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# What Does “Highly Qualified” Mean for Urban Special Educators?

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In this article, the authors discuss the context of urban special education and the complexities of meeting the demands of standards-based reform in urban settings. The study presented highlights the voices of urban special educators in two large urban school districts as they navigate meeting the demands of teaching students with disabilities, and share their perceptions of their roles and responsibilities as a result of No Child Left Behind Act. Findings reveal several implications for educational policy and areas of future research in teacher quality and workplace conditions for urban special educators.

**Keywords:** *urban; special education; standards-based reform; highly-qualified*

In recent years, a great deal has been written about the complexities of schooling in urban settings (Cuban, 1989; Gordon, 2003; Haberman & Post, 1998; Kozol, 1991; Zhou, 2003). Much of what has been explored has focused primarily on the identification of problems such as underachievement and disproportionate representation, which are exacerbated within the urban context rather than examining the roots of these dilemmas through nontraditional lenses (Nygreen, 2006). Some believe that the intersection of race, culture, and socioeconomic status presents opportunities to expand understanding of the aforementioned problems as well as challenge deficit thinking models that have often found a home in America’s public schools (Delpit, 1995). Consequently, the area of urban special education has grown in prominence and has contributed to a burgeoning body of research in which scholars seek to examine the lives of those who live and teach in urban settings and provide insights which will yield positive outcomes for urban students and their families (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Fleischner, 1993; Pugach & Seidl, 1995; Voltz, 2000). Voltz and Fore (2006)

provided a framework for understanding key elements of urban special education: cultural and linguistic diversity, resource allocation, poverty, student achievement, and home–school relationships. The authors also discuss how each of these variables interrelates with standards-based reform and the inherent challenges of this intersection. By further examining these elements with attention to how current legislation exacerbates or diminishes critical issues associated with each, researchers can advance new understandings in urban special education research and promote the employment of culturally responsive and relevant practices in urban settings.

It is critical that at this juncture in time, educators and those committed to a social justice and equity agenda rally in support of urban schools that are direct targets for the standards-based reform movement. On the surface, promises of adequate yearly progress, data-based decision making, and positive student outcomes may quell persistent calls for accountability particularly in special education. However, the reality is that the political ideologies that undergird recent school reform mandates, such as providing highly qualified teachers, fail to address the roots of urban school failure. Consequently, teachers are doing more with less and the yardstick by which their success with students is measured is contrived and lacks credibility. The authors of this article explore the context of urban special education and the impact of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) on special educators. Finally, the voices of special educators in response to NCLB are shared and contribute to our understanding of their changing roles and inform future research in the area of teacher quality and program development in teacher education.

### **The Impact of Legislation on Urban Special Education**

NCLB (2001/2002) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA; 2004) mandate teacher qualifications as well as participation in state assessment and access to the general education curriculum by students with disabilities. A critical element of both is accountability that results in improved student outcomes. The extent to which legislation positively impacts student performance is mediated by contextual variables such as race, socioeconomic status, and teacher quality. What is necessary in examining the effectiveness and credibility of legislation such as NCLB on urban special education lies in a discussion of the opportunities and challenges inherent in standards-based reform for students with disabilities in urban settings and how it intersects with IDEIA.

The roles and responsibilities of special educators have changed greatly during the last 10 years (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Luft, 2008; Singh & Billingsley, 1996; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). With the increase in inclusion efforts around the country, special educators have been spending more time in general education settings facilitating learning and assisting in the delivery of instruction. In response to the changing needs in the field, teacher preparation programs for special education candidates are attempting to prepare special educators for the challenges inherent in serving diverse students often in inclusive settings with higher standards and limited resources. In addition to being knowledgeable about research-based strategies and possessing pedagogical skills critical to addressing the needs of students with special needs, many special educators must now also be content-area experts. Content-area knowledge has become a key element in the reconceptualized role of special educators. Student outcomes for all public school students, including those with special needs, is predominately measured by student performance on standardized assessments. During this time of increased calls for accountability, the participation of students with disabilities in state- and districtwide assessments have ushered in a greater emphasis on curriculum and instruction in special education and the need for collaboration between general and special educators (Booher-Jennings, 2006; Hardman & Dawson, 2008; McLaughlin & Thurlow, 2003). For many, these changes represent a paradigm shift that involves moving from a reliance on concepts such as compliance and individuality that have long guided what occurs in special education to standards and accountability, which have taken on new meaning in recent years.

