

PEDAGOGY

Teachers' Perceptions, Teaching Practices, and Learning Opportunities for Inclusion

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Abstract

Lack of expertise of general physical educators relative to teaching students with disabilities in inclusive general physical education (GPE) has been identified as a major challenge affecting the implementation of inclusion in the United States (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007). Several studies indicated that insufficient inclusion training (Hodge, Ammah, Casebolt, LaMaster, & O'Sullivan, 2004; Lieberman, Houston-Wilson, & Kozub, 2002; Smith & Green, 2004) during teacher preparation resulted in teachers' negative feelings toward inclusion. The current study was designed to explore GPE teachers' views of teaching students with disabilities in their GPE classes to gain understanding of teachers' teaching practices, learning, needs, and challenges. Specific research questions related to inclusion focused on teachers' (a) perceptions, (b) teaching practices, (c) learning, and (d) needs related to teaching inclusive GPE classes. Data consisted of individual interviews, teachers' artifacts, and researcher's journals. Seven elementary physical educators, whose teaching experiences ranged from 8 to 16 years, participated. Data were analyzed using content and constant

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comparison. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of the data, peer review and debriefing, and member checking. Four themes emerged: (a) dedication to inclusion, (b) necessity of adaptation, (c) experimental practices, and (d) challenges to inclusion. These findings are discussed in light of a pedagogical framework (Feiman-Nemser, 2001) that provides insights about the ongoing professional development needs of teachers. These findings suggest “coherent and connected learning opportunities” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1048) are needed across teachers’ careers.

Over the past 20 years in the United States, the number of students with disabilities who are included in general physical education (GPE) classes has dramatically increased. Block and Obrusnikova (2007) reported that in the United States “almost half of the students with disabilities spend the majority of the school day in general education classrooms” (p. 103). The influx of students with disabilities into general education has influenced scholars and practitioners to examine issues related to successful inclusion practices in GPE (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; Porretta & Sherrill, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In the physical education literature, one element identified as necessary for successful inclusion was employment of quality professionals who are adequately prepared to include students with disabilities in GPE classes (An & Goodwin, 2007; Houston-Wilson, Dunn, van der Mars, & McCubbin, 1997; Murata & Jansma, 1997).

Other authors have noted that the increase of students with disabilities into GPE classes has provided a substantial challenge to physical educators who focus on the needs of students with disabilities while also focusing on the needs of typical students (Combs, Elliott, & Whipple, 2010). Block and Obrusnikova (2007) emphasized that the major problem associated with teaching GPE in inclusive settings is the lack of expertise of GPE teachers. This resonated with the results of several studies that indicated that GPE teachers receive insufficient training to provide successful inclusion classes (Hodge, Ammah, Casebolt, LaMaster, & O’Sullivan, 2004; Lieberman, Houston-Wilson, & Kozub, 2002; Lienert, Sherrill, & Myers, 2001; Morley, Bailey, Tan, & Cooke, 2005; Smith & Green, 2004; Vickerman & Coates, 2009). Teachers in these studies described their preservice experiences with inclusion as inadequate and expressed that they were not adequately prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Furthermore, professional

development learning opportunities for in-service teachers were perceived as limited and ineffective (Chandler & Greene, 1995; Klavina, Block, & Larins, 2007; Lieberman et al., 2002). Although teachers expressed a willingness to participate in inclusion workshops (Klavina et al., 2007), they perceived that learning opportunities in this area are rarely provided. Many of these teachers described their efforts to adopt appropriate teaching practices for inclusive classes as unsuccessful (Hodge et al., 2004; Hutzler, Fliess, Chacham, & van den Auweele, 2002; Klavina et al., 2007). Results of these studies indicate that additional research is necessary to determine specific areas of need of physical education teachers in inclusive settings. Studies investigating the needs, practices, avenues for learning, and resources of teachers at varying levels of experience and education are greatly needed to highlight effective practices related to teaching children with disabilities in GPE.

