

Perspectives of Effective Teachers of Students with Low-Incidence Disabilities

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Abstract

Studies have examined the characteristics of excellent general and special education teachers. However, comparatively few studies have examined the characteristics of excellent teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities. Outstanding teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities were contacted to determine their willingness to share information about their teaching practices and beliefs by participating in interviews. Teachers were selected for participation because they were recipients of the annual Excellence in Education Award sponsored by the National Center on Low-Incidence Disabilities. Qualitative analysis of the 12 interviews revealed several common characteristics of excellent teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities including high expectations, communication, respect, professional knowledge, and relationships.

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Introduction

Within the field of special education, there has been a tendency to focus on the things that are wrong, the parts that are broken, or the skills that cannot be mastered. In more recent years, educators, families, and individuals with disabilities have expressed concern about educational outcomes, resulting in efforts to improve results. These efforts are bringing about a change in the way we see special education. Students with disabilities are being held to the same standards as their non-disabled peers. There is a new desire to look at the strengths, the parts that work, the skills that bring success. This new perspective can be applied to teachers, as well.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) has emphasized the need within the qualitative research paradigm to study goodness rather than failure. Part of her concern is the tradition within social science research to focus on pathology and disease rather than on health and resiliency. "This general propensity is magnified in the research on education and schooling, where investigators have been much more vigilant in documenting failure than they have been in describing examples of success" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 8). The description of the social context above delineates the historical trend

within special education to focus on deficits, and the need to look at success rather than failure. The intent in studying excellent teachers is not to imply that the teachers participating in this research are perfect. Indeed, the focus on goodness is not a search for things that are only positive. Rather, the emphasis is on capturing the origins and expressions of goodness, which will of course balance with some elements of vulnerability and weakness (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Studies have examined the characteristics of excellent general education and even special education teachers (e.g., Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy 2000; Guskey & Passaro, 1994; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Tschennan-Morrان, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). However, comparatively few studies have examined the characteristics of excellent teachers in the field of low-incidence disabilities. It is important to learn about the characteristics of this relatively small group of teachers in order to positively impact the education of this group of students (see box, "Studying Expert Teaching"). This article describes the results of a qualitative research project designed to investigate the characteristics of excellent teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities.

Studying Expert Teaching

In contrast to research that examines particular teaching methods and then makes recommendations about integrating these practices into the classroom, studies of exemplary instruction fall into the category of investigations about expert performance (Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999). The study of expertise in teaching, as a defined endeavor, has been described well by Berliner (1986, 1988). Berliner viewed the development of expertise in pedagogy as a series of five stages or levels of skill development: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert (1988). Expert teachers “provide exemplary performances which might become cases – richly detailed descriptions of instructional events” (Berliner, 1986, p. 7). Expert teachers have accumulated useful experience in the classrooms, which is reflected in their classroom performances. Expert teachers have a privileged understanding of their instruction, and are able to share their insights and experiences with others (Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999).

When asked about effectiveness in the classroom, teachers offer a variety of explanations, including personal characteristics or personality aspects, or educational philosophies and practices (Guskey & Passaro, 1994). Breeding and Whitworth (1999), suggest that there are certain characteristics that exemplary teachers possess, including child-centeredness, motivational to students, consistency, empathy, cooperativeness, good interpersonal skills, and flexibility. Studies of expert performances allow us to examine real-life situations in which many complex variables are successfully integrated.

Research Methods

Outstanding teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities were contacted to determine willingness to share information about their teaching practices and beliefs by participating in an interview. The teachers were selected for participation because they had been recipients of the Excellence in Education award, sponsored by the National Center on Low-Incidence Disabilities (NCLID). Individuals were nominated for the award by students, parents, or educational colleagues (typically administrators). Nominees were then asked to submit an application packet including personal reflections and letters of reference. The award recipients were selected through a review process established by NCLID, which

included professional review of application materials as well as direct observation. Participants were evaluated on their demonstration of leadership, effective teaching, collaboration, advocacy, services for students, and innovation.