A primary and overarching goal of NCLB is to ensure every child is taught by a highly qualified teacher (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). A highly qualified teacher has a minimum of a bachelor's degree from a college or university, full certification in his or her content area, and has demonstrated content area competency in the core academic subject(s) which he or she teaches. These same requirements apply to special educators who provide direct instruction in core content areas to students with disabilities who are pursuing a general diploma. In other words, special educators who serve students pursuing general education standards must be certified in both special education and the content area. For those working with students with special needs and those from the neediest of homes, there are a plethora of skills needed to effectively address the needs of students and their families, and thus certification is one of many areas that should be addressed in determining who can be characterized as "highly qualified" (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006).

McLeskey, Tyler, and Flippin (2003) conducted a review of the research on the chronic shortage of special education teachers. They found special education to be the highest need area for the 200 largest cities in the United States and a shortage area for 98% of the school districts in the nation. The U.S. Department of Education (2003) reported that 10.5% (42,513) of all individuals providing special education and related services are not fully certified resulting in approximately 722,721 students receiving instruction from teachers who are not highly qualified due to lack of full certification. These shortages are more pronounced in urban settings and are exacerbated in high-poverty schools by higher turnover rates (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996; Ingersoll, 2002).

The 2006-2007 annual report to the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) on Critical Teacher Shortage Areas (Office of Information and Reporting, Florida Department of Education, November, 2005) shows that exceptional student education (ESE) is the most critical shortage area or personnel gap for Florida. The FDOE reports that nearly one out of every five ESE teachers hired was not certified in the appropriate field indicating that these teachers will have to undergo additional professional development to obtain highly qualified status. Although much attention has been placed on accountability issues related to student achievement and teacher quality, little data exist examining the effects of these mandates on in-service teachers in general and special education teachers specifically. The expectation that special educators be certified in both special education and content areas places an increased burden on teachers as they work toward achieving the additional certifications required. Conversely, a similar expectation is not required of general education teachers who teach the multitude of students with mild/moderate disabilities that are served in general education settings.

Anecdotal data indicate a possibility that special education teachers certified in both ESE and content areas may choose to abandon special education due to the added stressors associated with paperwork, compliance, and lack of parity in coteach settings (Dieker & Murawski, 2003; Keefe & Moore, 2004). Based on the aforementioned data, there is an urgency to create policies and structures that address the unique needs of urban special educators, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Brownell, Hirsch, & Seo, 2004). Further, examining contextual variables contributing to teachers' decisions to stay or leave teaching will greatly inform the types of resources and supports needed to counter current trends in teacher retention (Billingsley et al., 2004).

### Teacher Quality and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

The purpose of IDEA is to govern how state and local education agencies provide services to early- and school-age children across the country. Part B of IDEA that addresses school-age children includes the following key elements: discipline, disproportionality, evaluation and reevaluation, teacher quality, identification of disabilities, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), monitoring and enforcement, instructional materials, procedural safeguards, transition, and assessment (IDEA, 1997, 2001). Two areas that are directly aligned with NCLB are assessment and teacher quality (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Teacher quality as highlighted in IDEA was recently aligned with NCLB to ensure that all students in special education have access to a highly qualified special educator. The current definition of highly qualified squarely places content knowledge at the core of teacher quality while at the same time touting the merits of pedagogical content knowledge. Although families may be pleased to know that they have a highly qualified teacher providing instruction to their children, the impact of this mandate has left many urban school districts struggling to recruit and retain the best and the brightest teachers in the face of increasing demands and challenging settings.

The shortage of special educators has been a persistent problem in recent years (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell et al., 2004). Consequently, every school year vacancies for special educator positions remain open and are often filled by individuals who are not certified to teach students with special needs and may have limited experience working with these students and their families (Boe, Cook, Bobbin, & Terhanian, 1998; Ingersoll, 2002). The shortage of special educators is caused in part by the inability of teacher preparation programs to prepare an adequate number of special educators (Billingsley et al., 2004; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004) and the attrition rate of special educators, particularly those in urban settings (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Flippin, 2004). In addition, research has denoted that variables such as employment issues, working conditions, support, changing student demographics, changes in certification requirements, and demands of NCLB contribute greatly to the shortage of special educators and ultimately student performance (Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007).

