The Changing Paradigm of Special Education in Mexico: Voices From the Field

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Abstract

Mexico's new model of special education integrates children with special needs into the regular classroom. In this model, a team called Unit of Support Services for Regular Education (USAER) is assigned to a number of schools, and the USAER team works with regular classroom teachers to meet the needs of special needs students. This study examined the integration process of this new model and its ramifications for elementary and special education teachers. Results revealed concerns about a number of issues, including the lack of preplanning; lack of inclusion of special and regular education personnel in the integration process; lack of communication between regular and special education teachers; and the need to create a community of learners among all of the participants dedicated to the common goal of providing quality education for special needs children. This focus group study of educational integration in Mexico revealed that it is difficult to achieve fundamental changes on a national level in long-entrenched educational practices and beliefs.

Introduction

The 1990s were interesting and exciting years for the field of special education, during which the inclusive education movement gained great momentum worldwide (Karagiannis, Stainback, & Stainback, 1996). The international conferences in Jomptien, Thailand, in 1991 and Salamanca, Spain, in 1994 transformed the idea of an appropriate education for every child and revolutionized the field of special education. The impetus for these conferences

came from prestigious international agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO, the United Nations Development Program, and the World Bank. Much of our traditional thinking as special educators about the best and most effective ways to help children who did not conform to the exigencies of the regular classroom curriculum changed drastically due to the new concepts that emerged from these meetings. At these international conferences, educators began to speak about equal educational opportunities for children with special educational needs. They talked not only about good schools and highly qualified teachers, but they also discussed that perhaps placing special needs children into separate classes is not the best option. Many new ideas were discussed, such as whether or not the notion that special educators are the only professionals who know what is best for children with special educational needs should be discarded, and that perhaps the role of the special education teacher should be changed to that of assisting the regular classroom teacher to accommodate special needs children in the regular classroom so that these children can participate fully with other children in a normal school environment. These conferences suggested that special educators must implement important changes, among them the integration and alliance of special education and regular education. Special and regular educators must form a team and work together for the benefit of all children (García Cedillo, Escalante Herrera, Escandon Minutti, Fernandez Torres, Mustri Dabbah, & Puga Vasquez, 2000).

In Mexico as well as in other countries, arguments for school reform were transformed into arguments for school restructuring with the recognition that inclusion implies a change in philosophical assumptions about the ways in which schools need to serve children (Edmunds, 2000). Changing the delivery of special education support to all children with special educational needs within a regular classroom setting represents a fundamental change for many educators (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998). Including children fully in the activities of the regular classroom brings intellectual benefits as well as increased social skills as they learn to relate to their classmates without special needs (García Cedillo et al., 2000). Furthermore, the inclusion of special needs children benefits their companions as they learn to value the individual characteristics of every classmate and to respect the differences inherent in every human being (García Cedillo et al., 2000).

Inclusive education generally means the inclusion of children with special educational needs into the regular classroom. UNESCO's definition states that it "is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and non-formal education settings" (2003, p. 2):

> Rather than being a marginal theme on how some learners can be integrated in the mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems in order to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment in the learning environment, rather than a problem. (p. 2)

For special education, this means ending separate placements for all students; rather, students should be placed full time in general education classes with appropriate special education supports within that classroom (Garvar-Pinhas & Schmelkin-Pedhazur, 1989; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). Inclusion means providing certain features and arrangements that allow people with certain needs to access and participate in their environment in limited circumstances. Inclusion is a reactive, non-anticipatory approach, which provides for a limited degree of independence. However, these definitions are not universal.

In Mexico, the term *educational integration* is employed, although it appears that *inclusion* is a more accurate description of what occurs in practice. Nevertheless, to include is not necessarily to integrate. The optimum situation is not that of inclusion, meaning that the children are physically included in the regular classroom, but rather integration, a term that implies not only a physical presence but also a full participation in all of the classroom activities.

Special Education in Mexico

The Mexican Constitution's amended General Education Law (Secretaria de Educación Publica [SEP], 1993), emphasizes that the state has the obligation to serve all persons who have disabilities and special educational needs and that the Dirección General de Educacion Especial [General Directorate of Special Education] should pursue a policy of educational integration (Dirección General de Educacion Especial [DGEE], 1994).

The law goes on to define educational integration as achieving the objective of permanent and equal access to the elementary and junior high school curriculum. Integration is a strategy that implies participation and interaction among students, teachers, parents, and the educational community so that all children, with or without disabilities (including gifted children), will experience success in school. The Department of Special Education must lend support to this effort, and if integration is not possible because students have severe disabilities, they can study the same curriculum as students in an integrated classroom but in a special school called a Centro de Atención Múltiple [Multiple Attention Center] (CAM). Special education will abandon the custom of offering a parallel curriculum and offer all students the same curriculum, adjusted to meet various needs. Educational integration is obligatory, but if this integration is not in the best interest of the child, and the child will be more successful in a more restrictive setting such as a special school or center, then he or she has the right to be in that alternative setting, under current policy.

