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What is This?
Challenges and Inspirations: Student Teachers’ Experiences in Early Childhood Special Education Classrooms

Susan L. Recchia¹ and Victoria I. Puig²

Abstract
Preparing teachers to meet the needs of children with disabilities remains a complex challenge. General education teachers feel unprepared, and attrition and teacher shortages in special education remain high. Despite a trend toward inclusive education, many children continue to be educated in segregated settings. This study explores the potential challenges and learning opportunities that self-contained settings offer early childhood special education teachers in training. Five early childhood preservice students seeking dual certification reflected on their placements in self-contained early childhood special education classrooms. Through an analysis of their weekly student teaching journals, we explored students’ experiences in segregated early childhood special education classrooms and implications for teacher education. Our findings revealed that including a self-contained setting as one of several field experiences encouraged future teachers to think flexibly about teaching children with special needs while enhancing their understanding of the principles behind the continuum of services.

Keywords
early childhood, field-experiences/internships, general special education, inclusion, teacher learning

Children with disabilities have been entitled to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment since the enactment of Public Law 94-142 in 1975. Reauthorized and amended most recently in 2004, this federal law, currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), continues to provide a legal framework for decisions about special education service delivery. As stated in the law, “Each public agency must ensure that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled” [§300.114(a)] (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, n.d.).

Over time, in response to both these legal mandates and changing ideas about best practice in the field, increasing numbers of young
children with disabilities are being educated in general education settings. However, depending on the nature of their disabilities and their resulting Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), the law also states that “the IEP team may determine that the child cannot be educated satisfactorily in the regular education classroom, even when supplementary aids and services are provided. An alternative placement must then be considered.” [§300.114(a)] (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, n.d.).

This is why schools have been, and still are, required to ensure that “a continuum of alternative placements is available to meet the needs of children with disabilities for special education and related services” [§300.115(a)]. These placement options include instruction in regular classes, special classes, special schools, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, n.d.).

According to the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2009), in 2006, 95% of children aged 6 to 21 being served under IDEA were enrolled in “regular school.” However, many of these children continued to spend a good portion of their school day outside of the general education classroom. Those children with particular disabilities such as autism, mental retardation, and emotional disorders are more likely than their peers with other disabilities to spend more than 60% of their day outside of the general education classroom or be placed in separate special education settings.

Advocates for inclusion question the value of self-contained settings that segregate children with special needs from their typically developing peers, whereas proponents of a continuum of services argue that some children’s needs cannot be met in an integrated classroom (Bailey, McWilliam, Buysse, & Wesley, 1998; Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; Handler, 2007). Teacher educators are also engaged in this debate as it applies to professional preparation of general education, special education, and dual certification teachers (De Vore & Russell, 2007; Titone, 2005). With a majority of general education teachers feeling unprepared to address the needs of children with disabilities (Early & Winton, 2001), and ongoing issues of high attrition and teacher shortages in special education (Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2005; Connelly & Graham, 2009), how to best prepare teachers to meet the needs of children with disabilities remains a complex challenge in the field.

Teacher education researchers have articulated the importance of field experiences as an integral and primary component of teacher preparation. Through field experiences, student teachers have opportunities to engage in authentic learning (Clifford, Macy, Albi, Bricker, & Rahn, 2005), gain experience in team collaboration (Fox & Williams, 1992), raise questions about curricular choices (Recchia, Beck, Esposito, & Tarrant, 2009), and see the realistic world of everyday teaching (Lava, Recchia, & Giovacco-Johnson, 2004). Regardless of one’s philosophical and political beliefs on issues of inclusion, the fact remains that many children with particular and more severe disabilities continue to be educated in segregated settings based on their IEPs and that these settings will be potential places of employment for graduates pursuing special education certification. Including segregated settings as a part of preservice teachers’ professional preparation can contribute to their knowledge of and experience in the full continuum of services.

In a seminal article focusing on the complexities of inclusion in early childhood, Bailey et al. (1998) discussed multiple challenges to ensuring that young children with disabilities receive high-quality special education services in inclusive settings. Although this article was written more than a decade ago, the issues continue to be relevant today. Despite our strong sense of the ideals of inclusion in the field, many children and families continue to encounter barriers to accessing quality inclusive programs. In some cases, quality factors are being compromised for the sake of inclusion. Specialized services, family-centered practices, and quality teaching and learning
experiences are crucial components that may be hard to address simultaneously within inclusive programs, particularly for those children with multiple or severe disabilities (Bailey et al., 1998). For these reasons, until there are significant changes in general education, there will continue to be a need to make a broad range of services available in early childhood special education and for student teachers to be prepared to teach across diverse placements.

In this study, we explore the potential challenges and learning opportunities that self-contained settings offer early childhood special education teachers in training. Drawing on the experiences of a small group of dual certification students during their placements in self-contained early childhood special education classrooms, we set out to discover what student teachers were learning in these settings. Through an analysis of their weekly student teaching journals, we explored the following questions: (a) How do preservice students describe their experiences in segregated early childhood special education classrooms? and (b) What are the implications of these experiences for teacher education in early childhood special education?

The Integrated Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Program

Our master’s-level teacher preparation program focuses on the characteristics, abilities, and needs of children birth to 8 years old in both general and special education. A strong emphasis on the need for collaboration with families and other professionals in working with young children is integrated into all aspects of the program, and our students have the opportunity to put theory into practice through a range of practicum experiences within both general and special education settings. Throughout their field experiences, we encourage our students to consider different ways of thinking about and responding to children’s diverse needs.

