

## Special Education Students in a General Education Classroom: Texas Educators' Perspectives

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### Abstract

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*This mixed methods study examined the attitudes, confidence and beliefs of teachers in relationship to working with special education students. In order to be successful, educators need to have confidence in their teaching ability. Confidence, attitudes and beliefs can be impacted through experience and professional development. Teachers' confidence in working with different categories of disabilities was assessed. Educators also reported on the amount of annual professional development they received in special education and their areas of continuing need. Both teachers' confidence and their professional development were analyzed quantitatively. Open-ended, qualitative questions revealed the educators concerns about special education students in the general education setting. Educators believed that special education students should be in the general education classrooms, but they also indicated that they needed additional training and support to be successful. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine educators' beliefs and needs related to special education students in general education settings.*

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**Keywords:** Special education, professional development, confidence, training, disability, inclusion

### 1. Introduction

With the passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, all children in US public schools must participate in the their state's mandated academic assessments. This mandate reiterated other federal rulings: "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and title I require inclusion of all students with disabilities in the State assessment system" (US Department of Education, 2003). This requirement to include all students in the state assessment system and to be assessed on the same curriculum as the general education students put increasing pressure on schools to find highly qualified teachers to meet these needs. Highly qualified special education teachers are in high demand as there is a pervasive and unending shortage of certified special education teachers. In Texas, any teacher who is fully certified can also become certified to teach special education, once they take and pass the TExES certification exam without any additional course work or professional development (Dykes, Gillam, Neel, & Everling, 2012, p.2). In addition, special education students are increasingly being mainstreamed into the regular education setting, which stresses the resources of both the general education and special education programs.

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## **1.2 Purpose**

In order to be successful, educators need to have confidence in their teaching ability, especially when working with students with special needs. With special education students being integrated into the mainstream classes, “the success of any integration effort is crucially dependent on the willingness and capacity of our teachers to implement it” (Keaney, 2012, p. 831). Teachers’ beliefs and attitudes can also impact their confidence. Confidence can be improved through experience and through professional development. The purpose of this study was to examine educators’ confidence, beliefs and needs related to working with special education students in general education settings.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1 Professional Development**

Professional development is often relegated to a few in-service days at the beginning of the year or semester, and in which required topics are covered quickly and often, superficially. In order to improve student learning, professional development can add to an educators’ expertise. “Research shows that teacher expertise can account for about 40 percent of the variance in students’ learning ...-more than any other single factor, including student background...” (Rhoton & Stile, 2002, p. 1). Research indicates that in order for positive change in educators’ practices to occur, they need to experience high quality professional development. “Traditional professional development often was presented as a decontextualized workshop presented by an expert.” (Everling, 2013). This shot-gun approach to professional development does not improve expertise. “The research on learning...and that on effective teacher development...suggest that teacher development as carried out in most schools today is not designed to develop the teacher expertise needed to bring about improved student learning” (Rhoton& Stile, 2002, p. 1). Effective professional development for educators needs to be extended experiences rather than short, one-time trainings so that deeper understanding can occur (Birman, Desimone, Garet, & Porter, 2000).

Effective professional development is collaborative, especially when general education and special education teachers are working together. “Teacher learning is most likely when teachers collaborate with professional peers, both within and outside of their schools, and when they gain further expertise through access to external researchers and program developers” (King & Newmann, 2000, p. 576). For teachers in inclusion settings, the collective participation can also assist in developing the instructional cohesion necessary for effective teaching. “Professional development activities that include collective participation—that is, the participation of teachers from the same department, subject, or grade—are more likely to afford opportunities for active learning and are more likely to be coherent with teachers’ other experiences” (Birman, Desimone, Garet, & Porter, 2000, p.30).

### **2.2 Teacher confidence**

In order for teachers to be successful educators for all their students, they must have the confidence or belief in their self. While most teachers believe that they can be successful in general situations, they may lack confidence, or self-efficacy, when required to work in areas outside their expertise or with students with special needs. “The higher a person’s self-efficacy, the higher their performance will be. Teacher self-efficacy impacts not only the teacher’s performance, but it also impacts their students’ performance” (Everling, 2013).

