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**EXAMINING PREPARATION OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS FOR
WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES**

By

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

in the program of

Early Childhood Studies

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Author's Declaration

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how well prepared first year teachers feel in teaching children with disabilities in the regular classroom. Six elementary school teachers, recent graduates from Faculties of Education in Ontario were interviewed. Findings indicate that the teachers in this study do not feel that their pre-service education program prepared them for the reality of teaching students with disabilities in the regular classroom, and that they will need to look to their School Board for further training. In addition, many feel that they lack the knowledge necessary to design and implement an IEP. The importance of further preparation for first year teachers to work with students with IEPs is discussed and explored.

Key Words: Teacher Candidates, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), Pre-service Education Programs, Inclusive Education.

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Dedications

My husband

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My daughter

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Table of Contents

Author's Declaration.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Chapter I: Introduction and Review of the Literature.....	1
Pre-Service Training.....	3
The Importance of Individual Education Plans (IEPs).....	5
Collaboration in Schools.....	9
Chapter II: Methodology.....	11
Research Design.....	11
Research Questions.....	11
Protection of Human Participants.....	11
Ensuring Confidentiality.....	12
Recruitment.....	12
Participant Demographics.....	14
Data Collection.....	17
Semi-Structured Interviews.....	18
Likert Type Scale.....	19
Data Analysis.....	19

Authenticity and Trustworthiness.....	19
Limitations.....	20
Researcher's Statement.....	21
Chapter III: Findings and Discussion.....	23
Faculty Courses.....	23
Practicum Placements.....	28
Exposure and Familiarity to Individual Education Plans.....	35
Collaboration with Peers.....	39
Changes in the Bachelor of Education Program.....	42
Chapter IV: General Discussion and Recommendations.....	50
Recommendations.....	54
Direction for Further Research.....	56
Appendices.....	58
Appendix A: Consent Agreement Letter.....	58
Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Questions.....	63
References.....	71

Chapter I:

Introduction and Review of the Literature

In the past fifteen years, there has been an increase in the inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms (Barton, 1997). Students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are spending the majority of their learning in the general classroom where classroom teachers have a significant role in the preparation and implementation of their IEPs. An IEP is a written plan that describes programs and/or services required for a student based on an assessment of the student's strengths and needs. It is a working document that serves as an accountability tool for the students, their parents and all of those working with the student to help them meet their goals and expectations as they work through the Ontario curriculum (Government of Ontario, Ministry of Education, 2004). It is developed for a student who may or may not be identified as exceptional, but requires a special education program and/or services. These services can be offered in a variety of placements which include in-class support, withdrawal support and segregated placements. The plan addresses the student's areas of strengths and needs and lists modifications and/or accommodations that need to be put in place for the student's success and accounts for any special equipment the student may need. Just as the Ontario curriculum is to be met and followed at each grade level, a student's IEP is also a document that is to be designed and followed throughout the school year. Curriculum expectations change throughout the year and the IEP is revisited throughout the year to ensure that the accommodations and modifications are best suited for the student as they learn and grow. This change in classrooms has put teachers in a position where they are actively involved in the process of preparing, modifying and implementing the expectations set out in the IEP (Ontario

Ministry of Education, 2004).

The need to provide pre-service education teachers with further training in the area of special education is well documented (Frankel, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2007; Rea, McLaughlin & Walther-Thomas, 2002) and there is a great deal of research emphasizing the importance of further training in pre-service programs (Mdikana et al, 2007; Sharma et al, 2008). But, there appears to be little research focussing on the regular classroom teacher and their level of preparation for teaching students with disabilities. While the role of the general education teacher is changing as classrooms continue to include students with disabilities (Causton-Theoharis, 2009, McLeskey & Waldron, 2007, Volante, 2006) many investigators are interested in understanding the effects of this shift in the practice of education and how pre-service education programs have prepared general education teachers for this reality (Rea, McLaughlin and Walther-Thomas, 2002).

As changes occur in the system, the roles of both the general education teacher and the special education teacher will continue to evolve to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms. Currently, the role of the general education teacher is to be responsible for the learning of all students in the classroom and must accommodate their teaching to address the needs of all the learners in the classroom. They are responsible for assisting in the design of the IEP and offering input, as well as implementing the accommodations and modifications of the IEP in their teaching practice. The role of the special education teacher, in accordance with Regulation 298, is that they are teachers who hold qualifications in the area of special education and are responsible for program development and delivery, consultation and liaison and assessment (Government of Ontario, Ministry of Education, 2004). They develop, implement and evaluate

the components of the IEP in consultation with the classroom teachers, parents and students. One of their roles includes assisting classroom teachers to provide accommodations for students with IEPs in the regular classroom and monitor and encourage success for the student. If they are withdrawing a student, in addition to classroom support, they provide learning strategies and specific programs to address student needs. As classrooms work towards further integration of all students in the regular classroom, the roles of both these teachers will continue to evolve and reflect the changes that are occurring within the educational system.

Pre-service Training

The importance of research in the area of pre-service training is seen in studies such as that of Hadadian and Chiang (2007) which looked at understanding the perceptions of pre-service teachers in order to prepare them to teach students with disabilities. This study used a four part survey to determine the level of preparation felt by two hundred and forty eight graduate and undergraduate students from two different universities. The results showed that the majority of those surveyed felt that they would benefit from a special education course dealing with disability categories and a course that offered them teaching methods for students with disabilities (Hadadian & Chiang, 2007). In a study by D'Aniello (2008) first year teachers in the United States were interviewed to find out how prepared they were to teach students with disabilities. The teachers who were enrolled in the general education courses felt that they did not have many opportunities to take courses in special education and were not able to receive any clinical experience in this area (D'Aniello, 2008). As teachers at the start of their careers, the participants did not feel that they had enough skills and knowledge to meet the demands of their diverse learners. They felt that their teacher education programs should have been more

reflective of the current classroom settings and that the curriculum should have been modified to reflect this necessary change in times (D'Aniello, 2008). There was a strong correlation seen in the research from the United States between pre-service education programs in the special education or dual track system and the confidence of graduates from these programs. On the other hand, teachers trained in the general education stream, which represents the majority of programs, are left with learning gaps related to teaching students with disabilities. Most of the research in this area is based on convenience samples, which limits its ability to generalize to programs in or outside of the United States.

In a study conducted by Mdikana, Ntshangase and Mayekiso (2007), the attitudes of pre-service educators towards including students with disabilities were explored. A convenience sample of twenty-two students from the Bachelor of Education program with a specialty in Physical Education were given a questionnaire asking about their attitudes towards including students with disabilities in their classrooms, their requirements for competence, and their requirements for successfully teaching students with disabilities. The results indicated that although sixty percent of those surveyed had a positive attitude towards inclusion, seventy-two percent felt that in order for successful inclusion to occur they would need special skills training and special resources for all classrooms (Mdikana et al, 2007).

When comparing pre-service education programs with special education courses and those that infuse special education throughout their curriculum, the findings again reinforce the importance of providing students with opportunities to learn about disabilities, program accommodations and modifications as well as the challenges that they will face in the classroom. A study with six hundred and three participants from Australia, Canada, Hong Kong and

Singapore (Sharma, Forlin & Loreman, 2008) used a four part survey to determine the benefits of special education courses in pre-service education. Students in Australia and Hong Kong took a specific course in the area of special education. At universities in Canada and Singapore, students were enrolled in classes where special education was infused in the curriculum of the pre-service education program. Results found that when comparing the pre-enrolment and post-enrolment surveys, there was a greater change amongst the students in Australia and Hong Kong in that they felt better prepared to teach in inclusive environments. In both countries, special education courses are offered. However, for Canadian students there was minimal change, reflecting the lack of courses offered in the area of special education (Sharma et al, 2008).

From the Canadian perspective, there is very limited research available in understanding the benefits of pre-service education training in the area of special education (Porter, 2008). Volante (2006) conducted research at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education using a qualitative study with focus groups and interviews of forty seven senior/intermediate level students. The interviews were conducted throughout the year and it was found that students saw a disconnect between instruction and practice. Students felt that they were not receiving the practical side to their education and that they needed to have more opportunity to be active participants in classroom settings (Volante, 2006). Similar results were found in research conducted by Mujawamariya and Mahrouse (2004) where teacher education candidates expressed a need to have more opportunity to engage in issues of special education and multiculturalism but were unable to do so because the program structure did not allow for such in-depth discussion.

The Importance of Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

Central to meeting the needs of children with disabilities is the use of the IEP. Many studies

have noted the lack of opportunity for training teachers in development and implementation of the IEP. In fact, very few pre-service education programs appear to allow teachers the opportunity to plan and implement Individual Education Plans into their curriculum and practicum experiences. Research from the United States demonstrates some opportunity for learning to plan Individual Education Plans where pre-service teachers have the option to enrol in a dual general and special education program. Kamens (2004) conducted research emphasizing the importance of hands-on experience with preparing Individual Education Plans in a special education course she taught in a dual track pre-service program in the United States. Nineteen pre-service teachers engaged in an activity where they were asked to write their own Individual Education Plans (Kamens, 2004). This research opportunity taught them the need to understand the process and be active participants. They realized that the process was by no means rote and that they should attach meaning to each Individual Education Plan that they write (Kamens, 2004). This type of research reinforces the need for understanding the Individual Education Plan process.

