



# VALUES AND ETHICS IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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## GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF FULL MEMBERSHIP FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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### Abstract

Full membership is acceptance and belonging in a school community where all stakeholders have a voice and the culture is reflective of these values and beliefs. This qualitative study compared the perceptions of general and special education teachers from two southern high schools. The author explored how scripts of disability inform teacher practices and what systemic barriers may be in place that impede full membership for students with disabilities. While both groups of teachers generally agreed that full membership opportunities were important, unexpectedly, a lack of exposure to disabilities during formative years and special education teacher perceptions tended to limit full membership opportunities. Challenges included educator mindset toward the abilities of students with disabilities and access to full membership opportunities. Methods to overcoming full membership barriers include professional learning communities, collaboration, and professional development designed for reflection on self-beliefs and practice.

### Introduction

Schooling has long been considered the best method for preparing youth to take their place as contributing members of society. This preparation has included areas other than just reading, writing, and arithmetic. Learning civic, social, and moral obligations have been a part of the overall goal in public education systems around the world. Today, societies are more involved with global issues. Moving beyond agrarian and industrialized focal points, the U.S. must look beyond its borders to see the bigger picture. In order to compete with established and developing countries, transforming education into a system that embraces all peoples is required (Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). Full membership for students with disabilities is one transformation that will enable change to begin.

Historically, education has followed a dual model. Autonomous, separate classrooms kept students with disabilities from interacting

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with non-disabled peers (Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, & Sheere, 1999; Kleinert, Miracle, & Sheppard-Jones, 2007). This also limited access to general education class participation which is connected to higher achievement and positive outcomes due to the increased time spent on academic content (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2010).

Keeping students in separate classrooms deny students with disabilities the opportunity to belong. According to Maslow's (1970) research and his hierarchy of human needs, belonging is a basic, psychological need that demonstrates the importance of providing membership for all students. The need for belonging, level three, must be met prior to movement to level four, that of educational learning and achievement. The educational system frequently requires students to achieve and master academic content before allowing them to develop that sense of belonging. We expect them to prove they are worthy of belonging by performing at a specific skill level prior to entering the general education classroom (Jorgensen et al., 2010). Students echoed this in studies conducted by Ellis, Hart, and Small-McGinly (2003), Smerdon (2002), and Williams and Downing (1998). Caring, listening, and respect from teachers along with feeling welcomed and wanted, were inherent to belonging to the school community according to the students that were surveyed in these studies and are important components of full membership.

The idea of full membership for students with disabilities grew out of the Civil Rights Movement. Sparked by the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, segregated but equal schools became unconstitutional. Prior to that time, students identified with a disability were mainly educated in separate classrooms and taught a separate curriculum. These students were isolated, stigmatized, even denied the right to attend their neighborhood schools. This landmark civil rights ruling encouraged advocates for students with disabilities to voice their beliefs that it was also unconstitutional to segregate students because of disability (Banks, 2006).

The voices of these advocates led to the 1975 enactment of Public Law 94-142, the *Education for All Handicapped Children's Act*, today known as the *Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act*. This act, which requires equal access to public education for students with disabilities, has been progressive and began by decreeing that students with exceptional needs be placed in classes with their general education peers in the least restrictive environment (IDEIA, 2004; Kleinert et al., 2007).

### **Background Literature**

Educating students in the least restrictive environment means that students with disabilities be given opportunities to be educated with their peers in non-special education classrooms to the greatest extent

possible (IDEIA, 2004). Increased access to the general education curriculum has positively increased for students in many areas including academic and behavioral (IDEIA, 2004; Smith, Gartin, & Murdick, 2012). Over time, this placement decree has progressed and evolved from mainstreaming to full inclusion to full membership, encompassing extracurricular and non-curricular activities as well as the general education curriculum. Yet, "in a deeper sense, the intent of IDEIA [has] moral underpinnings, which [is] to ensure full membership for students having the greatest needs" (Morgan & Leonard, 2012, p. 1).