Thus, the child with special educational needs is a different kind of student whose educational requirements are not necessarily those of his or her classmates, and the school may provide modified strategies for facilitating

learning and skill acquisition. Having a disability does not necessarily mean that the regular curriculum requires modification. It is important to remember that some children with conditions such as cerebral palsy do not have trouble learning the general education curriculum and can be perfectly at ease in the regular classroom. The transformation of educational opportunity in Mexico means that children such as these, who were often in special education schools, are now in regular classrooms. Blanco Guijarro (2000) suggests that some children need more help, and other children different sorts of help, than their classmates. Education, in terms of accessibility, should be the same for everyone, but some children will need adaptations of the general education curriculum in order to succeed in the regular classroom. The DGEE (1994) in Mexico City provided a definition of special educational needs stating that when a child, in comparison to his or her classmates, has difficulty learning the curriculum content and requires more resources or different resources to enable him or her to meet the educational objectives of the curriculum, that child is a special needs child. If a child has difficulty accessing the curriculum and making progress, he or she can be provided with additional supports and resources within the framework of special education. The notion is that the child's learning is also dependent on the learning context; some students' learning rhythm may be different, and they may develop and progress more slowly. If the resources of the school are not sufficient to facilitate a child's acquisition of the curriculum, then specialized support may be required, including special education teacher support, curricular accommodations and differentiated materials, and adaptation of architectural barriers and/or classroom space provided by the regular classroom teacher. All children have a right to be fully integrated into the regular classroom unless extenuating circumstances indicate that the child could not function in an integrated situation.

In Mexico, since the inception of educational integration in 1993, more than 2.7 million children were identified in the *Registro Nacional de Menores con Algun Signo de Discapacidad* [Registration of Minors with Signs of Disability], and fewer than 600,000 were receiving services (García Cedillo et al., 2000). More than 503,000 students receive special education services, and 11,000 have been integrated without the assistance of special education that many of them need.

Even though Mexico has implemented various special education projects during the last 10 years in an attempt to comply with international practices, research indicates that the Mexican saying, *"Entre dicho y hecho hay mucho trecho* [A lot of time can elapse between words and deeds]" could be used to characterize the practice of educational integration—or the lack of the practice (Escurra Ortiz de Rosas & Molina Argudin, 2000). In Mexico, the Constitution and the General Education Law provide for educational modernization and educational integration, but until 6 years ago, integration was not really

occurring. Article 41 in the General Education Law (SEP, 1993) states that differences in sex, language, religion, culture, and physical and mental conditions should not be a factor in access to education. Special education is to be provided to individuals who have permanent disabilities (e.g., mental retardation, visual impairment, hearing impairment) and to those with temporary disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities), as well as to gifted individuals. In addition, counseling and training is to be provided for parents, regular classroom teachers, and other educational professionals involved in the educational integration of students with special educational needs.

When the SEP implemented the service delivery model of *grupos integrados* [integrated groups], for many educators, this represented an integration effort. These integrated groups were designed for children who failed first grade and were put into special groups with the hope of integrating them into the regular classroom in a period of 1 or 2 years. This program was an all-day integration program (Mexican children are in public schools for 4 hours a day). The program was administered by the GDEE at the federal level. A lack of collaboration between regular and special education made this effort a weak attempt at best since the students in the integrated groups were physically present at the regular school but not integrated into the school. These groups of students were given storerooms or tiny classrooms and treated like second-class citizens.

The integrated groups were part of a unit that included six schools and a multidisciplinary team that supported the effort. This team was composed of a social worker, a psychologist, a speech and language therapist, and six special education teachers. Thus, when the decision was made to implement integration under the auspices of the new federal directive, the integrated groups program was dissolved and restructured to form the Unit of Support Services for Regular Education (USAER). This reform, a part of the integration effort, was made immediately effective by decree, without any transition plan.