Low confidence can impact the way teachers react to and teach their students, especially when working with students with special needs.

Hastings and Brown (2002) found that special education teachers who have perceived low self-efficacy did not manage their students’ challenging behaviors.

In addition, those teachers tended to have a more negative emotional reaction to those behaviors. Reacting negatively emotionally can impact the learning adversely of both the general and special education students.

### **2.3 Special education terminology**

Although much of the special education terminology used in the United States and internationally is uniform, some terminology may vary from locale to locale. In Texas, the committee that meets to make decisions related to the special education students is referred to as the Admission, Review and Dismissal (ARD) Committee. The ARD committee is the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) team under federal law (Texas Education Agency, 2012). It is responsible for the development and implementation of special education service plans for eligible students, which includes individualized educational plans and behavior plans and determining the least restrictive environment appropriate for each student (Texas Education Agency, 2012).

Following state and federal requirements, students who qualify for special education services must be placed in the least restrictive environment learning environment.

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (US Department of Education, 2013).

There are many different options for placing students with special needs in Texas school. The most restrictive are specialized schools like the Texas School for the Deaf. School districts may also have specialized classrooms or schools for students with special needs. The most common type classroom for students who are classified as severe and profound is called Life Skills. Life skills classes focus on the skills students will need for daily interactions (teachingaid.org, 2013).

For special education students who need small group settings for academic instruction, a resource classroom may be appropriate. A resource classroom generally is the least restrictive environment for students who can be in a general education setting for a portion of the school day, but who require more specialized instruction in one or more academic areas (Watson, 2013).

The two least restrictive environments are content mastery and inclusion. Content mastery is an instructional support program for special education students who receive instruction in the general education setting. The content mastery teacher receives the lesson plans and materials from the general education teacher. The special education student participates in the regular classroom instruction, but can benefit from additional instruction when needed by the content mastery teacher. The content mastery teacher can also act as a support to the general education teacher as they collaborate to ensure the academic success of the special needs students (Amarillo ISD Special Education, 2013).

Inclusion is the least restrictive environment for special education students. "Inclusion is defined as an educational approach providing the students with special needs education in the regular classrooms, which are the least restrictive educational environment for them" (Gökdere, 2012). Inclusion requires that special education support services be provided in the general education setting to allow the general education teacher, general education students and the special education students to be successful (Gulliford & Upton, 1992; Idol, 2000; Miles & Singal, 2010; Osborne & Dimattia, 1994).

Successful inclusion classrooms are characterized by the collaborative nature of the relationship between special education and general education educators.

### 2.3.1 Critical special education topics

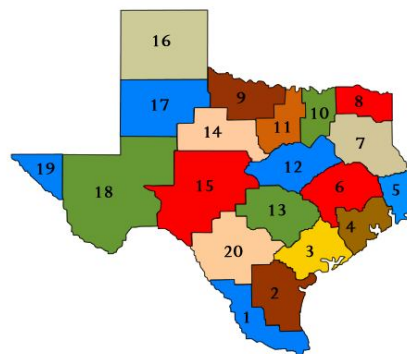
There are many topics that educators who work with special education students need to know. The most critical include: differentiation, response to intervention, accommodations for special education students, modifications for special education students, the referral process, academic interventions, behavioral interventions, special education law, dyslexia, and standards based IEPs. Understanding why and how to implement the response to intervention process can lead to appropriate special education referrals while reducing inappropriate referrals. Once students qualify for special education services, the teachers need to know how to continue to differentiate instruction, make appropriate accommodations and modification, implement effective academic and behavior interventions and comply with the students' IEPs. "In the general classroom setting, informed teachers can deliver necessary and appropriate services to students with special needs, while at the same time work toward successful outcomes for those children, their peers, and their parents" (Patterson, 2005, p. 62). They also need to be informed of the laws related to special education. "Knowing about the origin, implementation, and relevance of the laws as they relate to students is an important responsibility for all classroom teachers (Patterson, 2005, p. 62). When general education teachers are well informed about special education practices, they can effectively meet the needs of their students.

