

TEACHING AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES OF CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS IN UNITED STATES

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Abstract Catholic schools in the United States have long had the reputation of requiring students to adapt to their methods of instruction and to meet their behavioral expectations or be removed from the schools. Today, a great number of U.S. Catholic schools are accepting students who struggle academically and social-emotionally including students with diagnosed disabilities. This raises significant questions about the structures in place to support these students. This article reports results from a survey of U.S. Catholic teachers about how prepared they feel to teach and the instructional strategies they use with students with disabilities. Furthermore, this study explores teachers' attitudes toward the support they receive from their principals. Results of this research indicate that Catholic Schools in the U.S. have made progress in meeting the needs of students with disabilities; however, it also shows a need for further development and continued research.

Keywords U.S. Catholic secondary schools, students with disabilities, principals, teachers


Introduction

Catholic schools in the United States (U.S.) have long had the reputation of requiring students to adapt to their methods of instruction and meet their behavioral expectations or be removed from the schools. While this approach impacted many students and their families, students who had special education needs and students who struggled academically and behaviorally experienced the greatest impact from this practice (Scanlan, 2008). Such students were frequently counseled out of U.S. Catholic schools because, as teachers and principals would explain to parents, the school could not meet their students' needs. In most cases, they were directed to the nearby public school that, by law, provided special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

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(IDEA; Scanlon, 2008). This meant that one or more children within the same family attended the local parish school or Catholic high school, while another child in the same family attended the local public school. When parents in the U.S. desired a Catholic education for their child with a disability, there were few options available to them. In some U.S. Catholic schools, this practice continues today; however, in recent years, a growing number of U.S. Catholic elementary and high schools have embraced the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) challenge “to make the Body whole by ensuring that Catholics with disabilities receive the catechetical and academic instruction essential for their full and equal membership in the Church community” (NCPD, 2010). Consequently, many U.S. Catholic elementary and secondary schools now accept students with disabilities and provide services to support their learning and development (Burke & Griffin, 2016).

For some U.S. families of students with disabilities and students who struggle academically and behaviorally (hereinafter “students with disabilities”) who desire a Catholic education for their children, Catholic schools have become a viable alternative to public schools. According to the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 78.4% of U.S. Catholic schools serve students with mild to moderate disabilities (McDonald & Shultz, 2021). These disabilities include physical, emotional, and learning disabilities. Most students are served in regular education classrooms with or without special resource teachers. In the 2020-21 school year, 6.1% of students in Catholic schools across the United States had a diagnosed disability (McDonald & Shultz, 2021). Previous literature reported that approximately 78% of U.S. Catholic elementary schools and 74% of the U.S. Catholic secondary schools have a process in place for identifying students with special needs (Durow, 2007).

The fact that Catholic schools are viewed as an alternative to public schools in the U.S. for educating and providing services to students with disabilities raises myriad questions, some of which have been addressed in recent literature (Long & Schuttloffel, 2013). For example, what types of services and programming would students need to be successful in Catholic schools? What type of training would teachers and administrators need to meet students’ needs? In schools that are already struggling financially, how would such initiatives be supported? What would be the impact on other students of admitting such students in Catholic schools?

The majority of research about students with disabilities and Catholic schools has focused on elementary schools with a limited amount focusing on Catholic secondary schools in the U.S. Consequently, this study focuses on the attitudes and practices of Catholic high school teachers toward students with disabilities in the U.S. In particular, the study focuses on three areas: 1) attitudes toward professional preparation, professional development, and supports provided to Catholic high school teachers for teaching students with disabilities; 2) types of instructional approaches implemented by Catholic high school teachers to support students with disabilities; and

3) Catholic high school teachers' attitudes about the support and resources they receive from their administration for addressing the needs of students with disabilities.

Literature Review

In recent years, families of students with disabilities in the U.S. have increasingly sought inclusion in Catholic schools. Given that there are a large number of students with disabilities attending Catholic schools today, it is clear that many U.S. parents view Catholic schools as an alternative to public schools (Scanlon, 2008). The inclusion of students with a variety of disabilities in Catholic schools places a great responsibility on the schools and perhaps an even greater responsibility on teachers within these schools to teach and meet students' academic and social emotional needs (Long & Schuttloffel, 2013). Teachers must be able to design a classroom and teach a curriculum that is accessible to all students. Allday et al. (2013) identified four skill areas teachers need for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities within their classrooms: 1) basic knowledge of characteristics of students with disabilities, 2) an understanding of how to differentiate instruction, 3) knowledge of effective classroom management strategies, and 4) the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively with special education teachers. These four skill areas raise the question of when and where teachers, specifically teachers in Catholic schools, receive preparation and training in developing them.

