Do Shared Decision-Making Teams Discuss Special Education in Educational Reform Meetings?

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Authors of recent reports have concluded that U.S. educational reform has ignored special education (President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). Little is known, however, about how local educational reform efforts consider special education when making decisions that may affect students in special education or special educators. The authors of this study examined the relationships between general education reform and special education by using focused analysis of qualitative data collected through a 3-year, comprehensive project in a suburban district that adopted shared decision-making (SDM) teams and site-based management. Data sources included observations of 86 SDM team meetings and interviews with team members and special educators. Findings from primary, middle, and high schools illustrated that there was little connection between general education reform and special education. Specifically, SDM teams seldom discussed special education. Most team members and special educators did not believe that special education was represented in team discussions. Some strategies for representing special education on SDM teams were occasionally effective (e.g., assigning a team member to represent special education for a specific topic). These findings have important implications for education policy because they are consistent with the 2002 report by the President’s Commission. The authors also offer suggestions for future research and practice.
special education may ignore the important connections between the two. More critically, this lack of integration may exclude many students from opportunities to develop the skills (Johnson & Rusch, 1992; NJCLD, 1992; Sapon-Sevin, 1987; Ysseldyke et al., 1992) and training they need to compete in the 21st century (NJCLD, 1992; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002; President’s Commission, 2002). According to the President’s Commission, the success of current efforts focusing on special education preventive and early intervention services will depend on developing close working partnerships with general educators.

Recent investigations of state and national databases containing pertinent measurable outcomes support concerns that have been expressed about the separation of general and special education reform. Prior to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act amendments of 1997, these databases often excluded significant numbers of students with disabilities, which makes it difficult to examine and compare the impact of various reform efforts on students in both general and special education (e.g., McGrew, Algozzine, Ysseldyke, Thurlow, & Spiegel, 1998). The evidence suggests that until very recently, there may have been little or no connection between general and special education reform at the national level. New reports and legislation provide hope that the previously disconnected reform efforts will merge, but the authors offer few specific suggestions to help local school districts actually integrate special education into local school improvement efforts.

Given that research to date has indicated little coordination between general and special education reform efforts—and the recent emphasis on changing that situation—understanding whether and how reform processes enacted at local school levels have included special education is important. Surprisingly, data on this topic are virtually nonexistent. Consequently, research on the connections between general school reform and special education is needed, particularly research that investigates participatory decision-making initiatives, which are prevalent in local reform efforts (e.g., Fullan, 1985).

In the present study, we investigated how shared decision-making (SDM) teams discussed potential special education concerns as they engaged in site-based decision making about educational issues that had the potential to affect students who are classified as having disabilities. Because the recent and substantial interest in implementing educational reforms through building-level SDM teams (e.g., Goldman, Dunlap, & Conley, 1993), it is important to understand whether and how special education is a component of such reform efforts. If SDM teams consider the issues, concerns, and instructional needs of at-risk students, and special education is regularly represented on these teams, the potential exists for meaningful collaboration between special and general educators in important school improvement efforts. If such teams do not consider special education issues, needs, or concerns, and special education has little representation on the teams, it is difficult to conceive of meaningful collaboration occurring between special and general educators in reform efforts designed to affect general education classrooms.

We found only a few previous empirical studies to guide our investigation. One prior study, by Jenkins et al. (1994), provided financial support and training for participatory decision-making activities in 12 schools. The authors found positive effects on general and special educators’ perceptions of the reform process and on their role in the decision-making process regarding low-achieving students. Furthermore, the teachers’ perceptions of improved decision making were supported by student data indicating that more special education services were delivered in general education settings with no deleterious effects on student achievement.

The generalizability of the Jenkins et al. (1994) study may be limited, however, because it evaluated the impact of an intervention designed and implemented by researchers. We were unable to find any investigations that examined the relationship between district-designed and -implemented educational reform and special education. Educational reform as implemented in an authentic school context is potentially a more accurate reflection of what occurs in practice.

The NJCLD (1992) identified general education reform topics of particular relevance to special education. These are considered essential topics for collaboration between special and general educators. Although the NJCLD recommendations were designed specifically to address issues relevant to students with learning disabilities (LD), the high proportion of students in the special education population classified as LD (approximately 50%), the difficulty distinguishing diagnostic or learning differences among students with different high-incidence labels (e.g., LD, mild mental retardation, speech impairment); and current efforts to focus special education on prevention and early intervention efforts (President’s Commission, 2002) make the NJCLD topics relevant to all persons interested in special education. We chose four of these categories to provide an organizational rubric for our study because they were applicable to the interests of all students in special education and were relevant to the educational reform efforts implemented by the school district under study. These four were academic standards and student achievement, curriculum and instruction, school and classroom organization, and locus of decision making.