This finding is reinforced by the results of a study of one hundred and twenty-three general education teachers in Georgia demonstrating that eleven percent of teachers never used Individual Education Plans once they were developed (Lee-Tarver, 2006). This study used surveys over a three month period to answer the question of the importance of the Individual Education Plan and found that all teachers agree with meeting the needs of all students in theory but not in practice. Many teachers felt that the IEP was time consuming and eighty-six percent of teachers surveyed found that Individual Education Plans were inaccessible because they were

usually locked away in the school's office making it inconvenient to access them. Results of this nature reinforce the importance for further research on teacher's level of comfort in designing and implementing Individual Education Plans.

The Individual Education Plan is often seen as a formality by teachers and teachers are often over-whelmed by utilizing this document in their classrooms (Armenta & Beckers, 2006). In a study by Ketterlin-Geller, Alonzo, Braun-Monegan and Tindal (2007) conducted in six elementary schools in the Pacific Northwest in the United States, the records of thirty-eight grade three students with Individual Education Plans were analyzed. The researchers looked to identify the consistency of accommodations between the students' Individual Education Plans, from the recommendation of teachers and from the students' performance data results (Ketterlin-Geller et al, 2007). The findings concluded that there is a disagreement between what is stated in the Individual Education Plans in terms of accommodations and what teachers are actually doing in their classrooms. The findings demonstrate that it is difficult for teachers without training to interpret the guidelines of the Individual Education Plan and further research should be employed to understand how to clearly define Individual Education Plan accommodations so that they are easier to understand and follow (Ketterlin-Geller et al, 2007).

In research conducted by Hehir (2002) the importance of the content of the Individual Education Plan was discussed as Hehir looked at the difficulties with the current system in the United States in addressing the needs of deaf-and-hard-of-hearing students, blind and low vision students and those with learning disabilities. The author examined the needs of each of these groups and discussed the short falls of the Individual Education Plan. He examined how the needs of the students were getting lost in a system that looks at temporary solutions by teachers

and administrators. Many of the choices made in the Individual Education Plans do not allow for the students to become independent but maintain dependency on the system. Hehir notes the importance of enhancing teacher knowledge and providing teachers with the tools necessary to develop individualized programs for these children. Teachers need to understand that they should not dismiss the curriculum when planning for these students, but rather find a way that would allow the student to succeed within the classroom environment. By having a school wide initiative and teachers who understand the process of the Individual Education Plan, perhaps the system will be able to better address the needs of its learners.

This struggle to clearly understand terms set out in Individual Education Plans is also investigated in research conducted by Byrnes (2008) where she reviews the ambiguity in accommodations and how this confusion about the intent of Individual Education Plan accommodations could cause misunderstandings between special education teachers and general education teachers (Byrnes, 2008). The most common terms that were misinterpreted were terms such as extended time, scribing and preferential seating (Byrnes, 2008). This ambiguity is often seen as a challenge in assigning grades to students with Individual Education Plans in the general education classroom. Research conducted by Guskey and Jung (2009) examined the lack of resources available to general education teachers on how to grade students with Individual Education Plans. They discussed the need for a model for general education teachers that establishes clear standards, adaptations and modifications and how to evaluate students based on those modifications (Guskey & Jung, 2009). Through the use of such a model, the researchers conclude that general education teachers will not feel the need to assign grades within a standards-based environment (Guskey & Jung, 2009).

The research on the importance of Individual Education Plans clearly indicates the need for further training for general education teachers in the interpretation and implementation of IEPs, but the research does not address the importance of examining the knowledge of beginning teachers in planning and implementing Individual Education Plans and what kind of training and support they would need to overcome the barriers of ambiguous terms and difficulty in grading.

Collaboration in Schools

This lack of training in the area of special education for general education teachers has led many researchers to investigate the benefits of collaboration in schools between teachers working with students with disabilities and regular classroom teachers (Causton-Theoharis, 2009; McLeskey & Waldron, 2007; Rea, McLaughlin and Walther-Thomas, 2002, Valeo, 2008). Valeo (2008) notes the significance of teacher attitudes as an important factor for successfully including students with disabilities. Valeo (2008) interviewed six elementary school teachers and five elementary school principals from a Canadian metropolitan school system using a pre-set system of questions. Results indicated that teachers felt challenged to find the time to include students with disabilities without making them too dependent on personal assistance (Valeo, 2008). Many needed more support from the special education teacher and felt that they were not receiving the necessary support which led them to prefer responsibility be placed with the special education teacher for their students with disabilities. Teachers felt that their relationship with the special education teacher became very personal and if they got along then they received support, if they didn't they were left to their own devices. As Armenta and Beckers (2006) discuss in their reflective research on the importance of understanding the accommodations set out in the

Individual Education Plans, there clearly needs to be collaboration between the general education teacher and the special education teacher to ensure that the students' accommodations and modifications are accurately addressed (Armenta & Beckers, 2006). Without this collaboration general education teachers are left to interpret the Individual Education Plan to the best of their ability, which sometimes leaves students in a position of failing before receiving accommodations for success (Armenta & Beckers, 2006).

There is often uncertainty from both general and special education teachers on how to work together without confusing the role that each teacher plays in the education of their students (Valeo, 2008). In 2005, Dover published work that provided special education teachers with strategies on how to work with general education teachers and collaborate with special education personnel to support students in their education. Special education teachers are often unsure of their roles and how to work with general education teachers to discuss goals and review students' work (Dover, 2005).

This collaboration between general education and special education teachers is an important part of teachers' success and self-efficacy. Although the current literature addresses the need for collaboration, there is limited research on the direct needs of teachers in the area of collaboration and how this collaboration can benefit them with regards to ensuring success for their students with disabilities.

Chapter II:

Methodology

Research Design

The research question is exploratory in nature and was addressed through qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews that were open ended and generated data from the participants' answers (Creswell, 2003). The purpose of this approach was to generate themes from the data that was collected and explore connections as they emerged (Creswell, 2005).

The research design used was a phenomenological case study and it is suited for this type of research in that it describes, interprets and analyzes a culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2005). This group is elementary school teachers working within the Greater Toronto Area. The study of this small group allows for insight into teacher preparation in pre-service education and how this prepares teachers to work with students with Individual Education Plans.

Research Questions

1. Are first year teachers knowledgeable on how to prepare and implement Individual Education Plans for their students?
2. What is the level of preparation that they received from their pre-service education programs from curriculum and practicum opportunities?
3. For those who have the necessary knowledge, were there additional opportunities or experiences that allowed them to gain this experience?

Protection of Human Participants

To protect participants, minimize potential threats and ensure that the design and administration of the study posed minimal risk for participants, all research plans were reviewed

by the Research Ethics Board of Ryerson University (REB). The REB reviewed the participant consent agreements to ensure protection of the participants' rights. An explanation of the research that would be conducted along with potential risks and benefits of the study (Creswell, 2003) were included in the consent agreement (*please see Appendix A for Consent Agreement*).

Ensuring Confidentiality

In order to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used for each participant to ensure their protection of identity (Creswell, 2003).

Recruitment

The participants of the study were initially recruited through convenience sampling using the criteria of identification as beginning teachers in the primary-junior division, working within the Greater Toronto Area (Creswell, 2005). Two participants were recruited who were first year teachers working in elementary schools in the Greater Toronto Area. From there, snowball sampling was used, again, ensuring that all criteria were met. The following script was used to recruit participants:

Hello my name is Penny Diamantouros. I am currently a student in the Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Studies program at Ryerson University. For my research, I am interested in exploring the degree of preparation that elementary school, first year teachers have in developing and implementing Individual Education Plans (IEPs). I feel that the best way to achieve this goal is by analyzing the knowledge acquired by the participants in their Faculty of Education programs but also by their individual experiences and the support network that they have at their school and outside of school with colleagues and other professionals. I am requesting your participation in an

interview that will last approximately 45 minutes that will be arranged at a time and place convenient to yourself. Your consent is requested to audiotape the interview. You may request that your interview not be taped if you would prefer. Please be aware that transcripts of the interview will only be available to me and my faculty advisor. They will be kept in locked files in my home and all information will be destroyed after the completion of the report. As well, your anonymity will be protected in the final report of the findings. The names of the participants will not be used at any time in the report, in publications or in presentations. As well, analysis of the results will make it impossible to associate any particular statement with the author. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please note that at any time you may refuse to answer any of the questions asked and you may withdraw from the study at any point if you so choose without negative consequences. I would like to meet with you to review the consent agreement and provide you with any additional information you may need prior to the interview.

If the potential participant accepts the invitation to participate in the study the following statement was given:

Thank you for agreeing to participate. I would like to arrange a time and place to meet that is convenient for you. If you do not have a preference, I may arrange for an interview location.

The researcher is an elementary school teacher and caution was taken in ensuring that the participant was comfortable with the location and aware that their response would remain confidential. As well, through the use of a semi-structured interview, the researcher would allow the participant to guide the direction of their responses and eliminate any issues of professionalism during the process. All participants appeared comfortable and interested in the interview process; however, if there were any signs of verbal or physical discomfort, the interview would have ended ensuring that the participant felt comfortable.

Participant Demographics

Beginning teachers were the population for the study, since they had the most recent experience in pre-service education. A total of six participants were recruited and all six graduated from South-western Ontario Faculties of Education and were certified in the primary junior division. All of the participants interviewed are in their first year of teaching in public school boards. Each participant was asked to reflect on their pre-service education training and specify the amount of training they remember receiving while in the Faculty of Education.