Feiman-Nemser (2001) developed one of the influential frameworks in pedagogy that offers a way to increase understanding of teachers' learning and needs. According to Feiman-Nemser, learning to teach is an ongoing process and teacher quality is dependent on what teachers learn to teach and how they implement their learning into their classes across their teaching careers. Her framework includes three major stages: (1) preservice, (2) induction, and (3) continuing professional development. Each of these three sequential periods of teachers' careers is associated with critical teaching practices and learning (Table 1). At each stage, elements of preparing and developing teachers' practices to improve teacher quality are identified.

In Feiman-Nemser's (2001) framework, the first stage, preservice preparation programs, focuses on filtering preservice teachers' beliefs of teaching that developed during their elementary and secondary school experiences. The preservice foundation is developed through attaining knowledge of essential elements, including content, pedagogy, learners and learning, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Connectivity between theories and hands-on field experiences is recognized as a cornerstone for effective preservice programs (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Following the preservice stage, Feiman-Nemser (2001) presented the induction period that extends through the first three years of teaching, "to develop a professional identity and consolidate a professional practice" (p. 1035). Induction is a critical period for teachers. Often, induction experiences determine the types of

Table 1*Central Tasks of Learning to Teach*

Preservice	Induction	Continuing Professional Development ^a
1. Examine beliefs critically in relation to vision of good teaching	1. Learn the context—students, curriculum, school community	1. Extend and deepen subject matter knowledge for learning
2. Develop subject matter knowledge for teaching	2. Design responsive instructional program	2. Extend and refine repertoire in curriculum, instruction, and assessment
3. Develop an understanding of learners, learning, and issues of diversity	3. Create a classroom learning community	3. Strengthen skills and dispositions to study and improve teaching
4. Develop a beginning repertoire	4. Enact a beginning repertoire	4. Expand responsibilities and develop leadership skills
5. Develop the tools and dispositions to study teaching	5. Develop a professional identity	

Note. From “From Preparation to Practice: Designing a Continuum to Strengthen and Sustain Teaching,” by S. Feiman-Nemser, 2001, *Teacher College Record*, 103(6), 1013–1055. Copyright 2001 by Teachers College, Columbia University.

^aEarly professional development phase.

teachers they will become and the types of teachers they will remain throughout their careers. Teachers need induction programs that include well-prepared mentors to develop appropriate and standards-based teaching practices matched to their students, school (e.g., culture and context), district, and state. Feiman-Nemser suggested that strong mentoring programs can not only benefit beginning teachers but also help mentors to broaden their knowledge and skills.

The third stage, continuing professional development, includes two distinct phases: early professional development, between 3 and 5 years, and later professional development, at approximately 7 years of teaching. Feiman-Nemser (2001) provided central tasks for teachers' learning in the early professional development (Table 1), which are characterized by experimentation and consolidation of teaching practices. This phase includes extending, deepening, and refining knowledge, skills, and dispositions for teaching. The latter phase, occurring around the seventh year of teaching, focuses on mastery and stabilization of teaching and promotes confidence (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Progress throughout this third stage depends on teachers' ability to engage in ongoing discussions with colleagues regarding experimentation and opportunities to share, analyze ideas, and reflect on teaching. These ongoing opportunities allow teachers to refine their teaching practices and deepen their conceptualization of content (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

An essential tenet in Feiman-Nemser's (2001) framework is the necessity of continuing meaningful learning experiences throughout the teachers' careers. Considering the limited and sometimes ineffective learning related to inclusion reported by physical educators who teach students with disabilities in GPE (Hodge et al., 2004; Klavina et al., 2007; Lieberman et al., 2002; Lienert et al., 2001; Smith & Green, 2004), addressing the professional development needs of current GPE teachers in inclusive settings appears significant. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions, teaching practices, learning, and needs for teaching students with disabilities in their GPE classes in light of Feiman-Nemser's framework. The following research questions were addressed in the current study:

1. What are the perceptions of teachers concerning teaching students with disabilities in their GPE classes?
2. What teaching practices have teachers developed for their inclusive GPE classes?

