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## Reflections on Two Pathways Towards Educating Students with Extensive Support Needs

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### Abstract

Students with extensive support needs (ESN) have a right to a high-quality education focused on ensuring success and inclusion within integrated environments. In this paper, the author juxtaposes two hypothetical approaches for educating for students with ESN, against which educational professionals can compare their current educational programming. The author then presents three areas in which efforts at disrupting poor quality education programming for students with ESN might be directed including (a) inclusion-oriented practice, (b) commitment to high quality instruction, and (c) uncompromising teacher preparation and support.

*Keywords:* extensive support needs, inclusive practices, educational programming

In the United States, all students are promised a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) regardless of the qualities and experiences comprising their uniqueness. This promise was built upon decades of policy and tireless advocacy, and though imperfectly kept, it serves as a cornerstone in framing inclusive communities. This promise also extends to students with the most extensive support needs (ESN) and their families. The term ESN is used, though imprecise, to center the importance of programming and supports in the lives of persons historically referred to as having severe disabilities (Thompson et al., 2009). These students often receive special education services under the eligibility categories of intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities and, in some cases, have other support needs (Taub et al., 2017; e.g., physical disabilities, sensory impairments). They often require comprehensive teacher, peer, and environmental supports to access educational and social opportunities available to their peers without ESN (Pennington et al., 2023). Like their peers, students with ESN have been shown to benefit from access to a FAPE

in numerous areas including but not limited to academics (Cannella-Malone et al., 2021), social development (Simacek et al., 2018), behavior regulation (Lory et al., 2020), and self-determination (Burke et al., 2020).

While the promise of FAPE has been realized, at least in part, in many educational spaces, data indicate that many students with ESN still do not experience high quality educational programming (Kurth et al., 2016; Pennington & Courtade, 2015; Zagona et al., 2022). Most of these students spend their instructional day segregated from their peers (Brock et al., 2018; Kleinert et al., 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024), many in receipt of instruction on curricula misaligned with demands of integrated environments (i.e., those comprised of persons with and without disabilities; Ruppert et al., 2023). Students with ESN often passively experience the educational environment with few meaningful opportunities to respond (Kurth et al., 2016; Pennington & Courtade, 2015) and in some cases, no functional communication system with which to fully participate during instructional activities (Kearns et al., 2011). They

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may experience the presentation of academic content but with limited opportunities to practice and acquire targeted skills (Pennington & Courtade, 2015). Further, even though researchers have established evidence-based practices for educating students with ESN, many of these students likely experience instructional practices that are ineffective or not supported by research evidence (Hamrick et al., 2022; Knight et al. 2018). Some experience potentially harmful practices (i.e., aversives, restraints: Westling et al., 2010).

The gap between the common educational experiences of students with ESN and what has been promised is concerning, especially considering the persistence of efforts by persons with disabilities, their families, educational professionals, and researchers to improve the quality of educational experiences for persons with ESN (Pennington & Travers, 2024). The field has identified several barriers to addressing this seemingly intractable problem including persistent teacher shortages and challenges retaining highly trained professionals (Sutcher et al., 2019), inadequate teacher preparation in essential areas (Pennington et al., 2021), existing general and special educator perceptions (Agran et al., 2020), and systemic bias towards exclusion of students with ESN (Dukes & Berlingo, 2020). Together, these interrelated barriers present a formidable mirroring of efforts to ensure students with ESN receive the programming they deserve.

Given the difficulty of navigating these complex barriers and the urgency towards meeting the needs of students with ESN, educational professionals (e.g., teachers, teacher support personnel, related service providers, administrators, researchers) may find themselves implementing programs in reaction to the immediate demands of the environment and astray from paths towards the most meaningful outcomes for their students, essentially navigating around small trees while losing their path through the forest. There is a need to call the field back to that path; one that directs the educational support of learners towards agency in the construction of their own enviable lives (Turnbull, 2010) as members of self-selected communities. There is urgency in righting the ship given that the programming and supports we provide have direct impacts on the quality of the lives of one of the most underrepresented and disenfranchised populations of students and because of other factors potentially chipping away at public education and its inherent protections (e.g., teacher shortages [Billingsley & Bettini, 2019], school choice initiatives [Berends, 2021], insufficient teacher preparation [Ruppar et al., 2016], persistent federal underfunding [Kolbe et al., 2023], recent federal dismantling of Diversity Equity and Inclusion [DEI] initiatives [The White House, 2025]). It is concerning that our time to finally get public education right for our students may be limited.