Participant One: Laura*(pseudonym) took one mandatory course in the area of Special Education within her Faculty of Education and had three practicum blocks. All of her practicum blocks were within the Public School Board. Her first two placements did not have any students with disabilities in the classroom. In her third placement, there were two students who were on IEPs with modifications, yet Laura says she was never shown any IEPs.

Participant Two: Amy* (pseudonym) took a mandatory course with a focus on children with disabilities and differentiated instruction and had three practicum blocks. She also took her additional qualifications in the area of special education completing part 1. All of her practicum blocks were within the Public School Board. Her first placement in a grade four/five split had four children on academic IEPs and her third placement had two students with IEPs. When describing her experiences with working with IEPs in her placements, Amy states:

I didn't get a lot of practise writing IEPs but I did get a chance to consult them and to utilize them to adjust my programming to suit the needs of various students and to become more sensitive towards the range of abilities that I could expect in my own classroom.

Teaching was a second career choice for Amy and she felt that because she was a mom herself and had worked with children in various settings, she was at an advantage for understanding children's needs and how to accommodate them in the classroom.

Participant Three: Jim* (pseudonym) had two practicum blocks in his B. Ed. Program. He did not have any mandatory classes in the area of special education or any elective classes. He did, however, attain his additional qualifications in the area of Special Education parts 1 and 2. All of his practicum blocks were within the Public School Board, with one identified student in his second placement. He sat down with the classroom teacher and recalls the interaction as follows:

The teacher sat down with me on day one and told me that he is Autistic and showed me the safety plan in place and behaviour log. I was already overwhelmed and so she walked me through the strategies in dealing with his needs, but there was a lot of resistance from the PDD team and the principal to have me work directly with him. The teacher encouraged it, but I know that there was a great deal of hesitation even from my site supervisor.

Jim felt that he was never given much opportunity to interact with the student, yet through the teacher's interactions and modeling, he learned a lot about the student even though he didn't have any access to the student's IEP.

Participant four: Nancy* (pseudonym) did not have any mandatory classes in the area of special education or any elective classes. She had two practicum blocks that were both within the Public School Board, with one identified student in her second placement who had a learning disability. The student was receiving withdrawal support and was not in the class for the majority of the academic program.

Participant five: Stella*(pseudonym) had three practicum blocks in her B. Ed. Program. She had a mandatory course that addressed the variety of students with disabilities and some of the characteristics of each. All of her practicum blocks were within the Public School Board.

She had three students with IEPs in the first two placements, grade one and four, and one in the last placement, which she found surprising because it was a kindergarten classroom.

In the first placement, Stella was told verbally about the students needs and was given little guidance on how to address these needs. In her second placement, she met with the associate teacher and sat down and strategized on how to best address the needs of the learners and discussed accommodations and modifications to be put into place, yet she was never actually shown a copy of their IEPs. In the last placement, she was told that the student was “hyper” and that was the only information she received. She was unaware if the age of the child was a factor, but she felt that she was “*expected to know what to do*”.

Participant six: Taylor* (pseudonym) had three practicum blocks in his Bachelor of Education program. He did not have any mandatory courses in the area of special education, but did take an elective that focused on how to address the needs of special education students. As well, he completed an additional qualification in the area of Special Education. All of his placements were within the Public School Board. He worked with students who had IEPs for behaviour in his first placement in a grade three classroom and did not have any students with IEPs in either of his other two placements.

Data Collection

Data was collected using face to face semi-structured interviews. All participants were greeted upon arrival and given ample time to read over the consent letter and were given a copy of the interview questions (*please see appendix A for consent letter*). The interviewer reviewed

the purpose of the study, the types of questions that would be asked, the potential risks to the participant and reminded them again that they may withdraw from participation at anytime throughout the interview process. The participant was reminded that the interview would be audio taped and that the interviewer may take some written notes. They were given a chance to choose not to be audio-taped and once consent was established, the participant had an opportunity to ask any questions.

All participants were invited to choose the location and time that they were most comfortable with for their interview. The interviews were conducted at the participants' homes or at their places of work. All participants had time before and after the interview to engage in conversation with the interviewer. The interview began when the interviewer and participant felt prepared and the interviews lasted approximately 25 minutes in duration. The participant was given the option of receiving a copy of the transcribed interview to review.

Semi-Structured Interview

The research tool that was used to collect data was a semi-structured interview (*please see appendix B for semi-structured interview*). There was demographic information, pre-interview procedures, interview questions with probes and an area to record comments and notes of reflection. The interview concluded with post-interview protocol and an opportunity for further questions or clarification. The interview questions focussed on educational experiences, professional experiences, as well as, attitudes and beliefs about their level of preparation in preparing and implementing Individual Education Plans. The semi-structured interview format allowed the interviewer to allow for structure within the interview, as well as, provide the participant with a chance to elaborate on certain topics or expand their thoughts.

Likert Type Scale

. In addition, a likert type scale asking respondents to agree or disagree with a number of statements using a scale of 1-5 in which a 1 meant “strongly disagree” and a 5 meant “strongly agree”, was also used in the data collection (*please see appendix B for likert scale*). This tool was used to enhance the understanding of the level of perceived comfort by participants in preparing and implementing IEPs and working with students with disabilities. By measuring the level of perceived comfort by the participants, the researcher could have a more accurate assessment on how comfortable they were by the way they rated their responses.

Data Analysis

After the data was collected and transcribed, the researcher read over the data numerous times and through the use of grounded theory design, analyzed the data using systematic codes (Creswell, 2003). Key points were marked with series of different colour codes. The codes were then grouped into concepts that emerged and from there six categories were formed. (Creswell, 2003) The categories included: faculty courses, practicum placements, level of perceived comfort working with students with disabilities, exposure and familiarity to IEPs, collaboration with peers and changes in the Bachelor of Education program. These results were then related to current literature, through themes that emerged from the findings.

Authenticity and Trustworthiness

Credibility (internal validity) was established by allowing the participants to check the transcribed data to ensure that the information provided during the interview process was interpreted and presented correctly. Transferability (external validity) was maintained through detailed description, participant quotes and coding of findings. Lastly, confirm-ability

(objectivity) was maintained throughout the process because the researcher stated her own biases as an elementary school teacher, special education teacher and their own theoretical views. The findings and the direct quotes from the participants allow for increased objectivity (Creswell, 2003).

Limitations

There are some limitations to this explorative study in that it is conducted with a small population of participants that have been chosen through a purposeful sample based on the criterion of being in their first year of teaching in the elementary panel. This focus does not necessarily reflect the variety of experiences found in the teaching population at large and cannot be generalized to this population.

All of the participants interviewed were trained in South-western Ontario Faculties of Education and work for school boards that are within the Greater Toronto Area. This could be a limitation in the findings, in that all of the experiences from these participants are within urban school settings. In addition, the expectations from each Faculty do vary, as do the guidelines and mandates from each school board.

There was limited time available to build a rapport and establish a relationship with each of the participants and that could have affected their level of trust or comfort throughout the interview process. If there was more time allotted to establishing a rapport with the participants perhaps they may have felt more at ease to share responses and provide further detail in their answers. Although all participants seemed willing to share and engage in conversation, it is difficult to assess if their responses would have been more elaborate or critical under different

circumstances and this could have presented as an unrecognized limitation.

As an educator in the field, there is a certain degree of personal bias that may have influenced perceptions from the data collected. Having taught in the school system for ten years and having specifically taught in the role of special education for three years, there could be a certain degree of bias that could have unknowingly affected the responses of the participants or the interpretation of the data. An understanding of the context of the response may have led to less clarification and potential misinterpretation of the context. This bias was accounted for by allowing participants to validate the transcribed data and having two external auditors verify procedures and themes from the findings.

Researcher's Statement

As a researcher, I approach this researcher paper and the Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Studies program, after being in the field as an elementary school teacher for ten years. After completing my Bachelor of Education, I began teaching in the elementary grades and have taught kindergarten, grade one and grade two. Once I entered the field of teaching, I quickly realized that I did not feel confident in meeting the needs of students with disabilities in my classroom. I didn't feel that my course work or placements prepared me for the realities that I would face as I embarked on my career in teaching. I decided to complete my specialist in the area of special education so that I can gain further insight on practices and policies in order to fully understand the needs of all of the learners in my classroom.

I have completed both a specialist in the area of Special Education and English Language Learners. I taught in the area of special education and was a mentor in the field for three years. I

have spent a great deal of my career trying to ensure that the needs of all of my learners are addressed and that all of my students feel a sense of belonging and pride in their learning. In May 2010, I was given the opportunity to be a speaker at the Inclusion: You and Me symposium held at Ryerson University and had a chance to learn about all of the amazing work being done throughout Ontario for students. I continue to educate myself on the importance of inclusion, diversity and equity in the classroom.

Chapter III:

Findings and Discussion

Faculty Courses

Within each province in Canada, each Faculty of Education follows broad guidelines in deciding on their curriculum making it difficult to ensure that all teachers are graduating from their programs with the same knowledge and skills to teach in diverse classrooms (Volante, 2006). As educational systems work towards inclusion of all students, the Faculties of Education need to address the realities of the classroom and make these realities reflective in their teacher preparation programs. Many teachers feel that their teacher education programs should be more reflective of the current classroom environments and that the curriculum should be modified in programs to reflect this necessary change in times (D'Aniello, 2008).