The provision of appropriate special education services in high school settings has been a relatively recent event. It is only within the past twenty-five years that school systems have addressed this issue. Many students dropped out of school due to that lack of programs and supports to meet their needs. Many others were placed in settings that did not challenge their abilities or stimulate their thinking. Students did not develop a sense of belonging nor did they find success with academic endeavors. Large groups of students with disabilities were entering society without the ability to obtain and keep a job or to live independently (Smith et al., 2012). Education in the least restrictive environment was one step in the right direction to providing appropriate support to students with disabilities at the secondary level.

Mainstreaming of students with disabilities, which began in the 1980s, was reserved for those students needing the least amount of support in a general education classroom in order to gain academic and or social benefit. Because Public Law 94-142 mandated education in the least restrictive environment, those students who were placed in academic classes received instruction that was often "watered down" or passive. Most students were excluded from general classes because they did not "fit" the mainstream or average student expectation (Smith et. al., 2012).

Mainstreaming evolved into the idea of full inclusion during the 1990s. Defined by Wright and Wright (2009), full inclusion is "an effort to make sure students with disabilities go to school with their friends and neighbors, while also receiving the specially designed instruction and support they need to achieve high standards and succeed as [a] learner" (p. 427). This instruction and support is outlined in a student's individualized education plan. This plan is a legal document that drives a student's instructional program by addressing his or her academic, social, communication, health, and behavioral needs. It includes information such as present levels of academic performance, along with stating the goals and or objectives the student is expected to master. This document also includes accommodations, strategies, and interventions that enable the student to access the general curriculum. There may also be assistive technological supports, and related services, such as speech and

language therapy, needed to help bridge deficits so the student has increased opportunities to be academically successful. The plan also outlines the number of minutes a student is to spend in a general education setting, a special education setting, and in some cases, time working and learning in the community (Wright & Wright, 2010).

Historically, inclusion has not been successful for all students with disabilities which may be due to a lack of appropriate teacher and administrator training or buy-in (Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 2012). There is little empirical research related to full membership opportunities for high school students with disabilities. This study will add to the limited knowledge that currently exists about school worker perceptions and viewpoints about full membership.

Full membership goes beyond access to educational programs for students with disabilities to encompass all areas and aspects of the school community while meeting the federal mandates required by NCLB and IDEIA. Full membership does not support the idea of a “one size fits all” way of thinking, but is provided along a continuum as outlined in IDEIA based on the individual needs and abilities of each child (Morgan & Leonard, 2012). Throughout the past four decades, special education has suffered problematic issues. One of the most lamented is that of including students with disabilities in the school community as an equal member. Merging the education of students with disabilities with the education of their non-disabled peers has spurred advocates into action (Townsend, 2009). To date, the idea of full membership has been approached more technically than through any ethical or moralistic manner. There have been ethically and politically charged incidents over time with both positive and negative outcomes (Paul, French, & Cranston-Gringas, 2001). Despite the law set forth in IDEIA, and numerous court cases revolving around education in the least restrictive environment, students with disabilities continue to be excluded, ostracized, overlooked, and left behind. We must marry our different philosophies into a new way of thinking to address the day-to-day needs of all students (Leonard & Leonard, 2003).

One perspective for facilitating the implementation of full membership has been posited by Black and Burello (2010). They reported full membership for students places them at the center of education while acknowledging their unique and individual needs, and this “placement” helps to overcome the stigma of special education. The premise of full membership is to overcome stigma and reduce marginalization while being a valued member of the school community. Full membership also includes access to social roles and group belonging (Williams & Downing, 1998).

Even with numerous federal and state educational policies, mandated ethics trainings, and court cases

revolving around the denial of the right to a free and appropriate public education, full membership continues to elude students with disabilities. While the courts continue to interpret the law as set forth in IDEIA, some of the neediest students with the greatest potential for growth are being excluded and left behind.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study focused on two challenging conceptual aspects of full membership for high school students with disabilities: *scripts of disability* and *systemic barriers* from the perspectives of general and special education teachers. Phenomenological qualitative research methods were used and teacher interview questions focused on these two major challenges identified by Black and Burello (2010) to achieving membership in high schools; scripts of disability and systemic barriers.