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## TWO COMPETING PATHWAYS

In considering the current and future trajectories of educational programs for students with ESN, it might be helpful to frame reflection around two competing analogs or potential pathways, a “high road” and an “end of the road” approach to educational service delivery. The names for these analogs are imperfect, but each carry with them existing meanings suited to this discussion. The term “high road” is associated with an ethical pathway taken when confronted with a complex situation or context whereas “end of the road” refers to a point beyond which progress cannot continue (Oxford University Press n.d.). It is my hope that the selection of these familiar terms will assist readers in comparing tapeproachonestrastingfurther described below. The following discussion is not intended to supplant decades of scholarly examination and, in many cases, vigorous debate regarding where and how to educate students with ESN (e.g., Agran et al., 2020; Ayers et al., 2011; Courtade et al., 2012; Fuchs, 2024) but to offer a simplified framework with which to view several complex and interconnected issues.

The high road approach is characterized as a person-centered approach in which a multidisciplinary team of professionals listens to the story of an individual, learns their preferences and goals, elevates their voice, and works collaboratively with the individual and others to identify support needs and design specialized intervention or instruction and other supports (Shogren et al., 2016; Zagona, 2023). Within this aspirational approach, professionals are highly competent in the delivery of specialized instructional supports, knowledgeable of the current research related to these supports, and use progress monitoring to make programming decisions (Brownell et al., 2010; Heward, 2003). Most importantly, the high road approach does not center service delivery within a single specialized location but directs assessment and intervention supports at getting individuals to the work of constructing their own lives within typical settings, routines, and activities “as quickly as possible.” This approach assumes that a meaningful life within integrated communities is possible and engenders the spirit of the landmark Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It carries forward the vision of early parent advocates and their allies that compelled the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

In contrast, the “end of the road” approach for students with ESN is framed around service delivery provided when there is “nowhere else to go” for a learner or when it has been deemed their support needs preclude a capacity for agency and success within integrated settings, routines, and activities. This approach in educating students with ESN is characterized by persistent segregation in educational settings and exclusion from experiences and opportunities afforded to students without ESN (Brock, 2018; Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Kurth et al., 2016). This approach emphasizes accommodation over instruction because its arbiters perceive students with ESN cannot learn skills to enact agency or experience success in typical environments. These reduced expectations for students, may in turn, engender low expectations and accountability for teaching quality. Unfortunately, and in many cases, the end of the road approach remains for students with ESN compliant with letter of IDEA, particularly stipulations related to the least restrictive environment and the removal of a student from general education when deemed, and sometimes assumed, by an IEP team they are not making progress even with specially designed instruction and supports (Giangreco, 2020; McCabe et al., 2020; Wehmeyer et al., 2021).

It is likely that many educational professionals leave their preparation programs oriented towards implement

ing a practice consistent with the high road approach, earnest in their intent to improve the lives of students with ESN. This approach is consistent with the high leverage and evidence-based practices likely, and hopefully, prescribed in their training programs (Hume et al., 2021; Pennington et al., 2023). Unfortunately, these best of intentions are often not fully realized, and many educators may find themselves shaped towards the less desirable path of end of the road programming within consistently under-resourced systems. Once on this path, educators may find it difficult to reorient their practice as existing school and classroom contingencies continually work to diminish teaching capacity. They may experience limited support and the unavailability of resources necessary to enact high quality programs or find themselves insufficiently prepared to respond to new and complex learning and behavior support challenges (Azano & Tackett, 2018; Jury et al., 2021). Over time, professionals entrenched in poor instructional delivery may find dissatisfaction and ultimately, burn out: leaving the classroom and often the field (Henry et al., 2011). Perhaps even worse, professionals unsure of how to change in such contexts may simply persist and negatively impact the trajectory of generations of students with ESN.