It is important to explain that in Mexico, teacher in-service training is very often accomplished with what is known as a cascade: figuratively speaking, a waterfall. Administrators are given a 1-week workshop. They, in turn, transmit the contents of the workshops to other administrators, who transmit the same information to teachers, serving as a "trainer of trainers" model. In the case of the rapid integration plan, very little information reached the teachers who had to implement the plan. Roles and responsibilities were not well defined. Regular classroom teachers were suddenly called upon to serve children with varying types of special educational needs, about which these teachers knew nothing. In the beginning, many teachers refused to comply with the integration efforts and refused to admit certain special needs children into their classrooms. Regular classroom teachers also denied access to special education teachers because they felt they were being observed and spied upon under the auspices of the SEP and felt very uncomfortable not knowing the true function of the

specialists. School directors denied access to services for children, and the very powerful teachers union did not support the integration effort. Initially, the union backed up recalcitrant teachers and school directors. Fortunately, over time, improvements have occurred. The presence of the USAER is now becoming more widely accepted and indeed welcomed. The regular classroom teachers look to the USAER members as "experts" and ask for help with their special needs children. Thus, we see changing roles for the integrated-group members who are now USAER personnel and who are now called upon to work directly with classroom teachers.

The USAER decides which students will be integrated into the regular schools. Special needs children with more severe disabilities who cannot be integrated are sent to the CAMs. These centers were once known as special education schools; they have a new name but utilize the same personnel and structure.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to share our research on the integration experiences of special educators, urban and rural, who in many cases are professionals comprising USAER teams. The study gives them an opportunity to express their feelings and relate their experiences without fear of reprisals or punishments.

Since the beginning of the integration process, there has been confusion regarding the roles and responsibilities of the USAER special education teachers who work with the regular classroom teachers. In some cases, consternation has replaced confidence as the special educators are asked to perform duties for which they have little preparation.

Methodology

Context of the Study

We, the researchers, decided to concentrate on USAER members since they are the people living the integration experience from different perspectives. Since the school system is still relatively centralized, and more resources are available in Mexico City, we decided to contrast the integration experience in a large urban center with the experience in a small city outside of the capital. We chose, in the case of Mexico City, a university site for the focus group because it was neutral and accessible. In Guanajuato, a small city about 4 hours from the capital, a teacher resource center was selected. We recruited subjects by word of mouth and by putting signs in various public school sector offices. We emphasized the anonymous nature of the research because in Mexico, teachers are very fearful about expressing their opinions, and we wanted real opinions.

Participants

In Mexico City, in the first group, the subjects were eight USAER members, a director of a primary school, and two regular classroom teachers. Their teacher education backgrounds varied. Some of the subjects were graduates of the elementary education teacher training school, Escuela Normal [Normal School]. Others were university graduates who possessed a degree in pedagogy, a program of study that emphasizes curricular planning. Still other participants were from the Escuela Normal de Especialización [The Special Normal School], which trains both teachers and clinicians in different specialty areas of special education. The second group was varied. Of the 12 participants, 2 were regular classroom teachers with specialized training in special education, and 10 were USAER team members. The ages ranged from 30 to 50.

The range of educational attainment and background of the participants in Mexico City ranged from a *licenciatura* [bachelor of arts degree] to partial completion of a master's degree. With the exception of one psychologist, all participants had degrees in education. The teachers' years of experience ranged from 2 to 21 years. For those teaching in special education, years of experience ranged from 2 to 17 years, but only one person had more than 10 years experience in special education. Two participants had more experience teaching in regular education than in special education.

In Guanajuato, the first group was composed of eleven special education professionals. Participants reported educational backgrounds including a family studies degree, two degrees in psychology, and four with training in fields related to special education such as speech therapy and learning disabilities. Two regular classroom teachers working in special education were included, and two other participants had received their *licenciatura* from the Escuela Normal de Especializacíon. These participants did not state their specialty or years of experience. Two participants worked as speech therapists, two as social workers, two as teachers of the learning disabled (without special training), one person as a psychologist, and one person as a director of a CAM. Three people did not reveal their positions.

The second group was made up of ten regular education teachers, the majority of whom had received in-service training in special education. Two participants had not received any type of professional development. Five persons had attended workshops with the subject matter ranging from speech, hearing, and visual impairment to learning disabilities, while one participant had some training in inclusion. One person had taken coursework in school psychology and curriculum adaptation.

Data Collection

To gather information about integration experiences, we organized focus groups consisting of USAER team members such as special education teachers, speech therapists, social workers, and psychologists, as well as regular education classroom teachers who worked at USAER schools. We held three meetings in a 1-year period, one in Mexico City and two in Guanajuato, and a fourth meeting 1 ½ years later in Mexico City. All interviews were conducted in Spanish. The authors have translated the substance of the questions and answers into English.

