

## General Education Teachers' Goals and Expectations for their Included Students with Mild and Severe Disabilities

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*Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine general education teachers' goals and expectations for their included students with mild and severe disabilities. Participants were seven inclusive classroom teachers who were interviewed about their goals and expectations regarding one of their included students with a mild disability and one of their included students with a severe disability. Teachers described their primary goals for students with severe disabilities to be in the area of social development and reported that academic performance for these children was of little relevance. For children with mild disabilities, goals and expectations focused on classroom and behavior skills, academic performance, and improved self-confidence. Findings are considered in relation to a model of differential expectations (Cook, 2001; Cook & Semmel, 2000), which suggests that teachers' attitudes towards students conform to their perceptions of the obviousness of the child's disability.*

The prevailing view among many parents, educators, and policymakers is that the general education classroom is the preferred placement for students with disabilities (Coster & Haltiwanger, 2004; Ferguson, 2008; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999). In fact, it seems that the debate over inclusion has largely shifted from a discussion about whether students with disabilities should be served in general education settings to a focus on how best to implement inclusive practices effectively and provide appropriate access to the general education curriculum (Ford, Davern, & Schnorr, 2001; Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007). Initially, growth in inclusive placements occurred primarily for students with mild disabilities such as learning disabilities and behavioral disorders. However, in recent years schools have also experienced a dramatic increase in the percentage of time that children with severe and profound disabilities spend in general education classrooms (United States Department of Education [USDOE,] 2006). A significant consequence of this expansion is that general education teach-

ers have been required to take on greater responsibility for educating students with mild, moderate, and severe disabilities alongside students without disabilities.

Advocates for inclusion argue that both students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers benefit from integrated environments (Agran & Alpers, 2000; Hollowood, Salisbury, Rainforth, & Palombaro, 1994), yet they also acknowledge that what occurs for students with severe disabilities in general education settings is very different from what occurs for students with mild disabilities or typically developing students (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Hollowood et al.). Traditionally, goals for students with severe disabilities have focused on functional, vocational, and social skills (Westling & Fox, 2008; Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007). However, legal mandates now require that all students, including those with severe disabilities, have access to the general education curriculum (IDEA, 2004). Thus, inclusive classroom teachers today are faced with the challenging tasks of determining (a) which aspects of the general education curriculum are appropriate for which students; (b) how and when to provide instruction in the general education curriculum to different students; and (c) how and when to address the functional, behavioral, and social goals of their included students.

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Teachers' approaches to these tasks are clearly related to the goals and expectations that they hold for their students.

The importance of setting goals and holding high expectations for improving learning outcomes has been demonstrated in numerous studies (e.g., Babad, 1998; Brophy, 1986; Good & Weinstein, 1986; Graham, MacArthur, Schwartz, & Page-Voth, 1992; Miller & Kelley, 1994; Page-Voth & Graham, 1999; Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Irving, Widdowson, & Dixon, 2006; Shilts, Horowitz, & Townsend, 2004; Weinstein, 2002). The assumption underlying these findings is that there is a direct relationship between the goals and expectations held by teachers and their behaviors towards individual students. This is undoubtedly the rationale behind the use of measurable goals and objectives in Individual Education Programs (IEP), which are seen as a cornerstone of effective special education practice.

The process by which teachers' goals and expectations affect the performance of students with disabilities is further clarified by research on teacher efficacy (e.g., Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Page-Voth & Graham, 1999; Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011). This body of research draws largely on the tenets of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory and the construct of self-efficacy. Simply stated, self-efficacy suggests that, "individuals pursue activities and situations in which they feel competent and avoid situations in which they doubt their capability to perform successfully" (Brownell & Pajares, 1999, p. 154). Research examining teacher efficacy with respect to inclusion has found that general educators who believe that they are successful in teaching children with disabilities are more willing to include those students in their classrooms and direct more teaching effort towards included students than teachers who feel less successful in this area (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Brownell & Pajares, 1999). A logical extension of this reasoning is that teachers will be more likely to set goals and hold expectations for their included students in areas where they feel confident in their own ability to help students achieve.