After the observation and application review, committees comprised of university faculty, university doctoral students, current educators, and individuals with disabilities made the final selection in each disability area. This award was sponsored in the state of Colorado for the 2001-2002 school year, 14 states within the western region for the 2002-2003 year, and nationwide in the 2003-2004 year. The researchers participated in the award process, but did not know any par-

ticipants prior to their selection as award finalists.

A letter was sent by e-mail to each of the 14 Excellence in Education award recipients from 2001-2003 inviting participation in this research project. E-mail was identified as the most effective method of contacting these teachers because this technique was commonly used to share information with this particular group regarding the process of selecting award recipients. Interested participants were asked to reply either by phone or e-mail to set up convenient meeting times and locations. Thirteen teachers responded to the request and agreed to participate in the interview process. A recording error made it impossible to transcribe one interview, leaving 12 participants.

Participants

Participants represented a broad range of teaching experience, from residential to inclusive services, provided to children and youth ages birth through twenty-one. Participants worked in rural, urban, and suburban settings. All participants held the appropriate state certification in their particular area of low-incidence disability expertise.

Materials

Each participant was asked a series of 13 interview questions (see box “Interview Questions”). Interview questions were generated from a brainstorming session of NCLID staff, including professors and graduate students working and publishing in the field of low-incidence disabilities. During the refinement of the question list, input from professional colleagues was sought. Once the questions were finalized, interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format so that it was permissible for the interviewer to ask follow-

up questions to elicit further information or clarification to previous responses.

Interview Questions

1. What was the most rewarding teaching experience you had with a student, and why?
2. Describe what you did to facilitate learning with a particularly challenging student.
3. If you could create a notebook to pass along to other teachers, what would you put in it?
4. What are the qualities of an excellent teacher of students who are deaf or hard of hearing*?
5. What major beliefs and principles guide you in your work?
6. What do you find most satisfying in your work as a teacher?
7. What do you find most frustrating in your work as a teacher?
8. What do you know now that you wish someone had told you when you started teaching?
9. What tips do you have for working with students who seem to be unmotivated in school?
10. If you had a magic wand what one change would you make in the field of deaf* education?
11. What is going to be different about deaf* education ten years from now?
12. How do you balance work and personal life?
13. What aspect of your job do you have to work hard at, but feel great about doing?

* Based on the expertise of the teacher, the questions were re-worded to emphasize the education of students who are blind or visually impaired, or students who have significant support needs.

Participating teachers worked in a variety of rural, urban, and suburban communities. Because of the wide range of physical locations, a combination of telephone and online interviews was used. The telephone interviews were conducted one-on-one at the participant's convenience. These interviews were recorded on audiotape then transcribed by the interviewer. Online interviews were conducted synchronously over the Internet, again at the participant's convenience. A log of the online interview was made, providing an automatic transcript. Each telephone interview lasted between 45-60 minutes, and each Internet interview took between 90-120 minutes.

Data Analysis

Following the interview and transcription process, the data were analyzed to determine systematic categories through coding. Coding was conducted independently by two researchers, and compared for consistency through all phases of the data analysis process. The method used to create these categories was the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During this process, the transcription from each interview was carefully reviewed in search of meaning units. A meaning unit is the key word or phrase that captures the main

idea the participant expressed. The meaning units for each participant were grouped into categories based on frequency of occurrence. Each participant was then compared with every other participant, again in search of categories established through repetition of the meaning unit. Categories drawn from meaning units across all participants and/or in more than one interview question were retained. Categories that did not appear as meaning units of all participants or across several questions were discarded. Finally, categories were clustered together into themes based on similarity of content. Based on these data analysis techniques, five themes were identified as consistent across data participants and across questions.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed several characteristics of excellent teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities. These characteristics can be described by five themes, labeled as expectations, communication, respect, professionalism, and relationships. Taken collectively, these themes can be considered the foundational characteristics of these excellent teachers (see box, "What Expert Teachers Say").