### 3. Methodology

This study combined descriptive statistics and qualitative, open ended responses into a mixed methods study. "In a mixed methods study, two or more methods of collecting and analyzing data are combined to provide a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon being studied" (Everling, 2013). The qualitative, open ended responses provide deep insight into the values, concerns and beliefs of the participants. The quantitative, descriptive statistics include the discrete points and concise measures of trends in the data.

#### 3.1 Context

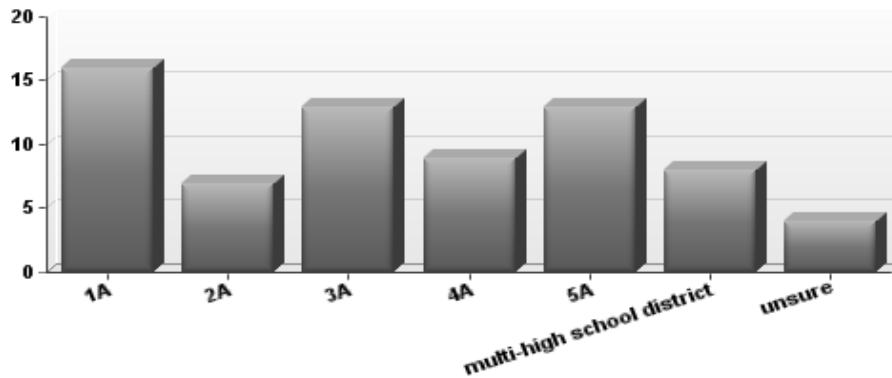
The state of Texas has 20 Educational Service Centers (ESCs) that are designed to facilitate the communication between the school districts and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (*see Figure 1*) (Texas Education Agency, 2013). Participants in this study were from all ESC regions except 2, 9, 15, 17, and 19.



**Figure 1: Map of the ESCs**

The majority of public high schools in Texas are members of the University Interscholastic League (UIL). UIL categorizes school districts for academic and athletic competitions based on the size of the enrollment in the high schools. (University Interscholastic League, 2013-2014). In this study, all size school districts were included.

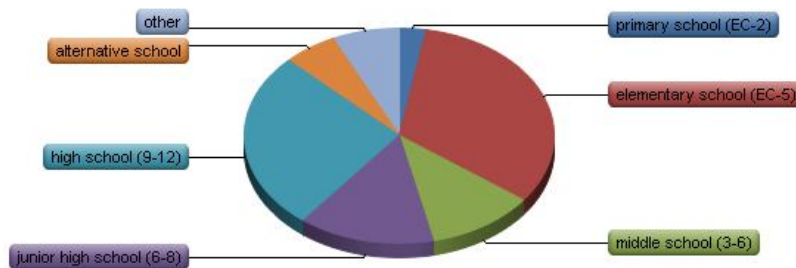
They ranged from school districts with multiple 5A high schools with enrollments greater than 2,090 to small 1A districts with high school populations of fewer than 199 students (*see Figure 2*).



**Figure2: Distribution of size of school districts of participants**

### 3.2 Participants

Participants included educators at a range of schools that included all grade levels and a range of grade level configurations(*see Figure 3*).Participants were teachers and administrators at schools ranging from primary, elementary and middle schools to junior high, high and alternative schools of the 72 participants in the study, 52 were teachers and 20 were administrators.54% of the participants' education level included a minimum of a Master's degree with an additional 12% had some graduate coursework