Despite considerable attention devoted to the need to differentiate goals for included students with disabilities (Baker & Zigmond, 1995; Carter & Hughes, 2006; Vaughn,

Hughes, Moody, & Elbaum, 2001; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003), little is known about how teachers actually plan and set goals for students whose learning characteristics differ meaningfully. However, several investigations have considered teachers' perceptions regarding the goals of inclusion for students with and without disabilities in general. For example, Carter and Hughes (2006) studied administrators, general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in 11 high schools. Consistent with previous research (Agran & Alper, 2000; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997), they found that teachers perceived social outcomes to be the most important benefit of inclusion for students with disabilities. Although studies such as these suggest that teachers place greater emphasis on the social benefits of inclusion as compared to other curricular areas, observational research indicates that the vast majority of instruction for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms tends to be related to academic content (Cameron, Cook, & Tankersley, 2011; Helmsstetter, Curry, Brennan, & Sampson-Saul, 1998).

The model of differential expectations (see Cook, 2001; Cook & Semmel, 2000), which draws on aspects of attribution theory (Weiner, 1979) and social comparison processes (Festinger, 1954), holds that readily apparent external cues as to the presence of a disability impact teachers' expectations and feelings towards students with disabilities. The model suggests that teachers hold typical expectations for students with mild disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, behavioral disorders) because these "hidden" disabilities provide no clear indicator as to the presence of a disability. In essence, teachers treat students with mild disabilities much like their nondisabled peers because they look just like them. Conversely, teachers may be more likely to adjust their expectations for students with severe disabilities because their disabilities are "obvious" and provide a clear signal to teachers that their abilities are different from others. The model provides a possible explanation for findings that students with mild disabilities such as learning disabilities and behavioral disorders are more often rejected

by teachers than students with more severe disabilities, despite the increased teaching demands that are likely to accompany students with severe disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Cook, 2001; Cook & Cameron, 2010).

In addition, the model of differential expectations suggests that in contrast to children with mild disabilities, inclusive teachers may be less likely to perceive the poor performance of students with severe disabilities to be a consequence of their own teaching effort (Cook, 2004). Thus, general education teachers may conclude that they have little to offer included students with severe disabilities and set goals for these students that are unreasonably low with respect to students' actual potential. With respect to students with mild disabilities, teachers may set goals and expect improvement in academic areas that are consistent with those held for modal students, assuming that if the child just "tried harder" then he or she could perform as well as non-disabled students.

Several studies have found a connection between teachers' attitudes and the instructional effort that teachers direct towards students with diverse learning and behavioral characteristics (Brophy & Good, 1986; Cook & Cameron, 2010; Good & Brophy, 1972; Jordan, Lindsay, & Stanovich, 1997; Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011). Moreover, ample evidence indicates that the goals that teachers set for students have a clear and profound effect on student performance (Christenson, Ysseldyke, & Thurlow, 1989; Doherty & Hilberg, 2007; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Deno, 1985; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The purpose of this study was to explore the goals and expectations general education teachers hold for their included students with mild and severe disabilities and to examine how these intentions differ by student group.

## Method

### *Participants*

We began the process of selecting participants by contacting special education administrators from local school districts in the region of northeast Ohio. Administrators were asked to identify schools that practiced inclusion and whose faculty would be willing to participate

in the study. We then met with principals and teachers from nine schools, briefly observed their programs, and discussed the study with potential participants. After identifying general education teachers who taught classes in which students with both mild and severe disabilities were included, we asked one general education teacher from each of the schools to participate in the study. Two of these teachers were unable to participate. Each of the remaining teachers represented a different school, including five elementary and two middle schools, ranging in size from 333 to 980 students. All seven teachers interviewed in this study comprise a subsample of participants from an investigation reported by Cameron, Cook, and Tankersley (2011).

The sample comprised two 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers and one teacher from grades 1, 2, 5, 6, and 8. Participants had an average of 8.7 years of teaching experience and between 1 to 16 years of experience teaching in classrooms in which students with disabilities were included ( $M = 6.6$  years). Four teachers reported having between 5 and 9 years of experience teaching in inclusive classrooms. One teacher had taught in an inclusive classroom for 16 years, and two teachers had less than 2 years of experience teaching in inclusive classrooms. All of the teachers were female and reported their race as Caucasian. Each teacher was responsible for a separate classroom in which average daily attendance ranged from 16 to 25 students. None of the classrooms were co-taught with other teachers. However, there were often other educational professionals, including assistants and special education teachers, present in these classrooms on an intermittent basis.

