LESSONS LEARNED FROM IDEA: ARE TEACHERS UTILIZING SPECIAL EDUCATION PRACTICES AND TECHNIQUES AS A WAY TO IMPROVE DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN ALL CLASSROOMS?

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the extent which general education teachers are utilizing special education techniques as a part of their classroom instructional practices. It also aims to ascertain if there is a difference in use of such practices among teachers in Title I and non-Title I schools. Utilizing qualitative interviews, our findings suggest teachers are currently not employing many special education practices, but, they believe they would be beneficial in their classrooms due to the differing abilities found in the general education populations. Training and perceived time to implement practices were listed as potential inhibitors of incorporation.

Keywords: IDEA, Differentiated Instruction, Title I

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LESSONS LEARNED FROM IDEA

One of the contemporary aims of compulsory public education in America is to provide an educational opportunity for all children (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, the idea of educational opportunity regarding equity for all has a turbulent history which has left a large achievement gap among certain demographics of students (Murphy, 2010; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Arguably, individuals of color, students with disabilities, English language learners, and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have received an unequal level of education (Hehir, 2002; Lareau, 2002; Noguera, 2003). During the past century all levels of leadership, from local to federal, have proposed and/or changed policy (reforms) many times trying to increase achievement and alleviate the gaps between learners (Murphy, 2010; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Individual school leaders often look to costly consultants, curriculum producers, and other strategies, such as reduction of classroom size and more hours added to the school day, as a means of increasing achievement (Morsbach Sweeney, 2015; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Yet, looking at the monetary costs of such interventions, one has to account that not all populations of schools have access to such resources (Hehir, 2002). Utilizing resources already present in the school or district is a way for improvement to occur without the expenditures that the above mentioned interventions incur.

With the passing of two landmark bills, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004), schools legally have to respond to the needs of, and employ experts for the education of students with disabilities. By the very nature of IDEA (2004), special education teachers employ some of the best and most inclusive teaching practices, focusing exclusively on what individual students of all abilities and backgrounds need for success. As it is almost 45 years after legislations aimed to protect the rights of students with disabilities, and 50 years after the Coleman Report (1966) inspired educational sociologists to turn towards the impacts of educational processes and school systems on opportunity (Sadovink & Coughlan, 2016), it is prudent to ascertain if school leaders have learned to utilized their experts as ways to improve the education of all students, regardless of ability and societal factors.
A great deal of research has already been carried out on various aspects of both general/special education, and ways to close the achievement gap (Murphy, 2010). Furthermore, although a couple of special education practices have successfully been applied to schools on the whole school level (macro), little academic inquiry has examined the possibility that special education practices could exist as techniques for the education of non-disabled students in the complex situations and changing contexts of present day classrooms (micro). Not contending general and special education teachers do not work well together in some regards, just highlighting evidence that they are often considered separate entities within schools. A division reiterated by special education departments having their own administrators, budgets (including salary) that are paid out of separate funding sources, and even some areas having their own special districts which send special education teachers into general education districts to work with the individuals with disabilities (“What,” 2016). Just like students receiving special education services, students without disabilities have differing needs and can fail for a lack of individualization, appropriate teaching techniques, and effective interventions. An entirely new paradigm emphasizing all students as individuals, and utilizing more practices from special education models as a means of improving student achievement in the general classroom setting is needed.

This study sought to contribute to the development of school leaders’ ability to effectively lead complex settings by utilizing the expert resources (special education teachers) already found within their own schools and districts. The following questions guided the inquiry:

1. To what extent are general education teachers utilizing special education practices in their population of individual with disabilities?
2. How do teachers’ special education practices compare and contrast in Title I (high concentration of lower socioeconomic status students) and non-Title I schools?

**Literature Review**

Traditionally, general and special education have been considered separate fields of research and practice. Even though these two entities have mostly been treated differently, there is a need to integrate their knowledge of successful pursuits, as both
have the same general purpose: to improve the academic achievement of students. This section looks at a brief history of education pathways, discusses the impact of socioeconomic status of students, and examines several special education techniques as means to improve the outcome of general education students’ performance in the classroom and the contributions of leadership.