From this point on, we will refer to these topics as “special education relevant” (SER). Because the purposes of this investigation included identifying whether the teams discussed topics of importance to special education, and, if so, whether the teams discussed special education when considering these topics, both the degree to which these four categories were reflected in SDM team meetings and the degree to which such meetings included discussions of special education were examined. Based on this rationale, the present study addressed the following three primary research questions.

1. How is special education discussed during SDM meetings? To what extent are the SER educational reform topics represented in the
transcripts of building SDM team discussions?
To what extent is special education evident in
the discussions of the SER categories, based on
an analysis of transcripts?
2. How is special education represented on the
SDM teams that engage in the district’s efforts
to reform education in each school?
3. Do SDM team members and special educators
believe that special education is represented on
the teams?

Method

Research Design

Because educational reformers have argued that the collaboration of general and special education is a challenge, we needed a methodology that would be sensitive to subtle collaboration efforts and potentially useful strategies. We chose to study SDM teams due to the prevalent recommendations for SDM and site-based management as reform strategies (e.g., Goldman et al., 1993) and because SDM teams seemed to be potential venues for collaboration between general and special education regarding reform. Furthermore, we studied the SDM teams because they were the means chosen to implement reforms at the building and classroom levels in the participating school district. The scope of the problem required a long-term, detailed examination of reform efforts. Accordingly, we decided that the research needed to include prolonged and intensive data collection in one district.

The original, guiding project purpose was to understand how special education interests were considered during the process of school reform in one school district. Over time, and with experience in the district, however, we began to raise fundamental questions about whether the SDM teams ever substantively discussed special education in their deliberations and whether the teams sought input from stakeholders who represented special education interests. It seemed logical to believe that some overt discussion or special education representation were necessary elements of any SDM efforts to include special education in their deliberations. Consequently, we developed the following frame of reference. For the SDM teams to meaningfully consider special education issues and interests in their reform efforts, the teams would probably need to (a) discuss special education issues and interests when considering relevant topics and (b) have some type of representation from special education system stakeholders. To research this conceptualization systematically, we examined some highly targeted, specific information from a detailed and deep collection of data accrued over the course of 3 years.

Based on these requirements, we conducted the current research using a longitudinal, modified analytic inductive approach (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) that featured data collected from multiple sources and methods over 3 years. This permitted us to focus our analysis on selected data from a large qualitative dataset for particular and specific information while remaining true to the inductive nature of qualitative research. We then developed the specific research questions presented previously and used them to guide our analysis. The sources and measures we used included observations of SDM team meetings from three different schools, interviews with team members from various groups represented on the teams, and interviews with special educators from the participating schools.

Three researchers served on the teams as participant-observers. Each researcher was a university-based member of one of the three studied SDM teams over the full 3 years of the research. In addition, three additional assistant-observers (one for each team) attended meetings to assist the participant-observer and audiotape the meetings. Assistant-observers were doctoral students in educational and school psychology who had received initial and ongoing training in the data collection procedures. Each assistant-observer was assigned to one school’s SDM team and was supervised by the relevant participant-observer. The participant-observers and assistants also conducted all interviews.

Context of the Study

The School District. The district under study was a suburban school district located in the greater capital district of New York State. This district had four school buildings with approximately 3,000 students serving a predominately White, middle class student population (11% of the districts’ students received reduced-price or free lunches). Approximately 12% of the district’s students had been placed in special education.

According to the district’s comprehensive assessment report, general achievement (SAT scores near the national average), attendance (> 92%), and high school completion rate (approximately 95%) were considered good.

The district had a previous history of outdated special education practices. Compared to surrounding districts, for example, it had been slow to implement resource room classes and had not yet fully adopted inclusion classes when this research began. During our study, however, a central district administrator (chief school officer, for the last 2 years) placed increasing emphasis on the inclusion of special education students in general education classes and activities, and the district made substantial progress toward inclusion and integration. In addition, in the 2 years prior to this study, the district implemented SDM teams as a part of an effort to reform education and in comply with the statewide mandates.

The Schools. The district’s four schools were organized developmentally. A primary elementary school consisted of kindergarten through Grade 2, followed by an intermediate elementary school (Grades 3–5), a middle school (Grades 6–8), and a high school (Grades 9–12). This developmental structure was adopted just prior to the onset of our study, and at
the elementary level required half of the staff to work in new buildings with new professional colleagues.

The SDM Teams. We studied the SDM teams responsible for educational reform in three of the district’s four schools: the primary, middle, and high schools. In accordance with district and state guidelines, the membership of these teams had to include the school principal, teachers, and parents. At the high school, students were also represented. The specific members of each team were, however, selected by each of the schools. For example, including a special educator was not mandated. The teams had 8 (primary), 11 (elementary), and 15 (high school) members, and usually met once per month.