Scripts of disability are medical or psychological labels or descriptions, given or perceived, that institutionally identify students as having some type of deficiency or damage. Scripts of disability have shaped professional practice, reactions, and behaviors in educational settings, in turn creating negative school cultures (Ware 2002). These practices have also shaped teachers’ beliefs in how students with disabilities are able to perform in an educational setting. Sileo, Sileo, and Pierce (2008) reported there are many lenses through which teachers make decisions. Personal values impacting decisions and judgments may be biased and, therefore, limit the full membership potential for students with disabilities.

Systemic barriers are those written and unwritten policies, procedures, and practices that limit opportunities for students with disabilities to have full access to their school community. Systemic barriers deter the rights of students with disabilities to be included in the school community. These barriers, which develop over time, may unfairly exclude certain groups from taking part (Black & Burello, 2010).

I hoped to gain an understanding of why full membership has been denied to many students with disabilities at the high school level. Through phenomenological qualitative methodology and data collection methods through face-to-face interviews, my intent was to explore how scripts of disability and systemic barriers affect full membership opportunities for students with disabilities. The exploration of themes and patterns derived from collected data adds to the growing bank of knowledge related to barriers that deny students with disabilities the opportunity and right to full membership in the school in which they attend.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Teachers may be the most important variable in providing full membership opportunities for students with disabilities (Sileo et al., 2008). Willingness to work with the diverse needs of these students is dependent upon their beliefs and perceptions. Teacher perceptions

are consciously or unconsciously guided by frames of reference. Frames of reference are the perceptual filters used to make decisions and determine understanding of life experiences. Perceptual filters in turn may not allow for understanding of others, setting up parameters that are resistant to mindset change (Friend & Cook, 1992). A clash of personal values and perceptions develop that create dissonance and conflict between teachers and student with disabilities. The personal values of teachers may be reflected in their behaviors and attitudes towards identified students (Steele, 2012).

A paradigm shift in the mindset of all stakeholders is required to truly understand the concept of full membership. Embracing community and full membership in schools must focus on learner-centered outcomes if providing full membership is to go beyond the classroom to promote quality-of-life experiences for all stakeholders (Black & Burello, 2010). Educator behaviors are generally formed by a varied set of professional and personal experiences that have informed their beliefs about students with disabilities (Jorgensen et al., 2010). Cultural constructs of difference are represented in personal attitudes, beliefs, and values. These constructs often shape how educators view and interact with students with disabilities (Steele, 2012). The importance of this study was to understand how scripts of disability and systemic barriers factor into providing educational benefit and full membership for students with disabilities.

Black and Burello's (2010) discussion of full membership identified several principles that should be present in fully inclusive schools: a) all school members having the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to promote high expectation for students; b) all students having access to quality teachers who possess moral literacy; c) parents and guardians able to fully participate in the life of the school; d) teachers differentiating instruction to address diversity focusing on transference of learning to the community and greater society outside of the classroom; e) school leaders invoking principles of deliberative democracy; f) school communities choosing to define disability as a central feature of the human experience while recognizing differences and demanding high expectations; g) schools where students with disabilities are placed with their peers in natural proportion and are not in clustered programs of like students, and; h) school leaders prepared to center purpose and work against bureaucratic inertia (pp. 2-6).

These principles of full membership guided my focus on two challenging, interrelated conceptual aspects of full membership for students with disabilities that were addressed in this study: *scripts of disability* and *systemic barriers* from the perspectives of general and special education teachers.

The first concept addressed in this study related to scripts of disability. This label or description identifies

individuals as having some type of deficiency or disability. The second concept, systemic barriers, is related to barriers set up by the school community or culture. These barriers develop over time as a result of attitudes, labels, and assumptions imprinted on societal members that view students with disabilities as being defective or damaged.

Informed by these significant conceptual aspects of full membership, the following questions guided the research:

1. What are general and special education high school teachers' perspectives of full membership for students with disabilities?
2. What scripts of disability may be reflected in the general and special education high school teachers' practice?
3. What systemic barriers may exist in the high school community to prevent students with disabilities from having full membership?

### Methodology

A phenomenological, qualitative approach best suited the purpose of this study. The goal was to gain an understanding of the experiences, concerns, and conflicts faced by general and special education teachers working with students with disabilities throughout the school community. The end result was to offer findings for educational institutions to improve educational practices and increase positive student outcomes. A phenomenological methodology enabled me to describe the participants' lived experiences as richly as possible while remaining neutral regarding the legitimacy of those experiences as described by participants as their reality.

