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Exceptional Lives: Teachers' Stories

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Abstract

This phenomenological research study explored the perceptions of educators regarding the education of students with low incidence exceptionalities through the use of semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the study was to discover the realities of teaching students with low incidence exceptionalities and what, if any, barriers exist in providing the best education possible for these children. All of the participants were educators with experience ranging from Kindergarten to Grade 12 and lived in Ontario, Canada. From the study emerged eight themes: school entry and leaving, assessment, placement, resources, teacher training, advocacy, independence and friendship. All of the participants raised concerns about the lack of support they receive in providing for the complex and multi-faceted needs of these children.

Keywords

low incidence exceptionality, education, teacher preparedness, community supports

1. Introduction

As a result of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Parliament of Canada, 1982) the rights and freedoms of all Canadians are established in the constitution. Section 15 of the Charter stipulates that every person is equal and must not be discriminated against based on race, religion, national or ethnic origin, colour, sex, age or physical or mental disability. The Human Rights Code (1990) further promises that every person has the right to be free of discrimination based on the grounds of disability or perceived disability. The Code also states that individuals must be accommodated in the most appropriate manner that respects their dignity, referred to as the duty to accommodate, but does not include undue hardship. Public organizations are responsible and held accountable to the terms of the Code, including Education and Community Services in the province (Province of Ontario, 1990).

1.1 The Educational Setting

Since the introduction of Bill 82 in Ontario (Education Act, 1982), an equitable education for all has been mandated in the province. Prior to the introduction of the bill, from 1970 to 1980, schools placed children into programs they deemed appropriate, often without input from the parents.

During the 1970s the integration of students with special needs into regular classrooms, or mainstreaming, was based on the principle of the least restrictive environment (Nirje, 1969). The least restrictive environment is a principle stating that students with disabilities are to be educated in settings

as close to regular classrooms as possible (Rueda, Gallego, & Moll, 2000). Consequently, the education of students with disabilities must, as closely as possible mirror the education of typically achieving students. In this model, students earned the right to be included in the regular classroom for at least one class to see if they could handle the challenge.

During the next decade, educators became aware of many challenges characteristic of the integration-mainstreaming model. These included long delays for assessments required prior to placement decisions, disagreements between parents and professionals with respect to identification and placement decisions, difficulties with eligibility criteria for services and prohibitive costs associated with special education services (Konza, 2008).

Partly as a result of these trials the education landscape across Canada has converted into an inclusive model for educating all students, including those with exceptional needs. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2009, p. 4) described inclusive education as "education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students". The inclusion of all students includes students with low incidence exceptional needs.

The majority of students with exceptional needs, 80% to 90%, are referred to as having high incidence needs. These students include those with gifts and talents, as well as those with mild and moderate intellectual/developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, behaviour disorders, emotional problems and communication problems (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015).

Students with low incidence exceptionalities are in the minority, comprising the remaining 10% to 20% of students with special needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). These students include those with visual and hearing impairments, physical and health impairments, pervasive developmental disorders, traumatic brain injury, and/or severe disabilities such as moderate to severe intellectual/developmental disabilities. Students with low incidence exceptionalities often require specialized assistance such as specialists and teaching assistants, as well as unique teaching accommodations and modified interventions (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). These students may be formally identified by an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC; Education Act, Reg. 181/98) or informally deemed to require services by their school. In recent years more students are informally identified due to the lengthy wait times for the process to occur (Bennett, Dworek, & Weber, 2013). The responsibility of the IPRC is to make two decisions: identification and placement of the student in question.

The Ontario Ministry of Education advises that the preferred placement for all students is within an inclusive classroom whenever possible. In 2005, the Ministry of Education released *Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6*. This document laid the foundation for inclusionary classrooms with the principles of universal design and differentiated instruction. This was to allow access for all students to regular classrooms by the means of effective teaching practices.