Data Sources

The two primary data sources used in this investigation were observations of the SDM teams and interviews with SDM team members and special educators. In addition, throughout the study we collected field notes and artifacts, which provided context for the main data sources.

Observations of SDM Teams. We conducted observations of all meetings held by the three SDM teams over 3 years (a total of 86 observations). At each meeting, two researchers (one participant-observer and one assistant-observer) were present, and the entire meeting was audiotaped. We collected artifacts (agenda, minutes, attendance, and handouts) from each meeting.

Field notes of 86 meetings. After the meeting, we developed field notes that reflected team member participation, the content of discussions and decision-making, and the degree to which special education was addressed. The participants-observer and assistant-observer reviewed these field notes after each meeting, and agreement was reached on the information reported in these forms.

Transcripts of 15 meetings. In addition to the field notes describing the 86 observed meetings, 15 meetings (5 per team: 1 from Year 1, 2 from Year 2, and 2 from Year 3) were transcribed to provide detailed information about the nature of discussions. These transcriptions become a central dataset for this the study. Meetings for transcription were selected based on the following criteria: All key team members were present, and the meeting addressed substantive topics that accurately reflected the work of the team. The recordings for each of these 15 meetings were transcribed line by line, and the participants-observer checked each transcription for accuracy.

Identification of discussions. A “key word” computer search strategy was employed as a “first-pass” method to identify discussions that involved special education. Key words were chosen based on the researchers’ extensive experience in the district and knowledge of state guidelines and practices regarding special education. They included special, handicapped, disabled, at risk (at-risk), OT/PT (occupational therapy/physical therapy), CSE (Committee on Special Education), skills (one common district special education program was called Skills Development), and speech. Committee on Special Education is the common name used in the State of New York for the multidisciplinary special education decision-making team. We examined areas of the transcript that contained these words for relevance to special education. Exact references to special education were highlighted from the beginning of the complete statement until the end. A second stage of data identification followed the keyword search. A researcher examined each transcript line by line to ensure that all discussions relevant to special education were found. Relevant references to special education found through this process were also highlighted from the beginning of the complete statement until the end.

We also examined the transcripts to determine if they included discussions of the SER topics chosen for this research: academic standards and student achievement, curriculum and instruction, school and classroom organization, and locus of decision making (NJCLD, 1992). When SER topics were identified, they were also examined to determine whether there was any evidence that special education was (or was not) mentioned at this point in the team discussions.

We used a systematic process to identify all discussion topics. We used the following criteria: (a) a consistent discussion with a specific theme that extended for at least 100 lines of dialogue, or (b) any discussion that related directly to one of the four SER categories, even when that discussion lasted for less than 100 lines. The 100-line minimum was chosen for non-SER topics because the teams frequently engaged in brief discussions about unrelated issues or ones that were irrelevant to our study (e.g., a member would arrive later, school business unrelated to the SDM process). Our experiences in observing the 86 team meetings and collecting field notes and a desire to focus on substantive team discussions led us to choose the 100-line minimum criterion for non-SER topics to weed out most irrelevant team discussions. Including all SER discussions as topics, regardless of length, guarded against the possibility of missing relevant but brief references to special education or issues that were potentially important to special education. Based on these operational criteria, we conducted all discussion topics and coded each topic as either SER or non-SER, which provided data on the total number of topics and categorized them for relevance. We used the key-word search and transcript inspection methods described previously to determine whether the team actually discussed special education during each topical discussion (both SER and non-SER topics).

An example of a topic that was identified as SER occurred when the primary school’s SDM team discussed developmentally appropriate education. This discussion was identified as falling under the area of curriculum and instruction. Non-special-education-relevant topics most often concerned team procedures, such as meeting dates or times.

Analysis of transcribed observations. We examined each identified discussion topic to see if it contained any reference to special education. Interrater agreement was calculated for
40% of the transcripts. One of the participant-observers re-coded each of the transcripts according to its focus on special education and relevance to the SER categories. Total interrater agreement (agreements/possible decisions) was 87% for SER educational reform categories, 90% for all other reform topics (non-SER), and 94% for special education discussion. Disagreements were resolved by reaching consensus between the raters, and any changes resulting from this process were incorporated into subsequent analyses. Finally, lines of dialogue were tabulated for each transcript, and the percentage of the lines devoted to special education was calculated.

**Interviews with SDM Team Members and Special Educators.** In Year 2 we conducted a semistructured interview with all of the SDM team members (N = 32). This interview included a range of questions regarding general reform activities in the district. Two questions relevant to this research were “How does the SDM team represent students with disabilities?” and “How does the SDM team represent special education?” Twelve special educators (4 from each school) were interviewed in Year 3. The questions relevant to this research were “How does the SDM team represent students with disabilities?” and “How does the SDM team represent special education?”