What Expert Teachers Say

“Let them go beyond what you think are their normal limits. So many times a lot of people are scared that they're going to hurt themselves, or they won't do it correctly, or they might look funny. Let them hold the expectation of what they can do and put your prejudices behind. You'll be surprised.”

“I guess if I could get every teacher to make the students be as independent physically and emotionally as possible, then I think we would see a tremendous difference They would leave knowing that they could succeed, and knowing that they had to succeed because people wouldn't pamper them.”

“You don't walk in knowing everything and knowing that you are right. To collaborate, you really do need to say to yourself that you don't know everything and that we all have contributions to provide.”

“We need to know how to work effectively with families and parents. I think that if we can't do that, then we probably aren't going to be as successful.”

“Never assume you have all the answers. Especially if you've been teaching for a while, teachers get this attitude, ‘I've seen it all, I've done it all, I've heard it all.’ It's never true! This is important to keep in mind always, you need to keep learning.”

“A lot of times they come from backgrounds where people tell them they can't do something. And then, once they can, you can just watch the self-esteem grow. And once it starts, it just keeps growing and growing and suddenly they can do lots of things they couldn't before.”

Expectations

It has been clearly established that the expectations of teachers have a strong impact on the outcomes of students (Colvin, 2002; Kuklinski, 2001; Lane, 2003). Holding high expectations is a factor repeated across several research projects related to teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities (Correa & Howell, in press; Luckner & Howell, 2002; Luckner & Muir, 2001). One of the new pieces pointed out by the teachers participating in this study is the need to expand those expectations to families, teachers, and society. These exemplary teachers have recognized the power that high expectations can have to change the life of a student, and have incorporated high expectations into their philosophy.

Most teachers today believe in the importance of having high expectations, but these teachers are insisting that those expectations be established for everyone involved – not just the student. As one teacher put it, “have high expectations for your students, yourself, and your colleagues.”

Participants discussed the importance of helping parents and general educators to raise the expectations they have for students with low-incidence disabilities. As one teacher described, “A lot of [my success] was from having my high expectations for him, and then showing the parents that he can make progress, you can expect him to learn. Then I held the same expectations for the teachers; they need to expect him to learn and I ex-

pect them to be involved in that process.” Anther participant also expressed the desire to foster high expectations. “If I could get every parent and every teacher to make the students be as physically and emotionally independent as possible, then I think we would see a tremendous difference They would leave knowing that they could succeed, and knowing that they had to succeed because people wouldn't pamper them.” The participating teachers encouraged others to put expectations into action. They explained that simply having an expectation in your mind will not have any effect; there must be the related behavior that shows what your expectations are. “We need to ponder our own demonstrations of the qualities we want to see in our students. Are we hard-working? Do we show that we're reflecting on our profession and improving with regularity?”

One of the great areas of frustration expressed by these teachers was the reduced expectation for success that society often holds for students with low-incidence disabilities. One participant indicated that one of the most frustrating aspects of working with students who are blind or visually impaired was that “so many of the factors in the sighted world cause lowered, unjustifiably low, expectations.” Another of these exceptional teachers lamented, “It's frustrating for me the professionals who don't have as high of standards, who look at these kids as poor little deaf kids, who don't put in the time and energy that I think kids deserve. This is probably my biggest frustration.” After expressing disappointment and discouragement with the low societal expectations, these teachers go on to talk about what they're doing to change those expectations. “Now, every time I go to a school I bring with me a success story from an-

other school. It's almost like I have to remind them every day that these kids can do it.” Another teacher discusses a school-wide program designed to raise expectations, “We host deaf culture awareness activities so everyone in the school has the chance to learn something about our students, and to make the connection that they have the same wants and desires and strengths and weaknesses as everyone else. I think over time it really helps the teachers and students see these [deaf] kids as more similar than different.”