In 2006, the Ministry released *Special Education Transformation: The Report of the Co-Chairs with Recommendations of the Working Table on Special Education*. The report restated that the regular inclusive classroom should be the placement of choice for students with exceptionalities. Where deemed necessary, segregated classrooms must concentrate on intervention and must be of a limited amount of time.

The inclusive education movement was built largely on the social model of disability, where society is the primary factor that contributes to a disability with systemic barriers, negative attitudes, and a lack of acceptance. The theory postulates that an-impairment becomes a disability as a result of the exclusion of persons based on their individual differences (Oliver, 1990; Thomas, Gradwell, & Markham, 2012). The inclusion of children with special needs in regular classrooms may be viewed as removing barriers to participation (Bowe, 1978). Oliver (1999) suggests that people, for whom the social model applies, have impairment and as a result endure subjugation and identify as disabled. He does not account for persons with cognitive challenges whereby identity of self as a disabled person has no meaning. The social restrictions of a disability are not the same experience for all persons regardless of their impairment.

Most children with low incidence exceptionalities, such as developmental disabilities, are identified before entering the school system and are involved with Community and Social Services in the pre-school years and again when they leave the school system (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2004). The Services and Supports to Promote the Social Inclusion of Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act (2008) defines a person with a developmental disability as a person who has prescribed significant limitations in cognitive and adaptive functioning (Province of Ontario, 2004). The limitations occur by the age of 18, are life-long and affect activities such as personal care, language skills learning abilities, or the ability to live independently as an adult. During their school years teachers and social service workers collaborate on the assessment and programming needs of these students.

This research study investigated the perceptions of teachers regarding the education of students with low incidence exceptionalities.

1.2 Research Questions

What are teachers' perspectives on the realities of impairment, disability and handicap? What are teachers' perceptions of the realities of teaching students with low incidence exceptionalities? What, if any, barriers do they face in providing the best education possible for these children? This phenomenological research study attempted to give voice to this group of educators.

2. Method

An exploratory phenomenological study was undertaken, with ethical approval from the Nipissing University Research Ethics Board, to discover the experiences of parents and teachers of students who have low incidence exceptionalities. Part A of the study explored parents' perceptions of the reality of schooling a child with low incidence exceptionality. This article includes Part B of the study that describes educators' perceptions of home, school and community experiences for these students and

their families.

To better understand the challenges of teaching a child who is disabled, it was imperative to gain an understanding of the meaning and essence of the experience as lived by the educators who experienced the phenomena (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Questions were generated for a semi-structured interview to explore the relationships teachers had with their students, parents of students, and support agencies with respect to input into programs and delivery of services.

Six people were recruited to participate in Part B of the study located in northern Ontario. The participants were comprised of consultants, teachers and support workers of students who have low incidence exceptionalities. They were asked to think of a student with a low incidence exceptionality or a segregated special needs classroom. The students in question that they were to discuss were chronologically 20 years of age or younger, were developmentally disabled, and ranged from primary to post secondary school. Of this group of six participants, two were consultants, two were teachers directly working with students and two were Educational Assistants (EAs). All participants signed letters of informed consent, were willing to share their stories and indicated that they were pleased that someone showed an interest in this area of education.

2.1 Participants

All of the participants were from Ontario, ranging from the northwestern to the northeastern regions. There were two consultants who worked at the board level to support classroom teachers and teachers in segregated settings who instruct students with low incidence exceptionalities. The first consultant was Helen who had been with her board for over 10 years working in several capacities, but who did not have a permanent position with the board. Jamie, the second consultant in the study, had been with her board for over 15 years having served as a teacher in a segregated classroom for 12 of those years. Both of the consultants had a master's degree in education.

One of the two teachers, Alice, was teaching in a segregated classroom while Mark was teaching in an inclusive classroom. They each had an educational assistant in their classroom who agreed to be interviewed for this study. Dennis was one of the EAs who assisted Alice in the segregated classroom and Carla was the sole EA in the inclusive classroom with Mark.