3. How have teachers developed their teaching practices for their inclusive GPE classes?
4. What are the pedagogical (or perhaps professional development) needs of teachers for successful inclusion?

Method

Participants

A purposeful sample of GPE teachers was selected using the following criteria: (a) teaching physical education at the elementary level, (b) teaching in inclusive settings for a minimum of 2 years, and (c) currently teaching children with disabilities in their GPE classes. Seven GPE teachers (Ben, Buddy, Elaine, Emily, Fred, JJ, and Kim), three females and four males, whose teaching experience ranged from 8 to 16 years, with ethnic backgrounds including one African American and six Caucasians, participated in this study. The teachers' informed consent was attained along with permission from their school principals and the University IRB Committee before data collection.

The participating teachers' experiences of teaching in inclusive settings ranged from 4 to 15 years. During their experiences of teaching children with disabilities in GPE, each of these teachers taught children whose disabilities ranged in level of severity (mild to severe) and included a variety of disabilities such as intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and autism. All participating teachers taught in the same rural school district located in the southeastern area of the United States.

Data Collection

This study employed a case study design that allowed "particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic" (Merriam, 1998, p. 29) information into the insights of GPE teachers who taught students with disabilities in their GPE classes. Several types of data were collected to gain insights related to the research questions: semistructured interviews, artifacts, and the lead investigator's interview journals. The semistructured individual interviews were conducted twice with each participating teacher. Both interviews were conducted face to face by one investigator at the participants' school in quiet and private rooms convenient to the participating teachers. Each audio-recorded interview lasted 30 to 45 min and was

transcribed verbatim. Artifact data from each participating teacher included (a) teacher reflection journals and (b) related documents. Teacher reflection journal forms required participating teachers to report (a) activities delivered during their inclusive GPE classes, (b) reflections of the lessons in terms of successes and areas for improvement, and (c) things needed such as equipment, support, or training. Participating teachers' related documents included lesson plans and resources used when teaching inclusive GPE classes. Teachers' submission of their journals and related documents was completed within 2 months after the first interview. The lead investigator wrote detailed notes after each interview to develop a journal that included the following: (a) descriptions of the interview process, (b) reflections about what was said that day, (c) ideas for further probing with subsequent participants, and (d) preliminary thoughts about themes emerging from the data. The journal notes allowed the lead investigator to conceptually return to the setting during the analysis of the data (Jackson, 1990) and to share this detailed information with the second investigator. Both investigators have worked extensively for over 5 years with a variety of teachers who teach children with disabilities in their GPE classes. To offset potential bias, each investigator created a list of personal assumptions that might influence the research findings. These assumptions were considered throughout the study as a self-reflection task to help the investigators to curb the influence of preconceived ideas about the findings.

Data Analysis

All transcribed interviews were member checked for accuracy by presenting the transcripts to the participating teachers and instructing them to proofread them for accuracy and to write comments to clarify or correct statements. Participating teachers confirmed that the transcripts reflected their perspectives and experiences accurately.

The data were analyzed using content analysis and constant comparative analysis. For content analysis, words, phrases, expressions, or statements that were mentioned most often and reflected the interest of research questions were coded and categorized (Stemler, 2001). Constant comparative analysis, taking one piece of data (one interview, one statement, one theme) and comparing it with all others that may be similar or different, was adopted to conceptualize the possible relationships between the various types of data (Thorne, 2000). Data analysis in this

study occurred during and after data collection. The investigators repeatedly read the interview transcripts line by line then compared and contrasted patterns of meaning from the interview data with the teachers' related documents. After performing an initial coding of the data independently, the investigators met to scrutinize the recurring patterns of meaning that emerged commonly across all participants' data. All coded data were examined, compared, and merged into thematic content areas that were refined and/or revised into themes. The data were repeatedly searched for interrelationships between and within the themes and subthemes associated with the themes that emerged. Triangulation across data sources and between the investigators was completed to finalize and to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. Peer review and debriefing, as well as member checking between investigators and participants, were used to maintain trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the data. Themes associated with participating teachers' perceptions, teaching practices, learning, and needs included dedication to inclusion, necessity of adaptation, experimental practices, and challenges to inclusion.