### *Students*

Interviews focused on the goals and expectations teachers held for seven students with severe disabilities and seven students with mild disabilities. Demographic information for included students is provided in Table 1. Students identified as having severe disabilities (a) were nominated by teachers as having a severe disability, (b) had scores that fell in the severe range on the Basic Scale of Disability Severity (Cameron, 2004; described below), and (c) were categorized by their

**TABLE 1**

**Demographic Characteristics of Participating Students with Disabilities**

<i>Student</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Disability</i>	<i>% Included<sup>a</sup></i>
<b>Mild disabilities</b>					
Student 1	1st	male	7–10	Learning disability	85
Student 2	2nd	female	7–10	Autism	90
Student 3	3rd	male	10–3	Learning disability	65
Student 4	3rd	male	9–7	Learning disability	90
Student 5	5th	male	11–0	Learning disability	70
Student 6	6th	male	12–8	Behavioral disorder	100
Student 7	8th	female	15–0	Learning disability	60
<b>Severe disabilities</b>					
Student 8	1st	male	7–1	Multiple disability	30
Student 9	2nd	male	7–11	Intellectual disability	20
Student 10	3rd	male	10–2	Multiple disability	25
Student 11	3rd	female	9–8	Multiple disability	40
Student 12	5th	male	11–11	Multiple disability	70
Student 13	6th	male	12–1	Multiple disability	80
Student 14	8th	male	13–11	Multiple disability/Down syndrome	30

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> Percent of school day the student is included in general education settings.

schools as having a multiple disability (MD) or intellectual disability (ID). Each of the teachers was responsible for a separate inclusive classroom in which only one student with a severe disability was included (i.e., only one student in each classroom met the above criteria). Students grouped as having mild disabilities (a) were nominated by their teacher as having a mild disability, and (b) had scores that fell in the mild range on the BSDS. Children in the mild disability group were labeled as having a learning disability (LD), behavioral disorder (BD), or were in the high functioning range of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Teachers reported that children with mild disabilities were included from 60% to 100% of the school day ( $M = 80.0, SD = 15.0$ ), whereas students with severe disabilities spent from 20% to 70% of the day in general education classrooms ( $M = 42.1, SD = 23.4$ ). All of the students with severe disabilities were supported by a paraprofessional when in general education settings.

*Procedure*

After obtaining informed consent from teachers, we asked them to nominate included students with identified disabilities (i.e., receiv-

ing special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) for participation in the study. We then solicited informed consent for participation in the study from the parents of these students. Teachers were asked to nominate students as having a mild or severe disability based on their perceptions of the level of support that students required. Students with mild disabilities were described as students with identified disabilities whom teachers perceived as requiring little or only “intermittent” levels of support, whereas students with severe disabilities required “pervasive” or “extensive” support (Westling & Fox, 2008). In addition, the first author and a graduate student in special education observed students over the course of several lessons and rated students nominated by teachers using the BSDS (Cameron, 2004). The BSDS involves rating a student’s ability as compared to his/her same-age peers on a 4-point scale in three areas: (a) intellectual functioning, (b) behavior, and (c) motor, sensory and/or communication skills. Reliability of the scale ( $k = 0.81$ ) was calculated by Cameron (2004) using Cohen’s kappa (Cohen 1961). Researchers randomly selected a student with a mild disability in each class to be the subject of interviews from among the

three to four students identified as having mild disabilities based on the above criteria. Teachers also completed a short survey with a number of demographic questions prior to the interview.

The interviews were conducted by the first author in a private setting at each school several days after our initial observations. Interviews ranged from approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and were audio-recorded. Interview questions were broadly grouped into three themes: (a) goals and expectations for students in general, (b) long-term versus short-term (e.g., day to day) goals and expectations, and (c) how goals and expectations differed for the different children. However, the interviews themselves were semi-structured so that we were able to move back and forth between themes or discuss adjacent topics, such as dilemmas and successes that teachers had experienced with particular children. We did not refer to “students with mild/severe disabilities” in the interviews, but rather to the individual students described above.

### *Analysis*

The first author transcribed each of the interviews. Teachers’ responses were then separated into their smallest meaningful units and a process of constant comparison was employed to develop a series of themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The second author then independently coded these items using themes derived from the first phase of analysis. We then compared responses and calculated an agreement coefficient (88%) using the point-by-point method (Kazdin, 1982). We discussed individual items where coding was in disagreement until we arrived at a consensus as to the meaning of each item and the major themes of the interviews. Some of the themes were broadened or adapted so that all items that we perceived as being meaningful for the study were included.