The role of the special education teacher is currently becoming the role of every teacher in regular classroom settings. School boards are moving away from segregation and pullout programs and working towards inclusion for all students (Rea, McLaughlin and Walther-Thomas, 2002). This change is a reality when pre-service education teachers begin their careers and realize that they are the ones responsible for the learning of all of their students. In this study, teachers were asked to evaluate how well their pre-service education program prepared them for the realities of the inclusive classroom. Teachers were asked about the types of courses they took in the area of special education, both mandatory and elective, and how these courses prepared them for the classroom they later encountered. Their responses reveal a variety of learning experiences at the faculties of education. Some were required to take mandatory

courses and some were not. None had had any information regarding use of the IEP. And, the majority felt that their preparation for working with students with disabilities was wholly inadequate. Nancy's response below paints a picture of frustration with her experience:

We did not have a mandatory course, but we did touch on it in our courses...We did have an elective course, but I didn't take it...many of us didn't because the way the schedule was set up it was hard to fit it in. My courses left a lot of unknowns. I feel that there was some theory taught to us but it was unknown how this would translate into practice. We were taught about the variety of disabilities that exist and we were taught about some common characteristics, but we didn't go into any detail.....everything was touched upon and dismissed. You knew you would encounter students with disabilities and that they would have needs, but we were told their needs would vary and I guess that is why it was so broad.

Nancy appears to have been left with many questions as a result of her experience at the faculty. Although she was taught about the range of disabilities which she might encounter as a teacher, she felt there was a considerable lack of detail and disconnect between theory and practice. Laura's response below echoes that of Nancy's in that her mandatory course gave a general overview of differing abilities within a classroom:

I had a mandatory course in special education that talked about the range of learning about abilities in the classroom...they did not discuss IEPs at all. It was very broad, they

showed you signs of kids and how to pick them out but not how to deal with things.....they really focussed on learning styles...There were 500 people in the room...it was one big lecture...how much could you have possibly learned in that environment. There was an understanding that there would be children with needs in the classroom...but I felt that I would cross that bridge when I came to it.

Although Laura did have to take a mandatory course on special needs, the structure of the course with 500 students in a large lecture format seems to have left her with a feeling of having gained little useful knowledge. But both Nancy and Laura's comments point to the difficulty facing faculties in teaching about children with disabilities; how can the teaching about children with differing needs be effectively done "in detail"? Students with disabilities are not a homogenous group across, or even, within disabilities. How can a program prepare teachers to feel confident in addressing the myriad differences between children? The faculties' responses to this appear to be to talk generally about disabilities and point to the range that may one day exist for a teacher. Jim's comment also reinforces the feeling that the information received was not very specific:

There was a basis there in theory. I got to understand a lot about conditions and things I was unaware of previously....things like the association between learning disabilities and giftedness...but I guess it was general.

Amy's response below placed emphasis on the role of experience in helping her learn about

disabilities. Both her own life experience as a more mature student and that of her instructor's personal experience as a parent of a child with disabilities made her course more useful to her and she notes:

I took an educational psychology course which had a sustained focus on servicing children with disabilities and differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all students. Also, the instructor's own daughter had Down syndrome, so this area was especially important to her...I took a music course because I think that we can teach a lot of subject material across the curriculum through music and movement...I don't feel that my coursework necessarily prepared me for the classroom...it was busy work. I was an older student so I was able to extrapolate what I needed and build my practices from what I felt was necessary for children.

Amy makes an interesting comment given that some studies show that working directly with students with disabilities enhances understanding of both inclusion and of disabling conditions (Sharma, Forlin & Loreman, 2008; Wiebe Berry, 2008). And while she did not herself work directly with students with disabilities, the instructor's background in having a child with a disability appears to have provided more useful information in the course than might otherwise have been possible. But, despite taking a course which seemed to offer more than the courses taken by Laura and Nancy, Amy still felt as if she was engaged in meaningless, "busy" work which did not prepare her for her own classroom. Taylor is perhaps the only one of the four participants quoted here who is more satisfied with his course work and he states:

There was nothing mandatory, maybe three or four lessons that focussed on special education. I took an elective...it was based primarily at types of students with disabilities and how you would be addressing their needs in the fall, without discussing IEPs...I feel that the courses were pretty good in the sense that we did a lot of finding out about accommodations...classroom management and behaviour were the main focus.

It is also interesting that he is the only one who mentions the word “accommodations” and seems to feel better prepared because his course specifically focussed on classroom management and behaviour. This is an interesting finding given that the research suggests that what teachers most fear about the inclusion of students with disabilities is unmanageable behaviour (Soodak, 2003).

Three of the six participants hoped that they would have opportunities throughout their first year of teaching to receive mentorship from the special education teacher and have opportunities to participate in workshops and seminars in the area of special education. The following were Taylor’s thoughts on the importance of trying to find opportunities to grow professionally in this area:

If you want help and access to resources, they are available to you...you need to seek them out. I went to an IEP in-service this year...my VP brought it to my attention...administration, colleagues and teachers may be cognisant of the help you need and it is up to you to outsource and research things...you aren’t an expert but it is one thing that is very important.

The participants were aware that they needed to seek out support in order to be successful at their jobs. They were aware that in order to receive support, they would have to be their own advocates to ensure that they were not left alone in their first year of teaching. Their uncertainty around whether or not they can expect to receive support is well warranted. The research on teacher mentorship continually points to the difficulty of collaboration between teachers, especially between special education teachers and regular classroom teachers. Time constraints appear to severely limit the collaboration and mentorship that can take place between teachers. Vannest & Hagan-Burke (2010) found that special education teachers spend the majority of their time completing paperwork given at the direction of their principal, or working directly with students with disabilities. They had little to no time to consult with other teachers.

Practicum Placements

Throughout the pre-service education program, teacher candidates are given the opportunity to observe and engage in classroom settings where they learn from associate teachers and have an opportunity to teach lessons and work directly with the students in the classroom. These placements can begin as early as September with gradual release of control from the associate teacher to the teacher candidate. The number of placements per year varies between Faculties of Education in South-western Ontario, yet there is a mandate for one primary (kindergarten to grade three) and one junior (grades four to six) placement within each practicum experience (Practicum Placements Handbook OISE, 2009).

The purpose of these placements is to provide teacher candidates with practical, hands-on experience in the classroom so that they receive mentorship and training that will prepare them

to teach in their own classroom once they graduate from the faculty (Practicum Placements Handbook OISE, 2009). Many graduates feel that the time allotted for practicum placements is not enough for them to feel prepared to teach upon graduation (Volante, 2006). Research has shown that teacher candidates often see a disconnect between instruction and practice and feel that they are not receiving the practical side to their education and need more opportunity to be active participants in the classroom setting (Volante, 2006).

All of the practicum placements that are offered in the Faculties of Education are in the mainstream classroom and there are no opportunities for specialized placements in the area of special education. Teacher candidates are often left with little exposure to students with disabilities from their placements and feel that their placements have not prepared them enough to the realities of the inclusive classroom. In a discussion with the participants about their opportunities to work with students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom, many felt that their experiences working directly with the students were limited. They had two to three placements and within each placement, there were a few students with IEPs but the teacher candidates were not encouraged to utilize the IEPs in their planning. They were often told to base their accommodations and modifications on classroom observations that were often for only a week or two, on and off. The practicum placements did not present an honest picture of the inclusive classroom because the teacher candidates were not expected to fully integrate all students and their learning needs into planning and delivery of lessons. The following were some of the experiences that the participants had in their placements:

Stella: I had three practicum blocks and in the first placement which was grade one, there was one identified student and in the second placement, which was grade four their

were two identified students and in kindergarten there was one student who was not identified...I did get to work with these students...In my first placement I was told that he had needs, but nothing further. In my second placement, the teacher met with me and discussed the student's needs and some strategies to use and in the last placement I was just told he was hyper....I was given opportunity to work with these students, but I was not given specific information about their IEPs and their accommodations, I was expected to accommodate as I saw fit and from observation.

Stella had exposure to students with disabilities in all three of her placements, yet she was given very little information on the needs of the students. She was told that the students had exceptionalities, but there was little clarification on their specific needs and in her last placement, she was simply told the student was "hyper". There was no explanation on how this is addressed in the classroom or how Stella should be accommodating her lessons to ensure that this student is engaged in the programming and is involved in the learning. Stella did not have a chance to see the students' IEPs and was told to base her accommodations on a few weeks of observation. She had no document to go by and was left to decide on her own what would work best for a student that she knew very little about in just a week or two. Laura had very similar experiences in her placements:

I had three blocks in kindergarten, grade one and grade five. I had two kids in my last placement, grade five, where I knew they had modifications and I was told to make modifications for them. I had no access to the IEPs but I was just told to make accommodations....the teacher told me to base it on his accommodations and

modifications that I had observed for a week.

Again, in the case of Laura's placement opportunities, there was no mention of access to the IEP, she was made aware of the need for accommodations and modifications, but was not given any further support and direction. Laura could have benefitted from having the chance to work directly with these students and learn how to plan using their IEPs and gain valuable insight and experience in the process, yet she was told to base her accommodations on classroom observations that she had noted from one week of being in the classroom for observation. Nancy did not even have the chance to observe any students with IEPs in her placements, because the student was removed from class for the majority of his learning:

I had two practicum placements, in grade two and six and in my second there was an identified student, but he was out of the class a lot and when I did get to work with him it was in art or gym and I didn't really get to see his needs...very little academic exposure.