3. Result

In general, the findings of this study illustrate that educators of students with low incidence exceptionalities feel dedicated to their role but often feel frustrated and ignored. The education of these students was said to be complex and demanding and resources are spread thin. Relationships with parents and caregivers were found to be rewarding but at other times tenuous and random.

Additionally, community services are stretched thin and the demands for meeting eligibility criteria are often confusing, frustrating, and exhausting for educators (as well as parents). The following section contains the findings of the study offered according to the themes that emerged from the study: school entry and leaving, assessment, placement, teacher training, resources, advocacy, independence and

relationships.

3.1 School Entry and Leaving

There was general agreement among the participants regarding the issues of school entry and leaving. The students in question entered school at aged 5 into Senior Kindergarten, a year older than typically achieving students, without the help from an educational assistant. All of the students had been involved with social services during their pre-school years and had participated in developmental programs. Many were in foster care; Helen explains, since many of my students are linked into Developmental Services, I have seen many different types of interventions for many different types of reasons. All of my students in foster family situations were already in care when they became my students—some have had short stints back with their biological parents (none of which were successful to date).

The entry into pre-school often is a challenge for families and teachers alike, even with the support of social services. Social workers meet with school personnel to share information about the child in question to prepare the teacher to facilitate a smooth transition from home to school.

Similarly, the exit from high school requires careful transition planning between social services and the school, in preparation for life after school. Compulsory school leaving in Ontario is at age 21, but there are few things available for the students to do at work or leisure after they finish high school. Sheltered workshops or living arrangements have strict criteria for eligibility and sometimes have lengthy waiting lists. “It is disheartening that after they finish high school there is nothing for them to do in their community”, explained Jamie. Helen agreed there are few things available to them after they finish high school. The placements are based on the needs of the students but they don’t take those high needs students.

Meeting eligibility criteria often requires a formal assessment of the student’s capabilities. Some parents, often disabled themselves, do not want their child to take part in assessments they do not understand or trust. This in turn creates a difficult situation for the teacher as she/he is trying to facilitate an easy transition from high school to community.

Community resources are spread thin and work placements are difficult to acquire. There are a limited number of options available to people with developmental disabilities and “the students with higher needs do not tend to be chosen; many are at home with nothing to do”, said Helen—She added that for those who come “from out of town” the situation is dire. These kids graduate at age 21 and then sit at home because there’s nothing for them to do. Community links are important but there are few resources from which to bridge.

3.2 Assessment

Issues in assessment run the gamut from little or no access to assessment, to parents denying assessment for their child. Many of the parents are dealing with a developmental disability themselves. For teachers the question of “a person’s ability to carry out the tasks for daily living and meeting their needs independently” are paramount Jamie advised. It is imperative that the risks are evident and that

we program appropriately to meet a student's needs. She added, "when a student is functioning at a level below the first percentile the environment doesn't account for all of it".

The range of student abilities requires individualized support for complex and demanding needs. Alice, who taught in the segregated program, described her class.

I had a huge range of abilities in my class ranging from a student who was functioning academically at a pre-Kindergarten level, non-verbal, needed a wheelchair, personal care, physio and help eating-to one who was functioning academically at a grade 3 level with major emotional issues and who was a flight risk.

It is important to determine the abilities of individual students to answer important questions, suggested Helen, one of the special education consultants. "What evidence is there to indicate the level of a person's ability to carry out the tasks for daily living and meet their needs independently? Where do they fall on the scale of independent living? Do they need personal care?" These questions are answered through the use of formalized assessments administered by qualified personnel such as school psychologists.

Yet access to school psychologists and other qualified persons is limited. School boards do not have adequate funding for psychological assessments (Psychology Matters, 2014) and many parents cannot afford to pay for private assessments that range from $1500 to $5000. Without proper assessment, students may go unidentified and under-served. "You can't know where you are going unless you know where you are" (Edutopia, 2015). But when the assessments have too narrow of a focus or when they are not aligned with the curriculum, they may offer little guidance for programming accommodations, modifications or alternative expectations for these students.