### **Presentation and Interpretation of Findings**

Five themes emerged from our analysis of the interview transcripts. These involved goals and expectations relating to (a) social development, (b) classroom and behavior skills, (c) academic improvement, (d) student self-con-

fidence, and (e) the perceived insignificance of academics (Table 2). Although teachers’ responses to questions about students with mild and severe disabilities were often quite similar, two of these themes pertained almost exclusively to one group of students. First, teachers’ emphasis on improving student self-confidence emerged when discussing children with mild disabilities. Second, the perception that academic progress was largely irrelevant pertained solely to students with severe disabilities. With respect to other between group differences, a strong trend was found among teachers’ responses concerning two themes: (a) teachers reported that social development was the primary goal for students with severe disabilities, whereas (b) expectations for students with mild disabilities centered on behavioral and classroom management issues.

As teachers’ goals largely overlapped with the expectations they held for students, we chose to combine these two concepts in the analysis. However, in general it seems that beliefs concerning teachers’ goals for students corresponded to long-term hopes or aspirations; whereas expectations related more directly to daily aspects of classroom life (e.g., “I expect all my students to pay attention”). Yet, this distinction was far from consistent.

### *Social Development*

The social development theme comprised statements indicating that the goal for included children was to gain social skills, make friends, or generally interact with other students. Also included in this category were items referring to the broad social benefits for both general and special education students, such as “greater diversity.” All seven teachers made multiple statements about the value of children with disabilities socializing and developing relationships with nondisabled peers. The only other theme that was emphasized to a similarly high degree was that of classroom and behavior skills. Although teachers at times referred to the social benefits of inclusion in general; when talking about individual children, this issue was almost exclusively used to describe teachers’ goals and expectations for students with severe disabilities. Only one

**TABLE 2**

**Teachers' Goals and Expectations for their Included Students**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Description of Category</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Focus</i>
Social Development	Statements concerning the goal or expectation that students with disabilities gain social skills, make friends, or generally interact with nondisabled students.	"My long-term goal is really just to get them comfortable with interacting with peers and being part of a group."	Primarily emphasized for students with severe disabilities and as a long-term goal.
Classroom and Behavior Skills	Statements related to the expectation or goal of performance in areas such as following routines, paying attention, staying on task, turning in homework, organizing materials, and/or motivation to work.	"An expectation would be that they come to attention when I direct them . . . so that they are sitting down ready to listen."	Primarily emphasized for students with mild disabilities in association with short-term goals and expectations.
Academic Improvement	Statements that the teacher would like to see improvement with regard to some aspect of academic performance.	"I would hope that his reading would improve."	Primarily emphasized for students with mild disabilities. Referred to as both a long-term and short-term goal.
Student Self-confidence	Statements that the teacher would like to see the students' perception of themselves and/or their abilities improve.	"I think a goal that I have for them is for them to see themselves as able to be successful."	Solely in reference to students with mild disabilities and primarily as a long-term goal.
Insignificance of Academics	Statements referring to the teacher's belief that the academic performance of the student is not likely to improve, is of lesser importance than other areas, is not the general educator's responsibility, and statements describing a lack of knowledge regarding student abilities.	"She had an academic plateau. She's not going to go past what she has right now." "I'm probably not real sure what his abilities are going to be at the moment."	The only area for which teachers stated what they did not see as a goal for students. These statements referred solely to students with severe disabilities.

teacher made this point when referring to her student with a mild disability.

The social aspect of inclusion was also more frequently represented in teachers' discussion of long-term goals than with regard to short-term objectives. The few statements referring to short-term expectations related to socially appropriate behavior for the entire class, such as the expectation, "that they get along and accept everybody." In contrast, long-term goals and expectations tended to be applied toward students with severe disabilities and focused on concepts such as making friends, fitting in, or feeling comfortable with one an-

other. For example, one teacher noted, "Probably the most important thing is getting them comfortable with relating to their peers." Another teacher expressed her hopes that a student with a severe disability would "become a real member of the class."

Teachers were also adamant about the goal of getting typically developing students to become more accepting of children with disabilities. For example, one teacher stated, "My biggest goal for all the children with special needs is that the kids see them as kids just like them, but with differences." The issue of acceptance was particularly prominent for stu-



dents with severe disabilities. A teacher reflected over her long-term goals for a student with a severe disability and issues such as, “how he’s going to fit in with the kids. Are they going to accept him? Are they going to be kind and respect him as a person and treat him as a class member?”