**Interview procedures.** Researchers with substantial prior interviewing experience conducted individual interviews with each team member. The interviews were scripted, including an opening description of the interview, a request for permission to conduct the interview and audiotape it, and specific directions about when to ask for additional information for each question. The interview format was translated to an interview template that included space for the interviewer to record the interviewee’s responses. The interviewers were trained in use of this form. Each interviewer wrote the respondent’s answers to each question, attempting to use the respondent’s exact words. In addition, the audiotapes were transcribed. Based on the interview notes and the written record from each tape, we created a transcript with the verbatim answers of each respondent.

**Interview coding: Interrater agreement.** Responses to each interview question were categorized and coded using procedures developed previously by Meyers, Gelzheiser, Yelich, and Gallagher (1990). Each question from each interview was scored independently by two raters, with interrater agreement averaging 94% for the SDM team members and 88% for the special educators. Each time a disagreement about a coding decision occurred the two researchers reached agreement, which was included in subsequent analyses to maximize accuracy.

**Results**

**Research Question 1**

Question 1 (*How Is Special Education Discussed During Building SDM Team Meetings?*) was addressed using both qualitative and quantitative data. The first step was qualitative examination of the field notes and archival data (i.e., meeting agendas, minutes, attendance records, and handouts) from all 86 observed SDM team meetings and the transcripts from 15 of these meetings to look for evidence of discussions of special education. These findings are presented next. Based on this analysis, we then examined the transcripts to obtain more specific quantitative and qualitative information indicating how special education was discussed. The quantitative findings based on transcripts are presented in the following sections.

**1a: Discussion Based on Analysis of Field Notes and Archival Data.** Review of the field notes from the 86 meetings indicated that special education was rarely mentioned in high school and middle school SDM team meetings. Most of the discussions citing special education occurred when the participant-observers (researchers) answered questions about the current project (which was about special education reform) or presented findings concerning special education. For example, in one meeting, the participant-observer presented interview data indicating the participants’ perceptions of educational reform and the role of special education in the reform process. The field notes revealed no examples where other team members initiated discussions of special education.

Analysis of the field notes and archival data from all of the primary school meetings in Years 2 and 3 indicated greater, but inconsistent, inclusion of special education in SDM team discussions. However, as noted in the following example, it took the better part of Year 2 to begin focusing the discussion on this aspect of reform. Even the addition of a special educator to the team in Year 3 resulted in limited additional discussion of special education. In the first meeting of Year 2, the principal suggested that “the team needs to focus on getting results for kids and to look at areas of impact . . . what is affecting kids, negatives and positives.” He went on to say that the “school doesn’t have a lot of hard data to look at” and suggested that the team “think about how to collect data in the area of math” and that maybe a “subcommittee should be formed.” By the middle of the school year, a focal emphasis had not been determined:

The SDM team has gone half the year and has not gotten down to the task of goal setting and brainstorming as to what they want to do. At this meeting, the teacher team leader presented the idea of focusing on language arts for the year, but the way it was presented seemed as if it was already a given. There had not been any discussion of this at previous meetings. Nor was there any lengthy discussion at this meeting. (researcher field notes)

Finally, by April, the team returned to the principal’s September request: “brainstorming ways in which we could collect data to establish baselines at the school with the objective
being: how can we improve results for kids.” The field notes revealed that 12 ideas were generated as sources for data, including the number of students at, above, or below expected scores on a reading test; the number in remedial and special education; and the number in speech, OT, and PT.

At the May meeting, efforts to survey special education, OT, and PT began, and there was some discussion about OT and PT, based on a parent member’s question. No final decisions were made about the surveys, although it was clarified that the principal would conduct the OT and PT survey and that someone would check to see if the special education results would be used solely by this school.

By November of the following school year, the transcripts of the SDM meetings revealed that reading test results had been reported, and one teacher shared the team’s disappointed reactions: “Yeah that is a pretty bad rating. Forty percent of the kids aren’t where we expect them to be.” By Year 3 of SDM team implementation, a special educator was now officially a team member, and she asked: “[Do] you know if special ed. was included in those numbers?” An examination of the remaining field notes and archival data indicated that this was the last time special education was discussed during Year 3. Furthermore, no follow-up or actions related to the data or discussions about special education that had been initiated in Year 2 occurred.

1b: Representation of SER Educational Reform Topics in Discussion Transcripts. Data from the 15 transcribed team meetings (5 transcripts per SDM team) were analyzed to provide more specific information pertinent to Research Question 1. This yielded quantitative analyses that are particularly informative in documenting the minimal discussion of special education by these reform teams.