In the United States, whether preparing teachers for Catholic or public schools, teacher candidates are commonly prepared in the same manner. They complete teacher preparation programs in which they take a sequence of courses, participate in field experiences, and complete a supervised student-teaching experience. After completing these programs, teacher candidates receive a teaching credential from the states in which they are prepared. How much of this preparation focuses on students with disabilities? In a study of teacher education programs across the United States, Harvey et al. (2010) found that the majority of institutions with teacher preparation programs offered coursework to preservice special and general education teachers regarding exceptional children and/or special education, specifically a course in characteristics of students with disabilities. Furthermore, they found that the majority of programs (89%) placed teacher candidates in inclusive settings for field experiences and/or student teaching. In another study, Allday et al. (2013) noted that while most teacher education programs require a characteristics course, the majority (67%) did not offer a course related to the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings nor a course specific to collaboration between general and special education teachers (93%). Secondary teachers, in particular, reported that the methods courses in their teacher preparation programs spent little time exploring special education issues (Gately & Hammer, 2005).

Teaching licenses in the United States are issued by individual state boards of education. Once teachers receive their initial license, they may receive additional training for teaching students

with disabilities through professional development offerings. These offerings take a variety of forms, and most are offered within school settings. Much of the professional development follows the traditional, one-day, “drive-by” format (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). As a result, teachers frequently have unfavorable views of the professional development offerings in their schools. Furthermore, this type of professional development does not have a lasting impact on teaching and learning. Darling-Hammond et al., (2017) define effective professional development as “structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes” (p. v). In an extensive review of literature, they identified seven widely shared features of effective professional development. Such professional development is content focused, incorporates active learning, supports collaboration, uses models of effective practice, provides coaching and expert support, offers feedback and reflection, and is of sustained duration. Unfortunately, most professional development does not contain many of these elements, and, as a result, it has little to no impact on teacher pedagogical practice or student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Providing support to students with disabilities takes a variety of formats in U.S. Catholic schools. For example, some Catholic schools are designed specifically for students with disabilities (for example, Holy Trinity Parish School, Louisville, Kentucky, USA). Additionally, many Catholic schools today have programs designed specifically for addressing the learning and behavioral needs of students with disabilities and students who struggle (for example, the Phoenix Program at St. Patrick High School, Chicago, Illinois, USA). According to the most recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics, 78% of Catholic schools in the United States serve students with mild to moderate disabilities which include physical, emotional, and learning disabilities, and they are accommodated in general education classrooms (McDonald & Shultz, 2021). With this said, there is little information in the literature about instructional approaches used in U.S. Catholic schools to aid students with disabilities in accessing the general education curriculum. It should be noted, however, that the student/teacher ratio in U.S. Catholic schools in 2021 was 11:1 (McDonald & Shultz, 2021). With a student/teacher ratio this low, teachers have ample opportunity to provide more individualized instruction and personalized learning opportunities which may be beneficial to students with disabilities.

While there is little information in the literature about instructional strategies and approaches used with students with disabilities in U.S. Catholic schools, research has identified certain strategies and approaches that, when implemented with fidelity, show a positive impact on learning for students with disabilities. These include, but are not limited to, direct instruction (Gersten, 1985; Flores & Ganz, 2007; Flores et al., 2013; White et al., 2014; Head et al., 2018), modeling (Regan & Berkeley, 2011), learning strategies instruction (Deshler & Schumaker, 2006; Reid et al., 2013), computer-based instruction (Weng et al., 2014), cooperative learning groups (Gillies & Ashram, 2000; Stevens & Slavin, 1995), one-on-one and small group instruction (Colón et al., 2018,

2022), and peer tutoring (Alzahrani & Leko, 2018). U.S.Catholic school principals reported that they have provided professional development for teachers on differentiated instruction, learning strategies, and alternative assessments (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016); however, it is unclear as to the extent to which Catholic school teachers have been trained in the other strategies and approaches listed above. Furthermore, the level of implementation of these strategies and approaches in Catholic schools is not known.

