering down you can do to the dad-gum theorem.” This is a prime example of how scripts of disability relating to students can lower expectations, denying the opportunity for full membership. These lowered expectations, when practiced over time, deter full membership in the greater community as well.

Teachers who were interviewed repeated the “watering down” concept of teaching the curriculum to special education students was repeated at least two other times. It would be of importance to know the origin of this belief. Special education is not about watering down the curriculum, but about sorting through it to identify the skills necessary for improving educational outcomes for SWD, and then providing the specialized instruction and alternative strategies for those outcomes to occur. General and special education teachers who do not keep high expectations for SWD hold these students back from gaining full membership and acceptance with their peers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Interestingly, even though both groups of teachers agreed on the aspects of full membership, there was a lack of consensus regarding the best approach to providing inclusive education. Additionally, the general and special education teachers were aware of problem areas needing to be considered when attempting to successfully implement an inclusion program. The problem areas that emerged in the study reflected commonly cited challenges to full membership and successful inclusion: (a) values, labels, and assumptions, (b) scripts of disability, and (c) systemic barriers. It is the authors’ contention that professional development is key to addressing these challenges.

With regards to professional development and training, both groups of teachers were asked if they felt adequately prepared to deal with SWD in the classroom. The most experienced teachers, felt
adequately prepared and claimed they did not need more professional development, while the least experienced teachers indicated that they would benefit from additional training. However, in keeping with Black and Burello’s (2010) full membership principles, SWD need access to quality teachers who are morally literate and have the knowledge, dispositions, and skills to promote high expectations for all students. Being able to work together for the greater good of the school by recognizing differences, while holding all students accountable for learning are desirable outcomes for collaborative relationships learned through professional development opportunities.

Professional development that targets uncovering teachers’ and administrators’ underlying values and their impact on inclusion practices may help to address the problems of systemic barriers and scripts of disability. In this study for example, all teachers seemed to agree that the general education teacher was responsible for “delivering the content” and teaching to all the students. On the other hand, when asked about the role of the special education teacher, which has been defined as being an expert in adapting curriculum to student needs, and providing alternative strategies to learning and appropriate accommodations, no one from either group included these ideas in their responses. In other words, it appeared that neither general nor special education teachers clearly understood the role of an inclusion teacher in a general education classroom, setting up a systemic barrier. The idea of using a learner-centered approach to create an environment where students are nurtured and able to learn was missing.

It would seem that inclusion is here to stay. The legislature continues to mandate changes and update requirements, with school districts continuing to comply but providing little support or training to ensure success. While inclusion is mandated it should not be just a compliance issue; rather, the notion of inclusion might have better success if it were viewed as the opportunity to provide full membership to SWD, as is their right as human beings. Many SWD are able to be served and can learn in the general education classroom, but only when general and special education teachers are provided with the knowledge and support they need through embedded and sustained professional development will inclusion programs have the chance to be successful. Professional development that addresses the principles of full membership where all students have access to high quality teachers, programs, and
activities is the responsibility of the educational community. Unfortunately, the experienced teachers’ responses in this study indicated that they did not need to learn anything else; this is grave cause for concern if inclusion is to be successful practice and students with disabilities are to achieve. According to Black and Burello (2010), the idea of full membership means that all stakeholders must be willing to “disrupt values, labels, and assumptions that sustain non-membership” (p. 1), engage in conversations relating to disability, and overcome the clinical descriptors that have resulted in scripts of disability so that all children will be able to become full participants in society.

General and special education teachers should be provided, and willing to continue through professional development. Problems with effective inclusion practices include not having time to develop teacher rapport, a lack of guidance in learning job expectations, a lack of knowledge for what inclusion means and a lack of time for planning plus collaboration continues to be an “echo in the caverns” of special education mandates. Could it be that systemic barriers are the most at fault for the lack of full-membership available for our students with disabilities? Teachers themselves appear to know what is needed to make inclusion practices successful. While successful inclusion practices rotate around strong administrators and their beliefs in the success of SWD, teachers need more training in effective methods for working together, sharing responsibilities, personal values and ethics regarding SWD, and supporting children. A change in the mindset of general educators regarding their classrooms with gentle guidance through the change process, reflecting on the right of full membership that should overarch all decisions made regarding SWD could effectively bring about a “new dawn” in the practice of inclusion for all students and stakeholders. Focusing on following a learner-centered approach to inclusive education may be challenging but is necessary if we are to prepare all students for their rightful place in this global society.

Additional research is needed to better understand how effective collaboration practices may uncover values and assumptions that work against full membership while changing the scripts of disability to scripts of full membership. Developing methods for teacher-chosen, inclusion-focused professional in-services that support full membership for SWD would improve special and general
education teachers’ relationships and help to alleviate systemic barriers that are in place, changing the school community culture as it relates to those barriers. Additionally, teacher preparation programs should include methods for collaboration and teaching SWD with a focus on changing the scripts of disability to one of diverse abilities.

Furthermore, training in ethics and the principles of full membership is imperative. Learning how personal values are reflections of teaching should be incorporated into not only teacher preparation programs, but professional development activities as well. Incorporating effective models for inclusive education that focus on full membership, participation, and learning may provide the tools necessary to provide opportunities for “learning from difference to understanding who all of us are as a community of individuals that are continuously in relationship with other human beings” (Black & Burello, 2010, p.1).

Creating schools where everyone is valued as equally important is needed to ensure that all are successful (Brower & Balch, 2005). To that end, the charge for educators is to re-imagine conceptions of disability in order to “interrupt the narratives of normalcy” (Ware, 2002, p. 155). This challenge needs to be embraced collectively and collaboratively thorough sustained and meaningful professional development that has meeting the needs of students with diverse abilities as a central feature of the school community. Then, and only then, may students with disabilities have equal access to full membership in schools.

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