It is extremely important to accommodate and to modify expectations to allow people with low incidence exceptionalities to reach their full potential, to be as independent as possible and to become included and contributing members of their community. "For people with developmental disabilities this can be a daunting task", concluded Carla, an EA in the inclusive classroom.

3.3 Placement

Students with low incidence exceptionalities such as a developmental disability require accommodations or modifications to their environment to be successful. "Some need highly structured environments, quiet environments, environments that provide visual supports or that reduce visual stimuli, environments that allow for regular repetition of skill practice, environments that allow for authentic practice", advised Helen.

Alice, who teaches in a segregated class, shared the story of a young boy who was severely to profoundly impaired who one day began to tap at a bliss machine in a meaningful way (A bliss machine is an augmentative communication device used by nonverbal persons to express thoughts, needs, wants and ideas). "No one had previously realized that he had any connections with the world around him". In none of his assessments had it become apparent that he possessed the awareness of others or the ability to interact. Without the specialized setting tailored to the needs of the student, it might not have

surfaced that the student possessed this level of cognitive ability.

Kids with developmental disabilities have unique needs that may not be served within the confines of a regular classroom. The needed facilities, such as a kitchen, shower, or toilet, are not included in the regular classroom (and instruction on life skills requires these facilities). Trying to teach how to make a sandwich or brush your teeth in a regular classroom also would "interrupt the learning of others" and be very distracting to other students who are in academic programs. Students who do not have a cognitive disability do not require this type of curriculum and tend to fare better in a regular classroom setting.

The topic of inclusion arose from the discussion of placement of students. One of the participants, Helen, a consultant, offered her interpretation of inclusion and who she thought would be best served in a regular classroom.

Inclusion to me means that students gain a true sense of belonging and are receiving programming that meets their needs. So, if those two requirements can be met in a regular classroom setting, then that student should be in that setting. The "illusion of inclusion" is a very dangerous thing—I have seen students integrated into regular class settings so they can be seen as more "normal" but at a cost of not receiving the programming that would give them the functional skills they need for daily living and at a cost of not developing any lasting peer connections (i.e., student in school until the age of 21, taking similar classes multiple times, and the peer group changes from year to year). To have a student integrated into a regular class that does not meet their needs academically or socially is doing a disservice to that student.

Considering the current climate in education in Ontario is to provide inclusion for students whenever possible, I asked Helen about the possibly discriminatory practice of the segregation of abilities into a small class setting and the effects on the students. She replied, the small class setting is as inclusive as an academic, applied, or locally developed classroom. Our "regular classrooms" and our education system are not very inclusive by their very nature. Our pathways divide our students into different streams and they go to academic, applied, locally developed, transitional, vocational or life skills classes. With existing pathways we are segregating everyone into a pathway, not just our life skills students.

"From grade 4 onward the divide widens of typically achieving students who do not want to be involved anymore with kids who have developmental disabilities", cautioned Jamie, another consultant for special education. They cease to have much in common as typically achieving students mature and naturally change their interests while the developmentally disabled kids do not. "They end up isolated and segregated within the regular classroom anyway. Kids play with kids who have similar interests", she clarified. "Some of the activities we do to teach life skills would cause them to be rejected further. Sometimes we need privacy", referring to the need to teach such things as personal hygiene and toileting. Typically achieving students are involved in their own education and activities, as they should be.

"We always have those kids who like to help out but not usually because they are trying to establish friendships but because they want a placement for public service", continued Jamie. "And sending behavioural students to be educated with developmental kids is not a good idea. It is viewed as a punishment and wreaks havoc on their self-esteem". Students with behavioural problems are on occasion placed with kids with low incidence exceptionalities. The students have widely different strengths and needs leading to low inclusionary practice and inappropriate placement.