The program requires that all students being certified as early childhood special educators have experiences in both inclusive and self-contained settings serving young children with disabilities. All of the students are required to spend at least one semester in a self-contained classroom, exclusively serving children with disabilities from birth through Grade 2, in order to more fully immerse themselves in the special education system. Within the large urban metropolis in which our university is located, and where many of our graduates will be seeking jobs when they graduate, there are many such programs available as placement sites.

Throughout the program, each of the participants, all of whom were seeking dual certification in early childhood and special education, engaged in five semester-long field placements. Each placement required between 150 and 250 classroom hours per term. Placement settings included an infant or toddler classroom, a preschool classroom, a kindergarten classroom, and a first- or second-grade classroom. The students were required to have experiences in both public and private school settings as well as to engage in fieldwork in at least one general education setting, one special education setting, and one inclusive setting. All participants began the program with an Initial Field Experience, which was followed by Student Teaching 1 and Student Teaching 2, taken over the course of their first calendar year in the program (Fall, Spring, Summer).

Participants in this study chose to do their self-contained special education classroom placements either as their first Field Experience or as their second Student Teaching Practicum. Although these students participated in some shared course experiences during their 1st year of classes (e.g., a course on Risk and Resilience in Early Development, a yearlong course on Integrated Curriculum in Early Childhood), other required courses related to working with children with disabilities could be interspersed throughout the program. Consequently, the participants’ course experiences were varied, with some of them
choosing the self-contained setting as an earlier or a later experience in their programs.

Our preservice program emphasizes the importance of reflection as a tool for quality teaching practice, and students are asked to engage in critical reflection in most of their courses, with a particular emphasis on this in the practica. The student teaching seminars are composed of small groups of five to six students who are placed in diverse early childhood classroom settings. All classroom cooperating teachers are required to have a master’s degree and at least 2 to 3 years of teaching experience. Those cooperating teachers who host our student teachers in self-contained settings are all certified with master’s degrees in Special Education.

The students meet weekly with an instructor who also acts as their mentor and field supervisor. Class meetings provide a space for students to discuss challenging issues at their sites, and mentors encourage the group to examine critically their experiences within a peer support context. Students are encouraged to try new strategies and to bring news of their efforts to the next class session.

Mentor instructors, who visit the students at their sites and thus have a good sense of the classrooms in which they are teaching, respond on a weekly basis to student journals. Instructors meet regularly as a group to engage in their own reflective process, providing networking and support to each other. They also conduct several individual meetings with students throughout the semester to address each student’s particular needs and situation. This personalized feedback often leads students to reflect on their practice in new ways.

**Method**

**Study Participants**

The 5 students profiled in this article were selected from a group of 15 students earning dual-certification in both Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education who completed the program within 2 years and were in the 2007 graduating class. The focal participants reflected the larger group in average age, average level of previous experience in classrooms, and the variety of their special education placements. They also reflected the group’s diversity; for example, 5 of 15 in the larger sample were international students as were 2 of our 5 participants. To add potential interest to our findings, we selected students who held different perspectives and who were known by the principal investigator to be particularly engaged in the journaling process. Further information on the participants and their settings is provided in Table 1 below.

**Data Sources**

For this study, field-based journals were chosen as the primary data source because of their organic, unfiltered nature. These journals provided students with a space to share their beliefs and question their assumptions about teaching openly. They were not graded for specific content or grammar, and the students were encouraged to use the journals as a vehicle to express authentic feelings about their experiences and to discuss issues that surfaced in practice. The course instructors responded to the weekly journals in a style intended to encourage inquiry and reflection.

Students’ reflective journals from their special education practica were sorted into individual case files. To obtain background information and provide a wider context within which to read these interactive journals, the researchers also reviewed the participants’ original program application statements. Each participant was assigned a number, and all identifying information was removed from the data files before our coding process began so that only the lead researcher knew participant identities.

**Data Analysis Process**

We began our analysis process by reading independently through participants’ personal admission statements, noting their backgrounds, previous experiences, and personal characteristics that brought them to the field.
Table 1. Participant and Setting Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity (self-reported)</th>
<th>Previous experience (prior to program)</th>
<th>Personal interest in ECE/ECSE (admission statements)</th>
<th>Self-contained setting description</th>
<th>Placement sequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Southeast Asian</td>
<td>Math tutor; ESL teacher; K-2; first-grade assistant teacher (in home country)</td>
<td>Inclusion; diversity; differentiation; global/international teaching</td>
<td>Kindergarten Diverse disabilities (ID, Lang., LD, PDD)</td>
<td>Student Teaching 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Jewish, Caucasian (North American)</td>
<td>Undergraduate student teaching and volunteer experiences in K, 3, and Head Start; assistant teacher; preschool</td>
<td>Diversity; individual differences; uniqueness of each child</td>
<td>Pre-K Diverse disabilities (ID, Lang., PDD)</td>
<td>Student Teaching 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Jewish, Caucasian (North American)</td>
<td>Volunteer, high school students with autism; elementary intern, ADD &amp; autism; assistant teacher; toddlers</td>
<td>Teaching the whole child; importance of social and emotional learning</td>
<td>Pre-K Diverse disabilities (ID, Lang., PDD)</td>
<td>Initial Field Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>Preschool teacher/child observation; volunteer toddler classroom; universal Pre-K teacher</td>
<td>Immigrant families; diversity; global EC policy</td>
<td>EI VI and MD (ID, Lang., SI)</td>
<td>Initial Field Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Latina (Central American)</td>
<td>Assistant teacher; preschool; child psychology hospital intern (home country)</td>
<td>Diversity; social justice; global/international teaching</td>
<td>Pre-K Diverse disabilities (ID, Lang., PDD)</td>
<td>Student Teaching 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ECE = early childhood education; ECSE = early childhood special education; ESL = English as second language; ADD = attention deficit disorder. Disability Labels: ID = intellectual disabilities; PDD = Pervasive Developmental Disorder; Lang. = language delay; SI = sensory impairment; LD = learning disabilities; VI = visual impairment; MD = multiple disabilities.