Dedication to Inclusion

The perceptions of these participating teachers concerning inclusion were overwhelmingly positive and, taken as a whole, revealed that these teachers were dedicated to implementing successful inclusive GPE classes. Consistently, these teachers voiced their beliefs about the value of learning of students with disabilities, the need to set reasonable expectations for them, and an ongoing commitment to modify their teaching styles and activities so that students with disabilities could be successful in their GPE classes. Buddy commented, "They [students with disabilities] are students and need to learn... That is my job—to teach them to be active and healthy, just like all the other kids." This view of the equal value of all students was echoed in the following response by Kim: "I don't look at them as anything different than teaching regular education students." Emily insisted, "You can't say 'they [students with disabilities] have a disability, so it's okay.' You still have to expect the same thing you would from other students, reasonably based on that child." Ben described his approach to teaching inclusive GPE classes:

I perceive it [inclusion] as an opportunity to change how I am teaching if they do not understand. It is an opportunity for me to channel my teaching for them to learn. I'm going to base my teaching on how each child can have an opportunity to learn whatever skill.

Each participating teacher emphasized the importance of providing all students equal opportunities to learn, and several of these teachers stated that they enjoyed their inclusive classes. JJ described her experiences of teaching a class including children with disabilities: "One of my favorite things to do. I have so much fun with them [students with disabilities]."

Necessity of Adaptation

Necessity of adaptations of teaching practices was discussed repeatedly. Participating teachers described ongoing efforts that began with planning for adapting and progressed to specific adaptations of equipment, environment, and instruction. Emily discussed planning adaptations based on each child's disability: "I think the biggest thing is just plan what you're doing with regular students of their same age and just modify, make any modifications you might need, based on the individual's disability." JJ explained the process of planning associated with modifications:

When I'm putting a lesson together, I try to consider everybody I'm teaching... I first develop the activity, and I include modifications so that when I have students with disabilities, I can modify the activity in a way that they are not getting special attention, because most of them don't like to be put in the spotlight.

Use of a variety of equipment and adaptations of equipment were essential elements in participating teachers' efforts to provide successful inclusive GPE. In general, these participating teachers reported use of different sizes, weights, and textures of balls for students with disabilities in bowling (Buddy), striking (Buddy), and throwing and catching (Buddy, Kim, Fred) lessons. The descriptions of modifications were consistently included in their reflection journals and in their lesson plans, as well as articulated in their interviews. In the interviews, Ben described using balloons for students in wheelchairs who lack the flexibility and strength to control traditional volleyballs: "They are not able to move around

and hit the volleyball. So, they can use the balloons to strike.” Fred selected yarn balls for young children with autism to throw because he observed that “the texture is something that works well with those kids. They’re going to do better at throwing games with those rather than using the playground balls.” When discussing adaptations for striking activities, Buddy noted in his reflection journals,

I can get something heavier; I can get something lighter... for striking. They can’t hold a tennis racquet because a tennis racquet is too heavy. I can get a balloon and they can use the palm of their hand..... So, I just modify equipment to suit them. I try to have a couple of things prepared ahead of time.

Adaptations of the environment by changing boundaries and distances between students and targets were frequently described. Fred said, “We might be throwing at the bucket, but their [students with disabilities] spot is going to be closer.” Buddy explained adaptation for his inclusion classes:

I’m not going to have them do things that I don’t feel that they could handle.... I’ll take my lessons and just modify them up or down and that way it just depends on what the lesson is. I can make them move closer to a target or move back.

Often these participating teachers noted multiple modifications in the same lesson, as noted in their reflection journals and in their shared lesson plans. Fred stated in his reflection journal,

Lesson modifications included using bigger containers, color-coded tape for boundaries, and organization of the equipment so that when all of the balls have been thrown into the trash cans, the student with autism knows that the game is over.