## RE-ORIENTING OURSELVES

Educational professionals may find themselves aligned somewhere between the poles described above, either on approach towards better programming, in decline, or unable to move. Those in positions of educator training, support, and technical assistance must find ways to lift educators from the nefarious contingencies shackling them to less effective practices, to optimistically remove barriers and guide them towards not merely understanding but actively implementing better practice, and to encourage them in taking one step at a time towards becoming the educators they originally envisioned. They must acknowledge that educational professionals do not choose to implement ineffective or harmful practices, but that a teacher’s practice is shaped through their interaction with their teaching environment which includes students, teacher educators, administrators, coaches, and colleagues. These environments also are influenced by school resources, policies, and cultures presenting complex professional demands and reinforcing some teaching behaviors over others (Bettini et al., 2020; Pennington, 2017). Teacher support personnel must further acknowledge that their own behavior and practice in supporting educators on the front line are also shaped by similar environmental forces. In short, the greatest problem facing

those committed to the education of students with ESN is not ineffective educators, but the complex environments that have shaped and influenced their practice. The field needs to be hard on that problem, not the countless individuals showing up each day to teach (Friman, 2021).

Further, those in direct contact with students must continuously reflect on their practice and its relation to student outcomes. As the quality of their work has direct implications for students' future safety, independence, and overall quality of life; they must be committed to transparency related to the efficacy of their programs and then to continuous improvement (Heward, 2003). This action will require disrupting patterns of less effective teaching behaviors by accessing frequent professional development, changing teaching practices and the environments that support them, and continuously reflecting on their current practice and the success of efforts at their personal behavior change (Pennington, 2017). For some, it may evoke discomfort as they realize they may need to ask for help in doing better by their students or challenge others to do so.

The levers needed to change teaching environments are as complex and diverse as the teaching force. They include implementation drivers that address both personnel competency and organizational structures (Fixsen & Blase, 2008). Further, they must be identified and engaged within institutions of higher education, state and educational agencies, school buildings, and classrooms. Fortunately, researchers have established frameworks, tools, and practices for tackling change at multiple levels (e.g., implementation science [Odom et al., 2020], technical assistance [Clark et al., 2004], multi-level coaching [Wood et al., 2016]). These existing resources can be leveraged to disrupt current environments that fail to support teachers on their path towards high quality practice for students with ESN and to facilitate positive change.

Lifting educational professionals to the high road and supporting those already making their way towards high quality practice for students with ESN, will require substantial changes across multiple fronts and will likely require a retooling or reconceptualization of many existing practices related to service delivery (Ruppar et al., 2023). Given the complexity of such efforts and the competing priorities and voices within the work, it might be helpful to organize the efforts toward change into three essential areas: (a) inclusion-oriented practice, (b) commitment to high quality instruction, and (c) uncompromising teacher preparation and support. Though these areas of focus may not capture all the work required to improve outcomes for students with ESN and their teach-

ers, they do cast a wide net and are essential to traveling the high road.

