Obstacles to Program Effectiveness in Secondary Special Education

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ABSTRACT: For decades, critics of special education have been questioning whether the field has succeeded in its mission of educating students with disabilities. They argue that service delivery is fragmented, curriculum and instruction is inadequate, and student outcomes are poor, particularly in secondary settings. In this study, the author examines program effectiveness through a survey of high school special education teachers. The research focuses on four key aspects of special education programs: basic skills instruction, content area instruction, vocational and prevocational skills instruction, and transition planning. Results suggest problems in lack of program coherence and lack of options for students, which lead to recommendations for reform.

KEY WORDS: school reform, secondary education, service delivery models, special education

Current high school special education programs face many criticisms, including failure to individualize instruction and failure to improve student outcomes, both academic and social (Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2002; Pugach & Warger, 1996). Researchers have found that special education programs do not appear to individualize instruction, curriculum is often watered down or nonexistent, and service delivery models are unfocused and fragmented (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Winzer, 2000). As a result, many special education students do not receive a high-quality education (Kozleski, 2002). Special education students drop out at alarming rates and have extremely poor academic skills, high delinquency rates, and poor employment records as youths and adults (Malian & Love, 1998; Pugach & Warger, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2001; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996).

Before blaming special education teachers for these failures, it is important to consider the realities of their work lives. These teachers are expected to teach academic skills as well as provide students with the life and vocational skills necessary for self-sufficiency. They are required to work in different settings (e.g., resource room, general education classroom) and tailor instruction to students with a variety of special needs (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002; Kozleski, 2002; Mastroperieri, 2001). They teach content classes in a variety of areas, some
The complexities of special education programs present myriad difficulties for teachers. The current organization of these programs actually hinders teachers in their effort to provide direct services to students, as many teachers report having too much paperwork, an unmanageably large caseload, and too few resources (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002; Council for Exceptional Children, 2001; Kozleski, 2002; Lyon et al., 2001; Mastropieri, 2001; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Pugach & Warger, 2001). Kozleski concluded that “the majority of special educator time is spent on activities that do not result in improved student learning outcomes” (p. 7).

Recently, the nature of teaching at the secondary level has been changing, with an increased emphasis on inclusion and curriculum alignment with general education (Salomie & deBentencourt, 1997; Wehmeyer, Sands, Knowlton, & Kozleski, 2002). This dramatic shift is occurring at a time of holding both students and teachers to higher standards. Legislation now requires that all students have access to the general education curriculum and participate in statewide assessment (Heumann, 2000; Pugach & Warger, 2001; Thurlow & Johnson, 2000). As a result, teachers face the added difficulty of helping students who may lack basic academic skills learn more in-depth and complex curricula (Pugach & Warger). As Pugach and Warger summarized, “[T]he rules regarding how we deal with the curriculum have changed” (p. 195).

If reformers wish to tie student learning and achievement to outcomes, then a thorough understanding of the current system in secondary schools is needed (i.e., teachers’ practices, opinions of program effectiveness, and recommendations for reform). In this study, I focus on four key areas of programming for high school students with disabilities—basic skills, content area knowledge, vocational and prevocational skills, and transition planning—and examine how they are dealt with in the world of practice. I selected these four areas because of both increased emphasis on teaching secondary students content area knowledge in addition to basic skills (Pugach & Warger, 2001) and the continued concern for student outcomes and providing courses of study that allow students to obtain practical skills (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). I investigated the roles special education teachers play in each of the four areas and present teachers’ views of the effectiveness of these components for their students as well as their recommendations for reform.

In this article, I focus on a subset of questions from the survey. I address program effectiveness through analysis of teachers’ responses about their daily work and their perceptions of the program in which they work. I concentrate on four components of special education programs: basic skills instruction, content area instruction, vocational and prevocational skills instruction, and transition planning.

Method

I mailed a survey to a stratified random sample of 378 high school learning disabilities teachers in the state of Michigan. The survey addressed teachers’ daily work lives, their roles and responsibilities, the positions they have held, and their assessment of the effectiveness of their teacher preparation.