We sent an open invitation to USAER members and regular education teachers, emphasizing the anonymous and confidential nature of the meetings. The moderators of the meetings were university professors from Mexico and the United States presently teaching in the area of special education in their respective countries. We met informally and provided refreshments. The object was to allow the participants to express their perspectives after a few years of experience with integration efforts. The subjects in Mexico City did not know one another, and the researchers asked that they not give their names. In Guanajuato, many of the participants were colleagues and worked closely with one another. The participants sat in a circle and spoke freely. Although an audiotape recorder was used, and the participants were aware of its presence, it was not in view. We referred to the literature on focus groups in terms of the structure of the meetings. For this reason, we used prepared questions and a moderator-type format.

Our data collection method, focus group interviews, has traditionally been used in product research. According to Beck, Trombetta, and Share (1986), a focus group is "an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics relevant to the situation at hand" (p. 73). According to Krueger (1988), the topics of discussion in a focus group are carefully predetermined and sequenced, based on an analysis of the situation. This analysis includes an in-depth study of the event, experience, or topic in order to describe the context of the experience and the ingredients or components of the experience. The questions are placed in an environment that is understandable and logical to the participant. The moderator uses predetermined, open-ended guide questions. The questions appear to be spontaneous but are carefully developed after considerable reflection. The questions, called the questioning route or interview guide, are arranged in a natural logical sequence (Krueger, 1988).

Focus groups may also be described as discussion groups that focus on a particular topic or topics, or a single theme. The goal is to create a candid, normal conversation that addresses, in depth, the selected topic. Lederman (1990) reiterates that people are valuable sources of information, especially about themselves. This assumption is inherent in all self-report measures. People are capable of reporting about themselves and articulate enough to

put opinions about their feelings into words. One way of obtaining peoples' feelings and opinions is through a structured group conversation in which the monitor solicits information. Certain effects of group dynamics enhance the likelihood that people will speak frankly about a subject. These effects usually do not occur in individual or small-group interviews. Related to this assumption is the notion that the information obtained from a focus group interview is genuine information related to what each person feels rather than a "group mind," in which people conform to what others believe. Thus, in this case, the use of focus groups created a secure atmosphere where people could address the topic of integration and exchange their views and experiences. These persons were not previously acquainted, although they shared a common work context. The goal was to generate perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas, not quantitative information.

Procedure

We asked our participants if they would speak freely about their experiences with integration over the past 2 years. We emphasized that everyone's comments were valid and that differences of opinion were appropriate. All sessions were audiotaped, and conversations were transcribed, analyzed, and coded into rich narrative. Our guide questions focused mainly on the role of USAER members within the new structure and their relationships with regular classroom teachers. We also asked about the role of school directors and administrators and the participation of parents. Furthermore, we asked questions about professional preparation and orientation to the new integration models and what differences exist between the release-time model, in which students are taken out of the regular classroom and given instruction in a special room with the special education teacher or specialist (e.g., speech therapist), and the total integration model, in which children with special needs stay in the regular classroom the whole school day. In this latter model, USAER team members go into the regular classroom to assist the regular classroom teacher by making adjustments in the curriculum and designing activities that focus on the needs of the special needs children.

Prior to the focus group interview sessions, a brief statement was read to all participants on the nature of integration of children with disabilities occurring in the United States and Latin America and the trend toward greater collaboration between regular and special education in meeting the needs of students with special educational needs. We then asked the following core questions that centered on multiple themes (e.g., roles, professional preparation, curriculum adaptation, collaboration, and parental participation) and that served as our guide questions for the discussion.

1. Do the teachers have a new role in this model?
2. How do you use the time that you have?

3. Is there time for joint collaboration and planning between regular and special educators for children with disabilities in classrooms?
4. What do you understand by "curricular adjustments," and how do you implement them?
5. What strategies do you use to modify the curriculum?
6. What have you achieved because of this new model of attention?
7. How have you changed as a result of this new initiative to integrate children into regular schools?
8. What obstacles do you face, and what challenges have appeared?
9. What do you expect of the children?
10. What suggestions do you have to better this model?
11. How do you feel about the collaboration between special and regular educators?
12. Do you agree that all of the special education students should be placed in the regular class?
13. What role do parents play in this process?

Each of the sessions lasted a little over 2 hours.

Data Analysis

The focus group sessions were transcribed, read, and analyzed. Recurring patterns and unique occurrences across the sessions were determined (Spradley, 1980). Data from the focus group sessions were placed in categories, and the researchers compared and contrasted categories to ascertain their validity. The patterns and categories determined were compared across the focus group sessions in the urban and rural settings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The teachers' narratives in the small provincial city fell into similar categories as those of teachers from the large urban setting. For example, when asked about the initial preparation for the integration experience, respondents' responses were similar. This was not surprising since the efforts to reorient education professionals were based on a national initiative. We obtained a rich narrative in both locations, with teachers narrating their experiences in great detail.