Practicum placements are supposed to offer those authentic learning opportunities where teacher candidates are learning from associate teachers and are being mentored and guided through the many realities of the classroom. Without having access to the students' IEPs, it is difficult to expect teacher candidates to feel prepared to accommodate and modify the needs of their students. When teacher candidates are not even exposed to students with disabilities in the regular classroom, as was the case with Nancy, they are extremely unaware of how to teach

students with disabilities and could be left with the impression that the responsibility of students with IEPs does not fall into the hands of the general classroom teacher, but rather the special education teacher.

It is this lack of experience and training that left many participants feeling as though their practicum placements did not provide them with the necessary tools and skills to teach in the own classrooms. The opportunities and program structure from the practicum placements left teacher candidates feeling a need to further engage in issues of special education. This need is often unattainable because their program does not allow them the chance to really have the necessary training to work with all students (Mujawamariya & Mahrouse, 2004). When participants were asked about how well they felt their practicum blocks prepared them to teach students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom, they all felt that their practicum blocks were helpful for the mainstream classroom, but not for working with students with disabilities. The following were some of their thoughts on their level of preparation:

Stella: I feel that the opportunity to work with the children was great, but it didn't really prepare me for the classroom in the sense that I was never give a chance to sit with the teachers and actually look at the kids IEPs and work from them...it was more the idea that I was there for a few weeks and worked on a need to know basis.

Laura: I don't feel they prepared me in any way to deal with students with IEPs or disabilities because I was never given the chance to work with any of these kids. I was

basically left on my own to figure it out. I didn't even meet the special education teacher nor do I know if she worked with the kids.

Stella and Laura both felt that their placements helped them in working with students in the general classroom, but they did not feel that they received any support and experience in their placements in working with students with disabilities. They felt that they were on a "need to know" basis, as Stella mentioned, and they were not immersed into the dynamics of the classroom. The associate teachers did not feel that they needed to provide them with all of the information and include them fully in classroom planning and implementation, perhaps because their placements were for a limited time. Taylor saw his placements as valuable learning tools and he felt that although he may have not had much experience with students with IEPs, his placements were practical in providing him with some strategies he could utilize in his own class:

A lot of my colleagues and I found that my placements were the most practical because the theory in class didn't compare to the hands on of the classroom experience. You try to do the best you can and you saw models of your associate teacher and not all of the things worked for me but I tried them. I was used to figuring out how to address all of my kids...I used a lot of the same techniques for my special education kids as well they worked in general for everyone and it was beneficial.

Taylor saw his placements as a chance to gain insight and skills to work with all of the children in his class. He devised ways to address all of the learners in his class by observing and

trying various strategies that he learned throughout his placements.

All of the participants interviewed felt that their placements were beneficial and essential in preparing them for their own classrooms, yet there was a lack of experience working with students with disabilities that left the participants feeling unprepared to accommodate all students' needs in the classroom. They were often left to make up their own accommodations and use the very little time for observation they had as a framework to guide their own planning and programming. This left both the students in the classrooms and the teacher candidates at a disadvantage. They left their placements feeling unprepared for teaching all the students in their classroom and wishing that they had a chance to work more with the students and be properly trained on their accommodations and modifications through familiarity with the IEP. There was a great deal of ambiguity on how students with IEPs are addressed in the classroom and this lack of training from the associate teachers left teacher candidates with little modelling and mentoring. But the reason why there was so little direction from the classroom teachers needs to be asked, especially in light of studies which show that regular classroom teachers themselves are not comfortable with the creation or implementation of the IEP. In many schools the creation and responsibility still rests mainly with the special education teacher and the regular classroom teacher are left feeling that they need more training themselves (Menlove, Hudson & Suter, 2001). It may be that the problem of expecting teacher candidates to receive training on the IEP in practicum may not be feasible given the current structures in schools where in regular classroom teachers themselves may not have been well trained themselves.

Without sufficient training and preparation in the area of special education, graduates are left feeling unprepared in meeting the needs of the learners in their classrooms. To understand

the participants' level of comfort in working with students with IEPs in their classrooms and meeting their needs, a likert scale was used addressing six statements where the respondents rated their responses using 1 for "strongly agree" to 5 for "strongly disagree".

When asked about their level of confidence in meeting the needs of all of the learners in the classroom, one of the participants felt that they were not confident at all, while four participants felt that they were adequately confident and one participant felt quite confident that they were meeting the needs of all learners. Despite participants' answers to interview questions, it seems that, on the whole, many of them do feel comfortable and confident teaching in the regular classroom overall, but not necessarily teaching children with disabilities in this setting.

The participants were then asked to rate their level of preparation in designing and implementing an IEP and all of the participants felt that they were inadequately prepared for working with students with IEPs and although they had a greater deal of confidence in addressing the needs of their learners, their level of confidence changed significantly when they were asked about their comfort level when it came to Individual Education Plans. Their education may have discussed differentiated instruction and the variety of learners that can be found in the mainstream classroom, but because it just touched on the topic and did not provide in depth discussion and preparation leaving the graduates feeling unconfident in their own abilities (Mujawamariya & Mahrouse, 2004).

Exposure and Familiarity to Individual Education Plans

The participants were asked to rate their awareness of the accommodations and modifications set out in their students' IEPs and their ability to consistently accommodate and modify curriculum expectations to meet the needs of their students. The ratings from all six

participants showed that they were not confident in their abilities. All of the participants felt that they were poorly prepared at accommodating and modifying expectations for their students during practicum placements and did not consistently plan for the needs of their students with IEPs. These results mirror those found in the literature that discuss how very few teachers use Individual Education plans once they are developed and few are aware of how to implement these plans into practice (Lee-Tarver, 2006). Many teachers find it difficult to interpret guidelines and accommodations set out in IEPs because they do not have the necessary training to understand and follow the accommodations and modifications (Ketterlin-Geller et al, 2007). It would appear that these beginning teachers do not feel well positioned to work with an IEP because they have not been exposed to it during their pre-service program.

The struggle to clearly understand Individual Education Plans and their purpose is well documented in the literature (Byrnes, 2008). The ambiguity of accommodations and misunderstandings of their implementations are common concerns. Teachers struggle to understand terms and familiarize themselves not only with the IEP but how to teach while addressing the needs set out in this document (Byrnes, 2008). Classroom teachers do not feel that they are able to confidently plan and evaluate these students, because of their own lack of preparation and experience (Guskey & Jung, 2009). It is extremely difficult to expect a first year teacher to enter a classroom and be confident in planning and accommodating for all their students, when they have never seen an IEP before nor have they ever had to utilize one in their planning and preparation. Without the degree of experience necessary in dealing with students with individualized needs, teachers are left to feel uncertain about how to include all of their learners in their classroom.

The Individual Education Plan is seen as a formality by many teachers and they are often overwhelmed by having to implement this document in their classrooms (Armenta & Beckers, 2006). Many teachers are uncertain of how to meet the individual needs of these learners and dismiss the curriculum when planning for these students instead of allowing them to succeed within the classroom environment (Hehir, 2002). Taylor addressed this concern when discussing his own lack of familiarity with the IEP and its process:

The first school I was at we had behavioural IEPs. My second and third placements didn't have any...The first one only and there were two kids and they were integrated. I never saw their IEPs and the teacher just told me they had IEPs...I went by what was already but in place. My associate teacher said I don't need to worry about accommodating for them, I guess from my observations I could get a sense of the rhythm of the classroom....But I never got to see IEPs until my first year of teaching in my LTO.

Without having to worry about addressing the IEP in his planning, Taylor was left to rely on observations to work with the students in the classroom and was never actually shown an IEP nor did he learn the value and importance of using this document in his planning. His associate teacher left it as a formality and did not feel the need to further address the importance of this planning tool. Jim's associate teacher gave him information on the contents of the IEP, yet she never showed him the document and although she was experienced and provided Jim with beneficial teaching tools from his observation, Jim had no familiarity with the IEP process:

I had a chance to observe how the autistic boy in my placement was without ever seeing his IEP...He had an IEP and the teacher did not show it to me but she did highlight key points in terms of social skills, toileting and behaviour. I watched her a lot too and how she dealt with him and I knew I had a lot to learn...she really walked me through it...if I had to do it alone I wouldn't know where to start.

The feeling of not knowing “where to start” as Jim pointed out, is understandable when teacher candidates are not shown the starting point of the IEP and how to begin the process by using this tool to assist in planning and accommodating the needs of the students. Perhaps if he was shown the IEP and the associate teacher used that same valuable technique of walking him through the process, he might have felt better prepared to work with the student even if he was on his own.

According to the expectations set out by the Ontario Ministry of Education, everyone working with students with IEPs should have access to their Individual Education Plans (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). This would allow them to prepare, modify and accommodate the programming for students with IEPs. None of the participants had a chance to look at an IEP or see how the accommodations and modifications are set out in the document. When teachers are experienced and exposed to this valuable plan, they develop an understanding of the process and are active participants in ensuring that the needs of this plan are met in their curriculum. They learn that this process is by no means rote and that they should attach a great deal of meaning to each IEP they write and each one that they implement in their classrooms (Kamens, 2004). The

importance of receiving this training in their pre-service program needs to be valued so that teachers graduate and become solely responsible for their own classrooms and for the learning needs of students with IEPs.