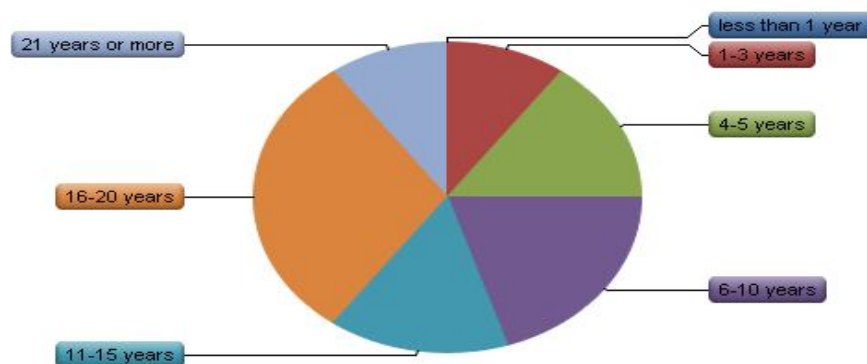
**Figure 3: Distribution of Levels of Schools**



**Figure 4: Education Level of Participants**

### 3.2.1 Administrator participants

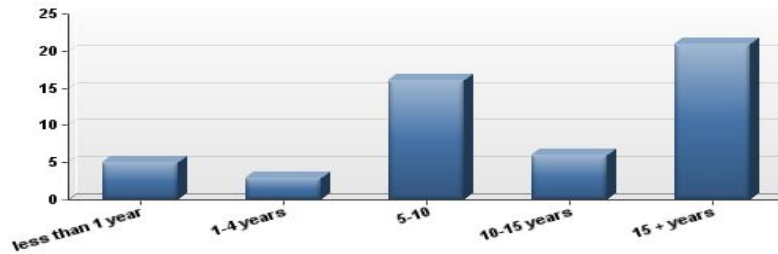
The administrators varied from between 1-3 years to more than 21 years of administration. 15 participants had than 5 years of work in administration. Furthermore, 85% of the administrators had taught for a minimum of 5 years before serving as an administrator.



**Figure 5: Years of Experience of Administrators**

### 3.2.2 Teacher participants

The teachers ranged from first year teachers to teachers with more than 15 years of experience. Of the participants, 61% were certified through a traditional university program. The 35% who were certified in special education, were also certified in other field, either as generalists or in a specific content area like math, science, language arts or social studies. Of those certified in special education, 54% received their certification by taking the required TExES exam, not as a part of their teacher certification program (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6: Years of Teaching Experience**

### 3.3 Instrument

This mixed method study utilized a survey that was created using the Qualtrics program. The survey instrument included 16 demographic questions that requested information about certification and years of experience, 52 Likert scale quantitative questions and 1 open-ended qualitative response question. In September, 2012, an e-mail was sent to Texas school district administrators via a list-serve. The e-mail included a flyer which explained the study, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, an informed consent and a link to an electronic survey. The e-mail also included a request that the campus administrators participate in the survey and also to forward the e-mail to their classroom teachers and other interested educators.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

In order to determine the minimum and maximum values, the mean, the variance and the standard deviation, a descriptive data analysis was used with the demographic and quantitative data. The qualitative analysis was analyzed using the constant comparative method. “Analysis begins with the process of organizing, reducing, and describing the data and continues through the activity of drawing conclusions or interpretations from the data and warranting those interpretations” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 6). In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, an audit trail of the qualitative data was created. In addition, the qualitative and quantitative data was triangulated. “Triangulation is both possible and necessary because research is a process of discovery in which the genuine meaning residing within an action or event can be best uncovered by viewing it from different vantage points” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 287). Triangulation is necessary when a researcher cannot conduct member checks.

### 3.5 Limitations

The first limitation of the study was due to the sample size. The small size of the sample makes it difficult to generalize the findings. The sample, however, provided a good depiction of the grade levels and district sizes, the years of experiences of teacher, as well as representing 80% of the ESCs in Texas. This study, therefore, should be considered as preliminary data that can help to develop a better understanding of the self-efficacy and the needs of teachers related to teaching special education students in a general education setting. With the small sample size, it was not possible to calculating accurate chi-squared values to establish if there was a significant relationship between the amount of professional development and the teachers’ self-efficacy. For this reason, the qualitative data, therefore, was crucial in disclosing the relationship between the two areas in addition to the trepidations of the teachers and administrators.