Next, guided by our primary interest in discovering what student teachers found most challenging and inspiring during their field experiences, each researcher independently read through students’ journals multiple times to capture emerging themes. These themes reflected how students were describing their experiences, the questions they were posing, the struggles they were identifying, and the connections they were making throughout the process. After reviewing each participant’s materials, the researchers met to establish and come to consensus regarding preliminary themes that emerged from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Stake, 2005). We discussed the themes we had identified separately and discovered commonalities and distinctions among participants’ experiences and perspectives using inductive or open coding to search for patterns in the data (Wolcott, 1994). We collaboratively collapsed our multiple subthemes into...
broader global themes that were shared across participants. Throughout this process, we referenced the journals to extract quotes and anecdotes to clarify and condense the themes in meaningful ways and provide more direct access to participants’ voices and experiences.

Ultimately, the data were integrated across all cases to elicit findings in response to the research questions. After a process of revising and refining our initial themes, we agreed on five emergent themes, which best reflected the students’ reported thoughts and experiences throughout their practica (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000): Initial Discomfort, Collaboration, Curricular Approaches, Behavior Management, and Special Education Protocols. Our collaborative analysis process and our use of multiple participants’ perspectives represented in their own words help make our interpretations of the data meaningful and trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

The reflective journals gave us deeper insight into the ways our students were creating meaning from their day-to-day experiences and interactions in their classrooms and offered greater understanding of how they were simultaneously building connections to the ideas presented in their course work. Students also drew on their previous experiences in general and inclusive educational settings to identify the distinct challenges and inspirations these placements offered. Although all of our participants had worked in early childhood settings prior to entering the program, and most expressed a strong support for working with diverse learners in their personal statements, few had actually worked with children with disabilities. Some of the self-contained placement settings served children with more severe disabilities.

Initial Discomfort

Let me just state right off the bat that special education settings are completely foreign to me, and I will admit my initial anxiety. Stepping into the classroom was like giving up all my prior experiences with children and starting all over; I didn’t know what to do or say, not to mention how to react or participate. (Participant 28, journal entry)

Student teachers identified many different factors and motivations that brought them to teaching. These included their own positive and negative educational experiences, coming from families of educators, having family members with special needs, a desire to serve populations in their home countries, and even “destiny” (Personal Statements). However, in approaching their practicum experiences in self-contained settings, they were in agreement in expressing a strong initial discomfort. In some cases, they conveyed a real fear about the prospect of spending time in a special education classroom. Through their journal entries, students reported feeling “apprehensive,” “excited,” “anxious,” “nervous,” and “rather uncomfortable.” They described the experience of being in a self-contained classroom as “more of a challenge” and “an enormous responsibility” as well as “the Unknown” and a “frightening beast.” As expressed by the quote above, perhaps this experience felt “foreign” to students and required a “giving up” of prior experiences and expectations because being in educational settings different from those they had experienced as students limited their ability to access their apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) as a resource and touchstone.

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than those these students had interacted with previously.

Although they were initially unable to articulate just what made them so uncomfortable, through the process of working in the classrooms and in particular through their relationships with the children, their initial fears and anxieties began to fade:

But after having been with these children for the past few weeks, their physical differences have faded as their personalities emerged. Despite the impairments, I see that these are children who are just as curious and playful as any toddler I have ever met. (Participant 28, p. 24)

This change in perception and comfort level seemed to be a by-product not only of the students’ increased time with the children but also of their time with the teachers and specialists at their sites. These experienced mentors served as resources to the student teachers, sharing their expert knowledge about addressing the particular needs of children with specific disabilities.

Collaboration

I am learning so much in these [team meetings] because I am listening to the perspectives of all kinds of specialists, such as an Occupational Therapists, Speech Therapists, Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Social Workers, and Teachers. I have also been participating in the planning meetings . . . it helps me better understand what is going on in the classroom and why. (Participant 29, journal entry)

This student teacher’s words are representative of what the participants were expressing about collaboration. They recognized the ways these self-contained settings expanded their access to a diverse range of colleagues and created new potentials for collaboration. They reflected on the collaborations they observed in their settings and commented on when they seemed to be working and when they were not. They discussed different levels of collaboration, examined their own attempts at collaborating with their new colleagues, and considered the benefits and challenges that collaboration presented.

Three subthemes were identified within the theme of collaboration. These subthemes—the critical nature of collaboration, becoming a part of the team, and learning from different perspectives—are discussed below.