One of the features of inclusionary practice for students with low incidence exceptionalities is to provide community outreach. This may take the form of recreational and employment opportunities. Employment opportunities in the community are known as work experience placements. Helen, a consultant, shared stories of work experience placements. One girl volunteered at an elementary school, walking with kids to school and reading to them. Now she volunteers weekly at that school. "But families have to continue the connections once the student graduates, asking for the placement and keeping it going. And in a regular classroom those connections won't exist and they need to happen over and over again". This points out the need for consistency, tenacity, dedication of time and the expertise needed to advocate for these students. With the demands of the regular classroom, a teacher would not have the time or the required expertise, resulting from a lack of specialized education and training.

3.4 Teacher Training

The participants in the study agreed that specialized instruction from a specially trained teacher is needed for students to become as independent as possible and that independence looks differently for each individual student, depending on their abilities. "Maybe he can brush his teeth, or maybe he can become a cashier. But to be plopped into a regular classroom is a disaster. Teachers in regular classrooms are not trained to provide this specialized instruction", said Alice, the teacher from the segregated classroom. And they do not have the time or the facilities to teach a child to do something like use the toilet. Further to that, a sense of belonging is very important. In small classes that can happen at the same time that they get the functional skills they need, such as brushing their teeth. If you keep these kids in a regular class "they won't have the functional skills because there is no opportunity to learn them in a regular classroom".

It is important that students with low incidence exceptionalities be assessed and placed properly, Placement may include a segregated, specialized classrooms or, a properly equipped classroom with a knowledgeable teacher in order to adequately meet their needs. Teacher training might alleviate some of these difficulties in the regular classroom but the issues of privacy, adequate facilities, time, advocacy and opportunities for authentic practice remain.

Teaching children with low incidence exceptionalities is a "highly challenging job to meet the complex needs of these individuals". Teachers need authentic opportunities to learn how to teach these kids. Teachers have varying degrees of comfort with students who have low incidence exceptionalities. "Even with training, to have a student working on life skills in a grade 10 science class? What does that

look like?"

It also requires a team approach noted Carla, who is the EA assisting in the inclusive classroom. And with a team you have to know how to work with others and where to go for help. "Making sense of it all is challenging". Constant collaboration and communication among all members of the team is essential (A school team might consist of the principal, the classroom teachers, educational assistants, resource teacher, school psychologist, occupational and physio therapists, speech pathologist, social worker and parents). In a segregated setting the school team exists but the special education teacher is a constant and coordinates services, and facilitates communication, particularly with parents. From this experience a special education teacher in a segregated setting continues to gather information and understand a child over a period of years as the student stays within the class for several years. In a regular classroom setting, the student moves each year into a new grade with a new teacher.

"And once you have an understanding of the student how do you pass on that information and understanding to another teacher?" asked Helen. Inclusion is built on a team approach but in practice it is the responsibility of the classroom teacher to educate the child, requiring the acquisition and understanding of information as quickly as possible in a busy environment with many demands.

By their nature, students with Low Incidence exceptionalities do not like change and take time to respond and adapt to changes such as the change of a teacher, causing them to falter in their acquisition of skills and abilities. Parents learn to rely on a teacher who understands their child and a change of teacher can be a disruption to the family.

In addition, with the threat of school and classroom closures teachers are faced with the realities of job insecurity. Helen, one of the consultants for special education, had applied for a life skills position 10 times in her school board before securing the position. After serving in that capacity for 6 years she got bumped. The consultant position she currently holds offers no job security, as she must apply for the job every year. Next it seems she will be going back to the life skills classroom causing a change of teacher for the students in the class.

Dennis and Carla, the two EAs who participated in the study, also spoke of being bumped. "Once you get to know a student and understand their needs you want to stay with that child but with our union we can get bumped. Change is difficult for these kids and their families and stressful when they have to train a new person on a frequent basis", said Carla. Dennis shared that he had been moved 7 times in 10 years in his job as an EA, causing stress for him as well as for others (students). He originally had been hired to work with a low functioning male student who needed grooming assistance but the policy of the union overrode his job description. Consequently, he was placed with a different student and a female EA was placed with the male student who needed grooming assistance. It became apparent early in the following school year that the placement of a female EA was inappropriate and Dennis returned to his previous post. The disruptions caused the student to act out in inappropriate ways and to become difficult for his teacher and family to manage.