Participants

I sent surveys to one learning disabilities teacher at each of 378 randomly selected high schools in the state of Michigan, based on the population size of 593 public high schools in the state. The sample size is based on a 95% confidence interval with a ±3% sampling error that is recommended when participants’ responses cannot be predicted in advance (Fowler, 2002; Salant & Dillman, 1994). I selected teachers working in public schools because the population in those schools is more representative of the general population of students with disabilities than students enrolled in private schools. Not only do private schools have the option of rejecting applicants but parents of children who attend private schools generally are wealthier than the average parent of a child attending public school. Nearly half of all students with disabilities are classified as learning disabled (U.S. Department of Education, 2001); therefore, teachers of students with learning disabilities are thought to work with the largest percentage of the overall population of students with disabilities and were selected because of this representativeness.

I selected schools in a stratified random method to obtain proportionate representation of school size. Proportionate representation was necessary, as teachers’ duties are thought to differ by the number of students and faculty in the school, as well as by the number of other special education faculty available to teach the same students (Ancess, 2000). For example, teachers at smaller schools may be teaching more courses or spend more time consulting with parents than teachers at larger schools.

Schools were broken down into four size categories, according to the levels set forth by the Michigan High School Athletic Association (2002). Therefore, I mailed 111 surveys to schools in Class A (enrollments 2,100,8), 103 surveys to schools in both Class B (enrollments of 488–1,007) and Class C (enrollments of 243–487), and 61 to schools in Class D (enrollments < 243). The surveys were mailed to the principal of each school, with instructions to assign them to a teacher who (a) was fully certified in special education, (b) had taught at least 3 years for the district in which they were currently employed, and (c) primarily taught students with learning disabilities.

After three follow-ups, I received surveys from 191 teachers, for a 50.5% response rate. The first mailing yielded a 29.4% response rate. Two postcard reminders followed the original mailing at 2-week intervals, bringing the total to 44.9%. I subsequently contacted principals directly by either phone or e-mail at nonresponding schools. This two-pronged approach was not expected to affect the findings, as the principal was merely the point of contact leading to the respondent rather than the respondent him- or herself.

Instruments

The survey instrument tapped four data components: (a) demographic information, (b) roles and responsibilities, (c) program evaluation, and (d) teacher preparation. The first group of items, demographic information, addressed the size of school; the
teacher’s gender, education, certification, and teaching experience; and the teacher’s caseload. The second group of items, roles and responsibilities, required teachers to enter the subject, setting, and their most common activity for each period of the day. Furthermore, teachers rated the frequency with which they engage in various practices, such as teaching reading, teaching vocational skills, working with other professionals, and completing paperwork for each item. The third group of items, program evaluation, asked teachers to indicate their perception of the effectiveness of various components of their high schools’ program. The final group of items, teacher preparation, focused on rating the effectiveness of their teacher education program for the various positions that they have held and then writing specific recommendations for improving special education teacher preparation.

I field-tested the survey with 10 graduate students who were practicing special education teachers. Respondents completed the survey independently, marking any questions that were unclear or answer choices that did not accurately describe their current position. First, I asked them to describe these problem areas. I then conducted a probative face-to-face follow-up interview to discuss their responses to each section. From this follow-up interview, I was able to determine whether their responses matched previous conceptions of each question, and I revised the instrument accordingly.

Design and Data Analysis

For the purposes of this study, I used simple descriptive statistics to determine the percentage of teachers responding in a certain manner to each item. I used an analysis of variance and chi-square design to determine whether teachers’ responses varied by demographic characteristics. I analyzed qualitative data in the form of teacher commentary about program effectiveness using a constant comparative analysis to develop categories for open-ended responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Teachers’ responses to each question were summarized and then categorized. Categories remained fluid until they fit responses.

Results

Demographics

The school size of respondents was representative of the distribution of school size in the state of Michigan, \( \chi^2(3, N = 191) = 0.915, p = .82 \). The sample was 82.4% female and 17.6% male. This statistic is comparable to the overall distribution of the special education workforce, \( \chi^2(1, N = 191) = 1.09, p = .297 \), which is 84.9% female and 15.1% male (Boyer & Mainzer, 2003). Most respondents (60.4%) held master’s degrees. A majority (58.3%) indicated that they held undergraduate degrees in special education or special education plus another area. Because the state of Michigan requires special education teachers to have a certification in general education as well, it is reasonable to assume that most of these respondents hold degrees in both general and special education. However, a significant minority held undergraduate degrees in general education (17.1%) or in a non-education field (21.9%).