The critical nature of collaboration. Student teachers expressed their understanding of the value of collaboration in nuanced ways:

Collaboration between the adults in the classroom is also an important component of a better learning environment for the children. For this, communication is the key element. Along with communication, there must be respect, solidarity, acceptance, and a set structure, which everyone must agree upon. . . . This will permit that the children respect them all equally. (Participant 29, p. 14)

They saw the complexity of collaborative relationships:

I guess that tension between colleagues is unavoidable because personalities will always clash in some ways. We learn so much about the need for collaboration among professionals in schools, and ideals show us that when there is good communication, learning is optimized for the children. However, this balance is so difficult to create. (Participant 1, p. 19)

Students identified glitches in collaboration that grew out of colleagues’ differences of opinion, opposing ways of interacting with children and families, and even gossip among professionals. They also reflected on their own challenges to participating in collaborative relationships when they received conflicting advice:
Basically, I found that [the teacher] and [the assistant teacher] have such different perspectives on what is appropriate for the children and how as teachers [they] should manage the class. Sometimes I feel that I am getting so mixed up in trying to accommodate both their comments. (Participant 1, p. 26)

Student teachers sometimes struggled with discrepancies between what they were learning about collaboration in their course work and what they were experiencing in their field placements:

Rarely do we follow through with the principle where we should talk to that colleague about our concerns. I am taking this from the Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator book. Although ideally we need to communicate with our colleagues as openly as possible... unless the situation is very serious we normally just keep little things to ourselves to avoid conflict. (Participant 1, p. 27)

They also recognized the ways different service delivery models found in their self-contained classrooms set the stage for strong models of collaboration and they tried to identify their essential components:

The staff seems really supportive of their students and of each other. Each classroom has a team of therapists (speech and language, PT, OT, psychology). These therapists work on a regular basis with individual students in the classroom in a pull-in and push-out basis. This team structure allows for easy transitions and a lot of collaboration. This collaboration occurs informally throughout the day, as well as formally once per week in the form of a team meeting, with the teacher, assistant teacher, and all of the therapists. The students and the staff have warm, friendly relationships. (Participant 3, p. 14)

Becoming a part of the team. These student teachers wanted to feel a part of the team of professionals in their classrooms and school settings. Again and again, they expressed their desire to be seen and responded to as “one of the teachers.” They shared their struggles regarding collaboration in student interactions. Student teachers also recognized that the process unfolded differently with the children and their colleagues: “With adults it is more difficult to establish close relationships than it is with children, it takes time, but I am working on it!” (Participant 29, p. 10). They shared their successes and identified milestones that demonstrated their involvement in professional collaborations: “This week was great because the teachers finally included me in the curriculum planning—I really felt like part of the team!” (Participant 20, p. 13). They shared their long-term aspirations for professional collaboration: “I hope when I have a classroom I can have partners and a great communication with them” (Participant 29, p. 9).

Learning from different perspectives. The student teachers recognized the collaborative relationships they encountered in these special education settings as learning opportunities. This student reflected on how a conference with a therapist offered her new insights on a child she was working with: “The meeting was spent on a phone conference with an outside therapist that J. is seeing for his eating disorder. I learned so much about J. that I hadn’t noticed before” (Participant 1, p. 22). Another student considered how push-in services created opportunities for professionals to learn from each other: “[The speech therapist] also spends time in the classroom, which contributes to the ease of which her efforts are translated and practiced” (Participant 3, p. 20).

This student teacher identified that the teamwork and role release that made it difficult to tell “who is who” was also a hallmark of effective collaboration:

As the teacher explained, even though these are their titles, they all work very
closely and it is hard to tell who is who. They all plan together and take turns to develop the different activities in the classroom. (Participant 29, p. 3)

Students’ experiences in these settings pushed them to think more deeply about the particular importance of professional collaboration in meeting the needs of young children with disabilities. Because of the severity and complexity of some of the children’s disabilities and their need for multiple services, several adults must work as a team to address children’s goals and partner with families. Unlike many inclusive classrooms, most self-contained settings are designed to provide these multiple services on-site. Thus, throughout the semester, students were afforded many opportunities to observe collaboration in action and to consider their own roles as collaborators.

Curricular Approaches

Coming from a placement which was so focused on inquiry-based curriculum and discovery, this shift to a much more direct method of teaching is quite a change... The children need routine and notice every detail! ... I do see how this more structured type of teaching works for these children ... some of the children in this class are doing better academically than those I taught last year in the [general ed] first grade. (Participant 1, journal entry)

Students considered the teaching and learning they observed in their settings and thought carefully about the best ways to meet children’s needs. Concepts of curriculum for very young children, particularly those in special education settings, are often controversial and these student teachers joined in the debate. They tried their hands at juggling with structure and flexibility and puzzled over families’ and professionals’ expectations for children. They reflected on the ways curriculum was enacted through the decisions, strategies, and adaptations they observed in their classrooms.

Balancing structure and flexibility. As the quote at the beginning of this section illustrates, students considered the ways structure and flexibility were used and balanced in their classrooms. They realized that some approaches that they learned about in their courses or observed in other settings could be a mismatch in their current classrooms:

Another policy in the school which children benefit from is the rigid schedule. In many nursery schools, the schedule is extremely flexible and often responds to the needs and mood of the students. However, that design simply won’t work in this special needs setting. ... These children rely heavily on their routine and have a very hard time with transitions. (Participant 20, p. 8)

They recognized some of the challenges experienced by the children and noted the strategies used to support them: “In terms of working with children with special needs, I have learned that structure, repetition, and consistency are crucial for creating and maintaining successful learning environments” (Participant 3, p. 16). Students also recognized their own needs for structure and predictability: “In my case, I need a set structure and organization to work with other people and in general because I am the type of person that plans ahead. This helps me give my 100% in a better way” (Participant 29, pp. 9-10). They identified that their very presence created a change in the structure and routine of their classrooms and that both the children and adults needed strategies to cope with the transition:

Both the classroom teachers and the students had already been grounded in their routine for almost a year and I was the new change ... both they and I had to make efforts to try and adjust to each other as quickly as possible ... many of the children had trouble getting used to
me because several of them struggle with changes in routine. (Participant 1, p. 30)

**Expectations for children.** Student teachers recognized that the individualized nature of goals and educational efforts for their students contributed to different expectations for children and what they should learn. Parents’ and professionals’ disparate expectations for children and for each other were expressed through comments such as “The parents began to complain that the children were not learning handwriting” (Participant 1, p. 19) and “The problem is that as much as everyone works with J. to try to help him, if his parents aren’t on board 100% there is only so much everyone can do” (Participant 1, p. 24).