Communication

These teachers were very intent on the importance of communication as a tool for successful education. They encouraged others to learn the skills of effective listening and other communication strategies. These tips for successful communication revealed the high value these teachers placed on the skills of communication.

Effective communication is an essential component of successful teaching with students who have low-incidence disabilities, primarily because many of these students face communication challenges. In every interview, participants described strategies they use to promote effective communication, including:

1. Employ active listening skills by repeating back what the speaker said, using body language to express interest, asking related questions, and taking notes on the discussion where possible. One teacher admonished, “One of the most important things is to listen. Collaborating is a give and take, and it goes hand in hand with communication skills.”

2. Ask others what kind of information they need and what format they want it to be in. Do they need copies of articles, worksheets, e-mail, phone calls? Find out how the teacher or parent wants to hear from you and follow through. One of the teachers advised others to “consider the purpose of the communication and the people you are communicating with. Do you need to listen more or do you need to ask more questions, or do you need to be more direct and give the information? That is probably the biggest key, being able to change your style of communication to match who you are communicating with.”
3. Use a calendar to remind yourself of when to communicate with people. One teacher described how this organizational tool could help with communication, “You want to make sure you have regular contact with teachers and parents, but some need more contact than others. If you have some way to control the frequency then people won’t feel either pestered or abandoned.”
4. Show respect for everyone in the room. You’re not the only expert in town and in fact there are certainly others at every meeting who know more about any particular aspect of a student than you do. Be ready to learn from others. One teacher summarized this point, “You don’t walk in knowing everything and knowing that you are right. To collaborate, you really do need to say to yourself that you

don’t know everything and that we all have contributions to provide.”

5. Be flexible, especially when communicating with students. Students who have low-incidence disabilities all have needs for communication that differ from the general population. One teacher stated, “Often, parents or teachers will try a particular method for communicating with a student, and when it fails they give up. Don’t! Keep trying until you find something that works for you and for that child together.” Another teacher echoed this sentiment, “The main thing I would want to get through to people is that not one thing works. There is no right and wrong answer; there is no right or wrong way.”

Respect

Another area teachers addressed was the need to maintain respect for students, teachers, and families. One of the challenges many individuals with disabilities face is a lack of genuine respect from individuals they meet. For teachers to effectively work with students, they must begin with a realization that each student deserves to be treated respectfully as an individual. “Try to get to know the student! Don’t belittle them; try to figure out what it is that turns them on. Watch their habits, watch what they do and find what turns their switch on and then gear material toward that.” Many of the participants echoed this idea with statements such as, “One of the things you have to do is find out what motivates those kids, and really take an interest in them.” Or, “Most kids, if you take an interest in their life and are consistent in rules and expectations, they will respect you and themselves.”

Respectful relationships with families are an often-overlooked key to educational success. The involvement of parents in the educational process is a critical factor for improving student achievement, but participants were concerned that many teachers don't offer parents enough opportunities for involvement. "We need to invite them more to get involved at school. Not just the old-fashioned classroom volunteer stuff, but ways that work for families of today. Be creative in thinking of ways they can feel more connected to and respected by the school. Parents make such a difference and sometimes we just leave them out of the whole process." Participants described the challenges of promoting a respectful relationship with the family, "I've seen teachers belittle parents without even realizing it. They're trying to show that they know how to educate students with disabilities, but the result is that the parents and the teachers start to feel like they can't do anything without that credential. That's flat out untrue. Parents know more about the child than anyone! We need to respect their expertise. General educators have great teaching skills. We need to respect their expertise. You can't walk into the room and onto your pedestal. For it to work, we need everyone to be working together." Another teacher admonished, "Everything just breaks down if you don't treat the family well. They get upset and hostile toward the school, and you wonder why the student acts out in your class. The family cares about their child, you have to respect that point of view is equally important to your professional perspective."