Table 1 presents the total number of topics discussed by each SDM team, including the frequencies and percentages of SER and non-SER topics. All three teams frequently discussed matters that were identified as important to special education. In fact, Table 1 shows that most team discussion topics in the transcribed meetings were relevant SER categories (i.e., about 80%). These findings were consistent across the three schools (i.e., primary school = 81%, middle school = 73%, high school = 85%).

1c: Evidence of Special Education in Discussions of SER Categories. Table 2 presents the percentage of total topics and SER topics that included discussion of special education. Although SER topics (see Table 1) clearly were often addressed at these meetings, Table 2 indicates that special education was infrequently included in these discussions (22% of SER topics). The proportion of discussions involving special education was even lower when considering all topics discussed by the team (i.e., total team topics).

In the transcribed meetings from the high school, special education was represented only once in discussions of SER categories (i.e., only 7% of the total SER). In this one instance, the principal said: “I thought it would be good for the participant observer to talk about the research project and her responsibility and role on our committee.” The researcher’s response included the following statements relevant to special education:

The purpose of the project is to look at school reform and school improvement and how it affects students who are in special education, and it is funded by the U.S. Office of Special Education. We’re focusing on new initiatives in these buildings that special education students happen to be involved in. . . . We’re kind of hoping to see that . . . things that we do in this committee will eventually impact on the instruction that special education and general education students receive.

In the discussion that followed, no team member questions or comments addressed this focus on special education. At the middle school, special education was mentioned briefly at two meetings. On one of these occasions, the school psychologist was among the persons identified as a child study team member. On the other such occasion, it was noted briefly that a discipline program under discussion included a special education component. As a result of these two discussions, special education was mentioned in only 21% of the middle school team’s discussions of SER topics and only briefly.

In contrast with the middle school and high school, the primary school team paid considerably greater attention to special education when the SER topics were discussed. Support for this conclusion is found in Table 2, which reveals that special education was mentioned in 41% of the discussions of SER topics. In fact, Table 2 shows that at two of this team’s transcribed meetings, special education was mentioned during the deliberations for most of the SER topics that were considered (e.g., three of four topics, three of five topics). These topics included special educator membership on a project team studying developmentally appropriate education, using a specific reading test for identifying students considered to be at risk, collecting data from special educators about enrollment and overlap in special programs, and procedures for making referrals to special services.

The degree to which special education was discussed at the meetings may be described more precisely in terms of the percentage of lines of transcript dialogue that directly addressed special education. Figure 1 presents these data for the teams over the 3 years of this study. The absence of discussions about special education at the middle and high school teams is clear and stunning. Special education was mentioned in only 42 lines of dialogue from a total of 11,865 lines for both of these teams, and when it was mentioned, it was in the superficial way described previously. In the one high school meeting that included some mention of special education, half of this discussion (14 of 27 transcript lines) was attributed to a description of this research project by one of the researchers.
The primary school team discussed special education more frequently, especially in the two meetings where there were discussions of data collected from special educators and of procedures for making referrals to special services (25% and 6% of the dialogue respectively). Special education was discussed in 1% of the dialogue in the remaining three meetings of the primary school team. Overall, special education was discussed in 2.4% of the dialogue for all of these teams. Almost all of these discussions occurred in the primary school SDM team meetings (i.e., team dialogue addressing special education: primary school team = 7.6%, middle school team = 0.3%, and high school team = 0.4%).

**Research Question 2**

Question 2 (*How is Special Education Represented on the SDM Teams That Engage in the District’s Efforts to Reform Education in Each School?*) could have several answers. Special educators might be standing members of the teams, representation could be assigned to a specific team member, people knowledgeable about special education (e.g., special educators, parents of students with disabilities) could be asked to attend particular meetings, and team members could be assigned to represent special education for designated tasks. The possibility of informal representation existed when no one was assigned the duty but (a) there was indication that a member interacted with a special education teacher or parent (e.g., in the faculty room) or (b) a team member without this responsibility mentioned something related to special education. The data presented next indicate how these different approaches to representing special education were used in this district’s reform efforts.

### TABLE 1

**Frequency and Percentage of SER Topics and Non-SER Topics Discussed at SDM Team Meetings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total team topics</th>
<th>SER topics</th>
<th>Non-SER topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( n )</td>
<td>( n )</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary School Meetings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2, mtg 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2, mtg 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3, mtg 1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3, mtg 2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle School Meetings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2, mtg 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2, mtg 2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3, mtg 1</td>
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<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3, mtg 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High School Meetings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2, mtg 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2, mtg 2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3, mtg 1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3, mtg 2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall total</strong></td>
<td>86</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. SDM = shared decision-making; SER = special education relevant.*

Although each team had parents as members, none were par-
ents of students with disabilities. The middle school team did not have a special education member on the team during the 3 years of this study. The primary school did not have a special education member on the team during Years 1 and 2; however, a remedial reading teacher was a regular member. A special education teacher and a school psychologist were added to the team during Year 3. Both of these professionals frequently missed meetings, however. The high school team had a special education teacher member who served as team leader during the first 2 years of this study, but it had no special education member during Year 3.