Students reflected on instances when teachers’ different expectations for children were demonstrated through learning activities: “What one teacher would do with the children the other teacher wouldn’t” (Participant 1, p. 26). They also identified times when their own expectations for children differed from the teachers’:

What concerns me though is how (the teacher) has put together this play. . . . These rehearsals have been frustrating for me because it really is around an hour of scolding children over and over again for not following instructions . . . I do think the expectations for this play are way too high for these children. (Participant 1, p. 22)

Students examined the ways the curricular efforts used in their classrooms addressed individual needs and developed skills across developmental domains:

Through this theme they not only learned about butterflies, they also had the opportunity to develop new skills to achieve individual goals. For example, through art activities the children exercised fine motor skills, through movement activities they exercised gross motor skills, and others. (Participant 29, p. 7)

They also questioned why there were not “more activities incorporated that brush on academically oriented goals” (Participant 3, p. 18) and wondered if academic skills were adequately integrated into the curriculum in their classrooms:

Since they have special needs, it seems like we may devalue some of the academic learning that would otherwise be appropriate in a preschool classroom (at least in the competitive New York City classrooms). Though the children are learning their alphabet and how to count to ten, this is basically where the academics end. There is little exploration with math, and even less with writing and drawing . . . I think that hearing books and exploring with books should be part of a daily experience for a preschooler. (Participant 3, pp. 18-19)

**Adaptations for diverse learners.** The student teachers paid careful attention to the ways curriculum was adapted to address the needs of diverse learners:

I have never seen such individualized, personalized, and adapted curriculums that are implemented so seamlessly and effectively for each student. . . . I think that it is important to note that everything was accomplished because of the intense focus, observation, and willingness on the part of the staff. (Participant 3, p. 27)

They noted when IEPs guided accommodations, “All instruction is differentiated, and the goals for each child vary as dependent on IEP mandates” (Participant 3, p. 18), and began to devise and implement their own responsive, differentiated strategies to work with individual children: “I try to keep him very focused by only presenting him with one object at a time, and this method seems to be successful with him.” (Participant 20, p. 19)
Students recognized how differentiated instruction was used to help children acquire skills across developmental areas:

Because many students have a hard time taking in language, the teachers use very simple and direct phrases to instruct. (Participant 20, p. 6) (Language)

Each child was given personalized attention, which was important because the task of cutting is still very difficult for these children. (Participant 3, p. 25) (Fine Motor)

Because these children have a particularly hard time with social interaction, teachers go out of their way to facilitate social activities and encourage group work. (Participant 20, p. 6) (Social Emotional)

Since it is a center for the visually impaired, I have seen several adaptations in the physical environment that help children with mobility and independent way-finding. (Participant 28, p. 20) (Sensory Awareness)

This experience made me re-evaluate my “always make them follow through” tactic . . . What if the child is clearly disturbed by the task? (I later found out that Z. has tactile sensitivities, so the feel of the dough and flour may have set him off.) (Participant 20, p. 18) (Sensory Integration)

I was so excited to implement a new improvisational technique I learned in my Integrated Curriculum (C&T 4112) class . . . This activity promotes cognitive thinking and imaginative abilities. Children with PDD have a particularly hard time using their imagination. (Participant 20, p. 15) (Cognition)

One student paraphrased her professor realizing, “There is no bag of tricks; there is only a lifetime of learning and experimenting” (Participant 28, p. 17). She added, “As embarrassingly naïve as it sounds, I was hoping to acquire this proverbial sack of secrets from which I could pull all sorts of magic to amaze and teach children” (Participant 28, p. 17). The students recognized that “the relationship is the curriculum” (Participant 28, p. 23).

These student teachers also began to consider how their own learning styles affected their approach to differentiated instruction,

I favor an emergent curriculum because I know first hand that things are more meaningful when they are relevant to your own life and experiences. . . . Also because of my own tendency to become overwhelmed and frustrated, I would encourage my students to set mini-goals for themselves and not try to take on an entire concept in one sitting. (Participant 20, pp. 4-5)

I think my own style of experiential and shared learning will render me the kind of teacher who plans field trips as often as possible, such that my students will be able to be in contact with the world outside of the classroom. . . . I hope, however, to be ever cognizant of the children who do not appreciate such rowdy and communal learning. Just like there is that learner in me who prefers to peruse the stacks alone. (Participant 28, p. 19)

and the importance differentiation would have in their “future classrooms”:

For me, differentiating instruction in my future classroom will be as important as it is for a human being to drink water and eat. For this, knowing the children, their abilities, needs, and personalities is key to their learning process. (Participant 29, p. 13)

Both the severity and the range of disabilities among the children served in these self-contained
settings, and the ways in which the special education teachers modeled distinct teaching strategies for individual children, provided our student teachers with a very clear sense of the need for multiple methods of instruction. The particularly diverse learning needs of children within EC self-contained classrooms required constant instructional differentiation. This helped to deepen our student teachers’ understanding of the complexity of early childhood curriculum and offered them new insights that could be generalized to other settings.