Purposeful sampling was used to gain knowledge specific to the research topic by providing detailed, first-hand experiential information. This method better enabled me to obtain rich, detailed data regarding general and special education high school teachers' perceptions on full membership and belonging for students with disabilities. Other methods were considered including convenience sampling and homogeneous sampling. Because this study intended to gain perspectives from both general and special education high school teachers who had daily experiences and contact with students having disabilities, school administrators, and other school community stakeholders, none of the aforementioned strategies were chosen. The participants in this study were representative of certified or highly qualified designated general and special education high school teachers from two high schools in the southern region of the United States.

### Participant Sample

Ten general and ten special education teachers from each high school were contacted to be interviewed. Of the fourteen teachers who agreed to participate, nine were

special education certified and actively teaching. Five of the special education teachers were also certified in a core subject area. These five teachers were teaching special education classes, mainly because of the lack of job openings in their general education areas of certification. Of all the special education teachers, six were inclusion teachers, one taught in a resource setting, and two were self-contained teachers of intellectually disabled, moderate students. The five general education teachers were certified in various core content subject areas such as English, math, biology, and American history. This sample included teachers from both genders (eleven females and three males), diverse ethnic backgrounds (five African-Americans and 9 Caucasians), and with various generational and teaching experience ranging from one to more than thirty-one years. While the two high schools these teachers worked at were located within the same district, the school communities represented a blending of different socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural groups.

The first data collection site was a high performing school with student enrollment of more than 1200 with a racial make-up of 46% Caucasian, 50% African-American, and 4% other ethnicities with 7% being considered as having disabilities. The second site was a low performing school with a student enrollment of 1100 and a racial make-up of 99% African-American students and 13% of the population having disabilities.

#### Data Collection

After obtaining superintendent approval and approval from the Institutional Review Board, email introductions and explanations were sent to the principals of the two schools in this study. An introductory email with copies of the school superintendent's approval and informed consent was sent to all teachers chosen for participation. I followed up these emails with phone conversations to arrange interview times and locations.

Interview data from these general and special education teachers working with students with disabilities were utilized to gain perspectives of full membership for students with disabilities and to determine if scripts of disability or systemic barriers may deter full membership involvement for these students. All teachers were interviewed face-to-face. Each interview lasted an average of 45 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Five teachers were known to the researcher so rapport had already been established. To build rapport with the remaining nine teachers, the researcher shared personal background information and educational experiences related to the reasons for this study. The researcher also gave the interviewees ample opportunity to share personal experiences and information.

An interview protocol with open-ended questions was developed from published literature that discussed areas related to teacher perceptions of full membership for

students with disabilities including scripts of disabilities and systemic barriers. Additional questions were asked for clarity or to delve deeper into teacher responses. Descriptive and reflective field notes were taken throughout the interviews.

#### Data Analysis

The principles of full membership (Black & Burello, 2010) informed the analysis of data collected in this study. Inductive data analysis provided insight into perceptions, beliefs, and biases of general and special education teachers in relation to full membership in the school community for students with disabilities. Interview data were clustered according to the three research questions pertaining to teacher perspectives of full membership, scripts of disability, and systemic barriers. The preliminary data analysis process allowed me to identify emerging themes and patterns of responses related to issues of educational ethics necessary to achieve full membership in schools that would benefit all students, including those with disabilities.

This study was carried out by prolonged engagement with the interview process, triangulation of data, and peer debriefing. Thick description and a detailed account of the researcher's field experiences inform the study's findings. Several colleagues not involved in this study examined the process and product of this investigation, as an external audit, in order to provide feedback and clarification. An audit trail of notes, summaries, coding processes, and products in addition to reports of researcher reflexivity contribute to the coherence of the study.

#### Limitations

There are several limitations regarding the data presented in this study. Only two high schools in one district, in one region of the United States were involved limiting the transferability of findings or conclusions to other school or districts. Different schools in different regions may present a variety of different findings. Ten interviews limited the amount of data collected. The proportion of general education teachers to special education teachers in this study may limit a clear perspective of teachers' ideas.