On the topic of educators and moving, Jamie noted that, "parents become very fearful of any moves of

placement or teacher for their child. They want their child to stay with a good teacher who cares and who meets their needs". Their relationship with the teacher is so special, with emotional attachment. You parent/guide them and they become attached to you and you to them".

3.5 Resources

Throughout the interviews the participants spoke of a lack of resources and the unintended barriers a lack of resources creates for the individuals and their families. These barriers occur at the school and community levels.

1) School Supports

A lack of resources and money overtax people. Helen said, "As a consultant I have learned that the lack of resources I experienced in my classroom is experienced across the school board and it is depressing. Resources are scarce".

Authentic learning experiences often occur in the community while on work experience placement. Alice, in her role as a segregated class teacher, continued, "The learning goals must be realistic, while allowing for the occasional miracle to occur". In order for learning goals to be realistic, students with Low Incidence exceptionalities require those authentic opportunities.

Helen explained the issue by saying, our hands are often tied by a lack of resources. When we send a student into a community placement we have to have an adult accompany them in the form of an EA. But we do not have one-to-one EAs so I am always short an EA every afternoon as I send the students out one at a time. That means not every student gets the opportunity to go. Students who are close to graduating get sent home. It stretches the resources so thinly. Is this the best use of limited resources?

The theory of inclusion creating an even playing field and removing barriers is challenged by the realities of the situation. Having inadequate resources means that there are unequal opportunities for the students. Preparing students to transition into life in the community means they should have more access to community placements not less; not sent home because they are nearing graduation. Teachers are aware of this but without support there appears to be no other choice.

"Teachers must be supported throughout the day", Alice continued, "in order for a successful school experience to occur". "Teachers, parents, social services, educational assistants are all working together and this requires meeting time built into the daily scheduling". Unfortunately, this does not always occur as time is a scarce commodity in busy schools. It does happen when a principal understands the need, fully supports his special education team and prepares scheduling accordingly.

3.5.1 Programs

2) Community Supports

Students access Developmental Services for a variety of reasons, such as for respite services, work opportunities, social opportunities, counseling, or to develop skills such as cooking. Helen talked about the problems with access to these services.

The options for participation are very, very limited; some settings more limited than others. Rural and isolated communities may have fewer opportunities for work and recreation placements. On the other

hand, when it comes to making connections, everyone knows everyone else. You have to be very careful not to wear out these people in communities with limited opportunities,

Support for families is important and complicated and varied. “Some students have service coordinators through Child and Family Services (CFS) and the level of support varies from worker to worker”. These workers have huge caseloads that create barriers every step of the way for these families. “Everyone is overwhelmed. Families are tired and sometimes give up. By the time they get to high school they are often tired of fighting. It’s devastating to see that happen. When they give up what level of care is being given to that child?” asked Helen. And when the parents give up it becomes more difficult for teachers to advocate for the child and secure the needed services and supports. Parents are called upon to complete lengthy application forms and assessments and without their input the process is stalled. The school team becomes discouraged and educators can give up, feeling that they are fighting a losing battle. The functionality of their classroom is challenged and teachers can feel ineffective as a result.

Through the normalization movement of the 1960s institutions were closed and “we thought that they had looked ahead” said Jamie, the other special education consultant. “But I don’t think that they were at all prepared. They didn’t have things in place to fill the gap in service that was created by closing these institutions. People were left with nothing. Maybe a restructuring of those institutions rather than a closure would have served better”. Bridging the gap may have taken the pressure off classroom instructors rather than placing the entire burden on their shoulders.