Michigan is a categorical state in which the first special education endorsement requires 30 hours of coursework, and each subsequent endorsement requires 18 unduplicated hours. Therefore, most of the respondents held one (35.8%) or two (43.9%) endorsements. The most common endorsements were learning disabilities (66.3%), emotional impairment (45.5%), and mental impairment (35.8%). The number of years of teaching varied considerably. On average, participants had taught for about 16 years, 14 of which were in special education and 9 of which were in their current position. These values parallel the demographic characteristics of special education teachers involved in the nationwide Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (Carlson, Brauen, Kalien, Schroll, and Willig, 2002).

Of the 191 participants, 89 (46.6%) chose to respond to at least one of the four prompts for written comments on the quality of vocational and prevocational skills instruction, and transition planning. Responders to these questions commented most often on the quality of vocational and prevocational skills instruction (67.4%), followed by transition planning (56.2%), reading and writing instruction (55.1%), and content area instruction (56.4%). Those who responded did not differ from the overall sample in terms of school size, gender, degree held, number of endorsements, or number of years teaching. In addition, no differences were found, either in quantitative ratings or in qualitative responses, by any of the demographic variables collected.

Basic Skills Instruction

The majority of teachers (61.6%) indicated that they teach reading on a daily basis (Figure 1). Nearly half (47.6%) teach writing daily. Over 70% of basic skills courses taught by participants are taught in special education settings, with 12.3% co-taught with general education teachers. Nearly half (48.2%) rated the quality of the reading or writing instruction at their school as satisfactory. Of the remaining participants, more felt that this instruction

![FIGURE 1. Percentage of respondents who teach subject daily (N = 191).](image-url)
needs improvement (27.2%) rather than it was excellent (20.4%; Figure 2).

Of the 191 participants, 49 (25.7%) opted to comment on the quality of the reading or writing instruction at their school. Of these responders, 13 (27.1%) made positive comments, indicating that they felt that their programs were excellent. Those who wrote more descriptive comments cited the use of appropriate or updated texts, good use of inclusion, and the presence of administrative support. Other responses fell into four categories: lack of a uniform approach, lack of specialized instruction, limited choices for students, and the need for more in-service or support (Figure 3).

The most widely cited criticism for reading and writing instruction was the lack of a uniform approach (n = 18). General comments included a lack of curriculum guidelines or that the schools did not teach reading specifically. Two teachers remarked that they “wish there was a guideline to follow” and that there was “no real special education curriculum in place.” A few indicated that either reading was good and writing lacking, or vice versa, or suggested the need for curriculum realignment and to connect with materials and instruction used in earlier grades. The remainder of the respondents indicated a lack of consistency in instruction or quality across teachers (both general and special education), departments, or schools.

The second most common response, addressed by 13 participants, was that the reading and writing approaches used at participants’ schools were excellent. Those who responded in this manner and provided an explanation attributed program success to new materials, support from general education colleagues and the administration, and a genuine commitment on the part of teachers and others to teaching these skills.

The remainder of responses (n = 18) consisted of comments encompassing several other problems. These included a need for more specialized instruction, limited choices for students, and the need for more monetary support. Those who commented on the lack of specialized instruction stated that students with low reading levels were not being served, especially in the general education setting. They felt that general education teachers were not making enough modifications to meet the needs of their students. A few saw the paucity of choices available to their students as inhibiting the quality of the reading and writing instruction. Other than a general expression of the need for more course options for students with lower skills levels, they expressed frustration with general high school course offerings. For example, one teacher explained, “Our general education curriculum has eliminated many courses designed for non-college-bound students,” and “Reading at upper grade levels becomes more difficult [because of] graduation expectations/time/vocational preparation.” A few also cited the need for more in-service and support, especially access to a reading specialist. As one teacher remarked, “[there is] not enough emphasis on how to address this deficit.”