#### Findings

Full membership for students with disabilities is the premise that they should be included in every aspect of the school community. Black and Burello (2010) reported that full membership for students placed them at the center of education. Acknowledging the unique, individual needs of students helps them overcome the stigma of special education while reducing marginalization. Two major challenges to achieving full membership in high schools are scripts of disability and systemic barriers. Scripts of disability are medical or psychological labels or descriptions, given or perceived,

that institutionally identifies students as having some type of deficiency or damage. Systemic barriers are those school policies, procedures, and or practices that may unfairly exclude students with disabilities from taking part in all aspects of the school community.

The findings of this study are presented and discussed according to each research question. Teacher responses may help to shed light on barriers to full membership and further provide ideas for improving opportunities for students with disabilities.

#### Teachers' Perspectives of Full Membership

Research question one focused on teachers' perspectives of full membership for student with disabilities. Interviewees were asked several questions related to full membership. Information included explaining what full membership means in relation to participating in the school community, how they saw students with disabilities in terms of being members of classes, how they felt about students with disabilities participating in school-wide activities, what involvement should students with disabilities have within the school, and what did they perceive as limitations for students with disabilities to fully participate in the educational experience. Teacher interview responses were categorized into themes that became evident during data analysis.

#### Belief in the Rights of Full Membership for Students with Disabilities

Overall, both general and special education teachers at both sites felt that full membership allowed everyone to be involved in all aspects of the school community, that all should be able to participate, and deserved equal treatment. Membership builds from school to neighborhood to community and beyond. Membership also involves relationship building. One general education teacher mentioned that "students with disabilities are valuable members of the classroom and community, providing opportunities for all students to build tolerance and awareness of the differences in people." Only two special education teachers had differing views. One did not understand what full membership meant and the other responded, "I don't know if that (full membership) would be applied to our students. In my opinion, their needs cannot be met in the regular classroom. Full membership is wonderful, but we need to determine if it will help self-esteem."

Teachers gave different reasons for supporting full membership. One general education teacher responded that it "is a human and civil right." Another general education teacher responded that it provided "opportunities for students to be seen without having a disability." One other response included that it "builds community and self-confidence." The same two special education teachers that previously responded with different answers gave different responses to this question as well. One said that participation is only

acceptable if the contribution the students can give is meaningful and good for the school and community" and the other commented "only if the student is capable and can make a difference." Teachers supported full membership in their responses; to "involve [students] as much as possible" as long as they have support and it is safe.

Interestingly, both sets of teachers at the two schools expressed some limitations that revolved around scripts of disability. When asked what limitations they perceived to full membership, six teachers responded that a student's disability was a limitation. These disabilities included cognitive, behavioral, social, and communication. Other comments included financial difficulties for families. One systemic barrier pertained to discrimination by school leaders.

When asked about concerns regarding full membership, six special education teachers responded with "none" while the remaining teachers had mixed responses. These included expectations being too high, behavior, embarrassment, and health needs. One general education teacher commented that a "40 watt bulb is not as strong or bright as a 60 watt bulb." This teacher alluded to the high expectations sometimes held for students to perform. A final response revolved around the treatment of students with disabilities by other peers such as ridicule and bullying. While the general premise was that students with disabilities should have full membership opportunities, there continues to be a wide range of understanding as to what it means and what it involves.

#### Early Exposure to Students with Disabilities

An unexpected theme, lack of exposure to students with disabilities, became evident when interviewees were asked how students with disabilities were taught during their own high school years. All but two general education teachers reported that there were no students with disabilities in classrooms or their school. This lack of exposure to students with disabilities was a recurring theme prevalent throughout the teachers' responses to the protocol questions. Responses frequently included such comments as, "Students were taught in isolation, not in the general population." One special education teacher shared, "We saw very little of them", and another commented, "I think all grades may have gone to one teacher. A lot of different abilities and types clumped together. We knew nothing about inclusion." A third special education teacher mentioned that, "in college they were in different areas of the campus, in the basement or across the property, away from the general group of students." General education teachers shared comments such as "students were housed in temporary buildings outside of the main buildings" and "they were only included for enrichment integration. They (students with disabilities) only joined us for physical education and other electives. We knew they had their own classes

and that's just the way it was." One general education teacher responded:

I come from a Chicago suburb. My school was ranked very high. My parents moved out of the city to go to this school. We had one little girl with a walker, one who was blind and used a Braille keyboard, and one deaf child. We had physical disabilities only, no learning disabilities. I never really thought about that.