In U.S. Catholic schools, the principal sets the tone and direction with regard to integrating students with disabilities into the school community and “builds the capacity of their school communities by articulating both a vision and strong expectations to meet this vision” (Scanlon, 2008, p. 44). According to the Catholic School Principal Competencies developed by researchers at Loyola University in Chicago, Catholic school principals “develop programs to address the unique learning needs of students” (Morten & Lawler, 2016, p. 340). Since Catholic schools currently serve students with disabilities, this suggests that Catholic school principals should have an understanding of the learning needs of students with disabilities in their schools, and that they should provide their staff guidance on how to effectively address their students’ unique learning needs.

In a study of attitudes of U.S.Catholic school principals about the inclusion of students with disabilities in their schools, Boyle and Hernandez (2016) reported that most Catholic school principals have a more positive than negative attitude toward including students with disabilities. They found that, “Principals with more positive attitudes towards inclusion reported higher percentages of students with special education plans in their schools” (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016). They also found that principals were more willing to enroll students with high-incidence disabilities such as learning disabilities, ADHD, and speech and language impairments and suggested that Catholic schools may be more equipped to meet the needs of students with these disabilities (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016).

Study Design

There has been an increasing number of research studies addressing inclusive education in U.S.Catholic schools in recent years; however, the overall amount of research about how Catholic schools in the U.S. support struggling students and students with disabilities and the role that school leadership plays in this endeavor has been sparse (Taylor, 2005). The purpose of this study is to investigate how prepared U.S. Catholic high school teachers feel to teach students with disabilities, examine the instructional approaches they use, and explore their attitudes toward the support they receive from their administration. Because this research is primarily descriptive and explanatory, a quantitative approach was used.

Participants

We used a recruited sample for this study. A recruited sample is when a sample is obtained by consulting and selecting from an existing sample frame, and a method is used to control respondents' entry into a survey (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). The participants for this study are Catholic high school teachers from four midwestern states identified through an internet search. This resulted in 101 Catholic high schools. Through additional internet searching, the principals of these schools and their email addresses were located and recorded. An email describing the purpose of the study and providing a survey link was sent to each principal inviting them to forward the email and survey link to the teachers in their schools. The researchers took this approach because they believed teachers were more likely to respond to a survey forwarded by their principal, and many Catholic high schools do not provide teachers' email addresses online. One challenge with this approach is the difficulty with determining the response rate since the researchers do not know the total number of teachers to whom the survey was forwarded. Van Selm & Jankowski (2006) suggest that in this situation, the response rate can be estimated by dividing the number of returned surveys by the number of times that a site was accessed. Ninety teachers viewed the survey. Seventeen teachers started but responded to fewer than half of the questions, and as a result, their responses were removed. A total of 71 teachers completed the entire survey (completion rate 81%). We recognize that this can be a limitation that will inhibit the generalizations that can be drawn from this study.

Of the teachers who responded to the survey, the average number of years of teaching experience in any school was 16 years, and the average number of years teaching in their current Catholic high school was 22 years. Table 1 provides a summary of the teachers' years of experience teaching and years teaching in their current high schools. It is interesting to note that for 24 teachers (34%), all of their teaching experience was in their current Catholic high school.

Table 1: Years of Total Teaching Experience and Teaching Experience in Their Current Catholic High School.

Years of Experience	Total Teaching Experience		Teaching Experience in Current Catholic High School	
	Number	%	Number	%
1-5	14	20	33	46
6-10	15	21	10	14
11-20	20	28	10	14
More than 20	22	31	18	25

Teachers were asked to identify the department in which they primarily taught. They represented a wide range of content areas. The majority of the teachers taught English (17 teachers or 24%)

and math (16 teachers or 23%). One teacher did not respond to this question. Table 2 provides a summary of the content areas taught by teachers.

Table 2: Content Areas Taught by Teachers

Content Area	Number	%
English	17	24
Math	16	23
Religious Studies/ Theology	13	18
Social Studies	11	15
Fine Arts	4	6
World Languages	4	6
Sciences	4	6
Business	1	2

Note: One teacher did not respond to this question.

One final question was asked to better understand teachers' experience and background. They were asked whether their school had a program to support struggling students and/or students with disabilities. We believe that teaching at a school with a program might influence teachers' attitudes and practice in terms of supporting students with disabilities. Of the 71 teachers who responded, 67 (94%) reported that their schools had programs. Table 3 provides a summary of the teachers' responses to this question.