An additional limitation was the inability to conduct a member’s check. A member’s check in qualitative research is utilized for respondent validation.

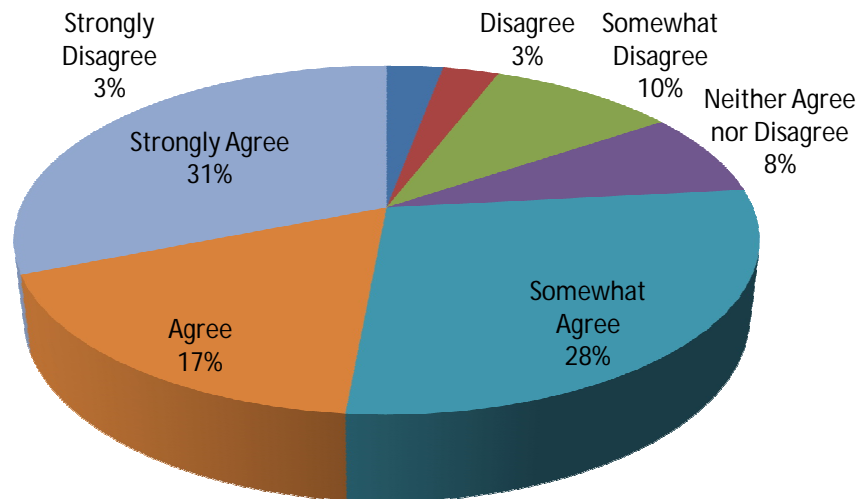
It is used to solicit feedback from the participants on the researcher’s findings. Because the survey was anonymous in keeping with the IRB, a member’s check was not possible.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Desire to teach students with special needs

Teachers who were certified to teach special education were asked if they wanted to teach special education classes. On a 5 point Likert scale, the mean was 4.04 with a standard deviation of 1.17 indicating that the majority of special educators wanted to teach special education. On the same question, the mean was 2.26 with a standard deviation of 1.23 indicating a neutral response; however, 53% indicated that they do not wish to teach special education. Neither group indicated that they were being pressured to become certified in special education.

When asked if students with special needs should be in the regular education classroom, the majority agreed, at least somewhat. Only 16% disagreed with the idea of inclusion for special needs students (*see Figure 7*). One participant responded, "I don't think a blanket mandate should be made in this instance. I believe you need to look at what is best for the special needs students, but not at the expense of other learners in the same setting." This sentiment was echoed by others: "I strongly believe that every child should be in a least restricted environment."



**Figure 7: Participants' Response to Special Education Students Being in Regular Education**

Although the majority of participants responded that they agreed with the idea of inclusion, they also indicated that it was a concern and that additional classroom support was needed.

When a teacher has several students with special needs, she needs lots of assistance to help with the kids. If there is one child with special needs in the classroom, the teacher will need a paraprofessional to help the class. Lots of people do not understand how much time and work it takes to take care of the one special need child and the whole class.

Another commented: "There needs to be a limit on the number of students in a class and allow more time for inclusion or co teaching in all subjects not just reading and math." One other teacher echoed this idea: "Their needs are so diversified; it is hard for one person to do all the work."

According to Janney, Snell, Beers and Raynes (1995), teachers are open to accepting special needs students into the general education setting provided they have the necessary support services and that it does not cause an increase in their workload. For inclusion to be successful, the general education teacher needs support through additional personnel, materials and training.



The primary rationale for not agreeing with having special education students in the regular education classroom focused on the ability to successfully teach all the students. “The teacher is trying to teach and take care of the whole class and it is hard to do that with the special need child in the classroom.” Another teacher commented: “My concern for students with disabilities in a general ed. environment is them getting left behind, or not getting the attention they need in specific areas.” One other participant remarked:

I fully believe in the "old style" resource room. Students with disabilities need to be grouped together to get the best possible instruction. This also allows them to be more successful and not feel dumb in a regular classroom. The regular education kids get lost because teachers are constantly having to do everything for SPED[special education student].