This lack of exposure to students with disabilities during the teachers' formative years may be one reason for differing perspectives.

While two different high schools were represented in this study, I did not identify any major differences in teacher reactions and responses during interviews. Both groups of teachers gave similar responses making school-based comparison of little value.

What are general and special education teachers' perspectives of full membership for students with disabilities? Based on the data, a summary of what was gathered could be developed that states: full membership is important and a deserved right of all students as long as the students are cognitively able to participate and follow the appropriate social rules. The school community must rally together to ensure that the necessary supports are put in place including specially trained general and special education teachers along with peer mentors to ensure success for everyone involved.

#### Scripts of Disability

What scripts of disability are reflected in general and special education teachers' practice in the high school community? Teachers may very well be one of the main deterrents to more students with disabilities being included as full members in the school community. The focus on students' disabilities, rather than abilities and strengths, may hold students back from successful integration in the school community. Lowered expectations deter improved and positive outcomes along with the acceptance of students with disabilities.

Scripts of disability were evident in the teachers' responses to problems they could foresee when including students with disabilities in the school community. When asked about expectations for students with disabilities to be involved in full membership opportunities, there was a 50-50 split in responses. These responses were equally divided between general and special education teachers. Responses from special education teachers included; "I try to have equal expectations but students with disabilities are different." "I expect them to produce almost equal work." "It depends on their ability to learn." Responses from regular education teachers included; "I am satisfied if they come to class and try." "It depends on the disability." "It depends on the students own limitations. Our expectations must be in line with what they can do. They need realistic expectations." This split

was also evident when asked about what should be considered when encouraging students with disabilities to participate. Teachers responded that "we need to consider the students' abilities," "be sure to know the students' limitations," and "identify the disability." Responses that did not focus on a script of disability included; "never say can't," "encourage them," "build on their strengths," and "provide peer groups and peer mentors."

Almost all teachers in both groups at both schools mentioned the student's stage of development, behavior disorders, or the limitations of the disability as being problems. These responses may also be the result of the lack of early exposure to individuals with disabilities as discussed in the previous section. The mixed responses demonstrate the need for additional training about full membership and what having a disability means in relation to what students with disabilities can and cannot do.

#### Systemic Barriers

Study participants were asked questions that involved administrative leaders and possible systemic barriers to full membership. Perhaps systemic barriers have been set up due to past educational preferences and practices when educating students with disabilities. When asked about past practices in their pre-high school years, all but one teacher stated that students with disabilities had been taught in isolation, separate, and self-contained classrooms when they were in high school, indicative of the prevalence for separate educational "systems" in the U.S. Only one general education teacher remembered a resource setting for students where they received core subjects in a special education classroom and electives such as physical education, art, and music with their general education peers.

When asked about the role school systems should play in full membership opportunities, teachers from both schools in general and special education responded that school is the catalyst that sets the tone, focusing on students first. This philosophy trickles down to other teachers and other stakeholders in the system. Teachers also felt that a lack of parental involvement was a problem when ensuring full membership for students with disabilities. But when reviewing parental participation data, the schools focused on support with homework and behavioral issues. In general, teachers and school administrators made minimal contact with parents, unless it was for one or both of these issues. Perhaps administrative practice should change to encouraging a different form of participation for parents that involve them more as educational partners than as just home supporters.

All but one general education teacher felt the administration was positive about including students with disabilities in all aspects of the school community. The one dissenting teacher felt that 75% of the school

was not included in the day-to-day opportunities school could provide.

While many of the challenges and barriers mentioned did not include administration, several general education teachers did allude to issues regarding how administrators approached allowances of students with disabilities to participate fully in the school environment. Administrative inertia and mindset play an important part in attitudes toward acceptance. The message that, “this is how it has always been done and is the tradition of this school” was prevalent in responses.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Though both groups of teachers at both high schools agreed on the importance of providing full membership for students with disabilities there was no real consensus on ways to provide the opportunity to further increase involvement for students with disabilities. Problems cited by participants that emerged during data analysis mirror what has been cited in previous studies (Inger, 1993; Ware, 2002; Sileo et al., 2008).