Professionalism

Another area these teachers identified as important for exemplary teaching

of students with low-incidence disabilities was professionalism. With advances in technology and changes in general education practices, it is entirely possible that the information learned in teacher training programs will be outdated within 3 to 5 years. The changing nature of the field makes it essential that teachers pursue opportunities for professional development and advancement.

These teachers spoke often of the importance of maintaining knowledge of current trends in the field. One teacher explained, "We need to exhibit not just an expertise in compensatory skills and best practices, but also in how to effectively teach skills for independence and a reliance on the natural supports and consequences." Participants spoke at length about the skills specialized teachers for students with low-incidence disabilities need to have. "One of the most important things to know is how to use assessments. Because our students sometimes miss information or have gaps in their background knowledge, you need to know how to teach a lesson, and then be able to evaluate how effective that was, for a specific student, and you do that on a daily basis. If you can't do this, you can't be as good of a teacher." Another critical skill is to understand normal learning and development across all ages. "You have to know the developmental processes of learning. What comes next, and what comes next, and what comes next. This way, you can do that assessment effectively and it will really impact your teaching." Another teacher described the technological skills necessary, "You have to know how to use all these devices, and – more important – how to learn how to use the next one that comes along. There are new things coming out all the time that

are supposed to make learning easier for our students but if we can't get it to them, how will it help?" Because of the need to continually expand their professional knowledge base, several of the participants have certifications in various areas of expertise.

In the field of low-incidence disabilities, paraprofessionals are increasingly used to provide constant individualization and support. However, these exceptional teachers warn about the dangers of placing insufficiently trained paraprofessionals with students who have low-incidence disabilities. One participant expressed concern that "many children suffer from the overuse of good-hearted, well-intentioned, but untrained paraprofessionals." These teachers strongly encouraged an increase in the amount and quality of training that is provided to paraprofessionals. Although NCLB does address the need for highly qualified paraprofessionals working in Title I schools, there is no similar requirement for working with special education students.

Relationships

Participating teachers placed a great value on relationships with students, families, and teachers. Many of these teachers see the same students over a period of several years, and discussed the importance of maintaining a positive perspective on that relationship. One teacher described the satisfaction that comes from these long-term relationships. "For me a rewarding experience is to watch these kids [who entered in preschool] leave my classroom three years later, walking into first grade with the ability to be mainstreamed into a regular first grade class." Participants described the importance of positive relationships for establishing an effective learning community. "If people feel good about working with you, they'll feel good about including the student as

well." Another participant explained, "When we're talking about inclusion it means being part of a community. It's not a special program, it's how you look at kids and how you treat them and how they are involved in the school."

One of the most critical relationships these teachers discussed was the relationship between the low-incidence specialist and the general educator. "I think to include kids, a key thing is that you get the buy-in from everybody, and you support the team." One teacher explained, "I support the general education teachers not only by giving them things that work with the student I'm having in their classroom, but other students." Another mentioned, "These students have a lot to offer the general education class, and people need to know you're not just sticking them in there and not having them do anything. They're not just sitting in the class." One of the participants described the cooperation that is necessary to build positive relationships with general educators. "Someone will modify a test without my help, and so I offer to help them with a kid who's having trouble on the playground. I'm on playground duty anyway, so I'll keep an eye on that kid who gets in a fight everyday on the playground. So I think it's kind of that give and take of what's easy for you to do for me, and what I can do back for you."

In addition to the professional relationships discussed above, these teachers also spoke about the importance of personal relationships. When asked about balancing work and personal life, all the teachers responded that this is an area of concern for them. This isn't surprising when you consider that these are exceptional and dedicated teachers; however, in spite of their struggles with keeping bal-

ance, they all had suggestions for improving. "I do recognize that it is greatly important not to confuse my students into thinking that my personal life is theirs to share. They need to learn to form relationships as do their age appropriate peers." Another offered this advice, "You have got to have personal time for yourself. The only way to get that is to program it in. You need that revitalization time for yourself, or you will definitely burn out." Another reinforced this idea by stating, "I work hard at school and I stay late at school, but I don't take anything home. It's nice because when I am home, I am home and I don't have to work or think about work. This really helps me in creating that separation."