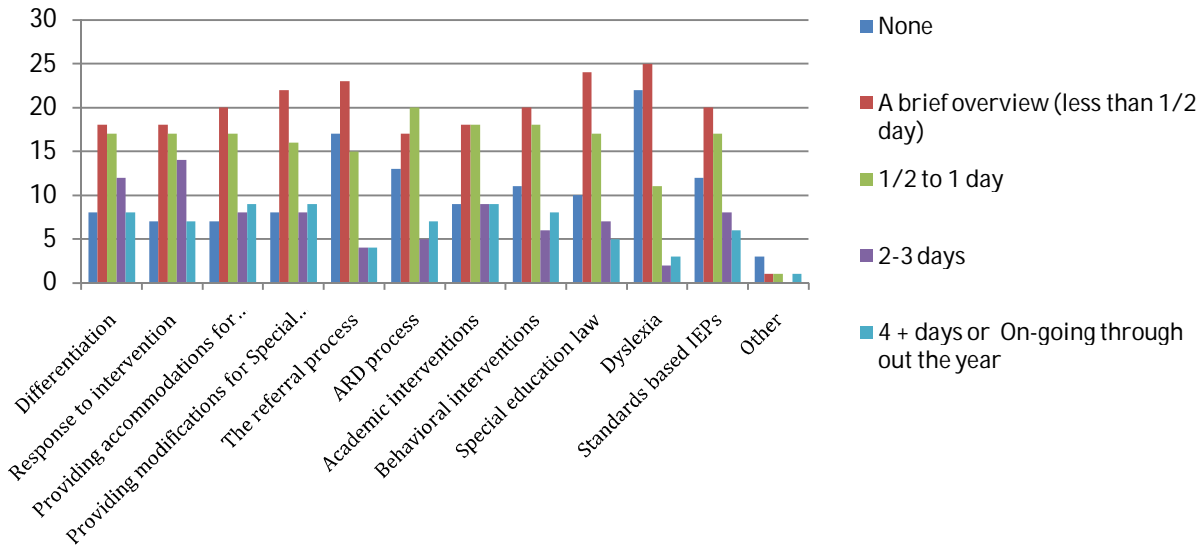
Although the quantitative data indicated that the participants agreed with the idea of special education students being in the regular education setting, the qualitative data overwhelmingly revealed their concerns with inclusion (*see Table 1*).

**Table 1: Participants Comments on the Inclusion of Special Education Students in General Education**

General agreement with inclusion	I agree that students with disabilities should be in a general education class as much as possible. Most special education students can benefit from regular education social interaction; If students have a learning disability in math, they need to be in a regular classroom to teach them the concepts and allow accommodations like using a calculator or multiplication chart. I have seen many success stories of students with learning disability be successful in the classroom with specific accommodations.
Inclusion decision based on individuals	Each situation needs to be evaluated for both the special education student as well as the regular education students. I don't think a blanket mandate should be made in this instance. I believe you need to look at what is best for the special needs students, but not at the expense of other learners in the same setting.
Support needed for general education teachers	It would be good if an expert came in with the child and told you how to work with that child. I also believe that as an educator we deserve to have the help in our classrooms for our children with disabilities.
Separate instruction for special needs students	Our student body is made up of children with primarily emotional disorder disabilities. The bulk of these children are many grade levels below their chronological placements e.g. 12th grader reading at 1/2nd grade level etc. I feel there are times when a SPED student should be in a self-contained room. In several instances on our campus there is such a disparity of skill levels between regular education students and the special education students that it makes it difficult to meet the needs of all. In academics, I would prefer to teach them at their own level in one class instead of slowing down the rest of the class. The special education students seem more confident with themselves and not intimidated when they are surrounded by students that work at their own level.
Inclusion hinders regular education students	[My concern is] taking away time from regular education kids very severe special education students are often more of a distraction to the regular education setting than the benefits they receive. These are our future leaders and it seems the government only cares about what we are doing with special ed. Some of these students can't tell you what half of 13 is yet they are in algebra and physics classes and failing. We have to focus all of our attention on them and legal action can be taken if we don't. No child left behind is slowing other students down.
Inclusion is not always appropriate	Where I disagree is when students are in AP [Advanced Placement] or PreAP classes with mods [modifications]. I have had several sped students not get the one on one they need but do not get in a self-contained classroom because of money and the difficulty getting them sped services. Some cannot focus in a general classroom. This is why I somewhat disagree. They need more breaks, less distractions, and undivided attention to focus their learning.
Requirements for students with special needs should be changed	Students with specific learning disabilities in English should not be required to take a foreign language. They should still have it as an option as an elective, but they should not be required to take it. Some of these special need students excel in my vocational classes and make high salaries when they leave yet many schools don't offer vocational education. Every student is not going to be a rocket scientist.