In accordance with concerns over students’ acceptance of one another, a number of teachers described scenes that depicted successful interactions between children with and without disabilities. For instance, one teacher described peers’ interactions with a student with severe disabilities during recess, “Out on the playground, like, one nice day last week—he’s never out on the playground—he was out there and the kids just had a ball with him. So, the socialization part is what it’s for.” A second teacher described a scene in which one general education student made a specific request to work with a child with significant intellectual and physical impairments, “I was kind of like putting the kids with their partners and D came up to me and said, ‘I’ll be A’s partner.’ She picked him. She wanted to do it. So, I thought that was awesome. So I was like, yeah, alright! I was just going to leave him with the aide.”

The finding that teachers set goals for included students in the area of social development is consistent with previous literature indicating that interaction with peers is considered one of the major benefits of inclusion (Agran & Alper, 2000; Carter & Hughes, 2006; Janney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes, 1995). For example, Agran and Alper (2000) found that teachers emphasized social interactions, friendships, and self-determination as more important skills for successful inclusion than academic performance. Presumably, the emphasis participants placed on setting goals related to social development is due to the important role that social skills play in forming friendships and emotional well-being.

On the other hand, it is also possible that teachers perceive social development as the area that they feel most qualified to address. In accordance with the model of differential expectations (Cook & Semmel, 2000), setting goals for students with severe disabilities primarily in the area of social development would be perceived as appropriate given teachers’ differential expectations for chil-

dren with “obvious” disabilities. In contrast, teachers may be less concerned with setting goals in the area of social development for students with mild disabilities as the difficulties they experience are largely “hidden”, leading to the expectation that their social skills and related needs are essentially the same as nondisabled students.

#### *Classroom and Behavior Skills*

Teachers often expressed the goal that their students improve in the area of classroom and behavior skills. Included in this theme were teachers’ expectations that students observe classroom rules and procedures, follow directions, and develop time-management skills. Examples of statements included in this theme were references to staying on task, completing classwork and homework, and asking appropriate questions at appropriate times. The frequency of statements falling within this area was second only to that of social development.

The issue of students’ attention to task was the most frequently expressed of teachers’ concerns in this area, referring primarily to students with mild disabilities. Six of the seven teachers cited this issue as a major goal for included students. Examples of teacher comments included expectations that students “pay attention” or “keep their attention focused on me.” These expectations also varied with respect to student ability. For example, one teacher noted, “that he’s engaged as much as he can be,” when referring to her student with a severe disability.

Teachers were also adamant that students be prepared when class begins and organized in their work. For example, an eighth grade teacher noted, “that’s a big thing, teaching them those skills like getting ready and being ready when we start.” In a fifth grade classroom a teacher and her colleagues had focused their efforts on ensuring that students kept their homework folders up-to-date and organized. When describing her goal for a child with a mild disability, she stated, “Our goal is that this year, he would just have it ready because he knows that we’ll be coming by to check it.”

Although behavior was an important goal for teachers, only a handful of comments re-

ferred explicitly to reducing or controlling misbehavior such as aggression or defiance towards teachers. Regarding her sixth grade student with a behavioral disorder, one teacher commented, "I have more conversations with him because of his behavior. I'm constantly redirecting him. Whereas other kids I might not say anything to them during the entire class period about behavior." Despite these concerns, teachers seemed generally more concerned with what they perceived as apathy or lethargy on the part of students. One teacher concluded that her student with a mild disability was simply "lazy." She surmised, "with him, my long-term goal would probably be to light a fire under his behind and get him moving."

Findings that teachers emphasized classroom and behavior skills for students with mild disabilities are consistent with previous research. In fact, since the beginning of inclusion reforms, teachers have expressed the importance of task and order-related behaviors for successful integration of students with disabilities into general education classrooms (Cartledge, Frew, & Zaharias, 1985). In a more recent study, 441 special educators rated the importance of different standards of practice for inclusion (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011). Findings indicated that classroom management skills were seen as more important than almost all other areas; only instructional strategies received higher ratings (Grskovic & Trzcinka). Thus, it is not surprising that teachers in this study also placed a great deal of emphasis on the issue of classroom skills and behavior. Teachers' differentiation of goals for students with mild and severe disabilities in this area also appears to be connected to the theme of academic improvement presented in the following section.