Many scholars have raised concerns about what the inherent messages in standards-based reform say about what is valued in curriculum and instruction (Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Rosenberg, Sindelar, & Hardman,

2004; Thurlow, 2000). For special educators who have worked diligently to develop their knowledge and skills in working effectively with students with disabilities and are now being asked to become content-area experts and collaborative consultants, the challenges in meeting current standards have yet to yield opportunities for meaningful professional and student growth. These concerns are exacerbated in urban and poor settings where special educators have access to limited resources and supports and face tremendous scrutiny.

## Method

### Instrument

A 36-item survey was developed to examine special education teachers' perception of the impact of NCLB on the teachers, their practice, and the students they serve. Demographic information was collected including race, ethnicity, highest educational level, areas of certification, and service delivery model in which he or she currently worked. Researchers with content area knowledge on NCLB, classroom teaching, and survey development created an initial draft of the survey with 34 items. Five graduate students with classroom teaching experience reviewed the initial survey and made suggestions for the clarification of items and directions. The final instrument consisted of 36 items with 28 forced-choice items and 8 open-ended items. Participants accessed the survey online via CTL Silhouette and Flashlight Online. A Web-based survey was chosen to reduce the possibility of social desirability in their responses and diminish fear of reprisal as a result of their comments (i.e., threat of job security).

### Data Sources

Participants of the study included 223 special education teachers from two urban school districts in the southeastern United States (County A:  $n = 138$ , 61.9%; County B:  $n = 85$ , 38.1%). Participants were fairly evenly distributed among the age categories with the largest number in the 51 and older age range ( $n = 74$ , 34.1%). The number of years of teaching experience ranged from 0 to 40 years with an average of 14.1 years. The majority of the participants were White ( $n = 171$ , 79.2%) and approximately half held a master's degree ( $n = 104$ , 46.6%). In addition, most earned their teaching certificate through a traditional teacher education program ( $n = 184$ , 84%). Almost all the participants were certified in special education

( $n = 217$ , 97.8%) and 88% were certified in one or two content areas. Most had worked in one to two schools ( $n = 90$ , 41.1%) for 9 or more years ( $n = 89$ , 40.3%). Representation of school level (elementary, middle, high) was approximately equal (ranged from 26% to 33.8%) with almost 8% of the participants reporting they were currently teaching at an exceptional center. Participants also reported working in various service delivery models (coteaching:  $n = 94$ , 43.7%; self-contained:  $n = 100$ , 46.5%; resource:  $n = 73$ , 34%; collaboration consultation:  $n = 70$ , 32.6%). Data analysis consisted of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Responses to open-ended questions were coded for themes both in the aggregate and disaggregate by district. Quantitative data consisted of both descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to determine significant differences between groups.

## Findings

### Likert-Type Scale Survey Responses

Overall, although most participants reported being required to attend trainings as a result of NCLB, fewer participants reported positive changes in their instruction and receiving school support for the implementation of NCLB mandates. In fact, 60% of the participants ( $n = 129$ ) have been required to attend some professional development training related to the implementation of NCLB. Professional development opportunities included the following: content-area trainings, coteaching, standardized assessments, and strategy training all are designed to increase students' with disabilities access to the general education curriculum. Approximately, 20% of the participants reported using research-based practices on a monthly or more infrequent basis ( $n = 56$ ).

Participants responses indicate differences in opinion as to how NCLB has affected students' academic performance. Twenty-eight percent ( $n = 59$ ) of teachers reported a positive change in students' performance and 31.2% ( $n = 66$ ) reported a negative change. Approximately, 40% reported that NCLB had not lead to any changes in their students' academic performance. When asked about the impact of standardized testing on students' academic performance, most participants reported either no change ( $n = 108$ , 50.7%). The remaining teachers were fairly evenly split between a positive change in academic performance ( $n = 48$ , 22.5%) and a negative change ( $n = 57$ , 26.7%).