Collaboration with Peers

This lack of training in the area of special education for general education teachers has led many researchers to investigate the benefits of collaboration in schools between general classroom teachers and special education resource teachers (Valeo, 2008). The need for strategies to be put in place to ensure that the special education teacher knows how to work with the general education teacher and collaborate with special education personnel to support students in their education is also well documented (Dover, 2005).

In addition, there is a need to understand to what degree this support is available to teachers and how many of them are comfortable asking their peers for assistance. There are many teachers who feel that by asking for help, they will appear unfit in their education and abilities and choose not to engage others with their needs so as not to appear incompetent in their profession (Dover, 2005). There is difficulty when the special education teacher does not take the time to meet with the teachers and allows personal dynamics and relationships to get in the way of working collaboratively with their peers (Valeo, 2008). These concerns were addressed with the participants when they were asked about the level of support they received as first year teachers in meeting the needs of students with IEPs. Taylor who was in a small school was fortunate to have arrived at the school in a year where there was a transition for all general classroom teachers. The responsibility of the IEP was being given to the classroom teachers

with the special education staff offering support and assistance:

There was pretty good support. I had a lot of in-service. Last year was the first year that the classroom teachers were asked to do IEPs at our school so the spec ed teachers went through the entire process with us. It was my first time going through it and I had a student with an IEP coming in...I had to update his and do two or three so it was really...well they understood that a lot of us needed help...I would go to teachers and ask if I was accommodating in the right way...other teachers would help with the language, some of the teachers even knew the students from the years before but they would walk you through their report cards and they would give you strategies that work...I asked for support and got a lot of it.

Taylor felt that because he was in a small school setting and everyone was in the same position, he was comfortable asking for support. He was fortunate to be starting at the school at a time where changes were occurring with the IEP process that allowed him to receive so much support and guidance. Other participants interviewed did not feel comfortable in asking for certain levels of support and were left feeling that they had limited backing from peers. Nancy and Jim felt that they were unable to receive the support they needed due to the schedules of their special education teachers or mentors and the size of their schools:

Nancy: I have received some support from my mentor but it is a really big school and there is little time to work with others and get to know them. I am sure the special education teacher could help more, but I rarely see her or have a chance to tell her about my experiences.

Jim: I have had help from a mentor teacher when she can take the time, but I am left a lot on my own because people are busy and that is the reality of a class. They have their own problems and situations to work out. The special education teacher is fine to offer suggestions and help fill out paperwork but rarely sees the students and says it is in order of priority of needs. I teach grade five and she feels the grade sixes should be addressed first since they are graduating this year.

From the statements made by Nancy and Jim, it is evident that being in a larger school environment left them feeling that “there is little time to work with others” and they did not feel that sense of collaboration and support that they could be receiving from the staff at their school. As Jim noted “people are busy and that is the reality”. For both Nancy and Jim, the reality is that they are in a large school and support is difficult to come by because they are not able to form relationships and gain insight from other staff members because they are often busy with their own classes or they feel that other students should have priority. Jim addresses the on-going issue discussed in literature, where the special education teacher is making decisions of who requires support and attention based on their own judgements rather than the needs of the school.

The experiences from these participants show that it is difficult to consistently expect that there will be support for beginning teachers as they struggle to meet the needs of their classrooms. Collaboration with peers is essential for success and support, but it is not always available to teachers and there needs to be further programming and planning in place that ensure that these first year teachers receive the guidance and support necessary as they start their journey in their careers.

Changes in the Bachelor of Education Program

There is a clearly defined need from the research for pre-service education programs to make changes that are reflective of the learning environments that are necessary for the education of all students. Graduates are feeling inadequately prepared for the realities of the classroom and are left questioning their own levels of preparation and ability when they are suddenly faced with so many unknowns as they embark on their careers. The need for change was discussed with the participants in order to understand how recent graduates feel they could have benefitted as they look back on their education. As first year teachers who are faced with the many realities of teaching students with disabilities, it is important to examine what aspects of their education they would have changed or added to, to ensure that they were better prepared for their first experiences in teaching.

The participants were first asked about their beliefs regarding mandatory courses in the area of special education and if they feel that these courses would be beneficial for graduates entering the field of teaching. Currently, pre-service education programs do not have a mandate for special education courses and these courses are offered in some faculties but there is a variance between faculties and there is currently no consistency in the mandatory courses that are offered in special education. Laura, who had taken a mandatory course in special education, feels that there is benefit to such a course, depending on how it is structured:

It would be helpful and I think that many teachers would benefit from it. I think that the programming has to be careful of not being too theoretical in nature and needs to be more practical. What I mean is...there should be practical suggestions on how to accommodate

all students and deal with varying behaviours...I don't want to be lectured on what ADHD looks like and its medical background and origin...that will mean nothing to me when I am standing in front of thirty kids with nowhere to start. Teachers college needs to be more practical, because you really don't learn anything from being lectured to.

Practical strategies and ways to manage behaviour seem to be an important issue for Laura and she felt that although she did receive theory in the course she took in her pre-service program, she did not receive strategies and practical suggestions that she could use in the classroom. As with many beginning teachers, she is worried about the behaviours that she will find from her special education students and wanted some strategies and ideas on how to deal with behavioural students. Taylor, as well, saw benefit to addressing classroom management and behaviour strategies in his elective course and feels that mandatory courses should be more in-depth:

Yes, there were a lot of things that I learned in the elective in one year. I mean it was condensed but going through the practicum placements, there is only so much you can recover. I wanted the classroom management and behaviour strategies and I wish they could have done more, but time...I mean it is only a one year degree...with kids with disabilities there are so many strategies, so very specific. Electives are essential, but you need mandatory too...You may be confident coming out, but a lot of us feel we are not up to speed.

Taylor realizes that there is a short time frame for these courses, but also notes that it is essential that there is more in-depth discussion and learning so that graduates feel “up to speed” on strategies so that they are confident going into their first year of teaching.

Once teachers are finished their pre-service education programs they have the option to take additional qualifications specifically in the area of special education. Many teachers choose this option if they are going to be specializing in the role of special education teacher and others take the courses because they would like to be better prepared for the variety of learners that they will have in their classrooms. These courses are offered in class or on-line and are in three parts, beginning from a general overview to looking at specific disabilities in detail. These courses can be helpful to many graduates, but are optional at the moment and are offered at a cost to the graduates. The participants were asked about how they felt these courses would benefit them in meeting the needs of students with IEPs and if they feel these courses should be mandatory to all teachers. Those participants who had completed courses in the area of special education discussed their opinions on the topic:

Jim: Yes I think they should be mandatory because I had that extra little bit of training and experience...I found my own experiences working with students with disabilities to be the most helpful and still I truthfully feel far from prepared...If I hadn't taken any classes in addition to my degree, I would have absolutely no strategies...the part one wasn't too helpful it was the rest that went into things and showed you and made you do IEPs and stuff...everyone would benefit from that.

As Jim discussed, without that additional qualification in the area of special education, he

would have felt that he had “no strategies” to work with and that his additional qualifications exposed him to the IEP and went into details of how to address the students in his class. Taylor’s experiences were different in that he only completed part one of the three part series of courses and felt that it did not help him as much:

You know what, I did my AQ (Additional Qualification course) online and it was my first AQ that I did and I don’t think that I...I don’t think it helped me as much. It was more theory based...it was hard because there was no direct involvement...I mean we looked at IEPs and stuff...I think in class it would be helpful and it should be mandatory but not online.

Taylor felt that because his course was online, he may not have received the same training and experiences that Jim did, but he did feel that it should be mandatory to include these additional courses in the course content at the faculties.

The findings reinforce the importance of further training through courses in the bachelor of education program. Course work and curriculum do offer a basis from which graduates can build and grow, but a more in-depth look needs to be made to ascertain what else can be done to ease the transition from pre-service education to the realities of the classroom. Graduates in this study are feeling overwhelmed and insufficiently prepared for their first teaching experience, and were asked about what they feel could be done to ease this transition and support beginning teachers. Taylor felt that he benefited from having a mentor/mentee program through his board and this

mentorship has helped him feel that there are many resources available to him and support is there for him through this program:

I think the beginning teachers program we have at our board and the work that has been done there and taking the initiative to be aware of the resources available to us...if you want help and access to resources, they are available to you. We have two days where we can visit other schools, meet with personnel...this type of program is really helpful because they assign you a mentor and you and your mentor attend workshops and have time to meet and work together.

He found the mentorship program to be extremely helpful in providing him with assistance and opportunities to develop professionally through workshops and chances to observe other teachers and have access to resources. Jim and Laura felt that their practicum placements were the core of their learning and that these placements should be the focus of the pre-service program:

Jim: I think that more practicum placements for longer periods of time to actually get to know the students and try strategies and develop a sense of belonging in your placements is important. Going once a week and on and off between days does not allow for a continuum or a sense of control of what you are teaching and what strategies you are using...if there were more practicum experiences, then the transition would be easier, you would have more experience going in.

Laura: I think the most important thing is the placements...in order to transition better. I

didn't learn anything in class, everything I learned was in the classroom...I think everything should be more hands on rather than being lectured to...that would help with the transition to the actual classroom.