2b: Assignment of Team Members. For this category, the question concerned whether special education was presented as a constituent group on the team.

**Special education representation assigned to specific member.** Assigned special education representation varied across the teams. The middle school and primary school teams both assigned at least one member to represent the special areas, which included special education (and gym, school nurse, guidance, remedial education, music, art, and English as a second language) as a constituent group. For the primary school team, the “special area” representative was the remedial teacher for Years 1 and 2. At the middle school, special area representation was assigned to a guidance counselor, school nurse, or physical education teacher, depending on the year. Although the role generally was not filled by a special education teacher in any of these schools, a school psychologist and a special education teacher did serve in this role on the primary school team in Year 3 (but their attendance was inconsistent). No member of the high school team was assigned the responsibility for representing special education (including the special education teacher who chaired the team for Years 1 and 2). None of the parent members of these teams were parents of students...
with disabilities or otherwise actively involved with special education.

*Special education representation by ad hoc attendance.* We used observational data to determine the other representation possibilities described in the beginning of this section. There is no evidence in either the 15 transcribed meetings or the 71 summaries of nontranscribed meetings that non–team members who were special educators attended team meetings for the specific purpose of discussing an identified topic and representing special education in that discussion. Parents of students in special education never took on this role either.

*Occasional assigned representation.* There is evidence that on occasion the primary school team assigned members to represent special education for certain specific tasks. A large portion of the discussion at one meeting was devoted to a survey of student needs for which specific team members were assigned to collect data from special service providers (e.g., special education teachers, speech and language specialists, OTs and PTs). This was confirmed in an interview with one of their team members: “We’re collecting data about the number of children receiving different services and how much overlap there is, and trying to make comparisons.” Information about enrollment in various special programs and the overlap between them was collected and presented to the team. Interestingly, the SDM team special area representative was not the person assigned to collect information from special education sources.

*Informal representation.* Informal representation of special education was observed in the meetings on several occasions. The stated philosophy of district-level administrators was that special education is part of a continuum of student services and is necessarily an important part of all discussions concerning education, curriculum and instruction, and educational reform. There is some evidence that this philosophy was expressed on occasion as an isolated event. In one middle school team discussion about reading achievement, the principal said the team needed to consider special education students. Also, in one report about a discipline program under consideration, a team member mentioned that this program had a special education component but did not elaborate on any specifics about it. There is no evidence from the transcripts or observations that a substantive discussion of special education took place following these types of comments.

2c: *Belief That Special Education Was Represented.* The question was, Do SDM team members and special educators believe that special education is represented on the teams?

*Team members.* SDM team members were interviewed regarding their perceptions of special education representation on and by the teams. We gathered data from interviews
### TABLE 3
Views of SDM Team Members and Special Educators About Whether Team Represents Special Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation</th>
<th>Team members</th>
<th></th>
<th>Special educators</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elem.(^a)</td>
<td>Middle(^b)</td>
<td>High(^c)</td>
<td>Total(^d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Represented</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not represented</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in Special Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Represented</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not represented</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. SDM = shared decision-making.*

\(^a^n = 9.\(^b^n = 13.\(^c^n = 10.\(^d^n = 32.\(^e^n = 4.\(^f^n = 12.*
of all SDM team members at the end of Year 2 and from special service providers at the end of Year 3. The two relevant questions we wanted to address were “How does the SDM team represent students with disabilities?” and “How does the SDM team represent special education?” The results are presented in Table 3.

One quarter of SDM team members indicated that they represented students with disabilities, although members of the primary school team accounted for most of these responses. Many of the primary school team members said that they represented all students in the school, including those with educational disabilities. For example, one team member stated: “I think I represent all of the students in the building, all of the parents in the building . . . and certainly we’re talking about improving results for kids, we’re talking about improving results for all kids—kids with handicapping conditions and kids without them.” Another stated: “I represent those students I work with and I have special education students in my class.” In addition, some primary school team members believed that they represented students with disabilities explicitly.

In contrast, many SDM team respondents indicated that there was little or no representation of students in special education on these teams. Almost 50% of the respondents indicated that these students were not represented, and a little more than 25% reported that they did not know whether these teams represented children with educational disabilities. Such answers were particularly characteristic of members of the high school and middle school teams. More than 50% of the high school team members reported that there was no representation of students with disabilities, and approximately 80% of middle school team members reported that either they did not represent these children or they did not know about such representation. This negative reporting is represented by the following comments: “Nothing yet [said about special education], I didn’t see it,” and, “I’m not sure that the team is keeping special education students in mind.” Furthermore, when the SDM team respondents did indicate that special education was considered by their team, they most often talked about systemic issues that might imply special education without mentioning the topic specifically. Examples of this type of response include “The mission statement applies to special education students,” “Special education is always in mind because team members are remedial or special educators,” and “The team represents the whole community.”