### 4.2 Annual professional development

Participants were asked how much professional development they received annually for 11 areas of special education that all educators in Texas should know and understand. The 11 vital areas for special education training included: differentiation, response to intervention, providing accommodations for special education students, providing modifications for special education students, the referral process, academic interventions, behavioral interventions, special education law, dyslexia, and standards based IEPs. With means of 2.03 to 2.94, the participants indicated that they were receiving, on average, only a brief overview of these critical areas related to special education (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8: Amount of Professional Development Training in Special Education**

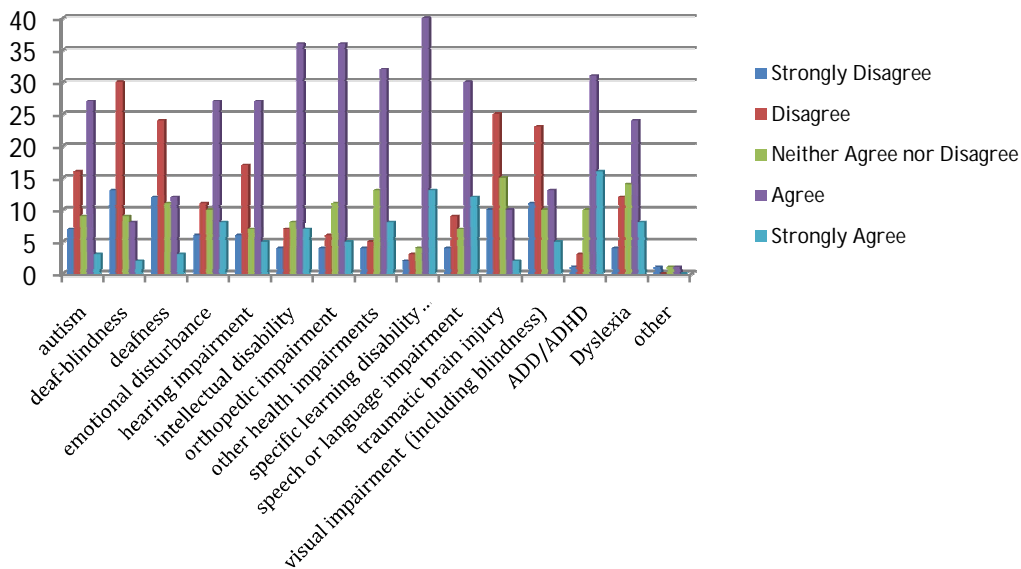
When the participants were asked if they would benefit from professional development in these areas, on a 7 point scale, the means ranged from 4.63 to 5.17 with the majority of the participants indicating a neutral to positive desire for additional training in all areas, especially behavioral interventions and dyslexia. The participants commented on the need to keep current and to understand the diverse and specific needs of special education students (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Participants Needs for Professional Development**