Discussion

As these exceptional teachers considered the aspects of their instruction and philosophy that are unique, five elements came out as commonalities. These expert teachers focused on the need for high expectations, effective communication skills, respect, professional knowledge, and strong relationships. When considering the results of this research, educators of students with low-incidence disabilities may find implications for their professional practice. By implementing the practices of educators who have been identified as exemplary, teachers can improve their own skills and strengths.

These teachers held high expectations for themselves, their students, and the families and professionals they work with. In order to maintain or increase expectations, teachers may benefit from engaging in self-reflection. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) has identified reflection on the teaching process as one of the five core skills that expert teachers should

have (NBPTS, 2002.). In order to help others in the community hold high expectations for students with low-incidence disabilities, educators may want to share their personal expectations and experiences with others. Some strategies that may be used to foster high expectations among parents, teachers, and community members include: changing the focus of IEP meetings from "need-centered" to "strength-centered" to draw attention to what is going well and continue to raise the bar for those areas; providing information for parents about support groups so they will see the skills of students with disabilities across ages; introducing interested individuals to adult role models who lead independent and successful lives; sharing success stories of students or schools who have met high expectations; and promoting disability awareness activities.

Participating teachers work diligently on improving their communication skills. They emphasized the importance of communicating effectively with students using various methods, and the critical role active listening plays in good communication. Individuals who desire to improve their communication skills may consider professional development opportunities focused on this area. Schools would benefit from offering more activities and workshops for both parents and educators designed to promote communication skills. Active listening skills should be emphasized in the classroom so students will have the opportunity to practice these skills at school and at home.

Participating teachers were strongly committed to fostering respectful relationships with teachers, students, and families. They valued individual contributions to the classroom and to society, and

encouraged individuals in the larger community to share this respect for individual contributions. Because respect is demonstrated through positive communication, the same personal and professional development opportunities discussed above should be applied to this arena as well. As educators and families are learning to communicate more effectively, miscommunication and misunderstandings will decrease and respect will grow.

Professional knowledge was described as a cornerstone for educating students with low-incidence disabilities. Participants reminded educators that increasing professional knowledge must be a lifelong process. Paraprofessionals are essential team members when it comes to educating students with low-incidence disabilities. In order to be effective, they need intensive support and training for the specialized support they can provide. Schools must provide this training, and should be encouraged to provide increased salaries for paraprofessionals who seek out additional skills in education. Specialized teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities must be given time within their caseload to manage and supervise paraprofessionals so that the team can provide the best educational experience possible.

Finally, these teachers were focused on building relationships. Positive relationships with students, families, colleagues, and self were all seen as necessary to foster the successful education of students with low-incidence disabilities. Participants emphasized the need for effective time management in allocating for personal and professional needs. As professionals and parents interested in the education of students with low-incidence disabilities consider the relationships they

have built with each other, they may want to implement the training suggested above in the areas of communication and respect. These related issues, when taken together, will foster a more productive educational environment in which students, professionals, and families are all engaged in positive, respectful, meaningful relationships for the purpose of improving academic and social skills for students.

These results are consistent with general trends in education, and help clarify that exemplary educators of students with low-incidence disabilities exhibit characteristics similar to other excellent educators. Further research is needed to more clearly define excellent teaching. This research should include qualitative case study descriptions of the instructional practices used by exceptional teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities. Another area to be addressed in future research is the relationship between teacher quality and student outcomes for students with low-incidence disabilities. In a review of research related to teacher expectations, Strahan explained that “although general patterns of achievement such as student engagement, teacher quality, and collective efficacy may describe 'what matters' in promoting achievement, successful practitioners accomplish these goals in ways that fit their particular students at their particular schools” (Strahan, 2003, p. 299). Research within general education has firmly established that teacher quality strengthens student achievement, but such research has not been conducted for students with low-incidence disabilities.

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