Findings and Discussion

Lack of Preparation

All of the participants in the four groups resented the fact that very little training occurred before the initial integration efforts were implemented. One-week workshops on the topic of educational integration had preceded

the literal dumping of children with special needs into regular classes. Many of the schools were not architecturally prepared for children with accessibility needs. Already overloaded regular classroom teachers suddenly found themselves with varying numbers of children in their classes who required differentiated attention, which in many cases they felt unprepared to provide. Special educators, whose roles were clearly designated before the changes, were suddenly told to work with the regular classroom teacher within the classroom.

One special education teacher on a USAER team responded regarding how the directive was operationalized and implemented from the Secretary of Education at the state level:

> We received a general orientation on the new plan that was being implemented, but this was the only administrative support we received. They left it up to us to enter the schools, begin to explain to the school personnel and make them aware of the requirements of the new plan, work closely with the parents to educate them, and collaborate with the regular classroom teachers.

Because each USAER team is assigned to work with five schools, they often cannot provide the time or resources expected by the regular classroom teachers. As a result, resentments surfaced on the part of both groups, which led to dissension and problems between regular and special educators.

Although it seemed apparent that all concerned had the same definition of integration, the placement of children who had been retained more than once proved to be a singular problem. Children with mild mental retardation, on the verge of adolescence, were placed in the early primary grades where they not only towered above their classmates but were unable to keep up academically with their peers. Primary teachers had not recognized that spending many years in the same grade does not produce positive results. It is important to note that the children who were left in the CAMs and not integrated into the schools had in many cases been given labels (e.g., speech impaired, language disordered, mentally retarded) that were not always accurate. Owing to lack of personnel, teachers at the CAMs who were trained in one special education discipline were required to work with children whose exceptionality required specific training that these teachers did not possess. Thus, specialists in visual impairment worked with children with hearing impairments. Teachers accustomed to working with children with mental retardation suddenly faced the need to give speech therapy. Many of these children were inappropriately placed in a CAM and could have been integrated into the regular classroom. Unfortunately, a lack of preplanning prevented the integration of these special needs children because they needed a support system that in many cases did not exist in the regular schools.

New Roles

When we asked about the new role of the USAER team, responses indicated that many of the issues that emerged could probably have been resolved if the participants had received a comprehensive orientation to the kinds of work expected of them and the procedures to be followed. The preschool teachers, for example, previously sent their children to the Centro de Atención para Edad Pre-Escolar [Attention Center for Preschool Age]. After the federal directive was implemented, the same specialists went to their local schools and worked with the students in the regular classroom. How these special education personnel were to function and collaborate with other teachers and carry out their teaching and intervention strategies was never clarified.

In many preschools, many children have social problems as well as traditional special education needs such as speech impairments, language disorders, and motor development. The regular classroom teachers realized that they needed a large measure of support and looked to the USAER group for this support. One regular classroom teacher stated:

> We were asking for help for some time. No help was forthcoming. We had to send our children to another place. Now we have a USAER and both of us realize that we need more support. We only have one day a week. In this semester, we have recognized that the USAER is good for both families and children. We need more time.

USAER teams were procedurally designed to provide assistance to five schools within their sector. Two resource special education teachers were assigned to each school while the specialists (i.e., psychologist, speech and language pathologist, and social worker) provide assistance 1 day a week to each school in their sector. Initially, the regular classroom teachers did not understand the demands placed upon the USAER team or the scope of their responsibilities. Since each USAER team is responsible for five schools, the specialists could not be at the school site or with the teachers on a daily basis, and the regular classroom teacher thought that the USAER team was not doing its job. Classroom space to pull out children was unavailable at most schools, which added to the difficulty.

Professional Communication

This was a recurring theme throughout our focus group interviews, and comments reflect the critical nature of developing, nurturing, and maintaining communication skills among professionals.

A regular classroom teacher reported:

> In our school we have USAER for the afternoon session and we work in the morning. No communication exists. This group of USAER works

> independently. They take the children during different schedules. The school has a population of 900 students and they take 4 or 5 each day. The group in the afternoon says that we should send them the morning children who have problems. I don't have any special training, but I detect lots of learning problems. Language problems are sent to them immediately. If I want to know how a child is doing, I have to wait until the afternoon to ask. I ask the specialist about the grade, if the child should pass, what she has learned, etc. Those of us who are teaching in the morning continue in the same way with the same curriculum and we wait for the news from the afternoon. The afternoon team talks with the parents and has more information. Sometimes the members of USAER come in the morning to talk to us and they tell us that they are giving the same content and if the child is behind, they give us the curriculum that he/she should have. But I do not know really what they are supposed to be doing. I know that their work is very detailed.