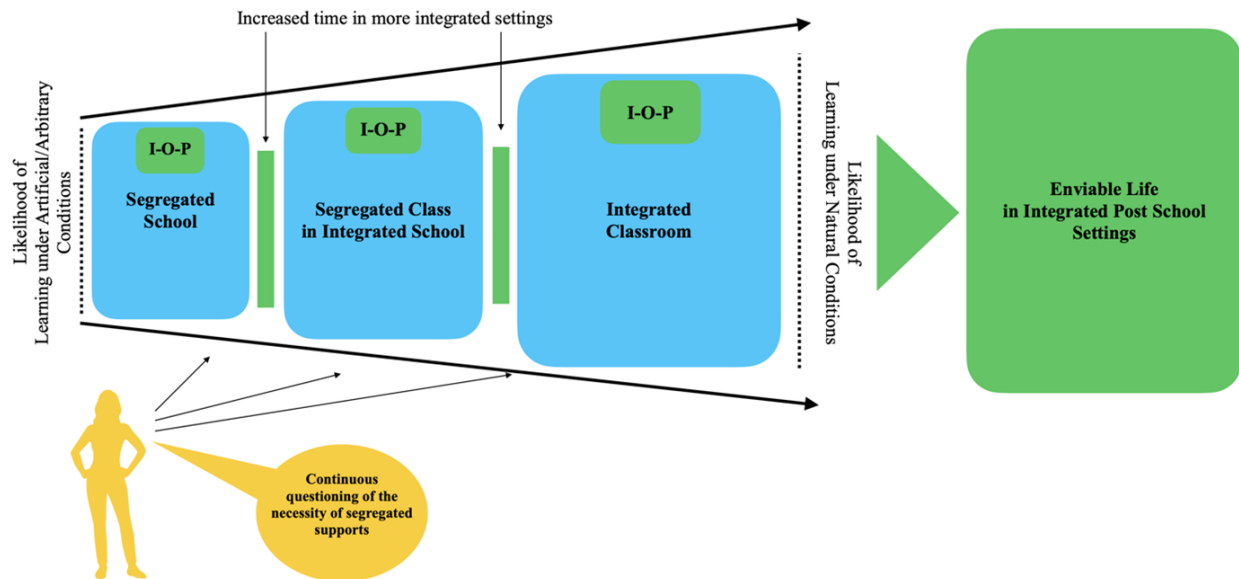
### *Inclusion-oriented Practice*

All students deserve to experience belonging and independence within communities comprised of persons with and without disabilities (Agran et al., 2020; Wehmeyer et al., 2021). The careful consideration of instructional context in the design of educational activities is essential to promoting independence and success within these complex integrated environments (Ruppar et al., 2023; Stokes & Baer, 1977). Students with ESN who spend most of their school day in tightly controlled and segregated settings likely will be ill-prepared to respond to the frequently changing demands of integrated school, employment, and community environments (Mazzotti et al., 2021). At the same time, students with ESN educated in integrated settings may not experience success without thoughtfully designed specialized instruction and supports.

Inclusive practice has long been considered a desirable feature of educational programming for students with ESN (e.g., Meyer et al., 1987; Shogren & Wehmeyer, 2014). These practices have been defined as those implemented and producing positive outcomes in general education settings (Fisher et al., 1995). Over the last several decades, researchers have demonstrated that students with ESN can benefit from several practices implemented in general education settings (e.g., embedded instruction [Johnson et al., 2004], AAC modeling [Biggs et al., 2018], peer supports [Carter et al., 2017]). Unfortunately, many students never experience these inclusive practices as they spend most of their time in segregated settings where they may be deemed to experience exclusive practice (Brock, 2018).

It is important to note that the use of terms inclusive or exclusive practice presents a false dichotomy, potentially obfuscating paths for students in both integrated and segregated settings towards meaningful inclusive outcomes. It may be more appropriate to employ the term inclusion-oriented practices, derived from Giangreco and colleagues' (2021) use of inclusion-oriented schools, as a broader framework for the promotion of inclusive outcomes by educators serving students with ESN across the continuum of education placements. In contrast to the term inclusive practices, which may be considered to only be experienced by students within general education settings, inclusion-oriented practice demands that educational programming for *all* students with ESN be



**Figure 1.***Inclusion-oriented practice (I-O-P) and LRE*

directed at inclusive outcomes regardless of their current placement.

Inclusion-oriented practice is set against traditional “either/or” arguments regarding placement and instruction (Giangreco, 2020; Ryndak et al., 2010) by positioning all efforts across all settings at increasing students’ agency, belonging, and success within integrated settings (See Figure 1). It then requires educators to orient all existing evidence-based and high leverage practices at achieving those outcomes. For example, educators currently serving students in special schools might engage in inclusive-oriented practice by arranging instruction to promote generalization, teaching self-management, and providing increasing opportunities to practice skills in integrated community settings. Educators currently serving students in segregated classrooms within their home schools, might increase opportunities for students to practice communicative interactions with same age peers, develop peer support networks, and acquire academic skills aligned with the general education curriculum. Finally, educators serving students with ESN in general education settings can extend the strategies described above with the use of peer supports, embedded instruction, and curricular adaptations. Most importantly, inclusion-oriented practice requires educators to look beyond their success in teaching skills aligned with the IEP or general education curriculum, but to also measure their performance against each student’s ultimate goals

regarding inclusion and belonging within integrated communities. Inclusion-oriented practice positions segregated educational experiences as temporary and requires educators, both general and special education, to be constantly questioning and evaluating their necessity. Consistent with the high road approach, its strategies and supports are continually evolving to ensure that students’ personal goals always remain in view.