#### *Academic Improvement*

A third theme emerging from the data reflected teachers' desire that students realize improvement in overall academic performance or within specific academic subjects (e.g., reading, mathematics). Four of the seven participants made at least one reference to this issue. In addition, goals and expectations in this area almost exclusively pertained to students with mild disabilities. Whereas a

third grade teacher had in mind a fairly concrete long-term objective that her student with a mild disability would eventually "read on grade level," another teacher stated that her goal for a student with a learning disability was, more broadly, "that his reading would improve."

In contrast to long-term objectives, short-term objectives were more closely aligned with academic issues pertaining to daily instruction. For example, a sixth grade teacher expressed the desire that included students "leave the classroom with an understanding of the key concept that we've gone over." Another teacher stated her hopes that "academically" an included student with a severe disability would become "more involved with the regular classroom." Thus, even within the area of academics, the social aspect of inclusion played an important role for this teacher.

We interpret the finding that teachers set clear objectives and hold high expectations in the area of academics as a positive sign for the potential for academic growth among included students with mild disabilities. However, teachers' lack of attention to academic goals and access to the general education curriculum for included students with severe disabilities may be cause for concern. Carter and Hughes (2006) found that teachers rated instruction in academic and non-academic areas as significantly higher for general education students than students with severe disabilities. These areas included: (a) following rules and procedures, (b) learning responsibility and good work habits, (c) developing skills for adult life, (d) actively participating in class, (e) acquiring academic or vocational skills, (f) learning course content, (g) developing critical thinking, and (h) completing homework assignments. In fact, the only goal that was significantly higher for students with severe disabilities was special educators' ratings in the area of "interacting socially with classmates" (Carter & Hughes). Correspondingly, our finding that teachers are more likely to hold academic goals and expectations for students with mild disabilities as compared to children with severe disabilities suggests that goals and expectations are lower for the latter group of students in areas not related to social development. One plausible explanation for this difference is that the teachers have lower



feelings of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) concerning their ability to engender positive outcomes for included students with severe disabilities. Accordingly, students will logically set higher goals for the performance of students whom they perceive as being able to help to achieve academic goals.

### *Student Self-confidence*

A small number of teacher responses dealt with the issue of student self-confidence. Statements coded under this theme described teachers' goals and expectations that students' perceptions of themselves and their abilities would improve. The vast majority of these statements were derived from responses to questions about teachers' long-term goals for their included students and all of the statements coded under this theme concerned students with mild disabilities or included students in general. Whereas a first grade teacher reflected on her goal that her student's "attitude about himself would improve," another teacher was concerned that students in her class recognize their potential for success. From her perspective, this goal was not likely to be accomplished in a segregated setting:

A lot of times I think special ed kids are used to coming in and saying, "oh, I can't do that" . . . or "they don't make me do that." I just kind of go "well, you're going to do it." So, I try to make them believe that they can do things.

Previous research applying the theory of differential expectations to teachers' attitudes in inclusive classrooms found that, in comparison to students with severe disabilities, students with mild disabilities were significantly over-represented among teachers' concern nominations (Cook, 2004). Early research establishing the validity of these categories identified "concern students" as those with whom teachers became intensely and personally involved because they felt that their efforts would make the difference between the child's success and failure (Good & Brophy, 1972; Silberman, 1971). It is revealing that participants felt strongly about the emotional well-being of their included students with mild disabilities and suggests that they were

aware of the important role that self-worth and self-esteem play in motivation and achievement (Covington, 2002; Thompson, 1994).

### *Insignificance of Academics*

In contrast to the goals of improved academic performance, a theme emerged from our analysis suggesting that academic improvement was seen as "insignificant" for students with severe disabilities. Often it was the belief that academic goals were of less importance than goals related to social skills that led to this conclusion. For example, a third grade teacher stated, "it works to come up here for the socialization part, but I don't think I'm doing anything for his education." A middle school teacher expressed a similar sentiment, "The reason for her being here is more for the socialization than for the academics . . . if they catch something academic along the way than that's a plus."