In sum, most special education teachers were teaching reading, and nearly half were teaching writing daily. Those who were pleased with their program cited administrative support, effective use of inclusion, and quality textbooks. Problems included lack of a uniform and specialized approach to teaching reading and writing, limited choices for students, and lack of training or support for teachers.

**Content Area Instruction**

Overall, special education teachers were less likely to teach content area courses than they were to teach basic skills. However, 56% did teach mathematics on a daily basis, 37.2% taught social studies, and 33.5% taught science daily (Figure 1). Again, most of the content area courses taught by participants (76.6%) were in self-contained settings. Some participants were involved in coteaching with general education teachers (14.3% for both math and science, and 10.0% in for social studies). A slight majority of respondents (58.1%) rated the
content area instruction as satisfactory. Of the remaining participants, more felt it was excellent (21.5%) than those responding needs improvement (15.7%; Figure 4).

Only 26 participants (13.6%) responded with comments when asked about the quality of the content area (math, science, social studies) instruction at their school. Although few responded to this prompt, in general, responses indicated a need for more options for students (n = 11). These responses are summarized in Figure 5.

Eleven of these participants indicated such frustration with the general education courses that they advocated the need for self-contained classes. They felt that the general education courses were too advanced, too abstract, and did not relate to real-life situations or skills. Six specifically expressed the need for tracking, especially to meet the needs of lower functioning students. A few seemed hopeful about team-teaching.

Six participants mentioned the need for students to receive more modifications or accommodations, citing resistance from general education teachers as a barrier to meeting this need. As one teacher stated, “I think if the student is in a regular ed class, there needs to be more accommodating at my school.” Four of these respondents commented that they currently were working on curriculum alignment, particularly with respect to state standards.

In sum, a majority of teachers taught mathematics daily, with about one third teaching science and social studies. Although few participants commented on the quality of the content area instruction at their school, they indicated the existence of several problems. These problems included general education courses that were too rigorous and not appropriate for many special education students and the need for more modifications and accommodations.

Vocational and Prevocational Skills Instruction

In general, learning disabilities teachers did not appear to be responsible for teaching functional skills, and only some taught vocational skills. There was great variety in the amount of vocational skills taught by participants, with nearly equal numbers responding daily, weekly, monthly, and rarely when asked how often they taught vocational skills. On the other hand, the majority (56.5%) responded that they rarely teach functional skills. When teachers do teach these skills, they work mainly in resource settings (52.6%), which was defined as “helping students with work from other classes in a pull-out special education class.” Although 40.3% of participants felt vocational instruction was satisfactory, a larger minority felt it needs improvement (34.6%), and only 22.0% rated it as excellent (Figure 6).

Sixty (31.4%) of the 191 participants responded with comments to the question asking about the quality of their vocational and prevocational skills instruction, the highest response rate of all four questions. Three main categories emerged from the data (Figure 7). The largest number of respondents (n = 21) mentioned the need for more options for vocational and prevocational training for different populations. Several blamed the school for placing too much emphasis on programming for college-bound students and eliminating “nonacademic” courses and programs. Some found problems helping lower functioning students or students who had not accumulated very many credits to access vocational programs. Others cited lack of time and resources. Most stated that the existing vocational and prevocational programs at their schools were not available to all students who needed them.

The second most common response was positive comments about their school’s vocational and prevocational program (n = 19). Those who answered in this manner...

FIGURE 4. Ratings of quality of content area instruction (N = 191).

FIGURE 5. Comments on quality of content area instruction (N = 26).
spoke highly of their community-based instruction or the support they receive from outside agencies, their district, or skill centers. Several also mentioned the number of options available to students, including a wide variety of on-site courses, as the cause of their high rating.

Third, 11 teachers responded that their schools were working on this area or that their programming needed to improve. These teachers felt the need to expand vocational and prevocational programming by offering more opportunities and applying skills across courses. They also wanted to make high school courses more relevant to the workplace. Finally, the 9 respondents indicated the need for better coordination. One participant stated, “[W]e need better coordination. Teachers have too many other responsibilities”;

another claimed that the guidance office did not collaborate adequately with special education. Finally, a few indicated that their vocational program was not on site. Participants said that students were often bussed to technical centers, and one commented that the school “needs on-campus options.”