#### **Deterrents to Full Membership**

Scripts of disability and systemic barriers deter positive outcomes for students, denying them the opportunity to grow socially and emotionally (Kleinert et al., 2007) and to become fully participating adults in a global society (Starratt, 2012). When asked what barriers or obstacles were in place that deterred full membership for students with disabilities, the majority of responses revolved around the students’ disabilities, teacher perceptions of the students’ disabilities, the students’ personal perceptions of the disability, and administrative mindset. Interestingly, when asked what suggestions they had to alleviate these barriers, teachers responded with much the same ideas as those reported in previous research (Milbury, 2005; Bagin, Gallagher, and Moore, 2008; Epstein and Associates, 2009). Responses ranged from school and parents working together as teams to more professional development that involved interactions with students having disabilities. The suggestion of getting rid of the current teaching staff and replacing them with teachers who are passionate and dedicated to serving students with disabilities was also mentioned. Perhaps most profound, yet supportive suggestion reflected my own sentiments as a researcher: “We are in so deep here, it would take a paradigm shift. Resetting the culture at the school where we didn’t value one type of student above all others. It is a hard thing to overcome.”

Teachers’ comments are in keeping with Black and Burrello’s (2010) principles of full membership indicating that students with disabilities need access to quality teachers to promote high expectations. They also support the idea that full membership means all stakeholders must be willing to “disrupt values, labels, and assumptions that sustain non-membership” (p. 1). Some

teachers alluded to the need for a top down approach to full membership. Systemic barriers may be most at fault for the lack of full membership opportunities for students with disabilities. Additional research focused on administrative practices and perceptions may help to better understanding full membership opportunities and how to change the current systemic barriers in place in many schools.

#### **Overcoming Full Membership Deterrents**

Possible methods to overcoming barriers to full membership and value-laden actions include collaboration between general and special education teachers to increase student achievement (Smith, 2010) and professional learning communities as catalysts for change and school improvement (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Another strong component to improving full membership for students with disabilities revolves around professional development (Carter & Hughes, 2006) that can provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on self-beliefs and practices (Townsend, 2009). Reflection is an essential component of teacher practice because we look through lenses based on culture, experiences, and skills to make decisions (Begley, 2010). Teachers would benefit from continued professional development focused on working with each other and the different aspects of general and special education in order to become true partners in education for all students.

Teacher preparation programs should include additional focus on specific methods for working with diverse learners in the classroom. Providing all prospective teachers with actual methods and opportunities to put those methods into practice prior to entering the classroom would go a long way towards reducing teacher perceptions of scripts of disability. This would improve opportunities for students with disabilities to capitalize on their strengths and increase their opportunity for positive educational outcomes.

Finally, training in ethics and the principles of full membership is imperative. Learning how personal values are reflections of teaching should be incorporated into not only teacher preparation programs, but professional development activities as well. Incorporating effective models that focus on full membership, participation, and learning may provide the tools necessary to provide opportunities for “learning from difference to understand who we are as a community of individuals that are continuously in relationship with other human beings” (Black & Burrello, 2010, p. 1).

Suggestions for further study include training in collaborative practices in order to uncover possible values and assumptions that work against full membership. The need for collaborative practices

continues to grow as our society takes on more and more global proportions and challenges. Another suggestion is in the area of special education teachers' perceptions and the role those perceptions play in providing full membership opportunities for students with disabilities. Individuals must be careful not to allow personal bias or perceptions to develop into systemic barriers (Podell & Soodak, 1993). One final area recommended for research would be related to the lack of exposure teachers had during their formative years. A lack of available research makes this an area ripe for needed pertinent information.

Creating schools where everyone is valued as equally important is needed to ensure that all are successful (Brower & Balch, 2005). To achieve that goal, the challenge for educators is to re-imagine conceptions of disability in order to "interrupt the narratives of normalcy" (Ware, 2002, p. 155). This challenge needs to be embraced collectively and collaboratively through ongoing, sustained, and meaningful professional development that has disabilities and abilities as central features of the school community. Then, and only then, may students with disabilities have equal access to full membership in schools.

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