**Education Pathways**

Historically, students with disabilities in the U.S. were often unable to attend their local public schools until federal protections were passed in 1975. In fact, at that time only one out of five students with disabilities was able to attend public school (National Council on Disability, 2000) since many states gave individual boards authority to exclude anyone they felt necessary (Weber, 1992). Even though the transition from excluding certain students to including them remains a point of contention, courts have continued to uphold the legal rights of students with disabilities to a free and appropriate education. As such, special education research and teaching has been focused on the best interventions and techniques employed to help students succeed (J. K. Brown, 2012; T. M. Brown, 2012; Conley, Ghavami, VonOhlen, & Foulkes, 2007; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Mitchell, 2014; Parker, 2009; Vallas, 2009). However, success can be affected by a wide-variety of factors. One of the main characteristics of students with lower achievement is that of having lower levels of socioeconomic status.

**Socioeconomic Status**

A family’s socioeconomic status (SES) greatly impacts student’s chances for success (Lareau, 2002; Mullen, 2010). The combination of family income, parental occupations, and family structure can either positively or negatively influence academic achievement in students and in their future choices (Lareau, 2002; Mullen, 2010; Schmid, 2001). Children of lower SES are more likely to attend schools with fewer resources and less qualified and experienced teachers (Barton, 2004; Farkas, 2003). Furthermore, children of lower SES have an increased likelihood to be over identified as needing special education services (Harry & Klingner, 2014). With mind to the above, utilizing the expertise of special educators, especially in schools of lower SES students, has the potential to highly impact learning.
Special Education Techniques

The most referenced special education based programs that are utilized by schools for general education students are the Response to Intervention (RTI) approach and the Positive Behavior Support (PBS) approach. While RTI is implemented mainly by teachers and specialists, the PBS framework is used by teachers, administrators, and parents with all students in the school (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Techniques found in the classroom are very different in intent from the previously mentioned school-wide interventions. While catching struggling children early and striving for behaviors consistent with expectations are important, the techniques utilized in the classroom for learning are invaluable to all students.

School-wide techniques.

Response to Intervention (RTI).

RTI, supported by IDEA, is a method to identify at-risk students in need of special education services or students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). This method can ensure better academic achievement for all students through prevention and remediation (LeNeveu, 2014; Vaughn & Swanson, 2015). RTI aims to identify students through universal screening in the general education classrooms, where those that are struggling are provided increasing levels, known as tiers, of interventions until they are able to access grade level curriculum, or get referred to special education for further evaluation ("What is RTI," n.d.). While the lowest tier is considered high quality research based classroom instruction, many of the interventions are provided in pullout settings (Fitzell, 2011).

Shinn (2007) and LeNeveu (2014) contend that the RTI model’s basis was in the transmission of special education practices to all students. Indeed, Vaughn and Swanson (2015) highlight this strategy as “one of the most successful examples of special education research influencing general education organization, instruction, and practice” (p. 12). Shinn (2007) argues that RTI is an important element for screening and progress monitoring for all students. He explores the scientific evidence for operationalizing the educational need component using curriculum-based measurement, and proposes the use of RTI as a part of the decision making process as a preventive intervention for all
students. Moreover, LeNeveu (2014) sought to determine the critical issues in the successful implementation and maintenance of RTI. He explained how RTI has helped Texas to integrate special education into the general education domain in order to improve all students’ academic success. Specifically, LeNeveu (2014) recognized that the method and expertise of special education teachers can help all struggling students, but is a challenge to school leaders (both principals and teachers). The study concludes that RTI is a good practice for academic improvement, however, it recognizes that training teachers is a primary obstacle for a successful RTI implementation (LeNeveu, 2014), as well as leadership commitment. These studies are an important starting point for a discussion about the application of special education practices for all students in the general education classroom, but it is also evidences to the lack of support in the implementation of special education practices. Beyond the steps of recognizing the benefits of special education practices on all students, more research in this area is needed “for extending understanding of RTI [and others] procedures, classroom practices, and student outcomes” (Vaughn & Swanson, 2015, p. 20).

Positive Behavior Supports (PBS).