Table 3: Programs Offered to Support Struggling Students and/or Students with Disabilities

Type of Program	Number	%
For both struggling students and students with disabilities	38	53
For struggling students	27	38
For students with disabilities	2	2
No program offered	4	5

Procedures

The survey administered in this study was developed using Qualtrics, an online tool for creating electronic surveys. Electronic surveys increase the reach of a survey, especially when the population being studied is distributed across a large geographic region (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). At the beginning of the survey, respondents were informed that their responses would be

kept confidential and that they and their schools could not be identified as a result of completing the survey. They were asked to agree to a confidentiality statement to proceed to the remaining survey questions.

The survey consisted of 20 questions divided into four areas. The first set of questions, which are described in the Participant section, asked about teachers' experience and background. The second set of questions related to the teachers' preparation for working with struggling students and students with disabilities. This section included questions about training completed in their teacher preparation programs as well as ongoing professional development received in their current positions. The third section of the survey contained questions about the teachers' current teaching practices and focused on teaching strategies and techniques that have been shown through research to support the learning of students with disabilities. For example, there were questions about differentiating instruction, providing students options for demonstrating their learning, learning strategies instruction, peer tutoring, presenting content in multiple formats, and using technology. The last section of the survey focused on administration and specifically on support provided to teachers by their school leadership, their perceptions about the extent and effectiveness of that support, and the allocation of resources for supporting those with disabilities.

Results

Preparation, Collaboration and Resources for Working with Struggling Students and Students with Disabilities

In the first part of the survey, teachers were asked to rate their preparation for working with students with disabilities using *extremely well prepared*, *very well prepared*, *moderately well prepared*, *slightly well prepared*, and *not well prepared*. The first question asked teachers how well they felt their university courses prepared them for teaching students with disabilities. In general, teachers did not feel that the university courses that they took as part of their licensure programs prepared them well for working with students with disabilities. The responses ranged from 21% who felt *not well*, 24% who felt the coursework prepared them *slightly well*, and 34% who felt it prepared them *moderately well*. Only 15% of the teachers felt that their university coursework prepared them *very well* or *extremely well*. There was a moderate negative correlation between teachers' years of experience and how well they felt their university courses prepared them [$r=-.35$, $N=71$, $p=.002$]. This might suggest that teachers who recently finished their preparation programs view their teacher preparation coursework more favorably, and as teachers gain experience, they view their teacher preparation coursework as less relevant. There was no relationship between how teachers felt about their preparation coursework and whether their school had a program for students with disabilities.

Teachers’ feelings about professional development (PD) offerings and how well they prepared them for working with struggling students and students with disabilities were even more striking. The majority of teachers (58%) felt that professional development offerings prepared them *slightly* or *not well*. There was no relationship between how teachers felt about PD and their years of teaching experience. Additionally, there was no correlation between their feelings about PD and whether their school had a program for struggling students and/or students with disabilities.

Table 4: Teachers’ Responses to Questions About Their Preparation for Working with Struggling Students and Students with Disabilities

Question	Responses to Level of Preparedness (%)				
	Extremely	Very	Moderately	Slightly	Not Well
How well do you feel the courses in your teacher preparation program prepared you for working with struggling or students with disabilities?	10	11	34	24	21
How well has professional development you attended prepared you to work with struggling students or students with disabilities?	1	16	25	37	21

Note: One teacher did not respond to this question.

Teachers were asked about the opportunities and resources that they received for working with students with disabilities and responded to these questions using the scale of *significant*, *many*, *some*, *few*, or *none*. Teachers reported having little opportunity to collaborate with colleagues about how to work with students with disabilities. The majority of teachers (69%) said that they had *some*. Furthermore, there were no relationships between schools that had programs for struggling students, students with disabilities, or both and teachers’ opportunities to collaborate.

Teachers were also asked about resources available to them to help them with their work with struggling students and those with disabilities. The majority of teachers (80%) responded that they had *some* (38%) resources available to them. Furthermore, there was no correlation between schools that had programs and resources available to teachers. Table 5 summarizes the responses to these questions about opportunities and resources.