Each of these participating teachers also stressed that differential instruction could be successful with appropriate adaptations for students with disabilities. For example, when teaching dribbling, JJ reported in her reflection journal that “selected students were allowed to use both hands when dribbling and to bounce the ball and catch it.”

Another common inclusion practice was use of a buddy system, as noted by JJ: “The buddy system really can work well for my

classes.” Ben used a buddy system to resolve his difficulty of teaching inclusive classes and commented,

If we are doing a specific unit, bowling or throwing or catching, if they need help, I’ll buddy them up with somebody... That is one of the easiest ways for me to give them the supervision and the help that they need.

Experimental Practices

The most common form of learning how to adapt for inclusion described by participating teachers was experimentation often described as a “trial-and-error” process. In the interview, Ben described the trial-and-error method of learning how to successfully include students with disabilities in GPE:

For me personally, it’s more of a trial-and-error process.... seeing what they [students with disabilities] can do, then tailoring the lesson to them so they’re included. I put myself in their shoes and say, “Well I know I can’t push that ball to the goal ...so what could I do? So, let’s try this bucket.”

Fred explained experimentation of his teaching practices:

Trial and error has been a real, real big help... That’s the only way you really know.... A lot of times it is just trial and error. You try something and when it doesn’t work, you say, “Hey, that didn’t work and I can’t do that anymore.”

Along with use of the trial-and-error process, these participating teachers noted in interviews and reflective journals that they use several sources to find ideas for appropriate activities. These sources include Internet sites designed for physical educators, physical activity/education activity books, and communication with other physical educators. Responses that illustrate their use of Internet sources include “I’ve looked through PE Central to find modified games” (Buddy) and “If we have any questions, we can look it up online. I’ll look up a disability and say, ‘OK let’s find out more information about that.’” (Ben)

Participating teachers discussed communicating with other teachers as a significant avenue for learning to teach inclusive classes. For example, Elaine explained, “I hadn’t had a lot of experience with these kind of kids [children with disabilities] until

I came here. I learned most of what I've learned working with them from her [co-teacher]." Although participating teachers considered other teachers' insights valuable for learning about adapting for children with disabilities, they emphasized that this source was not often available. Buddy's response is an example of the comments that indicated that opportunities for sharing with other teachers were valued, but had decreased or were not currently available: "Something great we used to do is all get together, and we would be able to talk about different things. We called it 'sharing sessions.'"

Challenges to Inclusion

Challenges to inclusion that participating teachers identified encompassed several areas of need. The majority of these teachers reported that they had limited preservice learning about including students with disabilities in GPE. Elaine's response is representative of these teachers' comments: "I didn't learn enough until I came here to have these students to work with." JJ also reported her limited preservice exposure and a lack of adequate professional development opportunities related to inclusion:

I took one undergraduate course related to APE, but I can't remember specifics that would really help me. It just kind of made me aware that I would be dealing with kids with disabilities and what approach I should take.... I think I've attended two workshops. But other than that, no additional training.

The need for continued learning opportunities in adapted physical education practices was reported by all participating teachers and exemplified by Elaine: "Nothing [learning opportunities] was offered to us to begin with really. I went on my own." JJ stressed, "If I had more exposure at workshops and things of that nature, it would be much easier for me, but we don't have very many opportunities for that."

Data from participating teachers' reflection journals revealed the need for learning opportunities about teaching practices related to specific instructional content areas for their inclusive GPE classes. JJ and Ben commented on content areas: "We need training in ways to make teaching jump rope easier" and "to make it [bowling] easier" for students with disabilities.

The limited professional development learning opportunities these participating teachers described were not perceived helpful unless they were participatory or included hands-on experiences. JJ described the need for participatory learning: “He [workshop presenter] presented a lot of different information and...we actually got to participate in the activities to really get a feel for them. So that type of exposure would really help.” Elaine supported the effectiveness of hands-on learning:

Hands-on is the best way to do it. You can go to a workshop with other teachers who are able bodied, but if you don't have those kids, it doesn't really help... The more hands-on, the more you're out in the schools...the better teacher you are going to be.