### COMMITMENT TO HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION

Those on the high road work to ensure students with ESN are learning continuously throughout their school experience. Given the high road is intended to lead to a self-determined life beyond the school, it requires educational professionals to be ever focused on increasing student skill repertoires and to be experts in overcoming both environmental and student barriers to learning and success in a range of integrated environments (Ruppar et al., 2022; Simpson, 2004). Researchers have demonstrated that students with ESN can acquire myriad skills when receiving specially designed instruction involving the deliberate manipulation of teaching variables (i.e., instructional presentations, reinforcing and corrective feedback) to facilitate learning (Crawford et al., 2024; Gulboy et al., 2023). Over the last 4 decades, research teams across the world have thoroughly evaluated the use

**Table 1.***Examples of Inclusion-Oriented Practice across Settings*

<b>Segregated School</b>	<b>Segregated Classroom</b>	<b>General Education Settings</b>
Teacher and speech pathologist use time delay and modeling to teach students to request preferred experiences and protest aversive ones.	Paraeducator uses prompts to facilitate peer interactions during integrated small group lessons.	Teacher trains a general educator to use aided language modeling during lessons for a student using a speech generating device.
Teacher supports students to self-monitor and evaluate their own behavior in school and community settings.	Teacher uses video modeling to prepare students for learning routines in the general education classrooms (e.g., turn & talk).	Teacher and vision specialist adapts literacy materials to ensure accessibility.
Teacher and parents work to develop supports for increased participation in a child's faith-based community.	Teacher uses assistive technology, sentence frames, and response prompting to teach students to write about a story as required of their peers in general education classrooms.	Teacher implements the Good Inclusion Game (Dillenburger & Coyle, 2019) in her general education classroom to facilitate belonging.
Behavior analyst develops behavior support plans with procedures for fading supports to a level that can be maintained by those in less segregated settings.	Teacher performs ecological inventories in a student's community to identify essential skills needed for access and independence within that community.	General education teacher takes an increasing role in IEP and support planning.

of systematic instructional procedures (e.g., task analysis, carefully planned presentation of instructional materials, response prompting, data-based decision making [Crawford et al., 2024; Tekin-Iftar et al., 2024]) across skill areas (e.g., academic, communication, daily living, employment [Spooner et al., 2012; Tapp et al., 2021]), instructional arrangements (e.g., repeated trial, embedded instruction, group instruction [Jameson et al., 2012; Ledford et al., 2008]), settings (general and special education classrooms, community, employment, home [Bross et al., 2021; Jameson et al., 2012]) and change agents (e.g., general and special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related service providers, peers, parents [Carter et al., 2016; Nevill et al., 2018]). Their findings have resoundingly supported the centering of these practices within programming for students with ESN. Many of these procedures have been deemed evidence-based practice (Hume et al., 2021) and been incorporated into commercially available teaching programs and curricula for students with ESN (e.g., GoWrite [Pennington et al., 2021]; Early Literacy Skills Builder [Browder et al., 2012]).

Systematic instruction is a data-based approach in which students' progress is continually monitored, and

changes are made in response to performance (Collins, 2022; Wolery et al., 1995). This ethically sound approach reduces the likelihood that students with ESN will be exposed to ineffective instruction for extended periods of time, especially when these data are made "public" to students' families and the members of their educational team. Given its demonstrated efficacy and capacity to protect learners from poor programming, systematic instruction should be emphasized in schools and teacher education programs. There are many resources available to guide educators in its use and adoption (See Table 2).