Table 5: Responses to Questions about Opportunities and Resources for Working with Struggling Students and Students with Disabilities

Question	Responses to Amount of Opportunities or Resources (%)				
	Significant	Many	Some	Few	None
How would you describe the opportunity you have to collaborate with colleagues about how to work with struggling students or students with disabilities?	7	17	38	31	7%
How would you describe your access to resources to help you work with struggling students or students with disabilities?	4	16	48	31	1

Use of Instructional Approaches that Support Students with Disabilities

As previously stated, research has demonstrated the impact of various instructional practices and strategies on students with disabilities' learning. Examples of such instructional practices include differentiation (Lai et al., 2020), modeling (Lopez et al., 2017), one-to-one instruction (Elbaum et al., 2000), peer tutoring (Maheady et al., 2003), and learning strategy instruction (Deshler & Schumaker, 2006; Reid et al., 2013). The second part of the survey focused on instructional practices and, in particular, teachers' comfort level with a variety of practices and how often they implemented them in their classroom instruction.

Teachers were asked about their comfort level with differentiating instruction in their classes. Differentiation is defined as "an approach whereby teachers adjust their curriculum and instruction to maximize the learning of all students" (IRIS Center, 2010). It is not a single strategy, but rather a framework that teachers can use to implement a variety of strategies. Teachers were asked to indicate their level of comfort with differentiation using the scale *comfortable*, *slightly comfortable*, *neither comfortable nor uncomfortable*, *slightly uncomfortable*, and *uncomfortable*. The majority of the teachers' responses fell within the comfortable range with 11% indicating they were comfortable and 44% percent responding that they were slightly comfortable. It might be expected that teachers working in schools with programs for struggling students and/or students with disabilities would be more comfortable differentiating instruction; however, no relationship was indicated in the data.

Additionally, there was no relationship between teachers' comfort level with differentiating instruction and their years of teaching experience.

Table 6: Comfort Level with Differentiating Instruction

Question	Responses to Comfort Level with Differentiating Instruction (%)				
	Comfortable	Slightly Comfortable	Neither Comfortable/ Uncomfortable	Slightly Uncomfortable	Uncomfortable
How comfortable do you feel differentiating instruction in your classroom for struggling students or students with disabilities?	11	44	21	6	10

In the survey, teachers were also asked about their use of a variety of instructional techniques. They were provided a list and asked to indicate which they implemented most often in their classrooms. Results indicated that on average teachers use at least 4 of the instructional techniques often in their teaching. As indicated in Table 7, more than half implemented direct instruction (75%), modeling (69%), and large group instruction (62%) often. One-to-one instruction was used by almost half (49%) of the teachers and small group instruction was used by 44% of teachers. Table 7 summarizes the use of instructional strategies in instruction.

Table 7: Instructional Strategy and Use in Instruction

Instructional Strategy	Teachers who use the Strategy Often in Instruction (%)
Direct instruction	75
Modeling	69
Whole group instruction	62
One-on-one instruction	49
Small group instruction	44
Cooperative learning groups	37
Computer-based instruction	37
Learning strategy instruction	30
Peer tutoring	20

Using a frequency scale, teachers were asked about how often they allow students to learn through their preferred learning modality, as this is consistent with differentiating instruction. More than half of the teachers (64%) indicated that they allow students this opportunity at least *somewhat frequently*. In a related question, teachers were asked how often they offered students options for demonstrating their learning. Whitman and Kelleher (2016) explain the significance of assessing students in ways that play to their strengths while posing significant challenges. Providing students options for demonstrating their learning can achieve this goal. The majority of teachers (77%) responded that they provided students options for demonstrating their learning *often* (21%), *frequently* (25%), or *somewhat frequently* (35%). In a related question, the majority of teachers (66%) indicated that they use a variety of data or evidence to determine where students stand in terms of meeting learning standards at least *somewhat frequently*.

Presenting content in multiple formats (e.g., auditory, video, multimedia; Center for Applied Special Technology, 2018) and using technology (Mahoney & Hall, 2017) has been shown to benefit the learning of students with disabilities and is consistent with differentiating instruction. Half of teachers surveyed indicated that they use technology to address the needs of students with disabilities *often* (28%) or *frequently* (22%). The majority of teachers (21%) indicated that they *often* present content to students in multiple formats. Almost 60% reported that they *frequently* (25%) or *somewhat frequently* (34%) engage in this practice. No teacher responded that they never present content in multiple formats. Table 8 summarizes the responses to questions about student preferences, and options for determining learning.