Other challenges to inclusion these teachers identified involved environmental variables. These included lack of adapted equipment and supportive staff. JJ described the need of equipment: “Equipment is always a barrier. [Lack of] equipment, in my perspective is always a difficulty. And I feel like I am constantly trying to find ways to add modifications and adapt activities so the student can be successful.”

Specific equipment for students with physical disabilities is a common need, as noted in Buddy's reflection journals: “I need something for students in wheelchairs to be able to use to grab their balloon when it goes to the floor.” When teaching bowling, Buddy also reported the lack of a ramp for students using wheelchairs: “Like I was saying with the bowling, I don't have all the tools to make it easy to adapt things, so equipment is a lot of times the big hindrance.” Miscellaneous equipment for inclusion such as portable microphones, larger scooters, visual cues, and adaptable goals for learning manipulative skills were noted frequently by JJ, Buddy, Kim, Fred, and Ben.

Another critical challenge for participating teachers is lack of human resources. Several teachers described the successful use of buddy systems and stressed that availability of adult human resources is inadequate. Emily explained the need for human resources is especially significant when children with severe disabilities are included in GPE classes:

I had an SPD class [class of students with severe disabilities] and that was my hardest because they were so diverse and doing this with this student, you know they would have to

practice lifting their arms up it's hard in an inclusion class to do that because you've got that one student and then the 50 others.

Overall, these teachers' perceptions, teaching practices, learning, and needs were described by four themes: dedication to inclusion, necessity of adaptation, experimental practices, and challenges to inclusion. Participating teachers consistently revealed their positive perceptions toward and their dedication to inclusion of students with disabilities in their GPE classes. They described ongoing efforts to learn to adapt through experimental practices. Primary challenges to successful inclusion, as these teachers described, are the need for hands-on experiences with students with disabilities and the need for opportunities for sharing sessions with colleagues. These teachers also noted other challenges including lack of appropriate equipment and lack of human resources.

Discussion

To gain a deeper understanding of the findings of this study concerning teachers' perceptions, teaching practices, learning, and needs, Feiman-Nemser's (2001) framework was used as a backdrop upon which to silhouette the themes these teachers voiced. As discussed, this framework presents a progression of three stages of teaching development, leading from preservice to a mastery level of teaching (continuing professional development). Although not focusing directly on teachers' perceptions of teaching, this framework identifies elements of teaching in each major stage that serve to prepare teachers to progress to the next stage.

The current study examined teachers' perceptions of teaching students with disabilities in GPE because previous studies have found that teachers' beliefs and perceptions concerning inclusion related to the quality of the class environment and successful inclusion classes in physical education (Chandler & Greene, 1995; Heikinaro-Johansson & Sherrill, 1994). Teachers in the current study expressed positive perceptions of teaching students with disabilities in their GPE classes and, taken as a whole, their voices expressed a dedication to inclusion. Although these participating teachers described challenges to inclusion, rather than focusing on disabilities as problems, they spoke about their responsibilities as teachers to teach all students with and without disabilities.