### ***Focus on Meaningful skills***

Given that students with ESN will likely leave school with smaller skill repertoires than their peers without ESN, educational teams that include the students they intend to serve, must come together to prioritize instructional targets. Consistent with a high road approach, they must select targets that are useful now but also in a range of practices for learners with autism creating meaningful lives their future environments (Brown et al., 1979). There has been much discourse regarding the focus of

**Table 2.**  
*Resources for Systematic Instruction*

Resource	Description
Book: <i>Systematic instruction for students with moderate to severe disabilities</i> (Collins, 2022)	Comprehensive textbook on systematic instruction, includes plans, data sheet, and protocols for implementing response prompting procedures
Article: <i>The application of time delay to teach functional and academic skills to students with extensive support needs</i> (Spooner et al., 2024)	Article in <i>Teaching Exceptional Children</i> describing the application of time delay procedures
Article: <i>Teaching with the system of least prompts</i> (Ault & Griffen, 2013)	Article in <i>Teaching Exceptional Children</i> describing the application of the system of least prompts
Website: <a href="https://ebip.vkcsites.org/prompting-procedures/">https://ebip.vkcsites.org/prompting-procedures/</a>	Website focused on supports for young children with video examples and descriptions of teaching procedures including prompting procedures
Website: <a href="https://autisminternetmodules.org/">https://autisminternetmodules.org/</a>	Website with training modules related to implementing a range of practices for learners with autism and low incidence disabilities
Website: <a href="https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules/">https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules/</a>	Website with training modules related to implementing a range of practices for learners with autism

instruction for students with ESN, often centered around the relative importance of instruction on academic or essential life skills. For example, Ayres et al. (2011) argued that a shift in focus to grade level academic standards for students with ESN might leave them unprepared for the demands of community engagement, employment, and independent living. In response, Courtade and colleagues (2012) suggested that a standard-based curriculum might provide students with ESN a richer educational experience and greater understanding of the world around them and the opportunities therein. The argument for teaching academic skills to students with ESN has been bolstered by an increasing body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of behavioral teaching practices in teaching academic skills previously considered unattainable for some students with ESN (e.g., Toews et al., 2021). These advances have increased expectations for academic learning in schools for students with ESN and in some cases, increased opportunities for students with ESN to learn academic skills alongside their peers without disabilities (e.g., Hunt et al., 2020; Wakeman et al., 2022).

Students with ESN should have access to high quality academic instruction to share experiences in and an understanding of the same world as their peers without

ESN. Further, they must have the opportunity to acquire those academic skills most related to independence and agency in their current and future lives (e.g., literacy, problem solving). Despite the importance of academic instruction aligned to the general education curriculum, educators must continue to prioritize skills that are critical to increasing students’ opportunities to construct meaningful lives beyond the classroom (Ruppar et al., 2023). Teachers, along with their students and their families, can identify instructional priorities that promote student agency but also improve their performance in academic contexts (Browder et al., 2009). For example, teachers might help a student make requests for support or additional information while reading grade level adapted texts or learn what materials are needed for a lesson from observing peers during a science lesson.

Though educational priorities should be determined by an educational team considering the unique needs of each learner (Zagona, 2023), some skill areas might be more heavily weighted when identifying instructional priorities and goals for students with ESN. Teams should focus on pivotal skill areas as their acquisition will improve student performance in nearly all aspects of daily living and a failure to teach these skills will serve as a

barrier to participation in integrated settings (Cooper et al., 2020). The most important of these skill areas is social communication. Students not taught to emit the most basic communication skills will likely struggle in demonstrating their understanding of academic content, developing meaningful relationships, enacting agency in their daily interactions, and protecting themselves from harm (Brady et al., 2016; Sigafos & Gervarter, 2019). Fortunately, the research literature is replete with evidence that students with ESN can acquire basic and more complex communication skills, often in a relatively short period of time (e.g., Pennington et al., 2016, Snell et al., 2010, Tapp et al., 2021).

Schools must prioritize effective communication as an outcome for all students, and allocate resources in training, materials, and supports towards ensuring students graduate with the competencies to navigate the complex social demands outside of the classroom (Ganz, 2015). For students with ESN and limited conventional communication skills, every member of the educational team must center communication as a focus of the instructional day. This will require the team to not abdicate responsibility for communication programming to a single expert or discipline (e.g., speech language pathology, assistive technology, applied behavior analysis) but to promote child-centered and discipline agnostic communication programming that is intensive, comprehensive, preferred by the learner, and supported by the entire educational team (Bruce & Bashinski, 2017).

Teachers also must prioritize skills that may decrease student support needs across their lifespan, especially those solely directed by others. Again, students' unique instructional targets must be identified through careful consideration of their existing repertoires and the demands of current and future environments (Brown et al., 1979), but educational teams must prioritize skills related to self-determination including self-management, problem solving, and advocacy. These skills must be taught and assessed under conditions like those students will encounter outside of the classroom.