Participants were also asked about their satisfaction with their current school. The majority of teachers reported being satisfied ( $n = 172$ , 79.6%)

and only 6% ( $n = 13$ ) reported being unsatisfied with their current school. Approximately half the participants reported having no intention of leaving their school ( $n = 99$ , 46.5%). School level administrators were the most frequently cited reason to stay or leave a school ( $n = 132$ , 60.3% and  $n = 78$ , 36.1%, respectively). Teachers who reported that they were not going to leave their current school selected students ( $n = 99$ , 45.2%), other teachers ( $n = 92$ , 42%), distance from home ( $n = 66$ , 30.1%), salary ( $n = 61$ , 27.9%), required trainings ( $n = 24$ , 11%), and other ( $n = 53$ , 24.2%) as reasons for staying at their current school. For participants who reported they were planning on leaving their current school, the following reasons were selected: distance from home ( $n = 41$ , 19%), salary ( $n = 39$ , 18%), other teachers ( $n = 28$ , 13%), students ( $n = 28$ , 13%), required trainings ( $n = 20$ , 9.3%), and other ( $n = 57$ , 26.3%).

In addition to being asked about their satisfaction with their current schools, participants were also asked about their satisfaction with special education. More than half the teachers surveyed stated they were not planning on leaving the field of special education ( $n = 124$ , 57.4%) with most teachers stating they were satisfied with special education ( $n = 141$ , 65%). A total of 43 teachers (20%) reported they were unsatisfied with special education. The most frequently provided reason for staying in special education was students ( $n = 90$ , 42.7%) followed by school level administrators ( $n = 72$ , 34.1%), federal/state/district mandates ( $n = 66$ , 31.3%), salary ( $n = 58$ , 27.5%), other teachers ( $n = 51$ , 24.2%), required trainings ( $n = 40$ , 19%), and other ( $n = 37$ , 17.5%). The teachers who stated they were leaving the field of special education most frequently cited the federal/state/district mandates ( $n = 100$ , 47%) as the reason followed by school level administrators ( $n = 53$ , 24.9%), salary ( $n = 53$ , 24.9%), required trainings ( $n = 34$ , 16%), students ( $n = 24$ , 11.3%), other teachers ( $n = 20$ , 9.4%), and other ( $n = 53$ , 24.9%).

Chi-square tests were also computed to see whether there were differences between participants with different degrees, how they earned their certificates, their school level (e.g., elementary, middle, high, exceptional center), how their instruction has changed, whether any training is required, frequency of receiving support, use of research-based practices, feeling prepared to teach, change in academic performance due to NCLB or standardized testing, and satisfaction with school and special education. The only statistically significant finding is between how teachers earned their certificates, and if they have been required to attend trainings,  $\chi^2(2) = 6.57$ ,  $p = .038$ . Specifically, teachers who earned their certificate through an alternative certification program or do not have a certificate report that they

have not been required to attend professional development trainings as a result of NCLB more often than teachers who earned their certificate through a teacher training program.

## Qualitative Analysis of Survey Responses

Survey participants were asked three open-ended questions that were designed to gauge the extent to which NCLB has influenced the following: participants' teaching, participants' ability to deliver services, and student outcomes. In addition, participants were asked to discuss the implications of NCLB and provide a comment for state and federal policymakers. Transcripts were independently coded line-by-line by two of the researchers who then met to determine percentage of agreement (100%) on the codes. Codes were collapsed into themes based on common characteristics: teaching to the test, a push to inclusion, unrealistic expectations, and leave no special educator behind. These themes are discussed through the voices of the participants in this section.

*"I feel like I teach to test the students."* The dichotomy of accountability and assessment in the face of the reality of NCLB has left many participants responding to the implications of NCLB with concerns about time constraints, an emphasis on content, and the overreliance on standardized assessments in measuring student performance. Many of the participants believed that due to NCLB mandates, students with special needs were required to meet the same standards within the same time frame as their same-grade counterparts and thus "teaching to the test" has become an unintended consequence of well-intentioned efforts.

One special educator writes,

I believe that all students should strive to achieve at a higher level. Many people teach to the test because there is only [one] way to measure the student. School systems are now going to a week by week pacing for classes. Teachers need time to help students. Even if that means that two or three days are spent teaching the same thing . . . not just running at a pace to say that everything has been covered.

A special educator asserted, "Less creativity . . . more test-taking skills . . . more pressure to assess (not portfolio) . . . less individualized education . . . less time to grade. Overall this means a less meaningful education for my students."