PBS has been called several different forms (e.g., PBS, PBIS, SWPBS, Sw-PBIS). For the sake of its most common use in the literature, this paper will continue to use PBS. Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1997) legitimized PBS systems throughout the special educational realm when the policy mentioned positive behavioral interventions and supports as practice (PBIS, 2016). PBS is a school-wide teaching approach with the aim of increasing behaviors conducive to learning while extinguishing and preventing problem behaviors in the same manner that any subject is taught (SWPBIS, 2016). Positive behavior supports shift discipline from reactive to proactive as schools focus on preferred behaviors. Sugai and Horner (2006) report that PBS leads to better student behavior with fewer detentions and suspensions, less bullying reported, and increased grades.
Classroom practices.

Lewis and Doorlag (2006) explained the differences between accommodations (accessibility concerns such as door, toilets, ramps, etc…), techniques (memory task, phonics sounds, motivational system, visual material), and instructional practices (reading exercises focused on codes, fluency, or comprehension, speech therapy) typically used with special education students. While there are as many ideas as there are students in schools, Simpson (2005) found evidence based practices (EBP), defined as interventions, teaching programs, or instructional strategies empirically demonstrated, produced consistent positive results. EBPs were further found to meaningfully improve student outcomes (Torres, Farley, & Cook, 2012).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is defined as an educational framework that promotes the development of diverse learning environments so individuals with different backgrounds, learning styles, abilities, and disabilities receive appropriate instruction (Rose & Meyer, 2006). Implementation of UDL reduces the barriers and provides opportunities for all students to access, participate in, and progress through the education curriculum (Rose & Meyer, 2006).

UDL is based on three principles: multiple means of representation providing learners various ways of acquiring knowledge; multiple means of action and expression that provides learners alternative ways for demonstrating their knowledge and skills; and multiple means of engagement that increase learner’s interest and motivation, and offers appropriate challenges (Rose & Meyer, 2006). UDL principles can be used in many areas of education in different ways. For example, IOS devices include photography, video, internet access, multi-touch input, and numerous of applications that teachers can use with their curriculum knowledge to create engaging educational opportunities (McMahon & Walker, 2014). Vitelli (2015) suggests that UDL based instruction improves learning outcomes of students with and without disabilities.
Differentiated Instruction (DI).

Differentiated instruction is a process to approach teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class. The intent of DI is to maximize each student’s growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is, and assisting in the learning process. To differentiate instruction is to recognize students varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning, interests, and to react responsively (Holloway, 2000). Classroom teaching is a blend of whole-class, group and individual instruction. DI is a teaching theory based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse students in classrooms. The model of DI requires teachers to be flexible in their approach to teaching and adjusting the curriculum and presentation of information to learners rather than expecting students to modify themselves for the curriculum (Huebner, 2010).

Peer-Mediated Instruction & Intervention (PMII).

Peer-mediated instruction and intervention is used to teach typically developing peers’ ways to interact with and help learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) acquire new social skills by increasing social opportunities within natural environments. A strength of PMII is that peers are systematically taught ways of engaging learners with ASD in social interactions in both teacher-directed and learner-initiated activities (English, Goldstein, Shafer, & Kaczmarek, 1997; Odom & Strain, 1986). PMII targets social skills like responding to others, reciprocity, understanding others, and interacting with others or in groups. PMII has been used effectively in clinical and school-based settings across preschool to high school age groups. Practically applied, PMII is intended to be used as part of the daily curriculum through a balance of teacher-directed and learner-initiated interactions and activities (Odom et al., 1999).

Theoretical Framework

We are not dissecting the structures that might have created the current school conditions, rather, we are utilizing a functionalist perspective, believing that schools are a means of encouraging social unity as a way to enhance democratic society. If society is able to better educate all students, then participation in the political and economic systems
will be greatly enhanced (Collins, 1971). According to Collins, whether explicitly known or not, most reform efforts utilize functionalism. Following the assumptions of Bennett and LeCompte (1990), schooling should address students in the intellectual, political, social, and economic arenas. Intellectually, students need access to basic cognitive skills, learn the ability to relay their knowledge, as well as developing higher-order thinking skills (Sadovnik & Coughlin, 2016). Politically, schools are meant to develop citizens that are able to participate in the nation’s political systems. Although Sadovnik and Coughlin (2016) points out that part of the political venue is for the assimilation of diverse culture groups into a common group, it is our hope that schools will promote a common group that will not be intolerant of other’s culture, rather, will educate and celebrate differences as part of our commonalities. Socially, schooling should enable students the means to function within a society that relies upon the ability to effectively communicate with one another. Finally, economically, schools should be producing students that are able to fit into the labor system of society (Sadovnik & Coughlin, 2016). Understanding these assumptions for education, the importance of educating all is the difference for a student in being able to participate in society versus not being a part of society.