It is important to understand in the context of these statements that not every school is assigned a USAER team, due to shortage of prepared personnel. Additionally, in Guanajuato, many teachers work two shifts, from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. until 7 p.m., at two different schools. Some children attend a school during the morning shift not served by the USAER team but receive special education services in the afternoon at the same school.

One teacher expressed confusion about the model: "What I understand is that the USAER member should be in the regular class with the child, but no, the members of USAER work independently with the child." Another classroom teacher responded:

> Now we work in the morning with our children without support. The child has his/her appointment in the afternoon. In my school we have had USAER for a few years. The first year they gave us a teacher who only helped us with math and Spanish. In our school there are 10 groups and the first problem was space. The teachers had to rank the children in order of difficulty. The teacher took at least five every day from each grade. Afterwards we had two teachers and a social worker. They are there every day working in math and Spanish but we have the social worker, the psychologist and the language specialist one day a week as they rotate to different schools. Now we have the problem of curricular adaptation and we do not have time to get together with the USAER team to get help.

A teacher with 50 students in her classroom responded with a note of desperation in her voice:

> We have a lot of problems. We have tried to use them [USAER] to talk with the parents who are difficult to locate and this is an advantage. But they do not work within our group. No. They are not with us giving

> support, no. I thought that maybe this year things would be different; they managed to detect and diagnose the children individually, and they interviewed parents and they gave some attention to groups. The integration teacher [USAER] was with different groups. The psychologist only observed the children who have problems. This was the only intervention. When they want to work with a child, they take him/her out of the regular classroom to the administrative offices. They do not work in the same classroom.

This confusion about how, when, and where the team should work is apparent and probably, as stated, had to do with the initial lack of communication about school integration and how it was to operate. A USAER participant expressed this doubt:

> One of the causes of these difficulties is that the whole integration process has been very abrupt. Some people say that everything in this country gets done by decree, but I do not agree with that point of view. Special education publishes really good books, but when we get down to reality, one sees that special education takes one direction and general education takes another route. We have not had problems with acceptance; for example, the teachers have accepted two children with Down syndrome. What I see is a duplication of efforts at the administrative level. The regulations for special education require things be done one way and regulations for regular education require another. The USAER functions are supposedly very explicit. We see that our main function is the detection and planning phase. We can work with the teacher and we do not have to take the child out of the class. What is more, we can continue adjusting our work plan. What I am fighting is that I have less contact with my special education supervisor and more with the basic education supervisor. I am caught between the different rules and regulations of two entities. They scold me and they tell me, "Your work is on this side," and I tell them, "OK," but if I want to be accepted I have to work for this other side. The indications and the instruction about how we should collaborate come from the Office of the Superintendent of Primary Schools. We need some kind of practical structure.

Another issue that focus group participants brought up involved the theoretical framework for the teachers' work and the materials that are used to make appropriate curricular modifications on behalf of the identified children. One USAER teacher stated:

> Well, what happens in my practice is that I get there and I tell the teacher, "Use these activity cards," and she tells me, "OK," but she never does it. In the meetings we talk a lot, but talk means nothing. I learned some time ago that I need to go into the class, and work with

> the class and the teacher. I encourage the teacher and say, “This will work, teacher, we can use this activity. You, teacher, have time to make materials, or we can use what we have, and we can put the idea into practice.” This way I see that the teacher is putting into practice what I suggest.

Another member of the USAER team stated:

> The directors of the five *primarias* [elementary schools] say that we have to work in a different way and include special education. Because now some bulletin is delivered to the school stating that, for example, this year all of the children will be integrated. Total integration. But no one says how. One thing is to tell regular classroom teachers that they are the persons who have to implement integration and another is to tell them how, to train them, to give them orientation. At least in my school, this year, we have left time during the meetings of the Consejo Técnico Escolar [School Advisory Board] to talk about curricular adaptation, how to do it, and the integration is not proposed as an adaptation but as a way to work with the children.

These self-reports about the USAER role and their working relationships with schools in the two sites of our study reflect a lack of uniformity in function and practice. This lack of uniformity has resulted in disparate reports by team members. One concern frequently mentioned was the problem of adjusting the curriculum to meet the needs of the children with special educational needs who cannot cope with the regular curriculum. Making these adjustments has been a constant frustration for the regular classroom teacher since curriculum adjustments have never been precisely defined. Does the regular classroom teacher give the same material but alter its level to meet the child’s abilities, or does the teacher alter the content? And what happens at the moment of the final exams at the end of the year? During these exams, itinerant supervisors go from school to school to help the directors and supervise the final exams, which determine (if the parents agree) the academic status of children for the following school year. The supervisors, who have never been directly involved in the whole integration process, expect every child to pass the same exam. If a student does not pass, the child must be re-evaluated; what should happen to such children who are being integrated? No one knows.