## UNCOMPROMISING TEACHER PREPARATION AND SUPPORT

Given the powerful relationship between teaching quality and student success (Darling-Hammond, 2000), it is essential that educational professionals are sufficiently trained and supported to ensure students with ESN receive the education they deserve. This support needs to include special education teachers and the general edu-

cation teachers whose doors by law are required to be open to students with ESN. In many parts of the United States, the teaching force for students with ESN has been diminished as fewer teachers enter the classroom through traditional routes and others, in response to worsening teaching conditions, vacate their positions (Bettini et al., 2020).

Further, the quality of preparation for some special education teachers, may be reduced as colleges of education create cross categorical programs that present candidates with a wider breath of content and fewer opportunities to practice and thus, acquire critical strategies (Ruppar et al., 2016). For example, students might receive a single course on instructional methods or behavior supports in which they complete a final project related to assessment and development of a plan. They may, in some cases, have an opportunity to practice or implement steps of the plan. The majority of candidates will complete the project with guidance and feedback from their instructor, receive a grade for the course, and then be deemed to have met the competency outlined in the state-approved course of study. There is then an expectation that candidates will practice these skills during student teaching experiences and then graduate prepared to implement them in their classrooms. Given the variability in teacher preparation programs and routes to certification, there is no certainty that teacher candidates will experience multiple opportunities to practice and receive feedback on critical teaching skills. This approach is problematic in light of the adage that "three data points a pattern makes" suggesting that acquisition of a skill can only be determined by observation of a pattern of performance. In the absence of observed patterns of desirable teacher behavior, programs are reduced to a model of train and hope (Stokes & Baer, 1977). Training programs must move beyond providing exposure to and engagement with critical content to ensuring the acquisition of essential teaching behaviors.

Barriers within preparation programs for teachers of students with ESN are likely reflected in data indicating some teachers are leaving their training programs without the teaching repertoires necessary to educate their students. For example, in recent series of studies researchers found that many teachers leave their programs ill-prepared to teach critical communication skills to their students with ESN (Andzik et al., 2023; Pennington et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2022). Similarly, researchers have reported that practicing teachers often have limited knowledge regarding essential evidence-based practices for use in the classroom (Hamrick et al., 2022; Knight et



al., 2018; Lukins et al., 2023; Morin et al., 2021). These findings are especially troubling given a reported lack of access to high quality professional development for some practicing teachers (Tagavi et al., 2024). Teacher preparation programs and those in roles of technical assistance and support must find new ways to elevate training and ultimately, the expertise of the teaching force.

## RE-ORIENTING PERSONNEL PREPARATION IN ESN

As described above, the current educational landscape is complex and for many, seemingly characterized by instability. Major inputs within the education system impacting students with ESN are potentially fading (e.g., personnel, expertise, legal protections). In addition, the field has observed increased movement towards federal funding of segregated private or charter schools and students' part time removal from schools for "medically necessary" therapeutic services (Stevenson et al., 2024). Though some students with ESN may benefit from choices, often not made by them, but by parents, educators, and providers to deliver services outside of public schools, these benefits must be weighed against the effects of further segregation from persons without disabilities.

The contingencies behind these shifts are powerful and rooted in both carefully constructed and inadvertently shaped narratives about how, where, when, and to whom high quality education should be provided (e.g., Giangreco, 2020; Kauffman et al., 2015). These narratives are likely to impact educational decisions made at federal, state, and local levels regarding the education of students with ESN. Personnel preparation programs are positioned to play a powerful role in directing narratives to include the importance of inclusion-oriented and teaching focused programs to the quality of life for their neighbors with ESN. For example, personnel preparation programs (e.g., general and special education teacher, behavior analyst, speech-language pathologist) might introduce incoming students to the problem of the persistent segregation and low-quality education of individuals with ESN, and frame their training as focused on disrupting, and supporting students with ESN and their families in disrupting, unnecessary segregationist practices. In this way, inclusion or inclusion-oriented practice is not a thing introduced to personnel within a few courses, but the "thing" around which programs are focused.