In sum, about half the respondents taught vocational courses daily or weekly, but few taught functional skills courses. Those who commented positively on their school’s vocational programs indicated coordination with local agencies, the availability of choices for students, and participation in community-based programs. Respondents who felt their vocational instruction could be improved cited a need for more options for different student populations and mentioned problems with an increased focus on college-bound over non-college-bound students and lack of coordination, support, and resources.

Transition Planning

Of the four areas, participants rated the effectiveness of the transition planning for their students the lowest. Only a small plurality rated the quality of transition planning as satisfactory (37.2%), with 35.1% responding that it needs improvement. Only 22.5% chose excellent when asked about transition planning (Figure 8).

Figure 9 summarizes teachers’ comments on the quality of transition planning for their students. Of the 49 teachers who commented (26.2%), the most common response (n = 15) was that they were working on improving this area. Teachers stressed collaborative efforts involving other special education teachers or county and district-wide officials. One teacher stated, “We are just beginning in this area,” and another said, “There is much to learn!”

The second most common response (n = 10) was that training and coordination were needed to improve transition planning. These teachers remarked on personal limitations in this area, stating a need for districts to provide in-service. One described her school’s approach to transition as “hodgepodge—need one person to coordinate on site!” Another was frustrated with outside agencies, stating that “[representatives from agencies] do not come to meetings and when they do, there is little to no follow-up.”

Third, 8 respondents described the current transition programming at their school as good. These teachers mentioned continuous efforts by a variety of individuals and agencies to ensure that transition planning was pervasive and ongoing. They indicated that students took self-advocacy or career courses in which they had access to guest speakers, visited school and community programs, were supported in job searches, and completed portfolios.

The remainder of the respondents (n = 16) indicated the need for more options for students, more involvement, and more time. Of those who cited the need for more options, most found difficulty setting up or maintaining programs for students with more involved needs, such as
students with mental or emotional impairments. Others indicated the need for more involvement or more time to implement transition planning properly. They suggested more involvement on the part of parents, students, and community agencies. One teacher wrote, “Need to help students realize the importance of transition planning; students and parents need to be more involved.” Others cited problems with time constraints, saying they did not spend much time doing transition planning and that they needed more. One teacher expressed frustration, “[Transition] is to be discussed with students during class time (or have them come in before/after school—yeah right).”

In sum, nearly half of those who commented on the quality of transition planning for their students mentioned that they were working on improving services in this area. Respondents to this question indicated the need for more options for students; more training and coordination among programs and staff; more involvement on the part of students, family, and staff; and more time. Those who were satisfied with the transition programming at their school cited support on the part of school and local agencies. They mentioned a commitment to addressing transition through required coursework, including student portfolios and assisted job searches.

**Discussion**

Two themes regarding program effectiveness emerged from teachers’ comments across the four areas: (a) lack of program coherence and (b) lack of options for students. Those who rated the effectiveness of their program low indicated these two problems as a reason for their low ratings, whereas those who rated their program’s effectiveness high remarked that their programs were coherent and allowed sufficient options for students. These two problems suggest several implications for current reform efforts in the field of special education.

**Lack of Program Coherence**

Participants indicated problems with program coherence in a variety of ways. They discussed the need for curriculum alignment or efforts to improve organization and coordination. In basic skills, participants commented on the lack of a curriculum and the wide variation in instruction across both general and special education teachers. The same themes were also expressed in remarks about content area instruction. In addition, participants felt that the general education curriculum and classroom teachers were not responsive to student needs, often to the extent that they advocated for more self-contained special education classes. They also cited the need for more adaptations and modifications and an increase in practical applicability of content.

Clearly, participants felt that vocational instruction should be improved, and that it was not accessible to all students who needed the services, particularly those who had low academic skills. Often, programs were off site in a variety of different locations. Vocational instruction is one area in which special education teachers’ roles were not consistent. The amount of vocational instruction they were required to do varied considerably from one teacher to the next. Respondents felt that problems in this area stemmed from poor coordination on the part of the school, district, and local agencies. Teachers rated the quality of the transition planning at their school the lowest in all four areas, again citing the need for better coordination, training, and more planning time and involvement. Teachers who commented positively about their schools’ programs indicated that programs were coherent and that there was coordination with the school and outside agencies and support from administrators, coordinators, and coordinating agencies.