When it comes to educating children with special needs, Giné (2000) explains that two basic principles exist: “The focus is educational and takes individual differences into account. The teacher needs to identify the learning styles, learning potential, needs and talents of every student to be able to design different teaching strategies” (p. 47). It is important for the teacher to recognize that children who experience difficulties present what Giné calls deficit factors and that these factors indicate possible special needs. She

comments, "The teacher needs to realize that these deficit factors are not the only variables that a teacher must consider to be able to understand the special needs of her/his students with a difficulty" (p. 47).

Teachers who have worked in a traditional school model most of their professional lives are now being asked to shift from an exclusive to an inclusive model. They still hold on to the belief that a specialist trained in the area should know the special strategies required to teach children with learning difficulties and that it is the specialist's responsibility to do so in a separate classroom. These traditional teachers expressed that they themselves do not have the necessary training, and due to a lack of knowledge, they have no idea how to proceed with special needs children.

In explaining the role of a special education teacher entering a regular classroom to help a student, a USAER team member commented:

> I have entered a classroom to work with a child that a teacher has identified as having a learning difficulty. The expectation of the teacher is that the student must learn the material at the level of their current grade placement. For these children, this is unrealistic. We work with them according to their needs and in agreement with what the child needs to learn at that time. The teacher in this case is adamant that the student needs to learn the content that his peers are learning.

The school year is very systemized in terms of how and when the general education curriculum is provided. Every teacher teaches the same curricular content at the same time during the school year. For this reason, as reflected in the statement above, some teachers focus on content and are not sensitive to differences in abilities and learning styles.

The USAER team members are also responsible for those children identified with special educational needs (students who demonstrate learning difficulties regardless of whether or not they have a disability), and this adds to their caseload. These children require significant or alternative activities and materials to meet the academic objectives of the curriculum since they are falling behind. Students with an identified disability may receive services provided throughout the year if they complete formal documentation called the *Documento Individual de Adecuación Curicular* [Individual Document for Curricular Adaptations]. It is essentially an individualized educational plan for the child and contains short-term and long-term objectives with specific methods to be used to teach the child.

Collaboration/Planning

Obviously, if USAER members have limited time, collaboration is difficult. Regular classroom teachers in Guanajuato reported that although the school director provided a room, the USAER team and the teachers only met once during the year. Other teachers reported that they met with the team

during the period scheduled for physical education, but met infrequently and only for a few minutes at a time. The USAER team members complained that they have limited time to meet with teachers because of the different school schedules (morning and afternoon sessions). Many teachers work two shifts each day, leaving little time for planning or collaboration. When the USAER team member arrives at the school, the teachers are departing for their next shift, which at best gives them only about 15 minutes to talk about specific children and recommendations. One team reported that it had 2 hours a week to meet and plan, but it had only met once during the year.

Since most teachers in Mexico City and Guanajuato had experienced 1 year or more of the integration model, we had expected positive changes in their viewpoints and actions. However, one special education teacher believed that for both sides, it has not been an easy path. This teacher remarked that regular classroom teachers had a new system of integration imposed on them, which naturally posed challenges. For the special education teachers, change also was inevitable. They feared that the children they were serving would find integration a debilitating experience. It has not been easy for special educators to pinpoint the skills a child would need in order to move from a segregated special education setting to a regular classroom. In the opinion of one special education teacher, the regular classroom teacher is better prepared than special educators to succeed in the integration program; nevertheless, it has been more work for the regular classroom teacher. In a few cases as a part of their collaboration, the regular classroom teachers will share their lesson plans and materials with the special education teacher, who in turn will review it and provide some additional recommendations and strategies to make the curriculum more accessible to special needs students.

Our study shows that some regular classroom teachers may resist integration due to personal biases. One regular classroom teacher remarked that she had been in a meeting with representatives of the teachers union and had heard teachers shouting about children with disabilities, saying that regular classroom teachers had studied to be able to work with "normal" children, not children with disabilities. Another regular classroom teacher answered that there is more acceptance of working with special needs children than existed 2 years ago. Still, she believes many regular classroom teachers think of the medical model when a special needs child is in the classroom, viewing that student as a "sick child":

> The CAM students who are now being integrated should be treated differently. We say to ourselves that we are going to integrate as many children as possible. Another problem is that we make firm decisions that we are going to do some things differently from the regular classroom teacher, and we finish doing the same thing as the regular classroom teacher. We fill the children with content-based material.