Community supports such as assisted living involves long waits up to 10 years or more to acquire a spot. If the students take part in a summer camp program (Note 1) they tend to have a shorter wait than those who don’t. But the supports involve a lot of paperwork to prove eligibility criteria. “Unfortunately the province is always changing forms and eligibility criteria and regulations”, said Helen. “The process and accountability demands create pressures for all parents and they cannot keep up with it, especially those parents with developmental disabilities”.

3.6 Advocacy

3.6.1 Bureaucracy Demands

As mentioned there are many demands on parents (Brackenreed, 2016) for which they are not always equipped. Many parents experience disabilities themselves and are challenged by the need to complete forms and attend meetings. Changing rules and regulations create barriers for families as they are constantly trying to meet the demands on them.

Parents’—voices are not being heard by the government argued the participants. They are not a large group because Low Incidence exceptionalities have a low incidence rate and consequently they do not wield political power. “A lot of energy goes into caring for their children and they don’t have energy left over for the red tape” agreed Helen. “But I know some real fighters!” Unfortunately these fighters often get labeled as trouble makers, difficult parents, difficult to work with. —“When we learn what the parents are enduring I can’t believe that there is this jaded view instead of understanding”, confided

Carl, the EA from the inclusive classroom. “And the scary part is that the parent is probably doing everything he can to advocate for his child” added Jamie, one of the consultants. “How can you make people empathic and compassionate to these kids and their families?” It is apparent that these families need advocacy support (Brackenreed, 2016). Without the support to educators they fall victim to discouragement and become less effacious for their students and their families.

3.7 Independence

With appropriate programming and instruction some developmentally disabled people with mild to moderate affects can establish a level of independence. “In general the most independent among them cannot live alone but require sheltered living and work placements”, said Helen. “They continue to need guidance and support” offered Carla. “They cannot attend to their own medications or health interventions such as self-catherization or budgeting requirements, among other daily living skills”. “Safety is always an issue as they do not always understand the behaviours or intentions of other people” added Jamie. Students with low incidence exceptionalities grow up to be adults with low incidence exceptionalities with the same needs as when they were younger. The reality is that in most cases they continue to have the same high level of need as when they were in school but there are not enough sheltered work and living arrangements available.

3.8 Friendships

In a regular class kids with low incidence exceptionalities will be there until age 21 but typically achieving kids move on so that there is a new group each year. In a small segregated class there are friendships. —In the regular classroom, typically achieving kids accept and are friendly but don’t make friends with kids who have low incidence exceptionalities.

Once a week buddies have lunch together in a social interaction program at Helen’s school that links typically achieving students to students with low incidence exceptionalities. “Friendships have developed but regular students go off to university and such and these kids stay home. Other students help out for the purpose of attaining volunteer credits but typically not for the purpose of making friends and few lasting friendships develop”. In a regular class a new group comes in each year but the student with a developmental disability remains. The other students in the class are always changing which creates a barrier to lasting friendships. “The others go off to university, work, and such while these kids stay at home with little to do”, added Dennis. “This may be a reason why teachers tend to become lasting friends”, added Jamie. These relationships are important to teachers and cause them to work harder for their students in terms of securing needed services. It also causes them a deeper sense of futility when they are unsuccessful due to a lack of resources.

When participants were asked about their wish list for change in the system they included more opportunities for students for learning functional skills for daily living, more opportunities for forming lasting connections with peers (friendships, social contacts, regular social activities), and more opportunities for forming lasting connections with the community (i.e., through volunteer/work experience opportunities). Helen argued for systemic change.

With existing pathways we are segregating EVERYONE into a pathway not just our life skills students. Combine pathways? I don't know what is best. We need a complete system overhaul. —Is it Finland that does things differently? How could that look? It's overwhelming to think about what could you change.

Once again we see teachers overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem and their feelings of inadequacy to effect change. Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs in their ability to produce and affect change that influences their lives. It determines how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. These beliefs produce effects through cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes (Bandura, 1994). A strong sense of self-efficacy enhances accomplishment and personal well-being. —It is clear from the results of the current study that within the realm of the education of students with low incidence exceptionalities there is much room for improvement.