Behavior Management

It is unfortunate and difficult to accept that some behaviors may just be out of the realm of “fixing.” When the teacher puts forth her best effort and the behavior or issue remains unsolved, then what happens? Who is responsible? (Participant 3, journal entry)

Throughout their journals, the student teachers raised many questions when it came to issues of behavior management. Several of the themes they waded through when discussing collaboration and curricular approaches rose to the surface again when considering behavior management. They worked to balance becoming part of their classroom teams while discovering their own voices, they considered adaptations for children, and they weighed the pros and cons of the approaches and strategies they saw enacted.

As is often the case in self-contained classrooms and as the words of the student teacher quoted above illustrate, when it comes to behavior management, questions abound while answers remain elusive. The three sub-themes of being respected as a “real teacher” and finding their own voices, responding to complex and diverse behavioral needs, and discomfort with harsh interventions are discussed below.

Being respected as “real teachers” and finding their own voices. Student teachers’ journals reflected the ways that they worked to be included in their classrooms while simultaneously searching for their own voices. This student found that fitting in with the classroom adults was sometimes easier than establishing herself as a “real teacher” with the children: “Now that I am beginning to find my place with the adults in the room, my next challenge is some of the children. Most of the children have grown to see me as another teacher but there are instances where I feel like some children still do not feel this way” (Participant 1, p. 20). In describing a particular incident when a child ran away from her she shared, “I told him to stop and come back and walk but he continued to run all the way back to the gym” (Participant 1, p. 20). The students looked to their own practice to identify the ways they “get stuck” and “struggle” in their responses to children and they deliberated strategies: “It was challenging to know when to stop the lesson and correct behaviors, and when small prompting would be appropriate” (Participant 3, p. 23).

Just as they considered ways to make adaptations in curriculum for their students, they also reflected on how to differentiate to address the students’ individual behavioral needs: “It really made me realize that there are not set answers to all problems in the classroom. Each child is different and may require different approaches in dealing with their particular problems” (Participant 20, p. 9).

Responding to complex and diverse behavioral needs. Student teachers considered how children’s groupings can affect their behavior: “Some children get hurt or frustrated and cry multiple times throughout the day. Other children can use their words but get scared from the noisy crying. Others have little control of their behaviors and unknowingly upset their friends” (Participant 3, p. 15). Through their observations, they noticed the reciprocal ways that children’s behavior affected their peers’ behavior:

With one child so defensive and the other seeking more stimulation, I actually have wondered why the teacher decided to seat them so near each other.
I personally would at the very least seat A at a different table from V because V needs to be able to move about more, and also to avoid triggering any defenses for A. (Participant 1, pp. 15-16)

They considered children’s various reactions to classroom management strategies:

The main thing I wanted to discuss was the chant they use to get the children’s attention (Stop, Look and Listen . . . Okay). I see that many of the children shout as loud as they possibly can during the response and many children end up covering their ears because they expect the loud response. . . . Using noise to create silence hasn’t worked well for me even in general education classrooms (Participant 1, p. 20).

Student teachers identified the intersections between behavior management and fostering socialization skills: “It seems like we spend a lot of time managing behavior and creating opportunities for social interaction and play. We are constantly prompting and reminding, as well as narrating” (Participant 3, p. 17).

Student teachers looked beyond the context of their classrooms when considering children’s behavioral needs. They looked to students’ lives and families. This student teacher wondered how a child’s behavior may be interpreted and responded to differently in school and at home:

When I hold onto S’s hands during meeting so that he cannot reach T. I wonder what his mother would say . . . I just am uncertain that a parent would see this behavior as destructive or disruptive. . . . S’s parents might think, “S. is merely trying to get T’s attention, and T is the one who is overreacting and scaring him.” (Participant 3, p. 22).

Situations like these pushed the students to examine their own beliefs:

I continue to wonder what our place is in everything, as teachers in a classroom with students with special needs, especially those that are socially constructed. It is unlikely that S. displays the same behavior at home where he is an only child. His mother probably never dodges his inquiries for attention like T. might and she probably does not screech like T either. Therefore, would she agree with how S is being handled in the classroom? Does she have a right to disagree? Would her opinion really matter? (Participant 3, p. 22)

Student teachers considered the importance of ongoing communication between teachers and families and how events in children’s lives may affect their behavior:

I have already seen many students benefit from this close school/parent collaboration. One student in particular was having some behavioral issues in school. But because communication with parents is so frequent, the teachers were able to decipher the problem quickly (the death of a pet, in this instance) and understand exactly how to respond to it. (Participant 20, p. 8)

Discomfort with harsh interventions. As student teachers reflected on the behavior of the children and the adults in their classes, they also began to develop opinions about the responses to children’s behavior that they observed in their classrooms. At times they expressed discomfort with some of the interventions they observed. This included verbal responses to children:

I am having difficulties with the way discipline is being handled in the classroom, but I think the teacher would like me to follow suit so that there is consistency in “firmness” and teacher response. I think she may see my way as too “soft” . . . I would at least like
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her to understand why I am reluctant to use her method because I don’t think it has been effective. I’m working on how to have a respectful voice in the classroom. (Participant 28, p. 24)

It also included physical responses to children’s behavior: “I find that the adults also use their hands a lot for corrective behavior before giving the child a chance to comply” (Participant 28, p. 21). Student teachers considered the ways children’s access to each other as well as to their environment were being limited in ways they considered inappropriate:

Many of the students in my class have delays in their social and emotional development, and because of this they become easily overwhelmed and frustrated. Often times, a student will require some time by herself to readjust. In the current classroom layout, that child would be escorted to a beanbag chair in a small cubby room that is separated from the classroom. I’m not so sure I am comfortable with this idea of complete seclusion. I think it is fine for a student, especially at such a young age, to need some alone time, but I think the child should be encouraged to take some time for herself within the classroom environment. That way she knows that she is still part of the group, but that it’s ok to step away and take some personal time without completely abandoning the social environment. (Participant 20, p. 14)

Another interesting occurrence from this past week is the arrival of a new student. V is a toddler who is most likely completely blind but is mobile (and explores a lot with her hands). During her first day of “school,” the bus was delayed for 1.5 hours, leaving them only about 45 minutes in class when they finally arrived. V was then made to sit at the table for snack, and when she resisted, she was held down and it was suggested that a harness be used next time around. I thought to myself that if that young child were me, who had traveled on the bus to a foreign place completely on my own for the first time, I would not want to sit still either. I would have preferred to feel around the room first. (Participant 28, p. 23)

Many of the children within these self-contained settings exhibited more severe behavioral issues than would be typically encountered in a general education or an inclusive classroom, and the cooperating teachers were more likely to enact specific behavioral interventions in response to them. This provided an opportunity for our student teachers to observe and practice diverse strategies to address particular behavioral needs, while also considering their own beliefs about and comfort levels with various interventions. Behavior management was a topic that stirred student teachers to consider their roles, search for their voices, and begin the process of defining the behaviors, strategies, and interventions that they consider appropriate.

Special Education Protocols

Reading through each child’s IEP made me realize how important it is to know exactly what each child is struggling with and what his individual goals are. When I first began working at this site, I made the mistake of assuming that PDD [Pervasive Developmental Disorder] affected each child in the same way. . . . However, after observation, and especially after reading the therapist evaluations, it became clear that PDD manifests itself very differently in children. (Participant 20, journal entry)

While students experienced an initial discomfort in their special education settings, they came to recognize the unique opportunities and challenges these settings provided.
They began to observe and engage in special education protocols. Three subthemes were identified within the theme of special education protocols. These subthemes, labeling and terminology, placing a high value on individual assessment information, and questioning appropriateness of classroom settings, are discussed below.

**Labeling and terminology.** Throughout their journals, students both used and reflected on the new labels and terminology they were exposed to in their settings. Like new speakers of any language, they seemed to engage in experimentation as they worked to understand labels and their limitations. They talked about children “diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder, though some may have signs of cerebral palsy or Asperger’s Syndrome” (Participant 20, p. 6). They referred to their students’ “speech issues” (Participant 1, p. 16) and “OCD [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder] tendencies” (Participant 1, p. 27). They tried to clarify the distinctions and overlaps of “language and speech delays and PDD” (Participant 29, p. 3) as well as “cognitive and motor disabilities” and “sensory integration dysfunction” (Participant 1, p. 30).

This student reflected on the new perspective her work in the classroom was giving her on “person-first” language:

This week I finally understood why my Risk & Resilience professor emphasized the “children first” approach to talking/writing about children. Before this week, the terms “children with disabilities” and “disabled children” seemed synonymous to me . . . they are indeed children first, disabled second. (Participant 28, p. 24)

Although our teacher preparation program placed a strong emphasis on child-centered teaching and supporting learner diversity, students who are preparing to be special educators must be aware of and understand the implications of the diagnostic categories that are imposed on children with disabilities. This knowledge takes on new meaning when it moves beyond a textbook to be understood within the context of real children and classrooms. The broad range of disabilities that our student teachers were exposed to within their self-contained placements contributed meaningfully to their foundational knowledge in this area.

**Placing a high value on individual assessment information.** The student teachers were very interested in learning as much as they could about the children, and they regarded their IEPs as a critical resource. They discussed the importance of accessing IEPs to gain insight into the children’s skills, needs, and specific objectives:

This week I was finally able to look at the children’s IEPs. . . . By reading each child’s individual goals, I could have a better understanding of the challenges they face and approach situations in a manner that will help them to achieve their specific objective. (Participant 20, p. 11)

They considered when would be the best time to read children’s IEPs and how they would apply the information they gained from them:

All instruction is differentiated, and the goals for each child vary as dependent on IEP mandates. I have yet to see the IEPs for the children, but I think it was worthwhile for me to get to know the children as children first, before reading their IEPs and looking at them based on their “disabilities.” (Participant 3, p. 18)

This student teacher recognized children’s IEPs as more than a protocol but as an essential element of the field of special education and a navigational tool for planning and implementing children’s learning activities:

I truly realized the importance of this field, and the importance of honing in on the exact issue of each child. If you know the exact challenges a child faces and work consistently on those challenges, that child will have a much
better chance in the world. These early years really are the most crucial, and it is important that we, as special educators, take the time to read each IEP and make a specific plan to help the child reach his or her individual goals. (Participant 20, p. 11)

Although children with disabilities in inclusive settings also have IEPs to guide their learning, the use of the IEP is often less emphasized in these classrooms, particularly if the primary classroom teacher is not a special educator. The focus on individual assessment and instruction in self-contained settings provided a deeper level of integration between assessment and teaching for our student teachers.