Faculty in personnel preparation programs are encouraged to identify and narrow their focus on essential skills related to improving outcomes for students with

ESN (Ruppar et al., 2023) and provide multiple opportunities for students to learn about, practice, and be assessed on their performance of them. Researchers and professional organizations have identified essential teaching behaviors for those supporting students with ESN (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children, 2020; Pennington et al., 2023; Ruppar et al., 2017) and programs must find ways to prioritize those to ensure they are acquired by professionals before they enter the field. Given the variability in routes to certification (e.g., traditional, dual or cross categorical, emergency certification; Day et al., 2024), training programs will likely vary in the number of teaching behaviors they can teach to mastery (Matsko et al., 2021). In that case, programs should prioritize evidence-based teaching and behavior support practices in the context of critical skills areas (e.g., communication, self-management, literacy), methods to evaluate the effectiveness of those practices, and strategies for engaging family members and those within integrated communities in supporting the inclusion and belonging of students with ESN.

The high road approach also must involve shaping general educators' perspectives regarding their responsibility and roles in serving all students. Given the siloed nature of some colleges of education, this likely will involve leadership and faculty working together to foster interdisciplinary collaboration in developing programs that ensure both general and special education teachers are prepared to provide instructional opportunities to all students (Robison & West, 2012; Young et al., 2011). College leadership must acknowledge the persistent segregation and disenfranchisement of this population of students as they do others and commit to cultural change within their buildings. Unfortunately, the fire required to make major changes within these systems will likely fall upon special education faculty to spark. These faculty, already overburdened and often exhausted, might find it difficult to tackle another responsibility. In this case, faculty might consider the impact of their current efforts towards inclusion and redistribute some of that energy from potentially less impactful practices, like *writing a paper about it*, and initiating discussions with their college leadership and non-special education faculty. This discussion might be centered around incentivizing increased shared coursework, college wide professional development around the ESN, and opportunities for non-special education faculty to interact with learners with ESN in schools or college-based transition programs. For some readers, greater collaboration across general and special education programs might seem a lofty goal, but without

it, there is likely little hope for the broad design of educational environments that maximize opportunities for belonging and learning for all students.

Finally, and as indicated above, teachers will likely leave their preparation programs in need of continued professional growth opportunities to acquire new teaching behaviors (Hamrick et al., 2021) and to strengthen existing repertoires that mitigate those school and classroom variables working to shape teachers' practice in the direction of the end of the road approach. The provision of these opportunities will require a blurring of lines between institutions of higher education and the districts they serve. It also will require close partnerships between districts, state educational agencies, and universities and the potential crossing of funding streams towards the allocation of university faculty resources to assess the effectiveness of their training programs on their graduates' performance and when necessary, offer support when essential teacher skills are not observed in the classroom. These partnerships might produce shared coaching and technical assistance personnel who are connected to both the classroom and research community. They might result in the co-construction of new technical assistance networks that identify unique areas of teacher need, connect teachers as co-conspirators in professional growth (e.g., professional learning communities, peer coaching), and provide them multiple levels of support. This work will require a significant reshaping of existing teacher training and support dynamics between schools and IHEs in some regions and increased investments in time and resources, often at a premium for those in leadership positions within the field. However, given the skills required to support students with ESN have broad generality to other student populations, the effort and resources required to transform teacher training and support in ESN is an investment worth making.

## CONCLUSION

Despite over a half a decade of advocacy, research, and legislation focused on improving the educational experiences of students with ESN, many of these students still experience segregation, insufficient instruction, and in some cases, harm. The purpose of this paper was to facilitate reflection on the current state of educational programming for one of the most disenfranchised populations of students and to stimulate discussion regarding potential solutions. It presented several issues in the field, the majority of which are not new, and two competing analogs for service delivery models against which educational professionals might compare their current

programs. Certainly, most school programs for students with ESN will fall somewhere between these poles, but many need additional support if they are to move closer to the optimal end of the continuum we presented. The imperfect terms high road and end of the road approaches were used because they present two very different and potentially resonating narratives. Narratives, especially when supported by data, can be effective drivers of social change and powerful analogs may help educational professionals connect with and embrace systemic and programmatic shortcomings while reorienting practice towards ensuring students with ESN receive the high-quality education they deserve.

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