Table 8: Responses to Questions about Students' Preferred Learning Modality, Assessing Learning, and Use of Technology and Multiple Formats

Question	Responses to Variety in Instruction and Assessment (%)				
	Often	Frequently	Somewhat Frequently	Sometimes	Never
How often do you give your students the opportunity to learn through their preferred learning modality?	27	17	20	32	4
How often do you give your students options for demonstrating their learning?	21	25	35	17	2
How often do you use a variety of data or evidence to determine where	18	14	34	24	10

each student is performing in relation to learning standards?					
How often do you use technology to address the needs of struggling students or students with disabilities?	28	22	20	27	3
How often do you present content to your students in multiple formats?	21	25	34	20	0

Attitudes About Support and Resources Provided by School Leadership

The final section of the survey focused on teachers' attitudes about support and resources provided by their school leadership for working with students with disabilities. Teachers were asked how supported they felt by their administration in meeting the needs of struggling students and students with disabilities. Approximately 33% responded that they were either *extremely well* (13%) or *very well* (20%) supported. The responses to a question about the administration's involvement in aiding teachers in meeting struggling students' needs were similar; 29% indicated that their administration was *very* (7%) or *significantly* (22%) involved in helping teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Table 9 summarizes the question of perception of administrative support.

Table 9: Perceptions of Administration-Level Support and Involvement in Meeting Student Needs

Question	Responses to Level of Support and Involvement (%)				
	Extremely	Very	Moderately	Slightly	Not Well
How supported do you feel by your administration in meeting the needs of struggling students and students with disabilities?	13	20	31	25	11
How involved is your administration in aiding you to meet the needs of struggling students and students with disabilities?	7	22	31	30	10

In a survey of U.S. Catholic School principals about their attitudes toward including students with disabilities in their schools, Boyle and Hernandez (2016) reported three major obstacles to including students with disabilities in the general education classroom. They found that financial constraints were the most frequently reported barrier. In this study, teachers were asked their level of agreement with the following statement: *My school’s administration allocates enough resources (time, money, staff, etc.) to address the needs of struggling students and students with disabilities.* Given Boyle and Hernandez’s findings, the level of agreement with this statement was interesting in that the majority of teachers either *strongly* (10%) or *somewhat agreed* (35%) with the statement. For the last question of the survey, teachers were asked about their level of agreement with the statement: *My school’s administration makes it a priority to address the needs of students who struggle and students with disabilities?* The majority of teachers indicated they believe that their administration makes this a priority. Table 10 summarizes the responses to questions of resources and prioritization of students’ needs.

Table 10: Level of Agreement with Statements About Administration’s Allocation of Resources and Prioritizing Addressing Students’ Needs

Question	Responses to Variety in Instruction and Assessment (%)				
	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My school’s administration allocates enough resources (time, money, staff, etc.) to address the needs of struggling students and students with disabilities.	10	35	21	23	11
My school’s administration makes it a priority to address the needs of students who struggle and students with disabilities.	14	41	17	21	7

Discussion

This study investigates attitudes of U.S. Catholic high school teachers about their preparation for teaching students with disabilities, types of instructional practices they use to teach students with disabilities, and their attitudes about the support and resources they receive from their administration for addressing the needs of students with disabilities. We believe that exploring these areas will provide the leadership and faculty of Catholic high schools, both in the U.S. and worldwide, guidance on how they can improve the educational experience for students with disabilities and their families.

One purpose of this study was to explore teachers' attitudes toward their preparation for working with students with disabilities. Consistent with previous research (Gately & Hammer, 2005; Allday et al., 2013), teachers indicated that they did not feel their university course work prepared them well, and their attitudes toward the professional development they received in their current schools was even more negative. Teachers specifically noted that there were few opportunities to work collaboratively with colleagues in planning and working with students with disabilities, and they believed that there were not sufficient resources available to them in this work.

This study also set out to investigate the instructional approaches teachers use to teach students with disabilities. In general, teachers reported that they feel comfortable with differentiation. Previous research has shown that differentiation was a frequent topic of professional development in Catholic schools (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016). While teachers reported feeling comfortable with differentiation, they appear to frequently rely on the same instructional practices, namely direct instruction, modeling, and large group instruction. Other instructional methods that have been shown to benefit the learning of students with disabilities and are consistent with differentiation were used with less frequency. This discrepancy leads us to question teachers' understanding and implementation of differentiated instruction. A notable finding was how infrequently teachers used instructional methods such as computer-based instruction, learning strategies instruction, and peer tutoring. These were reported as being used the least by teachers.