A large number of survey participants revealed that they supported higher standards for all students, particularly those with special needs. However, they felt current legislation failed to reflect an understanding of the nature of special education, including increased demands and working conditions of special educators. Therefore, special educators are forced to make difficult decisions about curriculum and pacing to ensure that their students are exposed to enough content and the structure and questioning of the state standardized assessment. Currently, much of what is expected of special educators is antithetical to the premises of special education that initially drew the educators to the field. An emphasis on individualized and specialized instruction, flexibility, and creativity have been replaced with content-area knowledge expertise, lesson pacing, and standardized assessment.

*The "push to inclusion."* As previously noted in this article, NCLB was not specifically designed to address the needs of students with special needs. However, students with special needs, particularly those in urban settings, remain the direct benefactors of school reform initiatives that emphasize standardized testing and content-area expertise. A large number of students with mild learning disabilities receive the majority of their instruction in general education settings. Thus, the needs of students with disabilities must be addressed in the face of a growing trend to include more students with disabilities in general education settings to the greatest extent possible. Often, these placement decisions are made by administrators who have a limited understanding of special education and are concerned about the impact of poor student performance on school accountability and accompanying funding rather than by school teams that include special educators and families.

One special educator reported the following:

Coteaching is a good idea for all students, but instead of throwing everyone in general education by force, it needs to be something that is done by the will of those involved. This includes students. Parents are very concerned that their child has been in a small group setting and is now being placed in a large group. In the long run, coteaching will be better for the ESE student population, but many good ESE teachers are changing to general education.

A special educator elaborated,

Too many children are mainstreamed without sufficient support. We were forced to mainstream students who needed a special class. Then, they cut teachers so those poor students were left to flounder in a class where they were totally lost.

The push to inclusion theme reverberated throughout the responses. There seemed to be consensus that there are students who benefit greatly from receiving the majority of their instruction in general education settings with support from a special educator. However, the majority of students currently being served in special education classes are there because they need the support and the expertise of a special educator.

In addition, participants reported that it was disconcerting that many of the placement and staffing decisions that are critical to ensuring that students with special needs are successful in general education settings were made by administrators without input from special educators.

One special educator writes as follows:

The push now is for more inclusion with general education students. The ultimate goal is to have all students in general education, which leads to the following question: If every student could function at general education levels, why was special education created?

*Unrealistic expectations.* As a result of NCLB, students with special needs are experiencing schooling very differently than their predecessors. Traditionally, the education of students with disabilities was primarily guided by the IEP and the expertise of special educators. Currently, many special educators believe that along with decisions about placement and staffing decisions, curriculum and instruction decisions are being made by school-level and district administrators and fail to take into consideration key variables, such as culture, socioeconomic status, and academic diversity, which contribute greatly to students' performance on standardized measures.

One special educator reports, "There is far less time to address individual student needs and areas of concern because we are constantly pushing through curriculum requirements and testing all the time."

The reality for many urban students with special needs is that the majority of them may not have certified teachers in special or general education due to the variables previously discussed in this article and are placed in settings with limited support and resources to be successful. Therefore, the impact of NCLB on students with special needs can be seen in classrooms where teachers must ensure that curricular decisions are made in concert with same-grade general educators—many of whom with limited experience in special education—that more time is spent in preparation for the state standardized assessment, and that the expectations for students with severe disabilities includes a more academic focus.

A special educator asserts,

Students are placed within ESE because they have significant disabilities by definition. Testing preparation takes away from individualized instruction in individual areas that my students are weak in, basic areas, such as phonics or telling time and counting money. Instead we are required by the region and district to cover content that is well above their current level of functioning.

Another special educator contends,

There have been some great positive changes (expectations are the same for all students, push to close the gap and show progress). But there are also some students with disabilities who continue to struggle because the pace is too fast or these children are not given an adequate amount of service time (due to personnel constraints) . . . the expectation by NCLB to show adequate yearly progress (AYP) is unrealistic due to the ever increasing annual benchmark . . . we are in a testing trap. While reliable and valid assessment is extremely important, what teachers and students experience is a never ending cycle of testing or practicing for testing.

Although, some of the participants reported that as a result of NCLB they have observed positive changes in dialogue among teachers about curriculum and pedagogy. Many of the conversations about meeting students’ needs are couched in an understanding that students must show progress and the strategies used must be research based. The unrealistic expectations theme speaks to the limited voice of special educators in policy decisions that directly impact their responsibilities and the students they serve.