4. Discussion

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4.1 Limitations of the Study

A limitation of the study is the need for participants to rely on their memory for information concerning students and teaching experiences. Some of these memories may have become faded or distorted with time. In addition, personal experiences with a student or their family can impact an individual's recollection in negative or positive ways. Further, an individual may have changed their story to present themselves in a more favourable light. There was no attempt to validate individual stories but the consistency of responses from participants indicates a degree of authenticity.

The small sample size although adequate for the methodological approach, is a limitation of the study.

A larger sample also may have enhanced the findings of the study. Additionally, the sample was taken from northeastern and north-western Ontario and is not generalizable to the population at large.

4.2 Recommendation for Future Research

It would be beneficial to replicate this study with educators of students from different age and ability levels and school and community settings. The current study addressed the perceptions of educators of students with low incidence exceptionalities, particularly developmental disabilities, in northeast and northwest Ontario. Different provinces may have different regulations and school policies that may impact the lived experiences of the people involved. Different settings within the province also may have an impact, such as comparing urban and remote areas for service delivery. Certainly we have learned from this study that opportunities for community involvement are varied from a small town to rural setting.

4.3 Conclusions

From the participants in this study we gain insights into the realities of teaching students with low incidence exceptionalities. From the time that they enter school these students require individualized education plans and specialized services. The resources for these services are limited while the demand appears to be limitless. Assessment, placement, and teacher training are specialized resources requiring an investment in time and money.

Our most vulnerable students depend upon us to advocate for their needs, to provide for them, as they are typically unable to advocate or fend for themselves. Our common goal is for them to become as independent as possible to living a full and rewarding life with meaningful relationships. The reality is that while the goal is obtainable in theory, often in practice it is out of reach due to a lack of supports. The barriers to reaching the ideal may be a result of the issues identified by the participants in this study.

As previously noted, the social restrictions of a disability are not the same experience for all persons regardless of their impairment. Persons with cognitive disabilities have specialized and often complex needs that require understanding and expertise to address. In turn, this requires an environment offering facilities and privacy where individuals have authentic learning experiences. Caring and trained educators have the skills needed but also rely on the support of the parents/caregivers, administrators and the community to deliver programming and services. Developmental disability is a complex condition requiring a variety of approaches and environments in which to provide services. Not all of these can be accomplished within the confines of a regular classroom.

Resources and people are over taxed. The education of these students is overwhelming and demands a lot from people. It demands understanding, caring, acceptance and patience on the parts of all concerned parties. At times the concerned parties are not going to agree on best practices as can be seen from the results of the current study. Not all teachers are trained in the education of students with developmental disabilities and certainly parents are not either. Parents/caregivers are often fearful of the confusing school system and of changes within it that will upset their children. Additionally there

are many parents of children with developmental disabilities who have the disability themselves, creating an even more complex situation.

Many of the barriers to access opportunities emerge from the policies and regulations of the very services that are intended to be supports. The ever-changing criteria and guidelines are difficult for educators to keep track of, or parents who have jobs and other children to raise, it can be at times impossible. Such a situation demands understanding and empathy from all players in order to create the optimal experience. Certainly educators and parents have a common goal to facilitate potential for each individual to become as independent and contributing citizen as possible. The means of achieving that goal is where the "rubber hits the road" and individual needs must be addressed.

The vision of "full inclusion" with all children being educated in the regular classroom appears to be impossible to achieve in practice. There will always be children who cannot be appropriately taught in the regular classroom (Evans & Lunt, 2002; Hansen, 2012). "Inclusion as a concept and value is now recognized as complex, with multiple meanings" (Norwich, 2013, p. 18).

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Note

Note 1. Many camps in Ontario sponsored by the province offer specialized medical care for specific disabilities or one-on-one buddies, while other camps provide tutoring for individuals with learning disabilities in addition to outdoor activities.