When viewed in light of Feiman-Nemser's (2001) framework, this study yielded several important findings related to teaching students with disabilities in inclusive GPE classes. First, it is important to note that the last stage, continuing professional development, includes two phases: early professional development between 3 and 5 years and later professional development at approximately 7 years of teaching. Considering only the number of years teaching students with disabilities in inclusive GPE, one would expect the teachers in this study, with the exception of one teacher (with 4 years), to exemplify the later phase of Stage 3. However, analysis of the participating teachers' reports of their teaching practices and learning revealed that their practices more closely match the early phase (experimentation or consolidation of teaching practice) of the continuing professional development stage. Consistently, participating teachers reported experimenting or, as they described it, using a trial-and-error process, as the primary avenue for adapting activities, equipment, and the environment. The early phase, associated with the third to fifth year of teaching, is characterized by experimenting with teaching practices to find what works. Teachers engage in a process of experimentation to become skilled in practices such as extending, deepening, and refining of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Challenges related to inclusion that participating teachers emphasized related, in large part, to insufficient preservice learning, as well as their need for professional development learning opportunities. These findings are similar to findings of other studies that reported inadequate teacher preparation (Chandler & Greene, 1995; Hodge et al., 2004; Klavina et al., 2007; LaMaster, Gall, Kinchin, & Siedentop, 1998; Lieberman et al., 2002; Lienert et al., 2001; Morley et al., 2005; Smith & Green, 2004; Vickerman & Coates, 2009). Examination of Feiman-Nemser's (2001) framework highlights critical features of preservice preparation, which include attaining knowledge of content, pedagogy, learners and learning, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, along with hands-on field experiences. Likewise, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of hands-on practices in field experiences for inclusive teaching. Participating teachers reported discrepancies between theory and practice during teacher preparation or in-service workshops and were well aware of the value of hands-on experiences in learning to teach students with disabilities. Feiman-Nemser

described hands-on experiences as the cornerstone to develop well-prepared and effective teachers during preservice programs.

With further analysis of these teachers' voices, it is clear that one of the major needs these teachers identified is an opportunity that Feiman-Nemser (2001) identified as essential for progressing to the later phase. This need is ongoing discussions with colleagues regarding experimentation and opportunities to share, analyze ideas, and reflect on teaching. These findings support Feiman-Nemser's notion that teachers' progress from the early phase to the later phase is largely dependent on opportunities to share, analyze ideas, and reflect on their teaching with colleagues. To their credit, these participating teachers were keenly aware of the significant need for sharing and collaborating with other teachers about inclusion practices. Feiman-Nemser explained that these opportunities lead to mastery and stabilization of teaching with confidence.

Last, there is one topic that was absent in the discussions and in the related documents of these teachers that appears to warrant attention. This topic, often described as a principle part of the rationale for expanding inclusion in education, relates to opportunities for students with disabilities to interact with peers (Place & Hodge, 2001; Suomi, Collier, & Brown, 2003). Promoting positive interactions with typical peers and ultimately building relationships with typical peers remains an important goal for students with disabilities in inclusive settings, but remains a complex area that is not well understood. Although participating teachers did not address this aspect of inclusion, perhaps their use of the buddy system provided positive opportunities for interactions with peers. Although it is beyond the scope of the current study, greater understanding of peer acceptance of students with disabilities in inclusive GPE is an important area for future study.

In summary, the findings of this study revealed that these teachers were guided by positive perceptions of students with disabilities in their GPE classes and primarily learned their teaching practices through experimentation. This appeared to indicate that they were taking opportunities to learn their teaching "in and from their practices" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1013). Furthermore, these findings strongly support Feiman-Nemser's (2001) primary argument of the need for continuing professional learning across the teaching career. Although the challenges to inclusion the participating teachers expressed were noted in previous studies (Chandler & Greene, 1995; Heikinaro-Johansson & Sherrill,

1994; Hodge et al., 2004; Kasser & Lieberman, 2003; LaMaster et al., 1998), those studies did not offer a framework for teacher professional development that provided guidance for development beyond experimentation.

Conclusion

Results of this study shed light on participating elementary GPE teachers' perceptions, teaching practices, learning, and needs for teaching inclusive GPE classes. Feiman-Nemser's (2001) framework supported participating teachers' view that hands-on experiences appear necessary for successful implementation of inclusion in GPE, but these experiences do not appear sufficient to achieve transition to the later phase (mastery of teaching practices) of teaching in the continuing professional development stage. The participating teachers stressed an ongoing process of sharing and collaborating with other teachers about inclusion practices is needed, and Feiman-Nemser described this process as essential for progressing to the later phase of teacher development. This is in concert with the findings of Vogler, van der Mars, Cusimano, and Darst (1992) who stressed that becoming competent in including students with disabilities in GPE requires experience and expertise in this specific area. In conclusion, the need for well-prepared teachers who continue to experience opportunities for meaningful professional development is critical for meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

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