Both Jim and Laura valued their time in the classroom and felt that was where they were able to authentically learn and challenge themselves. They would have liked to have more consistent time in the classroom so that they could develop relationships with the students and have a chance to build on their learning. This need for further experience in the classroom is well noted in the literature (Volante, 2006), but the variance between the amount of time that each of the faculties allots to practicum placements raises concern. Jim mentions being in class observing "once a week, on and off". Without consistency in observation and teaching, teacher candidates are left without a sense of belonging and continuum in their placements. However, consistency in observation can be enhanced by having the teacher candidates share and hear about what and how others experienced in their placements and to be allowed the opportunity to critique placements with their peers (Mueller & Skamp, 2003).

Although more practicum placements and a mentoring program would be essential for teaching students with disabilities, the participants were asked about their opinions on what can be done to help first year teachers with the realities of teaching students with IEPs. Since this is an area that all of the participants felt that they did not have enough exposure to in their pre-service training, it is important to address and receive their thoughts on how they could be better prepared for this reality. The participants shared their thoughts on how to prepare first year teachers for this reality:

Stella: I think that there needs to be more mentorship and more access to materials and workshops...I wish I had more time in my day to get help and see how other teachers deal with certain accommodations...first year teachers need more time to visit other classrooms and see how other teachers handle certain situations...more time to meet with other teachers.

Taylor: I think it was stressed in school, you want to do as much for each kid as you can, so it wasn't that much of a shock...I think that its just knowing if you are doing a good job. Consistency and implementation have always been a big thing for me...you have the framework but the reality of doing my IEPs justice is a different thing...I think first year teachers have idealism and we need support to see that things aren't always that way and see how teachers cope with the accommodations and modifications so that we aren't feeling like failures if it gets tough...definitely more support in developing IEPs and implementing them in our practice...we don't have that in all schools...I am lucky here, but I have colleagues who never see the special education teacher and who are left to sink or swim...that is tough, more needs to be done to have consistency and support.

Both Stella and Taylor feel that there needs to be more opportunity for assistance in addressing the accommodations and modifications of IEPs. Stella notes the need to have more time to meet with other teachers and visit their classrooms to observe their strategies. Taylor feels that first year teachers have “idealism” and feels that talking with other teachers and

visiting their classrooms will help first year teachers see that they are not failing their students. First year teachers need the support of their colleagues and as Taylor mentioned, and was noted above, this support is not consistent from school to school. Nancy feels that the only way to change the level of support that is needed for first year teachers is to mandate it:

I think that there needs to be more support in place and somehow assign a person to the teachers to assist them with all the paperwork and accommodations and stuff...I think that the special education teacher in every school, their job should be to train first year teachers...they need to be assigned more of a leadership role and be mandated to help first year teachers because many of them don't...I think that there needs to be that support from the beginning of the year, before you get overwhelmed and have no control over things...I think it has to be mandated, otherwise it won't get done.

Mandating support expresses the frustration felt by Nancy in that she realizes that without it being part of the job title of the special education teacher or another member of staff, "it won't get done". Her sentiments are a glaring reality of the frustration felt by first year teachers as they struggle to receive support and deal with the many challenges faced by the paperwork and implementation of IEPs. Supporting first year teachers, from the beginning of their careers is essential to ensure that they feel guidance and assistance is available to them and they are more comfortable and at ease with their transition.

Chapter IV

General Discussion and Recommendations

This study addresses the frustrations and struggles faced by first year teachers in teaching students with disabilities in the regular classroom. The findings highlight the need for changes in pre-service education courses and practicum placements. As well, they expose the degree of familiarity first year teachers have with IEPs and the need for this lack of preparation to be addressed in pre-service education programs and at the school level through collaboration.

Due to the increase in including students with disabilities into mainstream classroom (Barton, 1997), there is a greater need for the current faculties of education to ensure that the course content and curriculum offered within their pre-service education programs is reflective of this change in times. According to the participants in this study, pre-service education programs are lacking course content and curriculum specifically in the field of special education. This was evident in the interviews with the participants where few stated having mandatory courses in the area of special education. The need to provide pre-service education teachers with further training in the area of special education is well documented (Frankel, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2007; Rea, McLaughlin & Walther-Thomas, 2002). As the literature and the participants' state, there appears to be very little change currently being implemented in the Faculties of Education in Southwestern Ontario to reflect the changes occurring in the classroom.

Without this necessary change, Faculties of Education are allowing teachers to feel that the responsibility of students with disabilities falls in the hands of the special education teacher in the school, rather than each teacher teaching the student with disabilities. The lack of course curriculum is leaving first year teachers to assume that the responsibility of their students with

disabilities will be placed with the special education teacher because they are the ones who are qualified to address the needs of these students. There is currently very little content in the courses offered to reflect the responsibility of the general education teachers and there continues to be an understanding that those teachers who have taken additional qualification courses in the area of special education will be the ones who are qualified to teach students with disabilities. There is an unspoken message being sent by the lack of education offered in the area of special education in pre-service education programs.

Faculties of Education offer practicum placements in their pre-service education programs that allow teacher candidates the chance to experiment and explore their roles as educators. The need for more opportunity to be active participants in the classroom has been discussed in the literature (Volante, 2006) and this need is further emphasized by the participants who felt that they benefitted from these placements. All of the participants felt that they were better prepared to teach in the general education classroom because of the variety of placements and the authentic learning opportunities they received in their practicum experiences. None of the participants felt prepared to work with students with disabilities because they had very little opportunity to work with these students and be mentored by their associate teachers on the relevance of their IEPs or how to implement their IEP in planning and practice. The participants were not shown any IEPs in their placements and had very little explanation about the students' accommodations and modifications.

This lack of preparation leaves participants in this study feeling uncomfortable with the idea of being able to meet the needs of all learners in a regular classroom setting. These feelings of being ill-prepared in working with students with disabilities leaves many teachers uncertain

about how to appropriately implement IEPs into their everyday practice (Armenta & Beckers, 2006). The participants in the study felt confident to teach in the regular classroom, but they did not feel confident to teach students with disabilities in the regular classroom. The literature and the participants both found that it is difficult for teachers without training to interpret the guidelines of the IEP and there is inconsistency in addressing accommodations and modifications for students (Ketterlin-Geller et al, 2007). Participants felt extremely unprepared to design and implement IEPs because although they had discussed differentiated instruction and the variety of learners they will have in their classrooms through their courses, these teachers had never been exposed to an IEP and had little understanding where to begin in designing one, let alone implementing one within the daily curriculum and routines.

The struggle to clearly understand IEPs and their purpose is well documented in the literature (Byrnes, 2008). Participants in the study were asked about their awareness of accommodations and modifications set out in students' IEPs and their ability to meet the needs of these students and all of the participants expressed being unconfident in their abilities. This finding ties in with the literature that discusses the importance of enhancing teacher knowledge and providing teachers with the tools necessary to develop individualized programs for children (Hehir, 2002). Many of the participants discussed their lack of familiarity with the IEP and its process and how they relied heavily on observation in their placements. This observation should be part of the mentoring process that teacher candidates receive, but it should not be the only exposure they have to working with students. There needs to be step by step reviews of the IEP and how the

students' strengths and needs are being addressed, so that the accommodations and strategies set out in the plan are clearly seen by the teacher candidate in practice. Teacher candidates need to learn that this process is not rote and that they should attach a great deal of meaning to each IEP they write and implement in their classrooms (Kamens, 2004).

General education teachers are left with little training in the area of special education through their pre-service program and are reliant on the assistance and support of colleagues and specialized teachers. The benefits of collaboration in schools between general classroom teachers and special education resource teachers are documented in the literature (Valeo, 2008). The level of support that is offered to first year teachers varies tremendously from school to school and individual situations. There are many factors that influence the support received by first year teachers. The participants' findings were similar to those in the literature that discussed the relationship between the classroom teacher and the special education teacher as being very personal and if they got along they received support, if they didn't they were left to their own devices (Valeo, 2008). Some of the participants felt that the special education teacher had different priorities and did not make the time to meet with them or address their concerns and needs and the literature shows that this feeling may be warranted given the number of other responsibilities that special education teachers often have in the school (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010).

Another factor is the size of the school and the inability to form relationships with colleagues and seek their assistance. The participants who were in large school environments tended to feel that it was more difficult to ask for help because they hadn't really established close relationships with their peers and their needs were often overlooked simply because of the isolation they

experienced from other teachers. Those who were in smaller school settings seemed to have a chance to establish close relationships with their colleagues and were more comfortable and able to ask for support and assistance when they needed it. They had more intimate relationships with their colleagues and felt that they could get the support they needed in their schools.

Recommendations

Consistency throughout the South-western Ontario Faculties of Education

It is extremely important that Faculties of Education are offering the same learning opportunities to all teacher graduates so that they are prepared to teach students with disabilities in the regular classroom.

Mandatory courses in the pre-service education program

From the findings and the literature, there is a need for a great deal of change at the level of the Faculties of Education to ensure that program content and practicum placements are reflective of including students with disabilities in the regular classroom. There is a need for mandatory courses in the area of special education that focus not only on theory but practical and necessary skills for success. The course curriculum must include the process of the IEP and its value and significance in working with students with disabilities.

Incorporating Additional Qualification course content within the pre-service program

It should not be assumed that special education teachers are responsible for the education of students with disabilities because they have additional qualifications in this area. These

qualifications should be incorporated within the course curriculum offered in pre-service education so that teacher candidates are equally prepared and confident in their abilities to teach students with disabilities in the regular classroom. By infusing these additional qualifications within the course content, graduates are not left to assume that the responsibility of their students with disabilities falls into the hands of special education teacher but rather into the hands of the inclusive education teacher, the general education teacher.