Program coherence is also a theme in the special education literature. Pugach and Warger (1996) argued that, traditionally, special education has de-emphasized the general education curriculum in favor of teaching basic skills and a variety of social skills and learning strategies. As a result, special education itself has become
“a-curricular.” Student placement is also quite varied by district. Programs in which teachers work in both general and special education settings and are responsible for providing students with everything from basic skills to content to vocational skills, and in which students are placed in different settings for varying amounts of time often become fragmented and incoherent (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Winzer, 2000). In addition, curriculum and instruction varies greatly from teacher to teacher (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002).

Lack of Options for Students

Historically, the hallmark of special education has been individualized instruction. However, it is clear from responses to this study that students do not have the options their teachers feel they need. “Limited choices” for students was a theme in responses across the four categories.

When discussing basic skills instruction, participants saw the need for courses for students with lower reading levels. This finding is not surprising, as many secondary schools do not address the acquisition of reading and writing skills explicitly (Moore, Bean, Birdshaw, & Rycik, 1999). In addition, many expressed a need for more self-contained content courses to meet the needs of students with lower skill levels. Some of the responses regarding both basic skills and content area instruction appeared to be tied to the perception that many general education teachers were not making appropriate modifications and accommodations for special education students. In sum, they felt that students lacked the opportunity to develop literacy skills and subsequently had difficulties in general education content area courses because of their low skill levels.

Again, in the areas of vocational instruction and transition planning, teachers mentioned overwhelmingly that more options were needed for students with various needs. As previously stated, participants who responded positively to questions about program effectiveness said that they had a variety of options in each of these areas, options that met the needs of a diverse student population.

Lack of options for students is also addressed in the special education literature, particularly in the areas of vocational instruction and transition. For example, Malan and Love (1998) found that parents of students with disabilities felt that their child “did not receive needed transition services” while in high school (p. 9). Wagner and Blackorby (1996) reported that rigidity in scheduling often prohibited students from taking needed vocational courses. Although teachers involved with the current study indicated a need to return to the “cascade” model (Deno, 1970), at least in some areas, current reform efforts appear to be leaning more toward inclusion. Results of this study do not appear to support conclusions reached by Conderman and Katsiyannis (2002) that indicate special education teachers’ primary responsibility for vocational instruction and that “a variety of transition services are available to students” (p. 174).

Implications

Current reform efforts in special education have demanded that special education programs increase inclusion of students with special needs in general education classes and in state- and district-wide standardized assessment (Heumann, 2000). This research suggests that special education as a field needs to address problems of program coherence and program options before it can solve problems of poor test scores and poor academic outcomes. If special education programs do indeed have a “hodgepodge approach,” the current organization of these programs will not allow teachers to succeed in improving student outcomes, a persistent problem in the field of special education (Malian & Love, 1998; Pugach & Warger, 2001; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). Such an approach includes the use of varied curriculum and instruction by teachers, varied vocational options and amount of special education teacher input by school, lack of individualized instruction in general education, and few to no programs for those with the lowest skills levels. As one respondent summarized, “Here’s the real quandary, as I see it: How does the special educator prepare a student (and family) for life after high school while at the same time ensure that the student is meeting all required state benchmarks? These equally [important] needs are often at odds with each other when it comes down to planning for a student’s academic career.”

This study also leads to several implications for special education teachers. Poor student outcomes are a serious problem among adolescents with disabilities, and the results of this study suggest that lack of program coherence and lack of options need to be addressed. Special education teachers can collaborate with their special and general education peers, as well as personnel from community agencies and sites that coordinate vocational training, to ensure that all are informed about individual needs of students. They can create mutually beneficial relationships with general education colleagues, in which each uses his or her expertise to benefit the other (e.g., general education teachers sharing knowledge of content and standards to help with curriculum alignment, and special education teachers sharing successful strategies to work with students with disabilities in the general education classroom). In addition, special education teachers can advocate for their students’ needs and their own needs with administrators and district-level personnel to inform them about necessary steps to coordinate programming. Such collaboration has been identified repeatedly as a crucial component to student success (Stodden, Galloway, & Stodden, 2003; Zigmond, 2003).