Questioning appropriateness of classroom settings. Their time in self-contained classrooms provided a context for the student teachers to add their voices to the debate on inclusive education as they considered the settings that would best meet the children’s needs:

I can see J. and even A. in a general education or inclusive setting provided they receive the necessary services. I still wonder how these two boys ended up at (this school) and if there are any other reasons why they are here that have not yet been revealed. (Participant 1, p. 15)

This student teacher extended the debate beyond individual children to consider the goals of the self-contained program:

It is a comprehensive program, and perhaps the children will eventually be prepared for inclusion in general education settings. I am skeptical, however, that this is truly a goal of the program—and whether or not it should be. Some of the children appear to be completely able to function in a general education setting, but I obviously do not know the extent of their needs. Hopefully, the self-contained environment is supporting their development. (Participant 3, p. 18)

This theme reveals the ways our students’ initial discomforts were transformed by their experiences. As they adopted the language and the culture embedded in their settings they more firmly established their own identities within the field of early childhood special education examining observed practices from a critical perspective. By having the opportunity to work with children with disabilities across settings, our student teachers were better positioned to critically analyze the meaning of the “least restrictive environment” and to consider the “continuum of services” from a better informed perspective.

Discussion and Implications

Findings from our study demonstrate that placements in self-contained settings can offer particular value for student teachers. As gathering places for children with a range of disabilities and the expertise and resources to serve them, these classrooms can be a rich training ground for new teachers’ learning and development. Being part of a team collaborating to meet the complex needs of children with disabilities allowed our participants to gain insight into their feelings about being a partner and become increasingly comfortable working with children with a wide range of abilities. The self-contained placements offered our students the opportunity to experience working with children with more severe disabilities and to learn from professionals with a wide range of skills and expertise in meeting children’s learning and developmental needs.

As students learned how to respond to individual children’s needs they grappled with the limitations of established early childhood “best practices.” Their course work and field experiences created reciprocity of learning demonstrated, for example, in their considerations of professional ethics and “person-first” language. In addition to drawing on their courses, students also called on their own learning styles and experiences to more fully understand the role of the teacher in enacting differentiated instruction. Self-contained classrooms provided extensive opportunities
for learning and implementing curricular adaptations. The nature and needs of the children served in these settings were initially challenging to our student teachers, but over time they developed new strategies for teaching young children with disabilities, and emerged feeling more prepared to take these skills into the field.

Students’ access to multidisciplinary perspectives helped them see the importance of looking at children’s behaviors more holistically. Their settings enabled them to practice diverse behavioral interventions, question their effectiveness, and carefully consider their value within different environments.

Working in self-contained classrooms supported students’ growing understanding of assessment and terminology in the field. They discovered how to use IEPs effectively and began to “unpack” labels used to describe distinct learners. Ultimately, students’ experiences in self-contained settings pushed them to expand their vision of appropriate learning environments for children with special needs.

As long as legal mandates require that “a continuum of alternative placements is available to meet the needs of children with disabilities for special education and related services” [§300.115(a)] (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, n.d.), professional preparation must also avail students pursuing dual certification to this full range of placements. Settings that serve children who need more intense services provide a context for teacher preparation that affords practical experiences with challenging behaviors, multiple disabilities, and support for families (Fox & Williams, 1992).

Including a self-contained setting as one of several field experiences was a critical component of preparing our participants to meet the needs of all learners. It encouraged these future teachers to think flexibly about teaching children with special needs and brought to life the principles behind the continuum of services.

The accounts of this small group of students provide insight into issues that are difficult to study (Brownell et al., 2005). They offer a glimpse into the complexities of preparing teachers to meet children where they are, educationally and developmentally as well as literally. To most effectively serve children with diverse needs, more studies are needed that explore essential components of special education teacher preparation for both preservice and in-service teachers.

Preparing teachers to meet the needs of young children with disabilities is a daunting task. As a program that embraces the philosophy of inclusion and embeds issues of diversity, differentiated instruction, and social justice through all of our courses, we struggle to find field placements that can provide opportunities for our students to gain the best possible knowledge and skills to prepare them to be quality special educators. Although our study did not compare experiences between inclusive and self-contained settings, our students’ journals make it clear that their self-contained placements provided specific learning opportunities that broadened their knowledge base and better prepared them to address the needs of a more diverse group of young children with disabilities.

Self-contained settings were distinct from most inclusive classrooms in the following ways: (a) Children had more severe and complex disabilities, allowing our students to observe and learn about a more extensive array of learning and developmental needs; (b) student teachers had clear access to an interdisciplinary team and support staff who are not usually accessible to them in other kinds of settings, allowing them to observe multiple types of collaboration and learn about disability from multiple perspectives; (c) the links between assessment and intervention, including the active use of IEP documents as learning tools, were illuminated in ways that helped student teachers to see each child as a unique learner and to implement differentiated instruction for all children; and (d) special education cooperating teachers were able to model for our students their particular areas of expertise, most notably in behavioral strategies and curricular adaptations. Each of these
distinctions helped the student teachers learn new ways to meet the needs of young children with disabilities that they can generalize to other settings.

Despite the many positive learning experiences that our students had in their self-contained placements, several challenges arose for them during the course of their time in these settings. Our students struggled to make sense of discrepancies between our child-centered program philosophy and the emphasis on more direct instruction and behavioral control that they were observing in many self-contained classrooms. The university student teaching supervisor’s role as a mentor and sounding board can play a crucial part in helping students to navigate these complex issues in the field. The use of reflective journals helped to serve this purpose, as well as the small seminar groups that allowed time for open discussion and shared problem solving. Offering students the opportunity to experience diverse field placements within a supportive context has been shown to expand their thinking about teaching and learning and to push them to develop their own sense of themselves as early childhood teachers (Recchia et al., 2009). Our evidence from this closer exploration of the value of including a self-contained early childhood experience for students preparing to become early childhood special educators seems to corroborate these findings.

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