Diverse needs	There is such a spectrum of the different disorders, you need so much training.
Specific training needed	I need more training in how to effectively teach children who suffer from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/ Fetal Alcohol Effects. The numbers are growing, and so many teachers simply do not understand how alcohol affects each child differently and at different times during their lives. Also, we need to know the law so that we may better serve them. Understanding how their mind works differently than mine and some strategies to help them better understand the curriculum they need to know. I would like much more specific training on modification for special education and ADD/ADHD in a mainly group-work classroom with high expectations.
Need to keep current	I feel being a new teacher, I can always benefit from additional training and experience. I believe that there are constant updates to what we know about students with special needs and teachers need this updated knowledge.

### 4.3 Teachers' confidence related to knowledge of special education

In general, the finding on their confidence in teaching students with many disabilities was neutral (*see Figure 9*). On a 5 point Likert scale (1-5), the mean of participants' confidence in their ability to teach specific disabilities ranged from 2.29 to 3.95. For the less common disabilities, the means of the confidence rating was lower: deaf-blindness (2.29), traumatic brain injury (2.5), deafness (2.52) and visual impairment-including blindness (2.65). With slightly more common disabilities, the mean of participants' confidence increased: autism (3.05), hearing impairment (3.13) and emotional disturbance (3.32). Participants' confidence in teaching students with disabilities commonly placed in inclusion settings had notably higher means: orthopedic impairment (3.52), intellectual disability (3.56), other health impairment (3.56), speech or language impairment (3.6), specific learning disability – reading, math (3.95) and ADD/ADHD (3.95).



**Figure 9: Participants' Confidence in Ability to Teach Children with Special Needs**

Most participants did not remark on their confidence, although one commented that one of the concerns was “not knowing best how to meet their [special education students’] needs always.” Another participant who also had a family member with special needs remarked:

I have a granddaughter with autism and I want my baby to interact and learn and be part of the school system as much as possible. I also want her to have the help that is needed so her teachers can deliver their lessons and help ALL the children. I believe that all children deserve the chance to show their abilities. If we as educators can have that support in our classrooms I believe that the Special Education program would run smoothly and teacher wouldn't be so stress and SCARED to have our children in their classrooms.

## 5. Implications

### 5.1 Professional development should be targeted

On-going professional development that targets the specific needs of the special education and general education teachers needs to become a priority. Building collaborative professional development communities of general and special educators will strengthen instruction for all students.

The needs of the educators on each campus should be assessed so that they can be specifically targeted. Generic professional development will not be sufficient to ensure the success of special education students in mainstream settings. If general education teachers are going to be required to work with special education students, they need to have the knowledge and skills to meet their diverse needs. They need to understand how to provide instruction that meets the content and grade level standards, but at the time, still in alignment with the students' individualized educational program.

## **5.2 Support is needed**

In order for special education students to be effectively taught in general education settings, appropriate support must be provided. Teachers need support personnel in order to provide individualized or small group instruction within the mainstream classroom. They also need the appropriate resources to teach students with a variety of learning needs. Finally, they need time. Teaching a highly diverse group of students in an inclusive setting takes additional time to plan instruction, to create modified and accommodated assignments and assessments and to collaborate with other educators.

## **6. Conclusions**

While the participants indicated that they believed that special education students should be in the general education settings, they also expressed concerns with meeting the needs of all their students. Lack of support and too many demands on general education teachers can lead to stress and can lower their confidence in their abilities. Teachers are most comfortable when teaching special needs students who are commonly mainstreamed, like students with specific learning disabilities. They are less confident in their abilities to teach students with disabilities that require more specialized training like student who are severely visually (blind) or hearing impaired (deaf). While they received annual professional development, the nature of the professional development was not conducive to developing the knowledge and skills they need to be successful.

As more special education students are mainstreamed into general education settings, teachers must receive the appropriate support through additional personnel, equipment, time and training in order to be successful. Educators believe in inclusion, but they know that they struggle to meet the needs of all their students under the current system.

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