Statements of this kind were also associated with the perception that a child's academic performance was unlikely to improve. "She had an academic plateau," noted one teacher, "she's not going past what she has right now." Also grouped in this category were items indicating that included students were not considered the general educator's responsibility and academic objectives were, therefore, not a primary concern. One participant came to the following conclusion, "I'm not concerned with his comprehension levels. I'm not his classroom teacher." With reference to her student who had an individual assistant, another teacher stated, "She doesn't take up more time because the aide works with her."

Given the assumption among many participants that students with severe disabilities were not the responsibility of general education, it is not surprising that teachers also professed a lack of knowledge with respect to these students. In describing an included student with multiple disabilities, one teacher stated plainly, "I'm not sure what his abilities are." This same teacher argued that attending to the academic instruction of this child would distract her from teaching her "core students," stating, "There are things that I've changed because he's in the classroom but, as in teaching, or, you know, being concerned

with his academics or actually what he's doing, I can't take my focus off of what I'm doing."

Schuster, Hemmeter, and Ault (2001) studied the frequency of teaching opportunities delivered on the IEP objectives of 12 students with low-incidence disabilities in inclusive classrooms. In 383 minutes of observation, four students did not receive any teaching related to their IEP objectives, and only 45% of objectives were addressed among those students who did receive instruction related to their IEPs. Although we did not investigate the IEP objectives of students in this study, it is highly unlikely that these students' IEPs did not include a number of goals related to areas other than social development. In other words, it appears that these teachers placed a disproportionate emphasis on social goals for included students with severe disabilities at the potential expense of other areas.

In accordance with the theory of differential expectations (Cook, 2001), teachers may set inappropriately low goals for their included students with severe disabilities because they perceive the likelihood that students will experience gains from their teaching efforts as minimal. Moreover, as the theoretical construct of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) suggests, if teachers see themselves as lacking the knowledge and ability to teach these students, they are not likely to invest energy in an area that they do not feel confident. Consequently, the combination of teachers' lack of awareness of educational objectives and low expectations for included students with severe disabilities may have serious consequences for the quality of education that these children receive, at least with respect to areas other than social development.

#### *Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research*

It is important to recognize a number of limitations with regard to this investigation. First, it is not certain that teachers' statements of their goals and expectations for students reflect their actual practice with these students. Teachers certainly interact with students on a daily basis in accordance with specific learning tasks in many different areas. Thus, teachers are likely to hold a range of activity-specific goals for students that are perhaps more relevant to the "here and now" of teaching than

the broad categories we have presented here. Observational research of teachers while they interact with students is necessary to clarify this picture. In addition, given the importance placed on IEPs in establishing the educational objectives of included students, more research is needed to investigate the degree to which general education teachers' goals and expectations align with students' IEPs. An additional limitation of the study is that we did not analyze individual student factors such as personality, disability type, gender, ethnicity, or age and grade level, which may have revealed subtleties about the way teachers think about and form goals and expectations for included students. By grouping children broadly into mild and severe disability groups and across grade levels we have potentially overlooked information about how teachers adjust their goals and expectations for students on an individual basis. We suggest that future research consider both contextual variables as well as individual characteristics of students and teachers in relation to the goals that teachers set for their included students.

#### *Conclusion*

Findings from this study indicate two strong trends with respect to the different goals that general education teachers hold for their included students with mild and severe disabilities: (a) participants reported that social development was the primary goal for students with severe disabilities, whereas (b) expectations for included students with mild disabilities centered on classroom and behavior skills. In addition, the goal of improving student self-confidence emerged when discussing children with mild disabilities. In contrast, teachers in this study viewed goals related to academic performance to be of little importance for students with severe disabilities.

We applied a model differential expectations to assist in explaining how teachers' goals and expectations for individual students with mild and severe disabilities differ. Our findings suggest that teachers' goals and expectations for their included students with disabilities conform to their perceptions of the obviousness of the child's disability, leading teachers to conclude that they have little to offer included students with severe disabilities

beyond the opportunity to socialize with other children. Whereas it is clear that students with different abilities should have different educational goals, the finding that teachers' goals and expectations for students with severe disabilities were narrowly focused on social development may reduce the learning opportunities for these students in other important areas. We recommend that school administrators, special educators, and general educators take the time to reflect on the different goals and expectations they hold for included students and consider how these beliefs may affect student achievement and development. In addition, in order for teachers to set realistic, challenging, and appropriate goals for their included students with disabilities, it seems necessary that sentiments indicating that general education teachers do not consider themselves primarily responsible for educating students with severe disabilities must be addressed.

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