Additionally, we are also concerned to determine any differences in teacher responses between lower-socioeconomic schools (SES) and higher-SES schools. Much in the same vein as Lareau’s (2016) research on childrearing differences amongst families of differing economic means. The thought follows that teachers working amongst buildings of differing economic means children might also have noticeable behaviors and thoughts that could continue to transmit advantage to a certain SES schools while denying it from others.

Methods

Qualitative research method enables the researcher to develop a detail data from high involvement in the actual experiences (Creswell, 2013). It is also an effective method involving purposeful use for describing, explaining, and interpreting collected data (Williams, 2007). Therefore, this study used qualitative interviews from general education and special education teachers working in low-SES and high-SES schools.
We employed a semi-structured interview protocol aimed at ascertaining the level at which teachers employ various techniques, feelings on learners of various abilities, and what entities they currently consider for “expert” help. The interview protocol was constructed based on lines of questioning looking for background information, opinions, knowledge, and feelings (Merriam, 2009). Open-ended interview questions were utilized to collect the data. Open coding was utilized as a means of determining similar themes present throughout the interviews, and once categories were identified and evidence sorted. Lastly, the evidence was compared to our guiding research questions. For the trustworthiness of the study, peer analysis checking was utilized. The overall research process was checked by an experienced researcher.

**Setting and participants**

During preliminary data collection the goal was to conduct at least eight voiced interview (either in person or over the phone/internet). This goal was altered to allow several of the surveys to be taken via email. In total we ended up with eight completed interviews represented in preliminary findings. We purposefully (Creswell, 2013) identified public school teachers that were already connected to us as a means of convenience (Merriam, 2007) and trust in responses. However, it should be known that one of our researchers is a school insider in one of the cities, and in a position of power over some of the interviewed teachers. Feeling that the positioning should not affect responses for our line of questioning, the interviews were analyzed. The teachers sampled were located in several different Midwestern cities and were divided into lower-SES and higher-SES schools based off Title I identifications. However, when all the data was analyzed we ended up with only one interview that involved a non-Title I school. Furthermore, at this point we did not regulate the inclusion of general education teachers or special education teachers in any way, including by numbers of years taught or gender.
Table 1. Participants (N=8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year of experience (average)</th>
<th>Schools’ socioeconomic status</th>
<th>Teachers’ classification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>General Ed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Special Ed.</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>12, 23 (17.5)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennings</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1, 2, 4, 29 (9)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>13.625</td>
<td>7</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Limitations

This study was undertaken in a short amount of time in which to conduct interviews. Furthermore, there was a shortage of information regarding non-Title I schools. In order to better compare the experiences from a socioeconomic lens additional interviews will need to be conducted. Finally, relooking at the power dynamics of interviewer/interviewees and eliminating those where there is a positions of power present and replacing them with new interviews would result in stronger confidence of findings.

Findings

In a cursory application of interview questions, we found that the majority of our interviewees became teachers due to their own personal experiences with teachers, and the desire to help/give back. Teachers discussed their biggest challenges readily, and for all teachers but one, multiple challenges were listed. Challenges fell fairly evenly between the following categories: lack of resources (most responses), student’s differing abilities, student apathy, and classroom management issues. When asked about feelings of preparation based on academic training for working with students of varying abilities,
all of the general education teachers that answered agreed that their training did very little to help them feel prepared for the actual classroom setting. All referenced personal experience in the classroom as the best tool. Responses on receiving adequate help in the classroom were split exactly in half. The general teachers that answered the interview questions for the researcher in a position of power all responded they felt adequately provided for. However, the other four teachers relayed that they felt help was not adequate without their own action. Discussing who/what resources they rely on for instructional help, again, there was a consensus amongst the categories. General education teachers equally responded that they rely on themselves or on paraprofessionals (aides) for instructional help. Two of the teachers also cited outside school resources. One outlier responded if they were not able to figure it out themselves they would seek out a good special education teacher. Interestingly, this was also the one respondent from the non-Title I school that generally felt more confident in the ability to work with learners of varying abilities. Several teachers reported that they do include some techniques that probably originated because of special education in their general education classrooms. Of these techniques, several listed behavior modification as impetus of technique, and two stated altering instruction to try to fit the learner, or trying everything possible to get students to learn. Two reported they did not have the training to do so. The singular interviewed special education teacher reported that their knowledge is beneficial for all kind of students, however, special educators need help from educational leaders to legitimize their expertise and to promote the inclusion of special education practices as a means for achieving better academic outcomes in complex situations. Perhaps most tellingly, in agreement, every general education teacher that was asked if they would consider incorporating special educational techniques into their classroom and why responded they would like to, as they felt the techniques would be beneficial to their classroom’s populations of different ability learners.