Table 3 also contains results from the interview question that asked team members whether their SDM team represented special education (broadly) in discussions. Few respondents at any of the schools (from 0% to 22%) indicated that special education was represented in this way.

**Special educators.** Half of the 12 special educators interviewed thought their respective SDM team represented students with disabilities (see Table 3). When these special service providers were asked whether special education was represented on the teams, however, 75% indicated that the team did not represent special education or they did not know whether the team had such representation. An example of typical statement is “I don’t think special education is represented—that there is not a person [from special education] on the committee.” Another member inaccurately stated, “I think there are people on the team from special education. I’m assuming their concerns are addressed.” Some responses indicated a belief that special education interests were indirectly represented: “We can see SDM team members and have our concerns addressed that way,” and “Even though we are not presently on the team, we are not overlooked.”

**Discussion**

Although claims have been made in the literature that special education is not given much consideration during general education reform (e.g., President’s Commission, 2002; Vanderwood et al., 1998; Ysseldyke et al., 1992), this empirical investigation is unique because it provides systematic, in-depth data confirming this statements based on the perceptions and behaviors of school-based practitioners in one school district. The SDM teams examined in this research generally paid little attention to special education or to students with educational disabilities. Specifically, transcribed dialogue from 15 SDM team meetings and researcher notes from 71 additional SDM meetings collected over the course of 3 years indicated that special education and students with educational disabilities were rarely mentioned at team meetings. Most topics that could have had substantive impact on students with special needs were discussed without reference to special education. These data were confirmed by the perceptions of SDM team members and special educators, who typically reported that either special education was not a part of team discussions or they did not know if the teams represented special education.

The general finding that the participating SDM teams seldom discussed special education has important implications for educational policy, because it is consistent with recent reports (President’s Commission, 2002) that identified the separation of general education and special education as a barrier to student achievement and to efforts to provide more preventive and early intervention services to students at risk. Thus, it supports recent legislation in which the substantive inclusion of special education issues and students in the general education process was mandated (IDEA, 1997; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). This research is also important because it shows that even in a district in which the administration has expressed support for special education students’ inclusion in general education classes and activities, SDM teams may overlook special education issues and concerns as they plan general education improvements that will affect all students.

**Why Was Special Education Rarely Discussed?**

Several reasons may be offered for the low level of discussion of special education by these SDM teams. One factor that ap-
pears to be relevant is that formal responsibility for representing special education was seldom assigned to a specific team member. The high school team had no member assigned to represent special education (or any other group within the school). This team had very low levels of discussion of special education even though a special education teacher was the chairperson for 2 years. When team members were assigned to represent the views of all special area teachers (including special education teachers; counselors; school nurses; art, music, and physical education teachers), we did not observe systematic representation of special education. As a result, under this condition, there was minimal discussion of special education, and special educators were given little knowledge about the SDM team in their school. In contrast, in meetings when representation of special education interests was specifically assigned (separate from the other special area teachers), discussion included substantially more references to students with special needs. These results suggest that it may be necessary to have a team member with the explicit responsibility for representing special education in team discussions. Given interview responses suggesting the need for input from special educators, such representation would be most useful if this team member was a special educator. Typical of these recommendations was the following observation from a team member: “[The] first step is to get someone from that portion of the faculty represented on the shared decision making team.”

Other team member interviewees suggested that increasing faculty and program resources devoted to special education were important ways for the team to influence special education: “Ensure fair allocation of special education teachers, programs.” Special educators believed that the teams’ basic knowledge and beliefs about special education needed to be revisited: “Teachers need to be more aware of inclusion and what that means. How could speech pathologists and special education teachers help with inclusion? We need to clarify definitions of inclusion”; “I think some of the people on the team and some of the teachers need to be more educated about special education”; and “I think more needs to be done in terms of understanding and tolerance.”

Team member interviews revealed that few members were assigned to specifically represent special education. However, several members believed that they did generally represent special education, particularly at the primary school. For example, a number of primary team members indicated that they represented special education on their team because they taught students with disabilities in various general education settings. Also, at least some members from each team indicated that they represented special education because the reform efforts were viewed as attending to all students (including those with disabilities). This general idea that students in special education were represented because general education teachers who had them in classes were on the team was supported by special educators; half of the latter reported believing such students’ interests were represented on the teams. The results of this study suggest that when special education representation was general or implied, however, discussions that included special education were infrequent. This was particularly true at the middle and high schools. It is possible that SDM team structures and procedures designed explicitly to represent special education issues could increase consideration of special education, but no such procedures were observed during this study. Discussion of special education did increase substantially when the primary school team decided to collect information from special educators.