*Leave no special educator behind.* The legislation and litigation that has framed how students with special needs are served in public schools across the country has traditionally come on the heels of calls for equity and accountability, primarily by families of students with disabilities and those outside the field of education. NCLB represents the first piece of legislation that has dramatically changed the ways in which schools provide services to all students including those with special needs as well as the preparation and expectations of special educators.

One special educator writes,

People in education are here because we care about children. Although accountability is a good thing, treating teachers as though they are the enemy and just want a job . . . and do nothing is not the way to make positive

changes in education. I would not be so presumptuous to go into a business and then how to improve production . . . likewise I do not think business people or politicians with no teaching experience have the knowledge to tell teachers how and what to teach.

Another special educator offers,

Talk to teachers who are actually implementing this mandate. Don't talk to educators or administrators who are not in the classroom and who know little about the progress of students and the implementation of the program at work. The teachers are the only ones who should be giving advice on what's working and what's not working. This is your starting point for reach change and hopefully real progress.

## Discussion

Districts have responded to the highly qualified mandate of NCLB by providing professional development opportunities in multiple areas. Not surprisingly, a preponderance of the trainings focused on content areas and data-driven instructional planning. When considering the emphasis of NCLB on improving student performance, the hope would be that students with disabilities are able to demonstrate competency in the general education curriculum. A majority of participants believed that NCLB had simply maintained the status quo (40.8%) or had resulted in a negative effect (31.2%) for students with disabilities. Similar perceptions were reported regarding the effect of participation in statewide assessments on students with disabilities.

Not unlike what is heard by general education teachers, many of our participants felt compelled to "teach to the test." In their view, they were expected to follow a specified pacing guide that correlated to the concepts that would be tested via the state assessment. They expressed frustration at being required to cover content at the expense of student understanding. Most felt constricted in their ability to provide individualized instruction to their students. This was especially evident for teachers who worked with students who were more significantly cognitively impaired. Many complained that the focus on academics came at a loss of the functional skills needed by these students.

Even with all of the changes that they were experiencing, the majority of the participants were satisfied with special education and were committed to staying in the field. They viewed themselves as advocates for their

students and indicated they stayed because of the children they served. Most understood the need for increased expectations but felt that desire needed to be tempered with individual needs of the students.

The push to inclusion was problematic for some of the participants, many of whom were veteran teachers. The reality that after teaching multiple years, they were now considered not highly qualified was troubling. They felt left out of the conversation and expressed a desire to be viewed as equitable partners in reform efforts. Their new role as coteachers was equally distressing in light of a lack of understanding by their general education counterparts regarding what value addition a special education teacher could bring to the classroom. Furthermore, many were concerned that the decision to place a child in an inclusive setting was often a result of compliance rather than based on the child's actual needs. It is possible that for some children an inclusive setting is more restrictive than a self-contained setting. The findings from this study corroborate much of what has been written about the complexities of meeting the highly qualified mandate in special education. Limitations of the study include the lack of diversity of the survey respondents. The majority of the participants were White, aged 51 and older, and veteran teachers. These demographics are not representative of the majority of urban special educators. Future research using Web-based surveys should include a multitiered dissemination plan that includes multiple avenues for participation and meetings with school administrators to address questions and concerns regarding the nature of the research study and the implications of the findings.

The findings from this study seem to indicate that the voices of urban special educators, a group greatly impacted by the mandates of NCLB, have been missing from the public discourse on school reform and its implications for students with special needs. It is important that the complexities of teaching and learning in urban settings are reflected in efforts to bring about much needed accountability in student outcomes. Current and relevant research addressing the changing dynamics between general and special educators, issues of diversity in special education, and the impact of standards-based reform on special education corroborate the concerns raised by the participants of this study.

Factors such as time constraints, increased paperwork, and professional development that is geared toward test preparation and delivering academic content have created tensions in schools and have left many special educators questioning the credibility and legitimacy of legislation that undermines the intent of special education. Urban special educators experience a great deal of challenges in meeting the diverse needs of their student population.

Many of these challenges are rooted in the intersection of race, culture, and socioeconomic status that remains at the core of the urban context. Thus, the impact of NCLB on urban special educators and their students should be the focus of future research that seeks to understand how those most influenced by school reform make sense of the changing dynamics of school relationships and developing assessment tools that best capture the essence of special education in urban settings.

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