One regular classroom teacher mentioned the problem of seeing the same reality, that is, what the special education teachers perceive and what the regular education teachers perceive are often two different things. Consequently, although many children are integrated into the regular classroom, they are not integrated into the everyday activities of the classroom.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of our focus group interviews reveal that the reality of educational integration is an unchanged reality. We thought that with more experience with integration, we would perceive positive changes in attitude, as well as more skill in the implementation of the programs. We thought that the special education and the regular education classroom teachers would be able to articulate their doubts and would be able to work together in greater harmony after some years of experience. We imagined that parents of children with special educational needs would perceive the advantages of regular education for their children instead of fearing that as a result of being integrated, their children's education would be diminished or that students without special needs would harm their children. We imagined that the fearful protests of parents of mainstream students would dissipate. This transformation has not yet occurred.

Findings from our study indicate that a lack of teacher preparation for educational integration is, and continues to be, pervasive in the educational profession (Bunch, Lupart, & Brown, 1997; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). As noted by Edmunds (2000), "Teachers have many concerns about the overall concept. . . . However, teachers have identified, in no uncertain terms, that their overwhelming concern is about their lack of skills and training to carry out their professional duties" (p. 14). It would appear that the move toward educational integration has been thrust upon the educational system without the proper preparation or training.

The practice of placing special educators in positions for which they are not qualified continues and does not add to the confidence that the regular classroom teacher must place in the special education teacher. Former classroom teachers who find themselves members of USAER teams add to the difficulties of defining roles and responsibilities. Regular educators expect that all members of the USAER teams will be experts qualified to help with problems as well as assist in modifying curriculum to meet the needs of special needs students. The communication and knowledge gaps can only be eliminated with clear instructions for placement of personnel and an elimination of unreasonable expectations. Additional training workshops, at regular intervals, with ongoing support would help to alleviate many of the problems. The professional development sessions could be collaborative training sessions for regular and special education personnel so that they could voice

their concerns over operational misunderstandings in the program. Administrative support for these changes was provided at the front end of this process, but little program evaluation has occurred since its implementation. Regular sessions with parents would also improve the communication and resolve many doubts about program services and functions.

Believing in educational integration does not guarantee transformation of educational practices. Resistance to change, but above all, lack of preparation and an unwillingness to include regular classroom and special education teachers in the planning stage condemn these commendable efforts to failure. Delivering special education support to all students with disabilities in a manner that begins with the assumption of regular-class placement represents a fundamental change for many schools (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998). School reform suggests that special educators must play an important part in the ongoing discussions (Lily, 1987; Sage & Burrello, 1994). Hargreaves (1997) points to some barriers that prevent change. He states that:

> The reasons for the change are not clearly understood by the actors who must suffer the change; the change is either too broad or too specific; the pace is too fast or too slow; resources are insufficient to implement the change; the key actors are not committed to the change; parents oppose the change because they are not involved in the collaboration; the leaders are either too controlling, too ineffectual or use the change to further themselves; the change is not related to other initiatives. (p. viii)

Since this investigation has been process centered, we have been able to perceive change, albeit slow, not only in the movement toward a fuller integration of students with special needs into the regular classroom, fulfilling the letter of the law, but also movement toward fulfilling the spirit of the law. Both special educators and regular classroom teachers are beginning to see that a disability does not necessarily mean an important difference in academic achievement, and both special and regular educators are beginning to see the advantages of a close collaboration that is beneficial to the child in the classroom and facilitates their work as educators. Nevertheless, work remains to be done.

Perhaps we must return to Step 1 to be able to implement successful programs that produce satisfied parents and teachers who can work together to benefit children with special needs, and, above all, a community of children learning. It appears that a careful and thoughtful preparation would have obviated many of the difficulties we face in Mexico.

Our research leads us to believe in the universal application of our results and conclusions. Regardless of the country, the problems faced by professionals who are working to change attitudes and policies are the same

problems and require similar strategies to resolve them. These strategies must begin with educational practices that include parents and teachers during the initial planning stage. Parents have rights and expectations, and they are a critical part of the process. Expectations should not include overworking professionals. Assignments should be realistic. An important step in our case would be to assure that the professionals who are asked to solve difficult problems have the requisite skills and training to be able to do just that. Above all, an assessment of the situation should include the resources available in every case; it is better not to make promises that cannot be kept. Children, the world over, have the right to expect the best education that their country can provide. We hope that the effort to give all children access to the same educational opportunities will result in more productive citizens in whatever society in which they live.

Given that the results of this study are consistent with the literature, it appears clear that the training and preparation of teachers for inclusive classrooms has not kept pace with the rhetoric of inclusion. Empty rhetoric must be replaced by thoughtful actions if we hope to implement successful educational integration.

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