### School-Level Differences

One potentially important finding was that the efforts to consider special education differed across schools. The primary school was more effective at representing special education in school reform. During interviews, members of this school’s team were more likely than middle or high school team members to report that their team represented special education. Moreover, there appeared to be a connection between an awareness that the team members should represent special education and the behaviors of these teams. It may therefore be important for educational reformers to consider team members’ beliefs and provide training and support to modify their understanding of the team’s role in implementing school reform directed at both general and special education. Future research in this area might focus on the impact that team members’ beliefs have on reform activities as well as on the differential findings based on school level (i.e., elementary vs. secondary).

Each of the teams in this study discussed educational reform topics that clearly were relevant to special education (as suggested by NJCLD, 1992). Such topics were related to academic standards and student achievement, curriculum and instruction, school and classroom organization, and locus of decision making. When these topics were discussed, however, their relevance to special education generally was not considered, and the dialogue at these meetings rarely addressed special education. The major exception to this trend occurred at two of five transcribed meetings of the primary school team.

### Marginalized Perspectives

Throughout our observations, we encountered only one discussion in which the views of special educators were solicited as a part of a discussion about general education curricula and instruction, and there were no instances when the views of students with educational disabilities or their parents were solicited. For such bidirectional collaboration to occur, general educators will need to enhance their awareness of special education and the potential contributions that special educators, parents, and students can make to general education issues.

Furthermore, more systematic and structured ways to solicit input from special educators is necessary. This will require training for general and special educators, but it may also require special educators, students with disabilities, and parents...
to take a proactive stance. These members of the educational community need to clearly advocate representation special education in discussion and implementation of educational reform, and the value of including all members of the school community in discussions of general education. This is particularly important as special education service delivery evolves to become more a part of general education.

Limitations

The design of this research focused on three SDM teams in one school district. Multiple samples and multiple data sources over 3 years increase confidence in the findings based on the intensive nature of the research. This is particularly true because the results across these sources, settings, and methods most often provided triangulation for the findings. The findings derived from this specific school district may or may not be generalizable to other districts, however. The purpose of this qualitative research was to develop an in-depth understanding of a specific situation and context, not to develop generalizable rules that apply across settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). Our results are consistent with past (e.g., Johnson & Rusch, 1992; Will, 1986) and current (President’s Commission, 2002) concerns that special education has not been included in general education reform efforts.

Six Essential Recommendations

Several key issues and recommendations should be considered by school districts and policymakers as they attempt to better integrate general and special education in reform efforts. Future research should evaluate the efficacy of these suggestions in promoting reform that integrates input from all stakeholders. First, at least one member of the school-based reform team should be assigned the specific responsibility of representing special education during team discussions. This person should be a special educator or parent of a child in special education. Second, the perspective of special education should be a routine, designated agenda item for SDM team meetings. Third, special education constituencies need to adopt advocacy positions to facilitate effective involvement in educational reform. Active participation in educational reform may require that special educators increase their knowledge about such reform and develop methods to influence the process. Fourth, special educators, advocates, and parents should include discussion of general education reform as a routine agenda item for meetings of special education groups. General education reform clearly affects students in special education, and special education groups cannot assume that adequate representation in the reform process will occur absent an effective advocacy program. Fifth, districts should state clearly and repeatedly that school-based reform teams represent special education teachers and students. General statements about educating all students do not appear to result in adequate representation of special education issues in SDM discussions. Sixth, ongoing training should be provided to general educators (especially SDM team members) to increase their knowledge of special education. Special educators could assist in such training and serve as natural, issue-specific mentors for other SDM team members. Adoption of these recommendations has the potential to empower stakeholders, promoting bidirectional collaboration between general and special education reform initiatives.

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REFERENCES


Making a Difference: Advocacy Competencies for Special Education Professionals

Craig R. Fiedler

Making a Difference: Advocacy Competencies for Special Education Professionals is the only single comprehensive source on the role and responsibility of special education professionals as advocates for children with disabilities. Most preservice educational programs cover the topic of advocacy only cursorily, leaving many to enter the field without the knowledge and skills necessary for effective advocacy. This highly specialized text fills this training void by presenting the competencies, dispositions, knowledge, and skills necessary to become an effective advocate. Preservice and inservice educators are introduced to topics such as ethical disposition, special education law, dispute resolution mechanisms, interpersonal communication skills, collaboration skills, and conflict resolution skills. In addition, numerous vignettes and case studies throughout help readers connect text concepts to real-life issues. Compassionate and informative, this text helps special education professionals learn how to make a difference in the educational lives of children with disabilities.

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