Despite the nationwide trend toward inclusion, the results of this study indicate that some teachers believe some of their students would be better served in self-contained settings. Their reasoning appears to stem from perceived difficulties with insufficient accommodations and modifications in general education classes, as well as the need to serve populations with varied needs (e.g., those with emotional impairments or more severe mental impairments). Zigmond (2003) has urged special education professionals to look beyond placement when making decisions about programming. She recommended a balanced approach to instruction, including both the use of adaptations and accommodations to help manage curricula and “bypass deficits” and focused remedial instruction to increase students’ ability to cope with curricula and materials. If implemented correctly, this approach might address many concerns of partici-
pants in this study, including those whose general education courses were too advanced for their students. It is particularly salient in an environment in which teachers, researchers, and policymakers disagree about what types of programming will best serve students with disabilities.

Policymakers and school leaders need to listen to teachers’ recommendations when planning for reform. The respondents in this study indicated that special education programs need coherence and increased options for students with a variety of needs. All of these concerns point to the need for reform in secondary schools, particularly given the national movement to an outcomes-focused educational system. These needs include (a) balancing teaching basic skills, content, and vocational skills in a manner that results in improved student outcomes, both in terms of test scores and employment; (b) supporting students in acquiring reading and writing skills and in using these skills to learn content; (c) making vocational and prevocational programs accessible to all students; and (d) infusing transition planning into coursework and school programming.

Researchers can follow up by going beyond teachers’ perceptions to study elements of effective programming for students with disabilities at the secondary level. They can attempt to measure program coherence and tie outcomes to the type of academic and vocational programming. Researchers also can create and test various service delivery models. Some questions for researchers that arise from this study include (a) Are teachers’ perceptions about program effectiveness valid? (b) What types of academic and vocational programming lead to improved outcomes for students? (c) What are the most effective transition supports? (d) What are the obstacles to implementing effective secondary programming in the schools?

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First and foremost, response rates should be seen as limiting responses, in both quantitative and qualitative components of the study. Only 13.6% to 31.4% of the sample chose to comment about the quality of these four program components. In general, participation in surveys depends on participants’ interest level in the subject matter as well as the difficulty of the task and amount of effort required (Beatty & Herrmann, 2002). As the time and effort required to answer the open-ended questions well surpassed that required to respond to the remainder of the survey, one can draw few conclusions about the differences between responders and nonresponders to these questions, although their demographics were comparable. One can postulate, however, that those who responded with comments had more interest (positive or negative) in the subject, namely the quality of their programs. Perhaps nonresponders (both to the survey in general and to the open-ended questions) held more neutral opinions about their programs. These cautions are important to consider when interpreting the meaning of responses, particularly in the percentage of teachers who may or may not feel that their programs are ineffective or lacking in some manner.

Second, the survey was representative of schools in one state. Although its conclusions support those of other researchers, generalizability to other states may be limited. Third, this study measured teachers’ perceptions of the quality of several components of the special education program in their schools, rather than examining the programs themselves. Therefore, participants’ answers reflect their own views, which may or may not reflect accurately the quality of those programs or the achievement of students in those programs. Fourth, “effectiveness” was not defined in the survey, so teachers’ perceptions of the meaning of the term was likely to have varied. Finally, although content validity was established through a pilot study, reliability coefficients were not measured.

In conclusion, special education program effectiveness has always been difficult to define and even more difficult to measure. In this era of increased accountability and efficiency of programming, we need to have a better picture of the current status of our programs and services. Teachers can provide us with such a picture. Therefore, it is imperative to consider their views about program effectiveness, to understand their assessment of their programs and their recommendations for improvement based on that assessment. Teachers involved in this study pointed to a consistent lack of program coherence and a lack of program options for their high school students. These issues of practice need to be investigated further and addressed before we can expect teachers to be able to make the kind of changes that we hope will improve student outcomes.

REFERENCES