There were interesting findings in regards to teachers' attitudes about the support and resources they receive from their administration when it comes to serving students with disabilities. The majority of teachers feel at best a moderate level of support from their administrations when working with students with disabilities. Furthermore, they are somewhat neutral when it comes to the administration's allocation of resources. Those who felt enough resources were allocated was similar to those who felt there were not enough resources; a large number fell in the middle. Given these responses and lack of research in this area, we were surprised that the majority of teachers (55%) reported that their administration makes meeting the needs of students with disabilities a priority.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

As stated in the introduction, it is clear that many parents of students with disabilities in the U.S. view Catholic schools as an alternative to public schools when it comes to educating students with disabilities (Scanlon, 2008). While many U.S. Catholic schools are meeting student needs, the results of this research suggest that there is more that can be done to do this more effectively. First, there is little research about the types of instruction and specialized programs provided in Catholic high schools. Further exploration into current practices, including in-depth interviews, with a focus on student learning outcomes would be beneficial.

A significant finding in this research was the lack of relevance teachers found in their preparation coursework and professional development. It would be beneficial to conduct further research with teachers from U.S. Catholic high schools in order to determine the types of courses and experiences that would better prepare future teachers for working with students with disabilities. For high school teachers, this coursework should focus on teaching students with disabilities in specific content areas. Additionally, it would be beneficial to provide teachers “structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. v). As stated in the literature review, such professional development is content focused, incorporates active learning, supports collaboration, uses models of effective practice, provides coaching and expert support, offers feedback and reflection, and is of sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

This research found that U.S. Catholic high school teachers frequently rely on the same instructional strategies, namely direct instruction, modeling, and whole group instruction. Professional development focusing on other instructional strategies that impact the learning of students with disabilities and that are implemented less frequently by U.S. Catholic high school teachers, such as learning strategies instruction, class-wide peer tutoring, computer-based instruction, and cooperative learning groups would be beneficial. Perhaps with more intensive and ongoing professional development focused on specific instructional strategies, teachers would be more likely to implement these strategies in their teaching.

Finding time for teachers to collaborate with colleagues about how to support students with disabilities is another major concern that was raised in this study. Systematic approaches to collaboration need to be identified and implemented in Catholic high schools. One such approach that has shown promise is professional learning communities (PLCs). These provide teachers time to collaborate with and learn from each other and to reflect critically on their teaching practice (DeMathews, 2014). Previous research has shown that PLCs have a positive impact on student learning, and they may also improve outcomes for students with disabilities (Blanton & Perez, 2011).

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that may impact the ability to generalize the results to broader contexts. We used a recruited sample for this study. A recruited sample is when a sample is obtained by consulting and selecting from an existing sample frame; a method is used to control respondents' entry into the survey (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). We took this approach because we believed teachers were more likely to respond to a survey forwarded by their principals, and not all Catholic high schools provide teachers' emails online. We received 71 completed responses to the survey which is lower than expected. Additionally, the fact that the survey was forwarded to teachers by their principals can create bias. The COVID-19 pandemic may have created a number of barriers, including principals forwarding the survey and the number of respondents. Studies have reported achieving a higher number of respondents when making follow-up telephone calls to identified nonrespondents (Bouck, 2004; Eignebrood, 2005). Perhaps follow-up phone calls to principals would have been beneficial. This is a limitation that will inhibit the generalization that can be drawn from this study.

Conclusion

The number of students with disabilities in U.S. Catholic schools today is strong evidence that Catholic families desire a Catholic education for their children. Catholic school principals and teachers must be prepared to effectively meet their needs. This study focused on U.S. Catholic high school teachers' attitudes toward their preparation for teaching students with disabilities, the types of instruction they implement in their classrooms to support students with disabilities, and their attitudes about the support they receive from their administration. We have identified a number of significant findings in this study that warrant further investigation so that U.S. Catholic high schools will meet the challenge of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) "to make the body whole by ensuring that Catholics with disabilities receive the catechetical and academic instruction essential for their full and equal membership in the Church community" (NCPD, 2010).

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