While general education teachers do apply some special education practices in populations of non-disabled students, they do not feel confident in their ability to use them properly, or necessarily recognize techniques that could help them in what situations. There was a complete acknowledgement of the desire to utilize special educational techniques in their general education classrooms, but a lack of dissemination
of said techniques. Overall, due to the changing ideas of classrooms, general education teachers would like to use special education techniques, but are not adequately trained in order to do so.

Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

Although more general education teachers are expected to accommodate students with disabilities and/or populations with varying abilities in today’s classrooms, university and staff development programs for general education teachers are often doing little to prepare these teachers compared to those in special education programs (Rosenzweig, 2009). Cameron and Cook (2007) pointed out that in-service general education teachers reported taking 1.5 courses on average in special education content or inclusion as a focus. Special education in-service teachers took approximately 11 courses (Cameron & Cook, 2007). In addition, even pre-service teachers who were about to complete their master’s degree believed that they were not learning the skills that they need to successfully teach in today’s inclusive classroom environment (Rosenzweig, 2009).

As a means of meeting the needs of the teachers and students of varying ability, the utilization of special education techniques in the education of non-disabled students potentially holds far reaching implications. First and foremost, special education techniques were derived from the mandate to educate all children regardless of ability and background. If this same ideal becomes the basis of all teacher’s thoughts, then all students will be looked at as individuals capable of learning. Utilizing the knowledge and expertise of special education teachers is not dependent on the socioeconomic level of schools. There is not the need to bring in outside consultants and experts as they are already a part of the school. Furthermore, it could potentially be a cost savings to schools as referrals to special education services should go down requiring less testing services. A lower population of special education students allows special education teachers to focus on the truly disabled.

Furthermore, having leadership in schools that supports research based interventions and the impacts of different societal factors on students should be a priority for school boards. (Boardman, Argüelles, Vaughn, Hughes, & Klingner, 2005).
Populating classrooms with high quality teachers should be a priority for administrators, as teachers have the most contact with students and are the main implementers of practice in schools (Boardman et al., 2005). As mentioned above, because of policy, every classroom in the U. S. has contact with a student with disabilities. It is essential for general education teachers to be knowledgeable on the practices that are used for students with disabilities, not only for the benefit of students with disabilities, but also for the benefit of students without disabilities.

A few precursor studies have proposed the utilization of special education practices in order to improve the academic achievement for all students (Boscardin, 2007; LeNeveu, 2014; Severance, 1997; Shinn, 2007; Vaughn & Swanson, 2015). Identified as a pioneer, Severance (1997) showed how principals can build a unified system where the regular and special education can be integrated. The author sought to identify critical tasks for job effectiveness for administrators. Principals recognized that it was important to “create [a] collaborative bridge between regular education and special education” (Severance, 1997, p. 59) as a part of administrators’ leadership. In the same vein, Boscardin (2007) advocates for unification of special and general education through collaborative leadership in order to employ special education knowledge and skills for the benefit of all students. In her design, “special educators assumed the role of experts, conferring with general educators after observing an academic difficulty” (2007, p. 195). However, Severance (1997) and Boscardin (2007) did not give much detail on the results or identify specific practices that special and regular education can share to improve the performance.

In the future more research needs to be undertaken regarding our second research question to determine the differences between Title I and non-Title I schools. Furthermore, determining a proper balance between special educators, general educators, and number of each type of schools should be looked at to determine when one could say that there is a trend. Ultimately, it is our hope that this study informs future policies pertaining to social justice and the education of all students regardless of need, as well as creates more inquiry into this previously minimally researched area.
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U. S. Const. amend. XIV