Increased and improved practicum placements

Teacher candidates should have consistent opportunities to work in classroom settings with students with disabilities. Longer blocks of time in classrooms would benefit teacher candidates in establishing relationships with students and allowing them the opportunity to follow through on strategies and observations. As well, practicum placements should allow teacher candidates to work with students with disabilities and receive proper mentorship in working with these students.

Mentorship and collaboration in schools

There should be consistency on the degree of support received by first year teachers that is addressed at both the ministry and board level so that there are clearer expectations and assignment for support offered to first year teachers. Assignment of a mentor to each first year teacher would be a benefit and having them attend workshops and have assigned meeting times to address concerns and offer support, would be an effective learning opportunity for both mentor and mentee. The mentor must understand the significance of the role and be prepared to

carry it through to its entirety as the year progresses. Collaboration with the special education teacher should be a mandatory part of the role defined for this teacher. With clear definitions and expectations in place, the special education teacher will know what is expected of them and be able to effectively conduct their role of mentor and advisor for their first year teachers.

Directions for Further Research

Through this qualitative study, it is evident that further research should be conducted exploring the level of preparation of first year teachers as they begin their careers in working with students with disabilities in the regular classroom. There has been a great deal of research on the movement towards including students with disabilities in the regular classroom (McLeskey and Waldron, 2007), but there is a lack of research focussing on the preparation of first year teachers through their pre-service education for the realities of working with students with disabilities. The importance of having training and experience in designing and implementing Individual Education Plans has not been explored in the current research. There is a need for further exploration so that the realities of the experiences of first year teachers can be documented and reflected on by school boards, Faculties of Education and Ministries of Education so that the necessary changes that must occur for success are put into place.

This small sample of participants needs to be further explored with a larger sampling in a longitudinal study so that there is opportunity to observe and analyze the difficulties and challenges faced by first year teachers in designing and implementing Individual Education Plans as they work with students with disabilities. These challenges need to be further addressed and examined so that there is substantial evidence and findings to ensure that there are changes made

in the preparation of teachers in their pre-service education programs.

The findings from various faculties of education throughout Ontario could be explored to see if there is a variance in the level of education received in special education and what the factors are that influence this variance. The level of preparation of these first year teachers could be explored to examine the relationship between pre-service education preparation and confidence in first year teachers working with students with disabilities.

As well, this investigation could be broadened to examine the level of education received in different provinces to provide a further understanding of the type of training that is in place in various universities throughout Canada. By understanding the type of programming available to pre-service education teachers throughout the country, there is a better sense of the benefits and drawbacks to the current educational system that is in place for pre-service education teachers. By investigating the varying experiences throughout the country, there could be a more in depth understanding of the changes that must take place to ensure that all first year teachers are prepared and comfortable with working with students and their needs.

Appendix A

SCHOOL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

FACULTY OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Studies

Ryerson University

Major Research Paper

Consent Agreement

Title: Examining the comfort level of first year teachers in the inclusive classroom

Investigator:

Masters of Early Childhood Studies:

Ryerson Graduate Student: Panagiota (Penny) Diamantouros, B.A., B.Ed., OCT

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Study Coordinator:

Masters of Early Childhood Studies

Instructor: Dr. Angela Valeo, B.Sc., B.Ed., M.Ed., Ph.D., OCT

Email: avaleo@ryerson.ca

Telephone Number: 416-979-5000 ext.7696

Purpose of the Study:

This Major Research Paper is a graduation requirement of the Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Studies graduate program in the School of Early Childhood Education at Ryerson University. I am conducting research exploring the challenges faced by first year elementary school teachers in developing and implementing Individual Education Plans (IEPs). I feel that the best way to achieve this goal is by analyzing the knowledge acquired by the participants in their Faculty of Education programs and looking at their individual experiences and the support network that they have at their school and outside of school with colleagues and other professionals.

Description of the Study:

The researcher will interview six first year teachers in South-western Ontario to investigate their level of preparation in developing and implementing Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Interviews will be audio taped and participants may request not to have their interview audio taped. During the interview, participants will be asked questions about themselves (i.e. which faculty they graduated from, what experiences do they have working with students with varying needs, etc.), and about their experiences in designing and implementing IEPs. They will be

asked questions about how their faculty of education prepared them for the realities of the mainstream classroom and how their support network at school has helped them in dealing with the needs of students with IEPs.

Location:

Each interview will be conducted at a location that is familiar to the teacher and will be chosen by the participant. Interviews will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete.

Risks or Discomforts:

There are no risks in participation and no immediate benefits on a personal level. Participant's decision to participate will have no impact on future relations with Ryerson University or the interviewer. Please note that at any time participants may refuse to answer any of the questions asked and may withdraw from the study at any point if they so choose without negative consequences. At the end of the study participants will be entitled to a summary of the results, if desired.

Confidentiality:

Transcripts of the interview will only be available to the investigator and study advisor, Dr. Angela Valeo. They will be kept in storage in a securely locked location with highly-restricted access and will be destroyed after the completion of the report. As well, participant confidentiality will be protected in the final report of the findings. The names of the participants will not be used at any time in the report, in publications or presentations. As well, analysis of

the results will make it impossible to associate any particular statement with the author.

Incentives to Participate: The participant will not be paid to participate in the study.

Costs and/or Compensation for Participation: There are no costs associated with participation.

Voluntary Nature of Participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with the investigator or Ryerson University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and end your participation at any time.

Questions about the Study:

If you have any questions about the research at any point, you may contact:

Investigator:

Penny Diamantouros

Masters of Early Childhood Studies Graduate Student

Ryerson University

Email: p2diaman@ryerson.ca

Telephone Number: 416-979-1878

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant of the study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board:

Research Ethics Board

c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation

Ryerson University

350 Victoria Street

Toronto, ON M5B 2K3

416-979-5042

Agreement:

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature indicates that you agree to participate in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement, you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix B

Research Tool: Interview

Date: _____

Time of Interview (start and end time): _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee (Pseudonym): _____

Pre-interview:

- Arrive at interview location in advance, set up all material (tape recorder, interview questions, paper, refreshment for participant)
- Provide participant with all necessary forms and agreements and thank the participant for taking the time to meet with me.
- Review information in letter of consent such as re-stating research purpose, collection of data, tape-recorded interview, and right to skip questions and withdraw at any time.
- Remind participant of the duration of the interview.
- Ask if there are any questions prior to beginning interview.

Interview:

1. From what school did you complete your Bachelor of Education? When did you complete your BEd? Do you have any additional qualifications?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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2. Did you have any mandatory courses in your pre-service education program that addressed students with special needs?

Probe: Did part of the course curriculum discuss students with special needs?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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3. Did you have any elective courses that addressed the needs of these students?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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4. If yes, in these courses was there any discussion or learning on the process of designing and implementing IEPs? If so, to what extent?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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5. How well do you feel your courses prepared you for teaching students with special needs in the mainstream classroom?

Probes: Why do you feel this way? Please elaborate on your experiences

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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6. How many practicum blocks did you have? Were any of these in special education home school programs?

Probes: How would you describe the classroom? How many students with special needs were in the class?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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7. If not, did you have the opportunity to work with students with special needs in the mainstream classroom?

Probe: What were the needs of the students?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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8. Was there any opportunity to work with students with IEPs in your practicum blocks? If so to what extent?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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9. How well do you feel these practicum blocks prepared you to teach students with special needs in the mainstream classroom?

Probe: Why do you feel this way?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
-----------	-------------------

10. For the following statements, please answer using a rating scale from 1 to 5.

1 for “strongly disagree” and 5 for “strongly agree”

a) I feel confident that I am meeting the needs of all my learners in the classroom

1 2 3 4 5

b) I feel my education prepared me in designing an IEP

1 2 3 4 5

c) I am comfortable with implementing an IEP in the classroom

1 2 3 4 5

d) I am aware of all of the accommodations and modifications for my learners set out in the IEPs

1 2 3 4 5

e) I consistently accommodate and modify curriculum expectations to meet the needs of my students with IEPs

1 2 3 4 5

11. How much support have you received as a first year teacher for accommodating the needs of students with IEPs in your classroom from the special education teacher, the principal and other classroom teachers?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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12. Do you feel based on your experiences that a special education course should be mandatory in pre-service education?

Probe: why or why not?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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13. If applicable-Do you feel your additional qualifications in the area of special education were helpful in meeting the needs of students with IEPs? Do you feel these courses should be mandatory to all teachers?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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14. As a first year teacher, do you feel that you were well prepared in your pre-service education program for the realities of accommodating a student with an IEP in the mainstream classroom?

Probe: What made you feel this way?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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15. In your opinion, what should be done to help first year teachers with this reality of teaching students with IEPs?

Probe: Does the help have to come in pre-service programming? Mentoring?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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16. In your opinion, what can be done to help with the transition from pre-service education to the realities of the mainstream classroom?

Comments:	Reflective Notes:
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Post-interview:

- Ask the participants if they have anything else to add or any questions that may have arisen.
- Ensure the participants again about the steps taken to ensure confidentiality and the fact that transcripts of the interview will be sent to them to look over. Clarify what the best way to contact them would be
- Thank the participants again for their time and willingness to participate.

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